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**‘When the cage came up there was something crouched a-top of it’**

**The haunted tales of L.T.C. Rolt - A Contextual Analysis**

**by**

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## Abstract

British writer and historian L.T.C. Rolt's collection of ghost stories, *Sleep No More* was published in 1948. His short fiction deserves greater exposure. More than simply a 'derivative imitation' of what came before, one could argue the collection provides an end point for the Victorian and Edwardian ghostly tale. Whilst heavily influenced by, and indebted to, the works of Sheridan Le Fanu and M.R. James, Rolt's tales assuredly re-shape the traditional ghost story from the outdated gothic settings of the past and the academic background of James's works - the isolated country churches, foreign abbeys and country halls - into the more identifiable surroundings of post-war Britain with its steam trains, canals and factories. Gone too are Le Fanu's country squires and James's fusty antiquarians, replaced by railwaymen, steel-workers and motor-racing enthusiasts. It is into this recognisable world populated by ordinary characters that Rolt slips his unease. In doing so, he forges the way, alongside Fritz Leiber for the generation of 'working-class' or 'blue-collar' stories that follow.

Beginning with a close analysis of the key fundamentals of a ghost story as laid down by M.R. James, and juxtaposing those against Rolt's informative essay *The Passing of the Ghost Story* (1956) we can see how Rolt's tales provide a distinctive connection between the traditional ghost stories of James and the industrial short horror fiction of Leiber. Rolt also sets a portion of his tales in isolated Welsh valleys and the Shropshire border country where he was raised. It is in these more wild and brooding locations, more aligned to the works of Algernon Blackwood and Arthur Machen, that his tales of ghosts and hauntings are transformed into unsettling, disorientating excursions where 'angel satyrs' stir.

## Introduction

Lionel Thomas Caswell Rolt (1910-1974) is best known as a biographer of important engineering figures from the past such as Isambard Kingdom Brunel and George and Robert Stephenson, non-fiction works on engineering, railways, canals and industrial history and as a key figure in the development of the Inland Waterways Association which he founded along with the writer Robert Aickman and canal historian Charles Hadfield in 1946.

He also wrote one collection of ghost stories, *Sleep No More*, which was published in 1948 by Constable. At the time of publication Michael Sadleir of Constable hailed Rolt as the successor to M.R. James. I would like to make the argument that Rolt's short collection of just fourteen stories does deserve greater recognition. More than simple imitations of what came before, one could argue the collection of stories provides an end-point for the Victorian and Edwardian ghostly tale. Whilst heavily influenced by, and indebted to, the works of Sheridan Le Fanu and M.R. James, Rolt's tales assuredly re-route the traditional ghost story away from the outdated gothic settings of the past and the academic background of James's works - the isolated country churches, foreign abbeys and country halls - into the more identifiable surroundings of post-war Britain with its steam trains, canals and factories. Gone too are Le Fanu's country squires and James's fusty antiquarians, replaced by railwaymen, steel-workers and motor-racing enthusiasts. It is into this more recognisable world populated by ordinary characters that Rolt slips his unease and his dread. Alongside Fritz Leiber, Rolt forges a new path for horror towards the urban stories that populate much of the genre today.

## I. Defining the Ghost Story

In his essay *The Passing of the Ghost Story* first published in *The Saturday Book* No. 16, 1956, Rolt laments the loss of the ghost story, bemoaning how a ‘venerable branch of the storyteller’s art seems to have fallen into neglect’. There was a time, Rolt mourns, ‘when no Christmas annual or Christmas number of a magazine was considered complete without a ghost story’. Rolt notes that critics in the decade since the end of World War Two seem to put the absence of the ghost story down to ‘materialism and cynicism’, suggesting it is ‘an exhausted form doomed to extinction in a world of science fiction’ (Rolt, “Passing”).

It is unsurprising that Rolt felt this way. Rolt’s collection of stories had not sold in the quantities both he and his publisher had hoped (so much so that *Sleep No More* was Rolt’s only excursion into fiction) and the reading public had moved on to new subjects of interest. This is in marked contrast to the early decades of the twentieth century and the Victorian era that preceded it, when published ghost stories were widespread, popular and very much part of the English cultural identity.

Before looking more closely at the stories of L.T.C. Rolt it is important to contextualise and consider their place in the wider history of the genre. As we’ve established, a ‘golden age of the ghost story’ (Sullivan) existed between the decline of the Gothic novel in the 1830s and the start of the First World War. Julia Briggs makes the point that ‘the most characteristic form taken by the Gothic from, perhaps, 1830 to 1930 is the ghost story’ (Briggs 122). It is certainly the case that this period contains rich pickings for any ghost story enthusiast, though, as is the case whenever a particular genre of fiction becomes popular, one must carefully sort the strongest material from less successful imitations.

In her recent study *The Ghost – A Cultural History*, Susan Owens tracks the enduring existence of the ghost story from its earliest forms through to the present day and entitles the chapter on the Victorian era as ‘A Haunted Century’ (184). She begins by focussing on Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* published in 1843, suggesting ‘Dickens re-fashioned the ghost story for the Victorian era’ (189) with his tale.

For the Victorians, Christmas Eve was a time for ghost stories. The roots of this tradition can be unearthed in paganism, the winter solstice or shortest day marking the time on the calendar when the dead were believed to have closest access to the living. Rolt himself recognises this oral tradition, noting that when ‘the winter wind boomed in the chimney...storytellers would...do their best to fright’ (Rolt, “Passing”).

John Sutherland points out that ‘The ghost story thrives on that holiday from rationalism, clear thinking and emotional self-restraint, which Christmas induces’ (Sutherland), something the BBC explored to their credit with a series of adaptations of various ghost stories, beginning with Johnathan Miller’s excellent dramatisation of M.R. James’s classic tale *Oh, Whistle and I’ll Come to You, My Lad* first aired on Christmas Eve 1968.

Rather than something new, Vic Zoschak observes that there is ‘etymological evidence’ that the tradition of telling ghostly tales in the depths of winter ‘stretches back at least to Shakespeare’s time’ (Zoschak).

In Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*, Marlowe writes:

Now I remember those old women’s words  
Who in my wealth would tell me winter’s tales  
And speak of spirits and ghosts that glide by night

Similarly, William Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale* includes Prince Maximillius remarking, ‘A sad tale’s best for winter; I have one / Of sprites and goblins.’

At the darkest time of the year families would spend the cold winter evenings exchanging stories that ‘ritually exorcised isolation and terror’ (Briggs 126).

Note the shift in tone that appears in Jerome K Jerome’s introduction to an anthology of ghost stories, *Told After Supper*, in which Jerome writes, ‘Nothing satisfies us on Christmas Eve but to hear each other tell authentic anecdotes about spectres. It is a genial, festive season, and we love to muse upon grave, and dead bodies, and murders, and blood’ (Jerome). Isolation and terror have been replaced by genial musings and satisfactions, suggesting that the ghost story had become an entertainment.

At the beginning of the 19th Century, Christmas was not celebrated by the population at large. It was institutionalised by Queen Victoria’s marriage to the German-born Prince Albert in 1848 and by the end of the century it had become an event far more like the one we recognise today.

The Christmas ghost story was institutionalised around the same time by Charles Dickens. ‘Feasting, games, and domestic dramas were the order of the “twelve days of Christmas” in the 1840s Dickens household,’ writes Sutherland and ‘Dickens made the annual event a merry holiday’. Keen to ‘open the hearts of the prosperous and powerful’

towards the living conditions of the poor, Dickens subtitled *A Christmas Carol*, 'A Ghost Story for Christmas' (Sutherland).

Susan Owens observes how the '1840s was an apt time to re-shape the ghost as a moral teacher' (187) and how Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* in protest against the effects of industrialisation and urban expansion, poor living conditions for the working classes and the 'exploitation of children through child labour' (187).

The book was a huge success and reached a wider audience through the theatre, with various companies (as many as eight) dramatizing the play for performance from as early as February 1844.

In 1850 Dickens published a weekly journal called *Household Words*. It had a weekly average circulation of approximately 38,500, though Christmas editions sold between 80,000 and 100,000 copies\*. Significantly, *Household Words* often contained supernatural stories (Allingham).

But why did the Victorians take to ghost stories so enthusiastically?

Vic Zoschack argues that 'the Victorian Age was one in which spiritual beliefs were constantly being upended by scientific discoveries' (Zoschak). Were the Victorians clinging to a past threatened by change and taking solace in ghost stories and spiritualism as comfort from Darwinism, industrial progress and science?

Many critics and historians have suggested as much but Susan Owens argues that the rise in interest in spiritualism, or communicating with the dead was in fact because this was perceived to be possible due to the rapid progress being made in the field of communication. If a 'message could be sent a long distance by an invisible force' states Owens, 'it was a relatively small imaginative step to put one of those two points in the spirit world' (202). Séances and spiritualist gatherings between people who, perhaps subconsciously, wanted to believe in the presence of spirits led to the notion of spiritualism reaching a heyday between the 1860s and the 1880s.

The 1880s also signalled the revival of the gothic form in literature, mainly due to the success of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, 1886.

In the shorter form, Rolt identifies Edgar Allan Poe's collection *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* as a classic of the art, whilst Briggs notes that '(Poe) set a high value on the self-sufficiency of a short story that might be readily absorbed at a single sitting' (Briggs 125). It is this economy of scale that Owens identifies as the 'ghost story's dramatic potential', noting that it was suited to the constraints of the short story form.



Improvements in technology and education during the Victorian era led to improved literacy and a public with a thirst for reading. With ghost stories high on the list, a 'new generation of writers' informs Owens 'was given a mandate by a large and enthusiastic audience' to create short ghost stories (190).

The ghost story, as we shall see, is one that moves with the times and adapts to the climate in which it exists. As is ever thus, younger writers developed ghostly tales that contemporary readers were drawn to due to their recognisable contemporary settings. In the hands of these writers, readers' expectations were continually frustrated and suspense was kept alive. As Owens states, 'the demand for more and more stories liberated them, allowing them to make their presence felt in different ways and spaces.' (190)

Over half a century later, L.T.C. Rolt would do the same with the ghost story, as it was familiar to him, utilising its familiar plot devices to tackle 'a world full of sinister possibilities' (Rolt, "Passing") and unleash his own terrors.

First printed as *By the Century's Deathbed* in *The Graphic* on 29 December 1900, Thomas Hardy's poem *The Darkling Thrush*, written in December 1899, illustrates how the poet, whilst alluding to the poetry of the past, is writing in a familiar language of the time, rich with the imagery of the ghost story.

I leant upon a coppice gate  
When Frost was spectre-grey,  
And Winter's dregs made desolate  
The weakening eye of day.  
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky  
Like strings of broken lyres,  
And all mankind that haunted night  
Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be  
The Century's corpse outleant,  
His crypt the cloudy canopy,  
The wind his death-lament.  
The ancient pulse of germ and birth  
Was shrunken hard and dry,

And every spirit upon earth  
Seemed fervourless as I.  
(Hardy)

The opening stanzas of the poem are full of metaphorical imagery connected to death and ghostliness. Note Hardy's use of the image of the 'spectre', the 'desolate' outlook, the words 'haunted', 'corpse', 'death lament', the image of a 'shrunken hard and dry' landscape. The nineteenth century itself is a ghost.

Owens points out that the new century brought with it a 'sense of unease and a mood of introspection'. The size and pace of industrialisation in the late Georgian and Victorian era had altered the character of Britain, creating an 'ever-widening gulf between city and country and upset the old balance between manufacturing, trade and agriculture (220)', an imbalance that Rolt identifies as still being present during the years between the wars, and addresses in his memoir, *Landscape with Machines*.

The populace at the turn of the century looked to the landscape as a means of preserving a sense of national identity. The National Trust was founded in 1895 and Owens observes how this led to the country being 're-imagined as a repository of ancient history and legend (221).'

No writer was better suited to serve the reading public a concoction of ghost stories and ancient history than Montague Rhodes James. Owens embellishes this point when she states 'the country hides the past in its pockets in the stories of M.R. James'. James wrote of buried histories guarded by malevolent supernatural entities and of knowledgeable professors, often his protagonists, who, through obstinacy, arrogance and a thirst for knowledge or power, disturb things that ordinary country folk know are better not being disturbed.

William Hughes argues that 'James's tales construct an almost idyllic late-Victorian and Edwardian world', one in which the reader would be forgiven for thinking the industrial revolution had not yet taken place. In his introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of *Collected Ghost Stories* Darryl Jones points out that 'M.R. James understood himself to be a Victorian, sometimes at sea in, and often at odds with, the modern world' (James).

'While much Victorian fiction veers between asserting family values and exposing their deceptions,' says Briggs, 'the ghost story could do both at the same time. M.R. James...stands conveniently at the centre of two centuries of ghost-story writing' (127).

Bloom argues that 'James's interest in the past was based on an avoidance of the future'. James certainly harks back to the Victorian era he felt so much a part of ('I am a Victorian') in his fiction, but he also warns against the over-zealous plundering of the present. James respected the past and understood something of the many layers that kept things buried within it. Many of his tales offer us stark and terrifying examples of what might happen to an individual who chooses to sweep away these layers without due care and deference.

Conversely, Rolt's ghost stories acknowledge the past, and the literary traditions in which they rooted, whilst also embedding themselves firmly in the contemporary surroundings in which they are set. Rather than offering the comfortably familiar, which some critics have argued is part of James's appeal, Rolt aimed for realism. He also rejected nostalgia. In *Landscape with Machines*, Rolt states:

I had always disliked those romanticised books about rural England designed to suppress the ugly truths and to make their readers forget that there had ever been an Industrial Revolution or even any Enclosure Acts, by painting a false picture of a countryside unchanged since the Middle Ages, or certainly since the mid-eighteenth century...their writers make much play with the adjective 'unspoiled' without pausing to consider its significance, much less to ask themselves who has done the spoiling and why (62).

## II. The Ghost Story and its Relation to the Gothic

During the Victorian era there was a move away from the traditional gothic elements that identified the ghost story, but the shift took place very gradually. As Owens notes 'the Gothic tradition of the large, decaying, solitary house as a haunt for ghosts is strongly maintained'. This is the case until well into the second half of the nineteenth century. This is hardly surprising. Owens identifies how it makes perfect sense for a writer of ghost stories to utilise a house's 'antiquity and large scale - which allows for the existence of long, dark passages, disused rooms and locked-up wings - to create atmospheric spaces in which we could expect to encounter ghostly presences' (190).

Rolt argues that basic plots, gruesome legends and long-standing superstitions were all poured into the 'melting pot of the Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* and its successors'. 'In its extreme form', he suggests, it was 'as crammed full with horrors both natural and supernatural as the most lurid of mediaeval "Last Judgments"...capable of inspiring no more than morbid curiosity today. For the Gothic writers simply did not know when to stop'.

Kelly Hurley begins her essay on 'British Gothic Fiction, 1885-1930' by offering a definition of the Gothic genre:

I understand 'Gothic' as a genre comprised of texts that have been deemed 'popular'; that deploy sensationalist and suspenseful plotting; that practice narrative innovation despite the frequent use of certain repetitive plot elements; that depict supernatural or seemingly supernatural phenomena or otherwise demonstrate a more or less antagonistic relation to realist literary practice; that actively seek to arouse a strong affective response (nervousness, fear, revulsion, shock) in their readers; that are concerned with insanity, hysteria, delusion, and alternate mental states in general; and that offer highly charged and often graphically extreme representations of human identities, sexual, bodily and psychic' (Hurley 194)

Hurley then quotes an M.R. James story *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas*, thus placing James in the Gothic tradition in terms of her appreciation of it.

There is no doubt that many of James's stories contain elements of Hurley's list. Many of L.T.C. Rolt's stories also fit this description but whilst James's stories are atmospheric, it is difficult to argue that his settings are 'overcharged with a fearsome and brooding atmosphere' another typical identifying aspect of the Gothic as described by

Hurley. Nor do his stories contain the ‘excessive imagery, excessive rhetoric, excessive narrative and excessive effect’ as suggested of the Gothic by Fred Botting in *Gothic*.

In fact, as we shall see, James set out with the clear intention of avoiding excess, heavily leaning instead towards restraint or, as James himself liked to describe it, reticence.

Perhaps then, it is easier to see James in the light of David Punter’s definition of the Gothic ‘as a historically delimited genre’ or, as part of a ‘cyclical genre that re-emerges in times of cultural stress in order to negotiate anxieties for its readership by working through them in displaced (sometimes supernaturalised) form’ (Punter).

James was of course writing throughout the death-throes of the Victorian era (Queen Victoria’s mourning of Prince Albert and, indeed, Queen Victoria’s death) and the duration of the horrors of World War One. Provost of King’s College, Cambridge and also of Eton, James lived to see many of his young protégés become casualties. Whilst he was Provost at Cambridge, a field hospital was set up in the University grounds.

A Briggs suggests, ‘In an age haunted by the unnumbered ghosts of those who died in horror and pain at the hands of other human beings, the ghost story can only figure as a form of light relief’ (129). As we shall see, James was often at pains to stress his stories were written to amuse or entertain a reader, whilst also to frighten them with malevolent ghosts.

Whilst there is some mileage in Punter’s argument that ‘James’s settings are often little more than ‘Gothic Stereotypes’ (Punter), I would suggest that there are more than enough examples in James’s work of settings that do not fit the gothic stereotype at all. The climactic scene in *Oh Whistle and I’ll Come to You* takes place in an uninspiring guest house bedroom, the death of Paxton in *A Warning to the Curious* on the wide open expanse of a Suffolk beach rather than a fierce, wind-ravaged headland.

We might end this short section by considering Julia Briggs’ observation that ‘James’s view that the element of the supernatural should erupt within the familiar marks another significant point of difference from the Gothic, which more often follows romance in locating its events in exotic or bizarre settings, whereas the ghost story often takes place in a very mundane and often urban context’(127).

James’s settings, whilst not, as established, always generically gothic, were rarely ‘mundane’ or of ‘urban’ context and neither were many other ghost stories written during this period. L.T.C. Rolt’s ghost stories, some familiarly Jamesian, some anything but, perhaps mark a suitable waypoint. The exception is Rolt’s *Music Hath Charms* that bears many of the hallmarks of a classically gothic tale, sprinkled, as ever, with Rolt’s eye for detail.

The story begins with news of an inheritance. Trevarthen House, ‘traditionally associated with activities of Count Henneze, notorious eighteenth-century smuggler and wrecker’ has fallen into the hands of James Heneage. We learn that the final Trevarthen family member to live there, Sir Peter Trevarthen died ‘improverished, embittered and without an heir’ that in 1750 the house was acquired by Henneze, a Huguenot and that tales of ‘unlimited licence and debauchery’ emerge. Henneze is also ‘reputed to have sold his soul to the devil’. Wrecks on the local ‘Goat Reef’ are put down to Henneze ‘luring vessels to their doom’. This goes on until ‘a reign of violence ended in violence’. Henneze is found ‘with contorted face and broken neck’ (Rolt 103).

All of this is dismissed by James Heneage as a ‘schoolboy thriller’ when he inherits the property and sets about restoring it. The story is wholly gothic in its setting with its ‘soft as only Cornish air can be’, ‘bleak uplands’ that are ‘gaunt’ and ‘derelict’, the ‘eternal voice of the Cornish coast; the endlessly recurring thud and surge of the waves’, the ‘lost crying of the gulls’. On first viewing Trevarthen House glows with ‘reflected fire’, a ‘romantic spectacle’.

Thornton wakes after a ‘dreamless night’ (Rolt 104).

Nothing sinister occurs until the discovery of a music box buried in the wall, one engraved with a sinister image that includes what might be a crouching demon. Rolt is unable to resist describing the inner workings of the little machine, the wooden barrel ‘studded with brass pins’, the ‘diminutive bellows’, the ‘barrel spindle, the ‘S-shaped handle’ (Rolt 106). The section is almost a pastiche.

Later, Thornton, the narrator of the tale and Heneage’s best pal, ruminates that ‘it was as though they had somehow awakened Trevarthen House from sleep’ and that the ‘wakefulness was hostile’. Heneage seems to develop a ‘nervous restlessness’. Mrs Penrice, the housekeeper, becomes ‘ill at ease’. Thornton sleeps badly. The weather changes. There are ‘lashing squalls of rain’ that remind us of Malden’s *Stivinghoe Bank* and the ‘house seemed full of sound’ with ‘creaking noises which suggested stealthy movement’. Thornton imagines he hears the music box again and his friend talking in his sleep. The following dawn is ‘grey and reluctant’. Heneage looks ‘pale and distracted’ and reluctant to make eye contact. There is a ‘barrier of reserve’ between the two men when they part company.

Three years pass. Separated from his friend, Thornton largely forgets about him. Eventually, whilst in Cornwall on business, Thornton bows to curiosity. On arrival his

immediate impulse is to turn back. The house is transformed. It is 'opulent'. It is also full of books on Demonology. There is an unpleasant painting on the wall. James Heneage comes 'noiselessly' into the room. He is 'paler and thinner'. His eyes remain 'restless' and he displays 'peculiar nervous mannerisms of speech and gesture'. He also seems 'smug and self-satisfied'. A girl appears. Heneage calls her Jeanne. She is the 'most striking woman (Thornton) has ever seen' and yet somehow 'repellent' too. He is drawn to her hands that are 'exceptionally long fingered'. They eat. At some point, something 'snuffs and scratches at the door'. A large dog? Heneage calls out an unintelligible word and the creature falls silent. Jeanne plays the piano with 'voluptuous languor' yet the sound also contains a 'nightmare quality'. Thornton realises his friend has become a 'voluptuary' and he doesn't like it.

The ending is powerful and terrifying. Thornton leaves. 'But when he reached the corner he turned to take a last look at the house. As he did so, the front door opened and a figure, which he recognised to be that of James (Heneage), was sharply silhouetted against the rectangle of light. He seemed to be peering out as though looking for something or someone. And then he saw, dimly visible in the light from the windows, that this unknown someone was in fact moving to meet him. Something about its shape and the way it crouched was very familiar to Thornton, and he confesses that at this point he turned and ran, nor did he stop running until he reached his car' (Rolt 113)

Joy Silence sums up the story perfectly by suggesting that *Music Hath Charms* 'ranks among the best in the collection and manages to be...*upsetting* as well as terrifying...a very effective story that is sodden with warped, unwholesome, downright *decadent* atmosphere' (Silence).

### III. M.R. James - What Makes a Good Ghost Story?

James's stories may be distinctive due to the nature of their emergence. As David Punter points out in *The Gothic*, they 'emerged in what is perhaps a unique fashion, in that most of them were initially read to small private audiences before being prepared for publication.' Punter notes how the stories 'combine a leisurely, affable, intimate habit of narration with an ending of sudden, explosive terror' (Punter), less of a quiet, private experience then, far more a shared one.

Reggie Oliver explains 'most of James's devices - the changes of tense, shifts of perspective, inconclusive or unreliable narrations, dislocating little asides - stem from his stories having been written to be read aloud to friends.' (Oliver)

On the 28th October 1893, in the Dean's rooms of King's College, Cambridge a select audience known as the Chit-Chat Society gathered. On the evening of their 601st meeting the entry in the society's minute book records 'M. R. James read two ghost stories.'

We are not required to speculate on the qualities M.R. James thought a ghost story should contain as James relayed this to his reading public in a series of unrelated introductions to various collections and essays (often, it seems, reluctantly) during the course of his writing career. He was keen to point out, however, that 'it is absurd to talk of them as rules; they are qualities which have been observed to accompany success...' (James 407)

The preface to *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary (1911)* contains insight into what James believed a ghost story might contain '...the setting should be fairly familiar and the majority of the characters and their talk such as you may meet or hear any day' (James 406). Unsurprisingly most of James's tales incorporate an antiquarian, academic or scholar moving in such circles, discovering ancient manuscripts or objects and, often unwittingly but also rather rashly, unleashing the ghosts that accompany them. This dose of familiarity, James being, primarily, a hugely respected antiquarian, is what gives his work the strong foundations upon which his horror is built, though we should recognise here that James is writing of a world familiar to him, not necessarily to the everyday reader.

In the *Introduction to V. H. Collins (ed.), Ghosts and Marvels (Oxford, 1924)* James suggests, 'two ingredients most valuable in the concocting of a ghost story are...atmosphere and the nicely managed crescendo' (James 407). James stresses the importance of a gradual building of horror, beginning with the reader being 'introduced to the actors in a placid way...going about their ordinary business, undisturbed by forebodings, pleased with their surroundings' before allowing 'into this calm environment...the ominous



thing...unobtrusively at first, and then more insistently, until it holds the stage,' (James 407) often quite horribly. James repeatedly stresses that the ghost should be 'malevolent or odious' (James 406) and develops this idea further in later introductions, a pre-requisite being the notion that a ghost story must actually do its job of scaring the reader out of their wits '...don't let us be mild and drab. Malevolence and terror, the glare of evil faces, the stony grin of unearthly malice, pursuing forms in darkness, and long-drawn, distant screams, are all in place, and so is a modicum of blood, shed with deliberation and carefully husbanded' (James 415). In fact 'deliberation and carefully husbanded' are key elements of the Jamesian style. There are no 'Grand Guignol', naturalistic, amoral horror type stories, complete with lashings of blood, in James's fiction, though there are moments of physical horror.

On the subject of setting James recommends a 'slight haze of distance' such as 'thirty years ago' or 'not long before the war'(James 407). He is less keen on stories that take place in a more remote past, feeling that 'a ghost story of which the scene is laid in the twelfth or thirteenth century may succeed in being romantic or poetical: it will never put the reader into the position of saying to himself, 'If I'm not very careful, something of this kind may happen to me!' (James 406).

Should the premise of a story involve some link to a more distant past, James offers us some potential techniques for bridging such a gap. 'The finding of documents can be made plausible; or you may begin with your apparition and go back over the years to tell the cause of it; or you may set the scene directly in the desired epoch, which I think is hardest to do with success', he suggests (James 408).

Modern settings are preferred by James so that 'the ordinary reader can judge of its naturalness for himself' alongside 'some degree of actuality strong enough to allow the reader to identify himself with the patient' (James 408).

Objects too, are of use to James when it comes to bringing the past into contact with the present, 'many common objects may be made the vehicles of retribution, and where retribution is not called for, of malice' (James 410). The most famous example of this technique is *Oh Whistle and I'll Come to You*, in which Professor Parkins discovers an ancient whistle, cleans it up and then blows it, unleashing the terror long contained within. *What* that terror is, we never truly learn.

James also stresses the importance of allowing the reader to feel there may be a natural explanation for the events in the story, suggesting 'it is not amiss sometimes to leave a loophole for a natural explanation; but, I would say, let the loophole be so narrow as not to be quite practicable' (James 407). James is a master at this technique, offering the reader just

enough information to create unease but often no more. James understands the power of the imagination to investigate the dark places where the story may not tread. The reader who settles for the rational explanation is left uneasy, not comfortable with their hypothesis. It is in these places of uncertainty where true horror lies.

By 1929 'Some Remarks on Ghost Stories', *The Bookman* (December 1929), James was confident in reflecting upon ghost stories in retrospect and critically engaged in identifying unworkable traits in modern writings within the genre. He particularly stresses the importance of reticence and the problematic employment of blatancy, 'Reticence conduces to effect, blatancy ruins it, and there is much blatancy in a lot of recent stories' (James 415). If James is reflecting upon the rash of imitators that followed in his footsteps in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, he does not go so far as to name them.

Mike Ashley, the bibliographer, author and editor of science fiction, mystery, and fantasy publications such as the *Mammoth Books* makes the following observation. 'James underplayed everything. He never went out of his way to shock, merely unnerve. His spirits had to be evil in intent, but never would he break the spell by describing them in detail. Only a few hints are necessary, and the reader's imagination does the rest' (Ashley)

This is misleading. In a number of his tales, as we shall discover further into this study, James does indeed go to some lengths to describe his spirits and monsters. The subjects who witness their presence may only manage a glance before turning away in horror, but the glance is usually enough for James to convey the physical form of the thing that is haunting its victim.

James saw no reason for sex to burden the content of his tales. 'They drag in sex too' he complains. 'Sex is tiresome enough in the novels; in a ghost story, or as the backbone of a ghost story, I have no patience with it', and later, 'in so doing (they) spoil the whole business' (James 415).

James never married. There is little evidence of a love interest in his life. He certainly had a close relationship with James McBryde (See Appendix), who illustrated *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* but then tragically and suddenly passed away. There is, however, no evidence of a sexual relationship occurring between the two men. Indeed, after McBryde's death James continued a lifelong friendship with McBryde's widow. James's sexual interests seemed to stretch no further than an open enjoyment of all-male playful wrestling, quaintly known in public-schools as 'ragging' or 'animal grab' (Gatiss), though his 'authorial

revulsion from tactile contact with other people' is something Julia Briggs highlights and something we will return to later.

James was not a fan of overly explained stories, a common trait in the latter Victorian period, 'The reading of many ghost stories has shown me that the greatest successes have been scored by the authors who can...allow us to be just a little in the dark as to the working of their machinery. We do not want to see the bones of their theory about the supernatural' (James 415).

James re-iterates this point with specific criticism of the writings of Ann Radcliffe 'whose ghosts are far better of their kind, but with exasperating timidity are all explained away'.

Mike Ashley expands on this point, explaining that James advocated that 'the story had to be easily understood and not overloaded with occult jargon as if it were a thesis rather than fiction' (Ashley).

By the time James wrote his article '*Ghosts — Treat Them Gently!*' *Evening News* (17 April 1931) he had covered most of his key points elsewhere. Still, there was room for some further embellishments, beginning with what a ghost is and is not and what a ghost is capable of doing:

'Since the things which the ghost can effectively do are very limited in number...the setting seems to me all-important, since in it there is the greatest opportunity for variety. It is upon this and upon the first glimmer of the appearance of the supernatural that pains must be lavished. But we need not, we should not, use all the colours in the box' (James 416).

Interestingly, L.T.C. Rolt, who respected the works of M.R. James greatly and who re-visited the stories every five years with precise regularity, felt that James was guilty of employing too few colours, 'their key and tone colour remains the same', Rolt suggests. 'To change the metaphor, the basic ingredients are seldom varied and all the skill lies in the way they are mixed and seasoned' (Rolt, "Passing")

James does not shrink from criticising those tales where he feels too many 'colours' are employed. Here, he seems to have an eye directed at the typical traits of the gothic:

'In the infancy...we needed the haunted castle on a beetling rock to put us in the right frame: the tendency is not yet extinct, for I have but just read a story with a mysterious mansion on a desolate height in Cornwall and a gentleman practising the worst sort of magic.

How often, too, have ruinous old houses been described or shown to me as fit scenes for stories! (James 417).

Both James and Rolt, however, are not wholly innocent of employing such tropes in their fiction. Professor Parkins (*Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad*) discovers the whistle of the title amidst the ruins of a Templar's church. *Canon-Alberic's Scrapbook* begins in the cathedral of St. Bertrand de Comminges, a building full of 'shadows, muffled footfalls and distant talking voices'. Rolt's *Agony of Flame* is set in a ruined castle in Ireland and his *Music Hath Charms* in a house nestled amidst 'rugged cliff scenery' in Cornwall. The subject of that story, James Heneage, does indeed seem to be practicing the 'worst sort of magic' (Rolt 102).

James throws further light on setting, adding a layer of detail to a previous observation: 'Roughly speaking, the ghost should be a contemporary of the seer...the more readily appreciable the setting is to the ordinary reader the better' (James 417).

James also offers further insight into the crafting of the story itself: 'The other essential is that our ghost should make himself felt by gradual stirrings diffusing an atmosphere of uneasiness before the final flash or stab of horror.

Must there be horror? you ask. I think so.

I say you must have horror and also malevolence. Not less necessary, however, is reticence' (James 417).

Initially, James was unforthcoming about his stories. In the preface to *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904) he is modest to the extreme about the tales he has created, 'The stories themselves do not make any very exalted claim. If any of them succeed in causing their readers to feel pleasantly uncomfortable when walking along a solitary road at nightfall, or sitting over a dying Ere in the small hours, my purpose in writing them will have been attained' (James 406). Perhaps, serious academic and antiquarian scholar that he was, James wanted to distance himself from his work and refer to his stories as purely entertainment. Given the context of their creation, this would be perfectly understandable.

This modesty is still present in 1911 when James refers to his tales as 'the mere ghost story, which is all that I am attempting.' He makes no exalted claims about them beyond suggesting that 'if they serve to amuse some readers at the Christmas-time that is coming — or at any time whatever — they will justify my action in publishing them' (James 407).

Even in 1931, just five years before his death, James does not feel the urge to suggest the stories he has created (almost forty) are anything more than light-hearted fun. 'But,

although the subject has its fascinations. I see no use in being pontifical about it. These stories are meant to please and amuse us. If they do so, well; but, if not, let us relegate them to the top shelf and say no more about it' thus dismissing them' (James 418).

Perhaps this is simply a case of James contextualising and contrasting his interest (and popularity) in writing ghost stories against the serious academic studies he embarked upon his whole life and for which, in antiquarian and academic circles, he is more widely respected and recognised. It seems that each time he might be seen to be taking his stories seriously in seeking to terrify or horrify his reader, he quickly retracts and passes the stories off as purely for amusement or 'light-hearted fun'.

But what of James's tales? Is James justified in his modesty? David Punter argues that's the case, suggesting 'James's tales do not invite the reader to dwell too long on horrors because this would be entirely out of keeping with the scholarly, or gentlemanly ambience' whilst Julia Briggs claims in James's tales 'psychology is totally and defiantly excluded' and that 'James's tales are therefore grounded in an 'aesthetic based on the pleasure of avoidance of deeper symbolic meaning' (Punter).

Clive Bloom argues that 'James's stories belong to modernity and the age of the tourist. Their nostalgia is urban and whimsical and complacently upper middle class' and 'There is nothing behind the horror in M.R. James. And the horror is doubly effective because of its unspoken origin (the horrors rarely have explanations). What is left is a series of images, stark, eldritch displays of the beyond which remain with the atmosphere of haunted places'. He continues 'in a world of rapid change they speak of the unchanging and the traditional: the ghost is innately conservative' (Bloom).

Punter, Briggs and Bloom make strong points here. L.T.C. Rolt's ghost stories, for the most part, may be similarly dismissed in terms of the unchanging and traditional style of their delivery and subsequently enjoyed merely for the familiar pleasures they deliver, but there is nothing conservative about the best of Rolt's fiction and in at least two stories, *Hawley Bank Foundry* and *The Garside Fell Disaster*, there is room for some serious analytical and contextual exploration. It might also be argued that Rolt's *Cwm Garon* is a serious reflection on the natural world and cosmic order.

Zoe Lehmann Imfeld argues differently about the work of M.R. James when she states that 'reading M.R.J's stories without reference to his otherwise orthodox moral scheme is a missed opportunity. As in Machen's tales, it is ultimately not the ghosts and demons which haunt M.R.J's stories, but the human being as fallen man. M.R.J's Christian orthodoxy

means that the haunted characters of the plot are at once those who haunt the piece' (Imfeld 80).

It is very much the case in James's work that the victims of his ghosts are those who have succumbed, be it to greed, temptation and/or a thirst for forbidden knowledge.

The notion that James's stories 'work well, but [...] mean almost nothing' (Punter) as argued by Punter in *The Literature of Terror*, probably would not have worried James too much. And certainly, James was not initially remembered for his ghost stories. As John Sutherland points out 'the obituaries, when James died in 1936, made scant reference to his spine-chillers.'

However, it is not challenging to locate praise for James.

HP Lovecraft considered James to be 'a literary weird fictionist of the very first rank'. 'In inventing a new type of ghost,' argues Lovecraft, 'he has departed considerably from the conventional Gothic tradition; for where the older stoic ghosts were pale and stately, and apprehended chiefly through the sense of sight, the average James ghost is lean, dwarfish, and hairy - a sluggish, hellish night - abomination midway betwixt beast and man - and usually touched before it is seen. Sometimes the spectre is of still more eccentric composition; a roll of flannel with spiders eyes,, or an invisible entity which moulds itself in bedding and shows a face of crumpled linen...and intelligent and scientific knowledge of human nerves and feelings; and knows just how to apportion statement, imagery, and subtle suggestions in order to secure the best results with his readers. He is an artist in incident and arrangement rather than in atmosphere.' (Lovecraft)

'He brought to the form an exceptional technical mastery,' argues Briggs, 'a brilliantly dry tone against which his supernatural horrors are silhouetted'(127).

Contemporary writer and current master of horror Ramsey Campbell points out that 'It's his genius for the phrase or sentence that epitomises so much dread and the uncanny that most of us struggle to achieve in a page. There's an astonishing succinctness and brevity of statement' (Campbell, "3am")

#### IV. L.T.C. Rolt - The Passing of the Ghost Story

It may be interesting, at this point, to amalgamate James's writings on the history of the ghost story with L.T.C. Rolt's essay *The Passing of the Ghost Story*.

Rolt identifies two writers he deems to be 'the first great masters of the supernatural art', Edgar Allan Poe and Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, quickly establishing Le Fanu as the true master. James, as we have learned, does the same. What is it about Le Fanu's works that attract both M.R. James and L.T.C. Rolt? Rolt describes Le Fanu's 'infinitely guileful brilliance with which he conjures up his apparitions' and acknowledges that this is 'a technique entirely his own to which all subsequent practitioners are indebted' (Rolt, "Passing") James argues 'I do not think that there are better ghost stories anywhere than the best of Le Fanu's', identifying the 'blend of French and Irish in Le Fanu's descent and surroundings that gives him the knack of infusing ominousness into his atmosphere' and his artistic skill with language. He also remarks that 'Le Fanu was a scholar and poet, and these tales show him as such' demonstrating an obvious respect. He acknowledges Le Fanu's ability to deliver 'the approaches of the supernatural nicely graduated; the climax adequate', applauding how 'there is wonderfully little that is obsolete in his manner' and 'nobody sets the scene better than he, nobody touches in the effective detail more deftly.'

James was well-schooled in the ghost story and its heritage, as evidenced in the essay (iii) from the *Prologue to J. S. Le Fanu, Madam Cowl's Ghost (1923)*, 'Were not the prototypes of all the best ghost stories written in the sixties and seventies?' Here James harks back to Le Fanu for clearly Le Fanu is the writer James most respects as a writer of ghost stories. '[Le Fanu] stands absolutely in the first rank as a writer of ghost stories...nobody sets the scene better than he, nobody touches in the effective detail more deftly.'

James embellishes his point as follows:

The gradual removal of one safeguard after another, the victim's dim forebodings of what is to happen gradually growing clearer; these are the processes which generally increase the strain of excitement...the unexplained hints which are dropped are of the most telling kind... The reader is never allowed to know the full theory which underlies any of his ghost stories... Only you feel that he has a complete explanation to give if he would only vouchsafe it"

(James *The Novels and Stories of J Sheridan Le Fanu* )

Mullen recognises the skills Le Fanu employed in James's own work. 'It is through subtle, chance preliminary encounters with "the ominous thing" that the atmosphere and tension of a good James story builds', going on to say that 'in leaving his readers to fill in the gaps, the author mastered the "peculiar power" he so admired in Le Fanu's best stories' (Mullen).

James identifies Le Fanu's *The Familiar* as his best work, whilst Rolt is more taken by the story *Squire Toby's Will*, celebrating the writer's ability to create stories which 'linger uncomfortably in the back of the mind' and stressing the importance of Le Fanu's skill at creating horror through subtle effect, 'the most grotesque and hideous monster ever conceived cannot be so frightening as the sudden revelation that the normal and familiar is not, after all, what it seems'. Despite this praise Rolt feels Le Fanu is guilty of repeated ideas and 'changing only the setting and the names of the characters.' It seems that, in general, Rolt was far more secure in engaging in criticism than James, something that might simply be put down to James's quiet and modest temperament.

Where *The Familiar* succeeds perhaps, is in its ability to introduce horror to the everyday. Much of it takes place in familiar settings, in newly constructed Dublin streets. It is a story of mental isolation and mental decay, a haunting of the mind of the victim, a relentless, teasing pursuit in which the ghost almost revels, as Captain Barton, the protagonist's largely rational world-view is gradually eaten away at, until the only viable escape for him is death.

Rolt is enthusiastic about the dog in Le Fanu's *Squire Toby's Will* however 'from the moment when the dog is seen fawning and writhing in obscene ecstasy upon the tomb of old Squire Toby,' he writes, 'its white body extended to a length quite disproportionate, it becomes a creature most horrible, the mere clattering of its claws in the nocturnal corridors of Gylingden Hall more disturbing in its import than the baying of all the hell-hounds of legend put together' (Rolt, "Passing"). He also applauds the way in which Le Fanu handles a variation upon the Faustian legend in *Schalken the Painter*. Here, by avoiding obvious descriptions of the demon as being 'distinguished as a species by a cloven foot or a smell of brimstone' and instead focussing on how we 'at first accept as natural the strange visitor to the studio of Gerard Douw,' Rolt appreciates how the reader becomes 'horrified when certain subtle peculiarities are remarked: the dark skin; the unblinking eyes in which the whites are



visible all round the iris; and a stillness in repose so profound that no motion even of breathing can be detected' (Rolt, "Passing")

Rolt does pick up on one other less successful element of Le Fanu's work, that being the detached narrator. Rolt bemoans how 'Each is presented as though it had been extracted from the case book of a pseudo-scientific investigator named Doctor Hesselius', labelling this stylistic device as a 'serious mistake...an unwanted extra.' 'If it is to make its full impact upon the reader', Rolt argues, it 'should remain as irrational and as inexplicable as a nightmare.' Here Rolt is echoing James. He stresses that 'the most effective ghost stories are told in direct narrative...one reason why *Squire Toby's Will* excels is that it is told directly' (Rolt, "Passing") Given that we've already established James's similar misgivings about such literary tactics it is surprising he does not mention this fact.

Certainly the stories of M.R. James and the best of L.T.C. Rolt represent a logical development of Le Fanu's technique though Michael Cox, in his introduction to the 2009 re-issue of '*Casting the Runes and Other Ghost Stories*', suggests James is 'more anarchic than Le Fanu' (Cox).

Rolt has the advantage of building on the techniques of James himself and acknowledges this thus, 'James's power of invention is unsurpassed. Moreover, no other writer in this field has ever maintained so consistent a standard' (Rolt, "Passing"). Rolt recognises how James' immediate background and 'academic milieu' aid his ghostly storytelling that is '...perfectly suited to the display of his particular powers, distilling as it did an atmosphere which made his singular inventions all too easily credible' (Rolt, "Passing").

We shall see how Rolt employs this technique to great effect in his strongest tales.

Rolt compares James' work to the gothic tradition that came before it, the very same that James dismisses. 'This world of his is, when we come to think of it, simply an ingenious variant of that Gothic gloom in which earlier and simpler writers wallowed. The difference is that whereas their characters lived in the ruins, so to speak, James's elderly and eminently respectable scholars visit them in the spirit of archaeological inquiry' (Rolt, "Passing").

Rolt then goes on to suggest a particular methodology that reoccurs in James' stories. He names it 'somewhat irreverently, the Aladdin's Lamp method', explaining how James's antiquarians, in their search for greater knowledge, invariably uncover a relic from a bygone

age and through actions such as murmuring a latin inscription aloud or studying a picture too closely ‘pay a high price for their curiosity’ (Rolt, “Passing”).

And whilst it is clear that Rolt admires James and his works, Rolt is also able to offer critical appraisal:

‘If James has a fault it is that he betrays, in some not easily definable way, a kind of impish glee, a malicious delight in his ability to frighten his readers. With infinite relish he sets about the task of freezing our blood and performs it most efficiently, but we are aware that his own blood has never cooled and that he does not believe a word of what he writes’ (Rolt, “Passing”).

Is James himself to blame for this for dismissing his stories as ‘mere entertainments’? Rolt argues that Algernon Blackwood and Arthur Machen ‘succeed in convincing their readers that they believe their own stories’ in a manner in which James fails, ‘so effectually’ Rolt goes on, ‘that wisps of the sinister necromantic fog which pervade their stories seem to hang about the writers themselves’ (Rolt, “Passing”).

Susan Hill, in her introduction to Rolt’s ‘Sleep No More’, argues something similar for Rolt, ‘There is occasionally a touch of melancholy, or wistfulness, in L.T.C. Rolt’s stories, but never laughter’ (Rolt X). Hill makes an important point. Rolt’s stories are nothing if not deadpan. The narrators may often be working class men and the framing device the telling of a story over a pint in the bar, but these men are not telling their stories for laughs. They are earnest and sincere and the reader can almost imagine the ponderous silence that ensues in those locations when the tale is finished.

It is interesting that Rolt finds some solidarity with Blackwood and Machen, describing them as ‘predominantly outdoor men’ in comparison to James’s ‘conjurations indoors’ and their interest in ‘elemental things’ (Rolt, “Passing”). These traits play a large part in the writings of Rolt himself, particularly in one of his strongest stories *Cwm Garon*, *The House of Vengeance* and *The Shouting*.

Like James, Rolt advocates an ‘atmosphere of mounting suspense’ and content containing ‘malign influence’ before mentioning some of the writers of James’s era. E. F. Benson, H. R. Wakefield and Oliver Onions are described as ‘not always successful’, and yet, with *The Room in the Tower*, *Look Up There*, and *The Beckoning Fair One* respectively, ‘each has earned his place among the masters’ (Rolt, “Passing”).

‘But where are the practising masters of today?’ laments Rolt towards the end of his essay. ‘The commonest fault of these modern stories is that they are too short’ he claims and then goes on to expound why a very short ghost story is rarely successful, ‘If it is to convince the reader, the process whereby the abnormal gradually intrudes and imposes itself upon the normal cannot be hurried...’ (Rolt, “Passing”), a point James stresses in his final essay on the genre ‘*Ghosts — Treat Them Gently!*’, *Evening News* (17 April 1931) when he explains that ‘our ghost should make himself felt by gradual stirrings diffusing an atmosphere of uneasiness before the final flash or stab of horror...’

And that horror in a modern tale, suggests Rolt, can be found by mining contemporary issues. ‘Never was a world so full of sinister possibilities awaiting exploitation’ he argues, pointing to Michael Asquith’s *The Uninvited Face* in which the victim is ‘an atomic physicist’ (Rolt, “Passing”). In his story *Hawley Bank Foundry*, for instance, Rolt finds a subject that engages all of his contemporary concerns.

Towards the latter end of his writing career (and his life) James similarly produced writings on the literary heritage of the ghost story. These appeared as ‘*Some Remarks on Ghost Stories*’, *The Bookman* (December 1929), 169–172. He begins by clarifying his area of study, ‘I am concerned with a branch of fiction; not a large branch, if you look at the rest of the tree, but one which has been astonishingly fertile in the last thirty years. The avowedly fictitious ghost story is my subject.’

James points out some works by Dickens that are worthy of mention. He stresses that he does not ‘call *A Christmas Carol* a ghost story proper’, though he does confess that he found ‘the introduction, the advent, of Jacob Marley...tremendously effective’. James recognises *The Signalman* and *The Juryman* as two Dickensian tales worthy of mention. *The Signalman* is a tale that Rolt would surely have enjoyed. Indeed, Rolt’s *The Garside Fell Disaster* covers similar ground. Both stories contain a lone signalman in an isolated setting, a growing sense of unease, swirling and disorientating mists, cloying weather and an earth-wrenching finale.

James remarks that both *The Signalman* and *The Juryman* ‘conform to the modern idea of the ghost story’, noting that ‘the setting and the personages are those of the writer’s own day’, two ingredients we know James saw as crucial to a story’s successful recipe and that Rolt most certainly uses in all of his fiction.

James skirts over a number of other famous novelists of the Dickensian era, stressing that he must mention Bulwer Lytton as ‘nobody is permitted to write about ghost stories without mentioning *The Haunters and the Haunted* (1859), even if James finds the ending unsatisfactory, suggesting it is ‘spoilt by the conclusion’. A familiar haunted house story to any contemporary reader of ghost stories, Lytton’s tale does include some genuinely frightening moments and the sort of malevolent ghost that James would have approved of, a physical manifestation of purest dread:

It was a darkness shaping itself forth from the air in very undefined outline. I cannot say it was of a human form, and yet it had more resemblance to a human form, or rather shadow, than to anything else. As it stood, wholly apart and distinct from the air and the light around it, its dimensions seemed gigantic, the summit nearly touching the ceiling. While I gazed, a feeling of intense cold seized me...as I continued to gaze, I thought — but this I cannot say with precision — that I distinguished two eyes looking down on me from the height. (Bulwer-Lytton)

Lytton’s story is both engaging, occasionally frightening but also lacking in subtlety. It is a story in which too much happens, perhaps too soon, and one that does indeed suffer from a long final section that ruminates long after the action has ceased.

‘In the early nineties comes the deluge’ of the illustrated monthly magazines, as James describes it. He suggests that Stoker’s *Dracula* is ‘a book with very good ideas in it, but one that ‘suffers by excess’ and then arrives, much like Rolt, at his immediate contemporaries. You get the sense James is on more fragile footing here. These writers are often not just contemporaries but his close acquaintances. There are brief comments upon the works of E. F. Benson, A. M. Burrage, H. R. Wakefield, Mrs Everett, Hugh Benson and K. and Hesketh Prichard. One other list hastily concocted, it feels, by James reads ‘of living writers I have some hesitation in speaking, but on any list that I was forced to compile the names of E. F. Benson, Blackwood, Burrage, De la Mare and Wakefield would find a place.’ Other names are notably absent.

James was aware that he was living through a ‘deluge’ of his own, observing ‘The recrudescence of ghost stories in recent years is notable: it corresponds, of course, with the vogue of the detective tale.’ Perhaps this is why he remained so reticent about his own work throughout his life? Perhaps he was torn between his religious upbringing, the horror of World War One and his serious academic responsibilities?

To sum-up this section then, we have identified the following suggestions from James himself about what makes a ghost story work: lack of melodrama and an emphasis on reticence; deliberately malevolent and odious spirits; an easily understood tale; familiar settings; a gentle introduction leading to a nicely managed crescendo; a loophole for a natural explanation; a slight haze of distance; objects as vehicles of retribution; horror.

It is my intention to show how L.T.C. Rolt not only accepted James's suggested techniques for his storytelling, and often utilised the same, but how he also applied a unique approach to the genre to carry the Jamesian ghost story out of the early 1900s and into the mid-20th Century. I also aim to demonstrate how, at his best, Rolt's fiction casts the traditional ghost story of the Victorian and Edwardian age into a form that enables, in some small way, the creation of the weird fiction and outright horror that emerges thereafter.

In Rolt's hands the distant and largely inaccessible world of James becomes terrifyingly familiar. Gone are seekers of crowns and ancient manuscripts. Instead we witness the lives and terrors of miners, foundry workers, signal operatives and country rambles. These are the places and people Rolt knew and his ability to describe and capture them are what leads to the authenticity of his tales.

Rolt's widest diversion from the style of M.R. James comes in his stories set amongst the Black Mountains of Wales. Often Rolt's malevolent beings are the more familiar ghosts that might appear in a Jamesian tale but when he gets his characters out in open country, particularly in the wilds of the Welsh mountains, Rolt seems more aligned to two other great writers of the Jamesian era, Arthur Machen and Algernon Blackwood. This is most clear in the stories in which Rolt's malevolent entities seem to manifest from the natural world. Here, Rolt is leaning towards the poetry of Yeats which he was exposed to as a younger man and which he read throughout his life, and his upbringing on the border of England and Wales where the Black Mountains were an enticing and foreboding backdrop.

It might be useful to incorporate some biographical information on L.T.C. Rolt at this point. Rolt's grandparents left their house in Cropthorne, Worcestershire because it was 'heavily haunted' (Rolt, "Landscape" 6) by 'heavy footfalls tramping up the stairs and through the corridors' and 'resounding thumps from the attic' as if a ghostly visitor were removing heavy boots.' Perhaps hearing these stories as a child ignited Rolt's interest in the supernatural? What we know for a fact is that Rolt was heavily influenced by Yeats, Francis Kilvert and Thomas Traherne. The *Diary of Francis Kilvert* was published in 1938. Kilvert was curate at Clyro, a Radnorshire village just across the Wye from Hay between 1865-1872. Rolt's family moved to Hay in 1914 when he was four years old. The surrounding

countryside had a profound effect upon him as he explains in *Landscape with Machines*, ‘its beauty and wildness was capable of inducing in me a strange feeling of intense exaltation that was part awed reverence and part terror. It could make my spine tingle and the hair on my head stand up. It was from such experiences and not from the teaching of any organised religion that there has stemmed my conviction that there is a God beyond human conceptions of good and evil. The reverse of this medal is that I believe these same experiences to be the source of my lifelong interest in supernatural evil’ (Rolt, “Landscape” 11)

During the course of his life, Rolt’s interest in the region remained. He studied the ‘the great mystical writings of Silurian Henry Vaughan and his contemporary Thomas Traherne’ and realised ‘with shock and wonderment’ that they had been similarly influenced by the same landscape (Rolt, “Landscape” 11). Rolt also read the short stories of Arthur Machen, *The Novel of the Black Seal*, *The Great God Pan*, *The Shining Pyramid* and *The White People*, and recognised that Machen, born at Caerleon, ‘had experienced (the region’s) darker side’ (Rolt, “Landscape 12)

Through Kilvert’s diaries, Rolt discovered a ‘single terse and otherwise inexplicable sentence’ that he would come to repeat in two of his stories ‘An angel satyr walks these hills’ (Rolt, “Landscape 12).

During his childhood, Rolt regularly accompanied his mother on long walks into the countryside. In *Landscape with Machines* he recalls a particular family outing in a two-horse wagonette as being particularly memorable. The family traversed the flank of Pen y Beacon, where a ‘breathtaking view unfold(ed)’ but then they moved into the Gospel Pass or the Pass of the Evangelists. Rolt explains ‘I found myself translated into a landscape much smaller in scale but in my eyes far more fascinating because it appeared so lonely, so secret and so strange.’ This was the Vale of Ewyas and the lost hamlet of Capel-y-ffyn, with its ‘tenantless monastery buildings’. Rolt explains ‘I will only say that if ever it is vouchsafed to man to see visions, then it would be in such a place as this valley whose very air seemed to a child to be numinous and charged with magic. A sad depressing place’ (Rolt, “Landscape” 21).

This landscape becomes the setting for two of Rolt’s stories, *The House of Vengeance* and one of his most powerful tales *Cwm Garon*.

On the subject of childhood influences, ‘*In Ghosts - Treat Them Gently*’ James responds to the question ‘What first interested me in ghosts?’ by explaining, ‘This I can tell you quite definitely. In my childhood I chanced to see a toy Punch and Judy set, with figures cut out in cardboard. One of these was The Ghost. It was a tall figure habited in white with an

unnaturally long and narrow head, also surrounded with white, and a dismal visage. Upon this my conceptions of a ghost were based, and for years it permeated my dreams' (James 416).

Yet it seems there is more. The short, and seemingly autobiographical piece entitled *A Vignette* published after his death, suggests that M.R. James may have witnessed the sighting of a figure in the grounds of the Sussex rectory that was his childhood home. 'I see myself' writes James 'in the small hours gazing out of the window across moonlit grass...a face was looking my way...malevolent...pink...hot...a white linen drapery hung down from the brows...a glamour of madness about it...a draped form shambling away among the trees' (James, 405)

James often had to deal with questions asking him whether or not he believed in or had ever seen a ghost. Here is James's response to that question from an article published in the *Morning Post*, October 9th, 1923. 'It is purely a matter of evidence with me. I have heard reports that seem absolutely genuine; on the other hand I have heard others based on the most insecure evidence. Personally I have had no experience of ghosts' (James, "Morning"). Notes from the BFI DVD booklet that accompanies the box set 'Ghost Stories for Christmas' suggest that James was 'sceptical and agnostic rather than dogmatically atheist' in his beliefs. What we also know is that James divided ghost stories into 'those which are founded in folklore and the purely literary tale. The folk-tales, which existed everywhere, formed the basis of ghostly literature, which grew out of them.' (James, "Morning")

**V. A Taxonomical Analysis of the Ghost Stories of M.R. James and L.T.C. Rolt  
with Wider Literary Connections**



## Horror of the Senses

In *Horror Fiction: In Search of a Definition*, Clive Bloom identifies a particular story by Lafcadio Hearn entitled *Nightmare Touch*, which the writer begins with ‘prefatory comments on ‘the fear of ghosts’. ‘It is not a fear of bodily violence. It is not even a reasoning fear - ‘Now I venture to state boldly that the common fear of ghosts is the fear of being touched by ghosts’ (160).

Ramsey Campbell directs the reader of James’s ghost stories to F Marion Crawford’s *The Upper Berth* mentioning that it was a ‘crucial predecessor’ and a story that James ‘greatly admired’. HP Lovecraft suggested that the story was ‘One of the most tremendous supernatural stories in all of literature’. Campbell points out that what makes the story unique is that ‘the drowned spectre is incredibly physical and the narrator feels it before seeing it.’(Campbell, “3am”)

Like L.T.C. Rolt, Crawford only published one actual volume of ghost stories entitled *Uncanny Tales* in 1903. *The Upper Berth* was first published in *The Broken Shaft, Tales in Mid-Ocean*, 1885 an anthology of ghost stories told within a framework of a nautical journey.

During a dull evening aboard the imaginary ship, the protagonist, Brisbane, calls for a cigar and tells his tale. Brisbane is very much a man’s man, unlike James’s protagonists perhaps, but not so unlike Rolt’s.

Brisbane relays how he was travelling across the Atlantic on a ship called the Kamtschatka. Taking cabin 105 Brisbane is disappointed to find that he has a roommate for his voyage, a man he forms an instant dislike to. ‘A little overdressed—a little odd,’ notes Brisbane. ‘There are three or four of his kind on every ocean steamer.’ Brisbane does not have to put up with him for long. During the night his unwelcome roommate leaps from his bed and runs out of room, leaving the door ajar. Later, the narrator hears the man moving about in the top bunk. There is the damp smell of sea-water, a groan, but in the morning the roommate is, once again, not present. He is, in fact, missing.

Brisbane rejects warnings and offers to move to a different cabin despite fears that his roommate may have gone overboard, as have others who stayed in cabin 105 on previous trips. The cabin, it seems, has a reputation. The porthole to 105 keeps opening by itself. The steward shuts it but it opens again in the night. Brisbane hears a noise, a ‘faint groan’ and reaches into the upper berth in darkness.

‘...thrusting in my hands to discover if there were any one there. There was someone.’

This direct, factual statement leads to the physical description of the entity. The character Brisbane recalls:

I remember that the sensation as I put my hands forward was as though I were plunging them into the air of a damp cellar, and from behind the curtains came a gust of wind that smelled horribly of stagnant sea-water. I laid hold of something that had the shape of a man’s arm, but was smooth, and wet, and icy cold. But suddenly, as I pulled, the creature sprang violently forward against me, a clammy, oozy mass, as it seemed to me, heavy and wet, yet endowed with a sort of supernatural strength.

(Crawford)

Will Ross and Mike Taylor make the point that this scene inverts the typical ghost story (Ross). The man of action grabs the ghost rather than the other way around. Here is physical horror, the assault on the senses we see so often in James’s tales. There are subtle differences however. Crawford uses the expressive adjectives ‘clammy’ and ‘oozy’, as well as more neutral adjectives such as ‘heavy’ and ‘wet’. Ramsey Campbell observes that James makes use of ‘neutral adjectives to convey horror. Whereas pulp writers would say something like “slimy,”’ observes Campbell, ‘James would say “wet” or “moist”’ (Campbell, “3am”).

Crawford leaves no real window for a rational explanation. There is something in the upper berth. There is something wrong with cabin 105. Brisbane’s attempts to write the events off as some sort of hallucinatory dream ‘the Welsh rarebit I had eaten had disagreed with me. I had been in a nightmare’, whilst echoing Dickens’ Scrooge on the visitation of Jacob Marley, ‘You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There’s more of gravy than of grave about you’ (Dickens, “Christmas”), do not convince even him.

And on the following evening, in the company of the ship’s captain, the thing in the upper berth returns:

It was something ghostly, horrible beyond words, and it moved in my grip. It was like the body of a man long drowned, and yet it moved, and had the strength of ten men living; but I gripped it with all my might—the slippery, oozy, horrible thing—the

dead white eyes seemed to stare at me out of the dusk; the putrid odour of rank seawater was about it, and its shiny hair hung in foul wet curls over its dead face. I wrestled with the dead thing; it thrust itself upon me and forced me back and nearly broke my arms; it wound its corpse's arms about my neck, the living death, and overpowered me, so that I, at last, cried aloud and fell, and left my hold (Crawford).

In Rolt's *Bosworth Summit Pound*, a similar scene takes place, when the drowned ghost of Mary Grimsden takes her revenge on the ghost of her lover John Lofthouse by dragging Lofthouse's ghost into her watery grave.

These physical, visceral encounters with strong and fast moving ghosts, attack the senses. The reader is left none the wiser whether the ghost in *The Upper Berth* is that of the lunatic who first died in cabin 105 or something else. The ghost's overpowering strength suggests the former.

'That is all,' Brisbane concludes. 'That is how I saw a ghost—if it was a ghost. It was dead, anyhow' (Crawford).

Like the protagonist in *The Haunters and the Haunted*, the 'man of action' refuses to give in wholly to the idea of ghosts.

There may be some elements of repressed desire in this tale, the suggestion that Brisbane's roommate could be homosexual. There is the obvious masculinity of Brisbane himself, the images of 'wrestling', the fellow guest who Brisbane takes an immediate dislike to. In his article *Homosexual Panic and the English Ghost Story: M.R. James and Others*, Mike Pincombe makes the case for a homosexual undercurrent in a number of James's tales, illuminating the 'ragging' or 'animal grab' and settling on some examples of homosexual subtext in both *Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You* and *A Warning to the Curious*. Such ideas are open to interpretation. What is clear is that James, like Crawford in *The Upper Berth*, focusses on ensuring that his ghosts assault the senses of the reader, with touch, quite naturally, being the most invasive. 'Imagine how dreadful it was to him (Parkins) to see a figure suddenly sit up in what he had known was an empty bed', writes James in *Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You*. '...the idea of getting past it and escaping through the door was intolerable to him; he could not have borne--he didn't know why to touch it; and as for its touching him, he would sooner dash himself through the window than have that happen (James 91).

The enclosed bedroom. A second bed. A presence within the bedding? In many ways, James's story echoes that of Crawford and was surely directly influenced by it.

Pincombe's interpretation of Paxton's experience of the physical touch of the ghost in *A Warning to the Curious* as homosexual rape and subsequent orgasm of 'misery and malevolence' is, perhaps a little over analytical:

It was like someone scraping at my back all the time: I thought for a long time it was only soil dropping on me, but as I got nearer the — the crown, it was unmistakable. And when I actually laid it bare and got my fingers into the ring of it and pulled it out, there came a sort of cry behind me — oh, I can't tell you how desolate it was! (James 350).

Whilst it is certainly the case that isolated males inhabit the stories of both James and Rolt, Pincombe's argument seems unsure of itself. Michael Cox's suggestion that for James it was the domestic that created a source of anxiety is far more persuading. The same might be applied to Rolt. The potentially 'termagant wife' (James 3) of the nervous sacristan in *Canon Alberic's Scrapbook* is no less demanding, perhaps, than Alf Boothroyd's 'missis' (Rolt 64) in *The Garside Fell Disaster*.

David Rowlands investigates the role of women in James's stories in *Ghosts and Scholars* No.15, delving deeply into some of the lesser characters in his stories. Michael Cox identifies how they are often the ghosts themselves. To name a couple, there is Mrs Mothersole in *The Ash Tree*, who seeks retribution for her conviction as a witch, and Ann Clark, who rises from the waters in which she was drowned to hasten the conviction of her murderer in *Martin's Close*. In Rolt's stories, there are numerous examples of men sharing walking holidays and/or hotel rooms but women are scarce. The malevolent and retributive ghost of Mary Grimsden in *Bosworth Summit Pound* is worth a mention. In fact that are close links between *Bosworth Summit Pound* and James's *Martins Close*. Both are rural tales, though James's tale is told in the deeper past. Both contain a well-heeled male character and female of the lower social classes, one the daughter of a potential witch, the other mentally disabled. Both stories involve the drowning of the female, villagers with tales to tell, and the drowned girl seeking revenge on the male after rising from the water. To a lesser extent, the 'haunted' phantom in the short *Hear Not My Steps* may evoke some sexual overtones. But really, sex plays virtually no role at all, the only exception being in Rolt's *Music Hath*

*Charms* where an Aickmanesque female character takes on the character of a temptress, most probably a demon in disguise.

There are further examples of the horror of physical touch in James's works. In *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas*, the physical touch of the ghost, if the physical manifestation is, in fact, a ghost, is repulsive, 'I was conscious of a most horrible smell of mould, and of a cold kind of face pressed against my own, and moving slowly over it, and of several — I don't know how many — legs or arms or tentacles or something clinging to my body' (James 108).

Whilst in *The Tractate Middoth*, Eldred's fate is only sealed when the thing that is haunting him grips him physically, though his death is put down to a weak heart. '... a little dark form appeared to rise out of the shadow behind the tree-trunk and from it two arms enclosing a mass of blackness came before Eldred's face and covered his head and neck' (James 142).

It might be argued that the only thing that truly connects the dead to the living is the face. The face, etched in the moment of finality, signifies to the reader what level of terror and/or pain must have been endured by the victim who is so often alone and isolated at the moment of departure. Both James and Rolt experiment with this technique in their fiction.

In James's *Lost Hearts*, 'Mr Abney was found in his chair, his head thrown back, his face stamped with an expression of rage, fright and mortal pain'(22). In *The Ash Tree* Sir Matthew Fell's body is discovered 'dead and black' and 'the Body...very much disorder'd as it laid in the bed, being twisted after so extreme a sort as gave too probable conjecture that my worthy Friend and Patron had expir'd in great Pain and Agony'(39). In *A Warning to the Curious* the narrator describes the discovery of the unfortunate Paxton 'His mouth was full of sand and stones, and his teeth and jaws broken to bits. I only glanced once at his face,'(357) suggesting perhaps that it was too awful to look at or that James was only too aware of the device he was employing and thus able to give a knowing nod to the technique by almost avoiding employing it. In Rolt's *The Mine* Joe Beecher is found dead in Dyke Wood. 'We covered up his face quick...it were too much for me, and it didn't seem right that a mortal face should take that shape' (Rolt 4). When Carfax discovers Elphinstone's dead body at the bottom of Black Daren in Rolt's *Cwm Garon*, Rolt explains how 'Carfax, who was familiar with death in many forms, was not dismayed...what drained the blood...and impelled him quickly to replace the sack which covered the body, was the expression on the face'(Rolt 46).

Smell is another of the senses that the writers utilise fully in their ghost stories. In Crawford's *The Upper Berth* it is the smell of the cabin that first unsettles. 'When I awoke it was still quite dark, but I felt a disagreeable sensation of cold, and it seemed to me that the air was damp. You know the peculiar smell of a cabin which has been wet with sea-water' and 'I remember that the sensation as I put my hands forward was as though I were plunging them into the air of a damp cellar, and from behind the curtains came a gust of wind that smelled horribly of stagnant sea-water (Crawford).

The smell of the ghost lingers even after its departure. 'The bed had been slept in, and the smell of the sea was strong; but the bedding was as dry as a bone.'

In *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas*, James also lingers on the sensory detail of smell:

And, Gregory...there was someone or something on the watch outside my door the whole night. I almost fancy there were two. It wasn't only the faint noises I heard from time to time all through the dark hours, but there was the smell — the hideous smell of mould. Every rag I had had on me on that first evening I had stripped off and made Brown take it away. I believe he stuffed the things into the stove in his room; and yet the smell was there, as intense as it had been in the well; and, what is more, it came from outside the door (James 110).

Unsurprisingly, Rolt's *New Corner* utilises smell in a similar manner to Wakefield's *The Seventeenth Hole at Duncaster*. Both the new corner and the new golf hole are troubled by an unpleasant odour. This from *New Corner*, 'Phew...what a stink! Old socks and rotten eggs...something must have died here a long time ago I should think' says Peter, though John cannot smell it (Rolt 25). Whilst in *The Seventeenth Hole at Duncaster* the doctor examining the first fatality remarks 'did you notice that appalling stink?' later referring to it as a 'loathsome reek'. Predictably, the green-keeper sent to investigate, much like John in *New Corner*, smells nothing. Later in the story the 'terrible death stench' keeps Baxter company as he investigates his golf hole. In the final section of the story whilst reading the memoirs of Simon Tyler on visiting the same wood in 1839, Baxter finds the following passage 'I perceived a very vile and curious stench' writes Tyler, before going on to write how he saw 'something reclining on the mound, a beast of some sort...and the something seemed to touch me, and I screamed'.

Another, virtually identical example can be seen in Rolt's *Hawley Bank Foundry*, when the Foundry manager Arthur Clegg visits the long abandoned foundry works at the beginning of the tale. 'Phew!' he added, withdrawing his head. 'Doesn't it stink, though. Dead bird or something must have dropped in from the top'. Later in the tale, the 'black sand' of the moulding-floor emits a 'pungent, acrid odour'(Rolt 88).

By utilising the senses of touch and smell, the writers of ghost stories, James and Rolt included, are able to add physicality to entities that may not inhabit a body any longer (or that may never have inhabited a body). Smell provides discomfort, touch, or the threat of it, horror.

## Revulsion

‘Like Radcliffe,’ argues Andrew Smith in *The Ghost Story 1840-1920*, James ‘appears to have been an advocate of the subtleties of Terror rather than a champion of the explicitness of Horror’ (177).

It is true that James advocated restraint in his fiction. It is also the case that James advocated *The Monkey’s Paw* by WW Jacobs as having ‘the right qualities of sensational mystery’. The final few paragraphs of the tale are full of tension, horror and, ultimately, tragedy and they are worth examining to consider what James might have been getting at. In the story a family are granted three wishes after gaining possession of a mysterious artefact, a monkey’s paw, from overseas. On, unsurprisingly, wishing for wealth, their son is killed in an industrial accident. The couple receive a pay-off as compensation. Stricken with guilt, the wife convinces the husband to use the paw to wish for their mutilated son to be returned to the living:

‘He raised his hand. “I wish my son alive again.”

...neither spoke, but lay silently listening to the ticking of the clock. A stair creaked, and a squeaky mouse scurried noisily through the wall. The darkness was oppressive, and after lying for some time screwing up his courage, he took the box of matches, and striking one, went downstairs for a candle.

At the foot of the stairs the match went out, and he paused to strike another; and at the same moment a knock came so quiet and stealthy as to be scarcely audible, sounded on the front door...

“WHAT’S THAT?” cried the old woman, starting up.

“A rat,” said the old man in shaking tones - “a rat. It passed me on the stairs.”

His wife sat up in bed listening. A loud knock resounded through the house.

“It’s Herbert!”

She ran to the door, but her husband was before her, and catching her by the arm, held her tightly...

“For God’s sake don’t let it in,” cried the old man, trembling’ (Jacobs).



The words, 'don't let it in' are particularly disturbing (and have recently been utilised to excellent effect in the masterful 2014 horror movie *The Babadook*). Note how Jacobs has the husband refer to his son as 'it'. What is 'it' beyond the door? What are the suffering couple likely to discover if they allow the door to be opened? Jacobs' is controlled enough to leave us to imagine and thus demonstrates the masterful art of restraint or reticence to which James repeatedly refers. "You're afraid of your own son," she cried struggling. "Let me go. I'm coming, Herbert; I'm coming."

But it's not Herbert. Whatever the thing is on the other side of the door it cannot be Herbert. And the husband realises this just in time to save his wife from the horror of opening the door to discover the truth for herself.

The husband's final wish brings only the promise of an empty future, but one far more endurable surely, than if his final wish was not made. There are signals here of the ghost story acquiring new levels of physical dread and revulsion. Our only reprieve is that Jacobs opts not to share the physical description of the creature.

James is rarely so restrained when it comes to describing the physical features, the revulsion, of his ghosts and demons however.

Julia Briggs highlights how 'pictures and texts that constituted his research often provided starting points (for his stories)'(127). Certainly, one of James's most powerful techniques is the physical descriptions of the ghosts and other dark creatures he conjures, many of which come not from his imagination but from the various antiquarian manuscripts and representations he encountered in his studies. Michael Cox, meanwhile, stresses the important and recurring theme of being 'called to account' in James's stories which may have stemmed from James's religious upbringing and exposure to biblical texts of retribution, the 'retributive imagery of the middle ages' (Cox). We should, perhaps, consider these two ideas together. To paraphrase Dr Stella Panayotova, Keeper of Manuscripts at the Fitzwilliam Museum, it is James's 'cross-fertilisation' of 'historically accurate detail derived from very wide reaching research and experience that creates the background for the supernatural in his ghost stories' (Gatiss). The most obvious example of this appears in James's earliest tale *Canon Alberic's Scrapbook*. In this tale, the demon that appears to the antiquarian Dennistoun, is no 'contemporary of the seer'. James accepts that 'there are exceptions to every rule. An ancient haunting can be made terrible and can be invested with actuality,' he writes 'but it will tax your best endeavours to forge the links between past and present in a

satisfying way', no better illustrated than in this tale. To begin with there is the detailed and terrifying description of the image of the demon in the picture of the manuscript itself:

...a mass of coarse, matted black hair...a body of fearful thinness, almost a skeleton, but with the muscles standing out like wires. The hands were of a dusky pallor, covered, like the body, with long, coarse hairs, and hideously taloned. The eyes, touched in with a burning yellow, had intensely black pupils...Imagine one of the awful bird-catching spiders of South America translated into human form, and endowed with intelligence just less than human (James 9).

At this stage of the story, the reader has the image of the demon firmly placed within their imagination (the recurring theme of 'hair' and its various connotations are covered in some depth in the *Introduction to the Oxford World's Classic edition of M.R. James Collected Stories*) and the narrator admits to showing the picture to a lecturer of morphology or biological form, a person of 'abnormally sane and unimaginative habits' (James 9). Surely, thinks the reader, he won't be afraid of what he sees. The lecturer refuses to be left alone for the rest of the evening and is forced to sleep with the light on for several nights thereafter. This layering of terror is James building upon his 'hint of mystery' in the 'leisurely style' he advocates. And it is hugely effective, particularly as the story reaches its 'nicely managed crescendo', for here the demon appears to Dennistoun in physical form. Just seconds after Dennistoun removes a crucifix from his person, his attention is taken by:

...an object laying on the red cloth just by his left elbow. Two or three ideas of what it might be flitted through his brain with their own incalculable quickness. A penwiper? No, no such think in the house. A rat? No, too black. A large spider? I trust to goodness not — no. Good God! A hand like the hand in that picture! In another infinitesimal flash he had taken it in. Pale, dusky skin, covering nothing but bones and tendons of appalling strength; coarse black hairs, longer than ever grew on a human hand; nails rising from the ends of the fingers and curving sharply down and forward, grey, horny, and wrinkled. He flew out of his chair with deadly, inconceivable terror clutching at his heart. The shape, whose left hand rested on the table, was rising to a standing posture behind his seat, its right hand crooked above his scalp' very close, it appears, to touching him.

There was black and tattered drapery about it; the coarse hair covered it as in the drawing. The lower jaw was thin — what can I call it? — shallow, like a beast's; teeth showed behind the black lips; there was no nose; the eyes, of a fiery yellow, against which their pupils showed black and intense, and the exulting hate and thirst to destroy life which shone there, were the most horrifying features in the whole vision. There was intelligence of a kind in them — intelligence beyond that of a beast, below that of a man. (James 11)

It is this knowledge of medieval manuscripts, the many horrors within them and the authenticity of his language and factual information that gives James an edge over other writers of the period, though, as Jim Rockhill notes in his article *'Thin Ghosts: Notes toward a Jamesian Rhetoric'*, this approach did result in numerous substandard mimics, a 'spate of atrocious olde Recordes and Meffages' (Rockhill). In the same way, it is L.T.C. Rolt's detailed knowledge and appreciation of geographical landscape, engineering terms and the working populace who inhabit his stories, that gives them weight and makes them stand apart.

Sometimes in James, although not often, the revulsion is purely physical, as in *Lost Hearts*, perhaps James's closest tale to absolute horror. The antagonist is Mr Abney, 'the tall, the thin, the austere' & 'a somewhat austere recluse...a man wrapped up in his books' (James 15), an alchemist seeking immortality by absorbing the hearts of children. Revulsion emerges in the disturbing description of the ghostly children that haunt Abney in retaliation:

Whilst the girl stood still, half smiling, with her hands clasped over her heart, the boy, a thin shape, with black hair and ragged clothing, raised his arms in the air with an appearance of menace and of unappeasable hunger and longing. The moon shone upon his almost transparent hands, and Stephen saw that the nails were fearfully long and that the light shone through them. As he stood with his arms thus raised, he disclosed a terrifying spectacle. On the left hand side of his chest there opened a black and gaping rent (James 21).

Sometimes the horror comes purely in the description of the ghost itself, even when the form is, as in *Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You*, nothing more than a white bed sheet

It stood for the moment in a band of dark shadow, and he had not seen what its face was like. Now it began to move, in a stooping posture, and all at once the spectator realized, with some horror and some relief, that it must be blind, for it seemed to feel about it with its muffled arms in a groping and random fashion. Turning half away from him, it became suddenly conscious of the bed he had just left, and darted towards it, and bent over and felt the pillows in a way which made Parkins shudder as he had never in his life thought it possible. In a very few moments it seemed to know that the bed was empty, and then, moving forward into the area of light and facing the window, it showed for the first time what manner of thing it was.

Parkins, who very much dislikes being questioned about it, did once describe something of it in my hearing, and I gathered that what he chiefly remembers about it is a horrible, an intensely horrible, face of crumpled linen (92).

The notion of a blind ghost groping for its victim is particularly disturbing, as is the image of a sentient being in the form of a bed sheet ‘darting’ around an enclosed space in search of its ‘victim’ is very powerful, reminding the reader of some of their first imaginings of what a ghost may be and the form it might take.

There are far more visually disturbing ghosts in James’s fiction. This from *The Tractate Middoth*:

And there was my parson again, back to me, looking at the books on the shelf I wanted. His hat was on the table, and he had a bald head. I waited a second or two looking at him rather particularly. I tell you, he had a very nasty bald head. It looked to me dry, and it looked dusty, and the streaks of hair across it were much less like hair than cobwebs. Well, I made a bit of a noise on purpose, coughed and moved my feet. He turned round and let me see his face — which I hadn’t seen before. I tell you again, I’m not mistaken. Though, for one reason or another I didn’t take in the lower part of his face, I did see the upper part; and it was perfectly dry, and the eyes were very deep-sunk; and over them, from the eyebrows to the cheek-bone, there were cobwebs — thick (James 133).

Note the repeated motif of spiders. James was very much one who suffered from arachnophobia. There are further spiders, or something like spiders, in *The Ash Tree*:

There is very little light about the bedstead, but there is a strange movement there; it seems as if Sir Richard were moving his head rapidly to and fro with only the slightest possible sound. And now you would guess, so deceptive is the half-darkness, that he had several heads, round and brownish, which move back and forward, even as low as his chest. It is a horrible illusion. Is it nothing more? There! something drops off the bed with a soft plump, like a kitten, and is out of the window in a flash; another — four — and after that there is quiet again (James 45).

The spiders, if indeed they can be described as spiders, appear in greater numbers at the end of the story when their ‘nest’ is discovered in the blackened stump of the ash tree that bears the story its name:

First, at the fork, they saw a round body covered with fire — the size of a man’s head — appear very suddenly, then seem to collapse and fall back. This, five or six times; then a similar ball leapt into the air and fell on the grass, where after a moment it lay still. The Bishop went as near as he dared to it, and saw — what but the remains of an enormous spider, veinous and seared! And, as the fire burned lower down, more terrible bodies like this began to break out from the trunk, and it was seen that these were covered with greyish hair (James 46).

All that day the ash burned, and until it fell to pieces the men stood about it, and from time to time killed the brutes as they darted out.

Here, the terrifying corpse-like entity in the cloaked room of the inn that a young Mr Thompson visits in the story *Rats*, invites comparisons with the images of emaciated corpses that occupy the transis and medieval manuscripts that contain James’s demons, ‘under the counterpane someone lay, and not only lay, but stirred. That it was some *one* and not some *thing* was certain, because the shape of a head was unmistakable on the bolster; and yet it was all covered, and no one lies with covered head but a dead person; and this was not dead, not truly dead, for it heaved and shivered’ (James 373).

Thompson, despite his horror, is unable to resist a further reconnaissance of the room on the day of his departure from the Inn:

Propped, or you might say sitting, on the edge of the bed was — nothing in the round world but a scarecrow! A scarecrow out of the garden, of course, dumped into the deserted room...Yes; but here amusement ceased. Have scarecrows bare bony feet? Do their heads loll on to their shoulders? Have they iron collars and links of chain about their necks? Can they get up and move, if never so stiffly, across a floor, with wagging head and arms close at their sides? and shiver? (James 375)

Rolt does not have the benefit of a lifetime of examining the horrific images in medieval manuscripts. Nevertheless, there are occasions when his ghosts are fully imagined. When the creature Joe Beecher is running from in *The Mine* is finally revealed to the reader it fulfils the threatening and malevolent role suggested of it by James. As the lift reaches the surface there is ‘something crouched a-top of it, holding on to the cables...a human shape...terrible tall and thin (James’s ghosts were often ‘thin’ and his 1919 collection of stories was entitled ‘A Thin Ghost’)...kind of dirty white all over, like summat that’s grown up in the dark and never had no light’ (Rolt 5)

*In Bosworth Summit Pound* Rolt describes the subject of the story, Henry Fawcett witnessing events from the past replaying before his eyes. We read how he ‘perceived a thickening of the shadows’ and ‘presently saw a figure, more shade than substance, move down to the margin to crouch and stare into the still water.’ Initially there is nothing frightening about this image. ‘It moved without sound, and only the face showed pale in the moonlight. For a time, the figure seemed to grope beside the water, and Fawcett knew, without knowing why he knew, that it sought for something which it feared to find’. The reader, of course, fears it too.

‘Then with a swift movement’, writes Rolt, ‘the figure rose and turned to peer intently into the tunnel. It was at this moment that the feeling of ominous expectancy, which all this while had been gathering like a thunder-cloud in Fawcett’s mind, suddenly assumed a hideous shape’(Rolt 19). Note the words ‘ominous expectancy’. We know something is coming. We know it will be awful. We just don’t know when it will arrive or what, precisely, the thing will be.

When it does arrive, the description of the form that appears from the tunnel is typically Jamesian, ‘Something rose out of the water; something monstrous that the reason most vehemently questioned, yet which possessed the semblance of human shape. Mercifully, it could not be clearly seen.’

The creature, the ghost, is described as 'hideous', a 'corruption'. There is 'nakedness of obscene distension'. It is a 'fearful antagonist', wholly the malevolent entity James advocates in the ghost story. And it is entirely without compassion:

The dark watcher on the bank, with a gesture of despair, made to turn away, but stumbled. Upon the instant his fearful antagonist fell upon him with such lithe and intent purpose that the issue of the brief and soundless encounter was never in doubt, and soon the waters had closed over them both. (Rolt 19)

In the final section of the story, the reader learns a gruesome fact about the discovery of the two bodies in the canal, 'For not only was the body of John Lofthouse recovered, but entangled within the grappling irons was another. Because the latter had been long dead, it was unrecognisable.' Nevertheless, the jury are ordered to view the bodies, resulting in the proceedings being suspended!

In the final paragraphs of *Hawley Bank Foundry*, something is discovered living in the sand on the foundry floor:

...seemingly impervious to the fiery element in which they moved, crawled creatures of most sickening shape. They resembled maggots seething and writhing in putrid flesh except for the fact that they were the size of a man's forearm (Rolt 98).

In the introduction to the Folio Society edition of *Ghost Stories of M. R. James*, Nigel Kneale states 'Although James conjures up strange beasts and supernatural manifestations, the shock effect of his stories is usually strongest when he is dealing in physical mutilation and abnormality' (Kneale). We have seen some examples of 'mutilation' in the creatures of James's imagination mentioned above. Often, James's monstrous creations are either tall and thin, or, in direct contrast, of stunted growth. Sheridan Le Fanu employs a diminutive figure to disturbing effect in one of James's favourite tales, *The Familiar*. Rolt sometimes takes the same approach. Here in *Cwm Garon*:

When he glimpsed them momentarily in the firelight, Carfax thought that the faces of a few of the taller ones seemed vaguely familiar, but the majority of the company appeared to be very short in stature, so short, in fact, that at the first instant of vision he thought they must be children. Their bodies, however, belied this impression, as did their faces, for their countenances were such that Carfax was grateful for the smoke which prevented him seeing them clearly (Rolt 48)

And here in *The House of Vengeance*:

There was a sound from within of hob-nailed boots scuffing on flagstones, followed by the rattle of door-bolts being withdrawn. The next instant he found himself confronting a very strange little figure indeed, whose face was thrown into high relief by the light of the paraffin lamp which he held before him, and who peered over it into the streaming darkness. He was so dark-skinned and dark-haired that he might have been a true Romany, yet so short in stature as to be almost a dwarf (Rolt 124)

Rolt also employs the unnerving action of dance and song in his fiction. Characters sing or speak in ‘lilting’ (Rolt 124) voices or exhibit a ‘capering’ (Rolt 109) dance. In *Music Hath Charms*, the character of Heneage sings a peculiar song as he wishes his now unwelcome guest goodbye:

HAR, HAR, HOU, HOU, danse ici, danse la, joue ici, joue la

The image of a grown man singing this song and dancing on his own doorstep is truly discomfoting. Sometimes revulsion is served in unusual and unexpected ways.

Both James and Rolt are able to utilise descriptive techniques to administer revulsion in their readers. We will see how Fritz Leiber’s ghost in *Smoke Ghost* is rendered in a different way altogether.



## Detailed Milieu

Susan Hill's introduction to Rolt's *Sleep No More* includes the following observation, 'The point is in the juxtaposition between this ordinary, apparently 'real' place, full of reassuringly solid objects like railway trains and racing cars, and people such as phlegmatic policemen and taciturn farm labourers, and that which is bizarre, strange, frightening, other-wordly and unaccountable' (Rolt IX)

As Hill explains, Rolt 'is best of all in the setting of scenes and the conjuring up of atmosphere. He adds detail slowly and patiently' (Rolt X).

In *New Corner* Rolt grounds the story in motor-racing language, 'Talk was of blowers and blower pressures, of gear ratios, suspension and braking systems and of twin rear wheels versus single'. He captures specific sights and sounds of race-day, ' he gave one sharp flick of the wrist and the engine broke into its characteristic deep-throated roar, little puffs of black smoke spurting vertically upward from sixteen short pipes' (Rolt 31).

Similarly, in *The Garside Fell Disaster* Rolt's authentic first person narrator, Alf Boothroyd, adopts a working class voice from a family of railwaymen who are knowledgeable about the railways, 'Bert our youngest went east to Grantham. He hadn't been there long before he was faring on one of Patrick Stirling's eight-foot singles...finished up driver on Ivatt's "Atlantics while Harry and Fred were working "Jumbos" and "Precursors" out of Crewe' (Rolt 59)

Rolt is adept at incorporating working class dialect into his fiction and he does so far more assuredly than James. In *The Mine*, the old man narrating the tale uses colloquial expression, dialect and regional variation, 'never got much forrader'/'seemed to get on their nerves like'/'for it be a queer lonely place' (Rolt 1). The inclusion of 'like' at the end of the middle of these three example sentences demonstrates Rolt's appreciation of the subtleties of regional dialect.

Rolt knows his working class characters. He drops authoritative knowledge of their ways, mannerisms and colloquialisms into his stories with confidence. They read authentically. The old man in *The Mine* refers to himself as once being a 'nipper'. He describes himself also as 'proud as Punch'. The brass on his engine is kept in 'Bristol fashion' which 'shone like my mother's kettle'. He knows his mining terms too. Rolt provides meticulous factual information concerning the technical aspects of mining and the

means of moving the coal, echoing the Jamesian technique of embedding a tale in rich and convincing ‘furnishings’. ‘In the old days when my father were a young man there was a horse-tram road – Ginny Rails we cal ‘em – between the mines and Cliedden Wharf’/’Shroppie Cut by Fen Moss’ (Rolt 1). One can imagine being able to locate the location of this story specifically. ‘You can still see the engine-house plain as can be on top of the hill, while the old chimney be a landmark ten mile away on a clear day,’ remarks the old man.

In *Hawley Bank Foundry* Rolt’s industrial detail echoes the antiquarian features in James’s stories as ‘builders, bricklayers, painters, glaziers and labourers; steel trusses and joists; corrugated sheeting, bricks, sand, bags of cement, gravel...scaffolding, planks...small engines driving hoists and concrete-mixers. A cupola salvaged from Brookend...a new firebrick lining...mould-boxes, patterns, modern foundry machines that Hawley Bank had never seen’ (Rolt 90) are utilised as the foundry is brought back into service.

In *Bosworth Summit Pound* Rolt even makes time for what is clearly a direct nod in the direction of M.R. James. Rolt’s narrator alludes to antiquaries and highlights the differences between the worlds he and they inhabit, ‘antiquaries and those who make it their hobby to ‘collect’ village churches will be familiar with the splendid broach spire of St Peter’s, Cold Bosworth’, suggesting a selective, cloistered and detached appreciation of the world in which they inhabit, ‘when they stand in the nave to admire the remarkable fourteenth-century rood-screen or the delicate tracery of the clerestory windows, they do not realize that the waters of the Great Central Canal lie directly beneath their feet’ (Rolt 15).

Rolt seems to be pointing unswervingly at the industrial heritage he himself is attached to and making a case for its importance and recognition in history. The detailed contextual background in all of his tales gives them extra weight and authority.

## Proximity, Powerlessness & Forced Voyeurism

Another interesting approach that both Rolt and James share (in James's case the unique opposite to his stories that utilise close physical proximity) is the delivery of horror at a distance, that is, to describe scenes to the reader that are taking place at a distance from which the horror itself cannot be affected.

The most effective and hauntingly horrific example of this technique occurs in James's *Wailing Well*. The events in question take place on a gloriously disarming summer's afternoon of 'shimmering heat' (James 387). Warned to stay away from a particular well by a local shepherd, who is arrogantly mocked and duly ignored by a misbehaved boy scout by the name of Stanley Judkins, the story relays how Judkins ventures into the field in which the well is situated, observed from the top of a nearby hill by the well-behaved and aptly named Wilfred Pipsqueak. A morality tale written to be read to an audience of cub scouts containing elements of humour and 'academic dithering'\*\*\* somehow takes on the form of a voyeuristic horror show:

"(Pipsqueak) looked at the field, and there he saw a terrible figure — something in ragged black — with whitish patches breaking out of it: the head, perched on a long thin neck, half hidden by a shapeless sort of blackened sun-bonnet. The creature was waving thin arms...He looked away hastily, to see Stanley Judkins making his way pretty quickly towards the clump...With a sudden and dreadful sinking at the heart, he caught sight of someone among the trees, waiting: and again of someone — another of the hideous black figures — working slowly along the track from another side of the field, looking from side to side....worst of all, he saw a fourth — unmistakably a man this time — rising out of the bushes a few yards behind the wretched Stanley, and painfully, as it seemed, crawling into the track... ." (James 388).

There is something 'hungry' about these creatures. It is difficult to imagine them as ghosts. The male moves 'painfully'. The female waves her arms in 'exultation' then quickens her pace whilst 'nodding gleefully'. The three of them drag Judkins into the trees and that is where his body is discovered. There is, we are told, 'not a drop of blood' in it. They might be vampires but they might also be something far worse. At such proximity, the reader is left to guess.

Sometimes, the crucial moments of a story take place ‘off stage’ altogether.

In Rolt’s *The Mine*, Joe Beecher is chased out of the lift and is last seen ‘running for dear life over the waste mound and along the hill-side’ in an attempt to flee a pursuer none of the witnesses can see, at least not at first. Later one of the men does indeed claim to have seen something make after Joe ‘as quick and quiet as a cat after a sparrow. This thing made never a sound though it went fast enough and was catching up on him, so that when he got to the edge of the wood it looked as if it was reaching out for him with its arms’ (Rolt 5).

The men discover Joe Beecher’s body later, in a wood at the bottom of a quarry. The reader doesn’t learn what the creature is that chased Joe Beecher or why Joe Beecher was selected as its victim. We only learn that the mine-shaft was covered with timbers and bolted fast, for fear of something else ‘come a-crawling up’ out of it.

Rolt employs a similar technique in his story *New Corner*. Once they pull on their goggles and gloves, the drivers in the story are alone. Rolt detaches the reader from any visual representation of the scene. As the drivers disappear up the hill they leave the reader with just the sound of the engine negotiating the track. As each car ascends the hill in the direction of the new corner, the reader is left to listen alongside Nelson, the nervous course director, for the tell-tale signs of a good run or the horrific silence that signals an accident. This is an effective technique and an observation that could only truly come from someone who knows race meetings. Rolt was involved in the formation of the Vintage Sports Car Club in 1934 and a founder of the Prescott Hill Climb on which the story *New Corner* is based:

Although invisible to him, John could follow Peter’s progress by the noise that now resounded through the wood and echoed about the surrounding hills. Now he had cut-out and changed down for the first corner into the wood...through to second, now into third...now he had cut-out for the new corner.

John waited expectantly for a renewed burst of sound, but no sound came  
(Rolt 26)

On this occasion, the sound does return and Peter is safe. Later, Rolt repeats the technique. When the German driver Von Eberstraum begins his run that will ultimately see him meet his fate on New Corner, all Nelson can do is wait for the sound of the time-keeper’s message on his headphones signalling Von Eberstraum’s finish time. When no message comes, Nelson,

already fearing the worst after a sleepless, nightmare filled evening, faints. His nightmare becomes reality and, we later learn, the new corner is to blame.

Two characters in HR Wakefield's *Seventeenth Hole at Duncaster* suffer death in a similarly non-proximal manner, suggesting once again, that Rolt borrowed the technique from elsewhere.

Cyril Ward a friend of Baxter, the troubled secretary of the Norfolk course with its new seventeenth hole, sets out from the clubhouse at six o'clock on a damp evening to 'defeat that blasted hole'. Baxter, momentarily distracted from watching Ward's progress in the direction of the green then hears a 'long scream of agony shaking down the wind' and rushes to the door. 'Just visible in the gloom', writes Wakefield 'a figure came staggering out from the wood, threw up its arms, and fell' (Drew 206)

Just two days later, the new hole claims another victim, Sybil Grant. 'There sprang down the wind a terrible cry of terror, followed by a desperate and prolonged scream' (Drew 209). Like Nelson, Baxter suffered a nightmare the evening before which was in fact a premonition. Like Nelson, Baxter is forced to witness his premonition come true at a distance too great for him to prevent it.

There are at least two other examples of this technique worth mentioning. In James's *A Warning to the Curious*, the narrator and his friend Henry Long race after the haunted Paxton in a bid to save him:

There was nothing to be seen: a line of dark firs behind us made one skyline, more trees and the church tower half a mile off on the right, cottages and a windmill on the horizon on the left, calm sea dead in front, faint barking of a dog at a cottage on a gleaming dyke between us and it: full moon making that path we know across the sea: the eternal whisper of the Scotch firs just above us, and of the sea in front. Yet, in all this quiet, an acute, an acrid consciousness of a restrained hostility very near us, like a dog on a leash that might be let go at any moment.

Long said he saw Paxton some distance ahead, running and waving his stick'  
For all of their efforts, Paxton remains tantalisingly out of reach.

And there were tracks on the sand as of someone running who wore shoes; and there were other tracks made before those — for the shoes sometimes trod in them and

interfered with them — of someone not in shoes. Oh, of course, it's only my word you've got to take for all this: Long's dead, we'd no time or means to make sketches or take casts, and the next tide washed everything away. All we could do was to notice these marks as we hurried on. But there they were over and over again, and we had no doubt whatever that what we saw was the track of a bare foot, and one that showed more bones than flesh.

Ultimately, they cannot catch up with him before the inevitable horror befalls him:

When you are past the tower, you know, there is nothing but shingle for a long way — not a house, not a human creature; just that spit of land, or rather shingle...we heard what I can only call a laugh: and if you can understand what I mean by a breathless, a lungless laugh, you have it: but I don't suppose you can. It came from below, and swerved away into the mist. That was enough. We bent over the wall. Paxton was there at the bottom (James 357).

Fritz Leiber does something similar in his story *The Hill and the Hole* (1942).

Surveying a piece of land, Ben watches his colleague Tom climb the hill opposite his own. 'Tom had gotten to the top of the hill and had the rod up.' Looking through the alidade, he witnesses something happen to Tom. 'Involuntarily he uttered a short, frightened cry and jumped away'. 'For what he had seen, or thought he had seen, through the alidade, had been a tiny struggling figure of Tom, buried in darkness, with dim, skeletal figures clutching him all around and dragging him down into a thicker blackness' (Leiber, "Black" 69).

Unsurprisingly, by the time Ben reaches Tom, it is too late to save his friend and colleague.

This technique of situating the narrator or protagonist, or sometimes just the witness of events a distance from the action forces them, and, in turns, the reader to become a powerless voyeur. In contrast to the physical and multi-sensory techniques previously analysed, the reader is limited to experiencing the horror purely through sight or sound and nothing else. The reader is limited to just one of their senses. The rest are impotent.

## Landscape and Setting

Whilst setting and location add to the atmosphere and appreciation of James's tales, the tales are less reliant upon landscape. James does pay particular attention to landscape and the development of atmosphere in one of his earliest stories, *Lost Hearts*. He describes Aswarby Hall, the home of Dr Abney, thus:

An evening light shone on the building, making the window-panes glow like so many fires...a flat park studded with oaks and fringed with furs, which stood out against the sky. The clock in the church-tower, buried in trees on the edge of the park...was striking six, and the sound came gently beating down the wind...tinged with the sort of melancholy appropriate to an evening in early autumn.

And later,

...from time to time strange cries as of lost and despairing wanderers sounded from across the mere. (James 14)

This is, by and large, an uncharacteristic approach for James. His stories do take place in recognisable settings and there is always atmosphere, but it is unusual for James to concentrate large sections of his stories to descriptions of the physical landscape, Parkins walk along the beach at Burnstow in *Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You* being one of very few other examples.

For Rolt, however, detailed and atmospheric descriptions of landscape are crucial component of his stories.

In *The Mine* Rolt begins with a description of the specific setting of Wenlock Edge, the Shropshire Marches and Long Mynd, imagining the village of Cliedden. The region is 'a wild and haunting area even when seen on a warm summer's day, an area in which myths abound...with craggy masses, most notably the Devil's Chair' (Anibalan) from which Rolt creates his own imposing and threatening geographical feature, Hell's Mouth.

Rolt's setting is intimidating. The November wind is 'a boisterous, buffeting wind' that 'cried'. The rain is 'hurled' and 'rattles like flung gravel' against the window-panes of the pub from which the story's telling will take place. The limestone escarpment of Wenlock Edge is described as a 'mane' (Rolt 1), immediately conjuring images of wild creatures.

Bill has disappeared in the tunnels after going back to fetch his tea-can. Setting off down the level, Joe Beecher becomes increasingly unsettled, 'scared of the dark and hush' and aware of the 'darkness being angry' (Rolt 3). The dark is personified. It takes on a physical form, despite its intangibility.

Similar techniques can be seen in the opening of *Bosworth Summit Pound*. The initial set-up is classic ghost story territory. Here we have the lock-keepers in their 'lonely cottages', the 'infrequent boatmen', the 'narrow, tortuous course' and 'little-used' section of canal that is the setting for the story, further embedded in reality by Rolt's direct reference to a specific place - 'very few people are familiar with the little-used North Midland section of the Great Central Canal' (Rolt 15).

Rolt's narrator makes a gentle swipe at progress 'main road and rail routes which stride so arrogantly across the Midland shires'(Rolt 15), the word 'arrogantly' clearly marking Rolt's own territory on the subject.

Rolt employs a haunting and unsettling place name and location in that of 'Cold Bosworth', based on the village of Husband's Bosworth in Leicestershire and the Bosworth Tunnel that runs alongside it, though not, as suggested, under it. The church does not lie atop the canal either and there are no ventilation shafts.

Rolt utilises a familiar genre trope, that of a tomb in the graveyard at Cold Bosworth that 'bears no inscription to attract the eye of the collector of curious epitaphs' with a double meaning of 'in death they were not divided' of which Rolt is acutely aware (Rolt 16).

On arriving at the entrance to Bosworth Tunnel, Fawcett finds it 'singularly unpleasant', a 'narrow cavern of crumbling brickwork as cold and dark as a vault' containing an 'evil-smelling mist'. Rolt foreshadows the horror that will come later, further unsettling the reader – 'All he could see ahead was a lambent white curtain, patterned confusingly with shifting shadows...' (Rolt 17)

The protagonist of Rolt's tale is Henry Fawcett, 'a confirmed batchelor'. Like in James, the lone male, seemingly uninterested in relationships with women, is a recurring theme in Rolt's work. Rolt emphasises Fawcett's independent nature, explaining to the reader how he is 'well accustomed to his own company' and how 'he spent the rest of another glorious afternoon happily engaged upon the numerous small jobs which can always be found on a boat' (Rolt 19).



Rolt's *The Garside Fell Disaster* once more draws on an actual location – Blea Moor on the Settle-Carlisle railway line (Anilbalan) and the inspiration may well come from the two major disasters on that route at Hawes Junction (Xmas Eve 1910) & at Ais Gill (1913)\*\*

Rolt gives us a precise geographical location, albeit an imaginary one, 'Garside on the Carlisle line south of Highbeck junction'. Local place names are hybrids of almost familiar locations eg Ennerthwaite and Frithdale. The reader is placed in a 'real setting' that does not exist and Rolt then stresses its remoteness. 'Garside Box takes its name from Garside Fell same as the tunnel. There's no station there, for there isn't a house in sight, let alone a village'.

Much like Dickens' *The Signalman* it is the isolated location that gives the story its strength. 'I doubt you'd find a more lonesome spot than Garside, or one so mortal cold in winter', informs the narrator and protagonist. The narrator is isolated both physically and mentally. 'Not a soul for company and all so quiet,' he complains. 'I wouldn't see a soul from the time I came on till I got my relief'. The irony that 'Hundreds and hundreds of folks must have passed me by every day, and yet there I was on my own' (Rolt 60) is not lost on him and this curious fact just adds to the characters isolation, loneliness and vulnerability. He is not only powerless in the wake of what is coming, but also invisible.

And when the weather turns, the signal box becomes increasingly lonely. 'Grand to be up there on a fine day in summer...it was a different tale in winter though' (Rolt 60).

Very gradually, Rolt focusses in on the narrator's true concerns. 'But in spite of all the wind and the snow and the rain...it was the mists I hated most...no signalman can a-bear mist and fog, it kind of blinds you, and that makes you uneasy' (Rolt 61).

The mist takes on a personality. 'They're queer things are those mountain mists. Sometimes all day I'd see one hanging on the moor, perhaps only a hundred yards away, but never seeming to come no nearer' (Rolt 60).

Rolt's appreciation of the natural world and his close observance of it, give his stories an extra layer of depth.

## Work and Industry

It is worth remaining with Rolt's *The Garside Fell Disaster* and Dickens's *The Signalman* here, to consider the wider concerns of the stories relating to work and the workplace.

The narrator in *The Signalman* describes the location of the signal-box:

...as solitary and dismal a place as ever I saw. On either side, a dripping-wet wall of jagged stone, excluding all view but a strip of sky; the perspective one way, only a crooked prolongation of this great dungeon; the shorter perspective in the other direction, terminating in a gloomy red light, and the gloomier entrance to a black tunnel, in whose massive architecture there was a barbarous, depressing, and forbidding air. So little sunlight ever found its way to this spot, that it had an earthy deadly smell; and so much cold wind rushed through it, that it struck chill to me, as if I had left the natural world (Dickens 1)

Dickens places emphasis on the signalman's working environment. He describes it as 'lonesome', 'solitary', 'dismal', 'depressing' and 'forbidding'.

This loneliness is further exacerbated due to both characters being of greater potential than the jobs they undertake. Early in *The Garside Fell Disaster*, Alf explains "I could have had the footplate... but (and sometimes I'm not sure as I don't regret it) I married early on, and the old woman persuaded me to go for a more settled job, so it was the signal box for me. A driver's wife's a widow most o' the week, see, unless he happens to click for a regular local turn" (Rolt 59). The general tone here is of a man who has suppressed his dreams by getting married. The notion of achieving the more rewarding job of the footplate is aspirational and well within his grasp, or so he would have us believe. Instead he occupies his lonely signal-box and ruminates, no doubt, on what might have been.

Similarly, the signalman in Dickens' story might have done better for himself also. "On my trusting that he would excuse the remark that he had been well-educated, and (I hoped I might say without offence), perhaps educated above that station, he observed...it was so in workhouses, in the police force, even in that last desperate resource, the army; and that he knew it was so, more or less, in any great railway staff" (Dickens 3). Dickens is clearly making some comment here on the roles working class men are given in Victorian society and a recurring theme of his writing is the poor being unable to rise above their station, despite having something to offer. We learn the signalman had 'attended lectures; but he had

run wild, misused his opportunities, gone down, and never risen again' (Dickens 3)  
Nevertheless, he tries to occupy his mind during the times between trains, ' Regarding those many long and lonely hours...He had taught himself a language down here--if only to know it by sight, and to have formed his own crude ideas of its pronunciation, could be called learning it. He had also worked at fractions and decimals, and tried a little algebra...'  
(Dickens 2)

The mental torture of both men occupying such isolated and lonely locations soon becomes evident, particularly when their well-rehearsed working routine is interrupted by strange events, but both are largely powerless and in fear of losing their jobs if they speak out. Here is Dickens' signalman, 'If I telegraph Danger, on either side of me, or on both, I can give no reason for it,' he went on, wiping the palms of his hands. 'I should get into trouble, and do no good. They would think I was mad. This is the way it would work:-  
Message: "Danger! Take care!" Answer: "What danger? Where?" Message: "Don't know. But for God's sake take care!" They would displace me. What else could they do?' (Dickens 8).

And here is Rolt's, 'At first I thought I'd best keep it to myself, but the same thing happened two or three times in the next month' and 'we might have said a lot more than we did , but it wouldn't have done no good, and it might have done us a lot of harm' (Rolt 65).

As the narrator of *The Signalman* remarks, 'His pain of mind was most pitiable to see. It was the mental torture of a conscientious man, oppressed beyond endurance by an unintelligible responsibility involving life' (Dickens 8).

Rolt's character describes the stress a fog can cause for a signalman, and the problem of what to do about it:

It's for the signalman to judge whether he shall call out the fogmen, and that 's a big responsibility. It may come up sudden after sundown in autumn, you calls your fogmen, and by the time they come on it's all cleared off and they want to know what the hell you're playing at. So another time you put off calling them, but it don't clear, and before you know where you are you've got trains running over signals (Rolt 61)

There is the gradual building of impending doom in both stories. Rolt ramps up the tension by utilising foreshadowing to excellent effect yet demonstrating such controlled

restraint that the reader is forced to wait, and wait some more. We know there is going to be a disaster, the title of the story has told us as much. But when? And how?

Both stories are about responsibility and powerlessness, about dutiful and professional characters who are cut-off, in both location and mind and left facing situations they do not know how to extricate themselves from. Both stories are examinations of a dull job that is hugely critical, of responsibility, of technology that is not up to pace, and both stories end in tragedy. The concerns here are far removed from Smith's 'gothic fascination with demonised or otherwise maligned aristocrats' (Smith 12). These are working-men with the lives of others, from all sections of society, under their trusted guardianship.

Will Ross makes an insightful comment that 'M.R. James stories are about the horrors of the past visiting the present, whereas this story (*The Signalman*) is about the horror that is the present' (Ross). *The Garside Fell Disaster* demonstrates how the fate of the working man has not altered and it mirrors, to an extent, Rolt's concerns about men being replaced by machinery and/or technological innovation, of skilled men becoming unskilled.

It is interesting to note that Rolt opts to include the suggestion at the end of the story that the tunnel might be haunted by spirits from ancient history, much like in his tale *New Corner*, rather than adopt a more ambiguous approach. 'Make of it what you like', says Alf at the end of the story. Kai Roberts remarks 'For all his affection for the industrial landscape, Rolt understands that it is impotent in the face of encroaching nature and it is often our trespasses against older, incomprehensible forces which bring disaster down upon us' (Roberts).

Perhaps the story that best illustrates Rolt's contribution to a new type of industrial ghost story is *Hawley Bank Foundry*. The story has been identified as 'The halfway mark of the shift from the pre-war "antiquarian" school of ghost story to the post-war "visionary" school of ghost and horror fiction' (Dust). This marks Rolt out as a transitional figure as 'the proper and civilized (we have suggested that many of James's ghosts are far from civilised) ghosts of the Victorian and Edwardian period gave way to the more abstract terrors of the post-war era' (Dust).

*Hawley Bank Foundry* is set in the Telford/Wrekin area. Rolt spent the war years working for the Ministry of Supply and once stayed at the Valley Hotel, Coalbrookdale

where he saw an engraving by George Robertson ‘The Inside of a Smelting House at Broseley’ and was introduced to the Severn Gorge and the ancient industrial district of Shropshire. Rolt refers to the ironworks as ‘haunted’ not by ghosts as such but by history itself and once again the set-up of the tale places the story in this real setting. ‘It is easy to visualise the scene’ writes Rolt, ‘the hanging woods on the hillsides misted with the first tentative buds of spring, cloud shadows sweeping over the broad back of the Wrekin and, far below, the silver stream of Severn threading her narrow gorge’ (Rolt 84)

Hawley Bank Ironworks was once a ‘pioneering’ and ‘prosperous’ business with a ‘good reputation for sound work’ albeit one ‘old-fashioned in its methods’ (Rolt 85). In the story, the introduction of a stranger, or outsider, to this settled environment - Druce to Hawley Bank - and his relationship with the old ‘traditional country squire’ type owner, Josiah Darley who later disappears in mysterious circumstances, leads to Druce inheriting the old man’s wealth. Under Druce, ‘time-honoured methods’ of working are ‘swept away’ (Rolt 86). This leads to the gradual decline of the iron-works, the antagonising of a once happy workforce, extraordinary minor accidents, and a fatal accident that kills three men, until Druce himself is found hanging in the same shop. ‘Suicide, of course’. Or is it?

All of this is relayed to the reader whilst the new owner (George Frimley) and his Foundry manager (Arthur Clegg) drive to the scene of Hawley Bank (abandoned since 1929) to survey it and consider its potential as a temporary replacement for the bombed out foundry in Birmingham that Frimley has temporarily lost.

Rolt loved the skilled craftsmen he worked with in the years after he left school, particularly his time at Pitchill on the fringe of the vale of Evesham, where he learned to admire and respect his workmates for their ‘versatility in tackling the practical problems of some new job’, almost always in a ‘calm, unhurried, dryly humorous way’ (Rolt, “Landscape” 84) and he recognised too, the hurt and damage when works were closed, experiencing such an event himself when the Kerr Stuart works in Stoke were wound-up in 1930. Rolt recalls this in the first part of his biography, *Landscape with Machines*. ‘The piston rods of the hammers or the hand controls of machines that had once gleamed brightly from constant use grew, first dull and then rusty. Finally, the shops fell silent. You could hear sparrows quarrelling under the roof trusses. So quiet was it in those long aisles that you tended to speak in a whisper as in the stillness of some cathedral’ (Rolt, “Landscape” 133).

This in marked contrast to the voluntary visits Rolt used to make to the works simply to observe them in action, ‘I found this fierce and violent drama of the steelworks at night so hypnotically fascinating that I visited it repeatedly, viewing the spectacle from every angle...It excited me, yet at the same time it filled me with a strange sense of apocalyptic foreboding’ (Rolt, “Landscape” 88).

Rolt utilises that sense of foreboding to dramatic effect in *Hawley Bank Foundry*, setting the story in the Ironbridge gorge which he often visited on summer evenings, wandering amongst the crumbling ruins of the old works. ‘The whole area seemed to me to be haunted’ (Rolt, “Canals” 43), he writes. And in the story, it is.

Rolt utilises natural imagery, describing the ‘‘long tentacles of encroaching briars’, and how ‘smoke is to a chimney as leaves are to a dead tree, and a derelict stack has the gaunt, forlorn appearance of a dead tree’ (Rolt 87) . ‘Overhead in the gloom of the higher galleries,’ he writes, ‘the ponderous beam hung poised at the top of its stroke like some titanic grasshopper petrified when about to spring’, and finally, towards the end of the story he describes the closing ‘tendrils of the briars’ (Rolt 99) as the foundry is returned once more to rest.

The first sign of something odd at Hawley Bank is the feeling between the two men of being watched. The scene mirrors the scene in *A Warning to the Curious* where Paxton first discovers the location of the crown of East Anglia and threatens to disturb its rest. ‘It began when I was first prospecting,’ tells Paxton, ‘and put me off again and again. There was always somebody — a man — standing by one of the firs. This was in daylight, you know. He was never in front of me. I always saw him with the tail of my eye on the left or the right, and he was never there when I looked straight for him’ (James 350).

Rolt foreshadows what is to come when Clegg notices the weird holes in the sand. ‘Rats’ (Rolt 89) he says.

As they stroll back to the car it is dusk, beautifully and eerily evoked by Rolt as follows:

...sun was fast setting over Wales. The keen evening air was filled with the scent of decayed leaves from the surrounding woods where, in mist and purple shadow, night was already advancing. The ironworks, too, were now in shadow. Only at the top of

the tall chimney-stack did the crumbling brickwork glow (ominously) red in the last of the sunlight (Rolt 89)

Will Hughes notes that George Frimley, the owner of the works ‘migrates personnel, equipment and modern commercial attitudes’ (Hughes, “Hole” 6) and in doing so, re-awakens the latent spirit that has been the guardian of the factory since Josiah Darley’s death.

The sightings by a fifteen-year-old apprentice of a ‘spy’, a ‘little ole feller in funny cloes...false whiskers...white an’ straggly like’ that some workers think might be ‘ole Josh Darley a-hoppin’ around’ (Rolt 92) are unnervingly reminiscent of Le Fanu’s dwarfish character in *The Familiar*.

Clegg is alarmed enough by events to visit the foundry at night where he experiences ‘the same sensation of discreet but purposeful surveillance’ that sets his ‘heart...thumping like a pile-driver’ (further industrial imagery) that is offset somewhat by a ‘slithering’ sound followed by something ‘cold and slimy’ moving in a ‘heaving sort of way’ (Rolt 93). He feels a ‘clammy, tentative touch upon his face’ and sees ‘something of indeterminate shape and of dirty white colour disappearing into the sand’ (Rolt 94) convincing him that ‘some power of malevolent and hostile purpose was fast gathering strength in the ironworks, pressing close about the place like the encircling woods’ (Rolt 94).

Direct links can be made here to another working class horror tale, Stephen King’s *Graveyard Shift* in which a young drifter is employed by a mill owner to undertake a cleaning job on an abandoned basement, only to discover an infestation of over-sized rats and a cow-sized queen rat with no eyes or legs, a creature that exists purely to breed more rats.

There are no rats in this story but something hideous and dangerous in the moulding-floor that the locals are already aware of. ‘No villager would ever go near the place’ informs Rolt. One local, old Charlie Penrice, maintains that both the ghosts of Druce and Durley haunt the foundry, ‘Druce with a bit of rope round his neck, and old Josh hopping after him like a spider’ (Rolt 95). Again, further examples of animal/insect imagery in this story and the recurring theme of arachnophobia.

Further injuries are sustained by the workers as the firm prepares for its largest job to date, one that will mean using the moulding-floor. Nevertheless, everything is set in place for the final casting. There is a moment of pure tension as the reader waits for something to happen:

he stood waiting with his plummet rod to stop the flow, a black silhouette against the glare, his shadow, vastly magnified, wavered on the opposite wall. There were some who said afterwards that they saw there also a second shorter shadow.'

Somebody laughed' but the 'voice was too thin and cracked...more a kind of snigger. (Rolt 98)

Laughter is another common trait in both James and Rolt's ghost stories. In James's *A Warning to the Curious* the laugh is 'lungless' (James 357), possibly referring to the guardian of the crown's death by consumption. In *Canon Alberic's Scrapbook* there is laughter in the church. In *Number 13* there is laughter in the mysterious hotel room. The laughter is almost always unnerving, laughter at the expense of another's misfortune.

As expected, there is a tragedy in *Hawley Bank Foundry*. As the molten metal is poured into the moulding-floor a 'deadly hail' of molten metal shoots high into the air, catching the 'wretched skimmer' who stumbles 'screaming like a woman, his clothes reduced to smoking rags' towards the door. One of the pourers trips and his fate is sealed. There is the 'sickly smell of burnt flesh' and in the 'translucent' metal the remaining men see a corpse 'burned beyond hope of recognition' and also 'in the last stages of decomposition' (Rolt 98).

In some ways, Rolt's story of hurried industrial production during a time of national crisis supports S Wasson's argument that the 'literature of second world war industry depicts the return of the perils that afflicted nineteenth-century factories. In traditional gothic fashion, the past arises again' (Wasson 93).

Around the body, 'maggots seething and writhing in putrid flesh...the size of a man's forearm' (98), writes Rolt.

What should we make of these creatures? Is there something of Lovecraft here?

In the final paragraph of *Hawley Bank Foundry*, nature reclaims the site once more:

The big beam engine still lurks in the ruinous engine-house like a great grasshopper eternally poised to spring...winter gales have stripped tiles from the roofs; water drips again from choked and broken guttering. The old silence has fallen once more in the



clearing of the woods. Even the grass is creeping back over the newly made road and the tendrils of the briars will soon meet across the way (Rolt 99)

The ghosts fall silent. George Frimley is less likely to shout at his employees, or we hope he is. The lost benevolence and respect for craftsmanship and his workforce of the original Darley's who were 'proud and jealous of the family tradition' (Rolt 85) with its 'respected but old fashioned...methods' (Rolt 85) may never be replaced. 'For Rolt,' argues Will Hughes, 'industry thus has – or should have- a human face and a human conscience' (Hughes, "Hole" 2) and therefore '...the relationship of George Frimley...to his immediate subordinate, Arthur Clegg...emblematises all that Rolt suggests has gone wrong with British industry under post-war socialism and, one assumes, under the wartime capitalism that immediately preceded it' (Hughes, "Hole" 2). Hughes concludes 'The real point is his (Frimley's) lack of artisan connection to the foundry and to the very trade from which he has made his vast fortune. (Hughes, "Hole" 8)

Rolt's characters, Hughes suggests, are 'a modern, artisan equivalent of the travelling antiquarians and academics favoured by M.R. James' (Hughes, "Hole" 1). 'Not surprisingly,' argues Hughes, 'British culture in the immediately post-war period wavered between nostalgia for a stable, comfortable past and the fearful perception of an uncertain future. These are narratives where machines mean something.' (Hughes, "Hole" 2)

## Nature

Rolt learned to love the natural world during his childhood. But he also faced a dilemma when it came to marrying his love of the natural world with his fascination for machinery and engineering. It was during his first journey aboard the canal boat *Cressy* (on which he was to live and of which he was to write about in his bestselling book *Narrowboat*) from Ellesmere to the Trent and Mersey canal, that the ‘consuming interest in engineering and my feeling for the natural world...had begun disturbingly to conflict with each other...suddenly reconciled’ (Rolt, “Landscape” 113).

Rolt describes the scene with the same care and attention to visual detail and landscape as he does in his fiction, ‘The long level pound of canal that we first traversed passes through a country strangely remote and of a mysterious beauty...across Whixall Moss, a great expanse of peat bog...morning dawned dry but cold and still with an overcast sky of a uniform pearly grey...black interlacement of bare branches silhouetted against this colourless sky, of a thin white mist lying waist high over the dark waters...silent landscape of a dream and through it *Cressy* glided smoothly and quietly...she did not intrude upon the landscape; she became part of it like the canal itself’ (Rolt, “Landscape” 113).

Rolt was learning that, ‘however beautifully a landscape may be aesthetically, without the sustenance of continuing life it becomes starved, dead and forlorn’ (Rolt, “Landscape 155).

Rolt wrestles with some of these ideas in a selection of his stories. Kai Roberts notes how ‘Rolt was not immune to the pantheistic mysticism which characterised the works of Arthur Machen and Algernon Blackwood. His particular fondness for the Black Mountains in Wales and particularly the Vale of Ewyas, site of the famed Llanthony Priory, informs *The House of Vengeance* and *Cwm Garon*’ (Roberts).

*Cwm Garon* opens placidly enough as John Carfax heads west on a labouring branch-line train. Rolt introduces us to a ‘moving panorama of hills stippled with April cloud shadows, of neat farms buried in the white mist of fruit orchards, and of rich meadows dotted with sheep or the red cattle of Herefordshire.’ There are ‘black-gaitered farmers and their plump, basket-laden wives.’ There is the ‘lilt of Border speech’ and ‘the lithe Welsh sheep-dog’ (Rolt 33). The Spring season is referred to as ‘she’ (Rolt 33).

Carfax 'starts' and catches his breath as a 'towering mountain wall' arises before him and begins to 'dominate and dwarf the familiar landscape'. And that landscape soon becomes threatening with 'sunlit levels below as to seem unreal and as menacing as a thunder-cloud. So impenetrable was the shadow on the mountain...the lip of a precipice the height of which seemed monstrously magnified' (Rolt 34).

At this point, Carfax's concerns seem to mirror Rolt's own existential dilemma:

He experienced momentarily a strange feeling of loneliness, realising that the train was an intruder from that world of elaborate artifice by means of which man had shut himself away from the eternal world of earth and sky as though fearful of their elemental mystery (Rolt 34).

On arrival at the local market-town, Carfax sets off in the direction of Cwm Garon and the inn at Llangaron Abbey, but as he walks, the landscape becomes increasingly disorientating, 'though the lane climbed continuously, the skyline of the ridge seemed to retreat elusively before him' and Carfax more isolated in a 'premature dusk' (Rolt 35).

Inclement weather threatens in the form of 'a white wall of cloud' and Carfax suffers 'a feeling of utter isolation, intensifying the loneliness...some inexorable progress designed deliberately to cut him off from the familiar world of his fellow-men' (Rolt 35).

It is as if the landscape holds a personality of its own, a dark element which Carfax is aware of but cannot fully comprehend. Myth and legend become more palpable as he contemplates 'the creatures which were believed to haunt the mountain mists, and he felt he knew the terror that might come with this loneliness as terror comes with darkness to the child' (Rolt 35).

Here is Kilvert's 'Ancient Satyr'.

Eventually, Carfax locates the ruined Abbey of Llangaron and its adjoining inn where he meets a mysterious fellow guest.

Carfax sleeps in lounge and wakes before bed to look out of window at the 'dark brooding' mountain. 'Here, truly, heaven seemed nearer earth...' he contemplates, to which his fellow guest adds 'And hell, too, maybe...' (Rolt 38).

Carfax goes for another walk the next day. An idyllic pastoral scene of a shepherd and his flock greets his vision. He drops into the next valley, which is friendlier. The locals

welcome him. Children stare at him 'round' eyed'. But returning to Cwm Garon he notices how the 'silence seemed to well up from the valley like water from a spring' and the 'feeling of loneliness and of strange oppression inexplicably returning' (Rolt 41).

He enters a pub. A monosyllabic woman serves him. He can hear the sounds of men talking in another room and there are signs that they had seen him coming and moved out of his way. He suffers a feeling of 'unwelcome intrusion' (Rolt 42) and hostility.

As Carfax heads back to the Inn with the 'shadows thickening' he imagines that 'every window concealed a watcher' and that 'every movement the subject of furtive scrutiny' (Rolt 42).

He considers the 'Fear distilled by the valley itself', the 'brooding mountains', 'still pines', the 'heavy, windless air', a 'silent and malign watch' (Rolt 42).

The professor, Elphinstone, believes that 'some evil force dominates Cwm Garon. A 'dark power dammed up in this valley'. The abandoned abbey suggests the monks 'feared something more potent but less tangible than wolves or robbers' (Rolt 44).

Carfax sleeps. He wakes just before midnight. He sees Elphinstone leave the building and spots 'lights, moving and dancing along the slopes of the mountain' (Rolt 45). It is 1st May. When Carfax reaches the crags of Black Daren he finds the body of Elphinstone.

Cwm Garon becomes 'repulsive' (Rolt 47) to Carfax but after several weeks in London his 'fear turned to curiosity and repulsion to an attraction'. He recognises how 'some powerful influence was luring him back...for lust of knowing what should not be known' (Rolt 47).

On a black and starless night he notices moving lights within the church. 'Around and about the brazier moved a considerable company of men and women. They were naked...lacquered. Short in stature. Carfax spots 'a horned figure seated upon some kind of throne' - 'a man clothed in skins and wearing a horned head-dress'. The figures 'writhe' and are 'obedient to the measure of some inaudible rhythm'. Lightning like 'the closing of some vast door'. The valley yawns like 'the mouth of hell'. There is 'soundless desolation', 'darkness blacker than any midnight' and Carfax realises that 'there stalked through the valley something intangible, unearthly, monstrous and very terrible' (Rolt 48).

Carfax flees in the direction of Black Daren and ‘two squat figures’ follow ‘lithely’, ‘moving in swift silence over the screes’ (Rolt 49).

The story ends there.

On a simple level it is one of devil worship and the ‘old religion’ (Lamb). But there is more going on here. The landscape seems to be a living thing, its inhabitants part of something far larger than themselves. Will Hughes observes how ‘a form of devil worship is enacted before the eyes of the traveller...in a landscape which fascinates and somehow holds him.’ (Hughes, “Satyr”)

This idea of ancient landscape harbouring secrets, of another world beyond our own, of nature existing as some sort of primordial spirit, echoes the work of Blackwood and Machen. We know that Rolt was inspired by both the landscape in which he grew up and his readings of the two authors. Rolt explores the idea in other ways in the stories *Agony of Flame*, *The House of Vengeance* and *The Shouting* but none are as effective as *Cwm Garon*.

*The Shouting* is instantly identifiable as a Machenesque tale, in the subject matter, if not in the telling. It concerns a man’s fear of the woods and a story of gipsy children worshipping what might just be a pagan God. Kai Roberts comments that the story combines ‘an authentically folkloric feel with a disconcerting ambiguity’ (Roberts) whilst Joy Silence sees it as ‘a bracing piece of sylvan horror which, again, draws on a somewhat sinister snatch of folk verse and is crammed with Machenesque concerns’ (Silence). It most easily sits alongside Machen’s short piece *Out of the Earth* which concerns curious ‘ill-behaviour’ (Machen 265) of ‘troublesome children’ (Machen 265) in Welsh towns, behaviour that the narrator does not witness first-hand and reminds the reader that ‘no first-hand evidence was available’ (Machen 265). Yet reports of the behaviour grow and worsen. The reputations of the towns suffer and rumours continue to spread, growing ‘more monstrous and incredible’ (Machen 267). A little girl is ‘set upon and beaten by a pack of young Welsh savages’, ‘visitor’s children had not only been beaten but tortured’ and ‘a little boy had been found impaled on a stake in a lonely field’ (Machen 268). No evidence is forthcoming and the narrator only witnesses courteous behaviour. On a trip with his family to Manavon, the narrator’s child talks of ‘funny children’ and later, whilst having a talk with a Welshman named Morgan, known for being a dreamer, the narrator learns of an incident at Castell Coch where a ‘swarm of noisome children, horrible little stunted creatures with old men’s faces, with bloated faces, with little sunken eyes, with leering eyes...no more than five or six years

old'. 'I saw blood running in streams, as they shrieked with laughter' tells Morgan, who eventually scares them away, 'but I could not find the mark of it on the grass afterwards' (Machen 270)

Towards the end of the story it is revealed that these 'little people of the earth' are 'only visible, only audible, to children and the childlike' and that they 'rise up and rejoice in these times of ours' (Machen 271)

But what times? The story first appeared in T.P.'s Weekly in late November 1915. 'I began to wonder,' tells the narrator who, in this reportorial styled tale is most likely Machen himself, 'whether the pressure and anxiety and suspense of a terrible war had unhinged the public mind, so that it was ready to believe any fable, to debate the reasons for happenings which had never happened' (Machen 268)

Machen writes about an East-West divide, of wartime rumour. He comments on how the issue is taken up and used as evidence in arguments about education and the role of the church, of 'the battle that is for age unto ages; and the People take delight in it'. The little people? The supernatural taking advantage of the times to push out into the world? (Machen 268)

Rolt's references to the atom bomb and Bikini Atoll at the beginning and end of *Agony of Flame*, in which two men are subjected to a malevolent and ultimately horrific attack by what might be elementals of nature, leaving one of the men 'not only deaf and dumb but blind also' (Rolt 82), suggests he was exploring similar themes and possibilities.

## VI. Towards Modern Ghosts

We have already touched upon the work of Fritz Leiber but it might be useful to end this study by considering another of his tales, *Smoke Ghost*, written in 1941.

Leiber was American, a fan of M.R. James, and a correspondent of H.P. Lovecraft, further demonstrating the intricate literary connections between the writers of the genre. *Smoke Ghost* might be considered a Jamesian tale. Leiber deliberately intended to write a Jamesian story with *Our Lady of Darkness* and Rosemary Pardoe argues that another Leiber story, *The Button Molder*, is again, suitably Jamesian (Pardoe 'Button').

If L.T.C. Rolt helped keep the ghost story alive and re-route it during the post-war years, tentatively finding place for it in the post-industrial world of the 1940s it might be argued that Fritz Leiber gave it a new home. If Rolt was the temporary custodian of the ghost story, Leiber was its new guardian. 'It is the American metropolis,' quotes Leiber, 'jammed with iron and stone, that sets off my sense of the horrible and beautiful... Things like the buzz of a defective neon sign, the black framework of the elevated, muttering of machinery one cannot identify – there are terrors in the modern city, in comparison to which the darks of Gothic castles and haunted woods are light' (Campbell, "Fritz" 1).

Ramsey Campbell suggests that 'radicalism combined with his knowledge of the field' to produce *Smoke Ghost*. 'Instead of being invaded by the supernatural, the mundane setting – forties Chicago – is now its source, and the grubby half-glimpsed spectre its genius loci' (Klaehn).

Campbell suggests that Leiber 'revives the reticence of M. R. James in a contemporary fashion' (Campbell, "Fritz" 1).

In the story, Leiber's city dweller, Catesby Wran, is being haunted by something:

Have you ever thought what a ghost of our times would look like?' Wran asks his secretary at the beginning of the story. 'I don't mean that traditional kind of ghost. I mean a ghost from the world today, with the soot of the factories on its face and the pounding of machinery in its soul (Leiber, "Smoke" 11)

Wran decides that the ghost would 'grow out of the real world. It would reflect all the tangled, sordid, vicious things. All the loose ends. And it would be very grimy' (Leiber, "Smoke" 12).

‘Just picture it,’ says Wran. ‘A smoky composite face with the hungry anxiety of the unemployed, the neurotic restlessness of the person without purpose, the high-pressure metropolitan worker, the uneasy resentment of the striker, the callous opportunism of the scab, the aggressive whine of the panhandler, the inhibited terror of the bombed civilian, and a thousand other twisted emotional patterns. Each one overlying and yet blending with the other, like a pile of semi-transparent masks’ (Leiber, “Smoke” 11).

If landscape and nature contain a hidden otherness, as witnessed in Machen, Blackwood and Rolt’s *Cwm Garon*, Leiber presents us with an urban horror to match it:

...he always saw it around dusk, either in the normal smoky half-light, or tinged with red by the flat rays of a dirty sunset, or covered by ghostly windblown white sheets of rain-splash, or patched with blackish snow; and it seemed unusually bleak and suggestive, almost beautifully ugly, though in no sense picturesque; dreary but meaningful. Unconsciously it came to symbolize for Catesby Wran certain disagreeable aspects of the frustrated, frightened century in which he lived, the jangled century of hate and heavy industry...(Leiber, “Smoke” 14)

Over a number of days, the ‘ghost’ encroaches on the protagonist, reminding the reader of the staccato trespass of the thing in ‘The Mezzontint’ as it makes its way across the image of the unidentifiable hall. Wran notices:

a shapeless black sack lying on the third roof from the tracks... Its colour and texture, and the grimy stains around it, suggested that it was filled with coal dust’ and ‘the following evening it seemed to have been blown against a rusty ventilator by the wind’ followed by, on the next night ‘for that evening the thing was on the nearest roof, though on: the farther side, looking as if it had just flopped down over the low brick parapet’ until ‘Next evening the sack was gone.’

Leiber’s description of the ‘creature’ is Jamesian in style:

For an instant an unpleasant picture formed in his mind— that of an inky, humped creature crouched behind the nearer parapet, waiting’ and there is something of the malevolent in the creature’s final approach, fantastically tense, in a lift-shaft. ‘He saw it peering up the shaft at him from three floors below, the sacking face pressed close against the iron grille-work. It started up the stair at a shockingly swift, shambling gait-’



There are reminders here of the creatures in James's *Wailing Well*. The movement is the same. There is the same combination of awkward physical dexterity and unpredictable speed.

What happens in between these sections re-enforces the idea that Rolt tackles at the opening of this study, the notion of the traditional ghost story gradually being replaced by both the weird and the scientific. As Maureen Kincaid Speller points out, 'Wran sets about dealing with his experience, attempting to explain it away through psychology (Kincaid-Speller).

It might also be argued that what we witness in the scenes with the psychiatrist is a diversion away from the idea of a ghost to an ultimately fruitless exploration of a possible scientific or psychoanalytical explanation, something more akin to the science-fiction stories rising out of the 1930s science-fiction boom or a return to the spiritualism of the Victorian era as Wran reveals to the psychiatrist that his mother used to use him as a 'medium for communicating with the...er...other world' (Leiber, "Smoke" 19). The psychiatrist's reticence to even mention this 'other world' is perhaps symbolic of the age.

Leiber's *Smoke Ghost* marks an important moment in the development of the ghost story and horror as a genre. Maureen Kincaid Speller argues that it is an example of how the 'narrative movement has shifted direction: the weird emerges more clearly into the contemporary rather than the story leaving the contemporary in search of the strange' (Kincaid Speller).

Rolt's *Hawley Bank Foundry* and *The Mine* are further examples of this shift.

Julia Briggs observation in *Night Visitors* that the 'ghost story no longer has any capacity for growth or adaptation' (Briggs, "Night Visitors" 14) fails to recognise the essentially resilient nature of ghost stories and horror fiction. As Clive Bloom observes and as writers of modern horror constantly prove, 'One minute out of fashion, the next in it, it is the horror tale itself that beckons from the grave – literature's own revenant genre' (Bloom 166).

## VII. L.T.C. Rolt – A Final Word

In this study I have tried to argue that L.T.C. Rolt's *Sleep No More* marks an important way-point in the development of the ghost story. Rolt learned from studying the genre, soaking up the most effective approaches and incorporating them into his own work, just as M.R. James had before him.

Some of the stories in the collection are readily familiar to a reader of ghostly tales. In *A Visitor at Ashcombe* Rolt dismisses the idea of ghost stories by suggesting there is 'no specific foundation either in fact or folklore' for them. He then serves up horror anyway, creating a strong and powerful ghost to serve justice on a brash 'nouveau riche industrialist' in classically malevolent, Jamesian fashion. The story culminates in 'burned...blistered and blackened' (Rolt 57) victims and stirs up at least a few echoes of *The Ash Tree*. Similarly, the familiar trope of the haunted room and the ghost hunter in Rolt's *Hear Not My Steps* can be traced from Bulwer-Lytton's *The Hunters and the Haunted* through Wells' *The Red Room*, all the way to King's *1308*. In *The Cat Returns* Rolt even allows himself a playful nod towards the genre, 'It was just like the conventional opening of a mystery film', he quips, 'You're not in the haunted grange' (Rolt 7).

Whilst the weakest of Rolt's stories do nothing more than reflect a certain type of story back at the past from which it originated, in his most effective works Rolt carries the ghost story forwards towards untrodden places. 'Certainly the most defining characteristic of his work remains the industrial environment into which he introduces his spectres, something which was still uncommon when *Sleep No More* was published in 1948, but he is no less convincing when exploring more natural landscapes and the reason you suspect his stories are so successful is because like all the best creators of weird fiction, he possessed an authentic vision. For him the weird tale was not just a literary exercise, but fundamentally an extension and communication of his world view and passions' (Roberts).

Mark Andersen points out that Rolt's tales are 'more than borderline derivative' (Andersen), whilst Christopher Roden highlights his 'individual style', his 'sense of realism' and the 'freshness of actuality to his writings about rural and industrial Britain' (Roden).

His interest in atavism, the notion of people in the modern era reverting to the ways of thinking and acting of a former time, possibly explains the paganism he explores in *Cwm Garon* and *The Shouting*. *Hawley Bank Foundry* is an argument against 'the evils of

industrialism: the degradation, the loss of responsibility and self-respect, the complete alienation from the natural world that brought it about' (Rolt, "Landscape").

'We are witnessing, not the laborious construction of a new world,' argues Rolt at the end of *Landscape with Machines*, 'but the ruin of a civilisation which, like a tower built upon quicksand, sinks faster than we can add brick to brick. This ruin appears to be coming about far more quickly than I could ever have believed. When it comes it can only be succeeded by some more self-sufficient form of society designed to make the fullest and best use of natural resources and human ability. It is in such a society that I believe those who have opted out will find their niches' (Rolt, "Landscape" )

Whilst James was a specialist, and an expert in his field, Rolt's life was occupied with a variety of wider interests. He was one of life's great achievers, a man of action worthy of remembrance. He makes this clear in his autobiography, 'No worldly interest should gain such power over a man that he has not the strength of mind to break free from it' (Rolt, "Landscape" 199).

Rolt only wrote one collection. He is greater remembered for his non-fiction, for his founding of the Inland Waterways Association and the Talynn Railway Preservation Society. A canal bridge on the Oxford canal bears his name, as does a blue plaque at Tooley's boatyard in Banbury.

Whilst his ghost stories have occasionally been anthologised, it is only recently that his slim collection has begun to garner recognition. If Fritz Leiber is recognised as the writer who moved the ghost story into new urban and industrial environments, Rolt's short stories deserve recognition for contributing to the transition.

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### **Unattributed**

\*[www.victorianweb.org/periodicals/hw.html](http://www.victorianweb.org/periodicals/hw.html)

\*\*(<http://vaultofevil.proboards.com/thread/2680/ltc-rolt-sleep-more#ixzz4wG5tkWRF>)

\*\*\*(<http://www.superdoomedplanet.com/blog/?p=517>)

## Appendix

1.



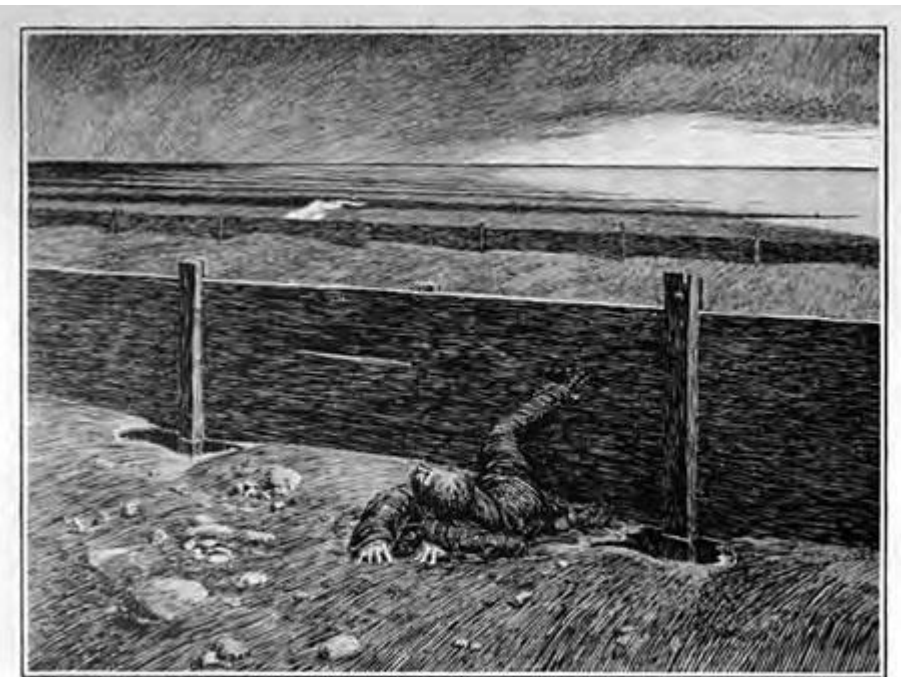
THE ENGLISHMAN WAS TOO DEEP IN HIS NOTE-BOOK  
TO GIVE MORE THAN AN OCCASIONAL GLANCE  
TO THE SACRISTAN.

2.



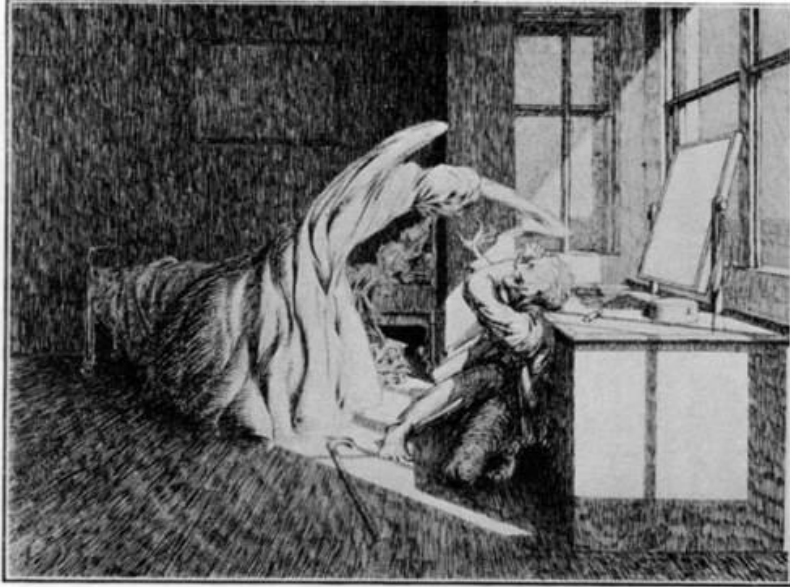
A HAND LIKE THE HAND IN THAT PICTURE.

3.



LOOKING UP IN AN ATTITUDE OF PAINFUL ANXIETY.

4.



IT LEAPT TOWARDS HIM UPON THE INSTANT.

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