

“THE DEMON LOVER”: ELIZABETH BOWEN’S
“UNASHAMED RETELLING” OF “THE JOLLY CORNER”

by Terry W. Thompson

According to Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert in *Victorian Ghost Stories: An Oxford Anthology*, spirits and specters, apparitions and wraiths can often provide “obvious, though still potent, images of the lost past—past sins, past promises, past attachments, past regrets—and could be used to confront, and exorcize, the demons of guilt and fear” (ix). Perhaps no writer took those sentiments to heart more than Henry James, the American expatriate who, although most renowned for his social novels, nevertheless “produced ghost stories, increasingly oblique in style, throughout his career” (xix). Aside from *The Turn of the Screw*, his psychologically ambiguous novella, the author’s best known supernatural work is “The Jolly Corner.” First published in 1909, this slow-paced, elegiac tale—flush with what John Humma calls “those wonderfully ambient sentences that only James could write”—likewise details a psychologically equivocal exploration of a disturbed character’s psyche (ix). In this brooding narrative which plumbs “the caverns and weirs” of obsession (Hocks 5), an expatriate named Spencer Brydon returns to his native New York City after an unbroken absence of thirty-three years. According to Tony Tanner, “for James, life was, indeed, a house” (86). And this architectural metaphor certainly holds true for the repatriated Brydon: once back in the country of his birth, he becomes obsessed with the “house on the jolly corner” of the block—the long-vacant Manhattan brownstone in which he was born and reared (James 604). Filled with shadows, memories, and the dust of lost decades, this boarded-up estate becomes a “consecrated” shrine of sorts (604), a temple to the American way of life which was not pursued by Brydon, the now increasingly regretful expatriate. In essence, the newly returned exile seeks a way to come to terms with what Jamesian critic Millicent Bell has so famously described as “the rival reality of the un-lived life” (27).

Although Elizabeth Bowen professed frustration whenever she was compared with Henry James—either in style or subject matter—she nevertheless produced short stories that almost beg for comparison. For example, her “Hand in Glove” has been called by Clair Hughes an “unashamed retelling of James’s” first ghost story: “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes” (173). Likewise, despite some surface differences, in Bowen’s best known tale, “The Demon Lover,” she closely mirrors the theme, mood, and even the plaintive tone of “The Jolly Corner,” providing an “unashamed retelling” of James’s earlier, much better known account of an empty house and its transcendent effect upon a former occupant. Moreover, both skillfully wrought stories contain mysterious antagonists, ill-defined but horrifying, who alter the safe and unremarkable lives of middle-aged protagonists in crisis: one a regretful American bachelor, the other a bored English wife.

In *Elegant Nightmares: The English Ghost Story from Le Fanu to Blackwood*, Jack Sullivan argues that the finer supernatural tales always offer “urbanity, suaveness, and economy” (90). That trinity certainly applies to “The Jolly Corner.” As the story opens, Spen-

cer Brydon is complaining about how everything he encounters in the bustling streets of turn-of-the-century New York is “somehow a surprise” (James 603). Absent from his homeland for over thirty years, “the differences, the newnesses, the queernesses, above all the bignesses” both appall and excite this cultured newcomer who has spent the majority of his life in slow and measured living amid the café societies of London, Paris, and other Old World capitals, those urbane centers of a more refined existence—far removed from the raw Gotham in which he now finds himself (603). Yet even as Brydon disparages the boisterous New York he encounters upon his return, he cannot help but feel somehow envious of the city’s energy, noise and gritty vitality. Gradually but implacably, fixated on “bypassed alternatives” and “suppressed potentialities” (Bell 275), the emotionally conflicted Brydon begins to obsess over what he might have become had he stayed in the country of his birth for those three decades and sought his destiny in the land of the Rockefellers, the Gettys, and the Vanderbilts.

Such conjecture is the subject of Brydon’s conversations with an old friend, Miss Alice Staverton. Described as a woman of “impregnable stability” by Edward Wagenknecht in *Eve and Henry James* (204), her self-assurance is admired, even envied, by the unstable and doubt-ridden Brydon. A native New Yorker who never moved away, this feminine source of “comfort and support” (James 603) shares Brydon’s “communities of knowledge [. . .] of the other age” (607): those halcyon years before his long expatriation. He informs the attentive Miss Staverton of his gnawing regrets over missed opportunities: “If he had but stayed at home he would have anticipated the inventor of the sky-scraper. If he had but stayed at home he would have discovered his genius in time really to start some new variety of awful architectural hare and run it till it burrowed in a gold-mine” (607). Brydon discovers now, at age fifty-six, that he has a natural affinity for construction and engineering, but these rare gifts—“dormant in his own organism” (605) while living the soft life in Europe—have atrophied from disuse, have not been allowed their full potential. With growing self-reproach, he belittles himself as “some important letter unopened” (613), left ignored or simply tossed into life’s dead mail basket. For despite his European sophistication, his polish and elegance, he realizes that he is but “a dim secondary social success” when measured against the powerful barons of America’s Gilded Age (617).

According to Philip Van Doren Stern in *Great Ghost Stories*, “The impressions made in our earliest years lie deepest, and they shape the very structure of our being,” so that forever afterward, “In our dreams, we revisit the long-vanished places associated with our youth” (xxvi). Increasingly curious about what he might have become had he never left New York City in the first place, the haunted-by-the-past Brydon begins nightly visits to the house on the jolly corner, the vacant dwelling that propels him back to a time when he was young and all his avenues were still open. Irresistibly baited by “this particular wanton wonderment” (James 607), as he describes his obsession, once the sun has set and he is ensconced inside the cavernous estate with the heavy doors bolted behind him, Brydon begins to search, by the light of a single candle, for the ghostly phantom of the American capitalist he would have become had he never moved to Europe. Eventually, he hopes to come face to face with what he terms his “intimate adversary” (629), his vaporous and elusive *doppelgänger*: a lifelong New Yorker, bold and ruthless, but rich, powerful, charismatic—in short, the ethereal other who is everything the real Brydon, so timorous and epicene, is not.

As he explores the abandoned rooms and hallways of the old brownstone, Brydon exults in the conjuring fragrances of his childhood home; he also relishes the familiar scenes that greet him in the golden nimbus of his candle. He savors “the mere sight of the walls, mere shapes of the rooms, mere sound of the floors, mere feel, in his hand, of the old silver-plated knobs of the several mahogany doors [. . .] and the impalpable ashes of his long-extinct youth, afloat in the very air like microscopic motes” (James 611). Every furtive visit to the old estate thrills the returned expatriate with the prickling electricity of vivid memories, with the intoxicating recollections of his happy boyhood and all the wonderful promise that it held those many years before. These secret visits are mystical episodes, spiritual and invigorating, yet they are also oddly unnerving, for Brydon knows that he is not really alone in the old house: “Oh, ghosts—of course the place must swarm with them! I should be ashamed of it if it didn’t” (612).

Night after night, by the cold luminosity of an autumn moon, Brydon answers the siren call of the memory-laden mansion. And in time, he begins to sense what Phyllis Cerf Wagner and Herbert A. Wise term “the old fears,” those subtle dreads which, “even though refined and sublimated” by education and science, by civilization and progress, lie dormant in the human subconscious and patiently await their resurrection (xiv). When, after several all-night visits to the old house, the actual *doppelgänger* encounter occurs, it is not exactly what Brydon had anticipated or hoped. In fact, it is horrifying, nightmarish, shattering. Once he realizes that he actually has, in this game of spiritual “hide and seek” (James 621), cornered his ghostly other in an upstairs room and the beast has turned at bay, Brydon suffers a complete change of heart. His bravado quickly abandons him as “the question of danger” assumes primacy (627).

The haunted expatriate no longer wishes to confront his American double, to measure himself against it: “He saw [. . .] the central vagueness diminish, and he felt it to be taking the very form toward which, for so many days, the passion of his curiosity had yearned” (James 633). The vaporous figure that coalesces before him is “spectral yet human, a man of his own substance and stature [. . .] with his own power to dismay” (633). Brydon belatedly realizes that the primeval forces that dwell in darkness “are far easier summoned than eluded” (Sullivan 69). Before the terrified man can turn and flee, the phantom of an un-lived life hurls itself toward him: the specter “advanced as for aggression, and [Brydon] knew himself give ground” (James 635). Overwhelmed by “the roused passion of a life larger than his own, a rage of personality before which his own collapsed,” Brydon attempts to escape the overpowering presence of this virile reflection, but it is too late; swooning, flailing, “he felt the whole vision turn to darkness and his very feet give way. His head went round; he was going; he had gone” (635).

On the morning after the encounter with his American *doppelgänger*, Spencer Brydon regains consciousness by degrees and finds himself cradled in the warm lap of Alice Staverton. As he remembers what accosted him in the upper floors of the old house—what flung itself at and into him—he realizes that he has vanquished his personal demon, has assimilated his Edward Hyde. In the end, possessing what Adeline Tintner calls “a new altered conception of himself,” Spencer Brydon finally becomes whole, becomes one (199). Like Jacob on the morning after, he is bruised and wounded, but he is a stronger, better man for his night of spiritual wrestling. With a newly acquired “serenity of certitude” (James 636), the middle-aged prodigal is no longer obsessed with looking backward—

ever backward—and dreaming of an American-style life that never was. The house, with its haunting memories and alternate possibilities, no longer controls him; thirty years of regrets—symbolized by the “dominating, Faustian” *doppelgänger*—have evaporated like psychic dew (Fadiman 643). If, as Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert posit, a supernatural tale “deals with power,” how it is obtained and wielded, then by the conclusion of “The Jolly Corner,” the flesh-and-blood Brydon has wrested power away from his spectral rival and gained spiritual equilibrium (*English Ghost Stories*, xiii).

Elizabeth Bowen’s “The Demon Lover” has been praised by Douglass A. Hughes as “a masterful dramatization of acute psychological delusion, of the culmination of paranoia in a time of war” (411). As the tale opens, it is August 1941, and most of the population of greater London has been evacuated to the countryside, leaving the thoroughfares of Britain’s capital city strangely quiet, unsettling, forlorn. The protagonist of the story—an expatriate due to her forced evacuation—is Kathleen Drover. Married and the mother of three, she has returned alone to London for a few hours to run sundry errands. Once those tasks are accomplished, “Mrs. Drover went round to her shut-up house to look for several things she wanted to take” back to the country (Bowen 661). As she cautiously picks her way through the “once familiar street” of her old neighborhood (661), she discovers, like Spencer Brydon, that her city has changed, has been rendered barely recognizable: “[L]ooking about her [she] was more perplexed than she knew by everything that she saw” (661). Courtesy of German air raids, only “broken chimneys and parapets” remain where the homes of friends once stood (661). An eerie silence, the smell of an approaching rainstorm, and an “unfamiliar queerness” permeate what was, before the dislocation of war, a pleasant place to live, to raise children, and to dream of the future (661). Anxious to examine her “bomb-damaged Kensington mansion” after the long absence (Coates 309), she makes her way to the vacant estate, inserts her key, and enters the front door.

Once inside, she notes the many small reminders of her pleasurable pre-war life: “The yellow smoke-stain up the white marble mantelpiece, the ring left by a vase on the top of the escritoire, the bruise in the wallpaper where, on the door being thrown open widely, the china handle had always hit the wall” (Bowen 661). Everything Mrs. Drover—a middle-aged and admittedly “prosaic woman” (661)—sees, smells, and touches conjures up vivid memories of her past, of peaceful times, before the shock and displacement of war. Like an English Spencer Brydon, she begins to roam the deserted rooms of her former home in wistful, solitary reverie. She hears her footsteps ring on the antique flooring; she inhales the heady, memory-laden vapors of the past as they swirl round her in the wake of her dreamlike passing, offering poignant “traces of her long former habit of life” (661).

Then she spies something completely out of place in the boarded-up home: a letter—addressed to her—rests conspicuously on the hall table. This is bewildering since all of the family’s mail has been forwarded to their country address with the usual British efficiency. Because the caretaker has not recently entered her sealed house, Mrs. Drover cannot fathom the event: “Letters dropped in at doors of deserted houses do not fly or walk to tables in halls. They do not sit on the dust [. . .] with the air of certainty that they will be found” (664-5). Inexplicable and unexpected, the letter makes her shudder slightly, makes her feel somehow “intruded upon” in the ominous hush—and suddenly unsettling solitude—of what was once a warm and comforting house (662).

After going upstairs where there is more natural light—the electrical power, just as in

Spencer Brydon's old estate, has been disconnected—Mrs. Drover unseals the envelope. As a thunderstorm breaks overhead and heavy rain pummels the house, she reads the terse, handwritten message:

Dear Kathleen: You will not have forgotten that today is our anniversary, and the day we said. The years have gone by at once slowly and fast. In view of the fact that nothing has changed, I shall rely upon you to keep your promise. I was sorry to see you leave London, but was satisfied that you would be back in time. You may expect me, therefore, at the hour arranged. (Bowen 662)

The letter is signed simply "K." There is no postmark, no return address, just the vague reference to some scheduled rendezvous. Puzzled, she wonders for a moment what such a bizarre and cryptic message could mean. Then abruptly, a long-hidden memory—"buried by years of conventional marriage" (Calder 91)—rises from the depths of her consciousness: this memory affects her so powerfully that "her lips, beneath the remains of her lipstick," suddenly "go white" with shock (Bowen 662). Dropping the letter onto the naked mattress of her old bed, she steps over to her vanity mirror, gone dusty and unused since her evacuation to the countryside. She rubs clear a portion of the glass and gazes "urgently and stealthily" into the countenance of "a woman of forty-four, with eyes starting out under a hat-brim that had been rather carelessly pulled down" (662).

In her reflection, "this rueful woman," as Douglass A. Hughes describes her, beholds not a traditional *doppelgänger*, but instead, staring back from the mirror she sees the unflattering image of the middle-aged matron she never thought she would become (411). She turns away "from her own face as precipitately as she had gone to meet it" (Bowen 663). Then, psychically transported by the strange letter, Kathleen remembers the vibrant young girl she was when, twenty-five years earlier, she had been passionately and unreservedly in love with a charismatic, dashing—but dangerous and demanding—British soldier. In an intense and thrilling daydream, it is "August 1916" (663), and she is bidding a lingering farewell to the man who has smitten her, has so overwhelmed her emotions that she has ceased to be an autonomous self. At age nineteen, she belongs to this beguiling "K," this dominating martial figure; she is his to possess, to own, to control.

Described by Daniel V. Fraustino in "Seduction or Psychosis?" as "clearly a sadist of the most deranged kind" (486), the rakish soldier goes missing in action soon after being shipped off to the front in World War I. It is assumed that he rests among the many nameless dead buried in mass graves at such places as Verdun or Ypres: "Kathleen behaved well when, some months later, her fiancé was reported missing, presumed killed" (Bowen 664). She mourns long for this forceful young man whom she ironically knew "almost nothing about" (664); but her family members are considerably relieved to be rid of him, for they feared his temper and his strange power over her. Because she had been so infatuated with this khaki-clad Heathcliff, because she had made him the center of her universe, once he is dead, she suffers "a complete dislocation from everything"; it is not until age thirty-two that she is "greatly relieved to find herself being courted by William Drover" (664). According to Fraustino, Kathleen marries the solid, respectable William not out of love but "out of desperation after other suitors" fail to appear (484). Once the two are wed, they move into the big house in "this quiet, arboreal part of Kensington" (Bowen 664). The

next twelve years pass by pleasantly if unremarkably; their three children are born, “and they all lived till they were driven out by the bombs of the next war” (664).

With her “elegant and civilized” comportment (she never removes her gloves in the tale) Mrs. Drover is the reserved epitome of her social class (Wilson 8). Her husband is an excellent provider, and she is the mother of three healthy young sons; thus, she should be contented with how splendidly life has turned out for her. Still, very much like the conflicted Spencer Brydon before her, Kathleen—once she is prompted by the letter—cannot stop dreaming of what might have been, cannot stop pensively, longingly “looking over her shoulder at the stripped bed on which” the mysterious epistle lies—open, bold, beckoning (Bowen 663). Her Kensington life, while pleasant, is routine, “circumscribed,” and achingly safe (664). In her mid-forties, she is admired as a woman of “utter dependability” who serves as “the keystone of her family,” but romance and passion are conspicuously absent from all thoughts of her husband and their conventional life together (665). According to Fraustino, Bowen’s tale hints at “the repetitious character” (484) of Kathleen’s life as well as a “deep and lingering dissatisfaction with her marriage” (485).

This contrasts sharply with the exhilarating relationship Kathleen had with the dashing soldier a quarter century before; and memories of that long-ago liaison slowly begin to consume the upper-class wife and mother—just as Spencer Brydon was consumed by dreams of the exciting American life that had passed him by. Coloring with arousal, she remembers how the soldier treated her at their last assignation, how he pressed her hand into his army tunic, roughly and “without very much kindness,” until her palm was pricked by one of his brass buttons (Bowen 663). She recalls—with an erotic tingling—how she felt a “complete suspension of *her* existence during that August week” twenty-five summers before, when she had been swept up in a whirlwind of forbidden passion, of dangerous submission to a will so much stronger than her own (665).

According to Edith Wharton, herself a virtuoso of the supernatural genre, “only continuity and silence” are necessary to precipitate a spectral episode (9); and Kathleen Drover is steeped in both these essentials while alone in the old house. Before long, a sense of unease begins to penetrate her recollections of youthful eroticism as she ponders the motive of the letter writer: “He was never kind to me, not really,” she confesses to the ether. “I don’t remember him kind at all. Mother said he never considered me. He was set on me, that was what it was—not love” (Bowen 665). A sudden rush of wind from downstairs brings her out of her reverie, brings her back to the present. And like the skittish Brydon, she decides at the apex of “this crisis” to flee (664), thus avoiding a confrontation with whatever might lurk in her former home.

Kathleen gathers up the items she had wished to recover from the house and ties them in the neat bundles of a middle-aged wife and mother who is back in control of her emotions. She decides to “walk calmly down” the stairs and out the front door “to where the square gave on the main road” (Bowen 665). Even though twilight has come and all is sodden from the warm rain, there will be other people there, she reasons, other expatriates come to London to check on their boarded-up properties. Amid that “ordinary flow of life” (666)—which suddenly seems so attractive to her, so reassuring—she can find a taxi with an obliging driver who will go back inside the house and collect her packages. Once clear of her former home—once far removed from that mesmeric letter lying so suggestively on the naked bed—she will be safe from whatever lurks inside the house, be it the

phantom of an unlived life or just a gust of wind through the shutters.

Her calmly formulated plan, however, fails horrifically. After making her way down to the taxi stand, she sees a black London cab facing away from her. Relieved, emotionally spent, she approaches it, opens the door, and climbs into the welcoming snugness of the backseat; but before she can speak to the driver, he roars off on his own. Annoyed, she leans “forward to scratch at the glass panel” which separates “the driver’s head from her own” (Bowen 666). The driver brakes, reaches back, and slides open the partition: “Through the aperture driver and passenger, not six inches between them, remained for an eternity eye to eye. Mrs. Drover’s mouth hung open for some seconds before she could issue her first scream” (666). As the black taxi, “accelerating without mercy,” thunders off “into the hinterland of deserted streets,” she keeps on screaming until the distance muffles her cries for help; and then she is seen and heard no more (666).

Bowen’s signature “multiplicity” of meaning, declares Chris Hopkins, frequently “leaves the reader with much work to do in the way of understanding the text” (114). Despite such ambiguity, one thing is absolutely clear at the end of “The Demon Lover”: unlike Spencer Brydon, her backward-gazing Edwardian precursor, Kathleen Drover is never reconciled with her lost past. She cannot overcome her regrets, assimilate an unlived life, and become whole—no matter how tightly she wraps her packages. According to Edward Mitchell, in much of Bowen’s fiction, “When the romantic imagination is unable to adjust its subjective vision to the world outside itself, dislocation, aberration, destruction are the consequences” (45). For Mrs. Kathleen Drover—wife, mother, socialite, dreamer—the potent allure of the sensual, passionate life she did not get to enjoy steals her away, devours her. There will be no rescue on the morning after, no sunrise of deliverance from her erotic longings. In the end, this comely maiden turned matron cannot make peace with her past. Instead, as Mitchell warns, she is utterly destroyed by her inability to escape it.

Just as in “The Jolly Corner,” the ghostly manifestation that finally makes a dramatic, life-altering appearance in “The Demon Lover” is ambiguous, dark, fleetingly rendered. Consistent with “the unbroken sense of mystery and enigma” that so permeates Bowen’s supernatural tales, the driver of the taxicab is never identified as a true specter (Sullivan 134). Similarly, the amorphous fog that attacks Spencer Brydon in the upper stories of the old brownstone may indeed be a real ghost, a genuine apparition of his unlived American life made manifest from another realm, another plane of existence. Just as tenable, however, is the idea that the diaphanous silhouette which appears out of the dark—so ill-defined and capillary—is merely a delusion caused by too much imagination and too little sleep on the part of the newly nocturnal Brydon. Via either interpretation—the actual or the occult—James’s tale still works, and works superbly.

In concert, the abductor of Mrs. Drover, the demon lover of the title, might be no more supernatural than a Chesterfield sofa. One possibility is that “K” really is her long lost lover, the dashing soldier who vanished without a trace in the First World War. He has simply—and perversely—come to reclaim his betrothed after a twenty-five-year absence, during which he watched and waited, stalked and followed. In such a reading, the living, breathing fiancé from Kathleen’s past shows up to kidnap her; and he will—according to Daniel Fraustino’s conventional murder mystery reading of the text—kill the hapless woman on the silver anniversary of their parting as punishment for her lack of fidelity (486). Robert L. Calder, disagreeing with Fraustino’s literal interpretation, claims that

the story should be “looked at as allegory,” with Kathleen representing an isolated and vulnerable Britain, while the soldier who reveals his face to her in the final paragraph is merely the dreadful embodiment of war (95). However, there is enough suppleness in Bowen’s narrative to support the traditional reading: that the taxi-driving kidnapper is an authentic revenant. John Coates argues as much in “The Moral Argument of Elizabeth Bowen’s Ghost Stories,” declaring that it is without doubt the “ghost of the First World War soldier” who spirits away the screaming socialite (309). Via such an interpretation, the handsome Tommy, killed in action and buried in foreign soil, nonetheless remembers his quarter-century-old promise to his beloved Kathleen. Hence, his loyal ghost, or hideous corpse, makes the long journey back—like countless other literary wraiths—to keep a vow which he had made in the full blush of life. Such post-burial dedication is a pet theme in classic ghost stories, from Edith Nesbit’s “John Charrington’s Wedding” (1891) to Algernon Blackwood’s “The Tryst” (1917) to Edith Wharton’s “Bewitched” (1925).

In the final tally, it matters little whether or not the demon lover in Bowen’s most famous tale is a demented stalker who has waited twenty-five years for revenge or is a genuine ghost with erotic designs on his former lover. For it is the evocative Jamesian theme of regret over a life unlived, a destiny unfulfilled, that reverberates so tellingly in every line and image of Bowen’s ambiguous little masterpiece, a tale which, just like “The Jolly Corner,” “traffic[s] concurrently in apparitions and pathology,” in creatures of flesh and shadow (Leithauser 13). Much like Spencer Brydon—three decades and two world wars before her—no matter how many distractions she seeks and no matter how hard she struggles “not to keep looking behind” her at what might have been (Bowen 666), Mrs. Kathleen Drover, late of Kensington, is consumed by the specter of the life she did not get to share with the dangerous man who was her first love: the irresistible incarnation of youthful passion and scandalous behavior, a Peck’s Bad Boy in epaulettes. Be he flesh or spirit, devoted lover or spiteful demon, he is still—a quarter of a century after their last encounter—the very nexus of her psyche, the possessor of her heart, and, in the end, her body as well.

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PRACTICE

"Solfegietto" stretches
 along the piano rack,
 notes tempting as chocolates.
 My daughter plays fast
 as the strength of fourteen
 years can race, then flexes
 her long fingers, joints
 and muscles liquid.
 I play it slowly
 pause in the valleys
 between the runs, linger
 on the lyric moment
 of her quickening age.