"The Reality of the Unseen": Shared Fictions and Religious Experience in the Ghost Stories of Henry James

In a ghost story from Henry James's early period, "The Ghostly Rental," printed in Scribner's Monthly in 1876 and never reprinted during James's lifetime, Captain Diamond, a man haunted by the ghost of his daughter, lectures the narrator, a young student at the Harvard Divinity School: "You have read about the immortality of the soul; you have seen Jonathan Edwards and Dr. Hopkins chopping logic over it, and deciding, by chapter and verse, that it is true. But I have seen it with these eyes; I have touched it with these hands!" (CS 2:175). The student, though attracted to Captain Diamond and his story, remains skeptical. Later in the story, he confronts the ghost in the Diamonds' haunted homestead, pulling off the veil of the Captain's flesh-and-blood daughter, who has disguised herself in a ghost suit in order (it seems) to punish her father for his reaction to her youthful love affair: "Instinctively, irresistibly, by the force of reaction against my credulity, I stretched out my hand and seized the long veil that muffled her head. I gave it a violent jerk, dragged it nearly off, and stood staring at a large fair person, of about five-and-thirty" (187). The narrator seems to have succeeded in debunking a tale of the supernatural. Yet a suggestion of occult forces lingers. For, a moment after the skeptical theology student tears the veil of the daughter's costume, he hears a thud at the bottom of some stairs, and the daughter claims to see her
father's ghost. The next day, it turns out that the father, about three miles away from the confrontation, has indeed died in the night. When the narrator returns to the old, haunted Diamond house, it has burned to the ground and the daughter has disappeared. James thus poses, in somewhat clumsy form, the sorts of questions that will bedevil interpreters of his later ghost stories. Was the father's death a natural result of his anxiety over the fake haunting, or did the narrator's tearing of the daughter's veil somehow, supernaturally, cause it? And did the daughter see a real ghost of her father or merely suffer a hallucination? James's refusal to answer these questions provides an early example of the workings of what I shall call "shared fictions" in his later ghost stories.

The ambiguous relationship between a traditional notion of "the supernatural" and an emergent modern conception of "the unconscious" in James's fiction has generated a great deal of critical debate about the ghost stories. This very ambiguity points to ways in which James's psychological and novelistic explorations continue to invoke structures of feeling and experience associated with religion. In James, the unconscious is structured rather like the supernatural. The visible, conscious world, with its familiar motives such as desire, ambition, and greed, interacts in subtle ways with an unseen realm, inaccessible to consciousness, where desire, ambition, and greed have more deep-seated, even uncanny, equivalents. This other world, whether we label it unconscious or supernatural, lies beyond our control. The image of the veil which shrouds the other world in its secrecy recurs frequently in James's ghost stories to suggest the danger of trying to have direct access to the other realm. Yet the ghost stories seem to invite a criticism based on a "hermeneutics of suspicion." From Edmund Wilson's identification of the governess in "The Turn of the Screw" (1898) as "a neurotic case of sex repression" (115) to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's claim that, in "The Beast in the Jungle" (1903), "to the extent that Marcher's secret has a content, that content is homosexual," (161) critics have sought to tear away the veil that James has placed between the reader and the unconscious lives of his characters. Brilliant and suggestive though such approaches often are, the critics who propose them inevitably share something with the narrator of "The Ghostly Rental." They insist on finding out the truth behind the veil, but in the process of unmasking they inevitably do violence to James's finely textured stories. Yet, critics who respond by defending the "reality" of James's apparitions and
claiming that real, supernatural ghosts did in fact appear to the gov-
erness at Bly risk enacting a counterpart to the veil-tearing of their
Freudian or Queer Theorist opponents. In response to a hermeneutics
of suspicion they offer a “hermeneutics of discipleship.” They seem to
insist on sitting at the feet of the master and taking his every word literally, but thus risk missing the very ambiguity of the ghost tales, in which
the reader can never know for certain what lies behind the veil. As
Shoshana Felman has observed, any attempt to read the “The Turn of
the Screw” seems to force the reader to choose one of these options:
“The reader . . . can choose either to believe the governess, and thus
to behave like Mrs. Grose, or not to believe the governess, and thus to
behave precisely like the governess. Since it is the governess who, within
the text, plays the role of the suspicious reader, occupies the place of the
interpreter, to suspect that place and that position is, thereby, to take
it” (190).4

Yet James’s ghost stories offer their interpreters a lesson in the dan-
gers of either approach. His eager debunkers, like the narrator of the
“Ghostly Rental,” tend to fare little better than those haunted char-
acters who, like John Marcher in “The Beast in the Jungle,” enthu-
siastically embrace their ghosts. In either case, the almost inevitable
moment of revelation tends to cause death or prostration on the part of
the haunted. The most successful protagonists are those who do their
best to live on good terms with their ghosts and avoid inquiring too
deeply into their worldly or supernatural origins. In “Maud-Evelyn”
(1900), a young man, Marmaduke, befriends an elderly couple, the
Dedricks, who so revere the memory of their daughter that, although
she died as a little girl fifteen years before the beginning of the story,
they invent a whole life for her. This invention of Maud-Evelyn’s past
goes so far that eventually Marmaduke (who in fact never met the girl)
claims to have been married to her. The Dedricks then support him
financially. The narrator, Lady Emma, considers asking Marmaduke,
“Are you the boldest and basest of fortune-hunters, or have you only,
more innocently and perhaps more pleasantly, suffered your brain
slightly to soften?” (CS 5:198). But she thinks better of it, and Marmad-
uke is never forced to answer. Yet, at certain moments in the story, Mar-
maduke more or less admits the fictionality of the girl’s past: “You see,
[the Dedricks] couldn’t do much . . . with the future; so they had to do
what they could with the past” (199). The shared fiction of the girl’s
life brings Marmaduke and the Dedricks together and seems to supply the spiritual as well as financial needs of the various parties. As Marmaduke says of his adopted in-laws, "they have made of her memory a real religion" (186). Perhaps the reader of James's ghost stories should take a cue from Marmaduke—or at the very least from Lady Emma—and attempt what I will call a "pragmatist hermeneutics," one that would avoid either "suspicion" or "discipleship," and would instead simply decline to ask the question of the metaphysical "reality" of the ghosts.  

Henry James's treatment of the unpredictable other world (whether we call it the supernatural or the unconscious) and his brother's philosophy of religion both seem to authorize such a hermeneutical approach. Henry James in the ghost stories and William James in The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902) share elements of what might almost be called a method. Both take the experience of the supernatural at face value and do not try to ascribe to it straightforward underlying causes. William James's work seeks to account for people's experiences of the "reality of the unseen" without either affirming the existence of supernatural forces or reducing religious experiences to mere products of mental illness, sexual repression, or other organic causes. Influenced by Kant's transcendental ideas, he refuses to address the question of the "thing-in-itself," the "real" origin of experience, including religious experience. Rather, he believes that the reality of the unseen consists in its effects in this world (53-77).  

Similarly, Henry James leaves the real source of his many apparitions a mystery: he refuses to tell us where the ghosts "really" came from and leaves us in doubt as to whether they are products of the unconscious desires of those who experience them. He emphasizes not their reality or unreality but their social character and their unpredictability.

This shared pragmatist attitude to the unseen contributes to the modernity of the work of both Jameses. Critics who emphasize Henry James's modernism have tended to focus on his interest in the social sphere and on his rejection of moral absolutes associated with institutional religion. Ross Posnock challenges what he takes to be a widespread opposition between "modernity, which represses ambiguity, and literary modernism, which valorizes it" (55).  

He associates James's modernism with a recognition of what Weber called "the disenchantment of the world" in modernity, and denies that modernism need be "anti-modern" in the sense of being nostalgic for a unified past (11).
This complex portrait rightly notes James's ambivalence towards many aspects of modernity, but generally assumes the connection between modernity and secularism and does not explore any religious dimension to James's modernism. Robert B. Pippin interprets James more straightforwardly as an investigator of secular modern life and claims that "James does not raise the issue of religion much, and obviously has little sympathy with the Church . . ." (52 n19). Thus, even when his views of modernity have been treated with subtlety, James has tended to be seen as a typically secular modernist. Yet, as F. O. Matthiessen noted many years ago, James's later works, those most closely associated with modernism, manifest an interest in "the religion of consciousness" (Henry James 131). This turn to religion is notable even in the titles of his last two completed novels, The Wings of the Dove (1902) and The Golden Bowl (1904), both of which are references to scripture. Impressive recent studies by Andrew Taylor and James Duban correct some of the secularist assumptions of commentators on Henry James's ethical beliefs by tracing the influence on both Jameses of Henry James, Sr.'s religious speculations and of a broader Protestant tradition leading back at least to Jonathan Edwards. However, they perhaps over-emphasize his deliberate engagement with specific theological concepts. I would argue that, while conscious of traditional religion and of his father's spiritual quest, James attempted to address central problems of the Protestant tradition in the context of a radically new spiritual situation. R. P. Blackmur described James's sensibility as "an example of what happens to a religious man when institutionalized religion is taken away" (101). In fact, Henry James's modernity seems closely connected to his interest in the supernatural, which is one source for such central and typically modern concerns of his as the double consciousness or divided self, the process of conversion, and the celebration of ambiguity, themes that in turn inspire a range of modernist writers, including Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound.

Henry James's particular approach to the supernatural participates in a general development in the psychology and sociology of religion around the turn of the century. In place of the institutional religion of churches and divinity schools, theorists of religion in the early twentieth century began to pay increasing attention to individual religious experience and to "primitive" forms of religious life associated with broad supernatural forces rather than with a single God. William James
offers a particularly sympathetic account of such supernatural forces. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he argues that the essence of religion consists in a belief in the unseen: "Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto" (53). This broad definition allows James to turn away from institutions, beliefs, and dogma towards individual experience. William James had a considerable influence even on those contemporary social scientists, such as Emile Durkheim (463–67) and Max Weber (232–33 n66), who thought that he underestimated the role of ritual and social structure in shaping religious life. Even Durkheim and Weber participated in the increased emphasis on direct encounters with forces associated with the supernatural, such as Durkheim's mana or Weber's charisma, rather than on formal theological dogma. Freud's slightly later interest in religious experience (in works like *Totem and Taboo*) manifests a similar tendency. Charles Taylor has suggested that William James's very lack of interest in religious institutions and dogmas contributes to the timeliness of his studies of religion, since his emphasis on personal experience and feeling points the way to the "expressive individualism" typical of modern religious life, in which "the religious life or practice that I become part of not only must be my choice, but must speak to me; it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this" (94). The modernity of William James lies in his emphasis on the direct, personal experience of the unseen and thus on his shifting the study of religion away from the formal theology associated in "The Ghostly Rental" with Harvard Divinity School and towards the sorts of practical experience claimed by Henry James's *Captain Diamond*.

This interest in the direct experience of the unseen sometimes causes William James's work to echo the ghost stories of his "younger and shallower and vainer" brother Henry (qtd. in Edel 5:298). In *Varieties*, William James meditates upon a number of recorded experiences of people sensing unseen presences: "It is as if there were in the human consciousness a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call 'something there,' more deep and more general than any of the special and particular 'senses' by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed" (58). Here, typically, William James uses religious experience as a basis for a criticism
of positivist and associationist psychology. He gives several examples of the operation of this sense of reality and quotes an “intimate friend,” who writes of three occasions in his life when he had a “horrible sensation” of a hostile presence in his room:

In all three instances the certainty that there in outward space there stood something was indescribably stronger than the ordinary certainty of companionship when we are in the close presence of ordinary living people. The something seemed close to me, and intensely more real than any ordinary perception. Although I felt it to be like unto myself, so to speak, or finite, small, and distressful, as it were, I didn’t recognize it as any individual being or person. (60)

In such examples, William is concerned with the sense of a presence, its feeling of greater reality than normal life, and its impinging on the consciousness of an intelligent, apparently not delusional informant. William James thus saw a fundamental aspect of religious experience in the sorts of encounters with the supernatural that form the basis of several of Henry James’s most successful stories.

The interest of both Henry and William James in apparitions undoubtedly owes something to their father Henry James Sr.’s experiences of supernatural presences. In 1844, while staying at Windsor with his infant sons William and Henry, Henry Sr. experienced a supernatural encounter (the “vastation”) that led him, before long, to take up the Swedenborgian theology with which he was identified for the rest of his life. A footnote in The Varieties of Religious Experience refers the reader to Henry Sr.’s account of the vastation in Society the Redeemed Form of Man (1879): “To all appearance it was a perfectly insane and abject terror, without ostensible cause, and only to be accounted for, to my perplexed imagination, by some damned shape squatting invisible to me within the precincts of the room, and raying out from his fetid personality influences fatal to life” (161). The apparition carries with it a strong sense of evil. The passage reads rather like some of the son’s later ghost stories, such as “The Jolly Corner” (1908): “It gloomed, it loomed, it was something, it was somebody, the prodigy of a personal presence” (CS 5:724). The novelist Henry James’s various stories of similar apparitions might be seen as attempts to explore the ghosts that
haunted his father's mental and spiritual life.12 Again, without explaining away the experience of such supernatural visitations, James brings to life their psychological horror and suggests the importance of taking them seriously as part of the life (the mental life, the spiritual life) of the "sick souls" who inhabit his tales.13

The idea, seen frequently in the ghost stories, that the reality of ghosts and other apparitions depends primarily on the willingness of the denizens of this world to believe in them shares much with William James's pragmatist defense of the particular sorts of religious experience represented by such visitations. William James's method relies on the pragmatist criterion of truth. As he wrote in Pragmatism, "The pragmatic method . . . is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true?" (23). For William James, the justification of epistemological claims about what we know lies in their practical import, their ethical consequences. As he put it, "God is real since he produces real effects" (Varieties 517). William James thus defines traditional religious beliefs essentially as fictions by which we understand the inchoate nature of our own religious experiences and which can in turn help us to guide our lives.14 The unseen order is, in a sense, the product of our beliefs, and its truth consists neither in the possibility of proving it scientifically nor in the possibility of having an unmediated access to it, but in the fact that it influences our practice in this world. One consequence of this position was that we could, at some level, choose what to believe. William James himself eagerly attempted to believe in God, although, as Louis Menand has observed, he never quite succeeded ("Pragmatism"). He also believed in the power of belief: "My first act of free will," he wrote, "shall be to believe in free will" (qtd. in Menand, Metaphysical 219). Henry James, more skeptical by nature, explored in his fictions those mechanisms by which individuals attempt to elicit particular beliefs from one another. In Henry James's ghost stories, the claim to believe in another's vision is a central act of friendship. Mrs. Grose tells the governess in "The Turn of the Screw": "I believe." In "The Beast in the Jungle," May Bartram tells John Marcher, "I believe you" (CS 5:505). In order to become part of a group (often simply a couple, but equally a social set or class), one must accept certain beliefs and accept them so wholeheartedly that one experiences them as one's own.15
James emphasizes the quality of shared fiction underlying the relationships of his characters with each other and with the supernatural. These shared fictions take the place for Henry James of more traditional religious beliefs and are often described as "sacred." Unlike his brother, Henry James never explicitly formulates the problem of belief in God. Yet other forms of belief are central to his fiction. The problem of believing in another person's good will, for example, troubles many of his characters. Particularly in the later novels, the characters frequently become embroiled in complex speculations about each other's motives. These ruminations often develop into attempts to live with each other in the context of a shared fiction; for their relations with each other, the characters require a shared, willed suspension of disbelief in one another and even a joint belief in some vague idea that is either not susceptible of precise definition or patently false. Two of the most prominent examples of shared fictions in Henry James's writing come from works written in 1902, just as William James was visiting Britain in order to deliver the Gifford Lectures and as Henry was reading the resulting volume, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Edel 5:115,140). In "The Beast in the Jungle," John Marcher and May Bartram share the knowledge of Marcher's belief that a momentous fate awaits him. They treat the apparently ungrounded belief as a fact. They learn to live together with this imagined fact, and their relationship grows up around it. A more complex variation on shared fictions occurs in *The Wings of the Dove*, in which Milly Theale wills herself to believe that Merton Densher loves Kate Croy, that the love is unrequited, and later that Merton transfers his affection to Milly herself. Kate and Merton do their best to sustain this fiction for Milly. What is remarkable about this elaborate falsehood, as about many other shared fictions in James's work, is that James ultimately uses the existence of shared fictions to make lying into a moral responsibility on the part of characters in the story. Instead of a breach of trust, lying becomes the foundation of trust. James's late stories and novels continually draw on the language and symbolism of religious experience, but in place of an actual supernatural force, the ultimate source of such experiences typically turns out to be a shared fiction of this sort. James's shared fictions place a great emphasis on the capacity of his characters and his readers for sympathetic fantasy. If they are not always strictly fictions in the
sense of being consciously invented by those to whom they appear, Henry James's ghosts nonetheless prefigure the shared fictions of his late novels through their role in cementing communities of belief among those who encounter them.

Interpreters of James's “occult” stories have frequently attempted to show that James's apparitions are products of the psychology of the person who encounters them. In the most comprehensive study to date of James's ghost stories, *Henry James and the Occult*, Martha Banta argues that James's stories of the supernatural can all be resolved into questions of psychological abnormalities:

“Supernaturalism,” as used by James pertains to that which is *human* (no divine presence is implied); it manifests qualities that are generally hidden (occult) to the empirical eye and that are above and beyond (super-, supra-, preter-, and trans-) so-called, normal powers. (Where these human powers came from originally and what larger powers endow them are matters for consideration James managed to avoid). (53)

This “psychological” interpretation of the ghost tales is not uncontested. In the case of James's most famous ghost story, “The Turn of the Screw,” critics have undertaken an extensive debate about the “reality” of the ghosts encountered by the governess. The pragmatic method of William James suggests that in fact such a debate misses the point. The ghosts are “real” not in their provable or disprovable existence outside the minds of the characters who encounter them, but precisely in their having an effect on those characters. A closer reading of “The Ghostly Rental,” from the point of view of a pragmatist hermeneutics, suggests two qualifications of the notion that the ghost stories are primarily “psychological.”

First, as Banta's parenthetical remark suggests, James declines to investigate the “real” origins of the apparitions that people the stories. The stories often turn on questions about evidence of supernatural visitations and thus raise the issue of “the reality of the unseen.” Yet in place of reasonings about the supernatural realm, Henry James offers a kind of practical theology. The ghost stories tell of the experience of encountering the supernatural and do not stop to “chop logic” over theological proofs. James prefers to attend to the effects of supernatu-
ral visitations and not necessarily to their origins. James's stories owe something to the American tradition of Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe, which frequently suggests that ghosts are the imaginary products of deranged minds. James uniquely exploits the ambiguity of this tradition by leaving open multiple possible interpretations of his ghosts. If his interest in the psychology of those who confront apparitions may seem to pathologize their belief in the supernatural, however, James's attitude remains far from that of the "debunker" of supernatural phenomena, who (like the narrator of "The Ghostly Rental") aims simply to disprove the reality of the apparition, to tear the veil from the hocus-pocus. English gothic and detective fiction from Ann Radcliffe to Arthur Conan Doyle tended to conclude with the revelation that all the apparently supernatural occurrences recounted in it could actually be traced to perfectly natural causes. Every ghost story in this tradition came with its obligatory debunking.²¹ In James's stories, however, the attitude of the debunker frequently proves crass and callous. What is most distinctive about James's early ghost stories is the extent to which the process of debunking reveals hidden truths not about the supernatural world but about the would-be debunker. James's emphasizes on the ambiguity of the fictional event and on the uneasy consciousness of the debunker contribute to his distinctive literary technique and his subsequent influence on literary modernism.

The second amendment of the "psychological" view of the ghost stories is to emphasize the element of social artifice involved in many of the apparitions. Consciously, semi-consciously, or unconsciously, many of the characters who encounter such apparitions thereby participate in a social world shared with others who have seen them. Central to many of the ghost stories is the appeal, frequently from a weak, impoverished character, often a woman, to an educated man, often the narrator, to share a vision. Many of the later ghost stories tell of a person who has seen a ghost and appeals to another witness for confirmation of her experience. In works such as "Sir Edmund Orme" (1891) and "The Real Right Thing" (1899), the experience of sharing in such a manifestation, and thus sharing a belief in a reality unseen by others, draws James's protagonists together. Here, the shared fiction belongs explicitly to the realm of religious experience in William James's sense, for it is the ability to participate in a vision of the supernatural that connects the sym-
pathetic Jamesian protagonists. There is often some suggestion that only mentally or emotionally gifted characters are capable of seeing ghosts.

“The Ghostly Rental” demonstrates both of these corollaries to the “psychological” thesis. Regarding the debunking attitude, it is clear that the narrator is a precursor of James’s later untrustworthy narrators and “focalizers,” such as the narrator of “The Aspern Papers” (1888) or the painter Lyon in “The Liar” (1888), both tried in detail and convicted of unreliability by Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (339–76). Captain Diamond has worried about the possibility that the theology student might offend the ghost: “Be very respectful—be very polite. If not—if not—” (CS 2:185). When the narrator does tear the daughter’s veil, her reaction is outrage: “My father, I suppose, did not send you here to insult me!” (187). The father’s ghost then appears, and the daughter blames herself: “It’s the punishment of my long folly!” (188). The narrator, however, realizes that his own intervention in the drama has been far from guiltless: “‘Ah,’ said I, ‘it’s the punishment of my indiscretion—of my violence!’” (188). The term “violence” is central here, as throughout James. The demand to get behind appearances and get at the truth frequently serves what Nietzsche would call a “will to truth.” The apparent claim to be a disinterested servant of the truth in fact masks a violent desire for control over circumstances (a “will to power”)(Nietzsche 225). It is the violent destroyer of illusions, frequently a narrator or focalizer, who is most responsible for the consequences when those illusions finally collapse. The narrator’s earlier tendency to lie to Captain Diamond about his motives for inquiring into the Captain’s life suggests his guilt. Once, for example, when he is staking out the Diamonds’ haunted house, hoping for a glimpse of the ghost on a day when the Captain must receive his quarterly rent from her, the Captain encounters him and asks, “And what brought you here this evening?” (177). The narrator offers the reader evidence of his own guilty conscience and unreliability: “I was obliged to evade this question” (177).

This story about a guilty debunker was the last tale strictly focused on ghosts that James would write for fifteen years (Banta 111). It encapsulates the problem of the voyeuristic impulses of an apparently disinterested observer that haunts later tales like “The Aspern Papers” and novels like *The Ambassadors*. In James’s stories about truth-seekers,
which share something with the Oedipus myth, the seeker after truth frequently reveals that he is in fact the source of error; as Peter Brooks has put it of The Aspern Papers, "the narrator... tells the story of his own crime while intending to tell that of a detection" (262).24 "The Ghostly Rental" offers a crude form of such a story. The narrator is forced to recognize his own "indiscretion" and "violence." In the story's final pages, the narrator and the Captain's daughter leave a burning candle behind them at the "haunted" house, thus causing a fire that destroys all traces of evidence for his story. This fire, a counter-part of other fires in James such as those at the end of The American (1876–77) and The Wings of the Dove, suggests how the narrator's attempts to throw light on what should have remained hidden generate a destructive heat. The narrator's passions defeat his quest for enlightenment.

On the other hand, the father and daughter manage to preserve both decorum and co-existence through the mechanism of the haunting. It is as if, without consulting each other, they have established the scenario of the haunted house as a way out of their earlier embarrassing conflict. The haunting begins when the father refuses to acknowledge his daughter's lover, who claims to be her husband. (She denies, first to the father, and later to the narrator, that she has a husband, so the case is presumably one of premarital sex.) The Captain curses his daughter, who swoons away, and whose body is spirited off by the putative husband. When the Captain returns to the house after this scene,

On the table was a note from the young man telling him that he had killed his daughter, repeating the assurance that she was his own wife, and declaring that he himself claimed the sole right to commit her remains to earth. . . . Captain Diamond wrote him a dreadful note in answer, saying that he didn't believe his daughter was dead, but that, whether or no, she was dead to him. A week later, in the middle of the night, he saw her ghost. (CS 2:172)25

The ghost later agrees to pay the father rent on the haunted house, and that "ghostly rental" supports him into his old age. The father's claim that "whether or no, she was dead to him" amounts to an "as if": he will treat her as if she were dead.26 She, in turn, acts dead: she plays the part of the ghost, and the narrator calls her an "audacious actress" (187). Yet, by means of the ghostly rental, she is able (one imagines) to
stay with her lover, to maintain her contact with her father, and indeed to fulfil her filial duty to him by giving him material support. Her sexual misdeeds turn her into a ghost, but the ghost disguise presumably allows her to maintain some sort of liaison with her lover. Only the intervention of the inquisitive theology student disrupts this beautiful fiction. His encounter with Captain Diamond’s practical theology suggests that in James’s fiction, as in his brother’s philosophy, the “higher” realms of theological debate do not necessarily offer a more privileged access to the supernatural than the realms of superstition and the occult. Like some more recent historians of religion, Henry and William James give as much credence to popular as to elite beliefs.

Henry James’s later ghost stories carry something like the pragmatist attitude to the “will to believe” into the realm of fiction and go far to justify his 1907 claim, after reading Pragmatism, to be “lost in the wonder of the extent to which all my life I have . . . unconsciously pragmatised” (Letters 466). Rather than unveil the ghosts and show their “true” origin in some particular material cause—say, repressed sexual desire—James treats the ghosts as real because they have a reality for those who experience them. To borrow a distinction from William James, Henry James seems to have been “tough-minded” where his father and older brother were “tender-minded”—he was less eager than they to prove the reality of ideas and less concerned with the problem of the existence of God (Pragmatism 9). Nonetheless, he shared with William a conception of how powerful ideas, like ghosts, make themselves felt in life. Indeed Henry James’s ghosts often seem like embodied (or partially embodied) ideas. Henry’s tough-mindedness manifests itself in the emphasis on those non-ideal motives that often enter into the functioning of ideas in this world. His ghosts are seldom just disinterested visitors who appear in order to increase our knowledge of another world. They always come with a mission of their own, and that mission either serves or frustrates the motives of the human beings privileged to see them. Without reducing the ghost to a product of any particular ideological or sexual motive, James shows how the ghost’s presence interacts with and can frequently serve such motives. This aspect of James’s ghost stories contributes importantly to the social quality of his conception of the unseen. The unseen is not a pure, ethereal substance. Rather (as indeed the pragmatist criterion of truth suggests) it has substantial practical impact on the affairs of this world. Whether as an unwelcome
intruder, an unreliable ally, or a useful tool for the seer who experiences it, the ghost always serves a worldly function. (In this respect, James’s ghosts are not unlike Shakespeare’s.) But it seldom serves exactly the function that the seer might desire, and its intervention in this world is always messy and unpredictable.

When Henry James returns to the genre of the ghostly or occult tale after 1891, his stories no longer focus on eager debunkers like those of “The Ghostly Rental” and “Professor Fargo” (1874). The later works tend increasingly to center on protagonists who desire to experience the supernatural and who even set aside their own rational beliefs in hopes of a more authentic occult experience. The typical protagonist of a late Jamesian ghost tale makes a great effort to believe in ghosts. The first of his late ghost stories, “Sir Edmund Orme” (1891), virtually reverses the plot of “The Ghostly Rental.” Here, a suitor learns that his beloved mother, Mrs. Marden, has visions of a ghost, the ghost of Sir Edmund Orme, a man she jilted in her youth. Mrs. Marden sees the ghost following her daughter Charlotte around. This is an odd, typically Jamesian haunting, since the daughter herself never sees the ghost. Whereas in “The Ghostly Rental,” the narrator seeks out Captain Diamond in order to inquire into his connection to the ghost, in “Sir Edmund Orme,” it is Mrs. Marden who tries to interest the narrator in her ghost. She tells him of a “deep presentiment” that he will soon experience a “mystic initiation” (CS 3:857). One day in church the young man himself sees the ghost, who appears to him as a perfectly respectable “pale young man in black, with the air of a gentleman,” sitting in the same pew with the narrator, on the other side of Miss Marden (858). Again, as in “The Ghostly Rental,” official theology appears inadequate to deal with such visitations. The socially sanctioned but empty ritual of Sunday service offers the setting for an occult appearance but apparently offers no solution to the problem facing Mrs. Marden. The proper channeling of sexual desire suggested by accompanying one’s beloved to church seems disrupted by the intrusion of this ghost who, like so many of James’s ghosts, represents the return of an illicit and repressed sexual passion. Yet even this product of passion is well-dressed and respectable.

The suitor takes it as his responsibility to shield his beloved from the knowledge of her mother’s torment. Like “The Ghostly Rental,” the story ends with the death of the haunted parent. Whereas the narrator
of "The Ghostly Rental" may contribute to Captain Diamond's death by his eagerness to unveil the daughter and prove her falseness, the narrator of "Sir Edmund Orme" performs almost the opposite function. Certain of the reality of the ghost, he is eager to defend Miss Marden from this knowledge. In the final scene, as the narrator offers his love to Miss Marden and her mother encourages her to accept him, Sir Edmund Orme appears one final time, seen at first only by the narrator: "Charlotte got up to give me her hand, and with the definite act she saw. She gave, with a shriek, one stare of dismay, and another sound, like a wail of one of the lost, fell at the same instant on my ear. But I had already sprung toward the girl to cover her, to veil her face" (CS 3:878). Exactly what Charlotte sees remains ambiguous, but it seems that she has finally recognized the presence of the ghost. The mother dies, and James informs the reader that "that was, mercifully, the last of Sir Edmund Orme" (878). Here, instead of ripping the veil off the beloved daughter (as in "The Ghostly Rental"), the narrator tries to "veil her face" and save her from knowledge of the supernatural. If the action seems noble, however, the motive remains suspect. The daughter consents to marry the narrator, but just a moment before the ghostly apparition she had been hesitating: "She had recognised something, she felt a coercion. I could see that she was trembling" (878). Here the mother and prospective son-in-law seem to use their knowledge of the haunting as part of their attempt to convince the young Miss Marden to accept her suitor. She sees the ghost precisely at the moment of giving the narrator her hand, as if entry into the world of sexual relations meant encountering directly the unseen force that has hovered around her for so long. If the narrator here is more open to accepting the reality of the unseen than James's earlier narrators, it is nonetheless true that this recognition serves his interests: the ghost gets him the girl. Indeed, Miss Marden's resistance to marrying may have reflected an instinct for self-preservation; a year later, as the frame narrator informs us at the beginning of the story, she dies in childbirth. The narrator is even conscious of the ghost's supporting his suit: "What I ended by feeling was that he was on my side, that he was watching over my interest, that he was looking to it that my heart shouldn't be broken" (874). Thus, the narrator's openness to the supernatural entails not only answering the appeal of the stricken Mrs. Marden but also looking out for his own interests.

"Sir Edmund Orme" sets the tone for James's later ghost stories,
in which the narrators and focalizers seem to have exorcised the skepticism of the early occult works. Increasingly, the stories turn on the efforts of the protagonist to participate in the world of ghostly apparitions and on the appeal from one haunted person to a possible witness for such participation. Stories like "The Real Right Thing" (1899) and "Maud-Evelyn" emphasize the fictionality of the ghosts, but explicit fictionality is not the norm in James’s late ghost stories, in most of which James's attitude toward his characters seems as pragmatic as Marmaduke's toward the Dedricks; if they believe in their ghosts, he will not attempt to shatter their convictions. The protagonists of James’s ghost stories can be roughly divided into two categories: those eager to uncover hidden truths and heedless of consequences (more frequent in the early stories); and those who are credulous about apparitions and desperate for the confirmation they can receive from others (predominating after 1891). "The Turn of the Screw" combines the two impulses in a remarkable way. Having been employed to take care of two children at a remote estate, the unnamed governess who narrates the tale sees the ghosts of a former valet, Peter Quint, and the previous governess, Miss Jessel. She seeks confirmation of her visions from an intellectual and social superior, her employer, who never responds to her letters. She does, however, get partial confirmation from the housekeeper Mrs. Grose, who, though not herself seeing the ghosts, tells her vaguely of the misdeeds of the two former employees and ultimately offers her faith: "I believe" (CS 4:727). The governess thus faces the same dilemma as such relatively powerless heroes and heroines as Captain Diamond in "The Ghostly Rental," Mrs. Marden in "Sir Edmund Orme," or the widow of Ashton Doyne in "The Real Right Thing." On the other hand, the governess shares many of the character traits of James’s debunking investigators, like the theology student in "The Ghostly Rental," Lady Emma in "Maud-Evelyn," or Colonel Gifford in "Professor Fargo." She attacks little Miles with a prosecutorial zeal in her attempt to expose what she imagines are his "lies." Although she feels "a perverse horror" at the "act of violence" involved in cross-examining him, she goes so far as to tell lies herself in trying to uncover his imagined misdeeds, which involve both his alleged commerce with the ghost of Peter Quint and his having "said things" (unspecified things) to other boys at school (CS 4:735, 738). This combination of two Jamesian character types gives the story some of its special potency:
the reader sympathizes with the plight of the governess but recoils from her attacks on the children.

The particular obsession of the governess with the children’s relationship to Peter Quint and Miss Jessel suggests a link between James’s interest in the question of shared fictions and the problem of evil. The children seem to participate in a shared fiction from which the governess feels herself excluded. She sees their “more than earthly beauty, their absolutely unnatural goodness” as “a game, . . . a policy and a fraud” (692). Her response is confused. On the one hand, she wants the children to admit her to their fiction. On the other hand, like James’s other debunkers, she wants to destroy the fiction altogether and reveal the true evil underlying this unnatural goodness. (She differs from other debunkers in believing that the true evil is supernatural.) What strikes the governess as evil is precisely any fiction into which she cannot be admitted. Like the suitor in “Sir Edmund Orme,” the governess has her own potentially destructive emotional needs, which seem to motivate her apparently altruistic attempt to shield the children from the horrors she witnesses.

The terrifying final scene of the story suggests how these impulses interact. It echoes both the scene at the end of the “Ghostly Rental” in which the theology student tears away the ghost’s veil and the corresponding scene in “Sir Edmund Orme” in which the suitor tries to place a veil over his beloved’s face. In the midst of her attempts to force Miles to confess the things he said at school, the governess sees an apparition of Peter Quint. Although she then “spring[s] straight upon” Miles, as if to shelter him, she fails to protect him from the vision of Peter Quint—and instead tries to force him to see the ghost and thus to admit that he has seen it in the past (CS 4:739). Miles never confesses either to the specific words he said at school or to having seen Peter Quint, but the governess claims victory when he acknowledges that he knows whom the governess is claiming to see. The famously ambiguous line “Peter Quint—you devil!” in which the devil might be either Quint himself or the governess, marks the tearing of the veil in this story, but the governess herself seems unable to see what James makes the readers see—her own involvement in Miles’s death (740). Miles denies being able to see Peter Quint, and asks her “Where?” She, trying to force him to see, gestures, “There, there!” and he, whether seeing Quint or not, dies in her arms, either exposed to the supernatural evil from which she
was meant to protect him or suffocated by her attempts to shelter him from it.

While “The Turn of the Screw” became James's most famous ghost story, “The Beast in the Jungle” presents his most elaborate and challenging account of a shared fiction and suggests more than any other of his stories the importance of this problem for James's contribution to literary modernism. Meeting John Marcher at a country house ten years after a previous meeting, May Bartram reminds him that he had previously revealed to her a secret about himself: “You said you had had from your earliest time, as the deepest thing within you, the sense of being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible, that was sooner or later to happen to you, that you had in your bones the foreboding and the conviction of, and that would perhaps overwhelm you” (CS 5:503). May tells Marcher that she believes in this hidden fate, which Marcher imagines as a beast in a jungle waiting to pounce on him. In this first section of the story, the beast has many of the qualities of the ghosts in James's stories that appear only to certain protagonists. It “haunts” him, like a ghost, and indeed he has already seen May function as a sort of guide who would show her great-aunt's country-house to people and furnish information on such topics as “the favourite haunts of the ghost” (497). As with other Jamesian ghosts, the beast is very real to Marcher, but no one else has experienced it. Like the governess in “The Turn of the Screw” or the mother in “Sir Edmund Orme,” he turns to another for confirmation of its existence, and May does indeed confirm it: “I believe you” (505). May and Marcher’s relationship develops around this shared fiction, which seems to be the primary subject of their conversations, or at least the central shared concern hiding behind all their interactions, over a period of many years.

The question they pose continually is what the rare and strange fate, “the real truth,” of Marcher will be (509). Candidates that are specifically dismissed include: Marcher's falling in love (504); May's acquisition of a house in London (509); May's death (518–19 and again at 528); and simply the possibility that there was no fate at all and that it has been “all a mistake” (526). Gradually, as both protagonists age, Marcher comes to believe that May knows what his fate will be but is refusing to tell him. Indeed, she tells him that he will “never find out” (515). In a scene that resembles some of James's apparition scenes
(as well as a related scene in "The Aspern Papers"), May seems on the point of revealing to Marcher his fate. One spring afternoon, after May has told Marcher that she is ill, he comes to visit her and she, seated in front of a cold hearth, "communicate[s] with him as across some gulf" (522). After he asks her once again what is "the very worst that, at this time of day, can happen to" him, she rises from her chair (522). A force seems to take possession of her: "the cold charm in her eyes had spread, as she hovered before him, to all the rest of her person, so that it was, for the minute, almost like a recovery of youth" (525). Marcher believes that she is about to reveal his fate to him, but, though the reader suspects that, like many other James heroines, she is offering herself, Dido-like, to the protagonist, Marcher apparently does not register this: "The end, none the less, was that what he had expected failed to sound" (527). Despite Marcher's inability to experience anything at this moment of apparent revelation, May insists from then on that "what was to" happen has happened, that "It has come" (527). She discourages him from inquiring further and in fact tells him to avoid knowing his fate: "You were to suffer your fate. That was not necessarily to know it" (531). After she dies, Marcher travels in the East. When he revisits her tomb, he has an uncanny encounter with another middle-aged man, a sort of double of himself, whose face looks into Marcher's "with an expression like the cut of a blade" (538). Marcher sees in a flash that the other man has experienced something—a wrong or a wound—most profound and that this wound is "Something—and this reached him with a pang—that he, John Marcher, hadn't" experienced (539). The other man, Marcher realizes, has known a passion such as Marcher's own "arid" life has never contained. Marcher has remained merely an observer: "He had seen outside of his life, not learned it within, the way a woman was mourned when she had been loved for herself" (539). This revelation discloses the meaning of the beast in the jungle: his fate was indeed in a sense to wait: "he had been the man of his time, the man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened" (540). Yet he realizes that May, on that earlier spring evening, had offered him the opportunity to "baffle his doom": "she was what he had missed" (540). If he had loved her, he would have baffled the fate. The Beast rises; Marcher, facing "the leap that was to settle him, ... [flings] himself, on his face, on the tomb" (541).
Ghost stories like “The Ghostly Rental” and even “Sir Edmund Orme” develop techniques inherent in the genre and particularly the ambiguity concerning the supernatural or psychological sources of apparitions. “The Beast in the Jungle” arguably offers James’s most distinctively “modernist” ghost story because of some additional innovations James introduces here, which are closely connected to James’s pragmatist attitude to the reality of the unseen. First, there is no ghost. Instead, John Marcher is haunted by an idea. In this respect, “The Beast in the Jungle” is much more strictly a story of a shared fiction than the earlier ghost stories, in which some ghosts were arguably real, others fake. In this story, the ghost exists only as a subject of discourse between the two protagonists. A second “modernist” innovation is that nothing happens. The momentous fate is that “nothing on earth” is to happen to Marcher. The story is, in the terms of the Russian Formalists, all sjuget and no fabula—all discourse about an event, but no event. As a result, the focus of the story falls entirely on Marcher’s psychology, and this is a third respect in which the story manifests its modernism and reveals its kinship to Conrad’s great contemporary works. Finally, James’s strict conception of point of view, which allows him to register events only as they appear to Marcher, although derived from realist techniques such as style indirect libre, contributes in this story to a distinctively modernist form of irony, in which the reader must attend to very slight differences between what Marcher observes and what the narrator seems to suggest. This subtle irony creates a form of the problem of the unreliable narrator or focalizer, and it is most evident in the scene in which May appears to offer herself to the narrator, and he fails even to notice. Bewildered, he asks May, “What then has happened?” She answers, “What was to” (CS 5:527). The reader must infer that the great event of the story is her unspoken offer of herself, but even that is a matter mainly of “her face shining at him” (like a ghost’s) and his failing to understand. The great gulf between Marcher’s perceptions and the reader’s is a product of James’s fine irony and a harbinger of much in modernist fiction.

In “The Beast in the Jungle,” then, James replaces the typical ghost of his ghost stories with a bare, disembodied idea, but he gives the idea, as shared fiction, more power than most of his ghosts. In a sense, by detaching the shared fiction itself (the beast in the jungle) from any “embodiment” in a particular ghost, he presents shared fiction in its
purest form. Marcher is haunted not by a ghost but by the sense of being haunted. Here more than in any other story James seems to make use of something like a pragmatist criterion of truth, and to explore its implications. Marcher’s idea itself is almost contentless; he believes that something will happen to him, but has no definition of what that something will be. This is as close as possible to a pure idea with no reality attached. What the “beast” really is can hardly matter, since all the beast consists of is Marcher’s belief in a special fate for himself. At the beginning of the story, this is a purely subjective idea. Louis Menand has suggested that the central idea of pragmatism was “an idea about ideas”:

... ideas are not “out there” waiting to be discovered, but are tools—like forks and knives and microchips—that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves. [William James, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Charles Sanders Peirce, and John Dewey] believed that ideas are produced not by individuals, but by groups of individuals—that ideas are social. They believed that ideas do not develop according to some inner logic of their own, but are entirely dependent, like germs, on their human carriers and the environment. And they believed that since ideas are provisional responses to particular and unreproducible circumstances, their survival depends not on their immutability but on their adaptability. (Metaphysical xi–xii)

The idea that haunts Marcher in the “Beast in the Jungle” shares some of the qualities of the idea as defined by pragmatism, and commentators such as Richard Hocks, Paul Lindholdt, and Megan Quigley have noted echoes of pragmatist debates in the story. The importance of Marcher’s idea lies not in a correspondence theory of its truth, that is, not in its accurately describing any reality outside the mind of John Marcher and May Bartram, but rather in its practical import for their lives, what William James would call its “practical cash-value” (Pragmatism 26). As May tells Marcher at one point, “whatever the reality, it is a reality” (526). The reality of Marcher’s idea seems to consist primarily in its influence on Marcher’s attitude to life; the idea is nothing in itself, everything in its effects. At the end of the story (if we take Marcher’s final interpretation of the beast to be conclusive), it is the fact that
the idea has prevented him from loving May that has given it reality. Because it has influenced his action (by preventing him from acting), it has been real. If the "beast" is a fiction, and a shared one, it is also, like James's other ghosts, intimately bound up with the desires and interests of those who experience it.

Largely because Marcher shares it with May, this idea has a concrete embodiment in social life—it is the nexus around which their relationship develops. It has some of the reality of a marriage for them. Henry James might have written a story in which Marcher was deeply influenced by his idea without sharing it. Instead, it is the shared quality of the idea that James emphasizes. The idea is ultimately the joint creation of Marcher and May: "looking back at the end of a period, he knew there was no moment at which it was traceable that she had, as he might say, got inside his condition, or exchanged the attitude of beautifully indulging for that of still more beautifully believing him" (509–10). By taking May into his secret, Marcher gives her some power to define the "beast." (Indeed, much of their relationship consists of his asking her to define it). From having a purely subjective reality for Marcher, the beast comes to be defined intersubjectively. Eventually, this vague idea experienced only by Marcher comes to be defined primarily by May, so that Marcher ends the story guessing at what he takes May to know: the reality of the beast.

Like the pragmatist idea of an idea, the beast is both highly adaptable—witness the many possible meanings for it that Marcher and May explore—and entirely dependent on its environment and what Menand would call its "human carriers." Marcher uses the beast to avoid confronting the beast. As Ruth Yeazell has put it, "Through the metaphor of the beast in the jungle, apparently a talisman of hidden knowledge, Marcher actually retreats from knowledge" (Language 37). The beast serves Marcher's apparent interests by creating an aura of uniqueness around him, by earning him May's devoted attention, and at the same time by making marriage to May impossible, since "his obsession . . . was not a condition he could invite a woman to share" (508). Of course, Marcher has in fact asked May to share the condition with him, but he has not asked her to marry him. Like so many of James's male protagonists, Marcher is incredibly selfish. While continually reminding himself not to be selfish, he blithely takes advantage of May Bartram's devotion to him, and indeed watches her waste away,
all the while thinking primarily of the effect on him. After learning of her “fear of a deep disorder in her blood, ... [he] immediately began to imagine aggravations and disasters, and above all to think of her peril as the direct menace for himself of personal privation” (CS 5:518). The reference to a disorder of the blood, which apparently eventually kills May, suggests the vampire theme that runs through so much of James’s fiction. In the vampire stories, one life depends for its strength on draining the powers of another; just so, Marcher’s obsession seems to suck all the life out of May Bartram. On the other hand, in their struggle over the meaning of the beast, May, somewhat passive-aggressively, uses the idea of the beast to forward her apparent interest—forcing Marcher to fall in love with her. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has pointed out, May’s motives are left vague and the story “has the Jamesian negative virtue of not pretending to present her rounded and whole” (159). We see her mainly through Marcher’s eyes, though James often calls attention to her hesitations and failures to speak, many of which Marcher apparently ignores. Yet, through these silences, May manages to take control over the definition of the beast. It is May who suggests that the fate awaiting Marcher is to fall in love. By continually hesitating to reveal her idea of the beast’s real meaning, she convinces Marcher that she holds the key to his fate. Indeed, she posthumously wins the struggle over the definition of the beast, as Marcher winds up convinced that she has taken the meaning of the beast with her to the grave and that she was his only possible escape from the fate that awaits him. In dying, May, or her ghost, has in a sense become the shared fiction. Marcher’s idea of her comes to define the beast for him. By defining the beast, May becomes the beast. Like Milly Theale in The Wings of the Dove, she wins the war, but only by dying.

If the ghosts and haunting ideas of James’s short fictions resemble pragmatist ideas, there is a subtle difference of valuation. Where the pragmatist emphasizes how ideas are deliberately chosen by people pursuing their everyday interests, Henry James emphasizes the unconscious element in his protagonists’ embracing of their ghosts. Pragmatism of course does not claim that people are fully conscious of the interests that their ideas serve. Yet, more than William James, Henry shows the extent to which ideas can haunt people. Whether half-consciously chosen (like the Captain’s belief in his daughter’s ghost in “The Ghostly Rental”), willingly accepted in response to an appeal (like the narr-
tor's recognition of the ghost of Sir Edmund Orme) or enthusiastically embraced for the distinction it confers (like John Marcher's beast), virtually none of the ghosts is the fully conscious creation of the person to whom it appears.40 Something of this difference in emphasis between the two brothers can be seen in Henry James's only published essay on an explicitly metaphysical question, "Is There a Life After Death?" (1910). James wrote this essay for a symposium on the afterlife in the year of his brother William's death and, as Richard Hocks notes, his approach is broadly pragmatist. Yet, Hocks does not note a discrepancy between the two brothers that arises in this context (217–25). Henry James writes that although all the evidence of the senses suggests the absence of any life after death, he himself has a powerful sense of a communication with sources of consciousness which are beyond the empirical world. He concludes by calling attention to the role of desire in his affirmation of a life after death:

I "like" to think, I may be held too artlessly to repeat, that this, that, and the other appearances are favorable to the idea of the independence, behind everything (its everything), of my individual soul; I "like" to think even at the risk of lumping myself with those shallow minds who are happily and foolishly able to believe what they would prefer. It isn't really a question of belief, which is a term I have made no use of in these remarks; it is on the other hand a question of desire, but of desire so confirmed, so thoroughly established and nourished, as to leave belief a comparatively irrelevant affair. . . . If one acts from desire quite as one would from belief, it signifies little what name one gives to one's motives. ("Is There" 231–32)41

The broad outlines of the argument are clearly pragmatist: the immortality of the soul is true or false (though Henry James doesn't use these words) to the extent that it affects how one acts in this world. Yet Henry's reference to those "shallow minds who are happily and foolishly able to believe what they prefer" seems to undercut the apparent similarity to William James, since who but the author of The Will to Believe could be taken to have argued for believing what one prefers?42 Is William James's "shallower" younger brother here accusing the philosopher of shallowness in turn? In place of belief, "a comparatively irrelevant affair," Henry James refers to "desire," that realm of uncontrollable
and perhaps even undefinable motive that is the subject of so many of
Henry James's ghost stories. The difference between "desire" and "will"
ilies in the tendency of desire to confound and surprise the desiring
subject.

The shared fictions of Henry James, and the "will to believe" of
William James, suggest the paradoxical status of belief for modernism.
In an era that attends increasingly to individual religious experience in
place of the institutional structures of religion, belief still seems to have
a role to play in social cohesion. Belief is not typically a voluntary state,
desire still less so. One either believes or does not, desires or does not.
It is generally not possible to choose what one will believe, certainly
not with the most fundamental beliefs, such as religious and moral ones.
Desires are even more intransigent. Yet William James developed a
philosophy of religion around the idea that one could choose what to
believe. Social contract theory, as it developed from Hobbes to Rous-
seau, had emphasized the act of consent. In coming together to form
a community, the originators of the social contract agreed to give up
certain powers or rights of their own for the protection of a community.
Henry and William James explore an aspect of community that social
contract theorists generally ignore, though Rousseau called attention
to the need for belief to underpin consent. In addition to the rational
consent of its members, a community often demands their irrational
allegiance. It demands their acceptance—not only at a conscious level,
but at an unconscious one too—of certain basic beliefs. It needs their
desires. Whereas voluntarist social thought, emphasizing the will, rep-
resents members of a community as coming together to create a social
contract, shared fictions tend to create their own communities of belief
and desire. What marks the Jamesian shared fiction as an echo of reli-
gious experience is the emphasis it places on the confluence of desire
and belief. The social contract and political forms of consent, typically
associated with modernity, depend on the free will of those who con-
sent to them. Traditional forms of belief demand acceptance without
question. William James's will to believe lies somewhere in between,
paradoxically the product of an effort actively to submit to a fiction that
demands passive, effortless submission. Henry James's shared fictions
explore the way that such a will to believe interacts with our desires and
interests. William James emphasized the fact that the other world has
pragmatic effects in this one. In Henry James's ghost stories, the unseen
has its peculiar force in the visible world. James's greatness as a teller of ghost stories depends on the fact that the "unseen" here involves the unconscious sexual, material, and social desires of his characters but cannot be reduced to any one of these.

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NOTES

1. The theologians named by Captain Diamond, important forces in the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century, both emphasized the innate depravity of man and the utter dependence of the sinner on God's grace as the source for regeneration.

2. A certain sexual thrill seems to attend this success.

3. The hermeneutics of discipleship has also been called a "hermeneutics of recovery." I borrow the term "discipleship" from a talk by Cohen.

4. Felman has suggested that "the most scandalous thing about ["The Turn of the Screw"] is that we are forced to participate in the scandal, that the reader's innocence cannot remain intact: there is no such thing as an innocent reader of this text" (97).

5. Such an approach shares much with the "phenomenological reduction" of the "natural world" in Husserl's Cartesian Meditations. Here, of course, the supernatural world is part of what is being "reduced," that is, the question of its reality is being bracketed. Cameron's phenomenological approach to thinking in Henry James suggests an entirely different vocabulary (from mine) for discussing shared fictions, one which would tend to de-emphasize religious experience. As Cameron notes, Husserl's bracketing of the question of the existence of what I am calling reality, and the rejection of Cartesian dualism on which this gesture depends, owe something to William James's pragmatism. Note especially Husserl's rejection of "the dichotomy between internal and external, between the psychological and the factual" (22).

6. William James explicitly criticizes approaches that seek an organic cause for every religious experience as "medical materialism" (Varieties 13). On the Kantian connection, see Lewis. The relationship between the philosophy of William James and the fiction of Henry James receives its fullest treatment in Hocks. Matthiessen collected and commented on a range of materials involving the relationships among the family members in The James Family; for the two brothers' views of religion,
see 587–614. Most such studies emphasize William James’s epistemological claims rather than his studies of religious experience, but Hocks does address the turn to religious themes in Henry James’s late fiction, which he describes in terms of consciousness “com[ing] right up to the edge of the supernatural realm per se and stop[ping] just short of entering it” (198). Hocks convincingly argues that, although his letters are highly critical of Henry’s late style, William was in fact a perceptive reader of his brother’s work. My proposal for a “pragmatist hermeneutics” does not entail any endorsement of William James’s actual readings of Henry James, though I agree that these have been too easily caricatured as hostile by those supporting Edel’s interpretation of the two brothers’ relationship in his monumental biography.

7. Poensck’s is the most comprehensive recent treatment of the two brothers’ relationship. Although Poensck represents James as attacking the instrumentalism of modernity in the Weberian sense, he also takes him to be celebrating the diversity of modern social life. He criticizes the assumption that James was “an aloof, genteel elitist repulsed by immigrant New York and modernity in general” (11).

8. Pippin’s sensitive readings of several of James’s ghost stories, and of his novels, depend heavily on his assumption that “modern moral life” results from secularization. According to Pippin, James describes morality “without a religious foundation” in a society “bound together by material interest and not by tradition or religion or a common history” (2, 16). Pippin perhaps exaggerates the secularism of modern moral life and certainly oversimplifies Henry James’s attitude to religion. Pippin’s assumptions about modern secularism may also account in part for the absence, in this philosophically grounded criticism, of any but a passing reference to the work of William James.

9. As was the title of his unfinished final novel The Ivory Tower.

10. See Andrew Taylor.


12. However, the ghosts should no more be reduced to emanations of Henry James Sr.’s mental life than to other biographical or historical causes like Henry Jr.’s homosexuality or contemporary class conflict.

13. For the concept of a “sick soul,” see Varieties 127–65.

14. William James compares the pragmatic criterion to Jonathan Edwards’s interpretation of the Biblical passage “By their fruits shall ye know them.” In the Treatise on Religious Affections, Edwards wrote, “The degree in which our experience is productive of practice shows the degree in which our experience is spiritual and divine” (qtd. in Varieties 20). William’s summary of the Protestant doctrine of grace echoes his formulations of the pragmatist criterion of truth: “The roots of a man’s virtue are inaccessible to us. No appearances whatever are infallible proofs of grace. Our practice is the only sure evidence, even to ourselves, that we are genuinely Christians” (20). This passage suggests the continuity between pragmatism and Protestant ethical thought: as with the perennial Protestant concern about who
belongs among the elect, the pragmatist has only the fruits of action as evidence. William James's discussion of Jonathan Edwards shows the continuity of a central epistemological concern shared by the early American Protestants, Kant, and the pragmatists. In the utter absence of direct signs from the Almighty, how is one to judge a righteous life on this earth? For the Puritans, this question was crucial to the notion of "visible saints," their attempt to limit membership in the American gathered churches to those who demonstrably belonged to the elect. Since the doctrine of faith said that good works could not in themselves earn salvation, the Puritan churches admitted only members who could testify to having experienced saving faith in a conversion experience. However, the only evidence of such an experience was the conversion narrative and consequent behavior of the "saint," so that speech and behavior became a crucial indicator of the invisible qualities of the saint's soul, thus nearly converting the doctrine of faith back into a doctrine of works. See Morgan. For Kant, the inaccessibility of the noumenal realm meant that one must look for the proofs of its existence in the logical structure of the mind's encounter with the phenomenal world. For William James, it is action in this world that provides the proof of the other world's existence.

15. This sort of belief belongs to what the Marxist tradition calls "ideology," but Henry James's analysis of these beliefs shares more with William James's pragmatism than with Althusser.

16. The story in which God makes the most prominent appearance, "The Altar of the Dead" (1895), although in some respects a precursor of "The Beast in the Jungle," does not quite count as a ghost story, since the haunting of the two protagonists by Mary Antrim and Acton Hague is explicitly purely mental. (The protagonists are obsessed with their dead, but the dead never make an appearance.)

17. On Henry James's strategic use of vagueness, see Quigley. Todorov explores the function of secrets in James's short stories, which is analogous to that of shared fictions.

18. See also Lindholdt.


20. Banta in fact comes down on the side of those who believe the ghosts are "real," but her point is that they nonetheless tell us much about the governess's psychology and little about the "supernatural." For the debate, see especially Wilson; and Heilman. The most convincing of the early contributions to the debate is Goddard's, written apparently before 1920 but not published until 1957. Goddard argues for the insanity of the governess, and thus comes down on the "medical materialist" side of the debate, but his recognition of James's subtle exploration of her insanity and of the trap James lays for his readers, in encouraging them to believe the account the governess gives, can be reconciled with my reading of James's ghost stories as deliberately ambiguous on the question of the ghosts' "reality." More recent versions of the debate are surveyed rather inconclusively in van Peer and van der Knaap. For other major studies of the ghost stories, see Beidler's, which argues
mainly for the "reality" of the ghosts; and Lustig's, which emphasizes James's place in the literary history of ghost stories and is most interesting on James as reviser of Hawthorne.

21. James draws, however, on a contrary tradition that includes such figures as Matthew Lewis, Charles Maturin, and Sheridan LeFanu, in which the ghosts are real and the tone apocalyptic. James is influenced in part too by the French fantastic tradition that culminates in Maupassant.

22. As Wilson notes, James placed "The Turn of the Screw" in the twelfth volume of the New York Edition alongside these two stories of unreliable narrators (153).

23. Lustig notes that "The Ghostly Rental" seems to demystify the American romance tradition of Hawthorne, but that James's emphasis on his narrator's violence also "revises" and "repeats" the moral of such stories as "The Silvery Veil" in Hawthorne's Blithedale Romance (70–74). For "The Silvery Veil," in which the protagonist, Theodore, seems a precursor of James's skeptical debunkers, see Hawthorne (726–33).

24. Felman notes a similar pattern in "The Turn of the Screw" (175).

25. In general, "The Ghostly Rental" has received little critical attention, and I have seen no study that suggests that the haunting is a shared fiction in the sense I describe in this paragraph. A recent article by Weinstein is suggestive on the narrator's psychology but gets the facts of the story wrong, stating that the suitor was held responsible for murdering the daughter, when in fact the text makes it clear that it is Captain Diamond who is accused of having caused her death. In the passage quoted here, the first "he" refers not to the young man himself but to the Captain, who has (earlier in the same paragraph) cursed the daughter and caused her to swoon away. Weinstein also mistakenly gives the name "Deborah," which is that of a neighborhood gossip, to Captain Diamond's (unnamed) daughter and claims that she dies in the fire at the end of the story. The best brief treatment of the story is Banta's (106–110).

26. Vaithinger is a contemporary theorist of shared fictions who shares some of William James's attitudes and is likewise influenced by Kant.

27. The pragmatic attitude of Captain Diamond's African American servant, Belinda, seems to confirm this view. Though frightened of the ghost, she seems uncertain of its reality, and announces the Captain's death with a "tragic chuckle": "He's as big a ghost as any of them now!" (CS 2:189).

28. See, for example, Butler.

29. Henry James, Letter to William James, Oct 17, 1907. For a detailed discussion of this and other letters exchanged between the two brothers, see Hocks 15–37.

30. Basil Ransome of The Bostonians (1885–86) is another, more successful debunker.
31. Mrs. Marden broke off her engagement to Sir Edmund Orme after she fell in love with Captain Marden. Sir Edmund Orme then committed suicide. He began to haunt her only after the death of her husband (CS 3: 872).

32. There is some suggestion of sexual attraction between the mother and the suitor.

33. See also Banta 111–14. The frame narrative emphasizes the problem of fictionality, as the narrator explains that the story is a fragment that may or may not be “a report of real occurrence” and similarly that it is unclear whether indeed Miss Marden was “in fact” the wife of the internal narrator who died in childbirth. Such framing devices are typical of Gothic genres, but the heightened ambiguity in this brief framing passage again presages the modernism of James’s late works. For a good, brief account of the story in the context of James’s later ghost stories, see Todorov 154–61.

34. She does indeed ask herself, “if he were innocent, what then on earth was I?” Her attempt to force Miles to see may result in part from her desire to prove him guilty and herself innocent.

35. On James and Conrad, see especially Watt 200–14.

36. My claim that James’s account of this idea resembles the pragmatist “idea about ideas” does not necessarily conflict with Hock’s convincing reading of Marcher as “anti-pragmatist” in his “a priori, monistic, intellectualist” approach to the idea (182–83). James’s account of the idea is pragmatist, but Marcher’s understanding of it is not. An interesting, albeit brief, study of the story along these lines is by Lindholdt, who reads Marcher as a spiritual descendant of the Puritans, a “sick soul” of the sort studied by William James. He then hypothesizes that Marcher is based on William James, whose own spiritual and mental crisis of 1870 is alluded to in Varieties. Although his reading of the tale actually says relatively little about pragmatism, Lindholdt makes the important point that “William and Henry James secularized and perpetuated into the modern era the Calvinistic determinism of their New England home” (275–84). The Calvinism was in fact that of their grandfather (a Scots-Irish immigrant who lived in Albany, not New England), and their father had rebelled against it, but it still played an important part in their thought. In a subtle treatment of the story, Quigley suggests Charles Sanders Peirce as a model for Marcher and reads “The Beast in the Jungle” as an intervention in pragmatist debates about vagueness in language. An expanded version of Quigley’s essay explores the implications of pragmatism for two other works that also make use of Jamesian “shared fictions,” “The Figure in the Carpet” and The Sacred Fount. On “The Beast in the Jungle,” see also Todorov 175–78.

37. Sedgwick shrewdly suggests that this last interpretation of the beast may be as mistaken as Marcher’s previous ones (159).

38. I leave open the exact reasons for Marcher’s lack of desire for May, on which topic see, of course, Sedgwick (esp. 160–63).
39. See Banta 81–104.

40. A possible exception would be the ghost of "Maud-Evelyn," but even here Marmaduke invents his marriage to her in response to the desires of her bereaved parents, the Dedricks.

41. The text is readily available in Matthiessen, *The James Family* 602–14. See also the discussion of this text in relation to *The Wings of the Dove* in Cameron (155–58).

42. William James disliked the frequent criticism of his work that it amounted to just believing what one preferred, and he later wrote that he should have called it "The Right to Believe," which (as Menand notes) would in no way have diminished the voluntarism of which James stands accused (Letter to L. T. Hobhouse, August 12, 1904, qtd. in Menand, *Metaphysical* 363). Henry may not in fact be criticizing William here; he perhaps knew that there was a difference between arguing that one could choose one's beliefs and actually believing what one prefers. As noted above, William James never quite managed to believe in God.

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