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POINT OF VIEW IN *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*

BY ALEXANDER E. JONES

ALTHOUGH Henry James described *The Turn of the Screw* as "rather a shameless potboiler," subsequent criticism has treated the work with more respect. As Robert Heilman has pointed out, the tale has inspired a surprising amount of discussion and speculation. Indeed, Heilman feels that James must have "hit upon some fundamental truth of experience that no generation can ignore and that each generation wishes to restate in its own terms."

Identifying that "fundamental truth" has, however, proved most difficult. Some critics classify *The Turn of the Screw* as a ghost story—"the thriller of thrillers, the last word in creeping horror stories." Others have described it as a sophisticated hoax, an allegory of good and evil in the manner of Hawthorne, a dramatic poem employing Christian symbolism to depict the twofold nature of man (a "morality play in modern dress"), an attack upon authoritarianism, a rejection of New England Puritanism, an account of hallucination due to terror, a case study of neurosis or even of psychopathology, an exercise in Freudian symbolism—or even as a projection of the doubts and obsessions of James's own "haunted mind." Such differences of opinion only serve to add a note of irony to James's remark to Lady Gosford, who complained that she had read the story with excitement and a growing sense of terror—but without really understanding what was happening: "My dear Mildred, no more do I. The story was told me by Archbishop Benson. I have caught the impression his mystery made on me and I have passed it on to you—but as to understanding it, it is just gleams and glooms."

The rather spectacular lack of agreement among the critics seems largely to stem from dissimilar interpretations of the governess, from whose point of view the story proper is narrated. Indeed, the whole question of James's handling of the technical problems of point of view is central to a proper understanding and appreciation of the work. It is, of course, a truism that no piece of fiction would have been the same had the author chosen some other angle from which to project his tale. In *The Turn of the Screw*, however, point of view takes on added significance, and it would therefore seem profitable to scrutinize the governess carefully. For only after one has analyzed her personality and behavior can he determine the meaning of the work as a whole.

Of course, *The Turn of the Screw* does not be-

gin either with the governess herself or with those events which are to be the chief concern of the narrative. Instead, James opens with a sort of prologue in which he introduces the reader to a character, Douglas, who in turn presents the story proper by reading from an old manuscript which the governess has presented to him years before. This parenthetical device, or "frame," is at least as old as the writings of ancient Egypt; and writers as dissimilar as Chaucer, Hawthorne, and P. G. Wodehouse have all employed the technique of the story within a story. But the device seems peculiarly useful to writers dealing with the supernatural and may be found in the works of Poe, Bierce, Kipling, Onions, Blackwood, and Lovecraft. Ghost stories were originally oral tales, whispered before a winter fire while the wind howled outside and darkness crowded in upon the little circle of firelight; and writers who propose to deal with the supernatural are obliged to recreate imaginatively this atmosphere of superstitious but pleasing shudders. For only then will the reader suspend his broad-daylight, common-sense disbelief and enter into the mood of the story. James has elsewhere referred to this process as the production of "conscious and cultivated credulity," and the establishment of such a mood certainly seems to be one of his main reasons for employing the frame in *The Turn of the Screw*. The little circle of friends around the fire are "breathless," and the previous tales have been "gruesome." Moreover, the next tale is to be the ultimate in terror, dreadfulness, "general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain." Little cryptic hints are given, and Douglas appears unnerved by what he is to relate. Thus James uses his prologue to set the mood at the proper emotional pitch.

Closely related to this evoking of mood is James's use of the frame to establish an illusion of reality. By placing himself within the confines of the story as "I," the narrator, James makes himself one of the characters rather than an omniscient author. No one is left on the "outside" of the story, and the reader is made to feel that he and James are members of the circle around the fire; James called this getting "down into the arena." Moreover, as Leon Edel has pointed out, by making himself a character in the story—a member of Douglas' audience—James has disassociated himself from the events recorded by the governess: "The skeptic may scoff at the ghosts, the haunting, the sorcery:

but James answers—here is the ‘document.’” In this way the tale achieves an air of authenticity. Finally, James is able to present a great deal of expository material in the prologue without shattering the illusion of reality. Douglas, rather than James, can prepare the reader for what is to follow. He can explain what sort of person the governess was, why she went to Bly, what that household was like, and similar matters. After this the stage is set, and the reader can settle back comfortably while Douglas opens the faded red cover of a “thin old-fashioned gilt-edged album” and reads aloud the narrative inscribed in “old, faded ink, and in a most beautiful hand.”¹

That is, theoretically the reader can settle back comfortably. In actual practice, critical controversy begins at precisely this point. In her narrative the governess has told of going to Bly, of encountering the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, and of struggling desperately to shield little Miles and Flora from their evil influence. But what sort of person *was* the fluttered, anxious girl, fresh from a Hampshire vicarage? Douglas goes out of his way to testify in her behalf. She was “charming,” “the most agreeable woman I’ve ever known in her position . . . worthy of any whatever,” “clever and nice.” Many readers accept these remarks at their face value; for them, the governess is a reliable recorder of the events at Bly, and *The Turn of the Screw* is therefore a ghost story. But to other readers the governess seems hysterical or even deranged; for them, the “ghosts” are merely the creations of her disturbed mind, and James’s tale achieves horror by encompassing the abnormal rather than the supernatural.

Well, then, are the ghosts “real” or not? While editing *The Ghostly Tales of Henry James* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1948), Leon Edel implied that such a question was irrelevant—a “confusion” arising from failure to see that *The Turn of the Screw* has several levels of meaning which must not be scrambled. The “horrified little governess,” said Edel, “has fantasies which may or may not be founded on reality.” More recently, Joseph J. Firebaugh has advocated “putting aside the question of whether the governess at Bly is subject to illusion”; he feels that “this much-argued point is no question at all.”² Nevertheless, such ambiguity seems undesirable; for, granted that the story may have various levels of meaning, it would appear on the whole unwise to have them mutually contradictory. Recognizing this fact, Edel has taken a more definite stand. In *The Psychological Novel: 1900–1950* (New York, 1955) he stated: “The ghosts, of

course, are there: they belong to the experience of the governess,” for whom fantasy “seems to be reality.” More recently, he has summarized his views: (1) “Henry James wrote a ghost story”; (2) the governess’ story “contains serious contradictions and a purely speculative theory of her own as to the nature and purpose of the apparitions, which she alone sees”; (3) “anyone wishing to treat the governess as a psychological ‘case’ is offered sufficient data to permit the diagnosis that she is mentally disturbed.”³

In other words, Edel accepts the ghosts as more than mere hallucinations; and he is therefore in essential agreement with the many critics who have asserted that the ghosts *are* real: Joseph Warren Beach, Carl Van Doren, F. O. Matthiessen, Kenneth Murdock, Elmer Stoll, Philip Rahv, Robert Heilman, Oliver Evans, Glenn Reed, Robert Liddell, Edward Wagenknecht, Mark Van Doren, Katherine Anne Porter, and Allen Tate. Critical opinion, however, has been far from unanimous. Some scholars continue to dissent both vigorously and persistently, and no serious study of *The Turn of the Screw* can afford to ignore their conclusions.

Although earlier critics had contented themselves with “reservations” concerning the validity of the governess’ testimony, Henry A. Beers remarked in 1919 that he had sometimes thought “the woman who saw the phantoms was mad.” Expanding this suggestion, Edna Kenton argued in 1924 that the whole sequence of events was merely a flight of the governess’ disordered fancy. James himself had described *The Turn of the Screw* as “a piece of ingenuity pure and simple, of cold artistic calculation, an *amusette* to catch those not easily caught”; and so Miss Kenton interpreted the whole tale as a sort of hoax based on hallucination:

the reader, persistently baffled, but persistently wondering, comes face to face at last with the little governess, and realizes, with a conscious thrill greater than that of merely automatic nerve shudders before “horror,” that the guarding ghosts and children—what they are and what they do—are only exquisite dramatizations of her little personal mystery, figures for the ebb and flow of troubled thought within her mind, acting out her story.

Miss Kenton’s theory attracted considerable attention, and in 1934 Edmund Wilson invoked

¹ All quotations of the text of James’s story are from the Modern Library ed. (New York, 1930).

² “Inadequacy in Eden: Knowledge and ‘The Turn of the Screw,’” *Modern Fiction Stud.*, III (Spring 1957), 57–63.

³ Prefatory note to Harold C. Goddard, “A Pre-Freudian Reading of *The Turn of the Screw*,” *NCF*, XII (June 1957), 2.

Freudian psychology to develop it further. According to Wilson, *The Turn of the Screw* should be read as "a neurotic case of sex repression," in which "the ghosts are not real ghosts but the hallucinations of the governess." Accordingly, toy boats and towers become phallic symbols, and the story is primarily a characterization of a woman in love with her employer: "her somber and guilty visions and the way she behaves about them seem to present . . . an accurate and distressing picture of the poor country parson's daughter, with her English middle-class class-consciousness, her inability to admit to herself her natural sexual impulses." Wilson's essay, as might be expected, proved highly controversial. Critics pointed out a passage in James's notebooks, published after Wilson's essay was already in print, which seemed to indicate that *The Turn of the Screw* was intended as a ghost story; they argued that Wilson had ignored certain incidents in the narrative which his theory could not explain adequately; they pointed out that Freud had not yet evolved his theory of dream symbolism when James composed his tale. Indeed, the bombardment was so heavy that in 1948 Wilson beat a strategic retreat. It had become quite clear to him, he said, "that James's conscious intention, in *The Turn of the Screw*, was to write a *bona fide* ghost story." Nevertheless, he did indulge in a little rear-guard skirmishing, implying that James's conscious and subconscious intentions were quite different: "One is led to conclude that, in *The Turn of the Screw*, not merely is the governess self-deceived, but that James is self-deceived about her." At best, however, this was but a delaying action. It was generally agreed that Wilson had surrendered, and in 1952 Edward Wagenknecht felt able to dismiss the whole matter in a footnote. The theory that the ghosts were "creatures of the governess's sex-starved imagination" had, he said, "about as much critical standing as the aberrations of the Baconians."

Nevertheless, several new Freudian interpretations of James's story have been published recently. Perhaps the most provocative is Oscar Cargill's "Henry James as a Freudian Pioneer."⁴ According to Cargill, the governess' experiences are based upon the case history of "Miss Lucy R." in Freud's *Studien über Hysterie*; but James was deliberately ambiguous in order to shield the memory of his sister Alice, herself the victim of severe recurrent hysteria.

Miss Lucy R. was an English governess. One of Freud's patients, she suffered from complete loss of smell but was subject to olfactory hallu-

cinations, especially the imaginary odor of burnt pudding. Freud decided that these were "chronic hysterical symptoms"; and, having learned that she had actually burned a pudding two months previously, he attempted to discover some traumatic experience which the smell would symbolize in memory. After extended questioning, Miss Lucy reluctantly admitted that she had been in love with her widowed employer but had finally concluded that he had no romantic interest in her. Soon after this confession the imaginary smell of pudding was replaced by a new hallucination—the odor of cigar smoke; and Freud realized that he had not yet uncovered the cause of her trauma. Finally, at his insistence she remembered that her employer had become angry at a guest who had tried to kiss the children goodbye; and since the guest had been smoking, the smell of cigar smoke had stuck in Miss Lucy's memory. Moreover, under Freud's prodding, she remembered a similar incident—a departing lady guest had kissed the children, and the infuriated employer had threatened to discharge Miss Lucy if it happened again. This outburst crushed her hopes, for she realized that he would not have made such threats over a trivial matter if he had loved her. According to Freud, the traumatic moment had been that of her employer's outburst. Its effects were not immediately apparent; but after the first reinforcing "auxiliary moment" involving the male guest, conversion took place, producing the cigar-smoke hallucination. A second auxiliary moment masked the first symptom of cigar smoke with that of burnt pudding "so that the first was not clearly perceived until the second had been cleared out of the way." Eventually, after nine weeks of treatment, Freud was able to cure his patient completely.

Such, in essence, is the case of Miss Lucy R., which Cargill has linked closely with *The Turn of the Screw*. In fact, he asserts that Freud's account exhibits "as many resemblances as are ever found in a literary source." Among the parallels which he cites are the following: each story presents the case history of a governess who takes care of two orphaned children, feels an "unusual sense of commission and trust," and is in love with her employer; Peter Quint and Miss Jessel "may be seen as trying to possess little Miles and Flora in their protectress' fancy as did the kissing male and female visitors"; each case history includes a stolen or appropriated letter; James's governess has an unusually keen sense of

⁴ *Chicago Rev.*, x (Summer 1956), 13–29.

smell, whereas Miss Lucy suffers from complete loss of smell coupled with vivid olfactory hallucinations; and "by telling her story to as sympathetic a listener as Douglas," the governess may have undergone "the kind of pathological purgation, as did Lucy R., which led to health and sanity."

Although Cargill's theory sounds plausible, it contains serious weaknesses. In the first place, he has overlooked certain differences between James's tale and Freud's case history. James's governess saw her employer only twice and knew he had no romantic interest in her; Miss Lucy saw her employer daily and allowed herself to hope that he loved her. James's governess believed the ghosts were corrupting Miles and Flora; but it was the employer, not Miss Lucy, who felt the guests might harm the children by kissing them. Finally, James's governess was an inexperienced girl trying to protect her charges, while Miss Lucy was a mature woman primarily concerned with her own welfare. Although not decisive, these differences at least indicate that the two narratives are not parallel in every respect.

There is also a more serious objection to Cargill's theory. If we assume that James had read Freud's *Studien über Hysterie*, we must also assume that he understood what he read. Miss Lucy R. was the victim of conversion hysteria; and Freud believed in 1895 that this neurosis developed, in a person predisposed to the condition, when a painful memory or idea was repressed into the subconscious. There it would take "its revenge . . . by becoming pathogenic," producing constant irritation like a thorn in the flesh; and this revenge might result in various hysterical phenomena, including hallucination. Freud stressed, in other words, two conditions necessary to the development of conversion hysteria: first, a memory too painful to be retained in the consciousness; second, an actual traumatic moment, "at which the incompatibility forces itself upon the ego and at which the latter decides upon the repudiation of the incompatible idea" by repressing it into the subconscious. These conditions are, of course, met in the case of Lucy R.; but in *The Turn of the Screw* there is neither a repressed incompatible idea nor a traumatic moment. James's governess had no painful memory of her employer; to the contrary, she thought him charming. Moreover, she made no attempt to repress her infatuation but poured out her feelings freely to Mrs. Grose. Finally, she thoroughly enjoyed her life at Bly until her encounters with Peter Quint and Miss Jessel. Lest

it be thought that these encounters might qualify as traumatic moments, let us remember that traumatic moments must *precede* any related hallucinations; the latter are symptoms or effects—they cannot be their own causes. Since Freud explained his theory clearly and fully, it seems unlikely that James would compose a study of hysteria in which none of the basic requirements for hysteria are present. Therefore, despite certain resemblances, the accounts of Lucy R. and James's governess are not really parallel; and Cargill's theory seems to be untenable.

Apparently, then, there is no close bond between *The Turn of the Screw* and Freud's history of Lucy R. That fact, however, does not in itself prove James's tale a ghost story, and it is still necessary to determine the governess' reliability as a narrator of the events at Bly. Several recent articles specifically seek to discredit her testimony. Such an attempt is made by John Silver in "A Note on the Freudian Reading of 'The Turn of the Screw'."⁵ In particular, Silver tries to demolish the two chief objections to the hallucination theory: that the governess gives a detailed description of Peter Quint, and that she has never previously heard of him. First, he cites the governess' remark concerning the stranger on the tower—how she had "made sure" he was "nobody from the village." Silver considers this evidence that she has been asking questions in the village, and thereby presumably learning about Quint. Actually, it probably means that she has been making inquiries among the other servants at Bly. And, incidentally, if one wishes to assume that the governess has learned about Quint prior to supposedly seeing him on the tower, why send her on a trip to the village? She could learn the necessary details from the other servants at Bly. Second, Silver considers it significant that the governess can discuss Quint's death although we never witness Mrs. Grose supplying her with these facts; he feels James would not "suppress" a scene of such importance. But that is absurd—Mrs. Grose undoubtedly held many "off-stage" talks with the governess, and Quint's death may well have been discussed during the conversation mentioned at the beginning of Chapter vi. Moreover, although Silver suggests that Mrs. Grose might not have known the facts of Quint's death, such ignorance is almost inconceivable under the circumstances. Therefore, we can only conclude that he has neither proven his case

⁵ *American Lit.*, xxix (May 1957), 207–211.

against the governess nor demonstrated that the ghosts are unreal.

Another attempt to prove the governess unreliable is contained in Harold Goddard's posthumous article (n. 3, above). Written "about 1920 or before," this study is important as the earliest known presentation of the hallucination theory. On the other hand, it is seriously weakened by a tendency to stack the cards against the governess. Some of the evidence is merely irrelevant: for example, the author has cited his own boyhood experiences with an insane servant who believed that ghosts "came to visit her at night." More serious are the distortions and strained interpretations of James's story: for example, in order to show a "hereditary seed" of mental disease, Goddard describes the governess' father as "psychically unbalanced" and possibly "even . . . insane," whereas James merely calls him "eccentric." It would be possible to point out many similar distortions; but there is one which is more serious than the rest: Goddard's attempt to discount the governess' description of Quint. He begins with a false analogy:

Suppose a missing criminal is described as follows: "A squat, ruddy-cheeked man about thirty years old, weighing nearly two hundred pounds; thick lips and pockmarked face; one front tooth missing, two others with heavy gold fillings; big scar above left cheek bone. Wears shell glasses; had on, when last seen, brown suit, gray hat, pink shirt and tan shoes. Then suppose a man, flushed with excitement, were to rush into police headquarters exclaiming that he had found the murderer. "How do you know?" the chief detective asks. "Why! I saw a man about thirty years old with shell glasses and tan shoes!" (p. 15)

This is obviously not comparable with the governess' account of the mysterious intruder. Goddard himself admits that his analogy is "a slight exaggeration," but it is more than that. The governess is able to describe Quint's height, carriage, general appearance, complexion, hair, whiskers, eyebrows, eyes, mouth and lips, and clothing. Perhaps the best proof that her description is adequate lies in Mrs. Grose's ability to identify Quint. Goddard considers it significant that Mrs. Grose hesitates before doing so; but inasmuch as Quint is dead, that is hardly surprising. He also asks why the governess should stress "the least characteristic points in the description"—namely, that the man was bareheaded and dressed in borrowed clothing. Yet, if the governess had a normal amount of feminine "clothes sense" it would be quite natural for her to detect a lack of harmony between the intruder's apparel and his general personal-

ity; and she would consider his being bareheaded worthy of mention since men of that period customarily wore hats while outdoors. At any rate, both of these details are meaningful, for Mrs. Grose announces that Quint "never" wore his hat but did appropriate his master's waistcoats. Goddard suggests that Mrs. Grose seizes upon these two details and "pays scant attention" to the rest. But does he mean to imply that Quint does *not* have curly red hair and all the other characteristics ascribed to him? Surely the reader must assume that the governess' description is substantially correct, and is accepted as such by Mrs. Grose. Goddard's logic seems rather strained, and he must have been aware of that fact; for he has shifted the grounds of his argument from his original position to one that is more easily defensible. At the beginning of his article, he specifically calls the governess "insane" and the ghosts "hallucinations"; before he concludes, he concedes that the specters may actually exist: "Perhaps they do and perhaps they don't." Indeed, he adds that nothing in the tale "absolutely demands" or "absolutely contradicts" the theory that the ghosts are real. All this, he says, is "incidental"; the crucial point is that the children are uncorrupted—"incarnations of loveliness and charm." But this is not his original position; and one can only conclude that he has beat a strategic retreat.

It would seem, then, that a Freudian reading of *The Turn of the Screw* is not justified, and that its advocates are inclined to present only those facts which support their thesis, ignoring any which conflict with it. Some Freudians influenced by the New Criticism even argue that one should use his "utmost ingenuity" in interpreting the story to suit himself. This is hardly objective analysis. But if it *is* permissible to expend unbridled ingenuity upon a set of carefully selected facts, why are Freudian critics content to depict the governess as hysterical? Using their present methods, one could "prove" that she is afflicted with pedophilia erotica and is therefore attempting to seduce little Miles.

Actually, there is an impressive amount of evidence to reinforce this interpretation—provided, of course, that it is considered *out of context*. The governess obviously prefers Miles to Flora; in fact, she admits that she "throws" herself upon him. Driven by the hope of "possessing" him, she is constantly kissing him, folding him in her arms, or hugging him tightly "to . . . [her] breast." She encourages him to address her as "my dear" and tells him that she is remaining at Bly primarily for the pleasure of "his com-

pany." She admits that his "secret precocity" makes him seem like an adult—"as accessible as an older person"—and she persuades Mrs. Grose to take Flora away so that she will be left alone with the boy. Having succeeded in this design, the governess reflects that she and Miles resemble a shy "young couple . . . on their wedding-journey"; and she asks him if he does not recall the night when she sat on his bed and told him that "there was nothing in the world" she would not do for him. To the reader she confesses that Miles has been for her "a revelation of the possibilities of beautiful intercourse"—a phrase loaded with Freudian ambiguity.

Does it seem unlikely that the governess could be sexually aroused by a boy ten years younger than herself? Let us not forget that eight years after the tragic events at Bly she manages to make Douglas fall in love with her; and is it mere coincidence that he, too, is ten years her junior? Also, since Goddard has cited the insane servant woman from his own childhood while attempting to establish the governess' insanity, perhaps it would be permissible to mention other examples of pedophilia erotica. There is, for instance, the governess named "Miss Lilian" who seduced young Kirk Allen in Robert Lindner's case history, "The Jet-Propelled Couch." Or, if that comparison seems too remote, there is the "pious" Scottish girl mentioned by Leslie A. Marchand in *Byron: A Biography*—a young woman employed in the Byron household who used to "come to bed" to Byron when he was only nine years old and "play tricks with his person." This last example is especially interesting, since the James notebooks suggest that Henry James was familiar with it. He had waded through the "masses of ancient indecency" in the Byron papers—in 1895, only a few months before writing *The Turn of the Screw*.

The above evidence is as solid as much of the data presented by Wilson, Cargill, Silver, and Goddard. Yet it does not constitute unassailable proof; rather, it demonstrates the shortcomings of excessive ingenuity. The odds are astronomical that James was *not* writing a tale of sexual abnormality. What, then, was he attempting to do? Goddard has asserted that James's conscious intention is unimportant: "it is always the work itself and not the author that is the ultimate authority." Nevertheless, before we examine the tale, it is interesting to note James's own comments. According to him, the story is a "bogey-tale," a "little firm fantasy," a "fantastic fiction," a "fairy-tale pure and simple," and a work "grossly and merely apparitional." In 1898 he

informed Arthur C. Benson that the source of *The Turn of the Screw* was a "small and gruesome spectral story" about children and dead servants which had been related to him by Benson's father, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Moreover, three years earlier James had recorded this spectral story in his notebook: After corrupting the young children entrusted to their care, wicked servants had died. Their ghosts had then returned to haunt the house and the children, whom they attempted to destroy. "So long as the children are kept from them, they are not lost; but they try and try and try, these evil presences, to get hold of them. It is a question of the children 'coming over to where they are.' It is all obscure and imperfect, the picture, the story, but there is a suggestion of strangely gruesome effect in it. The story to be told—tolerably obviously—by an outside spectator, observer."⁶

Ordinarily, such a statement would be looked upon as decisive evidence of James's intentions. Moreover, he explained to Frederick W. H. Meyers, one of the most active members of the Society for Psychical Research, that his whole intention had been to "give the impression of the communication to the children of the most infernal imaginable evil and danger." Why, then, does anyone hesitate to accept James's story as a tale of the supernatural? Among the most important reasons for this reluctance must surely be the ambiguous remarks which he included in his preface to the New York edition. He spoke of "our young woman's keeping crystalline her record of so many intense anomalies and obscurities—by which I don't of course mean her explanation of them, a different matter"; he described the tale as "a piece of ingenuity pure and simple, of cold artistic calculation, an *amusette* to catch those not easily caught."⁷ Some critics have viewed these statements as a veiled confession that *The Turn of the Screw* is a "trick" designed to make the reader mistake hallucinations for hobgoblins. But such a view is an obvious misinterpretation of James's remarks. James was attempting to tell a story which would be the ultimate in "general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain." Knowing the dullness of most modern psychical investigation—prosaic, authenticated tabulations of knocks and raps and levitated tables—he was determined that his ghosts would not be in the tradition of con-

⁶ *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York, 1947), pp. 178–179.

⁷ "Preface to 'The Aspern Papers,'" *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James*, ed. Richard P. Blackmur (New York, 1934), pp. 172, 173.

temporary psychical phenomena; instead, they would be "goblins, elves, imps, demons . . . [or] fairies of the legendary order, wooing their victims forth" (*Art of the Novel*, p. 175). In other words, they were to be the traditional haunters of the dark. But James was also aware that it is easier to promise an ultimate than to deliver it, for a reader's expectations are likely to exceed the author's powers of invention. James's solution was to create an atmosphere of evil, a tone of "suspected and felt trouble," but to allow each reader to imagine the details for himself. Through a process of adumbration he would create a mood of portentous evil, and the reader would do the rest: "Only make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough, I said to myself . . . and his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy (with the children) and horror (of their false friends) will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars. Make him *think* the evil, make him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications. This ingenuity I took pains . . . to apply" (*ibid.*, p. 176). This, then, was the *amusette*: to terrify each reader with the fruits of his own imagination. And in this way James proposed to catch and hold the interest of sophisticated readers who would find ordinary ghost stories boring. His trap was set for "the jaded, the disillusioned, the fastidious."

An examination of *The Turn of the Screw* reinforces this view of James's intentions. By allowing the little governess to relate her own experiences, James gives the tale added interest. For the first-person point of view contributes more than the vividness of an eye-witness report: in addition, it produces suspense. As she gradually pieces together the sinister facts, the governess is increasingly horrified by what they suggest; also, she realizes in despair that she cannot be in two places at once—with the result that one of her little charges can serve as decoy while the other slips off to some infernal rendezvous: "'The trick's played,' I went on; 'they've successfully worked their little plan. He found the most divine little way to keep me quiet while she went off.'" Unlike the third-person omniscient narrator who knows exactly what is happening and is therefore obligated to furnish "specifications," the governess can only guess and hope and fear. The children are inscrutable, and Peter Quint and Miss Jessel appear and disappear without warning. Moreover, the absence of the ghosts is even more disturbing than their intermittent materializations; for they are apparently still at work undetected,

weaving their subtle web around Miles and Flora. Thus the story is fundamentally a study in tone—"the tone of suspected and felt trouble . . . of tragic, yet of exquisite, mystification." This, then, is the "turn of the screw"—the agonizing and steadily increasing pressure of uncertainty, helplessness, and terror.

In most stories, first-person point of view also produces a sense of credibility; after all, an eye-witness account of an incident is usually the most authentic report possible. In *The Turn of the Screw* that customary effect is not produced automatically; it is first necessary to establish the reliability of the governess' observations. Of course, the Freudian critics would insist that we cannot trust her version of the events at Bly. Since they consider her a victim of hallucinations, a pathological liar, or both, it is only natural that they should view her unsympathetically. But two scholars have recently published studies which concede the existence of the ghosts, and it is interesting to note that they are as unsympathetic as the Freudians.

As we have already seen, Joseph Firebaugh is not really interested in whether or not the ghosts are real. His article, "Inadequacy in Eden: Knowledge and 'The Turn of the Screw'" (n. 2, above), is an allegorical interpretation of James's story; and he feels that "denial of knowledge" is the major theme. The "delightful" children represent the human race. Peter Quint and Miss Jessel perform the function of the serpent. The uncle symbolizes the "irresponsible" deity of the Old Testament. And the governess is his "inadequate priestess"—a personification of incompetent authority, an ignorant person who fears knowledge, an "agent of denial." Believing that knowledge is sin, she struggles to preserve the children's innocence but eventually destroys them by imposing original sin upon them. Firebaugh's main point is somewhat obscured by his contention that there is a hint of "boyish homosexuality" in Miles's misdeeds at school, but that this is "highly useful knowledge in the world as it is unfortunately constituted." Nevertheless, it is quite clear that he has no sympathy for the governess, or for her effort to stand "between the would-be knower and the knowledge he seeks." The kindest thing he can say about her is that she may be a "good" person who, through ignorance, does evil "in the name of good." In other words, he accepts the ghosts as symbols, but he rejects the governess' interpretation of every incident in the story. As the very embodiment of ignorance, she cannot give reliable testimony.

John Lydenberg has reached a similar conclusion in "The Governess Turns the Screws."⁸ Clearly recognizing that James did not intend his story to deal with "the hallucinations of a frustrated, sex-starved governess," Lydenberg accepts the ghosts as real. Yet he finds the question of their reality "a thorny one"; for he wishes to show that the "two children, potentially angelic but human like all of us, [are] harried to distraction and death by an overprotective governess." Certainly, he paints a most unflattering portrait of her. She is hysterical, compulsive, overly possessive, tense, excitable, nervous, lacking in wisdom, and prone to make faulty judgments. A Puritan, she appears an "almost classic case" of the authoritarian character, alternately masochistic and sadistic. The "sin of pride" leads her to take upon herself, unaided, the task of saving the children, who are mere "pawns which she must protect and can use, but for which she has no real concern"—she wishes to attract attention to herself through an "extraordinary flight of heroism," and the ghosts present her with a "magnificent chance." The apparitions satisfy a "deep-lying need" to "objectify her fears, to project her uncertainties onto something external." She even welcomes them, since her possession of the children is contingent upon the continued threat of supernatural evil; subconsciously "she wants the worst to come true." In other words, Lydenberg believes that what is happening to Miles and Flora "is, clearly and terribly, the governess herself." She "turns the screws of Puritan discipline and suspicion until the children fatally crack under the strain."

At this point, however, a critical problem arises: "Once grant that the evil spirits have really returned to haunt the children and it would be preposterous to ask the governess to remain calm, collected, and normal; instead her heroic self-dedication should be deemed wholly admirable and proper." Having admitted the existence of the ghosts, but not wishing to view the governess as "admirable," Lydenberg attempts to minimize the importance of Quint and Miss Jessel. First, he asserts that their reality is "somehow symbolic"—that they do not represent "pure evil" and are symbolic "not so much [of] some particular evil attacking the children as [of] a more generalized evil that is part of man, of the governess as well as the children." Second, although conceding that the governess does see Quint atop the tower, he feels that subsequent confrontations are increasingly ambiguous, and that we feel "more and more

that Quint and Jessel are creatures haunting her, desired by her, almost controlled by her." Third, he criticizes the governess for continuing to "exacerbate" the evil, for making "active, effective, dominant what might have remained quiescent." Finally, he suggests that her influence is more injurious than that of the ghosts: "We don't really know or feel what Quint and Jessel are doing to Miles and Flora. But we know and feel that the governess is hounding them." To Lydenberg *The Turn of the Screw* is a story "in which a hysterical woman turns a quiet summer into a fall of dark hatred and tragedy."

As Lydenberg points out, James has made the governess "a character with eminently discussable characteristics." Furthermore, although they disagree concerning some of the particulars, Cargill, Silver, Goddard, Firebaugh, and Lydenberg are all firmly united in the conviction that she is an unreliable recorder of the events at Bly. Yet such was not James's intention. He himself referred to her "particular credible statement of such strange matters" and said she had "authority." Indeed, he explained to H. G. Wells that he had deliberately kept her an "impersonal" observer save for "the most obvious and indispensable little note of neatness, firmness and courage"—he had attempted to "rule out subjective complications of her own."

But despite these avowed intentions, James was too interested in subtle shades of character to keep the governess impersonal. In addition to the neatness, firmness, and courage, he endowed her with many other qualities. Some of them are admirable: the governess possesses a keen intelligence, remarkable devotion to duty, and another characteristic which can only be described as acute sensibility—a highly developed trait of awareness or discernment that is in marked contrast to the stolidity of Mrs. Grose. On the other hand, her personality is certainly not free from undesirable traits. She is often impulsive—for example, in her decision not to investigate Miles's expulsion from school. She tends to employ hyperbole rather than exact language ("What is he? He's a horror.") She is nervous, sometimes fearful for her own sanity, and given to unusual mannerisms ("I had to smother a kind of howl") and eccentric flights of fancy ("we continued . . . as silent . . . as some young couple on their wedding-journey"). She has odd "scruples" against mentioning the ghosts in the presence of the children; and her verbal fencing, her circling around "forbidden ground," and her preoccupa-

⁸ *NCF*, XII (June 1957), 37-58.

tion with "instinctive delicacy" strike the reader as peculiar—as does the fact that Miles's evasions and subterfuges seem "charming" and shake her "with admiration." She occasionally displays a tendency toward self-dramatization that is half egotism and half irony ("I was wonderful"; "I confess I rather applaud myself as I look back"). She is quick to give up Flora as lost, abandoning her as "hideously hard" and a "vulgar, pert little girl" at the very time when the child presumably needs help most; and she expresses her anger rather vulgarly ("Ah, she's 'respectable,' the chit!"). Also, it is not very charitable of her to say, "Oh, thank God!" when she learns of Flora's appalling language, or to feel alarm that Miles might be innocent ("for if he *were* innocent, what then on earth was I?").

Obviously, the governess falls short of perfection. But her recording of these flaws only makes her seem more honest. A pathological liar would have related the events at Bly much more smoothly and plausibly. Moreover, the governess need not have written the manuscript at all, or have shown it to Douglas. Silver asserts that she has written her apologia. If so, she has been remarkably unsuccessful in hiding her defects. Instead, she has displayed ironic detachment in giving a full account of her youthful shortcomings—her vanities, confusions, and terrors; and that ironic detachment is of considerable significance to any interpretation of the story. Looking back across the years from the vantage point of middle age, the governess has seen her former self as slightly ridiculous; and, far from portraying that former self as a magnificent heroine or as a savior, she has been consistently self-deprecatory. As the result of modesty, reticence, or some other scruple, she has perhaps failed to do herself justice. At any rate, she has presented her defects with unflinching candor. And while the resulting record clearly indicates human frailty, it does not reveal hysteria. As Lydenberg has said, if evil spirits *are* haunting the children, "it would be preposterous to ask the governess to remain calm, collected and normal."

The governess has, however, another trait which some readers find disturbing. She tends to jump to conclusions, and then to report her deductions as though she were stating facts rather than interpretations. For example, when Miss Jessel appears at the lake, the governess assumes on rather slender evidence that Flora is deliberately pretending not to see the apparition; and she later tells Mrs. Grose, "Flora *saw!*" Although some scholars feel that she is either lying or else speaking irrationally, her actual meaning is as

follows: "It is my belief that Flora saw." We can be sure of her intention, for she informs the reader that she has "made it out to her [Mrs. Grose], made it out perhaps only now with full coherency even to myself." In other words, she has pondered the incident at the lake and then expressed her considered opinion. Unfortunately, she tends to employ overly emphatic, and overly dramatic, language; but this is a trait which is not uncommon among Jamesian characters—for instance, Lambert Strether and Maria Gostrey are sometimes equally dogmatic in *The Ambassadors* when speculating about Chad. Similarly, when the governess observes Miles on the lawn at night, staring at something which is "apparently" above her, she deduces that there is "clearly" a person on the tower; and she states the possibility as though it were a certainty. Yet the result is obvious exaggeration, not calculated deception—she is employing overstatement to achieve added emphasis. In other words, she *feels* quite strongly that there must be someone on the tower. Had she been a pathological liar, the governess would have flatly stated that she *saw* the ghost.

This same tendency can be observed after she catches sight of Miss Jessel in the schoolroom and later allows Mrs. Grose to believe that there has been an actual conversation. Of course, she does not flatly state that Miss Jessel has talked to her; rather, she says, "It came to that"—that is, the encounter has been *equivalent* to a conversation since Miss Jessel's facial expression has spoken volumes. But as might be expected, Mrs. Grose misunderstands the governess' remark—and so does Cargill, who confuses overstatement with deliberate falsehood. Yet the governess is truthfully relating her *impression* of the encounter. It is interesting to note that her earlier account of the incident contains the same conversation-equivalent which she mentions while talking with Mrs. Grose:

She rose, not as if she had heard me, but with an indescribable grand melancholy of indifference and detachment, and, within a dozen feet of me, stood there as my vile predecessor. Dishonoured and tragic, she was all before me; but even as I fixed and, for memory, secured it, the awful image passed away. Dark as midnight in her black dress, her haggard beauty and her unutterable woe, *she had looked at me long enough to appear to say that her right to sit at my table was as good as mine to sit at hers* [my italics]. While these instants lasted indeed I had the extraordinary chill of a feeling that it was I who was the intruder. It was as a wild protest against it that, actually addressing her—"You terrible, miserable woman!"—I heard myself break into a sound that, by the open door, rang

through the long passage and the empty house. She looked at me as if she had heard me, but I had recovered myself and cleared the air. There was nothing in the room the next minute but the sunshine and a sense that I must stay (pp. 89–90).

When the governess later mentions the above scene to Mrs. Grose, the latter asks, "Do you mean she spoke?" And the governess replies, "It came to that," by which she means, "It amounted to that." Where is the deception? At most, the governess can be charged only with ambiguity. It is true that she often presents interpretations rather than raw facts. As Edel has pointed out, James made many changes in the text of *The Turn of the Screw* while preparing it for the New York edition; and the net result was "to put the story into the realm of the governess's feelings. Where he had her say originally 'I saw' or 'I believed' he often substituted 'I felt'." But when the governess says "I felt," she clearly labels the ensuing statement as a personal impression; neither a pathological liar nor a hysterical victim of hallucination would make such a distinction.

It would seem, then, that the governess' testimony is generally reliable. When she says that she saw Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, or that she felt a gust of icy air in a sealed room, there is no reason to suppose her hysterical. Certainly the fact that Mrs. Grose is consistently unable to see the specters does not prove them unreal; rather, it indicates that the governess somehow possesses a psychic power that the stolid housekeeper lacks. This convention, incidentally, is quite common in tales dealing with the supernatural: only Macbeth can see Banquo's ghost, only Jack Pansy can see Mrs. Keith-Wessington in Kipling's "The Phantom 'Rickshaw," and only Topper can see the madcap Kirbies in Thorne Smith's comic fantasies. Moreover, there are many incidents in James's story which cannot be dismissed as subjective sensory impressions. Of these, three are especially significant.

First, after her initial encounter with Peter Quint the governess is able to describe his appearance in such minute detail that Mrs. Grose identifies him immediately. Cargill assumes that the governess has previously acquired the necessary information from Flora, but the governess states specifically that the children have not mentioned Quint. Silver suggests that she has been asking questions in the village; but, as we have seen, there is no real evidence to support this hypothesis. Therefore, the governess' description of Quint seems proof that she has actually seen his ghost.

Second, although Mrs. Grose is consistently unable to see the spirits, she becomes convinced of their corrupting power after little Flora's outburst: "From that child—horrors! . . . On my honour, Miss, she says things—!" Furthermore, they are "shocking" things, "beyond everything, for a young lady," and they convince Mrs. Grose that the ghosts are real. "I believe," she states flatly. Goddard has tried to discount this bit of evidence by comparing Flora's appalling language with the "innocent profanity" of Hareton Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*, but the two cases are not parallel. For Hareton openly and frequently uses the shocking language he has heard, while Flora cleverly sustains the illusion of angelic innocence throughout most of the story.

Third, although the governess is careful never to mention Peter Quint to the children, Miles is at last goaded into a "surrender" of his name. It is true, of course, that the governess has accused Flora of meeting Miss Jessel at the lake. But the children have been kept apart, except for one breakfast under the watchful eye of Mrs. Grose; and it is therefore unlikely that there would have been any talk of Miss Jessel. But even if Miles somehow knew about the scene at the lake, an innocent child would not necessarily sense the connection between Miss Jessel and Peter Quint. Moreover, during the last scene of the story, the governess gives no hint that the "white face of damnation" outside the window belongs to Quint. She carefully refers to the ghost as "it" and "coward horror"; it is Miles who asks, "It's *he*?" "Whom do you mean by 'he'?" demands the governess. And Miles, frustrated and enraged, hurls back at her the fateful name "Peter Quint—you devil!"

These three incidents prove that the ghosts are real; for there is no other way satisfactorily to explain the governess' knowledge of Quint's appearance, Flora's shocking language, or Miles's final "surrender of the name." Or, more accurately, there is but one other way—to assume that the governess is a pathological liar offering deliberately falsified evidence. Cargill does make that assumption. To him, the reader is the victim of "palpable deception, the trick of a demonstrable pathological liar, a pitiful but dangerous person, with an unhinged fancy." But if the governess were indeed a liar, her "authority" would be gone; and the reader would be obliged to disbelieve the tale *in toto*. For in any story employing the first-person point of view, the narrator must, on the whole, be trustworthy. Of course, the narrator need not be infallible. He

may be immature like Huck Finn, mentally defective like William Faulkner's Benjy, inclined toward obvious exaggeration like Mark Twain in *Roughing It*, or somewhat muddleheaded like Conan Doyle's Dr. Watson. Indeed, like Dr. Sheppard in Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, he may even deliberately withhold information from the reader—provided that fact is eventually revealed. But he may not deceive the reader *permanently*; for the basic convention of first-person fiction is necessarily a confidence in the narrator. Otherwise, how would we know whether Huck Finn really drifted down the Mississippi on a raft? After all, we have only the word of that inveterate liar himself. And how could we be sure that Captain Ahab really pursued his white whale around the globe? For if we do not accept the authority of Ishmael, there is always the possibility that *Moby Dick* is merely a wild sea story—a hoax played upon gullible landlubber readers. Or, to cite *The Turn of the Screw* itself, how can we be positive that Douglas is not the liar, forging a manuscript to entertain his little circle of friends? Indeed, what assurance have we that the "I" narrator at the beginning of the story is not deceiving the reader by fabricating both the tale of an imaginary governess and also the opening "frame" device, with its storytellers around a Christmas fire in an old house? Once an erosion of authority begins, who can say where it must stop?

Therefore, unless James has violated the basic rules of his craft, the governess cannot be a pathological liar. To the contrary, he has gone to great pains to give her authority, and there is no reason to consider her less reliable than Huck or Ishmael. As James commented later, "To knead the subject of my young friend's, the supposititious narrator's, mystification thick, and yet strain the expression of it so clear and

fine that beauty would result: no side of the matter so revives for me as that endeavour."

It would seem, then, that the conventional interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw* is probably correct. The evil spirits do appear; the children are corrupted; and the governess does struggle to save them. Unless we accept the story as a fantasy, Miles's death is absurd—in real life, children do not drop dead merely because someone insists a ghost is peering in the window. Clearly, James did not intend to portray the governess as a sex-starved spinster, a hysterical personality subject to hallucinations, a deliberate liar, or an embodiment of ignorance and repression; on the other hand, he did not mean her to stand as a "Christ-symbol," a "Good Angel," or a paragon of all the virtues. Rather, she is a little Hampshire parson's daughter—inexperienced, bewildered, frightened—who battles the powers of darkness. Superficially, hers may seem a Pyrrhic victory. "Salvation by such as the governess doesn't save," says Lydenberg. Nevertheless, according to the conventions of the classical ghost story, she *does* save the children. For she is engaged in immortal—rather than mortal—combat; and the prize is nothing less than the souls of her young pupils. Before she makes her appearance, the ghosts are comfortably entrenched, casting their evil spell unhindered. By the end of the story, Flora has been removed from the corrupting atmosphere of Bly; and, although Miles is dead, his heart has been "dispossessed." Granted, the governess is not perfect; but her all-too-human frailty should not blind the reader to her great accomplishment. Standing resolutely at her own little Armageddon, she has routed the forces of evil.

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