

Kovács, Ágnes Zsófia. 2015. "Oliver Tearle: *Bewilderments of Vision: Hallucination and Literature, 1880-1914*. Review. *The Henry James Review* 36(2): 15-18.

Oliver Tearle, *Bewilderments of Vision: Hallucination and Literature, 1880-1914*. Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2013. pp. 207.

For Jamesians, the title rings with the echo of Strether's transforming adventure in Paris. In *The Ambassadors* bewilderment means an experience that forces one to reconsider one's former notions of his relations to others, his place in the world. One pauses to review different possible interpretations of a sequence of impressions before deciding on how to interpret them publicly. *Bewilderments of Vision* has nothing to do with Strether *per se*, as it maps out how five mostly little-known authors used hallucination in their short stories between 1880 and 1914, but the title phrase is borrowed from James (25). 'Bewilderment' is relevant here in a general sense: the book links hallucination to the experience of hesitation between different interpretations of a visitation by ghosts, so hallucination becomes a trope for a bewildered sense of ambiguity. From the perspective of Jamesians, then, the issue of hallucination in ghost stories will be linked to the problem of individual perception and experience James was engrossed within other genres of fiction as well, as has been discussed lately in and on account of *Henry James and the Supernatural* (2011) (Reed and Despotopoulou 5, Pahl 8). Although authors other than James were writing similarly ambiguous ghost stories which also relied on established devices, such as the meta-text of Gothic fiction and the haunted house, they have not received sustained critical attention.

Bewilderments of Vision explores little known ghost stories from before 1914 in which hallucination appears as a narrative ambiguity to be resolved. The book traces the rise and fall in the popularity of the theme with the help of contemporary documents. By the 1920s, the ghost story was an unpopular nineteenth-century genre, while hallucination had spread out of the ghost story and 'infested' literature: Modernist literature and art would be its new home. As Virginia Woolf comments on ghost stories by Henry James in 1921: "[t]he stories in which Henry James uses the supernatural effectively are, then, those where some quality in a character or in a situation can only be given its fullest meaning by being cut free from facts. Its progress in the unseen world must be closely related to what goes on in this. [...] [so] the ghost story, besides its virtues as a ghost story, has the additional charm of being also symbolical. [...] Henry James's ghosts have nothing in common with the violent old ghosts – the blood-stained sea captains, the white horses, the headless ladies of dark lanes and windy commons. They have their origin with us." (Woolf 52-3) The question arises why the ghost story and the theme of hallucination were so popular in the nineteenth century, and what kind of experience hallucination carried exactly when it was transferred to the Modernist text.

According to Tearle, hallucination is linked to the psychological aspect of the ghost story, which has not been sufficiently studied before: how did Robert L. Stevenson, Vernon Lee, Henry James, Arthur Machen and Oliver Onions explore the potential of hallucination for representing psychological content before Modernism? The study answers this question in part by contextualizing the literary issue of hallucination, introducing the contemporary scientific discourse of hallucination the stories rely on. Tearle argues that the falling

Kovács, Ágnes Zsófia. 2015. "Oliver Tearle: *Bewilderments of Vision: Hallucination and Literature, 1880-1914*. Review. *The Henry James Review* 36(2): 15-18.

popularity of psychic science and the rise of psychoanalysis in the early decades of the twentieth century coincided with the decreasing interest in fictive ghosts and hallucinations.

The argument starts out by discussing late nineteenth-century scientific definitions and uses of hallucination. The most important theorist of apparitions, Edmund Gurney, published his volume *Phantasms of the Living* in 1886, in which he analyzed real cases of hallucinations and proposed the possibility of hallucination among the sane. Gurney recognized the scientific need to find the blurred line between ordinary perception and abnormal perception (hallucination) and defined it as "a percept which lacks, but which can only by distinct reflection be recognized as lacking the objective basis which it suggests." (10) For Gurney, hallucination is related to memory, through which it can be distinguished from the experience of reality. Hallucination is a mental image, an act of memory. William James argued with Gurney over the issue of the absence of an external stimulus in hallucination. William thought hallucination was more than a mental image, it was a sensational form of consciousness needing a stimulus, yet without the real object present. Given the link between normal sensation and hallucination, William James suggested a link between extraordinary sensitiveness and supernatural demons later: "if there were real demons, they might possess only the hysterics." (14) The debate unfurled in scientific and other contexts, and the theme of hallucination even appeared in Yeats' collection of essays, *The Celtic Twilight* (1893). Tearle argues that "in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the relationship between emerging psychological disciplines such as psychic research, psychoanalysis, and William James's pragmatism all enjoyed a far more close-knit engagement with literary texts than most criticism is prepared to acknowledge." (24-5)

All five authors discussed in the book are shown to have referred to the debate Gurney's apparition theory evoked. Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* is read as a field where Gurney's theory of apparitions is tested; it constitutes a widely known and therefore necessary example in the introductory chapter. In *TTS* the question of whether the governess is mad or not is shown to be a version of the question on the nature of hallucination: if she is mad, there are no ghosts or hallucinations, if she is sane, then there are ghosts and the story is a case of hallucination as Gurney described it. Henry James knew all too well the terms of the debate on the nature of hallucination, yet he did not resolve the question. He dramatized it instead by drawing out the ambiguity by fictitious means. Theoretically, such an account of hallucination ties in with Todorov's model of the fantastic, in which the reader hesitates between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. The fantastic occupies the duration of uncertainty. Tearle argues that while Todorov's approach is useful for understanding the basic uncertainty in these stories of hallucination, one also needs to see that at stake is the scientific debate about the workings of hallucination. Also, in Victorian ghost stories the ambiguity of the ghost is kept up by methods of creative writing: neologisms, narration, characterization, and the use of point of view.

The book sets out to explore some less popular pieces of ambiguous Victorian ghost stories that rely on the Gothic for inspiration. These stories keep up the ambiguity of the ghosts until the very last page or beyond. First, Robert Louis Stevenson's short story "Markheim" (1885) poses the question if hallucination is divine justice or natural development from Markheim's

growing sense of conscience. The story is a traditional Christmas ghost story that draws on emerging psychic research, in which the ghost is no longer a visitation but a symbol of the protagonist's consciousness. Next, Vernon Lee's "A Wicked Voice" (1890) focuses on the inner ghost, portrays the haunting of the character of Magnus and shows the potential for music to be a destructive force. Then Henry James's "The Friends of the Friends" (1896) is shown to be a precursor to *TTS*. It presents a fictional ghostly encounter that both responds to and reacts against those real apparitions Gurney analyzed: Henry had read William's paper for the Society for Psychic Research in 1890, and wrote this ghost story, which sounded plausible in the age of psychic research while at the same time steering away from the categories employed by the society. James denounced the idea of apparitions as documented in psychic research and turned to the ghost story for its dramatic potential. He used suggestion and extra visual elements to generate tension, while the narration displaced the event of the visitation and showed what happens after somebody claims to have seen a ghost. Arthur Machen's novel, *The Hill of Dreams* (1906) can also be analyzed in two ways: Lucian's visionary experiences can be seen as hallucinatory or as ghostly and spiritual in nature. Finally, Oliver Onions' "The Beckoning Fair One" (1911) presents aural hallucinations that may or may not be the result of a ghostly female figure haunting the protagonist. In all these stories, hallucination provides a rational explanation for the haunted, but contemporary scientific thoughts about the supernatural are really at stake. From story to story, hallucination moves from the shadows of the fictional narrative to the limelight: it represents the mind's power over its owner. Generally, Tearle argues, in the Victorian imagination the borders of the visible and the invisible were increasingly blurred. Yet there were external reasons for the popularity and increasing use of hallucination in the ghost story: a general Victorian crisis of faith, the emergence of psychic research.

Methodologically speaking, this is a study of how the scientific discourse of hallucination interacted with literary discourse between 1880 and 1914 and how the knowledge of hallucination was reconstructed fictionally. The primacy of the historical interest is manifested in the material used, as roughly half of the bibliographical entries have been grouped under the heading 'primary sources' and it is indeed refreshing to read about the ghost story in the context of the discourse of hallucination put forward in a lucid prose. As part of this enterprise, an interest in the changing meanings of terms is indicated by numerous references to the OED's findings on where, when, and how a given word was used. For Jamesians this method becomes understandable through the book's strategy of reading "The Friends of the Friends" and *TTS* as reactions to the contemporary scientific idea of actual apparitions, an approach that has been used for James's texts (Banta, Beidler, Reed, Scofield), if not yet for "The Friends of the Friends". Probably as a correlate of the contextual orientation, one finds that accounts of the critical reception are kept brief, although in the case of James for instance all the above could have been integrated neatly. Another reason for the brevity may be that there is no sustained critical reception for some of the little-known pieces discussed. Despite the relative lack of interest in problems of reception, Tearle has a clear idea of the theoretical implications of his work. There is a need to change our methodological assumptions on the basis of the material at hand, he claims. Most importantly, one needs to reconsider the issue of realist fiction versus fantasy opposition, he maintains (17) when he

Kovács, Ágnes Zsófia. 2015. "Oliver Tearle: *Bewilderments of Vision: Hallucination and Literature, 1880-1914*. Review. *The Henry James Review* 36(2): 15-18.

criticizes Eagleton's easy dismissal a fantasy fiction as such. Tearle also states that in his work he wanted to "highlight the way the ghost story is indebted to a form of realism that is not opposed to the world but merely uses different approaches from realist fiction to bring out certain real world issues" (18).

References

Banta, Martha. *Henry James and the Occult: The Great Extension*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1972.

Beidler, Peter G. *Ghosts, Demons, and Henry James. The Turn of the Screw at the Turn of the Century*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989.

James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw and Other Stories*. Reed, Kimberley Clarke, ed. and intr. Peterborough: Broadview, 2010.

Lustig, Thomas. *Henry James and the Ghostly*. Cambridge: CUP, 1994.

Pahl, Dennis. "Review of Anna Despotopoulou and Kimberly C. Reed, eds. *Henry James and the Supernatural*. New York: Palgrave, 2011." *The Henry James Review* 34(2013 Winter):1. 8-13.

Reed, Kimberley C., and Anna Despotopoulou, eds. *Henry James and the Supernatural*. New York: Palgrave, 2011.

Scotfield, Martin. "Introduction" James, Henry. *Tales of Mystery and the Supernatural: Ghost Stories by Henry James*. Martin Scotfield, intr. and notes, vii-xxii. Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2008.

Woolf, Virginia. "The Ghost Stories." In Leon Edel, ed. *Henry James: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 47-53. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1963.