

Academia, Avocation and Ludicity in the Supernatural Fiction of M.R. James¹

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In his 'antiquarian' ghost stories, Montague Rhodes James sought to examine the male character sub specie ludi, as solitary types who – in their sensitivity to inherently playful, or ludic, situations – are launched into a transformative game in which their identity is traumatically and horrifically challenged. In the vast majority of his tales, James focuses upon a main character that is usually a middle-aged English academic or antiquarian who, by his insatiable intellectual curiosity, encounters a demonic spectre in some cathedral or library. In this paper I argue that James emphasises the 'amateur', avocational, and non-professional status of these ghost-seers as a playful textual strategy that reflects upon his own blended identity as a career academic and part-time supernatural savant. It is the typical 'normality' of M.R. James's amateur academic that allows for abnormal events to occur which dramatically invigorate everyday life and challenge stable identity through the medium of familiar, yet fearful, scholarly artefacts.

The Concept of Ludicity

The advent of Edwardian modernity initiated a cultural discourse which aimed to probe the boundaries between labour and pleasure, vocation and avocation, and work and play in an effort to examine the needs and requirements of individual desires and fantasies. This occurred in reaction to the 'civilised values' and ethics which sought to provide stability in the rapidly changing nature of industrial and post-industrial society.² In the writings of Sigmund Freud this discourse comes to assume a central role in analysing the psychological mechanisms employed by the desiring ego in its encounter with social reality.³ In 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' (1907), Freud wrote:

Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him?⁴

This theme of playing with given reality was continued by Georg Simmel in his essay 'The Adventure' (1911), where he noted the profound affinity between the artist and the adventurer. Simmel analysed the experience of adventure as a phenomenon which dramatically drops 'out of the continuity of life' and thus assumes intoxicating and dream-like qualities which resonate rapturously in its aftermath.⁵ The fantasising nature of ludic activity noted by Freud and Simmel comes to inform the literary genre that I term 'ludic terrorism' which featured prominently in the thematics of many classic Edwardian novellas, such as G.K Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare* (1907), Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* (1907), and André Gide's *The Vatican Cellars* (1914).⁶

Ludicity, or ludic activity, (from the Latin 'ludo': I play) has been described as an intrinsically motivated phenomenon engaged in by individuals or groups of individuals for its own sake, that is, regardless of any utilitarian or profiting purpose.⁷ As a hermeneutic concept it has occupied a key role in debates about the nature of play, pleasure and the work ethic in a whole range of disciplines and areas of research from aesthetics to paediatrics, and from anthropology to post-1968

leftist politics.⁸ In his influential and pioneering work *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1938), the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga raised the concept of ludicity to the forefront of criticism in interpreting issues of art, war, and human development.⁹ Huizinga aimed to explore 'how far culture itself bears the character of play' and proposed an influential theory of play that would illustrate how far cultural history bears the stamp of a world *sub specie ludi* (under the terms of play).¹⁰ Drawing on a broad range of cultural references to play and playfulness from the ancients to his own contemporaries, Huizinga proposed the notion of free play as the essential constituent of civilisation, which he believed 'arises *in* and *as* play, and never leaves it'.¹¹

The significance and worth of the ludic impulse, as asserted in different contexts by Freud, Simmel and Huizinga was also stressed in the supernatural fiction of the author under examination in this paper, the English scholar and writer Montague Rhodes James (1862-1936). Like those influential thinkers, James was a Victorian by birth and culture and hugely accomplished in his vocational sphere. Yet, unlike them, James's contemporary explorations of the ludic drive had the character of a sideline project, or insignificant hobby to be publicly depreciated and heavily regulated. Despite the avocational impulse behind James's fictional efforts, and his trenchantly non-professional attitude towards them, it thus becomes greatly significant that he consistently located his fictional tales in the environment of his working and vocational life. If Freud was correct in stating that the 'opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real',¹² then James's creation of a supernatural world of ghosts, demons and vampires could safely emerge under the rubric of 'make-believe' where issues of ludicity could be highlighted from *within*, and linked to, the tangible world of 'real' everyday existence - in James's case the setting of the scholarly space.

M.R. James and his Milieu

As *Eton and King's* (1926), the title of his memoir suggests, James understood his biographical identity as a fundamentally *collegiate* one, an identity mediated through the academy and the Edwardian academic culture that formed such a large part of his life. A well-connected deacon, James irresistibly rose through the ranks of university administration: he was made a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge in 1887; Dean in 1889; Provost in 1905; and Provost of Eton in 1918. A precocious polymath and bibliophile, he was chiefly known for his scholarly achievements: he was a world specialist in apocryphal Biblical literature and medieval manuscripts, a noted antiquary, an accomplished palaeographer, and a fiercely dedicated bibliographer. A member of the 'Godly' camp in King's College,¹³ James was a popular figure in the academy with his old-school sense of donnishness and was known to be at his most comfortable around enthusiastic undergraduates – a situation which was destroyed during the dismal period of World War I. Even a cursory overview of James's biography leads one to the conclusion that his life was essentially a *bibliographical* experience and that he managed to blend a concern for the rules of work and play with an inherently bookish identity throughout his long life. In 'A Memoir of Montague Rhodes James' (1939), his close friend S.G. Lubbock related some interesting anecdotes about the young James. He wrote that 'Monty' broke into tears during his first children's party and was only placated when he was placed in the library. In a similar vein, during a severe attack of bronchitis James

expressed a longing to see a certain seventeenth-century Dutch Bible that he had heard was in the possession of his father's friend, Bishop Ryle. This was sent to him, and Mrs Woodhouse recalls him, sitting up in a red dressing gown, poring happily over it.¹⁴

It is clear that James in his Eton days was what Victor Nell terms a prototypical 'ludic reader', a reader who becomes intoxicated with the magical qualities of written material and is quite literally 'lost in a book'.¹⁵ We learn that James had an 'astonishing capacity for reading for pleasure works of the greatest knottiness', and he himself admitted a relentless fascination with 'obscure authors, all of whom it was my ambition – for no definite reason – to read'.¹⁶ James, who once remarked 'we are nothing if not bibliographical nowadays',¹⁷ can be compared to that eminent Victorian John Stuart Mill, whose father, a historian, aimed to give his son 'the highest order of intellectual education'.¹⁸

He made sure that Mill's childhood was dominated by scholarly books and the paraphernalia of learning; Mill wrote: 'Of children's books, any more than playthings, I had scarcely any, except an occasional gift from a relation or acquaintance'.¹⁹ While most avid readers recall life and its development through the spectrum of the enchanting books read along the way, Mill's bookish identification was rather morbid: his memoirs of childhood read like a psychological bibliography.²⁰ Even during relaxing walks in his youth, Mill was obliged to take his reading notes with him to discuss with his father important issues in the open air. James and his fictional characters betray a significant likeness with Mill and the strict and organised Victorian culture of higher learning that he experienced. As Roy Porter has noted, the notion that reading can be a dangerous and even addictive pursuit – bibliomania – has a long cultural history, which has highlighted not only the physical and medical damage that incessant reading could provoke, but also the moral and spiritual peril which students in their relentless pursuit of knowledge could fall into.²¹ James's concern for ludicity, and the almost Faustian nature of his bookishness, can be traced to his childhood behaviour as an inherently ludic reader who devoured all types of books with remarkable pleasure and zest. Yet, the desire to read in bed, a secure space of playful identification, becomes a prelude to the first supernatural situation in James's well-known chiller 'Number 13':²²

...an almost necessary preliminary to bed, if he meant to sleep, was the reading of a few pages of print, and he now remembered that the particular book which he had been reading in the train, and *which alone would satisfy him at that present moment*, was in the pocket of his greatcoat, then hanging on a peg outside the dining-room.²³

This compensatory function of the book raises the theme of reading and the collecting of knowledge as a 'guilty pleasure' within James's fiction, as a sedative or pacifier where bibliomania can become not only an alternative, sometimes enforced, to the spontaneity of child's play, but also a substitute ludic apparatus which was culturally encoded and respected within James's sociological milieu.²⁴ Despite his notable lack of athleticism, James managed to rise in young men's society during his Eton days through his intelligence, talent for mimicry, and general good-humour. Lubbock mentions James's love of games and wrote that 'the iron grip of his fingers will be remembered by anyone who played the game of Grab when he was one of the grabbers'.²⁵ However, reading Lubbock and Pfaff's respective biographical efforts, the casual reader would perhaps overlook the importance and significance of an aspect of James's university career – his compelling and influential collection of ghost stories.

Written in the so-called 'antiquarian' vein of English and Anglo-Irish supernatural fiction, which began when James read his first effort in the genre 'Canon Alberic's Scrap-book' in 1893,²⁶ these stories were designed to spruce up the social gatherings of academic colleagues in James's rooms at Cambridge known as the 'Chitchat Club'. In this thoroughly common-room situation, the ghost stories, sometimes only just completed by James, were assigned the status of an after-dinner curio, like a fine cigar - to be consumed by close friends for pure pleasure. James, like his fictional counterparts, would become the quintessential teller of ghost stories and revelled in recuperating the oral ghost story back into the redbrick retreat, where he told his tales around a single candle to a select collegiate audience, usually at Christmas. In his introduction to the supernatural anthology *Ghosts and Marvels* (1924), James outlined a few of his considerations on what constituted a good ghost story:

Let us, then, be introduced to the actors in a placid way; let us see them going about their ordinary business, undisturbed by forebodings, pleased with their surroundings; and into this calm environment let the ominous thing put out its head, unobtrusively at first, and then more insistently, until it holds the stage.²⁷

James was obviously adapting the textual games of the fairy story which imparted to the child a parallel belief in the absolute paranormal, or securely fantastic, sphere of the narrative alongside the everyday identities and paraphernalia of the child's world wherein the events of the tale can occur - ('If you go into the woods today, beware of a big surprise', etc.).

In his fascinating essay 'Sociability (An Example of Pure, or Formal, Sociology)' (1917), Simmel identified the play-function in the phenomenon of sociability among individuals. He postulated the play scenario as a democratic micro-culture in which the equality of association of all participants is implied, or 'played' as it were:

And to 'do as if' is no more a lie than play or art are lies because of their deviation from reality. The game becomes a lie only when sociable action and speech are made into mere instruments of the intentions and events of practical reality – just as painting becomes a lie when it tries, in a panoramic effect, to simulate reality.²⁸

This notion of the game as a 'true fiction' reflects the socialised experience of James's ghost story presentations and the experiences described in the narratives themselves, for in both cases membership of a highly ritualised social category is bestowed upon the reader and implied in the fictional characters.²⁹ The Jamesian milieu was engaged in what the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski termed 'phatic communion', a mode of social communication that aims to establish itself as just that: a mode of social communication between hearer and speaker. Like free play, this communion comes to signify itself and 'serves to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship and does not serve any purpose of communicating ideas'.³⁰ The Chitchat Club and the Christmas gatherings provided an extremely social atmosphere in which James could deliver his tales with nothing more than an acute concern for the disturbed enjoyment of the listener. According to James, the sole aim of his fictions was to allow for the sensation of pleasure for the listener/reader. This leads one to the recognition of the ritualistic character of the social gatherings where most of the ghost stories were premiered. These occasions served to cement collegiality and friendship in an era when, following the university reforms of the 1880s that allowed for married dons in the academy and women's participation in higher education, traditional male homosocial bonds in the universities were weakening considerably.³¹ It is the function of ghost stories as phatic communions that explains James's linking of spontaneous pleasure with an extreme reluctance to explain or grant undue significance to what were essentially playful creations.³²

The Theme of Play in the Ghost Stories of M.R. James

James once wrote of a deeply significant primal scene in his youth which led to his interest in ghosts:

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.³³

While the experience of marionette theatre and the puppet show is well known to encourage philosophical reflections of the deepest significance,³⁴ perhaps no one has fully integrated the sense of childish horror into an adult environment as forcibly as James did in his 1913 tale, 'The Story of a Disappearance and an Appearance'.³⁵ This tale, which can most fruitfully be read as an occult game in which the methodology of a ludic type of terrorism features strongly, involves a trip into the country at Christmas following the sudden disappearance of the narrator's uncle, the local deacon. When the issue of the disappearance is combined with the arrival of a Punch and Judy show which had been touring the area, the narrator has a vivid dream during which he is frozen in a catatonic state and forced to watch as Punch commences a horrific and murderous rampage with the crack of the stick sounding disturbingly and sickeningly real to the narrator:

The baby - it sounds more ridiculous as I go on - the baby, I am sure, was alive. Punch wrung its neck, and if the choke or squeak which it gave were not real, I know nothing of reality.³⁶

Following this, Punch is pursued and captured by 'a sturdy figure clad in black' a character that we assume is the wraith of the narrator's uncle. The dénouement to the tale comes the next day after the arrival of the real Punch and Judy Show performers. The show ends abruptly as an unseen presence collapses the stage and drives the two performers to a grisly death - beside their bodies

the townsfolk find the corpse of the narrator's uncle, who had been murdered and tossed in a chalk pit. Here, James selects the metaphor of Punch and Judy, an international and institutional horror show, as a map to his supernatural fiction. This highlights the extent to which he conceived the antiquarian genre of ghost stories as an opportunity to deal with the supernatural in a context of a ludic terrorism allied to free time and the frisson of entertaining nightmares.

It is the prevalence of the ludic attitude which separates the antiquarian genre from most of the other major offshoots of supernatural fiction; most notably the visionary genre of Edwardian and post-Edwardian ghost stories as practiced by Algernon Blackwood, Walter de la Mare, and Arthur Machen. If I may adapt Pascal for our purposes, in the Jamesian world most of the world's evil seems to be unearthed once the quiet man leaves his bookish and academic retreat in order to sample the world outside.³⁷ This supernatural exploration can be attributed to the deep connection in the literary history of the supernatural between bibliomania and the receptiveness to the ghostly experience, a thread that, outside James, found most success in works such as Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's 'Green Tea', and Walter de la Mare's 'The Green Room'.³⁸ James, who developed his thematics of the antiquarian tale from 'the Master',³⁹ Sheridan Le Fanu, imparted a noted lack, or unclear status of, a distinct moral or ethical dimension from which to judge the tale and its supernatural events.⁴⁰ The major common thread that directs James's work, the paradigmatic motto, 'a warning to the curious', is undoubtedly a ludic component – playfully threatening the academic character, daring him not to engage in his everyday practices of researching and collecting relics and old books; the 'warning to the curious' appears as a darkly humorous postscript rather than a genuine introductory threat.

When a child James had, in a Sunday-school notebook, defined communists as 'an abominable set of people' who, in reference to the Paris Commune of 1871, destroyed precious art treasures and antiquities 'by means of petroleum and other equally detestable compounds'.⁴¹ By accepting the image of the communards as anti-art monsters with a toxic and abhorrent identity, James demonstrated a conception of the artefact and antique as some sort of necessary narcotic and security for mature civilisation and the academic milieu where he worked.⁴² For, as Jack Sullivan has noted, James's over-educated characters have a void in their lives which they attempt to fill by collecting, investigating, discovering, digging up, or otherwise unearthing:

The endless process of collecting and arranging gives the characters an illusory sense of order and stability, illusory because it is precisely this process which evokes the demon or the vampire.⁴³

Critics have noted that the theme of collecting in James's fiction has acute psychoanalytical parallels: indeed Ernest Jones believed that the impulse to gather, collect, and hoard was a strong symptom of anal eroticism.⁴⁴ In James, 'the malice of inanimate objects'⁴⁵ reflects both the urge to achieve order and ownership of the artefact, but also the subterranean horror which this possession implies. This conflict is expressed in the many symbolic pseudosexual games between the ghost and the 'curious' researcher throughout James's ghost stories. For instance the exemplary tale 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad' reaches its climax as the ghost of crumpled linen rises threateningly from the bed opposite Parkins; the most horrible moment in 'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas' occurs when the ghost of the Abbot puts his arms around the neck of Mr. Gregory; and 'A School Story' ends with the corpse of a demon and teacher wrapped in each other's arms.⁴⁶ These experiences serve as stern moral, if ironic, lessons for the listener/reader who *just can't resist*. As James wrote, one aim of the ghost story is to suggest "' If I'm not careful, something of this kind may happen to me!'"⁴⁷ The artefact thus becomes a by-proxy entrance into the occult situation and this deep connection between the demonic, the collectable, and the atmosphere of ludic terror recurs throughout James's work in which events have an irresistible teleology of horror to them.

Ludic terrorism, a concept based upon the relationship between avocation and the ludic impulse inherent in debates revolving around the transvaluation of work, forms a central fulcrum in James's thematics as a dramatic interiorisation of fear deep within the vocational and 'civilised' sphere of modern 'workaday existence'. This concept can be traced to Joseph Conrad's deconstruction of the adventure genre in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) in which the rapturously adventurous situation began to relocate to the post-colonial domestic front. This would emerge in a reactionary format in the guise

of the commonwealth espionage thrillers of John Buchan's Richard Hannay series (1915-36), yet also developed to produce a subgenre of Edwardian literature in which Conrad's own *The Secret Agent* (1907) would become a founding text.⁴⁸ This work explored the violent game between the political establishment and the anarchist-terrorist underground from the point of view of both the players and the potential spoilsports. This same agonistic 'punch and judy' contestation can be discerned in that special dissonance in James's ghost stories created by the clash of the *a priori* vocationalism of the academic figure with the rapturous imposition of the terrorist ludicity of the ghost, resulting in a shocking realisation of the avocational nature of these scholarly activities.

Many fairy tales involve some sort of cunning plan on the part of the confederacy of the good against the villain of the piece, and this plot template can be seen in 'Casting the Runes'⁴⁹ where we are introduced to Mr. Karswell, a wealthy independent scholar of the occult who retains an over-healthy notion of his intellectual self-worth. He is also in the habit of murdering peer reviewers who have advised against his scholarship to academic journals and societies. A mischievous Aleister Crowley-type figure,⁵⁰ Karswell practises the black arts, which he uses to terrorise academics and locals alike. In one memorable passage he plays a sick game upon a group of local children who had a predilection for wandering into his grounds to play their games. Beginning with a slide show featuring Little Red Riding Hood, Karswell gradually introduces more and more horrific scenes designed to drive the children mad with fear. Every child becomes mesmerised by the show, especially a scene of Karswell's estate which portrays a running child being overtaken by a spectral creature in white which proceeds to tear the boy to pieces. When Karswell begins to set his sights upon Mr. Dunning, the latest academic to reject his demonological scholarship, an alliance between Dunning and the brother of a murdered peer-reviewer succeeds in displacing the runic curse which Karswell had employed against his adversaries – a slip of paper that had the effect of 'bringing its possessors into very undesirable company'. The allies thus transfer the supernatural terror back upon the ludic terrorist and competitively redefining the rules of the game.⁵¹ This tale is unique in James's oeuvre for the fighting spirit of Dunning, who through his resistance and counter-cursing of Karswell, manages to defeat an adversary who stood, in James's milieu, for scholarly imposture and diabolical autodidacticism – a situation of blatant and unacceptable avocation.

In the tale 'Number 13', Mr. Anderson, an academic residing in a nondescript hotel room during a study trip to the Rigsarkiv in Viborg, Denmark has his whole opinions upon everyday life and death, (and the demonically relevant nature of history) brought home to him during the rigours of a supernatural situation. In this tale the queer appearance and disappearance of a room in-between no.12 and no.14 signals that play, like the supernatural experience, appears to emerge as something absolutely paranormal, in absolute contrast to the certainties of everyday life.

The daylight...let the true proportions of the room with its three windows appear, and satisfied its tenant that his choice after all had not been a bad one. When he was almost dressed he walked to the middle one of the three windows to look out at the weather. Another shock awaited him. Strangely unobservant he must have been last night. He could have sworn ten times over that he had been smoking at the right-hand window the last thing before he went to bed, and here was his cigarette-end on the sill of the middle window.⁵²

This tale quite literally proves Sullivan's point that the supernatural emerges out of a void in James's characters' lives; in 'Number 13' the very walls of the hotel room are enlisted in the supernatural situation as they encroach upon Anderson's personal/scholarly space. Anderson had particularly desired a large room which could serve as both a bedroom and a study with a view of the street. Unlike tales of the crushing or reducing of space, such as Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Pit and the Pendulum', or Wilkie Collins's 'A Terribly Strange Bed',⁵³ Anderson is free during the daytime to pursue his research in the collegiate space of the archive, which not surprisingly, is historically connected to the horror lurking within room no.13. It is interesting to note that the occupant of no. 12, a certain Herr Jensen, who also experienced much inconvenience at the room-shifting and horrific laughter, is an amateur palaeographer who aids Anderson in discovering and interpreting a manuscript hidden between the two rooms. These amateur academics are men who like Mr Dillet

in 'The Haunted Dolls' House' would 'be none the worse for a bit of a shake up'.⁵⁴ They are also supernatural tourists, cruising for a paranormal experience deep within the arena assumed to be the least typically open to one – they construct environments in order to heighten the affective activities of academia and run a current through their scholarly lives; for in 'Number 13' Anderson and Jensen between them – between their very walls – manage to unearth a satanic work of astrology, a tome which presumably had not haunted the hotel until Anderson arrived on his research trip. The men who feature in the genre of ludic terrorism are neither adventurers nor heroes, but men alienated from workaday existence, and their heroism is that of a liberated avocation.

The Jamesian academic then, like the tribal shaman and the literary adventurer of the nineteenth-century, 'discovers his vulnerability to the demonic element. His ties to conventional reality have been loosened, and this provides him with a terrifying personal knowledge of the world beyond man'.⁵⁵ The fact that 'Number 13' ends with a reference to the legend of Daniel Salthenius who, we are told, sold his soul to Satan as an undergraduate and was later made Professor of Hebrew at Königsberg, enhances the dark metaphysical scope and Faustian thematics which dwell within academic life. However, the most spectacularly evil amateur academic in the Jamesian world is Mr Abney in 'Lost Hearts',⁵⁶ who through his occult studies kills young children in order to increase his life and knowledge. He displays a deadpan agonistic attitude toward the spectres which inevitably haunt him, and he dislikes the word 'murder' in this context; one suspects he prefers the term 'research':

Some annoyance may be experienced from the psychic portion of the subjects, which popular language dignifies with the name of ghosts. But the man of philosophical temperament – to whom alone the experiment is appropriate – will be little prone to attach importance to the feeble efforts of these beings to wreak their vengeance on him.⁵⁷

James's tales do not imply that we see ghosts because modern life is boring, but seem to suggest that the integration of work with play and a repression of the awareness of the ludicity of scholarly work, of the avocational nature of the knowledge industry, produces the ambient basis for the supernatural situation.

The Academic as an Avocational Figure

It is within the strain of avocational discourse that we may locate the supernatural fiction of James, for he took the development of the erudite ghost story to its logical ends and had the main characters easily identifiable with his ludic readers – scholarly men of independent means. Of all the generic types in literature, the man of independent means, secure with his pile, rules in the supernatural genre. Traditionally, the main avocational character in classic ghost stories would be a child, clergyman, aristocrat or convalescent (for in literary history ghostly occurrences do not happen on the assembly line in a factory, in a working office, or in the lecture theatre; rather, they occur in inherently avocational spaces such as rural mansions, abandoned train-lines, and most richly, in the city of Venice). It is their very moderation, steady habits, solitary pursuits, and bachelor status that allows James's characters to be 'hauntable' in the first place. They go to the continent and to the east coast of England for imaginative and recreational, rather than work-related business; they seem to flee the academy as they would a veritable prison, as if it were an institutional restraint upon the imagination and its ludic expressions, and yet they continue to engage in the academic duties of curiosity, research and scholarly conclusions.

Far from being Everymen innocuously involved in run-of-the-mill everyday activities that James believed them to be, the characters and environments are highly specialised; one can only justify James's seeming insistence upon the issue as pointing to the innately avocational identity he assigns to his thoroughly academic characters. Of the thirty tales in James's *Collected Ghost Stories* (1931), ten of their number feature a main character who is either an academic or an amateur academic, five in which the main character is an antiquary, and two tales that are set amongst schoolchildren. In James's situations the academic everyday is seen as a non-vocational sphere: the cathedrals, libraries,

and foreign archives that permeate these classic tales operate as sites of the terrifying supernatural situation where the perils of pleasurable work repeat themselves again and again.⁵⁸ James, at his chilling best when the situation is among academics, a 'home' situation one might say, conceives of this non-institutional scholarly space as a touristic sphere of perilous avocation, or non-work, in which the spectre of ludic terror arises to reflect upon the identity of the academic. In this context perhaps no one has grasped the issue of the difference between the work/play dialectic quite as succinctly as David Cohen who wrote that, 'Digging is work; digging about in the playground is play'.⁵⁹ Through his location of the academic outside his sphere of 'work', beyond the precincts of professional standards and ethics, James bestows upon his academic the status of an amateur and spontaneous player. In James the signpost for the commencement of play is often simply the very designation of academia or antiquarianism to the situation rather than any prologue of threat or 'warning to the curious'. The ghost here peeps out as some sort of metaphysical justification for the scholarly hedonism of the amateur academic. It seems to say, "vocational I am supposed to be, avocational I seem to be; haunted I deign to be".

'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come To You, My Lad', demonstrates that even a non-antiquarian, scientific, and anti-supernatural ('Saduccean') person, simply by being designated an 'academic', is left wide open to the horrors of the supernatural situation. Parkins, a humourless, sceptical Professor of 'Ontography' at St James's College, heads to the east coast for a golfing trip during which he intends to improve his game. Before he leaves his academic colleagues taunt him over his negative attitude toward the popular superstition of ghosts and ghouls. Parkins retorts: 'I hold that any semblance, any appearance of concession to the view that such things might exist is equivalent to a renunciation of all that I hold most sacred'.⁶⁰ After being persuaded to engage in some amateur archaeology at a Knights Templar preceptory by the sea – a temptation 'few people can resist' – he discovers a bronze whistle at the site and is stealthily followed back to his hotel room by a strange distant figure we may presume is the ghostly owner.⁶¹ James rarely included any formative conclusion or postscript to his tales, perhaps wary of Le Fanu's over-indulging of the trope with Dr. Hesselius's 'post-mortem' in 'Green Tea'. Yet even without such a dialogue, in the Jamesian ghost story if the character has not died horribly – as in 'The Ash-tree', 'Count Magnus',⁶² and 'A Warning to the Curious' – it is certain that he has been well and thoroughly shaken up, as in the case of 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad'. It is this non-professional status which allows the characters such ludic potential, with a hint of puritanical reproach it must be said. As Sullivan argues, 'their adventures represent a sophisticated version of the old warning that idleness is the devil's workshop'.⁶³

In 'Canon Alberic's Scrap-book', Dennistoun, a Cambridge man on holidays in France, visits the town of St Bertrand de Comminges, a place James himself once visited. Departing from his friends who do not share his interest in amateur archaeology, he proposes to 'fill a notebook' in examining the local cathedral.⁶⁴ The sacristan who shows him the church strikes Dennistoun as an odd, haunted figure, obviously petrified of something in the place, yet he does not inquire further. He then asks the Frenchman if he would like to leave for lunch, but the native declines. Here James engages in deadpan comedy by having Dennistoun remark: "'Very well, my little man", quoth Dennistoun to himself: "you have been warned, and you must take the consequences"'. The sacristan recognises in Dennistoun a fellow *amateur des vieux livres*, and offers him a curious and rare volume: Dennistoun's 'dreams of finding priceless manuscripts in untrodden corners of France' seem to have come true.⁶⁵ The scrapbook the sacristan shows him is a precious collection of illuminated leaves and engravings culled from other manuscripts, apparently by a certain Canon Alberic in the seventeenth century. One picture in particular grabs his attention; it is an illustration of what appears to be Solomon facing down a repulsive demon. As an aside, Dennistoun remarks that the appalling image of the beast in the representation haunted a lecturer of morphology for many a night. The book is of course cursed, and tied to the horror of Canon Alberic who practised the demonological arts with impunity generations before. Once possession of the cursed book has changed hands the sacristan 'seemed to become a new man'.⁶⁶ Dennistoun returns to his lodgings with much haste eager to examine his spoils, and is confronted by the animate representation from the scrap-book.

As shown in 'The Mezzotint',⁶⁷ the supernatural situation can arise from any artefact, even when in the sphere of English topographical drawings and engravings: for a department which is usually 'so homely and familiar' as this may also conceal its 'dark corners'.⁶⁸ Mr. Britnell, a professional antiquarian, forwards what appears at first sight to be a banal and rather uninteresting mezzotint to an academic in charge of a college museum. After golf Williams, the new owner of the mezzotint, looks at the image again, this time in the company of a colleague. In contrast to its previous unremarkable appearance, following the interest shown by the academics, the mezzotint begins to reveal an almost cinematographic narrative, for that evening Williams observes that

there was a figure where no figure had been at five o'clock that afternoon. It was crawling on all-fours towards the house, and it was muffled in a strange white garment with a white cross on the back.⁶⁹

Yet the next morning there was no figure on the lawn; however it is noticed that one of the windows on the ground floor is open – "Is it really? My goodness! He must have got in" remarks Williams, rather nonchalantly.⁷⁰ As always with James, the utter common-sense postures of the academic discourse belie its nascent ludicity: as more academics look at the mezzotint it progressively gains in subtlety, worth, and evil. Indeed, the entire tale can be read as an off-duty chat in the common-room which involves half-a-dozen academics, the narrator, Dennistoun from 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook', and 'the Sadducean Professor of Ophology';⁷¹ basically a group of over-educated dons with too much free time on their hands. While they try, in vain, to freeze the swiftly changing image like a legal document, it slips through their photographic medium and the ghastly narrative of murder, revenge, and kidnapping has to be discovered through some deft research and detective work. Yet the coterie of academics are careful not to alert the local 'Phantasmological Society' to their find, a thinly disguised jest at the expense of the British Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882. This seems to suggest that the academics conceive of their position as playful *amateurs* in the ghost-hunting field. As Huizinga notes, play 'promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means'.⁷²

Known amongst connoisseurs of the ghost tale as one of the finest writers of the supernatural in the Edwardian period, James's tales come from a personal and deeply scholarly environment that seem to blend the spheres of work and leisure to an unusual degree. Despite his aversion to literary modernism, James's supernatural output as a whole can be seen as a self-reflexive corpus which arose out of, and playfully interrogated, the avocational attributes of the academic system in which he was such a prestigious and successful player. James, whose recreational reading included such works as the apocrypha and dusty papers from seventeenth-century English state trials, and who was an avid scholar-tourist of churches, cathedrals, and obscure archives on the continent, achieved a productive academic identity as a writer. This is demonstrated in the playful and erudite sense of the supernatural in his fiction. Despite the fact that his terrifying tales 'would have appeared to outsiders completely at variance with his official status as Provost',⁷³ James stressed the (academic) everyday background to his tales, not only as a textual strategy for heightening the it-could-happen-to-me effect of most supernatural fiction, but also to develop a repetitive procedure of emphasising the avocational aspect of the supernatural situation through the thematics of ludic terrorism to his internal contemporary audience, and present-day avid readers.

Notes

¹ I would like to acknowledge the support and funding provided by the 'Humanities Institute of Ireland Doctoral Scholarship'. I would also like to acknowledge the helpful suggestions provided by the anonymous peer-reviewers who read this article.

² Simons has examined the role of ludicity and the play ethic in the writings of Joseph Conrad in which 'work is rendered through a system of metaphors involving its opposite, play, and this system of metaphors in turn is permeated by a constellation of images relating to childhood'. K. Simons, *The Ludic Imagination: A Reading of Joseph Conrad*, UMI Research, Ann Arbor, 1985, p.ix.

³ See especially S. Freud, 'Civilization and Its Discontents' in *Civilization, Society and Religion: 'Group Psychology', 'Civilization and Its Discontents' and Other Works*, J. Strachey (ed.), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1991, pp.243-340.

⁴ S. Freud, 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming', in *Art and Literature: 'Jensen's "Gradiva"', 'Leonardo da Vinci' and Other Works*, J. Strachey (ed.), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1985, pp.131-132.

⁵ G. Simmel, 'The Adventure', in K. H. Wolff (ed), *Georg Simmel, 1858-1918: A Collection of Essays, with Translations and a Bibliography*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1959, pp.243-258.

⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare*, Penguin, London, 1986; J. Conrad, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale*, Penguin, London, 2000; André Gide, *The Vatican Cellars*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977.

⁷ See V. Nell, *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure*, Yale University Press, London, 1988, p.2.

⁸ Some notable works that deal with ludicity and the play impulse in human culture include O. Rank, 'The Play-Impulse and Aesthetic Pleasure', in *Art and Artist: Creative Urge and Personality Development*, Charles Francis Atkinson (trans.), Norton, New York and London, 1989, pp.91-110; J. Piaget, *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, C. Gattegno and F.M. Hodgson (trans.), William Heinemann, London, 1951; R. Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, M. Barash (trans.), Thames & Hudson, London, 1962; D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1971; G. Bateson, 'A Theory of Play and Fantasy' in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2000, pp.150-166; H. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, Penguin, London, 1969; L. Martz, 'Free Time! Ludicity and the Anti-Work Ethic', viewed 18 August 2006, <http://cultronix.eserver.org/martz>.

⁹ On the criticisms of Huizinga's work see R. Anchor, 'History and Play: Johan Huizinga and His Critics', *History and Theory*, vol.17, no.1, February, 1978, pp.63-93, and J. Ehrmann, 'Homo Ludens Revisited', K. Lewis and P. Lewis (trans.), *Yale French Studies*, no.41, 1968, pp.31-57.

¹⁰ J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1994, p.ix.

¹¹ *ibid*, p.173. A major source for Huizinga, Friedrich von Schiller, wrote something similar in his analysis on the play-drive (*Spieltrieb*): 'For, to mince matters no longer, man plays only when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays'. F. von Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, E.M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (eds.), Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1982, p.107.

¹² 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming', pp.131-132.

¹³ See A.J. Engel, *From Clergyman to Don: The Rise of the Academic Profession in Nineteenth-Century Oxford*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1983.

¹⁴ S.G. Lubbock, 'A Memoir of Montague Rhodes James', in M.R. James, *A Pleasing Terror: The Complete Supernatural Writings*, Christopher Roden and Barbara Roden (eds.), Ash-Tree Press, Ashcroft, British Columbia, 2001, p.xxxi.

¹⁵ See Nell.

¹⁶ Cited in R. W. Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James*, Scholar Press, London, 1980, pp.28 & 15.

¹⁷ James, *A Pleasing Terror*, p.369.

¹⁸ J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, London, 1873, p.7.

¹⁹ *ibid*, p.9.

²⁰ Apropos to these anecdotes a fruitful exercise outside the scope of this paper would be to look at James and his fiction through the framework of Nicholas Rubakin's science of 'bibliopsychology', developed in the Soviet Union from the 1920s onwards. Rubakin sought to explore the central role that books and the bookish identity have in the subjective and internal creation of human consciousness. He wrote that 'when the book is being read it is a subjective psychological phenomenon based on impressions which the reader's psychophysical organism receives from it as an external object'. S. Simsova (ed.), *Nicholas Rubakin and Bibliopsychology*, M. Mackee and G. Peacock (trans.), Ringley, London, 1968, p.11. Italics in original.

²¹ R. Porter, 'Why Reading is Bad for Your Health', *History Today*, vol.48, no.3, March, 1998, pp.11-16.

²² 'Number 13', in James, *A Pleasing Terror*, pp.51-64.

²³ James, *A Pleasing Terror*, p.53. Italics are mine.

²⁴ The simultaneous pleasure and work ethic that James operated within baffled many commentators who were presumably too polite to raise any Faustian allusions. Arthur C. Benson wrote: 'He is, in the first place, a savant with a great reputation; but he makes no parade of his work, and sits down to it because he likes it, as a hungry man may sit down to a pleasant meal. He is thus the most leisurely man that I know, while, at the same time, his output is amazing'. Cited in James, *A Pleasing Terror*, p.xxxvi. J.H. Clapham wrote: 'When Monty James was in his early thirties, Lord Acton came here with his older and wider fame and his insatiable curiosity about people. "You know Montague James?" he asked a King's man. "Yes, I know him". "Is it true that he is ready to spend every evening playing games or talking with undergraduates?" "Yes, the evenings and more". "And do you know that in knowledge of MSS he is already third or fourth in Europe?" "I am interested to hear you say so, Sir". "Then how does he manage it?" "We have not yet found out"'. Cited in Pfaff, p.128.

²⁵ James, *A Pleasing Terror*, p.xxxi. It is interesting to note that James left behind a tantalising fragment of a tale entitled 'The Game of Bear' which seems to have included some type of horrible grabbing game as part of its plot. See James, *A Pleasing Terror*, pp.445-448.

²⁶ 'Canon Alberic's Scrap-book', in James, *A Pleasing Terror*, pp.3-16.

²⁷ James, 'Introduction', in V.H. Collins (ed.), *Ghosts and Marvels*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1926, p.vi.

²⁸ G. Simmel, 'Sociability (An Example of Pure, or Formal, Sociology)', in K.H. Wolff (ed.), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, Free Press, London and New York, 1950, p.49.

²⁹ For comparisons between the academic *habitus* and the playing of games see P. Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, P. Collier (trans.), Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988, pp.xii, 56, 88, 89 & 179.

³⁰ C.K. Ogden et al, *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language Upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1949, p.316.

³¹ See L. Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York and London, 1994, p.85.

³² For instance: 'I am told they have given pleasure of a certain sort to my readers: if so, my whole object in writing them has been attained, and there does not seem to be much reason for prefacing them by a disquisition upon how I came to write them'. James, *A Pleasing Terror*, p.368. 'It is, perhaps, unnecessary to warn the critic that in evolving them I have not been possessed by that austere sense of the responsibility of authorship which is demanded of the writer of fiction in this generation [...] 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'. *ibid.*, p.114. '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'. *ibid.*, p.483.

³³ *ibid.*, p.481.

³⁴ Eugene Ionesco wrote: 'So I am really not a passionate theatregoer, still less a man of the theatre. I really hated the theatre. It bored me. And yet...when I was a child, I can still remember how my mother could not drag me away from the Punch and Judy show in the Luxembourg Gardens. I would go there day after day and could stay there, spellbound, all day long. But I did not laugh. That Punch and Judy show kept me there open-mouthed, watching those puppets talking, moving and cudgelling each other. It was the very image of the world that appeared to me, strange and improbable but true as true, in the profoundly simplified form of caricature, as though to stress the grotesque and brutal nature of the truth'. E. Ionesco, *Notes and Counter-Notes*, D. Watson (trans.), Calder, London, 1964, p.18. See also the musings contained in H. von Kleist, C. Baudelaire, and R.M. Rilke, *Essays on Dolls*, I. Parry and P. Keegan (trans.), Penguin, London, 1994.

³⁵ 'The Story of a Disappearance and an Appearance', in James, *A Pleasing Terror*, pp.265-278.

³⁶ James, *A Pleasing Terror*, p.272.

³⁷ Pascal wrote: '...I have often said that the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room'. Pascal, *Pensées*, A.J. Krailsheimer (trans.), Penguin, London, 1966, p.67.

³⁸ J.S. Le Fanu, 'Green Tea', in D. Sayers (ed.), *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery, and Horror*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1929, pp.953-984. W. De La Mare, 'The Green Room', in *Ghost Stories*, The Folio Society, London, 1956, pp.119-170.

³⁹ James frequently drew attention to the quality of Le Fanu's work and its influence upon him in his correspondence and through a steady stream of articles, prefaces, and introductions, especially his edition of *Madam Crowl's Ghost and Other Stories* (1923). See 'The Novels and Stories of J. Sheridan Le Fanu', in James, *A Pleasing Terror*, pp.491-496; 'MRJ's Prologue to *Madam Crowl's Ghost*', *ibid.*, pp.497-498; 'MRJ's Epilogue to *Madam Crowl's Ghost*', *ibid.*, pp.499-505; 'MRJ's Introduction to *Uncle Silas*', *ibid.*, pp.506-509.

⁴⁰ See J. Sullivan, *Elegant Nightmares: The English Ghost Story from Le Fanu to Blackwood*, Ohio University Press, Athens, 1978, p.70.

⁴¹ Pfaff, p.30.

⁴² Similarly Matthew Arnold posited culture, and the spiritual values it inculcated, in opposition to the spectre of 'Jacobinism' and destructive anarchy. See M. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*, Smith, Elder and Co., London, 1869.

⁴³ Sullivan, p.75.

⁴⁴ See E. Jones, 'Anal Erotic Character Traits', in *Papers on Psychoanalysis*, Maresfield Reprints, London, 1977, pp.413-437; M. Richardson, 'The Psychoanalysis of Ghost Stories', *The Twentieth Century*, December, 1959, pp.419-431; B. Cowlshaw, "'A Warning to the Curious": Victorian Science and the Awful Unconscious in M.R. James's Ghost Stories', *The Victorian Newsletter*, vol. 94, Fall, 1998, pp.36-42; P. Fielding, 'Reading Rooms: M.R. James and the Library of Modernity', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 46, Fall, 2000, pp.749-771.

⁴⁵ This was the title of one of James's fantasy fictions. See James, *A Pleasing Terror*, pp. 403-408.

⁴⁶ 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad', in James, *A Pleasing Terror*, pp.79-96; 'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas', *ibid*, pp. 97-113; 'A School Story', *ibid*, pp. 115-122.

⁴⁷ James, *A Pleasing Terror*, p.114.

⁴⁸ J. Buchan, *The Complete Richard Hannay*, Penguin, London, 1993; J. Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, Penguin, London, 2000.

⁴⁹ 'Casting the Runes', in James, *A Pleasing Terror*, pp.149-166.

⁵⁰ Known as 'The Wickedest Man in the World', Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) was an infamous character in Edwardian society as an occultist and proponent of black magic. See R. Weighell, 'Dark Devotions: M.R. James and the Magical Tradition', *Ghosts & Scholars*, no.6, 1984, pp.20-30.

⁵¹ James, *A Pleasing Terror*, p.161.

⁵² James, *A Pleasing Terror*, p.56.

⁵³ 'The Pit and the Pendulum', in E. A. Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1982, pp.246-257; 'A Terribly Strange Bed', in W. Collins, *Tales of Terror and the Supernatural*, Dover Publications, New York, 1972, pp.24-39.

⁵⁴ James, *A Pleasing Terror*, p.290.

⁵⁵ P. Zweig, *The Adventurer*, Dent, London, 1978, pp.90-91.

⁵⁶ 'Lost Hearts', in James, *A Pleasing Terror*, pp.17-26.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p.25.

⁵⁸ Sullivan correctly identifies this theme: 'James's stories assume a radical breakdown of the work ethic in which the forces of evil take advantage of idleness'. Sullivan, p.74.

⁵⁹ D. Cohen, *The Development of Play*, Croom Helm, London, 1987, p.10.

⁶⁰ James, *A Pleasing Terror*, p.81.

⁶¹ The order of the Knights Templar were, of course, famously disbanded under charges of 'obscene kisses', homosexuality and vague horrific perversions. See 'The Psychoanalysis of Ghost Stories'.

⁶² 'The Ash-tree', in James, *A Pleasing Terror*, pp.39-50; 'Count Magnus', *ibid.*, pp.65-78.

⁶³ Sullivan, p.75.

⁶⁴ James, *A Pleasing Terror*, p.2.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, pp.5-6.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p.10.

⁶⁷ 'The Mezzotint', in *ibid.*, pp.27-38.

⁶⁸ James, *A Pleasing Terror*, p.27.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p.32.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p.32.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p.37.

⁷² J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1994, p.13.

⁷³ James, *A Pleasing Terror*, p.xxiii.