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In the review she wrote on the occasion of the publication of the French translation of Edith Wharton’s ghost stories, in 2001, Florianne Vidal places the tales in “a typically anglosaxon fantastic tradition,” adding that they are, however, far from “Mathurin’s or Lewis’s macabre horror, or Edgar Poe’s very dark humor.” Wharton, who in The Writing of Fiction (1924) expresses her admiration for the mastery with which Scott, Hawthorne and Poe handled the supernatural in their short fiction,1 acknowledges in the preface to her collection Ghosts, published posthumously in 1937, the influences that “stimulated [her] to make the experiment” of writing ghost stories:

1
The earliest, I believe, was Stevenson, with “Thrawn Janet” and “Markheim”; two remarkable ghost stories, though far from the high level of such wizards as Sheridan Le Fanu and Fitz James O’Brien. I doubt if these have ever been surpassed, though Marion Crawford’s isolated effort, “The Upper Berth,” comes very near to the crawling horror of O’Brien’s “What Is [sic] It?” (Preface to Ghosts, xi)

2
In the preface, Wharton also cites Henry James’s “The Turn of the Screw,” which, “For imaginative handling of the supernatural no one […] has touched” (xi), and in the dedication puts her “spectral strap-hangers” “under the special protection of the only modern ghost-evoker whom [she] place[s] in the first rank” (xi), Walter de la Mare.

3
Ten of the eleven stories collected in Ghosts3 had already been published in magazines, the only exception being “All Souls’,” which Wharton sent to her agent only a few months before her death in 1937. The collection includes the author’s first attempt at a ghost story, “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” published in Scribner’s in November 1902 and later included in The Descent of Man (1904). This early tale demonstrates that Wharton had extracted from her readings of supernatural tales the devices that must be activated if a shiver is to be sent down the reader’s spine, and how proficient she was at using them in her own writing. Indeed, Wharton structures her story on gaps, absences, deferral of meaning, implication and innuendo, and “marshalls for her own purposes other techniques developed by masters of supernatural fiction,” in particular “the
confused or unaware single consciousness as narrator or register [...] , and James’s process of adumbration” (Dyman 7).

The story is organized in four sections of unequal length and is told in the first person. Alice Hartley, the narrator, recounts her experience at Brympton Place, an isolated country estate on the Hudson, where she has been hired as a lady’s maid. On the day of her arrival, as the housemaid, Agnes, leads her to her room in the servants’ wing, she is intrigued by “a thin woman with a white face, and a dark gown and apron” (501) that she passes in the corridor; the woman does not speak and Agnes does not seem to see her. Hartley soon notices a number of odd things about the house and its inhabitants, one of them—in direct relation to the title of the story—being that her mistress never rings for her but asks Agnes to fetch her instead. Hartley has no complaints about her mistress, to whom she takes an immediate liking, or about the other servants. She is also fond of Mr. Ranford, who discusses books with Mrs. Brympton and keeps her company whenever Mr. Brympton is away, which is often. Mr. Brympton, however, instantaneously becomes an object of dislike when Hartley finally meets him, a week after her arrival. Her first impression of him confirms the misgivings she had tentatively expressed during her conversation with Mrs. Railton, “a friend of the lady that first brought [Hartley] out to the States” (499) and Mrs. Brympton’s aunt, who sends Hartley to Brympton Place, assuring her, “my niece will take you on my recommendation” (500). Part two, about half-way through the story, culminates with Hartley’s bell going off in the middle of the night, summoning her to her mistress’s bedside. Mr. Brympton opens the door of his wife’s bedchamber, and his reaction makes it clear that another maid has got there before her. The identity of this unknown woman is elucidated in the third part of the story: it is Emma Saxon, Mrs. Brympton’s former maid, who has been dead for six months. In the last section, also the longest, Emma Saxon’s ghost leads Hartley to Mr. Ranford’s, as if she wanted her to deliver a message, but Hartley fails to comprehend what it is she must tell him. That same evening, Mr. Brympton abruptly returns from a trip he had supposedly taken to the West Indies; it seems that he suspects his wife of having an affair with Mr. Ranford. He is prevented from entering his wife’s dressing room, where he thinks Mr. Ranford is hiding, by Emma Saxon’s ghost. Mrs. Brympton dies in Hartley’s arms and the story ends with her funeral, Mr. Brympton’s departure, and the servants’ return to the house.

Hartley never questions the reality of the ghost once she has seen it; but the reader, having been deftly steered to the threshold between the natural and the supernatural, is left to decide for himself whether or not the ghost is a figment of Hartley’s imagination. Wharton manages to keep him suspended in a state of undecidability until the end of the story and even afterwards. Indeed, as Margaret McDowell puts it, “the effect lingers as the reader ponders the tale long after it has been told” (299). Moreover, what remains with the reader is not so much the reality or irreality of the ghost as all the questions raised in the course of the story about the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Brympton. Did Mr. Brympton physically or sexually abuse his wife? Were Mr. Ranford and Mrs. Brympton having an affair? Were they planning to escape together, that night, when Mr. Brympton unexpectedly returned? Did Mr. Brympton have anything to do with Emma Saxon’s death? What did she actually die of?

Comparing Wharton’s ghost stories and Walter de la Mare’s, McDowell explains, [the] presence [of the ghost] is less important than the cause of that appearance and the shocked response of a character to the supernatural phenomenon. For both
of these authors, the interest of the story centers on the living and the human individual, on the relationships among the characters, and the exploration of the situation in which they find themselves. The impact of the story comes from these elements, rather than from the apparition itself. (298-99)

The reader thus stands, irresolute, faced with interpretations, conclusions and hypotheses he can never verify. In other words, the enigma makes it difficult to establish the truth. Wharton’s skill at maneuvering the reader towards this position relies on her use of a first-person narrator who provides evidence both in favor of one interpretation and against it, and who is unable to offer a clear-cut, decisive account of her experience as a lady’s maid at Brympton Place. In what follows, I propose to take a close look at the cogs and wheels that turn the narrative into a puzzle for the reader, in order to expose the inner workings of a system that Wharton had mastered.

Establishing the Narrator’s (Un)Reliability

In The Writing of Fiction, Wharton explains that “The effect of compactness and instantaneity sought in the short story is attained mainly by the observance of two ‘unities’—the old traditional one of time, and that other, more modern and complex, which requires that any rapidly enacted episode shall be seen through only one pair of eyes”; a bit further down, she adds that in order to achieve “the ultimate effect of probability [...] the character who serves as reflector [must never] record anything not naturally within his register (34, 36). She applies these rules in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” and plays with the paradox entailed by the use of a first-person narrator: because Hartley tells her own story, recounting events she has witnessed and experienced, her account stands out as truthful and not to be doubted. However, precisely for the same reason, it is questionable—especially since this episode of her life apparently took place in a not too distant past. In other words, the subjectivity of the tale is due not only to the use of a first-person narrator but also to the fact that little time seems to have elapsed between narrated and narrating time. In spite of the past tense used throughout the story, the specific time marker with which the story opens (“It was the autumn after I had the typhoid”) and the proleptic remark in the middle of the first paragraph (“or I thought so at the time”), the impression conveyed is one of instantaneity, as if one were following the unfolding of events at the same time as Hartley. The story ends in winter, apparently sometime in February; so the reader understands in retrospect that the opening sentence does not refer to the span covered by the story but to Hartley’s encounter with Mrs. Railton and to her subsequently being hired as a lady’s maid at Brympton Place.

From the first lines of the story, Wharton invites the reader to see through, almost to doubt, Hartley’s tale and Hartley herself. At the same time, however, aware that the reader’s confidence must be secured from the start if he is to “be lured on to the most incredible adventures” (WF 30), she introduces her narrator-character as a straightforward, honest, and articulate woman. Single, self-supporting, Alice Hartley seems to have no relatives and very few acquaintances in the United States; nothing is said about her past. Her age is indeterminate, as is her nationality; it is made clear, however, that she is not an American citizen, a fact that accentuates her position as an outsider in the household. Moreover, she is nearly penniless after a three-month stay in hospital and two months of unemployment, hardships that appear undeserved and appeal to the reader’s compassion. Hartley’s illness, like the use of the first person,
plays a double role: it attracts the reader’s sympathy but it also puts him on his guard. Having Hartley down with the typhoid is not a random choice, for typhoid, from the Greek word meaning “stupor,” causes the patient to lie prostrate for about three weeks with a high fever that often leads to delirium (hence its nickname of ‘nervous fever’). Hartley’s case must have been severe indeed, as she stayed in the hospital for three months, and then “looked so weak and tottery [when she came out] that the two or three ladies [she] applied to were afraid to engage [her]” (499). Her weakened state is corroborated by Mrs. Railton’s comment that she does not look “particularly brisk […] just now” (499). Even after a few weeks at Brympton, where she enjoys “the good country air,” she says that she feels “still languid from the fever” (506), and complains that she does not sleep well. What may look like a detail is actually very important, as it implies that Hartley is still suffering from the after-effects of the typhoid and therefore may be likely to have a distorted perception of her environment—may even see things that do not exist, such as ghosts.

9 The narrator carefully tries to establish herself as a trustworthy person, one who keeps her own counsel and does not allow herself to be led astray by other people’s opinions: “I had asked no questions of the groom, for I never was one to get my notion of new masters from their other servants: I prefer to wait and see for myself” (500)—a point she comes back to a bit later: “not being one to ask questions I waited to see what would turn up” (501). When trying to discover the identity of the mysterious woman she saw in the corridor, she comes up with plausible explanations: at first she thinks that the woman is the housekeeper (501), then Mrs. Brympton’s trained nurse (501), and upon being told that there is neither a housekeeper nor a nurse in the house, “decide[s] that she must have been a friend of the cook’s, or of one of the other women-servants” (503). The verb “decide” indicates that Hartley is determined to shut out the “queer,” “odd” or “strange” things she has noticed by providing her own rational explanation for them. The repetition of these three adjectives in the space of half a page, to which “peculiar” is added a few lines further down, signals to the reader that a number of things are amiss in the household.

10 The same oscillation between one statement and its opposite is also noticeable in the description of the mansion. Hartley’s acknowledgment that “the house did look a bit gloomy” (500), in echo to Mrs. Railton’s warning (499), is brushed aside in her comment, “I could tell by the look of everything that I had got into the right kind of house, and that things were done handsomely” (500); but the isolation and the darkness of the place have an ominous ring. Her first impression runs as follows: “It was a dull October day, with rain hanging close overhead, and by the time we turned into Brympton Place woods the daylight was almost gone. The drive wound through the woods for a mile or two, and came out on a gravel court shut in with thickets of tall black-looking shrubs. There were no lights in the windows, and the house did look a bit gloomy” (500). Kathy Fedorko has underlined the parallel between Hartley’s first impression of Brympton Place and the opening paragraph in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher”: “Her approach to Brympton Place is a toned-down version of the arrival of Poe’s narrator” (85). Later in her narrative, Hartley comes back to the sense of oppression she experiences in the house: “As soon as I was out of doors my spirits rose […] but the moment I caught sight of the house again my heart dropped down like a stone in a well. It was not a gloomy house exactly, yet I never entered it but a feeling of gloom came over me” (506). And a bit further down: “There was something about the house—I was sure of it now…” (507). Similarly, her depiction of the interior
decoration is double-edged. The “dark panelling and a number of old portraits” (500) meet her approval and admiration, but they also denote darkness and age, well-known landmarks of any Gothic tale, like the verticality of the building, hinted at in the mention of two flights of stairs (500).

At other times, Hartley abstains from comment, as in the scenes where her rather innocuous questions unexpectedly elicit ill-humored reactions from the housemaid and the cook. When Hartley asks Agnes if the room opposite hers is the cook’s, Agnes answers “crosslike,” “Laws, no [...]. That’s nobody’s room. It’s empty, I mean” (501). Later, as Hartley presses her point with the cook, Mrs. Blinder first grows confused and tries to evade the question, then turns pale before telling her “trembling-like” that it was Emma Saxon’s room, and upon Hartley’s query as to Emma Saxon’s physical appearance, gives her “a kind of angry stare” and “walked off into the kitchen and shut the door after her” (503). Hartley’s surprise is conveyed by the suffix “-like” in “crosslike” and the expression “a kind of” in “a kind of angry stare”: she perceives the two women’s reactions as expressions of unjustified anger and tones down her appraisal with comparative elements. The cause of the two women’s reactions is never given, and the reader is left conjecturing: perhaps they mean to deter Hartley from investigating the matter further—but why would they do that? Perhaps their reaction is linked to the circumstances of Emma Saxon’s death, never accounted for by anyone in the story—in which case their anger may be a defense mechanism and an expression of their fear (as “trembling-like” suggests). Perhaps they believe that Emma’s ghost still dwells in her old room, which is kept locked on Mrs. Brympton’s orders, and they want to prevent Hartley from finding out—but neither Agnes nor the aptly-named Mrs. Blinder seems able to see the apparition. Such episodes point out not so much Hartley’s fallibility as a narrator as her helplessness when confronted with inexplicable facts. They create an atmosphere fraught with mystery and secrets, heighten tension, and remind the reader of how much he depends on the narrator for information. They bring out the similarity between his position and Hartley’s, and invite him not only to question her reliability as a narrator but also to exercise his own faculties for deduction and play an active role in the reading process if he is to make sense of the story at all. The story demonstrates Wharton’s “finely tuned awareness of the reader,” her “recognition of the importance of the reader and the process of reading in the assignment of meaning” (Whitehead 54).

Hartley’s Shortsightedness

Hartley’s inability to grasp the full meaning of what she observes and overhears adds to the “effect of probability” sought by Wharton. Hartley is, after all, “only” a maid, even if she is said to be “quiet” and “well-mannered,” “educated above her station” and capable of “read[ing] aloud well” (500). Even though Mrs. Railton pays her several compliments in the course of their conversation and thinks highly enough of her to recommend her to her niece, Hartley’s social status is firmly established from the very beginning. As Karen Jacobsen and Sherrie Inness have pointed out, one of the reasons for this is that servants are used by Wharton as “a fictional device through which to observe and criticize the doings of the wealthy” (Jacobsen 8) and “a vehicle for critiquing upper-class values and for suggesting the instability of the class system in which she grew up” (Inness 1). Indeed, some of Hartley’s comments on her employers
draw attention to the shortcomings of the upper classes. Her main target is Mr. Brympton, “the kind of man a young simpleton might have thought handsome, and would have been like to pay dear for thinking it” (504). The latter part of the sentence, added to her account of the way he looks at her during their first encounter, shows that she puts him in the category of those upper-class gentlemen who take advantage of their position to force themselves on the maids: “He swung about when I came in, and looked me over in a trice. I knew what the look meant, from having experienced it once or twice in my former places. Then he turned his back on me, and went on talking to his wife; and I knew what that meant, too. I was not the kind of morsel he was after” (504). This brings to mind the beginning of the story and Hartley’s conversation with Mrs. Railton. After a word about the house and her niece, Mrs. Railton begins a sentence about Mr. Brympton but abruptly interrupts herself, as if afraid of saying something she should not: “her husband—well, he’s generally away” (499). Mrs. Railton’s hesitation and hurried dismissal of the subject is not lost on Hartley, who comes back to it with, “And the gentleman, ma’am?” (500). Again, Mrs. Railton’s manner, as the terms “quick-like” and “suddenly” indicate, show that she does not want to dwell on the topic: “The gentleman’s almost always away, I tell you,” said Mrs. Railton, quick-like—“and when he’s there,” says she suddenly, ‘you’ve only to keep out of his way”’ (500).

The ominous ring of this piece of advice, given as a kind of afterthought, finds an echo in Mr. Brympton’s portrait, which suggests strength, surliness, and a latent streak of violence: “a big fair bull-necked man, with a red face and little bad-tempered blue eyes” (504). The other adjectives Hartley uses to qualify him are “coarse, loud and pleasure-loving” (505-506), and she remarks several times (504, 507-508) on the strain put on the household by his permanent irritability and constant “cursing” and “grumbling” (505). She also comments on his drinking habits:

Mr. Brympton [...] (as I soon found out) drank a deal more than was good for him.

After Mrs. Brympton left the table he would sit half the night over the old Brympton port and madeira, and once, as I was leaving my mistress’s room rather later than usual, I met him coming up the stairs in such a state that I turned sick to think of what some ladies have to endure and hold their tongues about. (505)

The colour red—an easy-to-read symbol—is always associated with Mr. Brympton, suggesting an uncontrollable temper, anger, even blind fury, and therefore danger. Hartley notices that a “red spot” comes out on his forehead whenever he is displeased or angry (511, 518, 519) and, interestingly, she associates “red” and “savage” to describe his face when he opens the door on the night when the bell rings for the first time (509). As she finds Mrs. Brympton “lying very weak and still, [...] without speaking, her breath coming quick, and her eyes closed” (510), the reader cannot but come to the conclusion that, besides being a philanderer and a drunk, it may well be that Mr. Brympton also molests his wife—a conclusion that seems justified by Hartley’s comment that Mrs. Brympton “had never been the same since that night [...] her spirits didn’t revive, nor her strength either” (514).

The antagonism between Hartley and Mr. Brympton is paralleled by the mutual affection that develops between her and Mrs. Brympton. And that is another reason why her status as a lady’s maid matters: her function places her in a privileged position. Not only is she able to observe situations and overhear conversations that the other servants would not be party to, but a closeness develops between her and her mistress, recalling Mrs. Brympton’s relationship with Emma Saxon. Hartley notices that
Mrs. Brympton “ha[s] grown attached to [her]”, and Agnes, the housemaid, tells her that “since Emma Saxon’s death, [she is] the only maid her mistress had taken to” (514). However, Hartley’s dedication to Mrs. Brympton means that her appraisal of her mistress’s relationship with Mr. Ranford is biased. If Hartley’s statement, “we were all glad to think that Mrs. Brympton had a pleasant companionable gentleman like that to keep her company when the master was away” (505), may be interpreted as a sign of her naivety, it certainly constitutes the first clue for the reader to understand that Mrs. Brympton and Mr. Ranford may have more in common than a taste for books. This is confirmed by a quarrel between husband and wife that Hartley overhears and reports in direct speech without commenting on it (508), and by the double errand Mrs. Brympton asks Hartley to run for her the next morning (510).

The episode shows how faulty and slow Hartley’s reasoning faculties are and the extent to which she may have misled the reader until then. Mrs. Brympton’s request that she go to the village “at once” to have a prescription made up is expressed “quickly,” and her instruction that she “be back again before Mr. Brympton is up” is added after a minute’s hesitation and a blush (510); and just before Hartley leaves the room, Mrs. Brympton calls her back “as if an idea had just struck her” (510) to ask her to drop a note at Mr. Ranford’s. The reader assembles the three elements (prescription, behavior, note) and understands immediately that the prescription is but a cover for the real errand Hartley is asked to run. The maid, however, although she has interpreted Mrs. Brympton’s hesitation and blush as signs of her uneasiness at having something found out, misinterprets their cause, linking them to the prescription and not to Mr. Ranford: “It struck me as peculiar that my mistress should wish the prescription made up without Mr. Brympton’s knowledge; and putting this together with the scene of the night before, and with much else that I had noticed and suspected, I began to wonder if the poor lady was weary of her life, and had come to the mad resolve of ending it” (510). It takes the chemist’s assurance that “It’s only lime water. You might feed it to a baby by the bottleful” (511) to make her revise her interpretation and add the third element to the other two: “If there was nothing to conceal about my visit to the chemist’s, was it my other errand that Mrs. Brympton wished me to keep private?” (511). The use of a direct question renders Hartley’s sense of shock, which is confirmed by her hurried dismissal of the idea: “I felt ashamed of my suspicions, and concluded that I was still disturbed by the strange events of the night” (511). The verb “conclude” here fulfills the same function as the verb “decide” discussed above, showing Hartley’s determination to brush aside any thought that might disrupt the rational and conventional order of things, and again pinpointing her unreliability.

For all Hartley’s attempts at “tell[ing] her story honestly” (Dyman 14), her narrative leaves several questions in mid-air, sometimes because she cannot provide an explanation, sometimes because she refuses to investigate the matter further. These blanks and gaps are in keeping with the character, but they are also, obviously, a narrative strategy used by Wharton to allow the supernatural to enter the story. It filters through the cracks and gradually pervades the narrative while it remains elusive, “its essence suspended in a void” (Balestra 3). The reader, “left in a disturbing cognitive stalemate” (Balestra 3), has no choice but to follow Wharton’s hint that “Every phrase should be a sign-post” (WF 30). In other words, the reader is invited to read between the lines in order to determine the real nature of the triangular relationship between husband, wife, and “friend,” and to solve the enigma of the closed
door—that is to say, to cross the threshold separating text and subtext to discover what secret is hidden in what Deleuze calls the fold(s) of the text.

Crossing the Threshold

Thresholds and doors are of course closely connected. Closed or locked doors are a staple of Gothic fiction, as they generate suspense and anxiety, and Wharton does not fail to use this device in her story. Every time Hartley mentions the door opposite hers (and that is often), she uses the adjective “locked” to qualify either “room” or “door”; the phrase sometimes appears twice on the same page (509, 512, 513, 514). Clearly, the locked door exercises a kind of fearful fascination on Hartley, yet she never expresses any wish to open it or to enter the room; neither does she try to imagine or picture what (or who) is inside. She admits that “the thought of that locked room across the passage began to weigh on [her]” and that “Once or twice, in the long rainy nights, [she] fancied [she] heard noises there” (506); but she dismisses this as “nonsense” (506). After her bell has rung for the first time, however, she becomes convinced that “someone was cowering there, behind the locked door” (513). The reason why so much emphasis is laid on the locked door is that Hartley’s perception of it opening and closing in the middle of the night must stand out in the narrative as an inexplicable fact. No rational explanation can be provided, therefore the source of the noises must be supernatural.

The threshold is not just a useful metaphor describing the area where the reader (and Hartley) is positioned in a delicate state of imbalance. It is also mentioned repeatedly in the story in direct connection with Emma Saxon and the ghostly. Indeed, whenever the ghost appears, she is described as standing on a threshold, in a doorway, or in the corridor, all of which are places which allow passage from one room, one space, to another. On the day she arrives at Brympton Place, Hartley perceives “Half-way down the passage [...] a woman standing. She drew back into a doorway as we passed” (501). On the day of the dénouement, Hartley looks up from her sewing to see the ghost standing on her doorstep: “[...] there, in the door, stood Emma Saxon” (515). That night, after her bell has sounded and she has stepped into the hallway, she sees the ghost ahead of her: “[...] there at the head of the stairs was Emma Saxon” (518). And when Mr. Brympton opens the door to his wife’s dressing room, he is faced with the ghost: “On the threshold stood Emma Saxon” (519). Once Hartley has identified the ghost as Emma Saxon, she resorts to the same syntactical pattern, putting the location first, then the verb, then the full name—an effective way of heightening the dramatic effect of the ghost’s appearance.

The threshold is an appropriate place for Emma Saxon’s ghost—any ghost—to appear, for a ghost is itself a threshold. It is a liminal image, placed at the junction of two states (death and life) and two times (past and present), which makes manifest what is invisible, materializes what is immaterial. It is a spirit made, if not flesh, at least visible (though only some can perceive it); it is both present and absent. This double and paradoxical status is rendered in the story through two apparently contradictory elements: Hartley can hear the ghost’s footsteps in the corridor, but when she follows her outside, in the snow, she “noticed that she left no foot-prints behind her” (515). It is only when Hartley finds herself outside and sees the ghost ahead of her that she realizes she has stepped over a threshold and into another dimension. As Martha Banta
puts it, “the ghostliness of thresholds comes from the fact that we do not know we have crossed them until after the crucial moment recedes into the past” (6).

A threshold is like an arcade, delineated by a frame and yet still open; as such, it is a liminal space. As Walter Benjamin noted in his reflections on architecture, “The threshold is a zone. And in fact a zone of passage (Übergang). Transformation, passage, flux—all are contained in the word threshold” (qtd. in Sieburth 19). To put it differently, it is “an ‘undefined zone’ between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side [...] or the outward side [...]” (Genette 2). Genette’s definition of the paratext as a “zone not only of transition but also of transaction” (2) seems particularly suited to this notion of threshold.

Indeed, by stepping over it, the reader signs an implicit pact with the narrator and agrees to see what she sees, to suspend his disbelief while at the same time keeping his “rational eye” open. The reader, in other words, sees simultaneously the dream and the real and, like the narrator, undergoes a rite de passage. The episode in which Emma Saxon’s ghost mutely invites Hartley to follow her and leads her to Mr. Ranford’s house constitutes one such rite of passage. Hartley, determined to “know what she wanted” (515), submits to the request she reads on the ghost’s face: “She looked at me long and long, and her face was just one dumb prayer to me” (515). Their long walk through the woods and the open fields may be regarded as a kind of ritual of initiation, which Hartley finds rather trying—she is tempted to give up and go back to the house several times (515, 516). As ghost and maid reach Mr. Ranford’s place, Hartley understands that “it was [her] turn to act,” that the ghost “hadn’t led [her] there for nothing” (516). But the ghost vanishes before Hartley has had time to ask her what it is she must do: “A sense of helplessness came over me. She was gone, and I had not been able to guess what she wanted. Her last look had pierced me to the marrow; and yet it had not told me!” (517).

The ghost does not “pass the word” and Hartley is, quite literally, wordless. She seems to have been struck dumb, left on the threshold of language, of articulateness, as if a door had closed in her face. Unable to answer Mr. Ranford’s questions, she faints. As in the episode where Hartley’s real errand was to give Mr. Ranford Mrs. Brympton’s note, the reader is able to piece the clues together immediately, whereas Hartley is not. Yet again, the maid’s failure to decipher the riddle and her confused awareness that something is pending help to build up suspense and accelerate the pace of the story—but both maid and reader are still in the dark as to what turn the plot will take, and Hartley is irresolute as to what she should do. It will therefore take one more intervention by Emma Saxon, another of her dramatic appearances on a threshold, to close the story.

However, although the final lines of the story convey the sense of an ending, with the different characters going their separate ways—Mrs. Brympton dies, Mr. Ranford “disappear[s]” the minute the service is over, Mr. Brympton “jump[s] into the carriage nearest the gate and driv[es] off” as soon as the coffin is underground, and the “servants [go] back alone to the house” (519)—closure remains superficial. That is because, as Sarah Whitehead puts it, “Wharton’s multilayered texts [...] are simultaneously explicit and subtle” and “retain their absences and implicitly ambiguous nature” (49). The reader never gets any straightforward answers to the questions raised by Hartley’s statements and comments; instead he is left to conjecture and to work out the subtext for himself, to sort out what is objective from what is
subjective in her narrative. Because Hartley’s account, in spite of her confusion—or possibly because of it—rings true and has an earnest quality about it, the reader cannot help being persuaded that the wife is the victim and the husband the brute, and that this ghost story is actually a tale of female victimization or, as Kathy Fedorko puts it, a portrait of “women’s constraint [and of] the nascent companionship among them, hampered by a reticence that prevents them from truly helping one another” (90). And yet even that interpretation seems to stop short of the real scope of Wharton’s tale. Jenni Dyman’s detailed analysis of the story, in her own words, “moves beyond the facile stereotypes of the villain husband, delicate Victorian lady, and kind friend, or the brute husband and the fallen, adulterous pair” (22). She suggests that Mrs. Brympton is not the only one who suffers in what Hartley calls an “unhappy match” (505), and that “The greatest suffering actually shown in the story is Brympton’s” (23). She also argues, convincingly, that “Wharton’s story is her own ‘Lady’s Maid’s Bell,’ sounding the alarm for women, and finally also men, in a society not sensitive to their needs or their true selves” (20). By resorting to an unreliable narrator and a fragmented tale, Wharton fashions gaps and spaces for the reader to investigate and to invest with his own meaning and interpretation(s). Her artistry lies in her capacity to create a text that transcends epochs and ways of reading: what on the surface is a rather conservatively written narrative, respectful of both Gothic and social conventions, turns out to be quite subversive. Wharton’s consummate art of irresolution, then, is but a topcoat covering her resoluteness in exposing the failings of the society in which she lived.

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NOTES

1. “almost all the best tales of Scott, Hawthorne, and Poe belong to that peculiar category of the eerie which lies outside of the classic tradition.” (28)

2. The title of Fitz James O’Brien’s story is “What Was It?”

3. The collection, minus “A Bottle of Perrier,” was reprinted in 1973 by Charles Scribner’s Sons under the title The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton.

4. The story that eventually appeared in print was slightly different from the first draft Wharton sent to her literary agent; he asked her to modify the ending in order to make the story more suited to “the average magazine reader’s desire for something at least approaching a conclusive ending” (Eric S. Pinker, qtd. in Balestra, 5). See Gianfranca Balestra’s online article for more on this subject.

5. The reader is never told about the circumstances or the cause of Emma Saxon’s death, but three elements seem to hint at some kind of foul play: Mr. Brympton’s violent temper, the way he looks at Hartley when he first meets her, and the fact that he can see Emma Saxon’s ghost.

6. Having an outsider as narrator is a frequent device in Gothic fiction. Many critics surmise that Hartley was born in Great Britain, probably with reason. One may conjecture that Wharton chose to make Hartley a Brit in order to pay subtle homage to the ghost story writers she admired and whose names she mentions in her preface; or perhaps, keeping in mind Wharton’s comment on the origins of the readers who demanded a rational explanation, “Need I say there was never a Welsh or a Scottish signature among them?” (ix), Hartley’s nationality is an indirect way of accounting for her capacity to see ghosts.
7. In “Gender and First-Person Narration in Edith Wharton’s Short Fiction,” Elsa Nettels underlines the fact that “Of the twenty-two first-person narratives in the two-volume Collected Stories, nineteen have male narrators” and “All three of the female narrators are subordinate in social position and wealth to the women whose stories they tell” (245-246).

8. His high colour stands in sharp contrast to his wife’s pallor: Hartley remarks on how “white, and chill to the touch” Mrs. Brympton is after her husband leaves her to dress for dinner (504).

9. Jenni Dyman offers a very prosaic and rational explanation: “The reader might even conjecture, from the footsteps that Hartley hears in the hall, that Ranford sometimes hides out in Emma Saxon’s old room, making noises at night, and after hours, sneaking into Mrs. Brympton’s rooms” (19).

10. For Gianfranca Balestra, “this obsession with the threshold is paralleled in Wharton’s autobiographical fragment “Life and I,” in which it is directly related to the reading of ghost stories. She recalled how, when she was a child, this type of text provoked a long lasting terror in her, which became most formidable whenever she was on a doorstep.” (6-7)

11. Even though I am not dealing with paratext here, I have taken the liberty of using Genette’s formulation in a different context.

12. See in particular pages 15 to 19 for another analysis of Hartley’s unreliability.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article étudie la maîtrise dont Edith Wharton fait preuve dans la première histoire de fantômes qu’elle ait écrite, « The Lady’s Maid’s Bell », en particulier les ressorts narratifs auxquels elle a recours pour maintenir le lecteur dans l’indécision jusqu’à la fin de l’histoire et même au-delà. Ellipses, informations données a posteriori, insinuations, allusions, affirmations à double sens font partie intégrante de la structure de la nouvelle, mais c’est surtout l’utilisation de la première personne qui s’avère particulièrement efficace. En effet, la narratrice a une compréhension imparfaite des événements et se révèle incapable d’offrir un compte rendu clair au lecteur, qui se retrouve ainsi sur un seuil : à lui de décider s’il va le franchir ou non, à lui de réfléchir et de déchiffrer le texte sous-jacent de l’histoire.

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