



European journal of American studies Reviews 2012-1

Despotopoulou, Anna and Kimberly C. Reed, eds.
Henry James and the Supernatural.

Maria Pirgerou



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9710>

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Maria Pirgerou, « Despotopoulou, Anna and Kimberly C. Reed, eds. *Henry James and the Supernatural.* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2012-1, document 10, Online since 26 March 2012, connection on 02 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9710>

This text was automatically generated on 2 May 2019.

Creative Commons License

Despotopoulou, Anna and Kimberly C. Reed, eds. Henry James and the Supernatural.

Maria Pirgerou

REFERENCES

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Pp. 196. ISBN: 978-0-230-11526-2.

- 1 This book is a compilation of essays researching Henry James's ghostly tales. As both editors state in their introduction to the volume, the book actually aims not only at dealing with the ghostly in terms of its supernatural element but also at scrutinizing it as a narrative technique, a strategy which endowed James's oeuvre with a realistic, proto-modernist quality "giving it the elusiveness it is so much celebrated for" (1). Both editors also point out that James's concern with the supernatural possibly reflects not only his era's spiritual concerns but it more often than not projects the author's preoccupation with the private and the public aspects of individual existence, his own metaphysical anxieties as well as his ethical and aesthetic sensibilities.
- 2 The first essay of the volume is contributed by Greg Zacharias and is entitled "'The Complexion of Ever So Long Ago': Style and Henry James's Ghosts." Zacharias's essay meticulously analyses a variety of James's texts, and prefaces to those texts, focusing mainly on his autobiographical writings such as *The American Scene* (1907) and *A Small Boy and Others* (1913). The essayist argues that the ghostly actually functions in James as a conversion from the very private to the very public and as such constitutes a therapeutic process which, in turn, transforms itself into his unique authorial style. For James, Zacharias argues, the ghostly is a confrontation and rearticulation of the author's past memories and fears which turns into a representation of truth. The essayist also makes a valid point as regards the unique complexity of James's style in his multi-layered

narratives such as *The American Scene* in which the division of narrative selves works in an aesthetic manner in order to confront cultural reality. The ghostly, thus, functions as an exploration of authorial consciousness which results in self-awareness. Zacharias's comprehensive and insightful essay provides an interesting viewpoint which sheds light on James's specters by aligning them with the master's own authorial consciousness.

- 3 The second essay of the volume is entitled "Immensities of Perception and Yearning: The Haunting of Henry James's Heroes" and is written by Kristin Boudreau. In this essay Boudreau draws from Kantian philosophy and *The Critique of Pure Reason*, (1781) as well as its effect on the later romantics and transcendentalists, in order to trace this philosophical influence on James's heroes in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Wings of the Dove* (1902)—novels which are nevertheless not, strictly speaking, ranked among James's ghostly tales. In a theoretically laden but most perceptive essay Boudreau also associates James's disbelief in post-mortem consciousness, his pre-occupation with afterlife with the distinction the author made (in the Kantian manner) between what can be empirically lived and proven and what can exceed sensory perception arguing that James's sensitivity to extra-sensible impression was the result of artistic sensibility.
- 4 The third essay of the volume is entitled "Haunting the Churches: Henry James and the Sacred Space in 'The Altar of the Dead'" and is written by Hazel Hutchison. Along similar lines with the previous essayist Hutchison explores the pattern of James's heroes "haunting" the churches throughout his oeuvre suggesting, as she argues, a rather uneasy relationship between the material and the spiritual. In James's short story "The Altar of the Dead" in particular, she notes, the architectural space of the church plays a metaphysical role between the living and the dead—a pattern which is repeated in a number of Jamesian narratives such as *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Tragic Muse* (1889) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). Tracing Swedenborgian influence on James's use of sacred space, the essayist analyses the connection between the material and the spiritual in James's work and its connection with the private and the public aspect as this is also expressed in the novelist's travel writing. Hutchison most convincingly argues that despite the distance James kept from Swedenborg's theology his ambiguous response to the supernatural determined the author's representation of cathedrals, temples and other sacred places to the effect of blurring the boundary between the metaphorical and the literal, the secular and the spiritual. In an exemplary clarity of argumentation Hutchison addresses a most complex issue in James which concerns the dissolution of boundaries and the way this is associated with the ghostly.
- 5 The fourth essay of the volume is contributed by Anna Despotopoulou and is entitled: "Mysterious Tenants: Uncanny Women and the Private or Public Dilemma in the Supernatural Tales." In her analysis the essayist, and co-editor of the volume, argues that in his supernatural fiction James negotiates stereotypical images of femininity because in these narratives women occupy a liminal position which prefigures the intrusion of the public into the private and signals, thus, the breakdown of patriarchal domestic ideology which relied upon clearly defined, gendered, separate spheres. Despotopoulou's elaborate use of the Freudian concept of the "uncanny" enables her to read women in James's ghost stories such as "The Ghostly Rental" (1876) and "The Real Right Thing" (1900), as not bearing the characteristics of the "heimlich," or, in other words, the familiar and domestic but instead turning sinister, uncanny, unfamiliar, or "unheimlich," in Freud's terms. The essayist also very wisely points out that even though in James's ghost stories women are represented as occupying a liminal position, this representation does not

overturn cultural constructions of femininity but instead emphasizes the precarious position that women held at the time.

- 6 Along the same lines, the fifth essay of the volume, written by Kathy Gentile is entitled “John Marcher’s Uncanny Unmanning in ‘The Beast in the Jungle.’” Gentile reads John Marcher’s supernatural visitant, “the beast,” as prefiguring Freud’s conceptualization of the “Unheimlich”—the Uncanny. She further suggests that the short story’s male protagonist is in constant suspense of his masculine identity and thus proves that “masculinity itself is a spectre, an illusion of coherent identity” (103). Again, in this essay, as in the previous one, gender becomes a central issue, as it should, I believe, in Jamesian narratives in which gender norms are readily questioned and often subverted. Through her analysis of “The Beast in the Jungle” as a ghost story Gentile most eloquently addresses Jamesian gender insecurities as sustained by the supernatural.
- 7 The sixth essay of the volume is entitled “Homospectrality in Henry James’s Ghost Stories” and is written by Diane Long Hoeveler. Focused again on gender issues Hoeveler reads James’s ghost stories as a “reverse discourse,” in Jonathan Dollimore’s terms, which desexualizes the male homosexual given also the socio-cultural background of James’s narratives—especially the Oscar Wilde trials of 1895. The essayist examines four short stories of James’s ghostly subgenre, namely “De Gray: A Romance” (1868), “The Ghostly Rental” (1876), “Sir Edmund Orme” (1891), and “Owen Wingrave” (1892) focusing on the dead/absent male bodies which are featured in them. By close analysis of each of the short stories Hoeveler claims that in James the use of spectrality not only reveals the author’s own queer anxieties but, by recourse to the gothic genre and the employment of figurative language Jamesian ghostly texts mark “an inexorable movement toward [the] twilight zone of signification” (116). Hoeveler’s ingenious argument re-establishes the crucial question between gender representation and language use, a question which is definitely at play in Jamesian texts.
- 8 The seventh essay of the volume is entitled “Second Thoughts: ‘Queer ‘Maud Evelyn’” and is contributed by Kevin Ohi. The essayist reads James’s short story “Maud Evelyn” (1900) as an experience of the closet—in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s terms—as the male hero of the story experiences an a-sexual union with the already dead Maud Evelyn. In sheltering a “fictional heterosexuality,” Ohi argues, the story hosts several “queer aspects” while the retrospective, backward gaze of the hero produces a temporal paradox which suggests an “impersonal subjectivity” (140-143). Ohi’s short but concise analysis enables us to read the story from the temporal perspective it establishes breaking conventional time sequences but also questioning gender and cultural norms.
- 9 The eighth essay of the compilation is written by Gert Buelens and is entitled “Uncanny Doublings in ‘Owen Wingrave.’” Unlike those critics who initially dismissed “Owen Wingrave” as “hardly achieving a terrifying effect,” Buelens suggests that if this story is read in the context of new socio-historical data and the light of new developments in literary criticism, it not only interrogates war ideology but also exposes the anguish, indeed the “passions” involved in the achievement of masculine identity won, as it were, on the battlefield of ideological normativity. Buelens’s analysis is sustained by both Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity and Freud’s concepts of the “uncanny.” Buelens brilliantly explores the doublings of the male characters in the main hero’s ancestral line which construct, as he suggests, a metonymic relationship between its members resulting in textual ambiguity and indeterminacy of identification. The homoerotic undercurrent of the story reveals in Buelens’s analysis echoing Butler echoing Freud “the uncanny

discovery in himself of the otherness that Owen Wingrave embodies” (163). Thus, the performative enactment of masculinity, Buelens very persuasively argues, brings the narrative to a typically Jamesian closure: the male heroes return to the conventional slots prepared for them by the social matrix.

- 10 The ninth essay of the volume is entitled “The Afterlife of Figures” and is contributed by Sheila Teahan. In this essay Teahan makes use of the literary device of “aposiopesis,” which she compares with the military expression “hanging fire” meaning “to hesitate,” or “remain concealed” in order to talk about “the play of concealment and disclosure” in Henry James’s short story “The Great Good Place”(1900) (166). Teahan considers “aposiopesis” as a narrative refusal or elision which in James is simultaneously, as she suggests, productive of narrative. The essayist also examines “aposiopesis” in its temporal effect in the short story arguing that it brings about “an uncanny disruption of temporality” (167). Along similar lines with the previous essay this chapter is also concerned with indeterminable subjectivities, uncanny doublings which, in their spectral effect, suggest the dissolution and diffusion of selfhood. Teahan’s essay, brilliant in its complexity, elucidates James’s recurrent technique of silences, deliberate omissions and elisions by placing it in its proper narrative perspective: as deconstructive of subjectivity.
- 11 The epilogue to the volume is entitled “Ghost Writing” and is written by Nicola Bradbury. The essayist, besides recounting the contribution of each of the previous articles to Jamesian scholarship, takes heed from the points already made in order to discuss one of James’s most complex novels, *The Ambassadors* (1903). Even though the novel does not belong to the ghostly tales, Bradbury suggests that the time interloping between Lambert Strether’s famous injunction to Brad “Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to” and the hero’s regretful concept of “too late,” lies an expanse of hypothetical narrative development which she calls “the ghost of a chance” (186). Bradbury, of course, refers to James’s well known strategy of omissions, silences and “the might have been” expanding thus and complementing the previous essay. Bradbury’s epilogue appropriately concludes a series of essays all of which attest to James’s unique, masterful management of linguistic discursual features which, on occasion, became as indeterminate and elusive as the ghostly.
- 12 All in all, *Henry James and the Supernatural* features an outstanding selection of essays which trace James’s pre-occupation with the ghostly from a variety of perspectives: philosophical, psychoanalytic, queer, rhetorical, among others. It is important to note that the order the essays are presented in is suggestive of a clear progression of argument which highly contributes to the primary aim of this collection: to alert readers to the multiple and diverse readings that Jamesian ghostly narratives lend themselves to, often voicing or silencing the anxieties which haunted the patriarchally appropriated Anglo-American culture at the *fin-de siècle*.

AUTHOR

MARIA PIRGEROU

University of Athens, Greece