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The Lies of the Land: The Alluvial Formalities of Gothic East Anglia

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Abstract

East Anglia is an evasive region; with its stretches of grey shingle that give way to silt and water, isolated marshes and great, flat panoramas that are literally falling into the sea. This article will show that East Anglia is a broader and more cohesive site of Gothic tradition and possibility than has previously been recognized, even if that possibility is found both textually and topographically in the incohesive, the ephemeral and the immaterial. We will also suggest that the short form is how this has so far been achieved – most famously in the short ghostly tales of M. R. James; more recently in Matthew Holness's unsettling short story 'Possum' (2013) and his 2018 film of the same name – and is, in fact, the most appropriate form for this act of textual production.

Key Words: M.R. James; Holness; Short Fiction; East Anglia; Coastal

'His mouth was full of sand and stones, and his teeth and jaw were broken to bits.'[1] Paxton's demise at the end of M.R. James's 'A Warning to the Curious' (1925) sees the form of his face shattered; his means of warning others about his find – a Saxon Crown that is supposed to guard the coast from invasion – is structurally disassembled and filled with the silt and shingle of the East Anglian landscape he had been digging in. Scholars, writers and readers alike have spent a good deal of time matching James's narrative locations and localities to their real flesh and blood counterparts – an act that speaks towards a grasp at recuperation in the face of absence. Mark Fisher, Adam Scovell and Sarah K. Marr are amongst those who join in an

emerging 'Sebaldian' pilgrimage that tracks the settings of James's original stories and those used in subsequent iterations – namely the shoot locations of the BBC's 'A Ghost Story for Christmas' [1971-78] versions of these tales. James's use of this landscape, nonetheless, has often been treated as an idiosyncrasy, viewed in terms of the connection between the author and a particular topography, rather than as part of a wider regional tradition that sits within the realm of the Gothic.

Lucie Armitt's recent work on James's stories has been a significant corrective to the critical trend to either fixate solely on the fine particulars of the region or jettison its significance entirely. Armitt reflects that in these ghostly tales 'Suffolk begins to give shape to an otherwise faceless but known predator: the monstrously avenging, unstoppably advancing North Sea'.[2] In this reading, the sea – eliciting climatological and sociological anxieties through its erosion of the East Anglian coastline – becomes ghoulish in James's fictive reconnoiters of this location. We aim, in this paper, to expand on Armitt's reading, exploring how the region more broadly is aligned with the Gothic in James's Suffolk stories and their BBC adaptations. We will also examine this alignment in a more recent depiction of the area; Matthew Holness's terse and emotionally fraught feature, *Possum* (2018) – adapted from his 2008 short story of the same name, written for a collection on the Uncanny – which sees puppeteer Phillip (Sean Harris) return to his squalid coastal family home in Norfolk and struggle with past traumas. Through this exploration, we posit that East Anglia is not just home to a series of one-off eerie stories but is a broader and more cohesive site of Gothic tradition and possibility, even if that possibility is found both textually and topographically in the (often incohesive and ephemeral) relationship between the material and the immaterial.

We will also suggest that the short form specifically (i.e. the short story and approximately hour-length television drama or film featurette) is how this relationship has so far been achieved, and that it is, in fact, the most appropriate form for this act of production. Just as

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Richard Davenport-Hines establishes the Gothic as 'an evasive genre', we might think of short stories and hour-long featurettes as evasive modes; while East Anglia, in turn, is an evasive region, which inspires and informs texts that capture this quality.[3] Paul March-Russell notes that '[e]ven though the term 'short story' implies a plotted narrative, written as opposed to recited, writers tended to regard themselves as producing the modern-day equivalent of the folktale'.[4] The short form thus becomes a bridging form that connects the intangibility and cultural ephemerality of oral tales with the tangibility and literary permanence of written text, just as James's ghosts seem to bridge the material and immaterial – presence and absence – and the erasure and persistence of the East Anglian region.

M. R. James and East Anglia Ontography

East Anglia is an idiosyncratic place, with a particular history of flooding, invasions and attempts to counteract its more difficult properties with human engineering projects; as Katie Ritson points out: '[t]he low-lying terrain of the North Sea coast is [...] a frontier between human and non-human forces, one that stretches across time, as well as through space.'[5] The shingled, salted threshold of the shore connected by waterways to prone sodden stretches further inland required past inhabitants to travel by wherry and on stilts even in the inner-regions.[6] Instead of fog, East Anglia has sea-frets that blur instead of blanket, rendering the edges of things incomplete or invisible. Historical peat drainage has led to subsidence and storm surges, while rising sea levels threaten the geological and geographical integrity of the region. It is not, of course, without folklore or supernatural histories also. The region has a well-documented link to witchcraft in the figure of witch-hunter Matthew Hopkins, to demonic folklore in the figure of the demon dog Black Shuck, and to haunting in the figure of the ghost of executed murderer Black Toby. However, despite their long history, these stories and fables do not yet seem to have added up to more than the sum of their parts.

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If, as James Bell states, '[g]eographical accuracy is of little significance in the Gothic; what is important is the landscape's expressive potential', then attempts to be specific, to locate James's stories in the 'real' and recuperate the particular, at the expense of a wider Gothic conceptualization of the East Anglian landscape and culture, seem to be acting contrary to what the landscape is doing or, indeed, hiding from us in form and fiction.[7] Although Ritson has produced a cohesive exploration of a range of literature as connected to the North-Sea Lowlands at large, it is the Gothic in particular that, we argue, has become a key mode for manifesting East Anglia in fiction.

In James's 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad' (1904) – set in Burnstowe, a fictional stand-in for Felixstowe in Suffolk – the protagonist, Parkins, is described as a 'Professor of Ontography'.[8] James does not provide any further elucidation of this discipline, however. Penelope Fitzgerald offers the most straight-forward definition with 'the study of things as they are', a sort of ontology without the metaphysics.[9] Brian Cowlishaw seems to put more emphasis upon '-graphy' than 'onto-' when he writes that the 'invented title suggests he [Parkins] studies what-writing-is, which indicates his investment in words, reading, writing, and investigation in general.'[10] *Oxford Living Dictionaries*, meanwhile, currently defines ontography as a form of geography which 'deals with the human response to the natural environment'.[11] This might be said to be what Sarah K. Marr attempts with her comprehensive essay 'Notes for the Curious' in which she undergoes the same journey as Paxton in 'A Warning to the Curious'. Marr collects and collates a series of personal photographs, geographical reference points, historical sources and ephemera into a footnote system that becomes a kind of narrative network itself, sitting beneath James's story, that illuminates how much we can (and cannot) know about the reality of that tale.[12] In James's story, the fictional Seaburgh stands in for the real Aldeburgh. Marr not only maps out the story from location to location, but also works out exact corresponding elements of space and time in an extended

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ontographical process – including the position of the tides – from the sparse details provided by James. Marr's hypertextual approach has the curious effect of binding together the disparate temporal and geographical elements of the story with her own visitation, blurring the fictional Seaburgh with the real Aldeburgh so that the East Anglia of the text becomes a kind of liminal heterotopia, suspended between a material and an imaginary time and space. This might be read as a disavowal of the disappearance of the region or, perversely, as a means of cannily capturing the region's alluvial qualities.

The OED page for 'ontography' does not mention James by name – a notable omission since the word did not exist until he coined it. Indeed, Graham Harman asserts that James's neologism was merely intended in a 'spirit of mockery'.[13] Thus perceiving the term as available for appropriation, Harman goes on to define ontography in his own terms as a school of thought which 'maps the basic landmarks and fault lines in the universe of objects', as opposed to 'a geography dealing with stock natural characters such as forests and lakes'.[14] These competing definitions of ontography seem to circle questions of cultural geography and whether meaning adheres within the material realm of nature or within the psychologies and behaviors of those (human and non-human) beings that inhabit it. The fact that some critics interpret James's neologism as referring to the study of matter without metaphysics, while others interpret it as referring to that which lies beyond, behind or above such brute reality, is suggestive of how the relationship between the material and the immaterial is not as binary as we might first think.

Tim Cresswell defines space as a 'more abstract concept than place.'[15] Place is constructed materially and often psychologically or habitually; it has meaning. Space is a realm without meaning, an undefined expanse lacking human curation or delineation. 'A Warning to the Curious' begins in what seems like place, in a distinct geography – heath, gorse, woods, but also a church, a railway terminus, a street, a windmill – specifics that cumulatively affect meaning and separate the 'commonplace details' of the town from the landscape around it.[16]

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Landscape operates here as space, differentiated neatly from the markers of place by its generality and volume. The narrator describes the land around the town in terms of modest, paired referentials: a sand road parallels the railway line, heath sits opposite firs, a ridge ends in a mound – and by its function as something to be looked at rather than utilized or entered. Ritson suggests that '[t]he word landscape is an aesthetic term, describing a place that is referenced by the human eye that sees it'.[17] Landscape, then, is both the general 'space' beyond or behind 'place', but also a surface, an aesthetic construction that speaks to a *glossing over* of that space. Information about what lies beyond these specifics comes in a subsequent passage, the pairings not jostling for exposure like the features of the town, but plotted out in a plain, underwhelming fashion. Mary Butts suggests that James:

> has an affection also for some very plain [...] English landscapes it takes a long time to appreciate and understand. Scenes that have an affinity with Constable, and which are not there, like mountains and savage valleys and rainbow-filled cataracts and eternal snows to awe and stun us and take away our breath. That ask instead years of patient contemplation and silent love […][18]

This is not the typical Gothic landscape that renders, in its sublimity, the over-awed observer voiceless, but something dormant and supine, deceptively contained in the realm of the aesthetic, which does not strike silence into the viewer but insidiously generates it before materializing such voicelessness in the form of Paxton at the tale's end.

James also starts 'A Warning' with a typical Gothic narratorial layering. The central story at hand is mantled as the reader is asked to first consider Seaburgh and its particulars; the tale is then connected back to a man who is apparently recounting his experiences to the narrator who then relates them to us. This Gothic cumulation is a form of oral-literary palimpsest. The marshes and dykes of Seaburgh recall, we are told, the Medway marshes of Kent that open Dickens's *Great Expectations*, suggesting that Seaburgh itself – already a mimeo of Aldeburgh – is viewed from the beginning as another place entirely, transposed over a different region and the echo of another fiction. Ritson suggests that '[t]he idea of the

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palimpsest is one that comes from literature; it describes the ghosts of former texts that resist total overwriting.'[19] Seaburgh here becomes, then, a gathering of cultural geographical anchors and landmarks over time, defined against the opaque film of landscape around it. However, given that a palimpsest is a scaffold of ghosts, and this story and its location are built upon unconfirmed or fictional origins, any solidity we might wish to hold on to here is soon lost. Over the course of 7500 words, where near all of the concrete geographical detail is stacked tightly in the first few hundred words, all of the tangible construction disintegrates and geographical specificities are pared back until we are left only with a space that seems to both stretch toward the interminable and contracts into a hostile, skeletal disappearing line: 'when you are past the tower, you know there is nothing but shingle for a long way – not a house, not a human creature, just that spit of land, or rather shingle, with the river on your right and the sea on your left.'[20] The repeated adverbial phrase 'not a' and its positioning here suggests that the thinly-rendered and formed peninsula is actually being defined in a kind of polarity to such features – houses, people – as opposed to their just being absent within it.

Likewise, if ontography deals with the 'human response to the natural environment' and maps out landmarks and fault lines as part of an ontological universe, then the landscape here seems to be both encapsulating and defying such processes as they happen, the shingle 'not' land because it is shingle – an uneven, shifting mass of small, rounded pebbles and other human and natural detritus, often on top of or mixed with sand – but not river nor sea either. Mark Fisher reflects that towards the end of Lawrence Gordon Clark's 1972 television adaptation of 'Warning', as Paxton tries to escape from the pursuing spirit of William Ager, 'it often seems that the two figures are the sole representational elements in an abstract space'.[21] The use of selective focus here negates the cinematic space, rendering the landscape impressionistic.[22] It is as though the landscape stubbornly refuses to become an environment which Paxton might move *within* and, in so doing, find a space to hide inside. Yet this

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inhospitality is not merely a trick of the camera lens but belongs to the landscape of East Anglia itself.

Finally, at the end of James' tale, all we are left with is the fragments of Paxton's broken face, rent asunder by the spirit of William Ager, last guardian of the crown, and Ager again – by dint of his skeletal manifestation and his lineage as traced in a family prayer book that goes back to the original Nathanial Ager in 1754 – seems to, like the East Anglican coast, keep an intermediate state between form and disintegration. A line in Nathanial's original entry in the book (part of a poem frequently found on gravestones and in family books throughout the 18th and 19th centuries), '[w]hen I am dead and in my Grave, and all my bones are rotton', suggests that even his skeleton – the calcified portion of the body that usually lasts after death – has or will have crumbled.[23] Ager's spirit, then, with its half-decomposed feet and 'lungless laugh' that runs through ever-thickening mist before Paxton, walks upon the necrosed forms of his ancestors. The spirit, his skeletal kin within the landscape and that landscape itself, are all part of a perpetual process of dissolution that captures both the fleshy (or boney) qualities of people and the material, rigid qualities of land and how they rot, collapse or resist such formation concurrently.[24]

Connecting this enervated spirit with the bed-cloth figure in 'Oh, Whistle', Andrew Hock Soon Ng suggests that '[t]hese "ghosts" are not merely a physical threat but an ontological one, with the disturbing implication of a lack of differentiation between human and other species'.[25] This is also touched on by H. P. Lovecraft, in his assertion that James, '[i]n inventing a new type of ghost [...] has departed considerably from the conventional Gothic tradition; for where the older stock ghosts were pale and stately, and apprehended chiefly through the sense of sight, the average James ghost is lean, dwarfish, and heavy [...] and usually *touched* before it is *seen*'.[26] Although the spirits in both these Suffolk stories are actually seen and then felt, they do not, as Lovecraft recognizes, function as typical ghosts. If,

as Paul March-Russell suggests, a ghost 'is literally a thing without substance' then the blind personage in 'Oh, Whistle' with its face of '*crumpled linen*' and the manifestation of Ager in 'A Warning' both abnegate a more ethereal, tenuous form of spectrality in favor of a more material presentation.[27] Ager is described as both as 'the thing' and, significantly, 'the other thing' – the narrator/recounter in this instance framing himself also as 'thing' if Ager is the 'other'.[28] The spirit has fooled Paxton into following it by convincing him that it is the recounter calling him forth. Before and behind Paxton, then, are things that look like people and people who become things, Paxton himself also ending up dismantled and part of the landscape. While, as Butts suggests, 'the essence of his [James'] art is a sudden, appalling shock of visibility. The intangible become more than tangible, unspeakably real, solid, present', underneath that solid presence is omission and erosion.[29]

At the conclusion of 'A Warning', we hear that '[a] verdict of willful murder by some person or person's unknown' is drawn, the identity of the killer as supposedly unknowable as the setting that bears witness to the crime.[30] The fact that later 'everything was gone from the sands' provides further evidence of the surface closing up over the unknown, filling it out with a self-contained nothingness.[31] The narrative too seemingly collapses and we lose clear sight of Paxton – his lack of connections creates, in his narrative, a 'No Thoroughfare' – as well as for the original teller of the tale with the story's ending – 'And I have never been at Seaburgh, or even near it since' – both conflating the narrator and recounter and reducing what we are left with to a retreating, fearful admission not clearly belonging to either, the written text all that links the two.[32] This lack of solidity and the use of both forms of elision is something March-Russell identifies as a formal fixture in the short story, particularly the Gothic short story. He states that in the short form '[p]resence can slide into absence, meaning into insignificance. This elision is shrouded in the disembodiment of the ghost. There may also be a pleasure in reading and writing short stories that is drawn towards the [...] hollowing out of

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experience' – something exacerbated in James' use of layered narratives and documents to grapple with the spectral.[33]

The often-repeated suggestion that Gothic signifies excess and overwhelm becomes reworked in the short form, where there is no room for the typical or expected Gothic set-pieces, looming or expansive locations, narrative trickery or heightened emotional states that suggest most immediately the Gothic enterprise. The short work pressurizes its concerns, working intensively to produce the desired effects, the 'hollowing out' of experience or meaning (to return to Paxton's mouth, filled with detail so fine and inconcrete that it ends up standing for nothing but itself). Sam Wiseman contends that,

> [t]he unnerving quality of James' stories, then, derives from his mastery of suggestion: in refusing to make the nature of the evil or malevolence at the center of his tales explicit, he invites readers to project their own fears and insecurities onto the narrative.[34]

Given that the short form bridges both the spoken word and written text, and presence and absence, it acts here as a formal representation of that duality and ambivalence. These stories then create a kind of textual and littoral space that connects form to style and region to narrative while concurrently rendering these elements as an abstraction where specificity hides absence. The surface collapses into the intangible and the flat line of the horizon is abstracted into neither sky nor sea nor land but something that becomes all and none congruently.

Harman's definition of ontography acts, therefore, as a kind of metaphysical rebuke to geography and its materialist assumptions. Harman establishes this philosophical position clearly in the opening chapter of *The Quadruple Object* (2011) when he writes starkly of materialism that it 'is the hereditary enemy of any object-oriented philosophy'.[35] In his more recent work, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*, Harman makes his radical democratization of the object as the subject of philosophical inquiry clear: 'objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, non-human, natural, cultural, real or

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fictional'.[36] Harman doubles down upon his earlier assertion that 'pixies, nymphs, and utopias must be treated in the same terms as sailboats and atoms', enfolded within the same ontology.[37] This is the reason why he can refer to object-oriented philosophy as a 'theory of everything' in his title and it is also the reason why his positive application of the term 'ontography' towards his own work is less an arbitrary borrowing of James's phraseology than his words imply. Like Harman, Parkins in 'Oh, Whistle' believes he has a philosophical *grasp* upon the world, which cannot exceed his ontological reach. Yet in his attempted repression of the material world, Parkins finds it cannot be so easily dismissed. Indeed, the stories' East Anglican locations have an unfigurable materiality, which is tied to their instability and alluvial composition. This is further embedded in March-Russell's framework for short fiction, which states that, '[a]lthough the use of incidents such as epiphany or single effect are often thought of as when character is most fully revealed, epiphanies are frequently deflated so that the protagonist's self-revelation is drained of significance'.[38] When Parkins uncovers the whistle and attempts to decipher its inscription before blowing it, or indeed when Paxton unearths the crown he knew was buried in Seaburgh, the knowledge that should, theoretically, come with such finds does not follow, and instead these protagonists are instead tormented and destabilized: Paxton dies and Parkins' 'views on certain points are less clear cut than they used to be'.[39] Any philosophical or theoretical grasp they had on their surroundings and beliefs is punctured by an interaction with the material, and character and narrative begin then to disintegrate rather than being shored-up for further development and denouement in these short works.

In James's stories, the landscape seems to toy with and resist this philosophical grasp using material objects themselves to enact its retreat into the resolutely unknowable and immaterial. *Things* – like the crown in 'A Warning' and the pipe in 'Oh, Whistle' – should remain buried. Significantly here, these objects are given up easily: the pipe in Burnstowe is found with little effort in some half-covered masonry; the crown in Seaburgh requires a little more effort but is

located easily enough and emerges without much issue. The land seems to treacherously offer up these knowable, material relics, uncovering them itself to set in motion the irreversible consequences suffered by Parkins and Paxton. As we have seen, returning the crown offers no relief for Paxton, while Parkins is forever changed by his experiences.

This canniness, the land bestowed with an instinctual will toward self-preservation in the face of human settlement or traversing, speaks to its own reality and history. Rebecca Pinner, in charting the Medieval history of East Anglian waterways, identifies that 'water was […] both a means of defense and East Anglia's greatest vulnerability. It facilitated trade and communication but also invasion', the fenland in particular 'possessed of the most compelling ambiguity'.[40] This environment has never been secure, and never allows for complete security, even as it offers up elemental resources. These stories' lessons then seem to be that attempting to overcome man's position in relation to his surroundings – to grasp at the ungraspable – is a form of transgression against a landscape which can easily take away what it gives. Hock Soon Ng suggests that 'James succeeds in demonstrating that what his characters fear most is the very real possibility that they be reabsorbed into nature'.[41] By taking the crown and the whistle, therefore, Paxton and Parkins are dragged out of their epistemological human spheres and drawn into the dirt or onto the sand, shortening or condensing that stretch of time between past and present through the push and pull of these historical relics and the ebb and suck of these fluctuating regions. Ultimately, trying to create or locate meaning here (the East Anglian coast) is a futile endeavor because the overarching effect/affect of the region is one of abstraction and lost moorings. That both Parkin and the unknown author and recounter in 'A Warning' choose to holiday there speaks to an imprudent conceptualization of East Anglia as pleasant, safe or restful, a happily-nothing place, with little chance of incident or overwhelm.

Parkins' belief in the reach of his ontological system is emphasized more clearly in Jonathan Miller's 1968 BBC adaptation of 'A Warning' through a key repeated line. Here,

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Parkins, played as a senior academic by Michael Hordern, pronounces in a distinctly self-satisfied aphorism that '[t]here are more things in philosophy than are dreamt of in Heaven and Earth'.[42] Hordern's embodiment of Parkins is more hectoring than James's figure as written on the page. While James describes Parkins as 'young, neat, and precise in speech', Hordern mumbles and mutters his lines.[43] Consequently, much of his speech is made up of qualifying phrases muttered aloud as though to reassure himself of the stability and reality of his surroundings. Such words are more often directed at objects than they are at other people. 'Chair', he pronounces, as he draws it to the desk. 'Now, what have we got?' he seems to ask his bag as he pulls out his packed lunch at the beach. Mike Taylor and his co-host Will Ross characterize Parkins as solipsistically concerned with only 'what he can see and what he can understand around him', with 'hard and fast evidence that he can nail down'.[44] Ross and Taylor position Parkins in this regard as standing in opposition to the supernatural, but their choice of words also suggest that Parkins' solipsism reaches further than this to exclude those aspects of the material world estranged from him in time and space. The coastal landscape of East Anglia cannot be 'nail[ed] down' because it is a constant process of slippage – a slippage mirrored in Parkins' language which often moves from meaning to pure phonetic nonsense, such as his 'phenomenon', which becomes 'phenome*non'*, and then 'e-non', before finally risking collapse into the professor's interminable 'pom pom pom'-ing typical of his hemming and hawing.[45]

Parkins dangerously underestimates the way in which the material world is characterized by constant change and flux rather than fixity. This short-sightedness is visually allegorized by an abrupt cut from the breakfast table to an extremely close, shallow focus shot taken almost at sand-level, of Parkins' feet stamping up the beach. However, instead of compacting the sand into place, a chunk of sand is dislodged, and a grainy plume sent flying upwards. The eerie precariousness of this East Anglican coastal terrain is captured in Fisher's scholarship, reflecting that:

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> [...] coastal defenses will surely only retard the process of erosion, not defeat it, especially when it is accelerated by global warming […] One has the uncanny experience of walking through spaces that, perhaps within only two generations, will persist solely as memories. Soon, this will all be an absence.[46]

This sense of the always already absent landscape is captured in the film by cinematographer Dick Bush in the sequence in which Parkins is pursued across the dunes by a shrouded figure in his dreams. The screen is dominated by negative space and the beach seems sparse and empty, defined and partitioned only by the coastal defense groynes, which intrude vertically within the frame, under which Parkins attempts to hide. These seem almost tragically, laughably inadequate in the face of the pursuer, just as they seem inadequate in the face of rising sea levels and coastal erosion. One might ask whether Parkins' retrieval of the buried whistle or Paxton's theft of the crown is what climate scientists refer to as a 'tipping point', which abruptly and irreversibly accelerates global warming and the loss of safety and stability for humanity and other species. Indeed, Armitt locates this threat specifically at the shoreline, suggesting that in these stories coastal erosion is the primary 'warning' and that 'Suffolk begins to give shape to an otherwise faceless but *known* predator: the monstrously avenging, unstoppably advancing North Sea'.[47] However, solely externalizing the threat here as the encroaching sea would seem to undermine somewhat the malignancy that James – and Miller – generate within the landscape more broadly, which is certainly littoral but also topographical and cultural, these elements interpermeating to produce this reticent, distrustful and self-preserving region that not only generates ghosts but seems to use them programmatically – advancing as surely as the tide – to keep people from digging too deep into it. These spirits manifest the slippage between definition and its lack, between thing and no-*thing*.

Fragmented Land and Thought in Matthew Holness's 'Possum'/*Possum*

James himself, in his study of the region, states that, '[i]n dealing with the larger county of Norfolk I can hardly hope to escape the censure of those who know the land and its literature.

Both are large and full of matter'.[48] A recent example of such fiction is the 2018 film adaptation of Matthew Holness's 2008 short story 'Possum', which is neither large nor full of matter, the region depicted as desolate, claustrophobic and empty. *Possum* sees a puppeteer return to his Norfolk childhood home, bearing with him a puppet with spider's legs and a human face that resembles his own. He constantly tries to get rid of it – throwing it in water, burning it, even cutting it up in the original short story, and continually fails. The narrator reflects, in an image repeated in the film: 'I watched Possum's face blacken and bubble, collapsing gradually into soft clear rivers of wax'.[49] However – both at the end of the written text and part way through the film narrative – after each apparent destruction, the puppet returns, once again reformed and full of uncanny life. Although slightly different in their presentations of central character Phillip, these two iterations of the same text present a grubby material return of repressed trauma, bound and unbound within the emptiness or – to use Fisher's term – *eeriness* of East Anglian landscapes.[50]

Fisher explains that '[t]he sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or [...] nothing present when there should be something'.[51] He reflects that 'we find the eerie more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human' and that such moments 'allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside'.[52] In this mode, eerie, emptied-out places might allow us to reach more psychological inner spaces, moving from the inhuman to the human (and potentially confusing or destabilizing the two).

Possum, both film and story, depicts a domestic location that sits between space and place, between the architectural interior and the elemental exterior. Upon returning to his childhood Norfolk home, Phillip notes: 'The boards were still damp, the floor slimy, and a strong odor of paste hung heavily in the cramped room. I'd opened a window – the weather was indeed horribly mild – and switched the overhead bulb off, favoring darkness for what I was about to

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do'.[53] Dirt and damp have both infiltrated his home and been sustained by the fetid habits and human atmosphere of the squatting Christie, who becomes the tobacco-stained and phlegm-ridden Uncle Morris (Alun Armstrong) in the film. '[H]orribly mild' speaks both to the misguided understanding of East Anglia as pleasant or unproblematic, and the behaviour of troubled Phillip – particularly in the film – who resists confronting Morris until the latter expedites proceedings and assaults Phillip at the film's end, something we find out has happened before in Phillip's childhood. On 'A Warning to the Curious', Patrick J. Murphy notes that '[t]he degeneration of living youth into half-excavated artifact suggests that the corrosive memorializing of Ager lays waste and lithifies the identity of the dead – transforming their living remembrance into something damaged and strange'.[54] This is seemingly the same process we see in *Possum*, only with the still-living. '[H]alf-excavated' captures the way in which Phillip is half-paralyzed, both developmentally because of his childhood experiences and physically in the way he carries himself, his arms barely ever moving away from his body. This arrested development also takes the form of a repetition compulsion, in which Phillip constantly throws Possum away – into tidal culverts, mud and within tree roots so that it becomes repeatedly half-covered – and then attempts to retrieve it or finds that the puppet has returned to him itself. Indeed, throughout *Possum* it remains ambiguous whether the puppet possesses Phillip or *is* possessed by him. As such, we are never sure how autonomous and supernatural Possum is. At times, the puppet seems to haunt Phillip (as per the spirits of M.R. James) whereas at other times the narrative hints that Possum is an embodied metaphor for a complete psychological break in the wake of childhood trauma. As such, Possum simultaneously belongs to Phillip's interior world while also being a grossly material agent of the exterior world. Trauma (in the form of Possum) is a kind of psychic rot that decussates Phillip's haunted memories with/against the stagnant waters of the Norfolk Broads and the mildewed surfaces of his family home.

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March-Russell states that short fiction treats 'human identity as a subject in process, so that characterization tends towards only partial realization'.[55] Given that most of the film is spent watching Phillip try and fail to get rid of Possum in dank monotonous East Anglian landscapes, encapsulated by direct cuts between wide landscape shots and those at ground level that place the camera in the mud, the sudden violent shift and focus on Morris's 'fingers' at the film's end and the reveal of previously hidden sexual abuse and a timeline of degeneration, takes us abruptly from absence to presence and from imagined threat to an insistently real one. March-Russell suggests that the 'Gothic imagination turns up a fear of objects, in particular the individual's anxiety of becoming subject to forces beyond its control' and that '[t]he fear of powerlessness [...] is paradoxical since it is also equated with sexual desire: the masochistic pleasure of becoming a plaything'.[56] Phillip has externalized this anxiety into an object – Possum – using a skill that Morris taught him and in doing so lessens the gap between himself and the puppet, the face of which he has deliberately made in his own likeness, the legs a black, wandering splay that seem like the inverse of Phillip's locked up arms.

These legs are mirrored in a repeated motif of some splayed blackened tree branches reaching up from the soil where Phillip repeatedly tries to stow Possum in a bag. These branches at once both resemble fingers and open legs (both the violator and the violated) and so visually stage (through pathetic fallacy) the primal site of Phillip's trauma to which he always returns. The region here seems to defend itself against intrusion through assuming the form of the human body, much as the spirits in 'Oh, Whistle' and 'A Warning' act as spectral embodiments of the East Anglican coast defending itself. However, the site of trauma is also an absence (the intrusion repressed by Phillip until the end of the film) that is filled by the material body of Possum – which may, after all, be a figment of Phillip's traumatized imagination. Thus, the material and immaterial are enfolded into each other in the narrative, with the immaterial using the material to resist its own fragmentation.

In this article, we have attempted to recognize a possible Gothic reed growing out of the murk of East Anglia. This reed reminds us not to neglect either the immaterial stories this region contains or the material qualities that need to be preserved and protected in the face of erosion, loss and trauma. Short narratives (such as the texts encountered here) suit the presentation of these dual entangled impulses due to their tendency towards the elliptical, the liminal, the unresolved and the undisclosed. However, many other longer narratives set in the region navigate similar terrain – from the irreconcilable violence of *Witchfinder General* (1968) to the disappearing ways of life in *Akenfield* (1974) – to the extent that it becomes clearly apparent that East Anglia has always already been a site of erosion, loss and trauma just as long as humans have resided there, which tilts its cultural representations towards the Gothic. In the face of escalating climate change that will undoubtedly impact much of the region in ways that will be upsetting to those who live there, it is useful – maybe even therapeutic – to tell stories that remind us that the materiality of Suffolk and Norfolk has always been defined by an interplay of erasure and persistence, and that absence is as much a part of the material realm as presence.

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