Haunted Hotels and Murder Inns: Travelers' Tales from Europe and the Gothic Short Story from the 1820s to the 1940s

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In gothic fictions from the Victorian period to the mid-twentieth century, it is as travelers and sojourners that most British, Irish, and Americans experience continental Europe. Consequently, hotels and inns are central to those travels and those tales. In this essay, I shall consider how when it came to the gothic imagining of the continent, these transient lodgings act as sites of disturbance or terror, places that frame a strange doubling. Taking key texts by Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Amelia B. Edwards, Sheridan Le Fanu, M. R. James, and Karen Blixen as my examples, I shall explore one of the ways in which gothic short stories and tales have manifested the anxiety induced by temporarily living alongside strangers, and thereby consequently charted our relationship to our permanent neighbors in continental Europe. This essay responds to a set of coincidences—coincidences in fact about co-incidence, related to European travel, the hotel, and the unwanted guest in the room—whether that unbidden guest is a ghost or a writer.

The hotel as understood in these tales becomes one of the ways in which Gothic frames property relations. The entrance to the inn or the hotel operates as the threshold to the street, ushering you in to a domestic space that's simultaneously a public space. The hotel is, of course, a temporary living circumstance, designed by its very brevity not to be a lasting part of life. For a night or two we call it "home," but the lease is too short to make much of an impression on us. It is, in the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) terms, a residential epitome of "liquid modernity," and emblematic of an experience of modern society formed loosely in the temporary, the isolated, and the immersion in the fluid "now." The traveler's residence in a hotel expresses just how far they are disconnected from the place they are in. There are no friends to visit, no family with whom to stay, or if there are, the traveler nonetheless prefers the semi-detached independence that a hotel provides. There they enjoy the status of the stranger, and any acquaintances they strike up, any holiday romance they chance upon will prove to be passing. These stories of haunted hotels are tales of a space unwittingly shared—our self-possession disturbed by the other bed in the room, the other

unaccounted-for lodger. The hotel offers a parody of home, combining in one space a functional domesticity with anonymity. It gives us a world without kinship, where the only relations are hierarchical, monetary, or accidental. The fact that the hotel is given over to the casual is one way in which it figures as an erotic space, inextricably linked with the dirty weekend and the affair.

Lodgers, new occupants in the district, travelers, and hotel guests—all make the ideal haunted, for their newness or their ephemerality opens them to an encounter with a ghost or spirit that persists, the true long-term resident of the place. The short story and the novella are ideal literary sites to explore this temporary occupation. As John Bowen (2006) has remarked, short fiction is already in itself "disjunctive, inconclusive and oblique" (37), and just right therefore for a story confined to the parameters of a hotel visit. Wilkie Collins imagined the short story as bound up with gothic sensation and detection. Within its brevity, we find characters who are trapped or confined, and "so, too, their narration is a form of constraint, a controlled space within which the persistent, unaccountable strangeness of their witnessing can appear" (Bowen 2006, 40–41).

Such stories as these are travelers' tales, yet seem often preoccupied with the question as to whether or not they are stories at all. In their encounter with a European elsewhere, the very possibility that such an experience can be contained within the conventions of narrative breaks down. The narrator in Amelia B. Edwards's "A Night on the Borders of the Black Forest" (1874) begins: "My story (if story it can be called, being an episode in my own early life)" (9); here the anecdotal, even the autobiographical origin of the event somehow precludes its gaining the honorary title of "story." This questioning of the possibilities of story-telling to order the world becomes entangled within the British response to the continental – itself imagined at last as a site of stories.

The Hostile Hostel and the Killer inside the Inn

One dark locale to be found in the subgenre of the uncanny hotel is the murder inn. There is a strand of stories in which the protagonists enter as a guest a space controlled by strangers—whether an inn, a hotel, a lodging house, or merely a room for the night—and find out (too late) that the proffered hospitality is homicidal. Above all, the new guest discovers that hospitality has always been murderous there: the protagonist is simply the latest in a sequence of victims. The telos of such a story is finding a way to escape from the snare, the hero rescuing themselves from their plight among malevolent strangers.

When it comes to gothic literature, peril begins once you have crossed the English Channel. The trope is there, most famously in Wilkie Collins's tale of Parisian gambling, "A Terribly Strange Bed" ([1852] 1875), in the farmhouse-inn of Amelia B. Edwards's story, "A Night on the Borders of the Black Forest" ([1874] 1890) and in Sheridan Le Fanu's

"The Room in the Dragon Volant" ([1872] 1993). Such tales persist—most obviously in Eli Roth's Slovakian-set *Hostel* films (2005 and 2007). Here abroad as such is dangerous, and to place yourself in the care of foreigners proves a foolhardy action. The passing possession of a room may become permanent, when the corpse, the ghost, is confined to the hotel, the inn, forever.

"A Terribly Strange Bed" stands as a classic early example of such paranoid examinations of the perils of European travel. Originally published in April 1852, this was Collins's first tale for Charles Dickens's *Household Words*. It is a story that occurs "on foreign ground" (8), in the streets of Paris. Collins had visited France and Italy from 1836 to 1838 (when he was twelve to fourteen) and returned to Paris in 1844. In a prologue written some years after the original publication, Collins presents the far-fetched events as a true story with "all the excitement of the most exciting romance" (28). Collins gives us a tale of "the corroding passion for play" experienced by the gambler (30); as in Pushkin's "The Queen of Spades," the ferocity of the gambler's passion becomes somehow sinister, an example of being given over to a state of mind that takes possession of the rational self. This strange state of intoxication, this gambling fever, will find its parallel later in the mysterious psychological passivity, the "trance" that has the protagonist submissively awaiting his death.

Collins's Parisian gambling den doubles as a lodging house. The hero ascends to a bedroom weirdly presented as a void space; in the absence of visual stimuli, he tries to read it in the spirit of Xavier de Maistre's room-bound fantasy travel book, *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (1794). But there is nothing to read, except the painting of a Spanish ruffian. The room appears unfamiliar and sinister, but also uncannily reminiscent: "The moonlight shining into the room reminded me of a certain moonlight night in England—the night after a picnic party in a Welsh valley" (36). As he lies in bed, the canopy descending so as to suffocate him, he finds himself instead in a Europe that signals a history of iniquity and violence:

> Amidst a dead and awful silence I beheld before me—in the nineteenth century, and in the civilised capital of France—such a machine for secret murder by suffocation as might have existed in the worst days of the Iniquisition, in the lonely inns among the Hartz Mountains, in the mysterious tribunals of Westphalia!
>
> (38)

The story confines its hero to a space, locked up with the ongoing evidence of long-standing European horrors. As later happens in Collins's *The Haunted Hotel* ([1878] 1975), the would-be victim's experiences precisely turn into a story, a commodity of a tale, and is dramatized by three "illustrious play-makers" (42), though the censorship keeps these plays from being performed.

Amelia B. Edwards's story likewise provides a classic example of the conventions of such tales. The "old legendary Schwarzwald" in Edwards's story is dwindling yearly, a space of enchanted stories that seems to be perishing under nineteenth-century progress. In fact, the brutal possibilities of the old tales are just as much alive here as ever.

The murder inn motif depends upon a sense of the vulnerability of sleep. The hotel stands as that place where privacy occurs among the presence of others, surrounding it, perhaps invading it. Claustrophobia frames these tales, bound as they are by the fear of being locked in, of being confined to the width of a room within the vastness of modern Europe. Concepts of perverted hospitality linger in such tales too, the barbaric violence of the Cyclops is there, the giving and sharing of food and drink and shelter turned transgressively into a murderous attack.

Sheridan Le Fanu's "The Room in the Dragon Volant" shows us another threatening lodging, and its out-of-Paris hotel room offers a route into the even starker confinement of premature burial. Le Fanu gives us a story of "English excursionists" (120) improving their minds by foreign travel to a newly unlocked continent, where the British may roam again following the fall of Napoleon. The central character, plain Richard Beckett, is fluent in French, and also happens to be a vain and conceited youth; before going out to meet the woman he loves, in his looking-glass he checks out how well he looks in the moonlight (192). He addresses his lover in the "bombast" of French lovemaking (224) and is given to remark upon the "rose-coloured light, *coleur de rose*, emblem of sanguine hope" (219). However, the romance into which he has been conscripted is in fact of altogether a darker fabric. As so often in gothic stories about the continent, the tale turns on an infatuation with a European woman, in this case the elusive bride, the Countess de St. Alyre. She first appears to him in a mirror, so still as to seem a portrait, or even a "tinted statue" (122). Death and love intertwine, and assignations designed to further an affair may turn out to seal the protagonist into a living grave. As W. J. McCormack (1980) argued, the death that the British traveler almost finds here is one that answers to his own masochistic quest for self-destruction (189).

In this tale, the continent acts as the home-territory for coney-catchers and confidence-tricksters, those skilled in cheating at "play," taking the arts of deception to a level of skill way beyond "our London rogues" (136). The deceptive Countess is something of a "tragedy-queen" and a deceiver (241). The conspirators lure Beckett away from Paris to the "antique and sequestered" (165) out-of-town inn, "Le Dragon Volant." The place has a reputation as a house where foreigners vanish, those who stay in one corner room especially being apt to be lost forever. Le Fanu raises the possible of "revenants" in his tale, only to replace those specters with the image of men "who have *never* returned" (168), about whom there was "nothing supernatural; but a great deal inexplicable" (186).

Yet an atmosphere of the supernatural nonetheless lingers around the tale. An old lady who warns our hero of the danger he is in appears to be "the *genius loci*, the malignant fairy" of a fairy tale written by "the delightful Countess d'Aulnois" (212). Not quite a fairyland, mainland Europe nonetheless seems a place of mystery and possibility to this romantic traveler. The "spirit of romance" (216) guides our hero, leading him to plan that he and the Countess should fly to "one of the most beautiful and sequestered nooks in Switzerland" (216). Indeed the notion of the "sequestered" frames the tale, with its out of the way inn, its corpse of a magician concealed in public inside a tent, its hopes of flight to a land-locked and hidden country, and, finally, its fears of being nailed in and buried alive in the confined space of a coffin. Our traveler escapes but, like the hero of "A Terribly Strange Bed," only to figure as a public figure of ridicule, reduced to the butt of a joke and a text, "figured even in caricatures" (240), his private and once so secret story turning him into a storied person, "a public character." In these stories, the great fate of these almost-victims is to become people contained in stories, pinned down to the small fame of narrative.

The Other Lodger

As we have seen, there is little explicitly supernatural in these tales of the "murder inn." However, one other form of gothic short story, those of the haunted hotel, wished to render the impermanent space of the continental hotel as a ghostly one, a zone to encounter strange spirits of place. The first such stories are crude in their effect, compared to later examples, though nonetheless interesting for all their robust coarseness. Washington Irving's "The Bold Dragoon" ([1824] 1987) is just such a vulgar trifle, its Irish narrator serving up the haunted hotel story as Shandyean farce, a "rigmarole Irish romance" (31) with a "burlesque tendency" (32). The Holland that the Dragoon travels through is "queer, old-fashioned," the buildings themselves "queer" (26). Without any Dutch, he communicates without language, making risqué jokes about "laying" the ghost, while romping (as was traditional with the randy lodgers of boarding-house tales) with the landlord's daughter (28). The inn he stays in is haunted, but without resonance or any trace of the uncanny, the spirits rather boisterously possessing the material furniture of a room.

The story of "The Bride's Chamber" in Charles Dickens's portion of *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices* ([1857] 1896) is a darker and more threatening haunting, though the old inn where the ghost lingers is a north country English one, and not the home to a continental spirit. Following a visit by Francis Goodchild (Dickens's alter-ego) to an asylum, we are left with an image from there of the human being rendered asocial, confined. The ghost too finds himself cramped within one house

forever, stuck within the constraints of his first-person story. The ghost tells the tale himself, and therefore delivers a vivid first-person account of what it feels like to be hanged before recounting his reminiscences of guilty deeds done in his past. (Drawing on ancestral memories of public corpses, the centrality of the figure of the public hanged to the ghost story is as potent as that of the beheaded to Gothic.)

Writers on Dickens such as Harry Stone (1994), Rosemary Bodenheimer (2007), and Michael Slater (2009) have seen the figure of the ghost doomed forever to tell the tale of how he had murdered his wife as a stand-in for the novelist himself, troubled by his infidelity and the coming end of his marriage to Catherine Dickens. In this sense, the ghostly stranger encountered in the random environment of a hotel acts as a double to the guest, the bearer of private and semi-concealed anxieties. This doubling will turn out to be central to the haunted hotel theme, its energies busy with imagining a shadow other, one that—in the majority of such stories—is also a continental other, a mainland mirror to a British self.In these subtler versions of the haunted lodgings story, we find not a murder inn, gruesome and horrific, but rather a disturbed hotel, where the room—your space, given over for these nights to you—turns out not only to be your own. Other rooms encroach on yours and what you possess grows uncertain. You may stumble into and grasp hold of another person's story. For these more sophisticated tales are particularly interested in the sharing of stories—and how the story itself becomes a way of claiming a territory—and letting others share those claims with us. Both the story and the absence of the ability to form a story are what we share—perhaps also what makes the imaginative territory of Europe.

Again imagining the European place as eerily pre-possessed, Wilkie Collins's *The Haunted Hotel*, serialized in *Belgravia* from June to November 1878, stands as a classic of the genre. A kind of sickness about things pervades this tale, a bafflement at life's perversities and cruelty; its heroine, Agnes Lockwood reflects, "'How much happier we should be…if we never grew up!'" (18). In this tale of Britons abroad in Venice, the "'hotel is under a curse'," as "'crimes carry their own curse with them'" (119). Here, Collins unites the detective mystery and the ghost story in his account of Lord Montbarry, who rejects his homespun sweetheart Agnes in order to marry the strange and suspect Countess Narona. With the courier, Ferrari, and the Countess's disreputable brother, the Baron Rivar, and a lady's maid, the newly-weds honeymoon in an old palazzo in Venice. There, in mysterious circumstances Ferrari vanishes, and the English Lord appears to die of a chest infection, leaving his vast fortune to the Countess—and her brother. The palazzo becomes a hotel, invested in by Lord Montbarry's younger brother, Henry Sedgwick. Henry loves Agnes, and hopes to make her his bride. The Sedgwick family and Agnes visit the Venetian hotel, and are haunted there by the apparition of the dead lord's severed head. Eventually, a

body is found, the Countess dies, perhaps having confessed her misdeeds in a play she is writing for her brother-in-law, Francis Sedgwick, and Henry and Agnes marry.

At the novella's end, the Westwicks quit Italy and honeymoon prudently by the Thames. The home counties ambience by then appears far preferable to "the hidden and sinister life in the palace at Venice" (46). The courier, Ferrari's temper is improved by the prospect of going abroad, an enthusiasm that will come to appear a black mark against him (22). English servants, however, tend to disapprove of continental doings: the lady's maid "disliked the Continent, and wished to get back to her own country. This is not an uncommon result of taking English servants to foreign parts" (36). The continent casts a shade of suspiciousness over a person; the physician in Venice comes "with the additional recommendation of having resided in England, and having made himself acquainted with English forms of medical practice" (38). Good old English decencies seem impertinence to European eyes. The Countess Narona takes Mrs Ferrari's exercise of her righteous indignation to be "insolence": "The ignorant English mind (I have observed) is apt to be insolent in the exercise of unrestrained English liberty. This is very noticeable to us foreigners among you people in the streets" (44). On the other hand, European complexity looks potently suspicious to plain English sight. When she is tracked down, the Countess's English lady's maid turns out to be a woman who is all but a man (57)—a gruff, sexless individual, whom Ferrari nonetheless (in his Italian way) has attempted to sexualize and seduce. This masculine maid considers the Baron and Ferrari to be "birds of a feather," as corrupt as each other. Through her prudish British eyes, she in her turn suspects the probity of the relationship between the Baron and the Countess (though they may be, perhaps, genuinely merely brother and sister).

Despite this inner enmity, the hotel, this Venetian property, stands in strong relation to the English-speaking world. The Palace Hotel Company is after all a good speculation for English servants (53–54), and the hotel itself is designed to appeal "mainly to English and American travellers" (69). The Countess herself embodies a curious amalgam of Britain and the continent, a medley of identities expressed for instance in her penchant for drinking maraschino and tea—a concoction, we are told, that derives from the English Queen Caroline's time on the continent; the Countess's mother shared her English mistress' tastes—"And I, in my turn, learnt from my mother" (80). On her return to Venice, the Countess adopts an English name ("Mrs James"), though she struggles to remember it (85).

Nonetheless, the Countess Narona embodies European dubiety. She enters the tale trailing rumors of her conduct from "Paris, Vienna, and London" (9). She appears both repellent and attractive—beautiful, but scarred, her complexion having been wrecked by some undefined poison she has taken in the past. In fact, she definitively possesses a past; her continental life is a level of depth and complexity, a realm of experience

that Agnes, the home-grown heroine, cannot access, and can only perceive as a horror to shrink from, or that men will (against her will, perhaps) shield her against.

Once again, a self-consciousness about the fact of the story they are in being a story begins to direct matters. A still younger brother of the late Lord Montbarry, Francis Westwick comes up with idea of a play to be called "The Haunted Hotel," the tragic circumstances into which his family has fallen striking him as ripe material for cheap art:

> The circumstances related to him contained invaluable hints for a ghost-drama. The title occurred to him in the railway: 'The Haunted Hotel.' Post that in letters six feet high, on a black ground, all over London - and trust the excitable public to crowd into the theatre!
>
> (74)

Scenting the prospect of success, Francis Westwick considers himself "on the trace of another 'Corsican Brothers'" (83). However, he comments on the action as "sad stuff" while praising the conceit of the various relatives being haunted in turn, as each passingly occupies the room where their brother was murdered: "'Material for a play, Countess—first-rate material for a play!'" (83). The Countess comes to realize her own dramatic instincts, her own talent, perhaps, for writing "The Haunted Hotel." She elects herself to be the play's writer, working for Francis Westwick, for money. She enters "the lists with Shakespeare" and tries "a drama with a ghost in it" (82). Considering her own credentials as the story's writer, the Countess depicts the Mediterranean type as typically "unimaginative": "'To anything fanciful, to anything spiritual, their minds are deaf and blind by nature'." Concerning this fault, she is an "exception," gifted with "that imagination which is so common among the English and the Germans—so rare among the Italians, the Spaniards, and the rest of them!" (81–82) This advantage has its drawbacks, as that imagination has become what she considers "a disease in me" (82).

Yet the tale resists its own bias toward the open disclosures of melodrama. The Countess warns us that her "affairs are my own secret" (81), and that remains true to the end of the tale. The novella falters upon the essential secrecy of others, but especially her secrecy, the Countess being a woman who is exposed by the story's discoveries, and yet is never truly revealed. As with the presence here of the supernatural, the tale asks if we are ready to listen to what is told us, to give it credit. The Countess Narona grows increasingly absent in mind, becoming entranced, remote, dreamy. In her hotel room, Agnes wakes to two shocks: first that of the unconscious, but very physically present form of the Countess; and then the equally mysterious specter of a severed head. Each of these mysteries literally confronts the other, each unreadable in its turn by the sensible English woman who regards them.

In this text, two kinds of detritus linger after a crime—and both stink: the ghosts (who are strongly physical spooks) and the putrid remains. Collins more usually avoided this "emphasis on physical horrors" (Peters 1991, 384). In this continental setting, Lord Montbarry's severed head brings back cultural memory of the excesses of the revolution; it is "like a head struck from the body by the guillotine" (96). It has become "Egyptian" too, mummified but above all disgusting—half-flesh, half-bone, with "bluish" lips, and traces of the hair—above all, it reeks, its "fetid exhalations" filling the confined room (97). Revolted, fearful of what his fingers might close upon, the hotel manager puts on his gloves when he reaches his hand into the hollow space secreted behind the mantelpiece (104). The head itself provokes disgust; it is no longer possible to recognize as a person and is unreadable as a face. Until they find tell-tale dentures, no one can tell if it belongs to Ferrari or the deceased Lord. The tale disrupts traditional hierarchies, with foreign couriers standing in for English lords. Collins flirts with the possibility of other such substitutions: is the Baron, absent for now in America, in fact Lord Montbarry? (99). This turns out to be a possibility not fully realized, but operates in the tale as the kind of guess a good detective-story reader might think up.

The tale's solution instead comes inside the Countess's written drama. As in Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), the detective figure here becomes the criminal herself, just as she also becomes a figure for the writer of the tale. Detective, criminal, writer, all collapse inward into the person of the Countess Narona, the pseudo-Mrs James, the one-time Lady Montbarry, a person doubled and tripled into so many roles that she becomes an entranced figure of strange emptiness, comatose, catatonic, though her hand moves on desperately writing, always writing. Her story, her play-text, both solves the crime, and leaves its solution hanging. Its provenance as a confession is weak, and the readers cannot be certain if it is to be taken as delusion or fact:

> Was this monstrous plot, revealed in the lines which she had just read, the offspring of the Countess's morbid imagination? or had she, in this case also, deluded herself with the idea that she was inventing when she was really writing under the influence of her own guilty remembrances of the past?
>
> (118)

Further to cast doubt on matters, just before her fatal hemorrhage, the Countess begins her play over from scratch, a second draft of the story commenced, but never completed (119). The presence of the supernatural mirrors the instability that gathers around the person of this scarred, intense, demonic European woman. The ghosts both point to the fact of a crime, but present the thought that any solution will not account for everything in the case; something remains over, like the head that is too difficult to dissolve or destroy.

One key question set up by the text is whether the Countess and the Baron were truly brother and sister, or lovers, or both at once? We never discover the answer to this mystery of incest, of a disrupted and dark European brood, so unlike the extended family, all loving and interconnected—all haunted—of the British Westwick clan. The Countess marries Lord Montbarry in order to spare her brother the taint, the indignity, of marrying a wealthy Jewish widow. The Jewish woman stands for a level of corruption and compromise that is seen to legitimate (or perhaps merely initiate) the much greater compromises opened up by the unfortunate marriage.

The explanation that the Countess offers in her play-text explains little unequivocally. Henry himself can hardly stomach to read the first draft to its conclusion, and indeed never fully completes it (123). He shares the knowledge he has and indeed the text itself with his older brother, the new Lord Montbarry. But his brother doubts the tale: "Because some of the crazy creature's writing accidentally tells us what we know to be the truth, does it follow that all the rest is to be relied on to the end?" (123) Henry reads the remaining pages for the two of them, out loud; though at the very end, the Countess's text breaks slowly into the incomprehensible, first with a double scene to be played simultaneously, and then with lines that break into frenzy and illegibility—"The last page looks like sheer delirium. She may well have told you that her invention had failed her!" (125) It becomes a matter of faith, with the second Lord Montbarry choosing to believe in "nothing, nothing, nothing!" (125). Earlier in the Countess's drama, Ferrari tells her, on receiving her offer of substituting with his employer, "'I have not hitherto been a religious man; but I feel myself on the way to it. Since your ladyship has spoken to me, I believe in the Devil.' It is the Countess's interest" (she writes) "to see the humorous side of this confession of faith" (121). So, we are told, as the manuscript burns, that this is how "Lord Montbarry disposed of the mystery of The Haunted Hotel" (125). The manuscript is consumed by fire, its secrets staying with the two brothers, neither of whom intends to pass them on. In the end, the only solid clue is the false teeth that fall from the rotten head when it is discovered. These revolting physical remains tell a story that seems more solid and substantial than that offered by the apparitions and nightmares, by the weaving of a theatrical plot.

For in the end, Henry Westwick considers Agnes too frail to receive the full knowledge of the narrative; the story, in all its horror and its unrelieved mystery, is something she must be spared. The continental darkness suggests a gloom from which the upright British woman should be protected. There's a fear of the past, of the pagan at work in the tale. The "'merciless marble face'" of the caryatid on the mantelpiece terrifies Agnes; though to Henry, it appears merely a "'conventionally classical figure'" (102). Agnes here intuits horrors to which Henry seems oblivious. Yet Henry concludes that the knowledge of the beheading, this inconclusive discovery, must not be shared with Agnes; the thought of her discovering it too is "a terror to him now" (105). The knowledge that Agnes

cannot know, the Countess already possesses. The British woman must be kept ignorant, while the continental female turns into a writer, either inventing horrors, or recalling them; in either case, she has access—by experience, or by her "exceptional" imagination to truths and possibilities that Agnes may not share. Indeed Agnes can hardly bear to see the Countess. In being European, in being corrupt, a woman of the world, the Countess becomes both the subject of and the bearer of a story. It is the possession of stories that counts here, the facility of the writer to mold experience, or otherwise to be overwhelmed by it. For the story, the history indeed, to which the Countess has access also destroys her. Its horrors, its uncertainties, are more than her brain can take. The Countess finds herself inside a story that she cannot conclude. She comes to Henry looking for help with her fourth and fifth acts, requiring a "hint" (110). However, Henry cannot help her either: "The words were suspended on his lips" (110–11). Her brain taxed, the monomania of her desire to find conclusions and to make a denouement exhausts and ultimately kills her. Her predicament matches Collins's. Her play offers a critique of his own magazine detective tale, both deconstructing its pretensions to order and meaning, and being the only way that the hidden narrative of the crime can be revealed. The Countess imagines herself in precisely the same ambivalent way that others do. She turns her own persona in the light and questions it, as though she were another: "It is at once a dangerous and attractive character," she writes of herself; "Immense capacities for good are implanted in her nature, side by side with equally remarkable capacities for evil. It rests with circumstances to develop either the one or the other" (113).

In dying, the Countess enters a liminal place, a zombie-realm, where her mind has gone (the head destroyed by what has been imagined in it), while the body, as a reflex, automatically persists for a while: "'Dead of the rupture of a blood-vessel on the brain. Those sounds that you hear are purely mechanical—they may go on for hours'" (119). The sounds in question are her "heavy stertorous breath, like a person oppressed in sleeping" (119). On the other hand, Agnes will be the happier, the sooner she can escape from Venice, "this horrible place" (109).

Agnes never hears the story's solution, and is therefore "not quite satisfied. The subject troubled her" (127). The destiny set up by the book, that Agnes will be the means to the Countess's destruction, remains uncertain; was it fulfilled, or not? Leaving mystery behind on the continent, Agnes lets her husband keep his secrets, content to be the dutiful wife. And the greater mystery, just as, the story tells us, "the explanation of the mystery of your own life and death" remains an incompletable tale and an open question.

Alienated Rooms

For the remainder of this essay, I shall compare two stories about alienated hotel rooms, lodgings where British identity finds its continental double,

its "secret sharer." The first is M. R. James's "Number 13" ([1904] 2011), first published in *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, though likely written in 1899, as James claimed, or in 1900, just after a visit to Viborg, Denmark, where the tale is set. The second story is perhaps aptly an interloper here, as it may or may not be a gothic tale at all. I wish to consider Isak Dinesen's/Karen Blixen's "The Young Man With the Carnation" ([1942] 2001) the second tale in her collection, *Winter's Tales*—"the most Danish of Karen Blixen's books" (Thurman 1982, 294). Both tales further the complexities of storytelling as imagined by Edwards, Le Fanu, and Collins, in the context of imagined British excursions into a haunted Europe. "Number 13" is a tale written by an Englishman set in a hotel in Denmark, and "The Young Man with the Carnation" is a story by a Dane, writing in English, about an Englishman in a hotel in Antwerp.

As Scott Brewster explores elsewhere in this book, the inquisitive or acquisitive tourist fairly often seems a suitable victim to James. "'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad'" ([1904] 2011) and "A Warning to the Curious" ([1925] 2011) two of M. R. James's most celebrated stories, both take place in East Anglian hotels. These stories have become icons of Englishness. "A Warning to the Curious" has a tourist unwittingly purloin an ancient, pagan protection against continental invasion. It appears that the passing people who stay in hotels may disrupt the loyalties and pieties of others who are rooted permanently in place. "A Warning to the Curious" is a very British tale, one of defenses against continental invasion from Danes, or French, or Germans (the buried crown that magically protects the coast recast in the Martello Tower out at sea, the recent crisis of the Great War lying behind the tale). Yet Paxton, the young man cursed to unearth the ancient crown, is about to migrate to the continent, a rootless fellow without connections ready to make a new life in Sweden (354). In "Oh, Whistle," we find the erotic fluidity of the hotel—the fear, or the desire that is a fear, that your room—the private space around you—may be taken possession of by another.

In "Number 13," Anderson, an historical researcher puts up at a Danish hotel. He has number 14 to stay in; next door is number 12. He speculates that superstition prevents there being a number 13 in a hotel. One evening, after working hard in the archives by day, Anderson goes downstairs to fetch a book, on his return he finds himself trying the door of the wrong room. Where there was no room, Number 13, when he went downstairs, now there must certainly is. And, it would seem, the room is occupied. The occupant is heard, its shadow cast against the wall of the building opposite —that of a man, perhaps a woman (53); though his boots mark him out certainly as a "gentleman," these turn out to belong to the guest in Number 14 (54). By means of the same shadows on the opposing wall, Anderson spies the person in the next-door room dancing and later singing (57–58). We manage a glimpse here into what happens behind closed doors on quiet corridors.

James's male protagonist echoes his neighbor's indeterminate gender, figuring himself as Emily in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (57), thereby taking possession of a classic locus for the oppressive, labyrinthine property, a place with more rooms than by rights it should have. The ghost's room similarly annexes part of the neighboring rooms. "Number 13" imagines a space that should not be there; the building has been converted into a hotel, and the modernizing process has obliterated the room where historical evil happened. However, that wickedness, that Dionysiac, gender-fluid, dancing refusal cannot be shoved away, but barges back in, reasserting presence within the new architecture of the place.

As in Margaret Oliphant's "A Beleaguered City" (1879), James alludes in this to the expansionist policies of Bismarck's Germany. Much as Oliphant recalls in her occupation of Semur by the dead, the Prussian invasion of France in 1870, there's a faint memory of the shameful defeat of Denmark in the Danish-Prussian wars: "'Is this,' he said, 'the Danish courage I have heard so much of. It isn't a German in there, and if it was, we are five to one'" (60). Both Oliphant and James imply that continental Europe's borders are not intact, but may be pierced and penetrated by wars and occupations. Moreover, Anderson's name—recalling inevitably Europe's most famous literary Dane—itself suggests ways in which identity may be permeable, as this British man bears a name whose provenance suggests Scandinavian inheritance. The British, true-born or not, are hardly able to seal themselves off from their own continental connections. We likewise see this conundrum of dual-identity, nominally British, ancestrally European, in the characters of Despard in "The Young Man with the Carnation" and Lamont in "The Heroine" (another tale of a British writer's hotel adventure) in Dinesen's *Winter's Tales*.

As Scott Brewster quotes elsewhere in this book, there's a cancelled manuscript opening to M. R. James's "Number 13," in which he worries about the effects of tourism. Will recommending Jutland as a place lead to its being spoiled by trippers? It seems that travelers destroy the places to which they travel. The story therefore presents itself in part as something likely to discourage tourists. The tale refers to some genuine Jutland hotels—Preisler's (where M. R. James once stayed) and the Phoenix, though the hotel where the story takes place is a fictitious one. Yet James closes the tale's first paragraph properly by informing us, "But I am not writing a guidebook" (48). The question arises what kind of story is he then writing?

Time in a hotel is a discrete experience, a parenthesis apart from the main tenor of our lives. Similarly, I would argue, what these haunted hotel stories of continental Europe show is that the ghost story acts as a moment complete to itself, something that stands starkly apart from our lives as social beings, our kin, our relations. The moment of the ghost story, its being entirely an incident, means that it does not really reach beyond itself, but is a kind of addendum—though it may intimate just how much our earthly lives are all anyway parenthesis, setting them in

the context of a space or zone either side of the brackets. This additional quality of the ghost story does not, of course, exhaust its meanings. For the beyond signaled in its passage finds itself in specific worldly locales. In being located here the ghost story enters contingency and context, and in particular I would argue (following other writers on the genre) the social context of property relations, relationships, and the various ways we frame our lives.

The ghost story—particularly, I think as written by Le Fanu and M. R. James—frequently recounts an event, a persecution, that stands somehow outside the main course of life; eccentricity and extremity separate it from the onward tenor of biography; if it exposes social realities, it does so only by providing a weird mirror for them—in itself, it is other than the real—an event with no before or after, a collision with contradictions that do not connect up with the main flow of experience.

Anderson visits Viborg to work in an archive, constructing his own historical narrative in the daytime, as he lives his own, inconsequential reprise of that history, by night. Religious history imbues the story—it forms after all the motive for the protagonist, Mr. Anderson's visit to Viborg—and the town stands as a place connected back to the peninsula's pagan past and to the strife of the Reformation. What is striking is how night-time experience, purposelessly weird, is to be accounted for by recourse to the library. Though the texts there prove as unproductive as the encounters with the ghost himself—suggesting connections, without their being sealed, sketching frameworks that do not find conclusion.

More even than most James stories, "Number 13" goes nowhere and has no proper end; it proves enough to make implications. No ghost is fully seen, the room is never entered; a manuscript is found under the floorboards, but it cannot be properly deciphered, let alone read. Anderson tells the tale to the story's narrator, but "refuses to draw any inferences from it, and to assent to any that I drew for him" (62). In the story's insistence on its own lack of consequence, its refusal of denouement or explication, it is typical in this respect of the form as M. R. James imagined it.

Blixen's tale is, if anything, even more skeptical about the nature of the story, found as it is in the collision between the British and the European. However, it might be doubted if Blixen, as a continental writer herself, belongs to the discussion. To me, her position feels a productive one in relation to the themes of this book. She is a Danish writer who is also an English writer, famous for tales written in the Germanic vein of Hoffmann that are uniquely both a part of a Danish literary tradition and a British one, though outside her native Denmark, her greatest impact was on America. Her biographer, Judith Thurman (1983), wrote of her that her life "was three lives" (in Welles et al. 1983, 7). Other than her tales written under the pseudonym, Isak Dinesen, her most significant achievement are her memoirs about her time as a

Danish settler in what was then the British colony of Kenya. Her writing exists between cultures, migrating from Europe to Africa, from the English-speaking world to the Danish homeland. As an English-language writer, she emphatically chose Europe as her subject-matter, her tales moving from Italy to Denmark, from France to Belgium, from the Baltic to the Mediterranean.

If storytelling appears to break down in "Number 13," even as the story nonetheless gets written, in "The Young Man With the Carnation," Blixen creates a world that is itself endlessly creating stories, whether those of the novelist, the traveler, or of God himself. "The Young Man With the Carnation" is another tale occupied with the fact of occupation, written and published at a time when the Nazis controlled Denmark. In part, it offers a work of covert resistance to that conquest, as here occupation becomes a kind of joke. It's a bedroom farce that metamorphoses into a mystical fable.

Despite its nineteenth-century setting, one way in which Blixen's tale is not gothic is that (unlike M. R. James's story) the preoccupations and usurpations of space outlined in it are not about the past. It is a present event, an assignation that looks to a future. The "murder inn" tales are similarly insistent on the present—they are not historically distant, but geographically so. There are few if any "murder inns" in the island of Britain; they are imagined to be a continental phenomenon. The only past allowed into those stories are intimations of previous victims. The resisting victim in the tale endeavors not to be the latest in an ongoing series. Their escape posits them as the last to be in this situation—thereafter, law will reassert itself, perpetrators are punished, and safety is established.

"The Young Man with the Carnation" is a tale of an English writer, Charles Despard, the author of a best-selling and much-praised novel of social criticism, heading to Italy to honeymoon with his beautiful wife. Despard believes that he has reached the end of his talent, and, although he is engaged on a second novel, has nothing more to say. He has discovered that he is essentially superficial. He believes that those who love him love him purely because he is a great writer. His wife adores not him, he believes, but a "phantom of her own imagination" (19); only as a storyteller does he deserve response. In Antwerp, having started early on his journey, his wife has arranged to meet him in the Queen's Hotel. He goes up to the room, finds the doors unlocked, lets himself in, discovering her asleep in bed. He gets in beside her, but finds he cannot sleep. As he lies there, there is a knock at the door and a young man with a pink carnation in his button-hole stands before the room. A look of radiant happiness on the young man's face strikes Despard. Each gazes at the other, mutually shocked. Despard asks the young man with the carnation what he's doing there, and the youth declares that he must have made a mistake and retreats. Despard's wife awakes, and he tells her that the young man was probably drunk, and she sinks back to sleep. But again, Despard cannot sleep; the young man's happiness haunts him, presenting all the joy he

too once had and has now lost. He has allowed himself to be turned from a human being into "printed matter," a purveyor of literature and good only in so far he transforms himself into books. He realizes that he has turned the good things of the world into words. He decides to leave the room, his wife, the compromise of his writing career, and go out into the real world to find the happiness, the reality, enjoyed by the mysterious young man. He writes a curt farewell note and leaves it on the dressing-table, and goes down to the harbor in search of a ship to board, wandering an Antwerp that is markedly French and not Flemish.

He meets a group of sailors, and sitting in a bar with them starts to weave a series of far-fetched tales about himself, making up stories; the sailors regale him too with tales, yarns of life at sea. He returns to his wife, and finds that the room he had gone to the previous night was not his room, that the young man was the rightful visitor, that the woman he had lain beside was not his wife, and that the note he had left for her must have been read by this other woman. The perfect surprise and symmetry of the event strikes him:

> As Charlie now looked back on the happenings of the night, with the experienced eye of an author of fiction, they moved him as mightily as if they had been out of a book of his own. He drew in his breath deeply. "Almighty God," he said from the bottom of his heart, "as the Heavens are higher than the Earth, so are Thy short stories higher than our short stories."
>
> (32)

Of course, the reader retains the knowledge that the author of this particular story is not God, as Karen Blixen winks at us from behind this passage.

As with the ghostly neighbor in "Number 13," Blixen's hero similarly experiences a moment in which his gender becomes uncertain, as he realizes, too late, the terror likely felt by the young woman with whom he inadvertently shares a bed: "As if he himself had possessed a pair of firm young breasts he was conscious of his heart stopping beneath them" (32). In his perception, by the close of the sentence the breasts he merely imagines have become certainly a physical part of him. This is only one of the ways in which Blixen shows him to be on both sides of the question at once. Despard is a suspiciously French name for an Englishman; so it is also that his mother "had a drop of gypsy blood in her" (27). Our native hero is fluent in French, "for he had in his time been apprenticed to a French hairdresser" (21). Moreover, he is a living man who feels himself to be already dead. Death is to have become, as does the Countess Narona, as do the protagonists of "A Terribly Strange Bed" and "The Room in the Dragon Volant," a person of words, contained in a narrative; the artist becomes as dead and finished as their works of art. In a dazzling revision of the haunted hotel story's tropes,

the living man himself takes the place normally possessed by the ghost in the room: "In his agony, for he was really in the grip of death" (21), Despard occupies the position of the corpse in the tale. He figures the ghost in himself, greeted by a revenant, the young man, who is more fully alive than he. Despard becomes the other in the room, and when he confronts the young man at the door, he does so having taken his place, wanting to be him. Donald Hannah's (1960) disappointed reading of the story as a "palimpsest" (95) is truer than perhaps the critic acknowledged. Despard's wife too is substituted, confused with another woman; to the writer's absentmindedness all cats are gray. In this tale, Despard puts himself in the mind of the other; he wonders, in French, what this Belgian must have thought of him—"*Ah, le pauvre petit bonhomme à la robe-de-chambre-verte*" (22)—thinking the thought that he imagines was in the mind of the other. Suddenly he sees himself as an other inside the tale: "it seemed that he was to see himself in it, as God saw him" (33). This Englishman on the continent sees himself in the European other, caught in the illumination offered by a tale, just as he has seen himself in the other in the room. The Briton is the haunter in this Belgian hotel room, the fugitive presence forever caught in the story, the experiences given to him. His final thought is "Oh, the young man… *Ah, le pauvre jeune homme à l'œillet*" ("the poor young man with the carnation") (35), this phrase occurring to him in the same French tongue in which he had previously imagined the other young man thinking of him. These last words of the tale combine condescension, sympathy, and a beautiful merging, the Englishman becoming the European he encounters and imagines.

Hearing early of Despard's Sunday School mind, and witnessing his taste for Biblical references, Blixen prepares us for his final dialogue with his divinity ("a rather obtrusive colloquy," according to Donald Hannah [94]), where he accepts God as an author, akin to but superior to himself: "so are Thy short stories higher than our short stories" (32). Despard wants to be on friendly terms with his creator, in losing his ability to invent stories, "He had become estranged from God, and how was he now to live?" (18). Despard's mind is replete too with classical myth; Theseus also abides there (22). Yet stories become suspect to him; if God is an author, He is, Despard feels for a time, a bad one: "It all goes to prove that the greatest of authors makes mistakes and that one should never become an author" (24). Yet talking with the sailors, Despard rediscovers the storyteller in himself. He tells lies about himself to those men, aware that—or falsely believing that—they will prove more amusing and hence more acceptable (25). The tale praises superficiality—and we may wonder if it too is contentedly superficial, a play of surfaces and coincidences. Through the tales Despard finds that he can feel pity for his wife—not named as "Laura" until close to the tale's completion (27).

Blixen favored an aesthetic of restitutions. As in her masterpiece, "Babette's Feast," the romance of life, its grace, is that the world grants us also what we lose, and more than we deserve. Despard's restitution marks a return to childhood too for, as he returns to his wife's room, he's put in mind of childhood thoughts and reminiscences (31). As Blixen expresses in "The Dreaming Child" ([1942] 2001) another of her *Winter's Tales*:

> 'There is a grace in the world, such as none of us have known about. The world is not a hard or severe place, as people tell us. It is not even just. You are forgiven everything. The fine things of the world you cannot wrong or harm, they are much too strong for that.'
>
> (104–5)

Here, as elsewhere, in Blixen's tales, a superabundance of stories overwhelms us—the plenitude a strange alternative to the apparent absence of story in Edwards or M. R. James. In this tale, Despard finds himself liberated from isolation to conviviality—a conviviality framed around the recounting, the sharing of tales. Accepting his place as a writer means accepting the duty of giving a response, of owing both God and one's fellow citizens an answer.

In his tale, experiencing his own separation from earthly happiness, by being accidentally in the place where another man's joy was supposed to be found, Despard picks up the thread of experience contained in the old, shared European box of tales:

> 'I am thinking, he said very slowly, of the garden of Eden, and the cherubim with the flaming sword…I am thinking of Hero and Leander. Or Romeo and Juliet. Of Theseus and Ariadne, and the Minotaur as well. Have you ever tried, my dear, to guess how, on that occasion the Minotaur was feeling?'
>
> (32–33)

Taking possession of the common European storehouse of shared tales, he wonders over empathy, the writer's uncanny task of putting herself in the place of another.

His nineteenth-century realism meets its challenging riposte in the tall tale, the fable, the parable, the purposeless anecdote, the gratuitous invention. In this way, Despard's tale acts as a mirror to all the narratives outlined in this essay, his falling into the web of narrative symptomatic of the processes that happen to the protagonists of Collins's, Le Fanu's, Edwards's, and M. R. James's fictions of the murder inn and the haunted hotel. If stories are what we tell each other to create, one by one, on the level of private exchange in a public place, a shared image of the world we inhabit together, then we might say that it is truly out of the fabric of stories that the concept of Europe has been constructed. Such stories may play out

anxieties, be acts of unease or aggression, designed to frame our disconnection. Or they may build up a common sense of the world, a continent of narratives, open in the exchange between text and reader, giving, as in Karen Blixen's/Isak Dinesen's story, an image of the tale as knit up in sociability, the individual experience refabricated as a gift, the other self mirrored in the hotel's passing encounter.

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