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A Pre-Freudian Reading of *The Turn of the Screw*

HAROLD C. GODDARD

Prefatory Note by LEON EDEL: The following essay on Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* was discovered among the post-humous papers of the late Harold C. Goddard, professor of English and former head of the department at Swarthmore College. According to Professor Goddard's daughter, Eleanor Goddard Worthen, he read this essay to generations of students, but made no attempt to have it published. It was written, she says, "about 1920 or before," and this is evident from the critics he mentions, no one later than William Lyon Phelps. The manuscript was communicated by her to Edmund Wilson, whose 1934 essay on "The Ambiguity of Henry James" first propounded the hallucination theory of *The Turn of the Screw* with a bow in the direction of an earlier essay by the late Edna Kenton. Mr. Wilson, in turn, sent the Goddard paper to me and we both agreed that even at this late date, when the ink flows so freely around the Jamesian ghostly tale, it should be made available to scholars and critics.

To Professor Goddard must now go the credit of being the first to expound, if not to publish, a hallucination theory of the story. Indeed he went much farther than Mr. Wilson was to go after him—and without the aid of Sigmund Freud. Goddard's essay is a singularly valuable example of textual study. He relied wholly on what James had written, and he gave the tale that attentive reading which the novelist invited when he called his work a "trap for the unwary." Professor Goddard does not seem to have been aware, when he read the tale, that there was a "trap" in it. He is

[1]

the only reader of *The Turn of the Screw* I have found who not only sought to understand the psychology of the governess but examined that heroine from the viewpoint of the children entrusted to her. No other critic has paid attention to the governess' account of the wild look in her own eyes, the terror in her face. Above all, however, we must be grateful to Professor Goddard's scrupulous analysis of the "identification" scene—the scene in which Mrs. Grose is led, step by step, to pronounce the name of Peter Quint. Even the most confirmed hallucinationists have never done sufficient justice to the ambiguity of this scene.

Before the discovery of this essay, Edna Kenton's "Henry James to the Ruminant Reader" published in *The Arts* in November, 1924, stood as the first to attract attention to the importance of the point of view in the tale: the fact that the story is told entirely through the governess' eyes. Miss Kenton did not suggest in her published essay the idea attributed to her by Edmund Wilson that the governess represented a "neurotic case of sex-repression." This idea was wholly Mr. Wilson's, and earlier seems to have been Ezra Pound's, who called the tale "a Freudian affair." Miss Kenton's article is patently innocent of any such theory, and those critics who have spoken of the "Kenton-Wilson" theory of *The Turn of the Screw* quite obviously had read only Wilson, not Kenton.

With the studies of Goddard, Kenton and Wilson before us, I would suggest that three points are now clearly established: (1) that Henry James wrote a ghost story, a psychological thriller, intended to arouse a maximum of horror in the minds of his readers; (2) that a critical reading of the story to see how James achieved his horror reveals that he maneuvered the reader into the position of believing the governess' story even though her account 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) that anyone wishing to treat the governess as a psychological "case" is offered sufficient data to permit the diagnosis that she is mentally disturbed. It is indeed valid to speculate that James,

in speaking of a “trap,” was alluding not only to the question of the governess’ credibility as a witness, but to her actual madness.

There is one particular aspect of Professor Goddard’s paper which we must not neglect. I refer to the fact that he was able to relate the story to his own memory of a governess he had when he was a boy. I think this important because it represents the use of the reader’s personal experience for which James made so large an allowance—as he confided to his doctor, Sir James Mackenzie, who questioned him about the story, and also as he explained in his preface: that is James’s refusal to specify the “horrors” so that the reader might fill them in for himself. Goddard’s experience happened to be particularly close to the very elements in the story. There was thus a happy conjunction of personal fact with his “factual” reading.

Professor Goddard’s other works, also published posthumously, include *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, *Atomic Peace*, *Blake’s Fourfold Vision*, and an article published in *College English* proposing that Hamlet’s love letter was a forgery by Polonius.

A GOOD MANY YEARS ago I came upon *The Turn of the Screw* for the first time. I supposed I already knew what it was to be gripped by a powerful tale. But before I had read twenty pages I realized I had never encountered anything of this sort before. From the first, one of the things that chiefly struck me about James’s tale was the way in which it united the thrills one is entitled to expect from a ghost story with the quality of being entirely credible, even by daylight. True, it evoked plenty of mystery, propounded plenty of enigmas, along the way. But the main idea of the thing was perfectly plain. So at any rate I thought. For it never occurred to me that there could be two opinions about that. What

was my surprise, then, on taking it up with a group of students, to discover that not one of them interpreted it as I did. My faith in what seemed to me the obvious way of taking the story would have been shaken, had I not, on explaining it, found the majority of my fellow readers ready to prefer it to their own. And this experience was repeated with later groups. Yet, even after several years, it had not occurred to me that what seemed the natural interpretation of the narrative was not the generally accepted one among critics, however little it might be among students. And then one day I ran on a comment of Mr. Chesterton's on the story. He took it precisely as my students had. I began watching out in my reading for allusions to the story. I looked up several references to it. They all agreed. Evidently my view was utterly heretical. Naturally I asked myself more sharply than ever why I should take the tale as a matter of course in a way that did not seem to occur to other readers. Was it perversity on my part, or profundity? And then one day it dawned over me that perhaps it was neither. Perhaps it was the result rather of a remarkable parallelism between a strange passage in my own early experience (of which I will tell at the proper time) and what I conceived to be the situation in *The Turn of the Screw*. However that may be, at every rereading of the story I found myself adhering more firmly than ever to my original idea, and I continued to find that it met with hospitable reception among others. Not that there were no skeptics. Or now and then a strenuous objector.

It was not until long afterward that I happened to read James's own comment on *The Turn of the Screw* in the introduction to the collected edition of his works. A man with an hypothesis runs the risk of finding confirmation for it everywhere. Still, I set down for what it is worth the fact that in this introduction I thought I detected a very clear, but very covert, corroboration of the interpretation I favored, and later still, I got a similar impression, on the publication of James's letters, from passages referring to the story.

I

From the point of view of early critics of the tale [Chesterton, Rebecca West, Carl Van Doren, Stuart P. Sherman, William Lyon Phelps, and others], the story may be summarized, in bare outline, as follows:

An English gentleman, by the death of his brother in India, becomes guardian of a small niece and nephew whom he places in charge of a governess at his country home, Bly. On his departure from Bly, he leaves behind him his valet, a certain Peter Quint, with whom the governess, Miss Jessel, soon grows intimate. The valet is thus thrown in close contact with the children, with the boy in particular, who goes about with him as if he were his tutor. Quint and Miss Jessel are a depraved pair and the children do not escape exposure to their evil. As to the details of the contamination they suffer the author leaves us mercifully in the dark. But it is easy enough to guess its general nature. A point at any rate that is certain is the character of the language that the children pick up from their two protectors: language the use of which, later, was the cause of the boy's mysterious expulsion from school. Prior to this, however, Peter Quint, while drunk, slips on the ice and is killed, and Miss Jessel, whose reason for leaving Bly is broadly hinted, goes away—to die.

The world seems well rid of such a pair. But it turns out otherwise. For it is precisely at this point that the full horror of the situation develops and the infernal character of the tale emerges. Such, it transpires, was the passion of Quint and Miss Jessel to possess the souls of the innocent children that they return to their old haunts *after death*, appearing to their helpless victims and infecting them still further with their evil. Meanwhile, however, a new governess has been procured, who, fortunately for the children, is herself susceptible to visitation from the world beyond, and who, accordingly, does not long remain in the dark as to what is going on. Moved by a love for her little charges and a pity for

them as deep as were the opposite emotions of their former companions, she attempts to throw herself as a screen between them and the discarnate fiends who pursue them, hoping that by accepting, as it were, the first shock of the impact she may shield and ultimately save the innocent children. In her protracted and lonely struggle with the agents of evil, she succeeds, but at a fearful price. The children are indeed dispossessed. But the little girl is driven in the process into a delirium which threatens the impairment of her intellect, while the boy expires at the very moment when he is snatched back from the brink of the abyss down which he is slipping.

So taken, the story is susceptible equally of two interpretations. It may be conceived, literally, as an embodiment of the author's belief in survival after death and in the power of spirits, in this case of evil spirits, to visit the living upon earth. Or, if one prefers, it may be taken as an allegory, in manner not unlike *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*: the concrete representation of the truth that the evil that men do lives after them, infecting life long after they themselves are gone. Either way, except for the heroism of the second governess, the story is one of almost unmitigated horror. One can understand Mr. Chesterton's doubt as to whether the thing ought ever to have been published.

II

It is possible, however, to question the fidelity of either of these versions to the facts of the story and to ask whether another interpretation is not possible which will redeem the narrative from the charge of ugliness and render even its horror subordinate to its beauty.

Consider the second governess for a moment and the situation in which she finds herself. She is a young woman, only twenty, the daughter of a country parson, who, from his daughter's one allusion to him in her story, is of a psychically unbalanced nature; he may, indeed, even have been insane. We are given a number of

oblique glimpses into the young woman's home and early environment. They all point to its stifling narrowness. From the confinement of her provincial home this young and inexperienced woman comes up to London to answer an advertisement for a governess. That in itself constitutes a sufficient crisis in the life of one who, after one glimpse, we do not need to be told is an excessively nervous and emotional person. But to add to the intensity of the situation the young woman falls instantly and passionately in love with the man who has inserted the advertisement. She scarcely admits it even to herself, for in her heart she knows that her love is hopeless, the object of her affection being one socially out of her sphere, a gentleman who can never regard her as anything other than a governess. But even this is not all. In her overwrought condition, the unexplained death of the former governess, her predecessor, was enough to suggest some mysterious danger connected with the position offered, especially in view of the master's strange stipulation: that the incumbent should assume *all* responsibility, even to the point of cutting off all communication with him—never writing, never reporting. Something extraordinary, she was convinced, lurked in the background. She would never have accepted the place if it had not been for her newborn passion: she could not bring herself to disappoint him when he seemed to beg compliance of her as a favor—to say nothing of severing her only link with the man who had so powerfully attracted her.

So she goes down to Bly, this slip of a girl, and finds herself no longer a poor parson's daughter but, quite literally, the head of a considerable country establishment. As if to impart the last ingredient to the witch's broth of her emotions, she is carried away almost to the point of ecstasy by the beauty of the two children, Miles and Flora, who have been confided to her care. All this could supply the material for a nervous breakdown in a girl of no worldly experience and of unstable psychological background. At any rate she instantly becomes the victim of insomnia. The very first night she fancies that she hears a light footstep outside her door and in the

far distance the cry of a child. And more serious symptoms soon appear.

But before considering these, think what would be bound to happen even to a more normal mentality in such a situation. When a young person, especially a young woman, falls in love and circumstances forbid the normal growth and confession of the passion, the emotion, dammed up, overflows in a psychical experience, a daydream, or internal drama which the mind creates in lieu of the thwarted realization in the objective world. In romantic natures this takes the form of imagined deeds of extraordinary heroism or self-sacrifice done in behalf of the beloved object. The governess is precisely such a nature and the fact that she knows her love is futile intensifies the tendency. Her whole being tingles with the craving to perform some act of unexampled courage. To carry out her duties as governess is not enough. They are too humdrum. If only the house would take fire by night, and both the children be in peril! Or if one of them would fall into the water! But no such crudely melodramatic opportunities occur. What does occur is something far more indefinite, far more provocative to the imaginative than to the active faculties: the boy, Miles, is dismissed from school for no assigned or assignable reason. Once more, the hint of something evil and extraordinary behind the scenes! It is just the touch of objectivity needed to set off the subconsciousness of the governess into an orgy of myth-making. Another woman of a more practical and common sense turn would have made inquiries, would have followed the thing up, would have been insistent. But it is precisely complication and not explanation that this woman wants—though of course she does not know it. The vague feeling of fear with which the place is invested for her is fertile soil for imaginative invention and an inadvertent hint about Peter Quint dropped by the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, is just the seed that that soil requires. There is no more significant bit of dialogue in the story. Yet the reader, unless he is alert, is likely to pass it by un-

marked. The governess and the housekeeper are exchanging confidences. The former asks:

“What was the lady who was here before?”

“The last governess? She was also young and pretty—almost as young and almost as pretty, Miss, even as you.”

“Ah then I hope her youth and her beauty helped her!” I recollect throwing off. “He seems to like us young and pretty!”

“Oh he *did*,” Mrs. Grose assented: “it was the way he liked everyone!” She had no sooner spoken indeed than she caught herself up. “I mean that’s *his* way—the master’s.”

I was struck. “But of whom did you speak first?”

She looked blank, but she coloured. “Why, of *him*.”

“Of the master?”

“Of who else?”

There was so obviously no one else that the next moment I had lost my impression of her having accidentally said more than she meant.

The consciousness of the governess may have lost its impression, but we do not need to be students of psychology to know that that inveterate playwright and stage manager, the subconscious, would never permit so valuable a hint to go unutilized.

Mrs. Grose, as her coloring shows and as the governess discerns, is thinking of some one other than the master. Of what man would she naturally think, on the mention of Miss Jessel, if not of Miss Jessel’s running mate and partner in evil, Peter Quint? It is a momentary slip, but it is none the less fatal. It supplies the one character missing in the heroic drama that the governess’ repressed desire is bent on staging: namely, the villain. The hero of that drama is behind the scenes: the master in Harley Street. The heroine, of course, is the governess herself. The villain, as we said, is this unknown man who “liked them young and pretty.” The first complication in the plot is the mysterious dismissal of the boy from school, suggestive of some dim power of evil shadowing the child. The plot itself remains to be worked out, but it will inevitably turn on some act of heroism or self-sacrifice—both by preference—on the part of the heroine for the benefit of the hero and to the discomfiture of the villain. It is a foregone conclusion,

too, that the villain will be in some way connected with the boy's predicament at school. (That he really was is a coincidence.) All this is not conjecture. It is elemental human psychology.

Such is the material and plan upon which the dreaming consciousness of the governess sets to work. But how dream when one is the victim of insomnia? Daydream, then? But ordinary daydreams are not enough for the passionate nature of the governess. So she proceeds to act her drama out, quite after the fashion of a highly imaginative child at play. And the first scene of her dramatic creation is compressed into the few moments when she sees the stranger on the tower of Bly by twilight.

Whence does that apparition come? *Out of the governess's unconfessed love and unformulated fear.* It is clearly her love that first evokes him, for, as she tells us, she was thinking, as she strolled about the grounds that afternoon, how charming it would be suddenly to meet "some one," to have "some one" appear at the turn of a path and stand before her and smile and approve, when suddenly, with the face she longed to see still vividly present to her mind, she stopped short. "What arrested me on the spot," she says, "—and with a shock much greater than any vision had allowed for—was the sense that my imagination had, in a flash, turned real. He did stand there!—but high up, beyond the lawn and at the very top of the tower. . . ." Instantly, however, she perceives her mistake. It is not he. In her heart she knows it cannot be. But if her love is too good to be true, her fears, unfortunately, are only too true. And forthwith those fears seize and transform this creation of her imagination. "It produced in me," the governess declares, "this figure, in the clear twilight, I remember, two distinct gasps of emotion, which were, sharply, the shock of my first and that of my second surprise. My second was a violent perception of the mistake of my first: the man who met my eyes was not the person I had precipitately supposed. There came to me thus a bewilderment of vision of which, after these years, there is no living view that I can hope to give." What has happened? The

hint that the housekeeper dropped of an unnamed man in the neighborhood has done its work. Around that hint the imagination of the governess precipitates the specter who is to dominate the rest of the tale. And because he is an object of dread he is no sooner evoked than he becomes the raw material of heroism. It only remains to link him with the children and the "play" will be under way with a rush.

This linking takes place on the Sunday afternoon when the governess, just as she is about to go out to church, becomes suddenly aware of a man gazing in at the dining room window. Instantly there comes over her, as she puts it, the "shock of a certitude that it was not for me he had come. He had come for someone else." "The flash of this knowledge," she continues, "—for it was knowledge in the midst of dread—produced in me the most extraordinary effect, starting, as I stood there, a sudden vibration of duty and courage." The governess feels her sudden vibration of duty and courage as the effect of the apparition, but it would be closer to the truth to call it its cause. Why has the stranger come for the children rather than for her? Because she must not merely be brave; she must be brave for someone's sake. The hero must be brought into the drama. She must save the beings whom he has commissioned her to protect. And that she may have the opportunity to save them they must be menaced: they must have enemies. That is the creative logic of her hallucination.

"Hallucination!" a dozen objectors will cry, unable to hold in any longer. "Why! the very word shows that you have missed the whole point of the story. The creature at the window is no hallucination. It is he himself, Peter Quint, returned from the dead. If not, how was Mrs. Grose able to recognize him—and later Miss Jessel—from the governess's description?"

The objection seems well taken. The point, indeed, is a capital one with the governess herself, who clings to it as unshakable proof that she is not mad; for Mrs. Grose, it appears, though she seems to accept her companion's account of her strange experi-

ences, has moments of backsliding, of toying with the hypothesis that the ghosts are mere creatures of the governess' fancy. Whereupon, says the latter, "I had only to ask her how, if I had 'made it up,' I came to be able to give, of each of the persons appearing to me, a picture disclosing, to the last detail, their special marks—a portrait on the exhibition of which she had instantly recognized and named them." This retort floors Mrs. Grose completely, and she wishes "to sink the whole subject."

But Mrs. Grose is a trustful soul, too easily floored perhaps. If we will look into the matter a bit further than she did, we will perceive that it simply is not true that the governess gave such detailed descriptions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel that Mrs. Grose instantly recognized their portraits. In the case of Miss Jessel, indeed, such a statement is the very reverse of the truth. The "detailed" description consisted, beyond the colorless fact that the ghost was pale, precisely of the two items that the woman who appeared was extremely beautiful and was dressed in black. But Mrs. Grose had already told the governess explicitly, long before any ghost was thought of, that Miss Jessel was beautiful. Whether she had been accustomed to dress in black we never learn. But that makes little difference, for the fact is that it is *the governess herself and not Mrs. Grose at all who does the identifying*:

"Was she someone you've never seen?" asked Mrs. Grose.

"Never," the governess replies. "But some one the child has. Some one *you* have." Then to show how I had thought it all out: "My predecessor—the one who died."

"Miss Jessel?"

"Miss Jessel," the governess confirms. "You don't believe me?"

And the ensuing conversation makes it abundantly plain that Mrs. Grose is still far from convinced. This seems a trifle odd in view of the fact that Peter Quint is known to be haunting the place. After having believed in one ghost, it ought not to be hard for Mrs. Grose to believe in another, especially when the human counterparts of the two were as inseparable in life as were the

valet and the former governess. Which makes it look as if the housekeeper were perhaps not so certain after all in the case of Quint. Why, then, we ask, did she “identify him”? To which the answer is that she identified him because the suggestion for the identification, just as in the case of Miss Jessel, though much more subtly, comes from the governess herself. The skill with which James manages to throw the reader off the scent in this scene is consummate.

In the first place, the housekeeper herself, as we have had several occasions to remark, has already dropped an unintentional hint of someone in the neighborhood who preys on young and pretty governesses. This man, to be sure, is dead, but the new governess, who did not pay strict enough attention to Mrs. Grose’s tenses, does not know it. We have already noted the part that the fear of him played in creating the figure on the tower. When now that figure comes closer and appears at the window, it would be strange indeed if, in turning over in her head all the possibilities, the idea of the unknown man to whom the housekeeper had so vaguely referred did not cross at least the fringe of the governess’ consciousness. That it actually did is indicated by her prompt assumption that Mrs. Grose can identify their extraordinary visitor. “But now that you’ve guessed,” are her words.

“Ah I haven’t guessed,” Mrs. Grose replies. And we are quite willing to agree that at this point she hasn’t. But notice what follows:

The governess has assured Mrs. Grose that the intruder is not a gentleman.

“But if he isn’t a gentleman—” the housekeeper begins.

“What *is* he?” asks the governess, completing the question and supplying the answer:

“He’s a horror.”

“A horror?”

“He’s—God help me if I know *what* he is!”

Mrs. Grose looked round once more; she fixed her eyes on the duskiest distance and then, pulling herself together, turned to me with full inconsequence. “It’s time we should be at church.”

What was the thought which was seeking entrance to Mrs. Grose's mind as she gazed at the duskier distance and which was sufficiently unwelcome to make her throw it off with her gesture and quick digression? Was it something that the word "horror" had suggested, something vaguely hinted in the governess's "He's—God help me if I know *what* he is!"—as if their visitant were a creature not altogether mortal? We cannot be sure. But when, immediately afterward, the governess refuses to go to church on the ground that the stranger is a menace to the *children*, there is no longer any question as to the thought that dawns over the housekeeper. *A horror in human form that is a menace to the children!* Is there anything, or anyone, in Mrs. Grose's experience that answers that description? A thousand times yes! Peter Quint. Can there be a shadow of doubt that it is Quint of whom she is thinking when, to use the author's words, her

large face showed me, at this, for the first time, the far-away faint glimmer of a consciousness more acute: I somehow made out in it the delayed dawn of an idea I myself had not given her and that was as yet quite obscure to me. It comes back to me that I thought instantly of this as something I could get from her; and I felt it to be connected with the desire she presently showed to know more.

So do the governess' fears and repressed desires and the housekeeper's memories and anxieties unconsciously collaborate.

The conversation is resumed and the governess gives, in the most vivid detail, a picture of the man she has seen at the window. Following which, from the governess's challenge, "You *do* know him?" the housekeeper holds back for a second, only to admit, a moment later, that it is Peter Quint and to stagger her companion, in the next breath, by her calm declaration that Quint is dead.

Now with regard to all this the critical question is: Granted that Mrs. Grose's mind was already toying with the idea of Quint, how could she have identified him unless the governess' description tallied with the man? For, unlike Miss Jessel's, she has received no advance hint with regard to Quint's personal appearance,

and the description, instead of being brief and generalized, is lengthy and concrete. The objection seems fatal to the view that the apparitions were mere creatures of the governess' imagination. But upon examination this line of argument will be found, I think, to prove too much.

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!"

Well, it is only a slight exaggeration to say that Mrs. Grose's "identification" of Peter Quint, in the face of the governess' description, is of exactly this sort. The picture the latter draws of the face at the window, with its red curling hair and peculiar whiskers, is so vivid and striking that Mrs. Grose, if she was listening and if it was indeed a description of Quint, ought not to have hesitated a second. But she did hesitate. It may of course be said that she hesitated not because the description did not fit but because Quint was dead. But if so, why, when she does identify him, does she pick out the least characteristic points in the description? Why, when she does "piece it all together" (what irony in that "all"!), does her identification rest not at all on the red whiskers or the thin mouth, but, of all things, on the two facts that the stranger wore no hat and that his clothes looked as if they belonged to someone else? As if good ghosts always wore hats and bad ones carried their terrestrial pilferings into eternity! That touch about "the missing waistcoats" is precisely at Mrs. Grose's intellectual level, the level, as anyone who has ever had the curiosity to attend one knows, of a fifth-rate spiritualist seance.

The thing is really so absurd that we actually wonder whether Mrs. Grose was listening. Recall the beginning of the dialogue:

“What’s he like?” [asks Mrs. Grose]

“I’ve been dying to tell you. But he’s like nobody.”

“Nobody?” she echoed.

“He has no hat.” Then seeing in her face that she already, in this, with a deeper dismay, found a touch of picture, I quickly added stroke to stroke.

We see what we expect to see. That Mrs. Grose should so instantaneously find a touch of picture in the colorless item that “he had no hat” is a measure of the high degree of her suggestibility, as good proof as one could want that an image is already hovering in the background of her mind waiting to rush into the foreground at the faintest summons. That, as we have seen, is exactly what the image of Peter Quint is doing. And so, is it at all unlikely that in completing the picture of which the mention of the hat has supplied the first touch, Mrs. Grose pays scant attention to the other, verbal picture that the governess is drawing? The point need not be urged, but at any rate she gives no evidence of having heard, and at the governess’ concluding sentence, “He gives me a sort of sense of looking like an actor,” her echoed “An actor!” sounds almost as if it were at that point that her wandering attention were called back. That of course is only conjecture. But what is not conjecture, and significant enough, is the fact that the two shaky pegs on which Mrs. Grose hangs her identification come, one at the very beginning, the other at the very end, of a long description the intervening portions of which would have supplied her, any one of them, with solid support. When a man crosses a stream on a rotten wooden bridge in spite of the fact that there is a solid one of stone a rod or two away, you naturally wonder whether he has noticed it.

III

“But why waste so much breath,” it will be said, “over what is after all such a purely preliminary part of the story and over such an incidental character as Mrs. Grose. Come to the main events, and

to the central characters, the children. What *then* becomes of your theory that Quint and Miss Jessel are just hallucinations? How can they be that, when Miles and Flora see them?"

Before coming to this certainly pertinent objection, I wonder if I may interject the personal experience mentioned at the beginning. It may be that this experience subconsciously accounts for my reading of *The Turn of the Screw*. If its influence is justified, it is worth recounting. If it is unjustified, it should be narrated that the reader may properly discount its effect on my interpretation of the tale. It may be that for me this memory turns into realism what for even the author was only romance.

When I was a boy of seven or eight, and my sister a few years older, we had a servant in the family—a Canadian woman, I think she was—who, I now see on looking back (though no one then suspected it), was insane. Some years later her delusions became marked, her insanity was generally recognized, and she was for a time at least confined in an asylum. Now it happened that this woman, who was of an affectionate nature and loved children, used to tell us stories. I do not know whether they were all of one kind, but I do know that the only ones my memory retained were of dead people who came to visit her in the night. I remember with extraordinary vividness her account of a woman in white who came and stood silent at the foot of her bed. I can still see the strange smile—the insane smile, as I now recognize it to have been—that came over the face of the narrator as she told of this visitant. This woman did not long remain a servant in our family. But suppose she had! Suppose our parents had died, or, for some other reason, we had been placed exclusively in her care. (She was a woman of unimpeachable character and kindest impulses.) What might have happened to us? What might not! Especially if she had conceived the notion that some of her spiritual visitants were of an infernal character and had come to gain possession of us, the children for whom she was responsible. I tremble to think. And yet no greater alteration than this would have been called for in an instance

within the range of my own experience to have duplicated essentially what I conceive to be the situation in *The Turn of the Screw*.

Now the unlikelihood of this situation's occurring is precisely the fact that in real life someone would recognize the insanity and interfere to save the children. This was the difficulty that confronted the author of *The Turn of the Screw*, if we may assume for the moment that I have stated his problem correctly. The extraordinary skill and thoroughness with which he has met it are themselves the proof, it seems to me, that he had that difficulty very consciously in his mind. He overcomes it by fashioning the characters of the master and the housekeeper expressly to fit the situation. The children's uncle, from the first, wishes to wash his hands entirely of their upbringing, to put them unreservedly in the hands of their governess, who is *never*, in any conceivable way, to put up her problems or questions to him in person or by letter. The insistence on this from beginning to end seems needlessly emphatic unless it serves some such purpose as the one indicated. The physical isolation of the little household in the big estate at Bly is also complete. The governess is in supreme authority; only she and the housekeeper have anything to do with the children—and Mrs. Grose's character is shaped to fit the plot. If she is the incarnation of practical household sense and homely affection, she is utterly devoid of worldly experience and imagination. And she is as superstitious as such a person is likely to be. She can neither read nor write, the latter fact, which is a capital one, being especially insisted on. She knows her place and has a correspondingly exalted opinion of persons of higher rank or education. Hence her willingness, even when she cannot understand, to accept as truth whatever the governess tells her. She loves the children deeply and has suffered terribly for them during the reign of Quint and Miss Jessel. (Her relief on the arrival of Miss Jessel's successor, which the latter notices and misinterprets, is natural.) Here is a character, then, and a situation, ideally fitted to allow of the development of the governess' mania unnoticed. James speaks of the original sug-

gestion for *The Turn of the Screw* as “the vividest little note for sinister romance that I had ever jotted down,” expressing wonder at the same time “why so fine a germ, gleaming there in the way-side dust of life, had never been deftly picked up.” His note, he says in one of his letters, was “of a most scrappy kind.” The form which the idea assumed in his mind as it developed we can only conjecture. My own guess would be that it might, in content at least, have run something like this: *Two children, under circumstances where there is no one to realize the situation, are put, for bringing up, in the care of an insane governess.*

IV

With this hypothesis as a clue, we can trace the art with which James hypnotizes us into forgetting that it is the governess’ version of the story to which we are listening, and lures us, as the governess unconsciously lured Mrs. Grose, into accepting her coloring of the facts for the facts themselves.

It is solely on the governess’ say-so that we agree to the notion that the two specters have returned in search of the *children*. Again it is on her unsupported word that we accept for fact her statement that, on the occasion in the garden when Miss Jessel first appeared, Flora *saw*. The scene itself, after Miss Jessel’s advent, is not presented. (Time enough to present his scenes when James has “suggested” to his readers what they shall see.) What happened is narrated by the governess, who simply announces flatly to Mrs. Grose that, “Two hours ago, in the garden, Flora *saw*.” And when Mrs. Grose naturally enough demands, “. . . how do you know?” her only answer is, “I was there—I saw with my eyes,” an answer valuable or worthless in direct proportion to the governess’ power to see things as they are.

In the case of Miles the method is the same except that James, feeling that he now has a grip on the reader, proceeds more boldly. The scene is not narrated this time; it is presented—but only indirectly. The governess, looking down from a window, catches Miles

out at midnight on the lawn. He gazes up, as nearly as she can figure, to a point on the building over her head. Whereupon she promptly draws the inference: "There was clearly another person above me—there was a person on the tower." This, when we stop to think, is even "thinner" than in the case of Flora and Miss Jessel, for this time even the governess does not see, she merely infers. The boy gazes up. "Clearly" there was a man upon the tower. That "clearly" lets the cat out of the bag. It shows, as every tyro in psychology should know, that "clear" is precisely what the thing is not.

These two instances are typical of the governess' mania. She seizes the flimsiest pretexts for finding confirmation of her suspicions. Her theories swell to such immense dimensions that when the poor little facts emerge they are immediately swallowed up. She half admits this herself at the very beginning of the story: "It seems to me indeed, in raking it all over," she says of the night following the appearance of Quint at the dining room window, "that by the time the morrow's sun was high I had restlessly read into the facts before us almost all the meaning they were to receive from subsequent and more cruel occurrences." Scarcely ever was the essence of mania better compressed into a sentence than in her statement: "The more I go over it the more I see in it, and the more I see in it the more I fear. I don't know what I *don't* see, what I *don't* fear!" Or again, where in speaking of the children's lessons and her conversations with them she says:

All roads lead to Rome, and there were times when it might have struck us that almost every branch of study or subject of conversation skirted forbidden ground. Forbidden ground was the question of the return of the dead in general and of whatever, in especial, might survive, for memory, of the friends little children had lost. There were days when I could have sworn that one of them had, with a small invisible nudge, said to the other: "She thinks she'll do it this time—but she won't!" To "do it" would have been to indulge for instance—and for once in a way—in some direct reference to the lady who had prepared them for my discipline.

And from this she goes on to the conviction that the children have fallen into the habit of entertaining Quint and Miss Jessel unknown to her.

“There were times of our being together when I would have been ready to swear that, literally, in my presence, but with my direct sense of it closed, they had visitors who were known and were welcome. Then it was that, had I not been deterred by the very chance that such an injury might prove greater than the injury to be averted, my exaltation would have broken out. “They’re here, they’re here, you little wretches,” I would have cried, “and you can’t deny it now!”

Her proof in these cases, it will be noted, is the fact that she “could have sworn” that it was so.

How completely innocent and natural the children really were through all these earlier passages of the drama anyone will see who will divest himself of the suggestion that the governess has planted in his mind. The pranks they play are utterly harmless, and when she questions the perpetrators, because they are perfectly truthful, they have the readiest and most convincing answers at hand. Why did little Miles get up in the middle of the night and parade out on the lawn? Just as he said, in order that, for once, she might think him *bad*. Why did Flora rise from her bed at the same hour? By agreement with Miles. Why did she gaze out the window? To disturb her governess and make her look too. These answers, true every one, ought to have disarmed the children’s inquisitor. But she has her satanic hypothesis, so that the very readiness of their replies convicts instead of acquitting them in her eyes. They are inspired answers, she holds, splendidly but diabolically inspired. They scintillate with a mental power beyond the children’s years. “Their more than earthly beauty, their absolutely unnatural goodness. It’s a game,” she cries, “it’s a policy and a fraud!”

And the same is true of the children’s conversation as of their conduct. Always their remarks are direct and ingenuous; always she reads into them an infernal meaning—until, when she says of Miles, “. . . horrible as it was his lies made up my truth,” we see that the exact reverse of this is the case: that in reality his truth, and Flora’s, made up her lies. If Miles asks about “this queer business of ours,” meaning the queer way his education is being attended to, she takes it as referring to the boy’s queer intercourse

with Quint. If, when she remarks to Miles that they are alone, the latter replies that they still have “the others,” obviously referring to the servants, the governess is not content to take his words at their face value but must interpret “the others” as referring to the specters. So candid, so unsophisticated, so prompt are the children’s answers that even the governess’ insane conviction at times seems shaken. But always—so James contrives it—some convenient bit of *objective* evidence comes in to reassure her: the fearful language that Flora uses in her delirium, the boy’s lie about the letter, the clear evidence at the end that he has something on his mind that he longs to confess.

As these last examples suggest, it is necessary to qualify the idea that Miles and Flora are just happy natural children. They are that during the earlier passages of the story. But they do not continue to be. And the change is brought about by no one but the governess herself. Herein lies one of the subtlest aspects of the story.

Fear is like faith: it ultimately creates what at first it only imagined. The governess, at the beginning, imagines that the actions and words of the children are strange and unnatural. In the end they become strange and unnatural for the good and sufficient reason that the children gradually become conscious of the strangeness and unnaturalness of her own attitude toward them. They cannot put it into words: they have never heard of nervousness, still less of insanity. But they sense it and grow afraid, and she accepts the abnormal condition into which their fear of *her* has thrown them as proof of their intercourse with the two specters. Thus do her mania and their fear feed and augment each other, until the situation culminates—in a preliminary way—in two scenes of shuddering terror.

The first of these is the occasion when the governess comes at night to Miles’s bedside and tries, without mentioning the dreaded name of Quint, to wring from the child a confession of the infernal intercourse which, she is convinced, he is guilty of holding. Forget, for the moment, the governess’ version of the occurrence and think

of it as it must have appeared to the child. A little boy of ten, who has for some time felt something creepy and uncanny in the woman who has been placed in charge of him and his sister, lies awake in the dark thinking of her and of the strangeness of it all. He hears steps outside his door. At his call the door opens, and there, candle in hand, is this very woman. She enters and sits beside him on the edge of the bed. For a moment or two she talks naturally, asking him why he is not asleep. He tells her. And then, quite suddenly, he notices in her voice the queer tone he has felt before, and the something in her manner, excited but suppressed, that he does not like. As they go on talking, this excitement grows and grows, until in a final outburst she falls on her knees before him and begs him to let her *save* him! Visualize the scene: the hapless child utterly at a loss to know what the dreadful "something" is from which she would "save" him; the insane woman on her knees almost clasping him in her hysterical embrace. Is it any wonder that the interview terminates in a shriek that bursts from the lips of the terror-stricken boy? Nothing could be more natural. Yet, characteristically, the governess interprets the boy's fright and outcry as convincing proof of the presence of the creature she is seeking to exorcise. Utterly unconscious of the child's fear of *her*, she attributes his agitation to the only other adequate cause she can conceive.

The corresponding scene in the case of Flora occurs the next day by the lake. Once more, think of it from the angle of the child. A little girl, too closely watched and confined by her governess, seizes an opportunity for freedom that presents itself and wanders off for half an hour in the grounds of the estate where she lives. A little later, the governess and the housekeeper, out of breath with searching, come upon her. A half-dozen words have hardly been exchanged when the governess, a tremor in her voice, turns suddenly on the child and demands to know where her former governess is—a woman whom the little girl knows perfectly well is dead and buried. The child's face blanches, the housekeeper utters a cry, in

answer to which the governess, pointing across the lake and into vacancy cries out: "She's there, she's there!" The child stares at the demented woman in consternation. The latter repeats: "She's there, you little unhappy thing—there, there, *there*, and you know it as well as you know me!" The little girl holding fast to the housekeeper, is frozen in a convulsion of fear. She recovers herself sufficiently to cry out, "I don't know what you mean. I see nobody. I see nothing. I never *have*," and then, hiding her head in the housekeeper's skirts, she breaks out in a wail, "Take me away, take me away—oh take me away from *her*!"

"From *me*?" the governess cries, as if thunderstruck that it is not from the specter that she asks to be delivered.

"From you—from you!" the child confirms.

Again, is not the scene, when innocently taken, perfectly natural? Yet again the governess is incapable of perceiving that the child is stricken with terror not at all at the apparition but at *her* and the effect the apparition has had upon her.

V

"All of which is very clever and might be very convincing," it will be promptly objected, "if it did not calmly leave out of account the paramount fact of the whole narrative, that in the end Miles *does* see and identifies Quint by name. It was this "supreme surrender of the name" that justified and redeemed the governess' devotion. Never, never—it was a point of honor—had the name of Quint crossed her lips in Miles's presence. When, then, it crossed his lips in her presence, it was the long sought proof that from the first he had been holding communication with the spirit of the dead man. That is the very point and climax of the story."

If you think so, you have failed to trace the chain of causation down which the name of Peter Quint vibrates from the brain of the governess to the lips of little Miles.¹ True, it was a point of

¹ For I do not think we are entitled to infer that Miles learned anything from the stolen letter.

honor with her not to breathe the name of Quint in the children's presence. But how about the name of Quint's companion? Ought not silence with regard to Miss Jessel's to have been equally sacred? It surely should have been. But there, it will be remembered, the governess' self-control failed her. On that day, by the lake, when, as we have seen, she blurted out to Flora her fatal, "Where, my pet, is Miss Jessel?" only to answer her own question a second later by gazing into what to the two others was vacancy and shrieking, "She's there, she's there!" she fixed forever in the child's mind a bond between her own (that is, the governess') strange "possession" and the name of Miss Jessel.

Flora, as we have remarked, is driven half out of her senses with fright, and while she has never "seen" Miss Jessel previously, nothing is more probable than that she "sees" her now. At the very least, memories of her and of the time the child was in her care figure prominently in the delirium that follows the shock of witnessing the governess' strange affliction. Whatever Flora's feelings toward her former governess originally were, from now on they will be linked inextricably with her fear of her present one. The two are merged in a single complex. How do we know? Because the child, in her delirium, uses shocking language or ideas which she has picked up in the days when Miss Jessel consorted with Peter Quint. To poor Mrs. Grose this is, at last, final proof that the governess is right in suspecting the little girl of diabolical intercourse. To the reader it ought to be proof of nothing of the sort. Nearly everyone remembers the case of the ignorant maidservant of the Hebrew scholar who, on being hypnotized, would overflow in a torrent of extraordinarily fluent Hebrew. This gift came very far from proving her learned in Hebrew. Quite as little did the "horrors," to use Mrs. Grose's word, to which Flora gives utterance in her fever prove her a depraved or vicious child. An interesting parallel and variant of the same motive is found in the innocent profanity of Hareton Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*, verbally shocking language from the lips of a rarely beautiful character.

The next link in the chain is the fact that Miles sees Flora between the time she is taken ill and the scene of his final interview with the governess. The very brevity of the author's reference to this fact suggests his expectation that the breathless or unwary reader will read right over it without getting its significance. (If it has no significance, why mention it at all?) The governess, fearing that Flora, who has now turned against her, will influence Miles to do the same, warns Mrs. Grose against giving her the opportunity to do so.

"There's one thing, of course" [she says]: "they mustn't, before she goes, see each other for three seconds." Then it came over me that, in spite of Flora's presumable sequestration from the instant of her return from the pool, it might already be too late. "Do you mean," I anxiously asked, "that they *have* met?"

At this she quite flushed. "Ah, Miss, I'm not such a fool as that! If I've been obliged to leave her three or four times, it has been each time with one of the maids, and at present, though she's alone, she's locked in safe. And yet—and yet!" There were too many things.

"And yet what?"

Mrs. Grose never really answers this "And yet what?" which, together with her flushing when the governess asks her if the children have met, more than intimates that they already have, especially in view of the assumed complete trustworthiness of "the maids." That they do meet later, at any rate, we know from half a sentence thrown in with seeming inadvertence in the next chapter. Vague as the matter is left, it is clear that the boy had an opportunity to fix in his mind a connection between his sister's illness, her dread of their present governess, and—Miss Jessel. It was an uncomprehended connection to be sure, but its effect on the boy's mind must have been all the more powerful on that account—and the more so at this particular moment because under the stress of the governess' attempt to extort a confession from him his mind was already magnifying his venial fault about the letter into a mortal sin.

When, then, at the end, the governess in the presence of her

hallucination shrieks to Peter Quint that he shall possess her boy “No more, no more, no more!” and the child, panting in her insane embrace, realizes that she sees someone at the window, how natural, how inevitable, that he should ask if “she” is “*here*,” and to the echoed question of the governess, who this “she” is, should reply, “Miss Jessel, Miss Jessel!” Bear in mind that, all through, it is Miss Jessel, according to the governess, who has been visiting Flora, while it is Quint who has been holding communication with Miles. Why, if the boy has been in the habit of consorting with the spirit of Quint and if he senses now the nearness of a ghostly visitant, why, I say, does he not ask if *he* is here? Surely, then, his “Is *she* here?” is the best possible proof that the idea of a spiritual presence has been suggested not at all by past experiences of a similar sort but precisely by something he has overheard from Flora, or about her, plus what he gets at the moment from the governess.

“I seized, stupified, his supposition,” she says, at his utterance of Miss Jessel’s name, “—some sequel to what we had done to Flora, but this made me only want to show him that it was better still than that.” (In one flash that “better” lays bare the governess’ possession!) “It’s not Miss Jessel!” she goes on. “But it’s at the window—straight before us. It’s *there*, the coward horror, there for the last time!”

If we could hear her voice when she cries, “It’s not Miss Jessel!” I suspect that her intonation of the last two words would show how completely, if unconsciously, she conveyed *to* the boy’s mind the very name which her whole justification depended on receiving *from* him. The child’s next question, “It’s *he*?” is but an ellipsis for “If, then, it is not *she*, you mean it must be the other one of the two who were always together?” But the governess, determined not to be the first to mention the unmentionable name, demands, “Whom do you mean by ‘he’?”

“Peter Quint—you devil!” is the child’s reply in words that duplicate, more briefly and even more tragically, the psychology

of the “horrors” uttered by his sister in her delirium. But even now he does not see, though he accepts the governess’ assurance that Peter Quint is there. “*Where?*” he cries. And that last word his lips ever utter, as his eye roams helplessly about the room in a vain endeavor to *see*, gives the ultimate lie to the notion that he does see now or has ever seen. But the governess, deluded to the end, takes it as meaning that at last the horror is exorcised and the child himself dispossessed.

VI

If on your first reading of *The Turn of the Screw* the hypothesis did not occur to you that the governess is insane, run through the story again and you will hardly know which to admire more, James’s daring in introducing the cruder physical as distinguished from the subtler psychological symptoms of insanity or his skill in covering them up and seeming to explain them away. The insane woman is telling her own story. She cannot see her own insanity—she can only see its reflection, as it were, in the faces, trace its effect on the acts, of others. And because “the others” are in her case children and an ignorant and superstitious woman, these reflections and effects are to be found in the sphere of their emotions rather than in that of their understandings. They see and feel her insanity, but they cannot comprehend or name it.

The most frequent mark of her disease is her insane *look* which is mirrored for us in the countenances and eyes of the others.

Mrs. Grose first sees this look in something like its fullness when the governess gazes through the window of the dining room after she has seen Peter Quint. So terrible is the sight of her face that Mrs. Grose draws back blanched and stunned, quite as if it were a ghost that she had seen. “Did I look very queer?” the governess asks a moment later when the housekeeper has joined her. “Through this window?” Mrs. Grose returns. “Dreadful!”

There are a dozen other passages that strike the same note:

“I was conscious as I spoke that I looked prodigious things,” says

the governess, “for I got the slow reflection of them in my companion’s face.”

“Ah with such awful eyes!” she exclaims in another passage, referring to the way Miss Jessel fixed her gaze on Flora. Whereupon, she continues, Mrs. Grose “stared at mine as if they might really have resembled them.” And a moment later: “Mrs. Grose—her eyes just lingering on mine—gave a shudder and walked to the window.”

In a later conversation between the same two: “I don’t wonder you looked queer,” says the governess, “when I mentioned to you the letter from his school!” “I doubt if I looked as queer as you!” the housekeeper retorts.

“I remember that, to gain time, I tried to laugh,” the governess writes of her walk to church with Miles, “and I seemed to see in the beautiful face with which he watched me how ugly and queer I looked.”

To which should be added the passage, too long to quote, in which Flora recognizes for the first time the full “queerness” of her governess, the passage that culminates in her agonized cry: “Take me away, take me away—oh take me away from *her!*”

The governess’ insane laugh, as well as her insane look, is frequently alluded to. Of this we have just mentioned one example. Of references to her maniacal cries there are several: “I had to smother a kind of howl,” she says when Mrs. Grose tells her of Quint’s relations with the children. Or again, when she catches Miss Jessel sitting at her table: “I heard myself break into a sound that, by the open door, rang through the long passage and the empty house.” What do we say of persons who shriek in empty houses—or who frighten children into similar outbreaks? “The boy gave a loud high shriek which, lost in the rest of the shock of sound, might have seemed, indistinctly, though I was so close to him, a note either of jubilation or of terror.”

The wonder is not that the children cried out, but that they did not cry out sooner or oftener. “I must have gripped my little girl

with a spasm that, wonderfully, she submitted to without a cry or a sign of fright." The implications of that sentence prepare us for the scene in Miles's bedchamber where the governess falls on her knees before the boy and for the final scene where she locks him in her insane embrace.

But the psychological symptoms are more interesting than the more obviously physical ones.

The consciousness of the governess that she is skirting the brink of the abyss is especially significant. It reminds us of Lear's: "That way madness lies." Only in her case we have to take her word for it that she never goes over the edge.

"We were to keep our heads," she says, "if we should keep nothing else—difficult indeed as that might be. . . ."

"I began to watch them in a stifled suspense," she remarks of the children, "a disguised tension, that might well, had it continued too long, have turned to something like madness. What saved me, as I now see, was that it turned to another matter altogether." Of the truth of this last assertion the governess presents precisely nothing but her own word as proof. Or, to put it from her own angle, she presents—the apparitions. "She was there," she says of Miss Jessel's appearance by the lake, "so I was justified; she was there, so I was neither cruel nor mad." The irony of summoning a specter as witness that one is not mad is evident enough.

Indeed this style of reasoning does not quite satisfy the governess herself in her more normal intervals. There are moments throughout the tale when a lurking doubt of her own sanity comes to the surface. When, for instance, Mrs. Grose begs her to write to the master and explain their predicament, she turns on her with the question whether she can write him that his little niece and nephew are mad. "But if they *are*, Miss?" says Mrs. Grose. "And if I am myself, you mean?" the governess retorts. And when she is questioning Miles, on the very edge of the final catastrophe, the same paralyzing thought floats for a second into her consciousness: ". . . if he *were* innocent what then on earth was I?" That she

never succeeded in utterly banishing this terrible hypothesis is shown by the view of the case she takes long after the events are over and she is writing her account of them: "It was not," she sets it down, "I am as sure to-day as I was sure then, my mere infernal imagination." Clear proof that she was sure at neither time.

There are a dozen other passages, if there were only space to quote them, that show how penetratingly, if unconsciously, the sane remnant of the governess' nature can diagnose her own case and comprehend the character of the two apparitions. "What arrested me on the spot," she says of the figure on the tower, "... was the sense that my imagination had, in a flash, turned real." "There were shrubberies and big trees," she says when she is hunting for Quint on the lawn, "but I remember the clear assurance I felt that none of them concealed him. He was there or was not there: not there if I didn't see him." The account of the first appearance of Miss Jessel, too, if read attentively, reveals clearly the psychological origin of the apparition, as does the governess' account of the experience, later, to Mrs. Grose:

"I was there with the child—quiet for the hour; and in the midst of it she came."

"Came how—from where?"

"From where they come from! She just appeared and stood there—but not so near."

"And without coming nearer?"

"Oh for the effect and the feeling she might have been as close as you!"

But perhaps the most interesting and convincing point in this whole connection is the fact that the appearance of the ghosts is timed to correspond not at all with some appropriate or receptive moment in the children's experience but very nicely with some mental crisis in the governess'. In the end their emergence is a signal, as it were, of a further loss of self-control on her part, an advance in her mania. "Where, my pet, is Miss Jessel?" she asks Flora, committing the tragic indiscretion of mentioning the interdicted name. And presto! Miss Jessel appears. "Tell me," she says, pressing Miles cruelly to the wall in their last interview, "if, yester-

day afternoon, from the table in the hall, you took, you know, my letter." And instantly Peter Quint comes into view "like a sentinel before a prison." But the last instance of all is the most revealing. With the ruthlessness of an inquisitor she has extorted from Miles the confession that he "said things" at school. It is not enough that he tells her to whom he said them. She must follow it up to the bitter end. "What *were* these things?" she demands unpardonably. Whereupon, "again, against the glass, as if to blight his confession and stay his answer, was the hideous author of our woe—the white face of damnation." If perfect synchronization is any criterion, surely, with these instances before us, the inference is inescapable that if Peter Quint has come out of the grave to infect or capture anyone, it is the governess and not the child.

VII

There will doubtless be those who can quite agree with all I have said about *The Turn of the Screw* who will nevertheless not thank me for saying it. "Here was the one ghost story left," they will protest, "that carried a genuine mystery in it. And you proceed to rationalize it ruthlessly, to turn it, in James's own words, into a 'mere modern "psychical" case, washed clean of all queerness as by exposure to a flowing laboratory tap.' What a pity!"

But do I rationalize it, ruthlessly or otherwise? Is insanity something easier to probe and get to the bottom of than a crude spiritualism? Are Peter Quint and Miss Jessel a whit less mysterious or less appalling because they are evoked by the governess's imagination? Are they a whit less real? Surely the human brain is as solid a fact as the terrestrial globe, and inhabitants of the former have just as authentic an existence as inhabitants of the latter. Nor do I mean by that to imply, as to some I will seem to have implied all through, that Peter Quint and Miss Jessel exist *only* in the brain of the governess. Perhaps they do and perhaps they don't. Like Hawthorne in similar situations—but with an art that makes even Hawthorne look clumsy—James is wise enough and intellectually

humble enough to leave that question open. Nobody knows enough about insanity yet to be dogmatic on such a matter. Whether the insane man creates his hallucinations or whether insanity is precisely the power to perceive objective existences of another order, whether higher or lower, than humanity, no open-minded person can possibly pretend to say, however preponderating in the one direction or the other present evidence may seem to him to be. Whoever prefers to, then, is free to believe that the governess sees the actual spirits of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel. Nothing in the tale, I have tried to show, demands that hypothesis. But nothing, on the other hand, absolutely contradicts it. Indeed, there is room between these extremes for a third possibility. Perhaps the governess' brain caught a true image of Peter Quint straight from Mrs. Grose's memory via the ether or some subtler medium of thought transference. The tale in these respects is susceptible of various readings. But for one theory it offers, I hold, not an inch of standing ground: for the idea, namely, that the children *saw*.

This is the crucial point. Everything else is incidental. Believe that the children saw, and the tale is one thing. Believe that they did not see, and it is another—as different as light from darkness. Either way the story is one of the most powerful ever written. But in the former event it is merely dreadful. In the latter it is dreadful, but also beautiful. One way, it is a tale of corrupted childhood. The other, it is a tale of incorruptible childhood. Of the two, can it be doubted which it is? Miles and Flora are touched, it is true, by the evil of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, but they are not tainted. That evil leaves its mark, if you will, but no trace of stain or smirch. The children remain what they were—incarnations of loveliness and charm. Innocence is armor plate: that is what the story seems to say. And does not life bear out that belief? Otherwise, in what but infamy would the younger generation ever end? Miles and Flora, to be sure, are withered at last in the flame of the governess' passion. But corrupted—never! And the withering of them in the flame is rendered tragic rather than merely horrible by the

heroism that they display. The things that children suffer in silence! Because, as here, their heroism generally takes the form of endurance rather than of daring, rarely, if ever, in literature or in life, is justice done to the incredible, the appalling courage of childhood. This story does do justice to it.

But in stressing the courage of the children, we must not pass over the same quality in the governess. That is clear enough however we read the tale. But her courage gets an added value, if we accept her mental condition as abnormal, from the fact of its showing the shallowness of the prevailing notion that insanity inevitably betokens a general breakdown of the higher faculties. It may mean that. But it may not. No small part of the horror and tragedy of our treatment of the insane flows from our failure to realize that mental aberration may go hand in hand with strength and beauty of character. It does in this case. The governess is deluded, but she rises to the sublime in her delusion.

The tale clarifies certain of the causes of insanity also. The hereditary seed of the disease in this instance is hinted at in the one reference to the young woman's father. And her environment was precisely the right one for its germination. The reaction upon a sensitive and romantic nature of the narrowness of English middle class life in the last century: that, from the social angle, is the theme of the story. The sudden change of scene, the sudden immense responsibility placed on unaccustomed shoulders, the shock of sudden unrequited affection—all these together—were too much. The brain gives way. And what follows is a masterly tracing of the effects of repressed love and thwarted maternal affection. The whole story might be reviewed with profit under this psychoanalytic aspect. But when it was done, less would probably have been conveyed than James packs into a single simile. He throws it out, with seeming nonchalance, during the governess's last interview, after Flora's delirium, with little Miles:

Our meal was of the briefest—mine a vain pretence, and I had the things immediately removed. While this was done Miles stood again with his hands

in his little pockets and his back to me—stood and looked out of the wide window through which, that other day, I had seen what pulled me up. We continued silent while the maid was with us—as silent, it whimsically occurred to me, as some young couple who, on their wedding-journey, at the inn, feel shy in the presence of the waiter.

The simile strikes the governess as whimsical. Whimsical in reality is precisely what it is not, guiding us, as it does, straight into her soul and plucking out the mystery of her lacerated heart.

VIII

If anyone will take the trouble to read, in the letters of Henry James, all the passages referring to *The Turn of the Screw*, I shall be surprised if he does not come away with the impression—which at any rate is emphatically mine—of a very charming and good-humored, but a nonetheless very unmistakable, side-stepping of questions or comments which had evidently been flung at him, touching his “bogey-tale,” as he calls it, by H. G. Wells, F. W. H. Myers, and at least one other correspondent—a side-stepping to the effectiveness of which, without risk of offense to its victims, James’s peculiar style was not less than gloriously adapted. He consistently deprecates his tale as a “very mechanical matter . . . an inferior, a merely *pictorial*, subject, and rather a shameless pot-boiler.” The element of truth in this is obvious. We need not question James’s sincerity. But in the face of the long list of notable critics and readers who, with different turns of phrase, have characterized *The Turn of the Screw* as one of the most powerful things ever written, it will not do to dismiss it as a mere exercise in literary ingenuity. It is easier to believe either that the author had a reason for belittling it or that his genius builded better than he knew. And indeed when we read his comment on the tale in the preface to the twelfth volume of his collected works, we see that he had come, partly perhaps under the pressure of its reception, which clearly exceeded his “liveliest hope,” to put a somewhat higher estimate on his quondam “pot-boiler.” He still speaks of it as a piece of “cold artistic calculation” deliberately planned “to

catch those not easily caught (the 'fun' of the capture of the merely witless being ever but small), the jaded, the disillusioned, the fastidious." But in the retrospect he does not disguise his satisfaction with the tale or his sense of having struggled successfully with its technical difficulties and dangers. "Droll enough," he confesses, referring to letters received after its publication, was some of the testimony to that success. He tells of one reader in particular "capable evidently, for the time, of some attention, but not quite capable of enough," who complained that he hadn't sufficiently "characterized" the governess. What wonder that the author's "ironic heart," as he puts it, "shook for the instant almost to breaking," under the reproach of not having sufficiently characterized a figure to the penetrating and detailed setting forth of whose mental condition every sentence of the story (barring part of the brief introductory chapter), from the first one to the last, is dedicated! "We have surely as much of her own nature as we can swallow," he writes in answer to this critic, "in watching it reflect her anxieties and inductions." He speaks of the necessity of having the governess keep "crystalline her record of so many intense anomalies and obscurities," and then adds, "—by which I don't of course mean her explanation of them, a different matter."

Now whether these various references to catching "those not easily caught," to the "droll" evidence of the success of his "ingenuity," to his "ironic heart" that "shook for the instant almost to breaking" under the reproaches of readers incapable of quite enough attention, whether all of these things, coupled with the clear, if casual, warning that the governess's "explanation" of her experiences is a "different matter" from a clear record of them, have any separate or cumulative significance, I will not pretend to say. In even hinting at anything of the sort, I may be guilty of twisting perfectly innocent statements to fit a hypothesis. They do appear to fit with curiously little stretching. But I do not press the point. It is not vital. It in no way affects the main argument. For in these matters it is always the work itself and not the author that is the ultimate authority.