

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Extra-Textual Encounters: Locating Place in the Text-as-Event: An Experiential Reading of M.R. James' 'A Warning to the Curious'

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### Abstract:

Montague Rhodes James (1862-1936) was a British historian, archaeologist and writer. He is widely known for his short tales of the supernatural, many of which are set in the actual-world landscape of Suffolk, England, where James spent much of his early childhood. James' writings offer the reader an interesting, albeit disturbing, glimpse into the horrors afforded by the East Anglian landscape, weaving together ghostly narratives of the imagined with regional folklore, local history and topographical description. The use of semi-fictionalised versions of actual-world locations makes it possible to locate and explore Jamesian hauntings in their extra-textual settings. The potential to experience these spectral environments both on and off the page further strengthens the role of place in the unfolding of James' narratives, and particularly so for those readers who share the author's intimate knowledge of the Suffolk landscape.

This paper sets out to examine the performativity of place under such conditions, aiming to articulate a specific text-as-spatial-event (Hones 2008, 2014) through an extra-textual engagement with James' short ghost story, 'A Warning to the Curious' (1925). The paper explores the particular affective qualities that are afforded by a narrative set within a landscape that is known to both author and reader, and where a performance of place can be seen to underpin the nature of the extra-textual encounter. Focusing on the sensory engagements with spectrality articulated both within and exterior to the landscape of the text itself, the work presented here also demonstrates how place can function in the co-production of specific extra-literary hauntings.

**Keywords:** extra-textual; literary geography; literary haunting; M.R. James; place; spectrality; text-as-event.

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## Introduction

The basic purpose of this paper is to explore the function of place in the text-as-spatial-event initiated by Sheila Hones (2014), so as to further reveal its role as an affective and performative component in extra-textual literary-spatial experiences. Through an experiential reading of M.R. James' short ghost story 'A Warning to the Curious' (1925), this article examines the position of place in the co-productive relationship between text and reader (Hones 2014), focusing in particular on the extra-textual nature of haunting, a sensory form of absence prevalent in Jamesian landscape(s) and which occurs exterior to the text itself. To this end, the interconnectedness of thematic and experiential immateriality between *this* reader, the text and the extra-textual – i.e. experiences of Jamesian haunting within *actual-world* engagements with place – shall be explored in the context of James' East Anglian location of 'Seaburgh', a thinly veiled, semi-fictionalised rendering of the village of Aldeburgh, located on East England's Suffolk coastline. Furthermore, the paper aims to build on the performativity of text described in relational literary geographic studies (Hones 2008, 2014; Anderson 2015; Anderson and Saunders 2015) and principally that of the 'expansionary literary geography' introduced by Dave McLaughlin (2016a, 2016b) elsewhere in this journal. The work that follows, then, forms a multilateral reading of place-based absence in James' 'A Warning to the Curious' providing a specific embodied response to immateriality as it manifests both within and exterior to the narrative of the tale. In doing so, the paper demonstrates the performative role of place through a specific experiential reading, highlighting the importance of place in the spatial relations that exist between author, text and reader.

The auto-ethnographic approach taken in the latter part of this article, an applied literary geography, is used to more precisely articulate the complexity of the extra-literary experience and its framing within the text-as-spatial-event process as it occurred for this reader. To this end, I have attempted to relate actual-world or extra-textual encounters of absence back to the haunting that manifests within the Jamesian narrative itself. Having grown up in East Anglia, I am well acquainted with the grey and haunting landscapes described in James' ghostly tales, which have continued to be invoked in analyses of contemporary spectral geographic encounters (MacFarlane 2008; Thurgill 2015). First reading the stories as a child and again later as an adult, I have vivid recollections of the spaces in which James' stories are set. The Suffolk coastline where James establishes his 'Seaburgh' provided the destination for many a summer daytrip during my childhood, and the aesthetically comparable North Norfolk coast, which acted as the setting for

both Jonathan Miller and Lawrence Gordon Clark's unsettling cinematic retellings of James' most well known works (*Oh Whistle and I'll Come to You* (1968) and *A Warning to the Curious* (1972) respectively), was only a thirty-minute drive from my family home.

As a geographer, I am aware that my approach to James' writings here is a purposeful one and I do not seek to deny the intention in which I read in order to map, spatialise and locate his works in actual-world settings. In seeking to excise and explicate the spatial elements of the text here, I am aware that I further shape the specificity of my experience of James' writing as one that is uniquely my own and not that of the general reader. I, unlike many other readers of Jamesian ghost stories, have arrived at his tales as an informed student of sorts, primed both with a memorised and experiential understanding of the extra-textual locations on which the texts have been based and, as such, am more readily susceptible to the blurring of literary and actual worlds. However, I would argue that rather than proving problematic for an understanding of the text-as-spatial-event beyond this author's interpretation, such a situation can work to further strengthen understandings of the role of place in the author-text-reader nexus, highlighting its position as an active constituent of the reading experience (Hones 2014). Whilst we may arrive at a text unaware of its narrative, we do not do so without a lived-cache of actual-world experiences to inform our reading, each one connected to places exterior to the text, and each charged with its own potential to shape the experience of reading the text itself (Hones 2014).

Place, then, is central to reading not only in its rooting of narrative to a locatable setting, either in imagined, literary or actual-world environments, but rather as a phenomenological imperative that enables a reader to comprehend the literary 'where' as an experiential spatial phenomena in which characters' actions, mobility and thoughts can be imagined and felt. Reading functions just as any other lived experience of the world, whereby an understanding of place is formed through the synthesis of previously encountered and newly imagined spatial engagements; places remembered and places dreamt of. Through the particular reading of a particular representative landscape, it is thus possible to demonstrate the cognitive oscillation that takes place between actual-world and literary places in the formulation of the text-event and, consequently, to reveal place's performativity in the experience of literary space as an extra-textual happening.

### **Relational Literary Geographies: expansion and application**

In recent years, relational literary geography has come to reveal the highly interconnected and interdependent existence of texts, highlighting the agency of a multitude of actors that co-contribute to a text's 'happening'. Hones (2008) describes this 'happening' of a text – an unfolding collaboration between authors, editors, readers, places, publishers – as a 'spatial event' (2008, 2014), which sees a gathering of actants 'engaged across distance [...] bringing together a broad array of people, places, times, contexts, networks, and communities.' (Hones 2008: 1301). The 'intermingling' of these actants, Hones writes, 'is inevitably spatial', happening across space and time to emerge as 'a geographical event' (Hones 2014: 19). Hones understands the literary work as 'a dynamic interaction, a process of engagement through which fiction becomes regenerated and

renegotiated in the process of being collaboratively written, published, distributed, read, and discussed.’ (22). The continuous unfolding of these ‘processes’, together with their limitless capacity to generate new meanings and spaces via a multitude of readings, interpretations and experiences of the text, allows for an understanding of fiction premised upon collaboration and co-production – an intertwining of each of the text’s constituent parts. Hones proposes there to be (at least) three types of space generated by these co-productions that are suitable for literary geographical analysis: [1] the intra-textual or fictional space of the literary work itself: ‘its locations, distances, and networks’ (8); [2] the “unending library” of inter-textual space’ that unfolds from the author’s (and reader’s) described connections to a (literary) world outside the space of the novel (8); and [3] the social space in which the novel is produced and which allows for the collaboration between author, reader, editor and publisher to take place – the extra-textual.

Using Hones’ conceptualisation of the ‘text-as-event’ and the three spatial types she describes, Anderson (2015) has employed assemblage theory as ‘a way to conceptualise and work through a novel as a specific actor-centred geographic becoming’ (126). Converting Hones’ language of the text-as-spatial-event into ‘the currency of assemblage’ (125), Anderson claims literary works are an ‘assembly of parts [...] formed by the intentions, (re)interpretations, social contexts, physical materialities, imaginations, personal memories and collective histories, of the constituent components’ (126-7). Similar to Hones, Anderson defines his text-as-assemblage in terms of *openness* and *valency*, noting the way in which the various components of a book ‘can move on whilst new components can also be added’ (127). It is in his application of assemblage theory to the third spatial realm, that of the extra-textual, where the most significant difference in Anderson’s thinking takes place. Whilst Hones states that the actual-world affect(s) of a text can ‘make a literal, physical impact on a place’ (Hones 2014: 67), therefore influencing the way it is experienced outside of the novel, her own analysis is primarily focused on intra- and inter-textual spaces (Anderson 2015: 127).

Through the positing of books as assemblages, Anderson (2015) expands on the way material geographies function *with* texts to form spatial events, emphasising the potential for spatial assemblages ‘to intermingle with places alongside the other actors that take and make the cultural world’ (128). Through the example of Tessa Hadley’s *The London Train* (2012), Anderson works to demonstrate how the assembled literary spaces of the novel’s Cardiff (UK) setting spilled into and affected his own memories and experiences of the extra-textual world. In doing so, Anderson shows how *his* reading of the text functions as a negotiation between real and (re)imagined geographies, a process he describes as ‘creating a territorial coming together that brought my own life-as-assemblage into composition with this fictional event.’ (Anderson 2015: 132). Moving in and between his own recollections of Cardiff and those spaces described by the author, Anderson establishes an extra-textual world shaped by the assemblage of a network of constituent actors, each playing an active role in his experience of the text, and in turn the text’s own evolution and co-production. Anderson comments on the particular significance of the extra-textual affect he encounters through his ‘personal psychogeographical engagement with the story’, whereby ‘representation, subjectivity,

and ‘reality’ were now blurred and co-composed’ (133). Through his reading of the text as an evolving assemblage of actors, meanings and imagined encounters, the extra-textual too comes to be redefined and reestablished, further shaping Anderson’s understanding of the literary work as ‘an assembled tool [that] enables the reader to use it to view their world, but also engage with and alter it.’ (133). The reflexive nature of Anderson’s attempt to engage with the extra-textual has been useful in developing a methodology for working with the space outside of a novel, and for further consideration of the affect of extra-textual encounters within Hones’ ‘text-as-event’. The undertaking of *deliberate* experiential readings, of actively seeking out a text’s actual-world spaces, holds the potential to push a text beyond the page and can further demonstrate the co-production of places and spaces that occur through specific readings.

Such (relational) thinking can be found in what Dave McLaughlin has termed ‘expansionary literary geography’, ‘a species of encounter with fiction in which readers harness the creative agency of literary production in order to *consciously* add to and extend the literary space of the story’ (McLaughlin 2016b: 147). While his examination of expansionary literary geography has been extremely valuable to the interpretation of place in James’ writing that appears in this article, McLaughlin’s extension of the literary world into a space of embodied co-production does not speak so much to the collaborative roles of authors and places (employed later in this work) as it does to that of the reader and interpreter of the text. Building on Hones’ ‘text-as-event’, where fiction is framed as a ‘dynamic, unfolding collaboration, happening in time and space’ (Hones 2014: 32), McLaughlin’s expansionary literary geography works to further demonstrate how the collaboration between reader and text continues to function in the extra-textual world as conscious embodied encounters through which the literary world is expanded and co-produced. For McLaughlin, these co-productions emerge from a shared readership formed of ‘deliberate acts by a *group* of readers to collectively and collaboratively co-produce and expand on a shared, favourite fiction’ (2018: 203).

McLaughlin (2018) makes the claim for his ‘expansionary’ literary geography through an examination of Sherlockians - ‘self-confessed devotees’ of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes novels (8) - and the intentional literary cartographic practices they implement in actual-world spaces, expanding the literary space of the character. By focusing on the conscious reading and mapping of Doyle’s Sherlock stories, McLaughlin illustrates that under specific conditions, readers will actively seek to push fiction beyond the page, demonstrating a purposeful literary geographical expansion. In emphasising the deliberate and conscious nature of these Sherlockian encounters with fiction, McLaughlin moves beyond what he criticises as the ‘almost automatic experience of combining real-and-imagined geographies to produce literary spaces’ that has been conceived of in existing relational literary geography (203).

Expansionary literary geography is, as McLaughlin (2018) determines, both a deliberate and shared reading practice; it is ‘a type or a species of reading, in which readers harness the creative power of their dialogic relationship to texts, in combination with the multiple dimensions of memory, experience and text through which they move, to consciously expand on or add to the literary spaces in which Holmes exists’ (202). McLaughlin develops his theory of expansionary literary geography by examining the

‘expansory’ nature of actual-world encounters with literary space through the analysis of Holmes-inspired literary tourism (2016b: 144), responding to three examples of literary touristic guidebooks that enable the reader to enter into an embodied ‘Holmesian’ geography. Here, there appears something of a departure from the literary geography of scholars like Hones and Anderson, where an erasure of ‘real’ and ‘fictive’ space forms the topographical foundation on which the text-as-spatial event happens – a spatial equivalency that does not posit difference between the literary and actual world. Instead, McLaughlin seems to maintain, albeit tacitly so, a somewhat orthodox position of spatial separatism, one whereby the fictional spaces of Holmes and his cartographers work to augment actual-world geographies rather than locating them as inclusive of actual-world experience.

On entering the world of Jamesian horror, however, we might attest to the notion that such a divide between ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ spaces does not and cannot exist - that the sensation of haunting manifests through the dissolving of any distinction between text and place. Space is space, whether it is rooted in reality or the imagination. Whilst both Anderson and McLaughlin engage with the extra-textual ‘realm’ identified by Hones, highlighting the importance of material geography to reading and bringing further attention to the affective role of actual-world spaces on fiction (and vice versa), both do so by privileging presence and materiality. A clear distinction in the way this article serves to operate within the relational, then, is in its engagement with intra- and extra-textual absences, making use of the material to seek out and explore the immaterial via actual-world encounters, allowing James’ ghosts to haunt beyond the page of the text.

### **M.R. James, Place and the Extra-Textual**

Although the geographically informed stories of M.R. James can clearly be seen to engage with both literary and actual-world places, they have not been discussed in the work of literary geographers to date. Despite writings on the spectral and the not-quite-human continuing to proliferate across the humanities (see Brewster and Thurston 2017; Heholt and Downing 2016; Holloway, 2016; Lipman 2014; Magner 2015; Thurgill 2018), forming a continuation of what Roger Luckhurst (2002) termed the ‘spectral turn’, studies of the topologically charged ghost stories of M.R. James remain scarce, having been almost entirely neglected by geographers (James is mentioned only in passing by Daniels 2006 and Matless 2008). Although scholars working outside of human geography have made some attempt to analyse James’ tales through a geographical lens, evident in the work of some literary scholars (Armitt 2016; MacFarlane 2015; Wiseman 2016), writings by geographers that deal specifically with landscape and place in Jamesian literature, and moreover its spectral agency, appear to be entirely absent. This is surprising given a) the notoriety of James as a writer who ‘produced some of the most influential ghost stories of all time’ (Murphey and Porcheddu 2013: 389), b) whose literary works have never been out of publication since first going to print in 1904 (Mason 1982), and c) the widely published acknowledgement of James’ works as being heavily engaged with landscapes and places, especially of those belonging to East Anglia (Armitt 2016; Cox 2009; Cox 2013; Fisher 2012, 2016; MacFarlane 2015; Wiseman 2016).

In part then, the work presented here aims to address the omission of James from geographical writings, highlighting the relevance of the author and his geographically-centred approach to the ghost story for those working with literary geography, in particular.

Certainly, James' ghost stories demonstrate themselves to be of a place-specific genus, as Lucie Armitt (2016) notes in her analysis of Jamesian narratives: 'place is an essential aspect of James's writing' (102). However, it is not merely an attention to place itself that marks James as worthy of enquiry here. The idiosyncratic way in which James frames place and its unfolding history within a mode of spectrality - one that has been considered particular to England's eastern coastal regions, which face the continual threat of flooding and coastal erosion from the North Sea (Armitt 2016) - reveals an intimate knowledge of the area he describes, 'mirror[ing] the East Anglian landscape where it is set' (Cox 2013). Such a view has been echoed by Robert MacFarlane, who has emphasised James' understanding of the English landscape 'as constituted by uncanny forces, part-buried sufferings and contested ownerships' (2015). Consequently, those readers of James' ghost stories who, like MacFarlane and me, share the author's intimate knowledge of the East Anglian coastline, may find themselves enveloped by a strange kind of pastoral horror, one that positions them in a seemingly distant yet familiar rural landscape and which exists at once both imaginary and realised. It is perhaps this element of the 'realised' places (and spaces) of M.R. James' fiction that draws both readers and scholars of Jamesian horror further into his world and motivates *some* of them to explore the extra-textual geographies of his works.

As mentioned above, James' comprehension of East Anglia is overtly expressed in his writings: no fewer than five of his tales depict places located in the county of Suffolk in which James grew up and sojourned, first as a child and then throughout his adult life ("'Oh Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad'"(1904), 'The Ash Tree' (1904), 'A Warning to the Curious' (1925), 'Rats' (1929) and 'A Vignette' (1936)). The author's knowledge of the Suffolk area, in particular, allows for his stories to be located in such a way that, at points, his tales read like the notes of an informed Edwardian travel writer - presenting his readers with descriptions of haunting that could simply be regarded as an over indulgence in 'creative license'. Further evidence of James' involvement with and intimate knowledge of the Suffolk region, if it were needed, can be found in his mapping of the area's ancient buildings and history in *Suffolk and Norfolk: A Perambulation of the Two Counties With Notices of Their History and Ancient Buildings* (1930). James' study provides a series of detailed and personal accounts of Suffolk places, their history and, in some cases, their associated folklore, clearly demonstrating the author's understanding of the county and its past. James can be seen, then, to engage with the geography of his tales both on and off the page, pushing himself, as he does his readers, to go out and engage with the extra-textual. It is this keen awareness of the practicalities of narrating place from experience that leads to the geographically imbued descriptions of the places that James utilises in his fictional writings.

His inclusion of deep topological description allows for the physical location of specific places used in James' literary works; meticulous accounts of extra-textual sites that provide even the general reader with near cartographic instruction and

representation of the ‘actual-world’ environments in which the fictions have been set. James’ writings are never read in isolation from their actual-world settings, even for the layperson; instead, they establish a (re)presenting and (re)producing of place within the complex interrelations that exist between author, reader, text, and the extra-textual. In working between actual-world and literary environments, James erodes spatial boundaries and establishes a sense of haunting predicated upon a sense of absence which is experiential, both within and exterior to the text itself. Absence, therefore, forms a constituent part of Jamesian haunted places; the (spectral) agency afforded to the unseen in his writings constantly works to undermine and weaken the existential foothold of both narrator and reader throughout the text. The world that James sets out in his ‘A Warning to the Curious’ is not one that is bound to the page; the author goes to great lengths to bring the place to life and, notwithstanding a vague attempt to mask the actual-world location of ‘Seaburgh’, provides readers with geographically attuned accounts that position them within the unfolding landscape of the text itself. James’ extensive knowledge of the Aldeburgh setting enables him to narrate recollections of ‘Seaburgh’ so vivid that they might appropriate the mind of the reader. As Mark Fisher claims, James’ writing ‘burns a memory into you that isn’t yours’ (2012: 182). Reading the text and then discussing it here, I find myself no longer able to tease apart my experience of Aldeburgh from that of James’ Seaburgh: the sensation of haunting having extended beyond the text and into my own lived environment.

In my own specific reading of the text, it is significant that I, as a reader with knowledge of the story’s setting, do not underestimate the impact of the actual-world place on my experience of the text. As the story unfolds in and around Seaburgh-Aldeburgh, it does so by simultaneously revealing those memories of the place that I have retained yet buried deep in the back of my mind, whilst muddying them with those that have been seeded through the author’s words. My own reading of ‘A Warning to the Curious’, then, sees a gathering of place, bringing together James, the text, Seaburgh, Aldeburgh and me, the reader, into a particular spatial event. It is an event that occurs very much with *place* central to its happening, to the end that the distinction between Aldeburgh as ‘Seaburgh,’ Aldeburgh as it exists in the actual-world, and Aldeburgh as I imagine it within my reading of the tale becomes distorted – Aldeburgh becomes all of these things. Seaburgh undergoes the same spatial smearing in my text-event; it is not spared from the diminishing of the perceived actual-literary boundaries by its (semi-)fictionalisation. Instead, the literary becomes palpable for this reader in the actual-world, with Seaburgh folding into and out of Aldeburgh. This blurring between the author’s and *this* reader’s worlds is further reflected in the blurring between author and narrator within the text: a semiotic collapsing and folding of signifier, signified and referent.

That the Suffolk town of Aldeburgh served as the template for James’ Seaburgh is relatively well-known amongst his readers. The author’s own handwritten corrections of the original manuscript for the tale show his crossing out and substitution of ‘Alde’ with what would be the finalised ‘Sea!’ (Pardoe 2001). It seems appropriate to question the confinement of the literary landscape to the page when, in the mind of the author himself, there ceased to be a distinction between the literary and the actual geographical worlds he worked with and in. To this end, Aldeburgh and Seaburgh can be understood



as one and the same place. That the writer should confuse the actual-world with the imaginary in his manuscript iterates the significance of the extra-textual experience for his readers. Here, we can observe deliberate attempts by the author to coerce the reader into the extending of literary space beyond the page.

The provision of a navigable actual-world place in 'A Warning to the Curious' allows readers an additional route *into* the story via the extra-textual. Nige Burton's blog article on 'A Warning to the Curious' (2009), subtitled 'East Anglia's Ghost Trail', offers fans of James a series of detailed descriptions of the exact locations that feature in the story. Similarly, the writer Victoria Connelly describes her personal journey through James' 'Seaburgh', providing a short photographic guide to some of the story's actual-world settings (Connelly 2017). In a similar vein, Adam Scovell's short non-linear film 'No Diggin' Here' (2016), which takes its title from the only words uttered by the ghostly William Ager in Lawrence Gordon Clark's 1972 televised adaptation of 'A Warning to the Curious', provides an atmospheric engagement with some of the key Aldeburgh locations of James' Seaburgh story. Although Scovell's film sets out to explore 'landscape disparity between the original Suffolk locations of James' story and the subsequent Norfolk landscape' used by Clark (Scovell 2016), the film clearly utilises actual-world sites that assist the would-be reader-explorer of Jamesian landscapes in their locating of the sites described in James' text. Elsewhere, in a short article for the M.R. James newsletter *Ghosts and Scholars*, Pardoe (1993) gives a detailed account of walking James' Seaburgh, offering further ruminations on the coastal erosion that has affected the Aldeburgh coastline and the setting of James' story in an actual-world context; resonant of the trajectory taken by Armit in her 2016 essay on 'ghost-al erosion'. In particular, Pardoe considers both the destruction of the battery where Paxton meets his death and the slow inward creep of the North Sea, and while not explicitly stated as such, the work demonstrates an understanding of the physical environmental impact upon experiential extra-literary spaces.

### **'A Warning to the Curious'**

The tale itself recounts the story of two middle-aged men, both of a scholarly inclination, who, whilst vacationing in the quaint coastal town of Seaburgh, encounter a young man named Paxton, 'a rabbit anaemic subject' (James 2009: 258), and the victim of a malevolent haunting from which he desperately seeks reprieve. Our anonymous witness to the event, accompanied by his companion, Henry Long, begins the account by reiterating his deep familiarity with the landscape that James uses to open the tale: 'I know all that country more or less (he said). I used to go to Seaburgh pretty regularly for golf in the spring' (258). To be sure, James places his characters within a spatial setting that both he and they seem to 'understand', but that such an understanding can (and will) be shaken forms an integral part of the tale – James wants us to know that *knowing* a place is not the same as *being* in a place.

The narrative proper revolves around the unearthing of a legendary Saxon crown, one of three that the tale claims were 'buried in different places near the coast to keep off the Danes or the French or the Germans' (James 2009: 260). Strands of local Anglian

history are used to bind the story to specific sites so that the narrative of the buried crowns thus interweaves an extra-textual geography throughout the Jamesian imaginary as it unfolds. Through the words of the Rector of Froston Church, James writes that ‘one of the three was dug up a long time ago, and another has disappeared by the encroaching of the sea, and one's still left doing its work, keeping off invaders’ (260-1). Of the first crown, specific details of a location are given in a recalled discussion between Paxton and the rector, where it is revealed that ‘the ordinary guides and histories’ to the county tell of a Saxon crown being dug up at Rendlesham (Suffolk) in 1687 and later melted down (261). Interestingly, though the legend of the three crowns does not itself appear within East Anglian folklore, the Rendlesham crown that James writes of, purported to have belonged to Raedwald King of the East Angles (the people from which the region takes its name), was indeed dug up at the historic Saxon site named in the text. This interweaving of local history with fictive myth further embeds the story in the extra-textual. The extent to which the narrative exists within a collaborative affectual relationship between the author and the geography of the story is further demonstrated by an entry on the webpage for the Suffolk Heritage Explorer, a site created by the county’s local authority, which has the record for the actual-world crown entered alongside the claims James’ characters make in ‘A Warning to the Curious’ (Suffolk Heritage Explorer 2016). Indeed, an Internet search of the legend of the three crowns reveals that James has been successful in urging readers of the text to question the story’s authenticity, with numerous individuals turning to the web in the hope of verifying the story.

The third crown that is reported to be ‘still left doing its work’, provides the focus of the tale, providing the impetus for Paxton’s transgression and mobilising a ghostly aggressor to pursue him. A local family known as the Agers, Paxton learns, had guarded this final crown. William Ager, the rector claims, was the last of the Ager family in line to watch over the crown and had died only recently: ‘So the last of the holy crowns, if it's there, has no guardian now’ (James 2009: 261). In the knowledge that the legendary crown, if it were to be real, would now be unprotected, Paxton hastily sets about locating the artifact’s resting place. After enquiring in Seaburgh’s curiosity shop, Paxton is quick to learn that Ager had taken lodgings in ‘a cottage in the North Field and died there’ (261). On locating Ager’s cottage and having successfully fended off the new tenants’ dog, Paxton is pointed to a tree-topped hillock at the back of the building, where he later begins a clandestine excavation and uncovers the lost crown under the cover of darkness. It is both Paxton’s curiosity and success that leads to his subsequent downfall at the hands of a spectral assailant. After relaying the details of his discovery, the vacationists, who initially praise Paxton for his success, learn of the despair that has befallen the young antiquarian. Paxton’s disturbance of the crown’s burial leads to his haunting by the malign spirit of William Ager, a haunting he is quick to attribute to his discovery: ‘the truth is that I've never been alone since I touched it.’ (265). Paxton implores both the narrator and his companion to assist him in returning the object to the land, in the hope that he might be freed from the curse that now hangs over him. After Paxton convinces them of his *genuine* fear of Ager’s absent-presence and the very real threat that it poses to him, the three men make their way out to the fir-topped barrow to re-bury the crown.

Unfortunately for Paxton, his gesture is in vain and, despite his efforts to return the crown, a disembodied William Ager enacts his bloody vengeance, eventually killing Paxton on the deserted Seaburgh beach.

My own reading of this text as experiential relies not only upon a prior knowledge of the actual-world locations in which the story takes place, but on the author's own literary mobility between real and imagined spaces. James begins 'A Warning to the Curious' with a rich evocation of place offered to us through the words of his anonymous narrator, immediately locating the story within a geographical context: 'The place the reader is asked to consider' the narrator tells us 'is Seaburgh' (2009: 257). From this opening sentence, the next four hundred and fifty words are dedicated to depicting the seaside setting of the story; a knowledge that is presented as the result of a long and intimate connection with the town: 'It is not very different now from what I remember it to have been when I was a child' (257). Such a gesture is telling: James is known to have spent childhood holidays in Aldeburgh with his paternal grandmother and also later vacationed there as an adult (Cox 2009). This alone demonstrates an emotional attachment between James and the site of the story, highlighting the inseparability between author and place that is reflected in his literary depiction of the town. James continues by describing the annexation of Seaburgh from its surrounding natural features, isolating the location of the story (as well as its characters) from the rest of the country:

Marshes intersected by dykes to the south, recalling the early chapters of *Great Expectations*; flat fields to the north, merging into heath; heath, fir woods, and, above all, gorse, inland. A long seafront and a street: behind that a spacious church of flint, with a broad, solid western tower and a peal of six bells. (James 2009: 257)

That the attention to place in the initial pages of the work might appear superfluous to the telling of the story does not escape the author/narrator, who keenly notes that such details 'come crowding to the point of the pencil when it begins to write of Seaburgh' (257). The place in which the events of 'A Warning to the Curious' unfold come to appear as an extension of the writer himself, a position which he appears willing to share from the outset. That a writer may position her or himself in the geography of a work, be it overtly or revealed through the text's characters, is not unknown, of course; Anderson (2015) describes as much in his own engagement with extra-textual geographies. The matter is raised here only to highlight the closeness to the specific place shared by both the author and the narrator of this story. It is a 'closeness' that appears to be extended to the characters in the work as well as to the reader via a near cartographic description of the Seaburgh/Aldeburgh space:

Walk away from the sea and the town, pass the station, and turn up the road on the right. It is a sandy road, parallel with the railway, and if you follow it, it climbs to somewhat higher ground. On your left (you are now going northward) is heath, on your right (the side towards the sea) is a belt of old firs, wind-beaten, thick at the top, with the slope that old seaside trees have; seen on the skyline from the train

they would tell you in an instant, if you did not know it, that you were approaching a windy coast. Well, at the top of my little hill, a line of these firs strikes out and runs towards the sea, for there is a ridge that goes that way; and the ridge ends in a rather well-defined mound commanding the level fields of rough grass, and a little knot of fir trees crowns it. And here you may sit on a hot spring day, very well content to look at blue sea, white windmills, red cottages, bright green grass, church tower, and distant martello tower on the south. (James 2009: 257-8)

It is this imparting of a shared knowledge of a collective (and subsequently collaborative) experience of the literary space that inflects my experience of the extra-textual landscape of Aldeburgh and immerses *me*, a reader with a prior knowledge of the location, in an actual-world setting in which author, characters, and ghostly absences are made manifest. The ensuing sense of ‘spatial immersion’ that is created through such a narrative, one that is acutely and overtly geographically aware, wrests the text from the pages of the book so that in this particular ‘text-as-spatial-event’, reader, author, place and text appear to ‘happen’ all at once. That my own experience of James’ narrative is predicated upon a familiarity with the tale’s setting, and is therefore an unquestionably idiosyncratic reading of the work, demonstrates the specificity of this text-as-spatial-event. However, whilst this text-event may itself be unique to *this* reader, it appears that similar experiences have been had by other readers of James’ work who share the author’s affinity with the East Anglian landscape (Fisher 2012, 2014, 2016; Macfarlane 2015; Scovell 2016).

The haunting of Paxton is not brought about by the presence of the spectre alone, but rather through the various registers of absence that are made manifest throughout the text. From the opening of the tale, James’ narrative is set within a previous landscape; the narrator refers to his prior knowledge of Seaburgh, commenting both on the geography of the town and also the specific atmospherics historically created by the seasons there. With reference to the ‘spacious church of flint’:

How well I remember their sound on a hot Sunday in August, as our party went slowly up the white, dusty slope of road towards them, for the church stands at the top of a short, steep incline. They rang with a flat clacking sort of sound on those hot days, but when the air was softer they were mellower too. (James 2009: 257)

The narrator does not refer to the peal of the bells again in his recollection of Seaburgh, nor do they sound within the haunting tale of Paxton that follows; their absence underpins a sensed change of atmosphere in Seaburgh, where the air is no longer as ‘soft’ as it is in the narrator’s memory. The Seaburgh geography thus undergoes a transformation throughout the telling of the story, with James configuring the coastal town as a transgressive space in terms of the physical changes brought about by seasons, tide and weather, but also, and more poignantly, through a change in atmosphere that is mobilised in an oscillating of focus between presence and absence. In reference to the ‘hillock’, for example, where Paxton is later to discover the cursed crown, the narrator initially informs the reader: ‘And here you may sit on a hot spring day, very well content to look at blue sea, white windmills, red cottages, bright green grass, church tower, and

distant martello tower on the south' (James 2009: 258). Naturally, the *presence* of Ager's ghost disrupts this bucolic scene; through the narration of the tale, the hillock becomes a space of violence, described by Paxton as 'desolate' and 'horribly threatening' (266). Later in the story the narrator describes another key feature in the Seaburgh landscape – a battery constructed close to the old martello tower (physically located in Aldeburgh). Of the old battery, the anonymous storyteller claims: 'I believe there are only a few blocks of concrete left now: the rest has all been washed away, but at this time there was a lot more, though the place was a ruin' (272). Each of these three examples – the bells, the hillock and the battery - demonstrates an awareness of Seaburgh (and Aldeburgh) being subject to change. These hazy descriptions of things that are no longer present in my own or the narrator's Seaburgh work a) to undermine the sense of stability of place that is introduced through the narrator's recollections at the beginning of the story and b) to express a physical absence of buildings and experiences that were once located in the coastal town of Seaburgh-Aldeburgh. As I shall come to discuss, this experience of literary absence is mirrored in my own extra-textual encounters of Seaburgh-Aldeburgh.

Like many of James' tales, 'A Warning to the Curious' presents its readers with the strange revelations of an anonymous narrator/writer and is offered as a second-hand narrative: a story that is told namelessly and recounts the experiences of an unknown third party. The absence of a named character, both in the recalling and further retelling of the story, positions the narrative as quasi-confessional and initiates a strategy employed by James (both here and elsewhere in his writings) to blur the distinction between 'real' and 'imagined', the 'self' and the 'other'. One can never be sure if the events that unfold from the text are recalled and retold from an auto/biographical perspective or are entirely fictitious. This approach gives the impression that some elements of the tale, like those of the environment in which the story has been set, are being held back. Such reticence was displayed by the author in his public commentary on belief in the supernatural (Cox 2009), something he never formally confirmed nor denied. That James avoided making any personal claim or denial of his belief in the supernatural (aside from his religious convictions (Cox 2009)) and yet deliberately situated his tales in the places in which he had lived and worked further shapes the mystery that unfolds from his narratives. It is impossible to clearly define James' role as either a storyteller or correspondent of events as they happened. In the case of 'A Warning to the Curious', where the barely disguised setting of the work adds to a blurring of boundaries between the real and the imagined, the reader finds themselves drawn into the oneiric – a dreamlike rendering of the eerie where the abstract can be located within the existent. "*There's nothing there!*" we tell ourselves, but who can be sure?

Practicing what I would call an applied (or in McLaughlin's terms 'expansionary') literary geography, has enabled *this* reader to perform James' Seaburgh and to experience what I will call here the *embodied eerie* by entering into the actual-world landscapes of the tale and undergoing an extra-textual sensory experience of haunting. In an effort to demonstrate the active role of place, as conjured in Hones' text-as-spatial-event (2014), the following section offers something of an experiment in the phenomenology of (literary) absence, focusing on experiences of extra-literary haunting in a specific text-event, and provides a mobile, locative engagement of this reader with James' 'Seaburgh'

through a perambulatory retracing of the footsteps of Paxton, his companion, Henry Long, and the tale's narrator/writer.

### **Performing James's Seaburgh: an extra-textual encounter with literary place.**

The potential for James' readers to position themselves within the geography of 'A Warning to the Curious' has, as I have shown, drawn various individuals to the Seaburgh-Aldeburgh location, enabling a further 'performance' of James' tale to take place – a deliberate embodied encounter with the extra-textual space of the narrative that dismantles the actual-world/literary spatial dichotomy and extends the tangibility of the reading experience beyond the page. A number of places belonging to the tale exist exterior to the landscape described by James' characters: a martello tower does indeed exist to the southern end of the town of Aldeburgh; 'The Bear Hotel' is present as The White Lion, now a Best Western chain hotel; Ager's cottage, the actual-world 'Sluice Cottage', is in a state of ruination but can still be located in a desolate spot between the marshes and the fir trees that conceal the site of the crown in James' tale; the beach, complete with shingle ridge, does indeed follow the entire Aldeburgh coastline as the narrator describes; and a flint church can be found at the top of a steep slope leading away from the seafront. Though these sites are certainly tangible, visiting them presented me with the very literal absence of the characters that inhabit the space within the text. To map out and follow these absent agents in the extra-textual world is to produce cartographies of the immaterial. Thus, by extending the performativity of absence as a literary device in James' work to an experiential actual-world setting that itself forms a constituent part of the text-as-event, it is possible to view haunting as a sensation that continues to be co-produced through the interaction of *this* reader with author, text and place.

On a typically cold and uninviting February morning in 2018, I made the journey from central Norfolk to the small coastal town of Aldeburgh, Suffolk. An unremarkable drive of approximately two hours, mostly via the two counties' arterial A-roads, which meander through field and woodland southward towards the country's capital, London. Turning off the main road and along a lane straddled by fields and hedges of gorse, I soon reached the site of James' Seaburgh. The potential to retrace the steps of Paxton and the various other characters of 'A Warning to the Curious' immediately became evident upon my arrival in Aldeburgh, where rows of 'cottages of bright red brick with slate roofs' (James 2009: 257) are set back from a shingle ridge beach, just as James describes. Starting my walk at the White Lion hotel (James' "The Bear", Figure 1), as James' initially intrepid Paxton does, the most unsettling aspect was the disparity between the actual-world location and that described by James' nameless narrator. Whilst there were indeed private spaces to be found in the White Lion, the intimate sitting room in which James' tale begins to unfold was noticeably absent, having presumably been opened up to create a large dining space that now serves the hotel's many guests. The experiential awkwardness presented by this encounter had emanated not from the recognisable presence of the hotel place, but rather from an ensuing sense of absence at the site. A very 'real' sense of haunting began to manifest as I searched for the spaces and

characters that appear in the text but that failed to appear in the place I was now standing. The experience presented me with sensed, discomfoting gaps and tears in the extra-textual world that I had not anticipated.



Figure 1: *'The Bear'* provides the starting place for James' Seaburgh tale. Photograph taken by author.

Leaving the White Lion and heading northwards along the shingle ridge, the town quickly gave way to the solemn marshland and fields through which Paxton had crossed in order to reach the site of the crown's burial (Figure 2). At this end of the town, in early springtime, Aldeburgh was just as James had described it: the beach, fields and marshes were desolate – 'There was nobody about - nobody at all. Seaburgh out of the season is an early, quiet place' (James 2009: 267). This literal absence, both of Paxton and any actual-world inhabitants, established a further iteration of haunting in my extra-textual encounter with James' 'Seaburgh' setting; whilst it was certainly possible to envision the text's characters traversing those murky wetlands, it was their failure to appear that, as with Paxton in the tale itself, forced me to look out for things that were not actually there. James describes the quietness of the space there in Seaburgh as fostering an 'acute' and 'acid consciousness of a restrained hostility [being] very near...' (268), and certainly, the isolation of the place, coupled with an absence of habitus that one might not ordinarily expect from a popular tourist town, established a sensation of haunting in that landscape as a threatening one – a sensed but unseen presence.





Figure 2: '*Marshes intersected by dykes to the south*'. Photograph taken by author.

Located at the edge of the marshes, overlooking the 'North Field' (James 2009: 262), stood the now derelict Sluice Cottage (Figure 3), reputedly the inspiration for William Ager's Seaburgh lodgings in 'A Warning to the Curious' (Scovell 2016). Whilst Ager was already conceived of as being absent from the cottage in James' story, having recently died and been replaced by new occupants, the dilapidated state in which the cottage currently exists engendered a spectral presence that had a definite impact on the way in which *I* experienced the area. Enclosed by bushes of thick gorse and thorn, Ager's actual-world cottage location appeared far more disturbing than James' portrayal of it within the text. The already ghostly overtones of James' absence-replete geography were amplified in my encountering of the extra-textual setting. The cottage adds a further sense of haunting to the Aldeburgh-Seaburgh place, prompting certain readers of James, like me, to seek out Ager's ghost for themselves. As the wind rattled through the semi-boarded windows, the cottage emitted sounds not too dissimilar from the breathless cries described by Paxton in his own encounter with the marshes. For me, the presence of the cottage in its current state emphasised Ager's absence from the site and subsequently strengthened the character's potential to haunt those who chose to visit it.

Following a narrow, hedge-lined footpath to the side of the cottage took me back to the marshland where it was then possible to gain a view onto the tree-topped hillock that conceals the guarded crown in the tale (Figure 4). Walking the causeway across the marshes, it became apparent that the potential to flee a spectral assailant (or any other kind, for that matter) had been dramatically reduced. The path was uneven; water flooded the land on either side of the hedgerow - there were no points of departure from





Figure 3: *Sluice Cottage: James' inspiration for William Ager's cottage in 'A Warning to the Curious'.* Photograph taken by author.

the route other than forwards toward the fictional burial site in the woodland or back, leading to Ager's spectral home.

With the cottage still rattling behind me, it felt sensible to continue on toward the skeletal fir trees that swayed in the crosswinds blowing across from the exposed fields ahead. The narrator of James' tale describes the sound of the Scotch firs at this site as an 'eternal whisper' above him (James 2009: 268); a disembodied murmuring that I quickly realised existed both within and exterior to the text, and which once again coaxed the absent figures of the Jamesian landscape into a performance that shaped my extra-textual experience of the place as one that was as haunting as the tale itself. The further absence of the Saxon barrow in which the cursed crown was concealed in the tale did little to detract from my experience of the site as Jamesian, moreover, as haunted. Rather, here the missing grave-mound worked to intensify the unfolding of literary and actual-world space in my own (extra-)text(ual) event. Both James' barrow and the barren grassy mound share an existence in their real-world context – the two places could not be separated in my experience and each played a role in my understanding of the text's geography. As is evident in James' story, the real and imagined are continually blurred in a sort of spectral haze, until it is no longer possible or necessary to distinguish one from the other: the events of 'A Warning to Curious' took place *there*, in *that* space. My reading of the tale had continued into an actual-world encounter so that the more I saw of Aldeburgh, the closer to James, Seaburgh and the tale I felt I would be.



Figure 4: *'flat fields to the north, merging into heath; heath, fir woods, and, above all, gorse, inland.'* Photograph taken by author.

Continuing with Paxton's journey, the trail led me back into Aldeburgh and back to the White Lion, where the revelation of the Saxon crown, Ager's ghost and the ensuing threat to Paxton's life had taken place.

On agreeing to assist Paxton in his returning of the crown to its burial site, the narrator and his companion join the young man and make their way to the barrow. They do so via an alternative route so as not to disturb the occupants of Ager's cottage and their temperamental dog, which had already attacked Paxton on a previous occasion. This alternative route takes the three characters, and followers of their route, up the steep incline leading away from the beach to the 'spacious church of flint, with a broad, solid western tower' (James 2009: 257). The Church of St. Peter and St. Paul (Figure 5) provides the template for James' church in 'A Warning to the Curious' and was clearly identifiable in my own extra-textual encounter with 'Seaburgh', thanks to the clear description of the structure presented in James' text.

The church building is offered only as a mark point in James' narrative, allowing curious readers to further establish the extra-textual setting of the story as/in Aldeburgh and locate the actual-world pathways traversed by its characters ('The shortest way is up the hill and through the churchyard' (James 2009: 267)). The narrator of the story comments on the sensation of being under observation by unseen agents when passing 'out of the churchyard into a narrow path with close, high hedges' (268):

I confess to having thought that there might be some lying there who might be conscious of our business: but if it was so, they were also conscious that one who

was on their side, so to say, had us under surveillance, and we saw no sign of them.  
(267)

There was indeed a swinging gate that led out of the churchyard and into a tight, hedge-grown footpath that continued up to the marshes and the site of the fictional crown's excavation, just as James/the narrator had described it. As with the trail across the marshes, the enclosed space affected a feeling of claustrophobia, and being unable to see over the hedges that line the pathway, a sense of surveillance from absent observers was easy to imagine, their presence near palpable through my own exact enactment of Paxton's movements. Both the place and the performance, then, became one of collaboration – a shared spatial practice that included me (the reader), the place, the text and its author.



Figure 5: 'a spacious church of flint, with a broad, solid western tower and a peal of six bells'. Photograph taken by author.

The climax of the story, Paxton's final scene, takes place on the deserted shingle ridge located back at Aldeburgh beach (Figure 6). Again, the strange absence of people here (or at least at the time this research was conducted) was evocative of the same austere atmosphere of the town described by James' narrator. The North Sea is fierce, locked in a continuous battle with the land it seeks to reclaim: empty fishing boats laid strewn across the crest of pebbles that separated the land from the sea. The grey skies so typical of that part of England extended the '[b]leak and solemn' view of East Anglia that James



perpetuates in his writings (James 2009: 62). Walking southward along the ridge during high tide, a very different sense of absence began to emerge as the strip of sand on which the narrator makes his pursuit of both Paxton and the spectral Ager was evidently missing. The actual-world environment had itself determined the extent to which the extra-textual landscape was able to manifest in relation to James' narrative. That the path taken by the characters remained missing on this occasion worked once again to underpin the collaborative nature of my performing of James' Seaburgh – with the added agency of the actual-world place playing a pivotal role in the way the story was encountered 'off the page'.



Figure 6: *'There was nobody about - nobody at all. Seaburgh out of the season is an early, quiet place.'* Photograph taken by author.

Whilst no ghostly sea mists were present to obscure my view of the coast beyond, as they do in the text, the non-appearance of James' characters and the old battery in front of which Paxton succumbs to the absent-present ghost of Ager, instilled in me the feeling that I could not see what I was looking for, a sentiment that saturated the entire experience. The haunting of the Seaburgh-Aldeburgh landscape manifested through both a failure to present that which was expected (Paxton, Ager, the battery and so on) whilst simultaneously delivering a presence which was unforeseen i.e. the very real material sites that existed in an actual-world context but which might have been assumed to belong solely to the book (the cottage, the fir trees, the churchyard pathway). Thus, the complex interrelations that exist between the text, my reading of the tale, the actual-world place of Aldeburgh and James himself, cannot be separated. The text-as-spatial-event exists as a multiplicity, an assemblage of the real, the imagined and the experiential – all of which

worked together to enable my understanding of the (extra-textual) place in which James' story unfolds.

### **Coda: The constellations of absence**

Using Hones' conceptualization of the text-as-spatial-event (2008,2014) so as to further demonstrate the performativity of place, this paper has emphasised the role of literary hauntings in 'actual-world' experiences via a specific reading of a specific text and a subsequent encounter with the extra-textual. In doing so, it has framed James' (extra-)literary hauntings as manifestations of spatial absence that occur and are sensed both within and exterior to the text itself. Experiential engagements with James' tales can be multiple and complex, and the motivations of fans to practice them undoubtedly vary amongst individuals. It remains evident, however, that visitation of the sites described in 'A Warning to the Curious' by its readers, including this one, can work to redefine and reshape the terms on which the Suffolk landscape is encountered in an actual-world capacity. Furthermore, it can be seen that the geography of haunting, itself a performance of literary absence in James' writing, extends to the embodied experience of the extra-textual places the author describes, forming an actual-world sensation of the eerie that results from the absent-presence of the spectral characters and place(s) of the tale. Accordingly, by viewing geographical details from James' narrative as informative of the embodied engagements of Seaburgh-Aldeburgh that can be experienced by readers, it is possible to understand the production of extra-literary space as not merely an appendage to, but rather a constituent part of place-making.

My own positioning as an active participating subject within the article was utilised so as to express the specificity of the reading process, showing that encounters with literary texts are shaped both by a cache of lived experiences that arrive with the reader, as well as an oscillating of cognition that moves in and between imagined and actual-world geographies. As such, reading becomes as much about a spatial performance as it does about a spatial event. Performing James' Seaburgh means to consciously establish a dialogue with the author's writing, one whereby a line of communication exists as a series of orchestrated engagements with place. It is both the absence of characters and the experiencing of the extra-textual (im)materiality that frames the story, supporting a tangible feeling of eeriness or haunting.

Furthermore, the literal and figurative absence of James himself inadvertently haunts Aldeburgh. Despite being a widely known writer lauded for his literary contributions, both within and after his lifetime, there is nothing in Aldeburgh to memorialise M.R. James. Even at the church of St. Peter and St. Paul, where James is known to have worshipped as a child and where a window is dedicated to his paternal grandmother, Caroline James, the presence of James himself is missing. That Aldeburgh enjoys such an established connection to James's work, through his own disclosure of the town being the setting for Seaburgh, as well as in myriad writings from outside sources on the relationship between the place and the author (Jordison 2009; Gaw 2012; MacFarlane 2015), and yet fails to mark this history by any permanent means is itself *eerie*. And whilst the majority of visitors to Aldeburgh likely do so in ignorance of James' ghost

stories, the spectral overtones of the place, its 'bleak and solemn' atmosphere, permeate the town. Thus, the extra-textual Jamesian geography exists as an assemblage of perceived absences – a gathering together of the missing author, his characters and the place(s) they are written into inhabiting. Seaburgh-Aldeburgh functions as an amalgamation of hauntings, where readers of James' tales can continue to experience and co-produce the spectres of the text in an actual-world environment that cannot be separated from its own literary geography.

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