ROMANCES OF CERTAIN OLD CLOTHES: HENRY JAMES'S NEW-FASHIONED GHOSTS

Clair Hughes

"Fifteen apparitions have I seen" said W.B. Yeats, "the worst a coat upon a coat-hanger." "The mystery and the fright," as Yeats put it (468), was neither the coat nor the hanger but the juxtaposition of the known reality of a coat with the hanger's bony suggestion of an unknown body. According to Richard Chase's classic study of the American novel, reality (the actual coat), was a distinguishing feature of the novel rather than romance. But for Chase, Henry James was the novelist who above all captured "along with the realistic substance of the story the wonder and beauty of romance" (125). We find in James the coat and the coat-hanger, as well as the mystery and the fright.

If one were to arrange James's fiction along a scale ranging from Realism to Romance, his stories of the ghostly would surely figure at the furthest point of the Romantic end of the scale. We might then ask how works such as *The Turn of the Screw* and "The Jolly Corner" combine their realistic substance with their romantic effects, since the essence of a ghost's effect is presumably the uncanniness and other-worldliness of its appearance. But one of the oddest characteristics that James's ghosts share is to be described in terms that are not especially other-worldly. James's ghosts are dressed. From the early short story, "A Romance of Certain Old Clothes" to the unfinished novel *The Sense of the Past*, the costume of the ghosts exhibits a quite worldly "specificity of detail." This is in marked contrast to a more obviously materialist novel, such as *The Spoils of Poynton* for example, where references to dress, even among the unghostly, are notably absent.

Four of James's early tales and twelve of his later ones can be described as ghostly. His ghosts start as literal and externalised in "A Romance of Certain Old Clothes" (1868) for example, but become progressively metaphorical and subjective, and finally, in *The Sense of the Past*, almost disruptive of the narrating and "reflecting consciousness." Seen with different kinds of specificity of dress, these ghosts seem in fact to usurp or complicate the narrator's role in James's fiction. What I want to argue in this paper is that attention to clothes, romantic or realistic, illuminates James's narrative method for us in a surprisingly clear way.

We might say that ghosts, clothes and rivalry form part of the same complex of interests for James. The many covertly antagonistic relationships between women in James's major novels are prefigured in the rivalry between Rosalind and Perdita, the two New England sisters of "A Romance of Certain Old Clothes" who are both in love with an Englishman, Arthur Lloyd. Their wooing of him is at first conducted in a minor key of "ribbons and top-knots" (Edel 9); it is not until Arthur declares a preference for Perdita that costume begins to be deployed in a more sinister way. Wishing her sister long life and many children, Rosalind forces "a bit of lace of her own" (12) on Perdita, and sets in motion the process of the substitution of herself for Perdita.

When Rosalind sees a blue and silver brocade sent to Perdita by Lloyd—a material better suited to her own majestic fairness than to Perdita's slight, dark looks—she takes the work of Perdita's trousseau into her own hands and "innumerable yards of

lustrous silks and satins, of muslins and velvets and laces passed through her cunning hands" (14). That cunning, James leads us to suppose, works into Perdita's gowns something more than the stitches. A year later Perdita lies dying in child-birth, tormented by the idea that Rosalind will replace her as Lloyd's wife. Perdita makes her husband vow that her great wardrobe shall be "sacredly kept" for their child. In an image which combines entombment with that of a Sleeping Beauty, she visualises her dresses, in particular a carnation satin, "quietly waiting" locked in the iron-bound chest "keeping their colours in the sweet-scented darkness" (18). Rosalind wastes little time supplanting the dead Perdita in both her husband's and child's affections, but her triumph is not complete until she has "the great wardrobe." Soon after her marriage to Lloyd she goes up and looks at the chest in which her sister's relics lie imprisoned. Lloyd is blackmailed into giving her the keys and shortly afterwards he finds her in the attic kneeling before the "treasure of stuffs and jewels," dead, with "the marks of ten hideous wounds" on her face (25).

We have no way of knowing what it is that Rosalind encounters, since James in these early tales has not yet developed his narrative method of the "reflecting consciousness." Perdita's ghost explodes unexpectedly upon us, and as T.J. Lustig complains in his book on James's ghosts, it "ruptures the fabric of the text . . . with more violence than sense" (55). Reviewing a novel by M.E. Braddon in 1865, James maintained that "a good ghost story must be connected at a hundred points with the common objects of life" (*Literary Criticism* 742), and he may have felt that the vivid colours and textures of the story's dress notations provided those necessary anchors to reality. But no structural details are given to date the clothes or make them realisable: they are just colours and fabrics. For the purposes of the rather simple plot the fabrics had to be able to assume a shape and force in the imagination which might be diminished if they were to become matters of bodice, sleeve and petticoat. This is not true of James's later ghosts. No credible connection is made between the fatal and particularised disfiguring of Rosalind's face at the end and the story's swathe of gorgeous fabrics. Elizabeth Bowen, in her unashamed re-telling of James's tale, "Hand in Glove," puts her finger, as it were, on the plot's weak spot: she makes the coveted articles of clothing a collection of delectable gloves.

Although Rosalind is not a ghost she is in fact the more alarming of the two central characters and her maleficent powers are implicit early in the story when she appropriates Perdita's wedding-veil. Perdita tries to retrieve it but then draws back in instinctive fear of Rosalind. In a later tale, "The Ghostly Rental" (1875), the narrator actually does tear the veil from a seeming phantom, a black-clad lady haunting an abandoned house. As it happens she is not a ghost at all but, as the narrator reflects, "a sham ghost that one accepted might do as much execution as a real ghost" (Edel 132): the paralysing *effect* of an apparition is what really counts. It is in this uncertain area of effects that James's later apparitions emerge; they are seen with varying degrees of detail, and begin to usurp and complicate the narrator/reflector's role—a development latent in "The Ghostly Rental" but more fully present in 1891 in "Sir Edmund Orme."

As James's first fully visualised and dramatised apparition, Sir Edmund Orme is central to my argument here. We see Orme placed in varying relationships to three main characters: to Mrs Marden, the woman who once jilted him, he is a visible, vengeful spectre; to the narrator, he is an increasingly sympathetic and very physical presence; but to Mrs Marden's daughter, Charlotte, who is courted by the narrator, he is an

unseen, unknown threat. The context of Orme's ghostly appearances is the breezy, cheerful ordinariness of contemporary Brighton, where the narrator first sees Orme in church, "a pale young man in black" (*Ghostly Tales* 150), just after he has decided to propose to Charlotte. The narrator merely registers Orme as another young man like himself, sitting by Charlotte, and kindly lends him his prayer-book.

After he has learned from Mrs Marden that Orme is in fact a ghost, encounters with the spectre leave the narrator with the impression of "a splendid presence" (158), a little old-fashioned perhaps, but very well dressed in full mourning and, as far the narrator is concerned, friendly. Mrs Marden, on the other hand, lives in mortal terror of Orme. We learn much of Orme's and of her past, but, curiously, nothing of the narrator: neither his name, his history, nor family. Because the narrator is our "reflecting consciousness" it is easy to overlook the fact that he is a blank and that the progressively substantial figure of Orme's ghost has imposed itself on the empty space of the story as the narrator's alter ego. And although we learn nothing about the narrator's appearance, he tells us of his admiration for Orme and the fact his ghost was "always arrayed and anointed, and carried himself ever, in each particular, exactly as the occasion demanded" (167). Charlotte finally sees Orme at a party, in evening dress like every one else, including—we assume—the narrator. It is here that Charlotte accepts the narrator's offer of marriage—at that moment, the ghost leaves Charlotte and closes in on Mrs Marden who dies of sheer fright.

Orme, according to Mrs Marden, had latterly only been seen in conjunction with Charlotte and the narrator. Mrs Marden is sure that if Charlotte rejects the narrator (as she herself had rejected Orme), she will be harmed. Not only, therefore, does the identifiable and material Orme "possess" the anonymous, invisible narrator in order to play out an improved version of the past, but we begin to feel that the narrator's rather bullying courtship of the girl parallels Orme's own past conduct and present terrorisation of Mrs Marden. We know from the framing device at the start of the tale that Charlotte will die within a year of her marriage. The death of Mrs Marden is thus not only an act of ghostly revenge, but a sinister parallel and portent which reflects us back to the beginning of the narrative circle.

The scarcely "happy" ending of "Sir Edmund Orme" prefigures the demonic conclusion of *The Turn of the Screw*, a tale which has been the subject of much critical debate. It has been so comprehensively discussed elsewhere that I shall not say much about it here except to point out that Peter Beidler in *Ghosts, Demons and Henry James* has explored fully the links between the presentation of the ghosts in *The Turn of the Screw* and the published proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research in the 1890s, which James had certainly read. The Society's ghosts, unlike the transparent wraiths and headless horsemen of legend, were sartorially very mundane. Female ghosts were reported as generally favouring unremarkable black dresses; males wore standard nineteenth-century costume, in which class and occupation were often identifiable. James's depiction of Miss Jessel and Peter Quint owes much to the Society's records, despite James's disclaimer in his preface to *The Turn of the Screw*: "Attested ghosts," he complained, "are . . . so little expressive, as little dramatic, above all as little continuous and conscious and responsive, as is consistent with their taking the trouble—and an immense trouble they find it, we gather—to appear at all" (*Aspern Papers* 40). James wanted to invest his quotidian coats and coat-hangers with the "old sacred terror" (36), and the dull purposelessness of these recorded spectres did not really meet his needs.

For the reader to "think the evil" (42) as James required, he would have to enter into the relation between the ghost and the narrator/protagonist, to sense as well as to question the reality of these appearances. To think the evil and sense the terror in a way that was consonant with a real aesthetic purpose and not just a sensational one, it was necessary not only to see what the "reflecting consciousness" sees, but to *see* the reflector "seeing." The invisibility of the narrator in "Sir Edmund Orme" meant that James sacrificed the reader's awareness of the process of the narrator's possession by Orme. The debate, however, over the reliability of the Governess's descriptions of the ghosts in *The Turn of the Screw* shows how successfully James explored this problem seven years later. Readers have always been able to "think the evil" in this tale for themselves.

One of the central objections to dismissing the Governess in *The Turn of the Screw* as a hallucinating hysteric is that Mrs Grose, the housekeeper, recognises Peter Quint, the dead valet, from the Governess's description of his appearance. The bar to accepting her accounts of the ghosts unreservedly is that her several versions of the scenes with the ghosts do not tally. While certain dress details are recounted with the clarity of a realist novel, the most vivid accounts are of subjective and unverifiable *effects*. We see the Governess "seeing," and we see that her own perceptions and prejudices about social class, sexual mores, professional and maternal rivalry over the children colour her judgment and her descriptions. The whole business of description in the Balzacian Realist Novel is thus thrown into doubt—as James so importantly did in his major novels—by the unresolved status of the Governess's visions.

I should emphasise that the specific details that have been given of dress in these stories are very few: James is not M.E. Braddon; he does not catalogue the ribbons and flounces of his heroines like a fashion-manual. But James's few details are telling ones and they allow the consciousness which registers them within the ghost stories to confront competing, if dislocated, versions of the real. The Governess's story raised an alarming host of "alter egos" for herself and for the children. The term "alter ego" was introduced by William James in his writings on psychology in the 1890s, and we find Henry James using the term for the apparition that is the other self of the protagonist of the tale "The Jolly Corner" (1908), Spencer Brydon. After years of exile, Brydon has returned to a modern and commercialised New York which—seeing himself as a man of culture and imagination—he detests. A monocle, the one detail we have of his personal appearance early in the story, suggests a refusal to see fully. In New York he is surprised to find in himself the "lively stir . . . of a capacity for business" (*Jolly Corner* 163), and this discovery draws him to "The Jolly Corner," one of the houses he owns in the city, in search of the man of business he might have become, had he stayed in America.

Brydon begins to prowl about the house encouraged by Alice Staverton, the woman who is his link to the past, and who claims to have seen his other self in a dream. He chooses to search at night, as if in a dream, in a house lit only by the street-lamps from outside. Brydon is not the narrator but he is in a very real way here a "reflecting consciousness," for through the darkness he catches gleams of his own appearance: he sees "the steel point of his stick" on the black and white marble floor and, "in the light of fairly hunting on tiptoe, the points of his evening shoes" (174). His imagination begins to colour the hunt with nightmare qualities in which he becomes conscious of how his own eyes, "large, shining and yellow," must alarm his "poor hard-pressed alter ego" (176). His awareness of himself in relation to the ghost, which he has

virtually wished into existence, then begins to alter—he feels he is being followed; "he was kept in sight, while remaining himself . . . sightless" (177). Is he the pursuer or the pursued? Has the man of business overtaken—or taken over—the man of imagination? Believing he has closed the door on his pursuer he begins to leave, only to find the front door blocked by "a spectral yet human man of his own substance." The man's face is buried in his hands but otherwise "every fact of him" is "hard and acute . . . his queer actuality of evening dress, of dangling double eye-glass, of gleaming silk lappet and white linen, of pearl button and gold watch-guard and polished shoe" (187). These actualities that shine out of the darkness are traditionally "ghostly" in their fragmentary glitter, but they are also credible as in the details of evening dress that would indeed be visible in light from the street. What Brydon sees is also, of course, a near mirror-image of himself in evening dress—except that the ghost has a *double* eye-glass and a mutilated hand. The ghost's appearance is Brydon's own—*almost*. The horror in a ghost story, as Elizabeth Bowen suggests, "lies in happenings that are just, *just* out of true" (qtd Cox and Gilbert x).

In Gothic-novel fashion Brydon faints when the ghost reveals his face; he comes to himself the next morning, pillowed in Alice Staverton's lap. Unusually, James allows Brydon a "happy ending," *not* because he has seen his whole self but because Alice has. "This brute's a black stranger," he asserts (*Jolly Corner* 192), although he has earlier admitted that his own past has not been edifying: "I was leading at any time these thirty years, a selfish frivolous scandalous life" (171). Alice, however, accepts the brute, though "he's grim, he's worn . . . he doesn't make shift for sight with your charming monocle" (193). Brydon has sought a romantic frisson in an old house; ironically he finds real terror in the absolute contemporaneity of his alter ego, the ghost.

We have seen, then, how Romance in James's ghost stories is achieved through a shifting play between actuality and consciousness. Finally, I would like to demonstrate how the complexity of this play can lock James into problems which seem inescapable—even for him—using *The Sense of the Past* as my example. James began the novel in 1900 but it lay unfinished at his death in 1916. The hero, Ralph Pendrel, an American in London in 1900, faces his own image in a portrait painted a century before. He can either reject that other self, or make the unimaginable imaginative leap, do the ultimately romantic thing, and enter the past. It is on the transaction between Ralph and his painted past self, and a discrepancy in dress, that I believe the unresolved plot of the novel hangs.

When Ralph first encounters the portrait of the young man he notes enough detail to date the costume to around 1820. Actualities such as a dark green coat, high collar, grey gloves and beaver hat provoke in Ralph the desire to see more, as does the man's strangely backward-glancing face, latent with life and movement, "as if he had turned it *within* the picture" (73). In his preface to *The American* James spoke of the ability of the romancer to insidiously cut the cable that tethers the balloon of experience to mundane reality. It is at this second encounter that James riskily cuts his cable. As Ralph enters the room he realises that the thing he had thought of had taken place: "Somebody was in the room. . . . The young man, brown-haired, pale, erect with the high-collared dark-blue coat . . . quite shining out of the darkness presented him the face . . . [which] confounded him as his own" (87-88). Ralph neither faints nor rejects his alter ego, but willingly enters the past. As he does so we might note that the coat in the first encounter with the portrait was green, in the second, blue. James—as fastidious

about dress in his novels as he was in life—wrote and re-wrote *The Sense of the Past* over sixteen years. It is impossible to say what he might finally have made of it, but it seems reasonable to suggest that the anomaly in dress was not an oversight and was to play a part in the effort, recorded in James's notebook, to rescue Ralph from a situation both he and the ghosts come to find intolerable.

On his arrival in the past Ralph finds he is engaged to his cousin Molly. He again notes those details that allow us to date her dress to around 1820—sprigged muslin with sleeves short enough to display a good deal of arm and shoulder; and these arms embrace Ralph in the most disturbingly fleshly way, for a ghost. Ralph, on the evidence of his unchallenged welcome into the past, decides that while in 1900 he had been considered "overdressed for New York" (145), his appearance here among the ghosts is acceptable. Interestingly, the years between 1800 and 1820 are those in which male dress first took its modern form, so a formally dressed male of 1900 might well have passed muster in 1820. The ghostly starts to complicate the narrative method in that Ralph is conscious of both his nineteenth- *and* twentieth-century selves as well as of the way the ghosts are experiencing *him*. His own growing unease runs parallel to, and is indeed fed *by*, his awareness of the ghosts' mounting and inexplicable alarm in relation to him. It is impossible to dismiss anyone in this triangle of communicating consciousnesses as more or less real than any other. Who is the ghost here?

The crisis comes when Ralph meets Molly's younger sister, Nan, and falls in love with her. Nan's dress, unlike the other clothes seen by Ralph in 1820, is rendered simply by its effect on him: "Why she's modern, modern!" (280). Falling in love with Nan's modernity clarifies for Ralph the urgency of his real ties to the twentieth century. Ralph's paradox is that what he loves in Nan compels him to leave her to return to his twentieth century American fiancée, Aurora Coyne. As if to exacerbate the paradox, Aurora is likened to "an Italian princess of the cinquecento . . . [with] low square dresses, crude and multiplied jewels" (8). A description which evokes the deliberately anachronistic elements of *fin-de-siècle* Aesthetic Dress. This rather heavy, decorated fashion presented a sharp contrast to the light, high-waisted, short-sleeved Empire Style which replaced Aesthetic Dress just before the outbreak of the First World War. Nan, in her dress of 1820, is the modern girl, not Aurora.

We know from James's notes of 1910 that "the climax of the romantic hocus-pocus" (336), as he put it, was that Nan should discover Ralph's bizarre secret but love him enough to help him escape. But how? For James, the key was "whether the portrait *in* the house in 1910, is done from Ralph in 1820 . . . or accounted for as coming into existence afterwards" (342). The portrait is thus the escape route. But if the first green-coated "Ralph" is actually himself, painted during his visit to the past of 1820, then the second blue-coated man is his ancestor—or vice versa. We would want to know the colour of the coat in the portrait *after* Ralph's return; and especially the colour of Ralph's own coat. We would also like to know just through whose eyes have we been seeing all this.

Although James freed his romantic balloon so dramatically from reality in *The Sense of the Past*, the dress worn in this spectral world is perhaps the most realistically—and most unnervingly—detailed in this work, the last demonstration of James's delight in a "palpable imaginable *visitable* past" (*Aspern Papers* 31) and a radical challenge to our assumptions about the Realist Novel. Actualities are filtered through consciousness, and consciousness is capable of alarming jumps and

dislocations, as well as odd accommodations. What we have seen in these stories is a growing—and sometimes a defeating—complexity. James does not opt for some static point between Realism and Romance; what we see developing in his treatment of ghostly dress is what he described in the preface to *The American* as the writer's commitment "in both directions . . . by some need of performing his whole possible revolution" (xv). How was the revolution to be performed here? James never found the way back, and Ralph remains trapped, leaving a coat upon a coat-hanger to frighten Yeats and the reader in some confusion over the status of the characters whose world he has been talked into entering.

Works Cited

Beidler, Peter. *Ghosts, Demons and Henry James*. Colombia: Missouri UP, 1989.
Bowen, Elizabeth. "Hand in Glove." Cox and Gilbert 444-52.
Chase, Richard. *The American Novel and its Tradition*. London: Bell, 1958.
Cox, Michael, and R.A. Gilbert, eds. *The Oxford Book of Ghost Stories*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986.
Edel, Leon, ed. *The Ghostly Tales of Henry James*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1948.
James, Henry. *The American*. Scribner's New York Edition. Fairfield, NJ: Kelley, 1976.
---. *The Aspern Papers and The Turn of the Screw*. Ed. Anthony Curtis. London: Penguin, 1984.
---. *The Jolly Corner and Other Tales*. Ed. Roger Gard. London: Penguin, 1990.
---. *Literary Criticism*. Vol. I. New York: Library of America, 1984.
---. *The Sense of the Past*. Scribner's New York Edition. Fairfield, NJ: Kelley, 1976.
Lustig, T. J. *Henry James and the Ghostly*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
Yeats, W.B. *Yeats's Poems*. Ed. Norman Jeffares. London: Macmillan, 1989.