

# Murmuring Seas, Broken Ground: the Liminal Landscape of M.R. James' "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad"

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*In the fiction of M.R. James, landscape functions as a device to represent and explore the world of the imagination. This is particularly true of his most famous story, "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad", in which the setting—a stretch of East Anglian shingle beach, caught between land and sea—functions as a liminal realm, which does not belong fully to one world or another. The region's elemental instability allows James to emphasize the inadvertent exploration of other thresholds by his protagonist, Parkins: between fiction/imagination and "reality", the sublime and the comprehensible, the oceanic and the cultural, and the animistic and scientific. In the story's most uncanny and frightening scene, Parkins finds himself trapped in a liminal psychological state—neither dreaming nor waking—in which the region's landscape and weather both play a key metaphorical and atmospheric role in establishing a feeling of destabilization. It is this sense of suspension between realms, I argue, that creates the story's distinctive power: it is typically Jamesian in its ultimate cautionary moral, one which warns of the dangers of investigating/eroding boundaries between categories, and which uses its haunting coastal landscape as a corresponding image to this message.*

The English author and medieval scholar Montague Rhodes James (1862-1936) was one of the foremost academics of his day, but he is remembered today for his ghost stories, recognized as masterpieces of the genre. In certain respects, James' work can be seen as modern: he eschewed the bombast and melodrama of gothic fiction for an approach marked by a stubborn understatement and reticence, and his narrative voice tends to express a certain ironic detachment from events, occasionally even making wry nods to the stories' fictional nature. Perhaps his most famous tale, "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad" (1904) opens with a comment from "a person not in the

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story" (65), thus creating a playful narrative paradox. In terms of moral message, however, his fiction is pointedly sceptical towards modern culture, if this is understood in terms of humanism, scientific theory, rationalism and the pursuit of knowledge. The typically Jamesian protagonist is a Victorian antiquarian scholar—invariably male—who meddles with an ancient English site or artefact, and thereby unleashes a mysterious force that defies his scientific understanding of the world. The danger posed by these encounters is often psychological, rather than physical: the hubristic worldview of the rationalistic western intellectual is destabilized by the challenge to his belief-system, to the extent that his sanity is threatened.

The unnerving quality of James' stories, then, derives from his mastery of suggestion: in refusing to make the nature of the evil or malevolence at the centre of his tales explicit, he invites readers to project their own fears and insecurities onto the narrative. A crucial aspect of this technique can be found in his use of natural landscapes. As Peter Ackroyd explains in reference to James' work, certain "sites in the natural world [...] also become sites of the imagination" (390); this is "the English sense of being haunted by a place and by a specific history associated with it" (391). East Anglia provides a key setting for several of the stories, "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad" among them. In this tale, which takes place near the fictional town of Burnstow on a windswept stretch of Suffolk coastline, the landscape undoubtedly also functions as a "site of the imagination". Yet it is not so much that this place has a "specific history" which emerges from the narrative. On the contrary, as I will argue, the setting is powerful precisely because of its literal and symbolic ambiguity: caught between land and sea, it is a liminal realm, which does not belong fully to one world or the other. As I use it in this article, "liminality" denotes the state of being poised on a threshold between categories, identities, or worlds. James' story creates a sense of destabilization in all three. The disturbing experiences of his protagonist, Professor Parkins, seem largely psychological, and their most obvious effect is to challenge his way of categorizing the world; but with this comes a challenge to Parkins' whole identity. This point is worth noting, since critics have drawn attention to the psychological vacuity of Jamesian protagonists: Julia Briggs notes that James "keeps his characters thin to the point of transparency" (135), while David Punter argues that "his characters are not very interesting, complex or even concrete" (86). While this may be true, it is also a characteristic that lends itself to the exploration of boundaries and thresholds. The lack of a "concrete" psychological foundation in the character of Parkins undoubtedly adds to the fear the narrative generates, since it emphasizes the instability—the thinness—of his identity. Moreover, the story derives much of its power from its blurring of the lines between dreams and reality, fact and fiction. All of these erosions, I argue, comprise a narrative that takes liminality as its guiding principle, and which uses the distinctive qualities of its setting to establish and emphasize this.

"Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad" follows Parkins, a scholar of ontography—that is, the cataloguing and defining of being itself—as he visits the region for a golfing holiday. He stays at the Globe Inn, occupying a room which looks directly onto the ocean:

*Immediately in front was a strip—not considerable—of rough grass, dotted with old anchors, capstans, and so forth; then a broad path; then the beach. Whatever may have been the original distance between the Globe Inn and the sea, not more than sixty yards now separated them. (67)*

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At the outset, then, James stresses the instability of this region, a world in which things that appear solid are under constant threat of being absorbed within the realm of the ocean. Earlier in the story, this elemental uncertainty is emphasized when an antiquarian colleague of Parkins notes that the ocean "has encroached tremendously [...] all along that bit of coast" (65). Whereas many of James' locations imply the "specific history" which Ackroyd refers to, the setting of this story is deliberately shifting and uncertain. The correlation between geographical and thematic liminality is the source of its particular power. In this landscape, boundaries between land and sea are shifting, because of both tidal activity and rapid coastal erosion. The shoreline therefore represents a threshold in which these geographical categories are suspended, and it forms a dramatic setting for the further destabilizations which follow.

Following his first day's golfing, Parkins investigates an archaeological site close to the shoreline, on the advice of his antiquarian colleague. This round church is thought to be a sacred site of the Knights Templar, an extinct Catholic sect forcibly dissolved in the fourteenth century. Investigating a hole near the surface, Parkins finds a bronze whistle. He makes his way home along the beach, noting but ignoring an "indistinct personage" apparently attempting to catch up with him. Here James first evokes the atmospheric setting of the story in detail:

*Bleak and solemn was the view on which he took a last look before starting homeward. A faint yellow light in the west showed the links, on which a few figures moving towards the club-house were still visible, the squat martello tower, the lights of Aldsey village, the pale ribbon of sands intersected at intervals by black wooden groynes, the dim and murmuring sea. The wind was bitter from the north, but was at his back when he set out for the Globe. (69)*

This scene emphasizes the insignificance and fragility of humanity in this environment, against the onset of darkness, the bitterness of the wind, and the "murmuring" sound of the ocean, reminding us of its inexorable erosion of the land. Placing his character within this context, James creates an image that mirrors the vulnerability of his worldview when tested against mysterious phenomena, and the environment introduces one of the ambiguities that are at the heart of the story: that between fiction and "reality". Parkins is reminded of Apollyon in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*: "What should I do [...] if I looked back and caught sight of a black figure sharply defined against the yellow sky, and saw that it had horns and wings?" James thus uses the haunting qualities of the landscape, and the power of natural forces, to subtly challenge the stability of the distinction between the fictional and the "real". As Steve Duffy argues, the source of fear in the stories often comes from within: "Fear need not arise solely from external stimuli; in the absence of a direct object, we can always draw upon ourselves, our own experiences and misgivings" (180). Parkins, here, draws upon his literary knowledge, and finds himself caught between the world of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and that of material reality. The liminal qualities of the coastal environment work upon his consciousness, making it more difficult for him to distinguish between his life and fiction, and his fears begin to rise to the surface. Aware that he stands upon a threshold between ocean and land, he seems also to hover between "reality" and imagination.

After cleaning the whistle back at the Globe Inn, Parkins blows it, producing a note with "a quality of infinite distance in it, and, soft as it was, he somehow felt it must be audible for miles around" (71). Moreover, this sound "seemed to have the power [...] of forming pictures in the brain. He saw quite

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clearly for a moment a vision of a wide, dark expanse at night, with a fresh wind blowing, and in the midst a lonely figure" (71). At this point, the wind suddenly rises, forcing the window open. James continues to cement the story's links between natural and supernatural forces: Parkins appears to have summoned the wind. Moreover, this introduces another link to the area's blurring of land and sea, since this apparent power of the whistle recalls sailors' superstitions regarding whistling on deck (a point noted by Julia Briggs, 133). As Andrew Hock Soon Ng explains, connecting these ideas, and suggesting their unified malevolence towards humanity, is a typically Jamesian technique: "In intersecting nature and ghosts, and mobilizing them as a concerted attack against human culture, James' stories imply that the latter is fundamentally premised on a vaster but unseen and therefore unknown Reality" (195). Such ideas are presented with characteristic subtlety, for example, in the earlier description of the sea as "murmuring", implying agency and consciousness. In the story, the sea represents one pole in a series of dualities, contrasted with the land: the Romantic sublime (awe-inspiring and ineffable), against the world of the articulable and comprehensible; the Freudian oceanic (limitless and eternal), against the restraint and limitation of human culture; and the animistic (a conscious natural world), against the rationality of the natural sciences. The narrow—and, in geographical time, ephemeral—shingle beach locates Parkins between these realms, no longer able to trust in the divisions between them. To further elucidate the relevance of Freud here, it is worth noting that Parkins is a typically Jamesian protagonist in his obsessive curiosity, which attracts him to those elements of the story represented by the oceanic. As Punter notes, "behind all curiosity, according to Freud, lies the displaced sexual urge, and James' characters do move in an entirely bachelor world" (86). On this reading, Parkins' psychic destabilization may be caused, at least in part, by a breaking-down of those barriers which protect the conscious mind from repressed sexuality.

After he blows the whistle, the border between Parkins' imagination and reality becomes increasingly blurred. In his vision, the wind is also blowing, and the figure that appears echoes the one seen earlier on the beach. This represents another stage in James' careful erosion of boundaries between worlds: Apollyon in *Pilgrim's Progress*, the "indistinct personage" seen earlier, and this imagined figure become harder to distinguish, both to Parkins and to the reader. James' gradual escalation of this destabilizing technique, which mirrors the ocean's inexorable erosion of the land, reaches its culmination when Parkins attempts to sleep. As soon as he closes his eyes, he finds that a vision continually plays out before him:

*A long stretch of shore—shingle edged by sand, and intersected at short intervals with black groyne running down to the water—a scene, in fact, so like that of his afternoon's walk that, in the absence of any landmark, it could not be distinguished therefrom. The light was obscure, conveying an impression of gathering storm, late winter evening, and slight cold rain. On this bleak stage at first no actor was visible. Then, in the distance, a bobbing black object appeared; a moment more, and it was a man running, jumping, clambering over the groyne, and every few seconds looking eagerly back. (72-3)*

Again, James emphasizes the role of the weather in creating the scene's unstable atmosphere; again, the coastal environment's inherently ambiguous quality, its absence of landmarks, gives it an unsettling fluidity; and again, a figure appears. Another allusion to the literary realm is present in the

description of the beach as a "stage" and the figure as an "actor", further confusing categories. The peculiar power of the story resides, above all, in this scene, which avoids the cliché of a nightmare—an experience that asserts a firmer boundary between imagination and reality—and instead creates this mental state, hovering between these realms, and representing the final dissolution of the boundaries between them. Although the story eventually reaches a more overtly supernatural climax (which I will not discuss here), this moment represents its most original and unsettling point. Indeed, as Patrick J. Murphy and Fred Porcheddu note, this "waking dream" is "truly one of the most frightening passages in ghostly literature" (403), and James achieves this through his incremental destabilization of categories.

"Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad" thus uses its distinctive setting to emphasize and animate the theme of liminality. James challenges the borders between fictional worlds, our own imagination, and empirical reality, in a way that mirrors the sea's encroachment upon the land along the Suffolk coast. The "persistent panorama" which Parkins is "tormented by" (72), moreover, is itself a kind of liminal state, neither a dream, nor a fully conscious experience. As noted above, this story does not derive its power from the kind of "specific history" Ackroyd alludes to, but rather through the deliberate murkiness of its source of malevolence. The whistle is apparently a Templar artefact, but its origins beyond this are obscure. Moreover, as Murphy and Porcheddu explain, the preceptory in which Parkins finds the whistle appears to be based upon the early twelfth-century Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Cambridge (397), rather than a Templar site. James' intention, therefore, is not to suggest a real historical key to understanding the events of the story, but rather to play upon the reader's vague and obscure associations with various different ancient belief systems. Our ideas regarding the Knights Templar and other Catholic sects become comingled with the natural and supernatural forces at work in the story, and the link between religion and nature here also suggests earlier, Pagan cultures that may have occupied the site. Its current position of literal geographic liminality emphasizes the comingling of these different religio-historical strata, an entanglement that deliberately confounds the reader's attempts to understand exactly what is happening to Parkins. In addition, the site's near-complete absorption by the earth—it is now "a patch of somewhat broken ground covered with small depressions and mounds" (68)—challenges the nature/culture division. As Hock Soon Ng explains, such sites are characteristically Jamesian: "they harbour a quality of ambiguity that compromises the observer's ontological and spatio-temporal stability" (194). Parkins' unsettled state of mind is caused, in part, by this evidence of humanity's ultimately ephemeral impact, which illustrates the porous character of the supposed nature/culture boundary, as well as conceptualizations of time and space.

The story's comingling of realms and challenge to categories, then, can be seen as central to its unnerving power. This is a particularly compelling conclusion if we consider Parkins' occupation: as a Professor of Ontography, he has devoted his existence to mapping and defining the supposedly distinctive categories of being in our universe, yet these divisions—between different temporal and metaphysical realms, and between different types of being—no longer seem stable. As Terry W. Thompson argues, "Parkins represents the apex of modern civilized man. Empirical, rational, scientific, unhindered by superstition, and free of all folkloric fear, he is the very model of British domination of the world" (193). Yet all of the assumptions inherent in that sense of superiority come under threat during his time at Burnstow, as he is gripped by an uncanny sense of hovering between worlds. In addition, the story derives its power from James' refusal to fully reveal or explain the

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source of malevolence, either to Parkins or the reader. To return to Duffy's point, much of our unease may consequently stem from the story's "absence of a direct object", which causes us to "draw upon ourselves". The fear thus generated may reflect our complicity, as readers, with Parkins, as a representative of collective guilt: for colonialism, the class system, the arrogance and destructiveness of much scientific enquiry, or the crushing of earlier belief systems by the Church of England. James opens up a space—geographical, conceptual, and figurative—within which the reader can project such anxieties, and it is the distinctively liminal quality of his story's location, above all, that enables him to do so.

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