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WHO IS THIS WHO IS COMING?
FROM NEUROSIS TO NEURODEGENERATION IN TELEVISION ADAPTATIONS OF M.R. JAMES'S 'OH, WHISTLE AND I'LL COME TO YOU, MY LAD'

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On Christmas Eve 2010 BBC Four broadcast a 50-minute drama that was at once a traditional piece of seasonal fare and something of a departure. Its title was 'Whistle and I'll Come to You'. The tradition of which it was a part, at least as far as television history goes, dates back formally to 1971 when the BBC broadcast what would be the first of its *Ghost Story for Christmas* strand – an adaptation of M.R. James's classic short story 'The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral' (1910). A run of similar dramas followed annually every Christmas until December 1978, after which the format was abandoned. It was subsequently revived for BBC Four in the mid-2000s, 'Whistle and I'll Come to You' being the third episode in this new, more sporadic, run.[1] Like most of its predecessors, 'Whistle', directed by Andy de Emmony and scripted by Neil Cross, was an adaptation of a well-known M.R. James tale,[2] the original text bearing the longer title, 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad' (1904). But where it marked a departure was in its creative reimagining of the story. Previous adaptations of James's work for the *Ghost Story for Christmas* – in the 1970s and in the 2000s – had been broadly faithful attempts to transpose the tales into a different medium. They were literary costume dramas, saturated in period detail (Wheatley 2006: 50), which aimed at authentic recreation rather than creative revision. 2010's 'Whistle', however, took unprecedented creative licence. It relocated the story in the present; it removed the eponymous whistle from the diegesis altogether, replacing it with the object of a ring; it made the protagonist – a celebrated epitome of the Jamesian bachelor-scholar – a married man; it endowed his wife with that most contemporary of afflictions, advanced dementia; and it linked the haunting specifically to her decline.

Critical and popular reaction was ambivalent. Reviews readily noted the film's 'emotional impact' (Gracey 2013; cf. Paskins 2010) and commended the strength of John Hurt's performance in the lead role (Gracey 2013; Paskins 2010; Warren 2012; Wollaston 2010). However, they were also uneasy about the extent of the creative departures introduced by Cross. For several viewers it was doubtful whether the production had a meaningful or coherent relationship to its putative source text. One TV reviewer suggested that James would be 'turning in his grave' if he could see how far his work had been 'tampered with' (Wollaston 2010). Others (Paskins 2010; Warren 2012; Wollaston 2010; Wilson 2010) worried about the jettisoning of the whistle, observing that it made the retention of James's title – or at least an abbreviation of it – at best 'obsolete' (Paskins 2010), at worst 'nonsensical' (Warren 2012). For still others it was not clear that the adaptation bore any relationship at all to James's text. In Derek Johnston's (2015: 155) view, the production was 'arguably more an adaptation of the Burns poem "Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad" than of the M.R. James story which took its title from the poem'.

What tended to go unaddressed in critical reaction to the film was its genealogical relationship to an earlier BBC adaptation of the story, directed by Jonathan Miller and with Michael Hordern in the lead role. Broadcast in 1968 as part of the BBC's arts strand *Omnibus* (1967–2001), this production

[1] In December 2000 the BBC broadcast a four-episode miniseries titled *Christopher Lee's Ghost Stories for Christmas*. Whilst in the same tradition of seasonal terror, this series was qualitatively distinct from the *Ghost Story for Christmas* of the 1970s and later 2000s. Each episode featured a reading – rather than a full-fledged dramatization – of an M.R. James tale, with Lee cast as James reading aloud to students in his rooms at Cambridge.

[2] Of the fourteen *Ghost Stories for Christmas* broadcast to date, 10 have been James adaptations: 'The Stalls of Barchester' (1971), 'A Warning to the Curious' (1972), 'Lost Hearts' (1973), 'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas' (1974), 'The Ash Tree' (1975), 'A View from A Hill' (2005), 'Number 13' (2006), 'Whistle and I'll Come to You' (2010), 'The Tractate Middoth' (2013), 'Martin's Close' (2019). Of the remaining four 'The Signalman' (1976) was a Dickens adaptation, and 'Stigma' (1977), 'The Ice House' (1978) and 'The Dead Room' (2018) were teleplays written for the series.

antedated the establishment of the *Ghost Story for Christmas* and did much to inspire it (Johnston 2015: 156; 158–9). Not that critics of the later film overlooked Miller's adaptation. On the contrary, the earlier production, now widely regarded as a horror classic, was frequently invoked as a comparator, and generally a superior one (Fisher 2012; Gracey 2013; Paskins 2010; Warren 2012). But reaction was nonetheless marked by the assumption of what Sarah Cardwell (2002: 13ff) calls the 'centre-based' view of adaptation. In this view, whose influence on criticism of adaptations has been pervasive, each adaptation of an original text is assumed 'to hold a *direct* relationship with [the] original' (14; my italics), however remote it may be chronologically. Thus the original text is presumed to be the common centre, without intermediary, of every subsequent adaptation, such that multiple adaptations are evaluated in terms of their relative fidelity to the 'source' text. As Cardwell emphasises, something that risks being foreclosed in the centre-based model is the 'linear' relation between adaptations themselves, that is, the way a later adaptation may actively 'draw upon' an earlier adaptation, 'as well as upon the primary source text' (25). If the relationship between de Emmony's film and James's tale appears obscure or insufficiently coherent, this is, I would suggest, because that relationship is indirect. De Emmony's is not an adaptation that bears straightforward comparison with Miller's in terms of their relative fidelity to James; the later adaptation *also presupposes* the earlier one, reacting to it and building from it systematically. So much is immediately signalled by its title: 'Whistle and I'll Come to You' rather than James's own 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad'. The foreshortened version is already the title of Miller's 1968 adaptation. Reusing Miller's title rather than the exact wording of the literary source, de Emmony's film implicitly positions itself not as an alternative adaptation to the 1968 production but as an adaptation that takes Miller's antecedent as a point of departure. The absence of any actual whistle in the diegesis only underscores the title's function as an intertextual reference to the previous production.

Rejecting the centre-based view, Cardwell proposes that adaptation is more accurately regarded as 'the gradual development of a "meta-text"', that is, an evolving lineage in which 'subsequent [...] adaptations draw upon previous ones' and the relationship between source and adaptation is no longer assumed to be 'direct, unmediated and ahistorical' (25). The present essay, in broad terms, is an attempt to plot the meta-textual lineage that goes from James's tale to Miller's adaptation and thence to de Emmony's.[3] It is, I suggest, a lineage that progressively extends a supernatural story into the domain of psychology and indeed psychopathology. As we shall see, Miller's adaptation encourages us to infer that the protagonist is haunted not so much by an objective spirit as by some unassimilated portion of his own self. To do this, Miller draws explicitly on the hermeneutic resources of Freudian psychoanalysis and on its understanding of so-called *neurotic* illness as the 'psychogenic' expression of a conflict, one in which something repressed menacingly returns and where 'involution' to earlier developmental stages is triggered. De Emmony's film reimagines the haunting not in connection with psychic conflict but pathological *neurodegeneration* (dementia), that is, actual and irreversible cerebral injury. In doing so, I will claim, it extends the psychologization of the tale into conceptual territory that is qualitatively different. In what follows, I track how each adaptation rearticulates James's story within its respective psychological framework. I also seek to delineate the interpretative stakes involved in the shift from one framework to the other. This delineation will draw on the work of philosopher Catherine Malabou. Her differentiation between the typical conflict-based neuroses that largely preoccupied Freud and the emergent psychopathology of the 'new wounded' (her name for those with brain injuries), underlines the phenomenal and aetiological distinctness of cerebral pathologies and the growing recognition of

[3] There are two other screen adaptations of 'Oh, Whistle': a recently rediscovered amateur film by the North Downs Cinematograph Society (1956) and a Halloween episode of the BBC soap opera *Doctors* (2014) in which a regular character experiences phenomena similar to those in James's tale. There have also been BBC radio adaptations in 1949 and 1963, the latter starring Michael Hordern. An exhaustive study of the story's meta-text would address all these adaptations. The scope of this short article is more modest. I am concerned specifically with the two free-standing television adaptations of the story, the second of which is – in ways that will be discussed – explicitly in dialogue with the first. Of the two other screen versions, the North Downs film, which is remarkable, was not made for television, and the *Doctors* episode, less remarkable, is not free-standing. It is perhaps worth mentioning that there is no evidence that Miller ever saw the North Downs film (Scovell 2017) and that its rediscovery in 2017 postdates de Emmony's film. Miller presumably knew the 1963 radio adaptation, since he too cast Hordern in the lead role.

their irreducibility to the explanatory models of classical psychoanalysis. De Emmony's adaption, I will argue, reinvents 'Oh, Whistle' as a story of the new wounded, self-consciously evolving it beyond the Freudian parameters of Miller's film in order to articulate a form of psychic suffering whose specificity has only recently begun to be understood.

Persistence of the past: James's tale

I will begin by outlining the plot of James's tale and the form of haunting it presents.

'Oh, Whistle' tells the story of Parkins, a prim young 'Professor of Ontography' at Cambridge, and a 'confirmed disbeliever in what is called the "supernatural"' (James 1904: 86). During a winter vacation Parkins takes a holiday at Burnstowe – a fictional location modelled on Felixstowe on England's east coast (James 1931: 419) – residing at the Globe Hotel and doing some work in between games of golf. He has also promised a colleague that he will undertake preliminary investigations at the site of a ruined Templar preceptory on the beach. At the end of a first day's golfing with a new acquaintance from the Globe, Colonel Wilson, Parkins locates the preceptory. In a cavity of its masonry, he discovers a whistle inscribed in Latin. One of the two inscriptions remains opaque. Back at the hotel he translates the other, QUIS EST ISTE QUI VENIT: 'who is this who is coming' (1904: 82–3).[4] Almost immediately after he discovers the whistle, curious phenomena occur. On his walk back to the Globe he has the impression of someone running after him without ever getting closer. During the evening he blows the whistle, only for a picture to arise in his mind of a windy expanse occupied by a lonely figure – an image interrupted when the hotel is struck by a violent gust of wind. He then spends an uneasy night, preoccupied by mental images of someone running on the shore pursued by a figure in 'pale, fluttering draperies' (85). The following day he learns that the sheets on a second bed in his room, which he has barely touched, are so disordered as to suggest it had been occupied during the night. Later, returning to the Globe from golf, Parkins and the Colonel bump into an agitated boy who has seen waving from one of the windows – that of Parkins's locked room – a figure in white that somehow wasn't 'a right person' (89). That night, in a climactic scene, Parkins is confronted by the mysterious entity. It rises beneath the sheets of the second bed and leaps towards him, presenting 'an intensely horrible face of crumpled linen' (92). The arrival of the Colonel, attracted by noise from the room, occurs just in time to terminate the encounter before Parkins should have been pitched into madness. The individual who returns to Cambridge is altered; his sceptical views are no longer 'so clear cut' (93) and he is prone to excessive fear.

Two observations about James's text require emphasis here. Firstly, it is an exercise in ambiguous terror, which presupposes a certain relationship between past and present. The fact that Parkins is subject to phenomena that really are supernatural is never in doubt, but precisely why and by what (or whom: *quis est…*) he is haunted remain unspecified. The text gives indications that are only sufficient to establish with certainty that Parkins is haunted by something *atavistic*. Poking about in a half-forgotten medieval ruin and sounding an exhumed whistle inscribed in a dead language, what the sceptic inadvertently causes to manifest in the present is an entity that, however obscure, is of an evidently ancient provenance. In this respect 'Oh Whistle' is an exemplification of what Hay (2011: 15) calls the motif of 'failed modernity' in British ghost stories. That is, it imagines a present that never succeeds in abolishing the past; rather, the past is something capable of latent survival and, sporadically, of uncanny recrudescences that overpower the present. Here, as in numerous other James stories, the contemporary world is 'a thin, recently developed crust riding uncertainly atop a restless mass of older formations threatening at every moment to […] break through' (Cowlishaw 1998: 171). Whatever thing 'comes' to the complacent young professor, it is the avatar of an enduring past that is reactivated and that resurfaces menacingly in the present.

Second, overlaid on this narrative of historical recrudescence is an attitudinal reversion in Parkins himself. A strict rationalist at the beginning of the tale – his very specialism, 'ontography',

[4] The obscure inscription, and the swastika-like pictograms that flank the 'QUIS EST…' inscription, are analysed at length in Murphy and Porcheddu (2013).

makes him an expert in 'things as they are'[5] – he ends the story fearful and superstitious. The reversive aspect of this alteration is briefly signalled by his own acknowledgement, soon after he discovers the whistle, of his 'unenlightened days' (James 1903: 81), a former time when he did accept the existence of the supernatural. That his early acceptance has been put in abeyance, rather than eradicated, by the subsequent development of his confidence in rationality is signalled by certain ironically negated indications he gives of his own unease about what is taking place, as when the wind rises after the sounding of the whistle: 'It might', he remarks with spurious dispassion, 'have made fanciful people feel quite uncomfortable' (83). If Parkins is altered by the haunting, it isn't a matter of embracing new beliefs but of past, and apparently surmounted, beliefs being horrifyingly reconfirmed.

A 'psychological' ghost story: 'Whistle' (1968)

At a manifest level Jonathan Miller's adaptation doesn't differ greatly from James's text. Parkins (Michael Hordern) is older than in James, the dialogue – largely improvised – is minimal, and the story is stripped down; but the core plot remains: a hubristically sceptical academic, holidaying on the English east coast, discovers on the beach a whistle with the familiar Latin inscription, and the ensuing haunting culminates in an encounter with a sheeted figure in the hotel bedroom. The distinctiveness of the adaptation, as has become virtually axiomatic to observe, consists less in material transformations of the narrative than in the 'psychological' interpretation placed on its events. In Miller's film the objective veracity of the haunting and the soundness of Parkins's mind – neither of which is in question in James – are cast into doubt.

In an important volume on the English ghost story, written 40-odd years ago, Julia Briggs (1977) invokes Miller's film as the as the inaugural example of what she calls the 'psychological ghost story'. She also stresses, however, that a particular field of psychology informs Miller's reimagining of James's text. Miller does not just psychologise the tale; he filters it through the lens – somewhat vogueish at the time – of psychoanalysis:

> [Miller] re-interpret[ed] [James's tale] in the light of psychoanalytic theory [...]. Professor Parkins was transformed from a courageous sceptic into a neurotic bachelor, a victim of Freudian *Angst* and repression, liable to any sort of fantasy about his bedclothes. Dr Miller had thus turned a highly traditional tale into what was, in effect, 'a psychological ghost story' – a story in which one explanation of apparently supernatural occurrences is to be found in the mental instability of the witness (142).

Briggs's recognition of Freud's influence on Miller's film – which continues to be cited critically (Johnston 2015: 159) and echoed popularly (Newton 2015) – is entirely legitimate. Miller himself, steeped in psychoanalysis from an early age[6] and a lifelong admirer of Freud's descriptions of neurotic behaviour (Bassett 2012: 35), readily acknowledges taking inspiration from Freud for this and other directorial work (Miller and Romain 1992: 36–7). Yet Briggs's point is more often remarked than elaborated; even she stops short of illustrating it in detail. My aim in this section, then, is to explore

[5] OED, Ontography, sense 1: 'The description or characterization of things as they are. *Rare, obscure*'. The professorship is of course fictional.

[6] Miller's father, Emanuel, was one of the founding figures of child psychiatry in Britain (Kahr 2016: 231). Having studied in the 1920s at Cambridge under W.H.R. Rivers – the psychiatrist who features in Pat Barker's (1991–95) *Regeneration* trilogy and one of Freud's earliest English followers – his own clinical work continued to be influenced by psychoanalysis (Bassett 2012: 13). As a boy, Jonathan Miller underwent psychoanalysis with distinguished figures in the British movement, such as Susan Isaacs and D.W. Winnicott (Bassett 2012: 34). He retained a mature interest in psychoanalysis. Four years after 'Whistle' he published an edited volume (Miller 1972) on the contexts and legacies of Freud's thought, and he would return to analytic therapy in middle age during a period of writer's block (Bassett 2012: 35). Miller remained sceptical of Freud's scientific ambitions for his discipline (Miller 1972: x; Miller 1974: 172) but called on his ideas as creative resources at various points in his career (Bassett 2012: 35).

what form Freud's influence takes in the film, and to outline specific ways in which the adaptation draws on the resources of Freudian psychoanalysis to rearticulate the tale of Professor Parkins as a psychological ghost story. Doing so doesn't mean seeking a specious conformity between the film and the minutiae of Freud's complex thought. It is a matter of identifying those aspects of the adaptation that are demonstrably indebted to an approach to psychic life and to (neurotic) psychopathology that is broadly yet distinctively Freudian. I will limit myself to outlining three key, interrelated aspects of this approach and exploring their dramatic resumption in the film.

The first, and doubtless most evident, concerns a certain *'deprojective' hermeneutic* that occupies an important position in psychoanalysis as Freud conceived it; though it is also something that, at least in elementary form, he recognises may be common to 'psychiatry' (Freud 1917: 142) more widely. The clearest illustration of this pervasive hermeneutic in Freud (cf. Goux 1993) emerges in his writing on the supernatural. 'Spirits and demons', he famously argues, 'are only projections of man's own emotional impulses' (Freud 1913: 92); it is the business of psychoanalysis to reverse this projection, exposing the purely endogenous, psychological basis of the 'construction of a supernatural reality' (Freud 1901: 258). Nowhere more than in the field of neurotic psychopathology is such a construction liable to occur at the level of the individual (Freud 1917: 141). The neurotic ego is assailed by thoughts and impulses that 'seem like those of a stranger' and which it therefore imputes to an exogenous source; such disorders are 'uncanny [*unheimlich*]' because they may therefore appear to involve 'the intrusion into the mind of evil spirits from without' (142). The therapeutic work of analysis is deprojective to the extent that it reconciles the subject to the truth that 'Nothing has entered into [them] from without'; rather, 'a part of the activity of [their] own mind has been withdrawn from [their] knowledge and the command of [their] will'. What seems like a strange visitation is revealed in fact as 'a derivative of [their] own rejected instincts' (142).

Miller's adaptation immediately inscribes itself in the ambit of this deprojective hermeneutic. It begins on a wide shot of the shoreline, with a solitary figure – Parkins – advancing across the beach towards the camera (fig. 1). As he does so, Miller's voiceover supplies an introduction just prior to the title sequence:

> This is a tale of the supernatural. It is the work of a man who wrote ghost stories as a side-line. The author, M.R. James, was an archaeologist, mediaeval historian, and a great expert on the early history of the Bible. He was Vice Chancellor at Cambridge University during the First World War, and later became the Provost of Eton where he died in 1936. He's best known for his ghost stories, all of which have a peculiar atmosphere of cranky scholarship. The darkest of them is called 'Whistle and I'll Come to You' [sic]. It's a story of solitude and terror, and it has a moral too. It hints at the dangers of intellectual pride and shows how a man's reason can be overthrown when he fails to acknowledge those forces inside himself which he simply cannot understand.

The prologue labours to establish a kind of period authenticity, the chronological detail of the author's life being articulated at the auditory level as it becomes ever clearer visually that the solitary protagonist approaching on screen is dressed in the outdoor attire of a Jamesian-era gentleman. However, the voiceover goes on to declare the distinct interpretative inflection the film will give to James's text. It emerges in the final, arresting remark about what the voice calls the tale's 'moral'. Having begun with the statement that the narrative in hand is 'a tale of the supernatural', the voice concludes by asserting that it shows the devastating consequences for the individual of 'fail[ing] to acknowledge those forces *inside himself* which he simply cannot understand'. No elaboration is given – this will be the work of the film proper – but the implication is unequivocal: in this iteration of the story, as in Freud's account of neurotic experience, what Parkins encounters as the uncanny visitation of an evil spirit is – or at least may be – the recurrence of an unacknowledged portion of his own mind.

Figure 1. Parkins approaches: 'Whistle and I'll Come to You', *Omnibus* (BBC1, 1968)

The second point – an extension of the last – is that the psychological dimension of the film has a distinctly *psychodynamic* inflection. That is, if the adaptation suggests that the haunting may be 'all in the mind' (Wheatley 2006: 46), then it does so by drawing broadly on conception of the mind as a site of struggle between conflicting forces. This conception, which is discernibly Freudian in origin, postulates not that aspects of our mental life happen to be hidden from conscious understanding but that they are actively rejected – 'denied', 'repressed' etc. – by opposing forces that seek to keep them outside consciousness.[7] In an interview with Michael Romain, Miller expressly noted the adaptation's implicit reliance on a dynamic view of psychic life:

> The Professor, this strange crusty bachelor who had denied so much of his emotional life was caught out by it, as so often happens – one's emotions, feelings and impulses, which one denies and represses, lie in wait and can sometimes ambush one. This was the story of an ambush. (Miller and Romain 1992: 36)

Miller's Parkins is not a rational man who simply 'loses his reason' or 'goes mad'. He is a being who is split between on the one hand the intellectual and the rational, which he embraces, and, on the other, the affective, the instinctual or erotic, against which he is profoundly defended. Conceived as an 'ambush', the haunting of this Parkins becomes readable as a 'return of the repressed', the confrontation of the protagonist by precisely those unassimilated aspects of himself, and of his own cognition, that he is most fortified against.

Parkins's defended interiority translates onto screen in various ways. His overdetermined disconnection from the affective and erotic is signalled during an awkward scene in the dining room, with no analogue in the original text, in which he is eyed with interest by an attractive woman at the table to his left (fig. 2). Noticing her, Parkins is nonplussed and turns away to face forward again, unable to manage a definitive response. His face becomes quizzical, he shrugs, and for some moments mutters to himself, apparently mystified as to how to decipher her interest. More generally, Parkins's persistent vocalisations seem to betray a continual effort of cognitive regulation. Whether alone (at his desk or during 'trudges' on the beach) or in quiet company (walking up the hotel stairs behind the taciturn proprietor (George Woodbridge)), he compulsively fills up silences, enunciating, tutting, muttering and humming to no one in particular, as though labouring to keep at bay anything other than regulated thoughts.

[7] The difference between the static conception of the split mind (e.g. the work of Pierre Janet) and Freud's dynamic model is elaborated in Freud 1910: 25–26. 'Repression' (*Verwerfung*) and 'denial' (*Verleugnung*, also translated as 'disavowal') are two mechanisms in the Freudian armoury of psychic defence.

Figure 2. Eyed with interest: 'Whistle and I'll Come to You', *Omnibus* (BBC1, 1968)

However, the clearest expression of dynamic conflict within Parkins, and of his susceptibility to being 'caught out' by the thoughts he disowns, is achieved by periodic extra-diegetic articulations of Hordern's voice which convey Parkins's inner thoughts directly. A key scene in this connection, again with no analogue in the source-text, sees Parkins lunching alone by the shore, after having discussed ghosts with the Colonel (Ambrose Coghill) at breakfast.

During the breakfast discussion – the only scripted portion of the film (Hordern and Romain 1992: 151) – when the Colonel asks Parkins whether he believes in ghosts, Parkins crafts an evasively negative answer by tacitly shifting ground from ontology to logic: he delivers a disquisition not on whether 'the human personality survives death' (the Colonel's definition of a ghost) but on the logical absurdity of the *statement that* 'the human personality survives death'. The Colonel, unconvinced but insufficiently articulate to argue, responds by paraphrasing Hamlet's admonition to Horatio, who refuses to believe in ghosts: 'True, true. But there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy'. Complacently reasserting the supremacy of reason, Parkins rejoins wittily: 'I prefer to put it another way. There are more things in philosophy than are dreamed of in heaven and earth!' During his solitary picnic by the sea he summons his rejoinder to mind; the extra-diegetic 'inner' voice repeats it with audible pleasure, and we see Parkins chuckle with self-satisfaction. Moments later the inner voice is heard again. Its tone is suddenly grave, it seems unbidden – the professor glances round, almost as if someone else had spoken – and what it utters, in conflict with the earlier articulation, is Hamlet's original admonition. The enunciation of these conflicting ideas – one readily summoned, one unsought – by a single inner voice lays bare the psychic rift that Miller outlines. Parkins's ostensibly sovereign reason shows itself to be in tension with a counter-impulse within. The unbidden utterance of Hamlet's view is not a confirmation of its veracity but a demonstration of how Parkins is haunted by the very ideas he repudiates and by an inner voice that he does fully command.

The final point is that Miller's psychological reimagining of the climactic scene where Parkins finally sees – or thinks he sees – the sheeted entity, relies on a certain supposition of *psychic plasticity* fundamental to the Freudian account of mental life. What Freud (1915: 285–86) calls the 'plasticity of mental developments' is the mind's 'capacity for involution – for regression'. Early stages of psychic development, he claims, are not annulled by maturation; they subsist 'imperishabl[y]' beneath later stages (285). Under certain pressures, later psychic developments may be suspended or destroyed, and the subject may seek refuge in 'a return to earlier states of affective life and functioning' (286). The very 'essence of mental disease' (286) consists in such a return: neurotic illness is an attempt to flee unbearable reality and take refuge in an earlier psychic state. In other words, neurosis, for Freud (1910: 50), entails a developmental 'regression to infancy'.

Figure 3. Regression: 'Whistle and I'll Come to You', *Omnibus* (BBC1, 1968)

In the climax, Parkins's encounter with the ghost in his room is coded as such a reversion. The 'crusty professor' returns to a state that is literally infantile insofar as he temporarily loses altogether his normally extensive verbal capacity (*in-fans* = without speech), being first reduced to terrified gasps then inarticulate moans that repeat with increasing urgency before a climactic elongation broken only by the Colonel's arrival. Parkins's visible reaction is also starkly configured to suggest regression, evoking as it does an immediately recognisable Freudian typology of the infant (Freud 1905: 178ff): as Parkins moans, he places a thumb in his mouth, which he sucks desperately, his eyes wide as he shrinks back in childish fear (fig. 3).

If Miller's adaptation isn't just 'psychological' but specifically 'Freudian', then, it is because the rendition it gives of James's tale relies demonstrably on some of the elementary postulates that define the classical psychoanalytic understanding of psychic life and its neurotic aberrations. Not only does the film put into question the exogeneity of the 'evil spirit' that comes to Parkins in the text; it re-articulates the haunting in relation to a distinctly conflictual/repressive conception of subjective interiority. It also ingeniously recasts in terms of the psychoanalytic view of mental development the generic motif, underpinning James's tale, of the persistence of the past. Where the text envisages the objective recrudescence of a supernatural atavism and Parkins's subsequent resumption of his former superstitions, the adaptation reframes Parkins as a regressive neurotic, his own helpless infancy being the distant but imperishable past that resurfaces as the defensive superficies of his mature self finally give way.

The 'new wounded': 'Whistle' (2010)

Andy de Emmony's adaptation does not so much imply a psychological explanation of the protagonist's experience as it uses haunting to articulate a distinct kind of psychic suffering. De Emmony's slightly renamed 'Parkin' (John Hurt) is a far cry from the repressed bachelor we know from Miller. He has none of the tics, inner voices or regressive susceptibilities; nor, as a man who, we learn, has enjoyed a happy marriage, is he allergic to sexuality. What is faced by this new iteration of James's protagonist is not a solipsistic encounter with his own neurotically alienated self but a relational tragedy in which a beloved other becomes unrecognisably alien to him.

Here is a broad outline of the plot. Parkin is a retired astronomer. His wife Alice (Gemma Jones) has a form of advanced dementia. In the opening sequences Parkin stoically transfers her to a care facility, unable now to look after her himself. He then takes a lonely sojourn at the fictional coastal resort of Combe Bideford, revisiting the sites and the hotel that he and Alice visited as young lovers. Having discovered, during a solitary picnic on the shore, a ring inscribed 'QUIS EST ISTE QUI

VENIT', he finds himself troubled by a figure in fluttering white sheets on the beach and noises in his hotel room, the severest of which is an importunate banging on the door. The film's climax occurs on the third night in the room. The presence at the door somehow gains entry and is revealed as a manifestation of Alice. It sits a moment smiling placidly at the end of Parkin's bed, before clambering towards him, its face grimacing more emphatically the closer it gets, and repeating with increasing violence 'I'm still here', then finally 'I'm here'. The experience leaves Parkin dead. Closing shots showing an empty chair at the care facility suggest Alice's subsequent passing.

Several aspects of the film invite us to read it not as a direct adaptation of James's source story but as the continuation, presupposing Miller's film, of the story's 'meta-textual' lineage. The reuse of Miller's foreshortened title has already been mentioned. There are also visual echoes of elements in the earlier adaptation that are not derived from James's text, such as the brass bedstead, which is shot in shallow focus from a similar angle in both films (fig. 4), and Parkin's picnic on the grassy dunes (fig. 5). Among several verbal echoes of Miller's adaptation, the most significant occurs when Parkin speaks to the hotel manager Carol (Sophie Thompson) after his second troubled night. She suggests the disturbance might be a ghost. Parkin responds:

> A ghost? A discorporate human personality that has survived death? [...] Well, I have to admit that I've never seen a ghost, so my empirical evidence is zero. But what I have seen is the opposite: a body that has outlasted the existence of the personality. And that is far, far more horrifying than any spook or ghoul you could ever hope to glimpse [...].

The remark both evokes the breakfast discussion in 'Whistle' (1968) regarding the 'human personality that survives death' – a formulation that doesn't appear in James's text – and, crucially, discloses the new 'psychological' departure effected by the later adaptation. Attaching horror to the effects of dementia, Parkin invokes a form of psychic damage of a different order than anything in Miller's film. It is in this that the interpretative innovation of the new adaptation resides: de Emmony's is a version of the ghost story filtered through the lens not of neurosis but neurodegenerative illness. Though Parkin differentiates the horror he describes from that of the putatively 'opposite' manifestation, a ghost, the supernatural experience that eventually kills him will be figured as an articulation of the psychic devastation caused by Alice's decline. As A.N. Wilson (2010) puts it in a review of the film, ultimately Parkin will come to be haunted by nothing less than the 'horror he expresse[s]' in this speech – though, as we shall see, that horror also entails something more.[8]

Figure 4. In bed: 'Whistle and I'll Come to You', *Omnibus* (BBC1, 1968); 'Whistle and I'll Come to You' (BBC Four, 2010)

[8] 'Whistle' (2010) is far from the only work of recent cultural production that filters the experience of dementia through a gothic/horror lens. For a highly critical take on this tendency, though with a focus on 'zombification', see Behuniak (2011).

Figure 5. Picnics: 'Whistle and I'll Come to You', *Omnibus* (BBC1, 1968); 'Whistle and I'll Come to You' (BBC Four, 2010)

The stakes of the interpretative shift introduced by 'Whistle' (2010) warrant clarification. It is here that the work of Catherine Malabou becomes relevant, a thinker who examines the particularity of cerebral pathologies such as dementia and reflects on the growing awareness, within the contemporary cultural imaginary, of the operations and vulnerabilities of the brain. In a major work, subtitled 'from Neurosis to Brain Damage', Malabou (2007) coins the term 'new wounded' to refer to individuals suffering from cerebral lesions, whether these are caused by degenerative illnesses, tumours or traumatic injury. It's not that there is anything 'new' about these pathologies; they are nonetheless 'an emergent phenomenon' to the extent that the understanding of their unique 'organic and psychic effects' (2007: 9) is only now taking shape. Crucially, the psychopathologies of the new wounded take us beyond the competence of psychoanalysis, at least in its classical (Freudian) declension. Malabou's claims about psychoanalysis are manifold; what needs to be emphasised here is only the decisive exteriority of cerebral pathologies vis-à-vis the basic aetiological framework of Freudian thought. Freud began his scientific career, before the invention of psychoanalysis, as a neuroanatomist, his work focusing on the aetiological role of brain lesions in conditions such as aphasia and cerebral palsy (Solms and Turnbull 2002: 62). It was his subsequent clinical interest in neurotic illness that led to his development of the psychoanalytic method. But this also entailed Freud's 'farewell to neurology' (Malabou 2007: 6). Neurosis, as Freud and his contemporaries conceived it, specifically excluded '[t]hose troubles for which there seemed good reason to postulate a lesion in the nervous system' (Laplanche and Pontalis 1967: 267). In other words, the neuroses, the pathological field *par excellence* of psychoanalysis, were nosographically differentiated from conditions supposed to be caused by cerebral damage. Hence the psychodynamic framework Freud evolves apropos of the neuroses, in which illness is the outcome of conflicting mental forces and not an organic injury. Indeed, in Freud's account where an organic injury is, contingently, present in a neurosis it is only aetiologically significant to the extent that it may 'trigger' (Malabou 2007: 97) a pre-existing psychosexual conflict.

To outline these arguments isn't to assume that de Emmony or screenwriter Neil Cross is familiar with Malabou's thought (in contrast to Miller whose familiarity with classical psychoanalysis is well documented). It's to suggest that the shift in focus from neurosis in Miller's film to neuropathological illness in de Emmony's, from the old to the new wounded so to speak, involves extending the lineage of the literary source in a way that Malabou helps us understand. If Miller reimagines James's supernatural story as a Freudian morality tale, de Emmony's adaptation both resumes its predecessor's psychological focus and seeks to evolve it. 'Oh, Whistle' becomes a story of *cerebral* suffering where that which 'comes' (*qui venit*) is decisively heterogenous to the explanatory parameters of psychoanalysis.[9]

To understand how the emergence of the supernatural is distinctive in 'Whistle' (2010) it is worth outlining the particularity of cerebral suffering with which it is articulated in the drama. Three

[9] Writer Neil Cross's interest in the effects of specifically cerebral damage shows up elsewhere in his work. His novel *Captured*, published the same year as 'Whistle' (2010) was broadcast, centres on protagonist with an inoperable brain tumour.

aspects of Malabou's description of the new wounded require emphasis. First, the new wounded are figures of 'radical metamorphosis' (2007: 213). Insofar as the brain is the organic substratum of the personality, brain lesions can give rise to fundamental transformations in the identity of the subject; the 'previous personality' may be lost irretrievably and a 'new identity' emerge (2013: 57–8). This cerebral capacity to become, as it were, 'someone else' within 'the same skin' is uniquely manifested by the new wounded (2009: 15, 12). If the neurotics of classical psychoanalysis were those ambushed by an unrecognized part of their own being, the new wounded are those beings made unrecognizable through and through by the cellular devastation of their brain. Second, such changes in personality tend to be characterised by alterations in affective as well cognitive functioning. In other words, not only may high-level processes be impaired, such as language, reason, memory, or attention; so too, fundamentally, is emotion. Such reciprocal impairment does not necessarily imply distinct wounds; emotion is so deeply enmeshed in the higher cognitive processes that disturbance in one entails disturbance in the other: 'every cerebral deficit has repercussions upon the sites in the brain that induct emotion' (47). These repercussions involve a greater or lesser deficit of affective range, frequently signalled by the patient's new coldness towards people and things once beloved. The new wounded are thus 'disaffected' (49). Third, the new wounded are subjects *par excellence* of what Malabou calls 'destructive plasticity'. The term seeks to capture the apparent paradox whereby a new identity is 'form[ed] and sculpt[ed]' through the cerebral destruction wrought by lesions (2013: 58). Malabou differentiates this phenomenon from the 'constructive' plasticity more commonly recognised by neuroscience, which describes the brain's capacity to form and reform itself positively by establishing neuronal connections in optimal ways: destructive plasticity names the creation, or recreation, of identity produced through the very 'annihilation of form' (2007: 20). Significantly, Malabou also distinguishes this concept from Freud's 'psychic plasticity'. As we've seen, Freud's concept, developed apropos of the 'old wounded', envisages regression to earlier stages of affective life and functioning, preserved 'imperishably' beneath subsequent maturational stages. The new wounded, however, 'do not regress' (213–14). Rather than becoming again what they once were, they are sharply severed from their own psychic history by irremediable organic damage. A patient with advanced dementia may 'fall back into childhood' – loss of executive function, impaired motor control, loss of speech etc. – but it is 'a childhood that is not their own' (61).

In 'Whistle' (2010) Alice's condition is never named. However, the film's first few minutes, encompassing her transfer to a facility populated by other impassive elderly patients, suggest a degenerative pathology. Its specifically cerebral character is recognisably signified by two factors that also feature in Malabou's characterisation of the new wounded. The first is that the nature of Alice's affliction involves an impingement on her identity. The earliest substantive dialogue occurs between Parkin and nurse Hetty (Lesley Sharp) in the facility's kitchen. Parkin begins the conversation as a slow tracking shot passes Alice – first from behind then from the front – sitting immobile in the lounge: 'I wish you'd seen her', he says, 'when she was herself'. His paradox immediately establishes the premise of the drama: the disease doesn't just affect Alice; it alters her very self. It is the question of Alice's identity – the fact that who Alice *is* is now in question – that will inflect the film's re-articulation of the coming of something or someone unknown. The second factor concerns the range of Alice's functional deficit. On the one hand, Parkin's many loving attentions – moisturising her, kissing her, singing her the Burns ballad 'Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad' – meet with expressionless neutrality. On the other hand, Alice demonstrates scant understanding of what is happening; her only words, uttered as Parkin departs, are non-sequiturs lacking coherence: 'She spilled wine over my toes. They said, "wine!" My mother was a darling. She barked. She barked and barked'. In a departure from the neurotic world of Miller's adaptation, with its recourse to the presumed diremption between reason and emotion, Alice is subject to a psychic suffering characterised by the coeval impairment of cognitive facility as well affective attachment.

Once Parkin has left Alice to revisit Combe Bideford, she and the nature of her affliction remain a major dramatic preoccupation – not only at the level of dialogue (such as Parkin's conversations with Carol about his marriage, and his one-sided phone calls to Alice) but also as it were scenographically. Derek Johnston (2018: 106) has convincingly argued that the function of landscape in the *Ghost Story for Christmas* strand is 'not [to be an] echo of human emotions or human actions, or

commentary on the narrative'; it is simply 'an environment in which a horror narrative plays out, [one] that is completely unconcerned with human activity'. 'Whistle' (2010), which Johnston doesn't discuss as part of the strand, is, I suggest, an exception.[10] Here the bleak shoreline of Combe Bideford isn't an indifferent backdrop to the story of the couple. For one thing it is already a meaningful location, having been the site of their visit in earlier years. For another it registers, in oblique yet material ways, the realities of their relationship – its past and its impossible future. During his penultimate night Parkin has a nightmare that refracts his and Alice's childlessness – a theme discussed with Hetty in the first conversation – and the effects of Alice's condition. Among several shots in the dream-montage, one shows a boy asleep on a wooden chair (which follows an unsettling shot of Alice whose arms are fondly cradled around an absence where a child should be); another shows a porcelain doll's head that breaks apart spontaneously (condensing the notions of a life without children and the shattering of a personality). During his walk on the beach next day Parkin inexplicably finds the chair and shattered head lodged in the sand, mysterious symbolic excrescences in the landscape which reify something unlived and now unlivable in the relationship itself. Even the ring Parkin discovers tangled in the sand grass is invested with subjective import. The whistles discovered in James's tale and Miller's adaptation respectively are unanticipated, without precedent in the narrative; but the simple gold band in 'Whistle' (2010) recalls the wedding rings worn by Parkin and Alice, each of which has already appeared in close up earlier in the film.

The foremost scenographic aspects of the shoreline, however, are the chalk formations consisting of a massive sea arch and elevated stacks severed from the mainland cliffs by erosion (fig. 6).[11] They are given considerable emphasis. In the first shot of Parkin, at home before departing with Alice to the care facility, he gazes silently at a painting of the cliffs showing the arch. At the hotel, another image of the arch looms on the wall behind him as he discusses with Carol his visit with Alice years ago. The scene of the walk on which Parkin finds the ring is bookended by wide shots of the cliffs and the arch. A similar shot features in a cutaway as Parkin marks time in the hotel that evening. The arch recurs in his nightmare, and the dream-items that materialise on the beach do so next to the stacks, where he encounters the fluttering white figure. The stacks are the last thing Parkin glances at before leaving the beach for the final time.

Figure 6. Chalk stacks and sea arch: Whistle and I'll Come to You' (BBC Four, 2010)

The chalk formations have a vital function in the imaginative economy of the adaptation. This is signalled by their chromatic connection to the afflicted Alice; their imposing whiteness is matched by her white hair and white nightdress – these things being also uniformly shared by the other 'new

[10] Johnston (2018) makes no reference to 'Whistle' (2010). However, the exclusion of this adaptation from Johnston's (2015: 156) broader case study of the 'ritual' character of the *Ghost Story for Christmas* is explained on the grounds that it is 'lacking in anything to connect it to the 1970s series', other than a relation to M.R. James. Johnston's reasoning is sound; the stylistic aberrance of 'Whistle' (2010) would be inimical to his intention of identifying consistencies across the strand. My concern, however, is not so much with the general properties of the *Ghost Story for Christmas* as with the singular relation between two adaptations of the same tale, the aberrance of 'Whistle' (2010) being a signal of the departure it makes from the Miller film that did so much to inspire the *Ghost Story for Christmas* strand.

[11] Though the fictional place-name, Combe Bideford, suggests a location in the south west of England, the filming location is Botany Bay in the south east.

wounded' at the facility – and by the pure white sheets that wrap the manifestation when it appears, still obscured, on the sand. Their particular significance arises from their geological specificity. Many English coastlines have long been affected by erosion. This includes those at Felixstowe, the coded setting of James's original story, and at Waxham and Dunwich, the filming locations for Miller's adaptation; indeed, criticism has acknowledged the implicit significance of coastal erosion in both the tale (Armitt 2016) and the earlier film (Fisher 2016). What's distinctive about the coastline in 'Whistle' (2010), relative to these other 'vanishing lands' (Fisher 2016: 76), is that it makes manifest the *formative* corollary of the sea's erosive action. Abrading the rock irreversibly, erosion doesn't simply eradicate it but sculpts it into something different in form from what was there before. In other words, the chalk formations expose the work of erosion as both destructive and plastic; it possesses a 'sculptural power that produces form through the annihilation of form' (Malabou 2007: 49).

The implicit affiliation between these coastal formations and Alice's inner world is consolidated in the scene of Parkin's last night, when she manifests in her white nightdress at the foot of his bed and crawls menacingly at him. The apparition is not a conventional ghost, in the sense of a posthumous continuance of a personality, so much as the extreme hypostasization of a personality that is *no longer continuous with itself*. To be sure, its initial enunciation, 'I'm *still* here', appears as a kind of appeal for Parkin to see – his continued, loving ministrations notwithstanding – that at some level Alice may remain Alice. Yet with each utterance a greater diremption emerges between the *énoncé* and the *énonciation*, the apparition's speech becoming fiercer, its bearing more violent, its face more distorted from its familiar form. Significantly its final utterance – the one that precipitates Parkin's death – is subtly but climactically different from the others: the modifier that had intimated subjective continuity, 'still', is abandoned; now unhitched rhetorically, as well as behaviourally, from any reference to the Alice that Parkin had known, the apparition merely bellows, in horrifying closeup (fig. 7), 'I'm here!', the pronoun referring to a self that has no apparent precedent at all. A.N. Wilson's claim that Parkin is ultimately haunted by the horror he describes to Carol – that of the premature termination of a personality's 'existence' – is doubtless correct, but this culminating sequence, with its fatal outcome, adds a further turn of the screw. The apparition hypostasizes the prospect not only of a deficit of identity – an individual who is no longer quite herself – but a mutation in being: the arrival, the advent, the *coming* of an altogether other self, 'a stranger' (Malabou 2009: 18) within the same skin; not only the erosion or annihilation of a subjectivity but the correlative formation of its metamorphosis.

Figure 7. 'I'm here!': 'Whistle and I'll Come to You' (BBC Four, 2010)

'Whistle' (2010), then, not only re-invents James's tale; it does so quite deliberately in the wake of Miller's earlier adaptation, resuming the latter's 'psychologization' of the story and extending it into qualitatively new imaginative territory. Displacing 'Whistle' (1968)'s centralisation of the protagonist's neurotic interiority and introducing a new relational dynamic, 'Whistle' (2010) recomposes the experience of ghostly visitation in such a way as to limn the 'tearing and piercing [of] subjective continuity' (Malabou 2009: 29) that arises specifically from cerebral damage. The provocative narrative substitution of a ring in place of the whistle – which, as we saw, exercised some viewers – is only the material emblem of the new cerebral departure that 'Whistle' (2010) makes: identical to the wedding bands worn by the couple – with the exception of its inscription – the supernumerary ring heralds the

advent of a veritable 'third' in the marriage, another 'I' taking shape within Alice herself. Neither a conventional ghost story nor a forensic exploration of a dynamically unreconciled mind, 'Whistle' (2010) articulates a horror which is not that of the past's uncanny recrudescence but that of an irremediable loss and the disquieting arrival of an absolute stranger, 'an unrecognizable persona whose present comes from no past' (Malabou 2009: 1–2) at all.

Conclusion

The relationship between 'Whistle' (2010) and James's original tale is neither arbitrary nor lacking coherence. The film's narrative divergences from James – and, correlatively, its stylistic distinctness from the mode of 'authentic' period drama more common to the *Ghost Story for Christmas* – follow a determined logic that remains obscure so long as the film is approached 'radially' as an alternative adaptation of the story to 'Whistle' (1968), rather than as the latter's conscious heir. In this essay, I have attempted to indicate this logic by tracing the linear, 'metatextual' trajectory of the tale, as it evolves from Miller to de Emmony. It is, I have argued, a trajectory of progressive psychologization, the first adaptation reworking 'Oh, Whistle' as a Freudian parable and the second taking up the baton to recast the tale as a meditation on an emergent psychopathology, a psychopathology that is ever more present in the cultural imaginary and that is intractable to the explanatory models of classical psychoanalysis presupposed by the earlier film. I have tried to explicate the interpretative gestures wrought by each adaptation in its re-articulation of the professor's haunting; to map the respective conceptual parameters of those gestures; and to underline the self-consciousness with which the later film takes its departure from the predecessor, re-inscribing the story, and the nature of its mysterious 'advent', within a wholly distinct frame of reference. Looked at in apposition, these two films exemplify adaptation not simply as a revival or reconstitution of a past text – still less its intact recrudescence – but as an ongoing, intertextual and *incremental* labour of reinvention.

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