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Source: *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Winter, 1971, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Winter, 1971), pp. 107-122

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1345146>

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Aesthetic Allegory in "The Turn of the Screw"

SUSAN CROWL

I

Critical stress on and over "The Turn of the Screw" has flourished through two generations with apparently no decrease in heat or vitality. The phenomenon suggests a dimension of interest in the tale beyond its intrinsic mystery, a dimension not further complicating the *trompe l'oeil* of the given duplicitous perspective, but resolving through a kind of depth perception the conflicting demands of literal versus critical readings. Leon Edel, in his most recent installment of the five-volume biography of James, helps us to locate "The Turn of the Screw" in James's history and psychology as a *locus classicus* of some of the more intense and continuing concerns of James's mind.

The writing of "The Turn of the Screw" coincided with James's decision to lease Lamb House in Rye, Sussex, and to move there from London. He had admired the house years earlier. Edel describes the connection between Lamb House and "The Turn of the Screw" in this way:

He had looked at the house, liked it—and suddenly he had been told he could have it. This was like rubbing a lamp in some old tale of the Arabian Nights. It was also a way of absolving himself of all responsibility. The fates had decided; and he was "doomed." From this kind of magical fantasy to a tale of the supernatural might seem a logical step in a writer of imagination; but that the tale should be one of the greatest horror stories of its kind—as the public and posterity would judge it—suggests that James was in some kind of abject terror himself, over a decision he believed not to have been his own. Something far deeper in his being had been touched than the mere thought that he was leaving bright London and "the world" for a rural life of solitude. "The Turn of the Screw" is a tale of a governess frightened by her own imaginings. And we must look at it closely to see what were the hidden imaginings of its author.¹

Edel later specifies that

The house symbolized the world of his childhood, the place where he had been least free. . . . In "The Turn of the Screw" James was saying, on the remote levels of his buried life, that Lamb House was a severe threat to his inner peace. It was haunted. It contained all the ghosts of his boyhood. . . . The children and

¹ Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Treacherous Years* (New York, 1969), pp. 202-3. James signed a 21-year-lease in September, 1897, and took up residence the following June. The story was completed by December, 1897, and began to appear serially in *Collier's* in January.

*the governess are the voices of James's past, early terrors re-expressed through his imagination and through art—the eternal power of fantasy and thought that can turn the calm quiet of day into a place of evil and horror.*²

But we know, of course, that James did lease Lamb House, and did live out his days there in fruitful calm. Edel describes the enthusiasm with which James entered into the details of his new house and life at Rye. "James's uneasiness, at the time of the signing of the lease, has long been banished. 'The Turn of the Screw' had taken care of the ghosts."³ The tensions in "the remote levels of James's buried life" were loosened in those depths by symbolic correspondences in the story to such a degree as to allow the author to enter the final culminative phase of his remarkable career.

Fair enough: a suppressive author writes an uncensored tale and is restored through uncritical absolution to the world that he alone ever made, the art world of the Jamesian style and vision. And "The Turn of the Screw," I believe, does represent the kind of turning point and release for James that Edel describes. But the story itself reflects the play of tension and release that Edel documents in its author, and in a way that shows it to be less the private confessional experience the biographer finds than an aesthetic apologia for the career that was to resume so confidently at Rye, and an analogue as well to the vision that is as self-critical as it is specialized. "The Turn of the Screw" is as critically placed in James's public career—after his bitter failure in the theater, before the "major phase"—as the acquisition of Lamb House was crucially reminiscent of his personal history. The imagery of the story traces a consistent and well-marked pattern of contraction and expansion that is clearly related to the validity of the governess' witness of the ghosts, the children, and of Bly itself.

Our reading of "The Turn of the Screw," of course, turns not so much on the reality or unreality of the ghosts, as on the reliability or unreliability of the governess, and on whether, given the fact of first-person narrative, that reliability can be determined. But the story in fact does not cut us loose in midstream-of-consciousness; it has a half-frame which is full of suggestive, if veiled, commentary on the story to follow.

To see the story in its specific critical frame is, in fact, very similar to seeing it in the frame of the Jamesian style and canon generally: one alters the view of it with the perspective. One is less preoccupied by the authenticity of the governess' visions than conscious of their origins in and mode of expression through her own mind. The imagery of the story, with the anticipatory witness of the narrators of the frame, will lead us to this qualitative interest in the governess' mind, and will further offer an at least partial answer to the other—still great—questions of the story, the source of the evil in "The Turn of the Screw" and the meaning of Miles's death.

James was aware, before he invented the governess, that those minds capable

² Edel, pp. 211–12.

³ Edel, p. 223.

of greatest original force and vision are often those capable of greatest self-delusion and a concomitant energy to publish and persuade that delusion. The line is thin and flexible at best between a mission for misguidance and a vocation for governance. The governess tries to convince herself that she has found a vocation. "To watch, teach, 'form' little Flora would too evidently be the making of a happy and useful life" (p. 25).⁴ Yet there is a reaching unrest in her that exceeds even her grasp of presiding mistress of Bly. The governess, like other heroines of James, has a wealth of *données*, in her case gifts of mind and person rather than of purse. One of the origins of the governess' sense of the evil at Bly, I believe, coincides with her sense of a power and potential in herself that will never reach adequate or appropriate realization, or any expression other than frustration.

Such an account of the sources of the governess' visions does not necessarily mean that her visions are themselves fallacious. The net comment of James's famous evocation of the "spider-web . . . of consciousness [which] . . . takes to itself the faintest hints of life, converts the very pulses of the air into revelations"⁵ is that this kind of impressionism is a mode of cognition as well as of experience. Certainly such impressionism characterizes the quality of the governess' experience and her ways of knowing; her force of conviction on such grounds is another question altogether. "The faintest hints" set off in her the accelerated and intoxicated response not merely of her mind but of all her senses. Further, that response is generally an interpretive one, carrying the experience beyond itself. In the Jamesian world a response is not finished until perception advances toward understanding. James's equation of nuance and revelation means that for him experience is not assimilated; it is largely generated in a finely susceptible mind. Such a view of experience is an exhausting one, perhaps still more so than the contrasting practices of a Fitzgerald or a Hemingway, for whom there were after all respite and retreat. For a Jamesian heroine, perhaps for James, life balances momentarily on the sheer verge of void or is precipitated into ecstasy by the weight of a nuance. The question is, with James or the governess, not whether their private worlds afford them adequate access to the public, but whether, given the common pitch of their vibrations with the universe, they can give a devil's advocate of self-skepticism his due and still give full allowance to a very singular vision and faith.

II

"She was a most charming person. . . . She was my sister's governess. . . . She was the most agreeable woman I've ever known in her position; she would have been worthy of any whatever" (p. 17). Without prejudice to the spirit of this remark made by the narrator Douglas in the introductory frame of "The Turn of the Screw," we may read "position" as implying more than a function; it is a posture,

⁴ Page references in my text to "The Turn of the Screw" are to *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel, X (Philadelphia, 1962-65), 15-139.

⁵ Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," *The James Family*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen (New York, 1947), p. 359.

a stance, an erect moral bearing connoting grace, poise, and a quality of reserve that only partly conceals profound reserves of strength and intuitive knowledge. As such a figure the governess is an exemplary Jamesian heroine, and it is as such that she holds interest for the present study.

But of course Douglas' remark need not, and cannot even apart from the present glut of criticism on "The Turn of the Screw," be taken at its face value. Douglas' credulity is suspect because of his emotional attachment to the governess and his consequent identification with the child Miles. Douglas is himself aware of a strain of self-disqualifying bias in his will-to-believe. Whatever his feelings about the governess—and he knew her eight years after the events of the story took place—he clearly has questions about the narrative she has confided to his care and to his caring or understanding, questions to which the governess herself was seeking solutions by the very writing of the tale. Her trusting of the manuscript to Douglas, he implies, was a plea for confirmation but at the same time an invitation to doubt. Cast as both apologist and confessor and bemused by the alternatives, he offers the story to Henry James as still another arbiter, one as carefully chosen as Douglas himself. "The Turn of the Screw" is thus a story only ghost-written by the "real" Henry James, who purports to be a patient medium for the active voice of Douglas reading from the governess' record of her experience, a voice which is itself a patient medium, "a rendering to the ear" of the tale set down "in old, faded ink, and in the most beautiful hand."

All this is conveyed by the brief introductory frame of the story, a frame which is not resumed at the finish. We are left, in effect, with a form whose chronological end is in its formal beginning. In my view, the form is left unfinished in this way in order to leave unfinished to our judgment the questions which occur in turn to the governess, to Douglas, and to James. The critical controversy, ranging from a Douglas-like attraction to and sympathy with the governess, to such a view as John Lydenberg's that "the governess is an authoritarian character, hysterical, compulsive, sado-masochistic,"⁶ is in a very real sense written into the story, portended and intended by it. The story is self-critical, open-ended in form and content, and the critical debate over it is an extension of these attributes.

A discussion of the story, then, ought to start by a discussion of the links between the frame and the body of the story. There is as much meaning in abeyance in the frame as in direct conveyance. It is fairly explicit, for instance, that there are certain simplistic responses, non-critical attitudes, which we as audience are to forego. We only begin to feel the force, on the other hand, of an increment of allusion to things locked, sealed, frozen, stilled, smothered, damned, and finally dead that builds all through the central tale.

In my view the introductory frame of "The Turn of the Screw" deserves attention and has importance for an understanding of the work as a whole. Mine is not a view widely shared; there is little comment or even recognition devoted to the form of the story. Considering the minute attention given to the rest of the tale, this inattention is probably not critical oversight. It is not uncritical to view the frame of a ghost story as a purely conventional, and critically expendable, piece of

⁶ John Lydenberg, "The Governess Turns the Screws," *NCF*, XII, no. 1 (June, 1957), 57.

machinery. Alexander E. Jones is a critic who does articulate a non-critical view of the frame, dropping the question with as much an air of taking it up as one might desire:

*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. . . . the establishment of such a mood certainly seems to be one of [James's] 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." . . . 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.⁷*

Jones's view of the frame as a detachable stereotype is implicit in most of the considerations of "The Turn of the Screw." I would not disallow the frame as a gothic convention tying the tale in with the oral tradition of its kind; I wish only to show that there is enough play left in the line to tie the tale in with some very specific purposes of James's own, purposes similarly served by framing and linking devices—the *ficelles*—in the novels.

To take up Jones's points in turn, the "little circle of friends around the fire" are not quite the same audience as for the previous "gruesome" tales. The audience lacks some of its former members, ladies whose "departure had been fixed," but who were in effect dismissed by Douglas because their "rage of curiosity" was already bent on sheer sensationalism, whether gothic terror or unrequited passion. Douglas uses the incorrigible ladies to correct and instruct James's judgment.

Our friend, with quiet art, prepared his triumph by turning his eyes over the rest of us and going on: "It's beyond everything. Nothing at all that I know touches it."

"For sheer terror?" I remember asking.

He seemed to say it was not so simple as that; to be really at a loss how to qualify it. He passed his hand over his eyes, made a little wincing grimace. "For dreadful—dreadfulness!"

"Oh, how delicious!" cried one of the women.

He took no notice of her; he looked at me, but as if, instead of me, he saw what he spoke of. "For general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain." . . .

⁷ Alexander E. Jones, "Point of View in 'The Turn of the Screw,'" *PMLA*, LXXIV (March, 1959), 112.

I asked him if the experience in question had been his own. To this his answer was prompt. "Oh, thank God, no!"

"And is the record yours? You took the thing down?"

"Nothing but the impression. I took that here"— he tapped his heart. "I've never lost it." . . .

They were all listening now, and of course there was somebody to be arch, or at any rate to draw the inference. But if he put the inference by without a smile it was also without irritation. . . . "Oh yes; don't grin: I liked her extremely and am glad to this day to think she liked me too. If she hadn't she wouldn't have told me. She had never told anyone. It wasn't simply that she said so, but that I knew she hadn't. I was sure; I could see. You'll easily judge why when you hear."

"Because the thing had been such a scare?"

He continued to fix me. "You'll easily judge," he repeated: "you will."

I fixed him too. "I see. She was in love." . . .

Mrs. Griffin expressed the need for a little more light. "Who was it she was in love with?"

"The story will tell," I took upon myself to reply.

"Oh, I can't wait for the story!"

"The story won't tell," said Douglas; "not in any literal, vulgar way." (pp. 16-18)

Douglas' ideal audience, James is telling us, is James himself, but the others in the party are at least admissible once the enthusiastic ladies have departed. Their absence "only made his little final auditory more compact and select, kept it, round the hearth, subject to a common thrill" (p. 19). It is a critical audience, forewarned that it will be called upon to "judge."

The frame introduces a major theme of the story proper at the same time that it establishes the audience's appropriate temper of receptivity. If the governess "had never told anyone" before Douglas, in turn neither has he confided her story to anyone before this occasion. We feel him to be more than "unnerved"; his silence has been a "long reticence," a sustained and active suppression, "with this outbreak at last." The sense of deep commitment and confession at hand that Douglas' manner virtually announces is what finally makes the most telling appeal to the James of the frame, more than any garish hints of the subject matter of the tale. The opening of the locked drawer that contains the manuscript is indeed a "tapping" of Douglas' heart and conscience.

"The story's . . . in a locked drawer—it has not been out for years. I could write to my man and enclose the key; he could send down the packet as he finds it." It was to me in particular that he appeared to propound this—appeared almost to appeal for aid not to hesitate. He had broken a thickness of ice, the formation of many a winter; had had his reasons for a long silence. The others resented postponement, but it was just his scruples that charmed me. (p. 16)

Many pages later at the end of the story when the governess exacts, as an admission of guilt, the name *Peter Quint* from Miles, she tells us she “flashed into ice”; it is that same ice that Douglas breaks at the beginning of “The Turn of the Screw.” If the point seems forced, it is because the many subtle interchanges between narrator and narrative, between protagonist and antagonist in the story, never are; their evidence is stylistic, not substantive. When the “thin, old-fashioned, gilt-edged album” does arrive, we are reminded again of some deep exchange of identity, some profound release taking place in our narrator: “Douglas . . . had begun to read with a fine clearness that was like a rendering to the ear of the beauty of his author’s hand” (p. 22). By the opening of the story proper we are prepared for the imagery of things sealed and stopped, claustal and smothering, that gives way to a catalogue of things open and flowing, and a horizon-sweeping perspective. We ought to be attuned, too, to the ringing of some ironic changes on that given theme.

The scene as Douglas sets it before the opening of the tale has two characters: “a fluttered, anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage” and her prospective employer, “a gentleman, a bachelor in the prime of life. . . handsome and bold and pleasant, off-hand and gay and kind” (pp. 19–20). The “young, untried, nervous” girl, with everything virginal about her, “succumbed,” says Douglas, to “the seduction exercised by the splendid young man,” and accepted the position. But if all passion is opened to the girl by her brief interview with the young uncle of the two children she is to have in charge, it is as sharply stopped by the stricture that, once having signed on, like the captain of the ship of which she feels “strangely at the helm,” she is not to look back until the voyage is over: “Never trouble him—but never, never: neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything.” And Douglas affirms, “She never saw him again.”

She does see repeatedly two ghosts, Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, her employer’s former valet and the former governess at Bly, who in life were partners in some secret amour that may have involved the two children. The stream of the governess’ passion, once spilled, can only be diverted, not dammed. The governess is in effect stalked by subjective correlatives of her inner secret self; the ghosts are a perverse admixture of her rather lean background and her natural romantic leanings beyond her moment and condition. Peter Quint, the gentleman’s gentleman who is no gentleman, is a lurid inversion of her employer; Miss Jessel, her “predecessor” (“she was a lady”), is a pallid reflection of the governess’ Victorian upbringing. That the condescension in their affair was all on the side of the lady is only one of the ironic inversions of the ghosts’ imaging of the governess’ inner world—here her fantasy affair with the uncle. Miss Jessel is portrayed in the text as a poor, pale, unhappy object of the governess’ pity, guilty though she is—but her name is only a thinly veiled version of *jealous*; and as a projection of the governess’ unconscious Miss Jessel is as much an object of envy as of pity. As for *Peter Quint*, the name is probably a combination of a ribald pun—he is first seen on top of a tower (“very erect, as it struck me”)—and the name’s derivation: Peter Quint is “stone dead” (p. 52).

The pattern of romantic release and suppressive retreat develops on an imaginative as well as on a physical and sexual plane. When the governess arrives at Bly, she feels as though she has stepped into "a castle of romance, . . . such a place as would somehow . . . take all colour out of storybooks and fairy-tales. Wasn't it just such a storybook over which I had fallen a-doze and a-dream?" (p. 27). The uncle has been described to us as "such a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel, before a fluttered, anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage" (p. 19). When the governess, having set such a scene for us, begins to have visions within her dreams, we are reminded somewhat dizzily of the form of "The Turn of the Screw"—insofar as we feel in touch with anything. At a point late in the story, when Miles and Flora are strolling on the great lawn, arms intertwined and heads bent over a book, the governess reflects, "but even while they pretend to be lost in their fairy-tale they're steeped in their vision of the dead restored" (p. 81). Here the story material offers a paradigm for the form of the story: the double frame and subtle shifting of identity among the narrators is paralleled by an exchange between reality and its false reflection; we contemplate the children engrossed in a story, enclosed in a setting which is itself like a fairy-tale, and absorbed the while in their "vision of the dead restored." It does not matter how manifold are the nested forms or how rapid the reversals of image-reality: what is to the point is just our disorientation, yet involvement, of vision; our perception of a reality infinitely reflected and refracted, yet sharply real to our sense in its very refraction.

Our own experience of the story is demonstrably correlated with the governess' experiences at Bly. I do not think it paradoxical that her deeply personal discovery of self there might also be a valid exploration of her environment; she experiences that environment, a rudimentary Victorian domestic society it happens to be, as an extension of self, but she is herself an extension, a product, of just that society, and her latent tendencies ought to correspond to its latent realities. The Chinese boxes of the form and matter of "The Turn of the Screw" disclose a very private vision, but one which is broadly public by the very measure of its private depth.

And indeed the ghosts consort no worse with the surface reality at Bly, for which the innocence and beauty of the children set the prevailing tone, than they make ill consorts for one another as extensions of the governess' unconscious. The ghosts are an improbable match, just as their threatening evil is an unlikely presence at Bly. The ghosts' mystery is contributive, if not altogether equivalent, to their evil and their incredibility. James's novels assert a similar challenge to belief by the almost unnatural privacy of the style, yet the comment of his style is like the comment of the ghosts: it is experience massed that crowds by its own pressure deepest into the recesses of the human "vessel of consciousness," experience represented in the mass by the idea of community, but expressed most profoundly, it may be, by an impulse to withdrawal.

I have tried to sketch some of the implications and applications of reading "The Turn of the Screw" as allegory—or, more precisely, as about allegory. We may read it, I propose, either as allegory about the way in which the intensities of ex-

perience felt as deeply private are also a social gesture, or as aesthetic allegory about another kind of publication of private vision. The governess is a figure both for social effects and for stylistic purposes. Bly and the events of the governess' stay there are turned into concrete and spatial metaphors in the process of the personal confession she undergoes.

It is important to see the opening out of the deeper layers of the governess' consciousness as a development paralleled by her sense of the expansive scale and liberating environment of Bly. But it is only ironically that Bly exerts a liberating influence on the governess' mind; the opening of her unconscious is a closing off of her sense of and even desire for freedom; the governess' sense of expanse turns to one of impasse as she self-assertively responds to Bly's open invitation. The theme of the story is stated and qualified by a variable imagery of expanse and impasse; indeed our sense of sliding scale in the story is our persuasion of its theme. Augmentation and diminution, mobility and tension, area and density, are theme as well as means.

III

The locked drawers, thicknesses of ice, long unbroken silences, and closed minds of the frame give way in the story proper to the governess' approach by carriage to the house at Bly, where everything conduces to an illusion of breadth, of high horizons. The governess' sense of spaciousness and freedom is actively promoted by contrast to what she had left behind: "The scene had a greatness that made it a different affair from my own scant home" (p. 23). Her consciousness registers at a grasp the sweep of lawn, the reach of treetops, the birds above, and the golden sky over all. Everything is open, flowing; even the small lake might be a river. Whatever her initial impression of her employer had been, it is now enhanced, together with her expectations of life at Bly. "I had received in Harley Street a narrower notion of the place, and that, as I recalled it, made me think the proprietor still more of a gentleman, suggested that what I was to enjoy might be something beyond his promise" (p. 23). From the open windows of the house she can again "take in the whole picture and prospect" that first widened her eyes.

Ironically, these surroundings are to prove as claustal as any left behind; they will in effect evoke what they seem to evade. The next time the governess raises her eyes to the open sky at evening it is to meet the "strange freedom" (p. 37) in the answering gaze of Peter Quint. But even before this point demarking a local habitation, if not yet named, for her imaginary fears the governess has shown ambivalent contracting tendencies even as she regards the open universe before her. The full-length mirrors that allow her to see herself for the first time from head to foot—larger than life as it were, or than life heretofore—are among the "things thrown in" to her "sense of liberality." But even so she feels inclined to "shrink again" at the largeness of welcome opened to her by the housekeeper Mrs. Grose: "she was so glad—stout, simple, plain, clean, wholesome woman—as to be positively on her guard against showing it too much" (p. 24). Again later she withdraws with "a slight oppression produced by a fuller measure of the scale, as I walked round them, gazed up at them . . . of my new circumstances" (p. 26).

Thus a rhythm of "flights and drops," of relaxation and recoil, is established early in the story and continued as the notorious complications of the plot are set in motion. Note the context of the governess' first view of Quint: it is evening, her allotted time for recreation. Appropriately enough, as she strolls in the garden, her mind and guard relaxed, she is musing about the handsome Harley Street bachelor and her own sensations. It is her pleasure hour, and she apprehends the meaning of pleasure too at Bly. "I learnt something . . . that had not been one of the teachings of my small, smothered life; learnt to be amused, and even amusing, and not to think for the morrow. It was the first time, in a manner, that I had known space and air and freedom, all the music of summer and all the mystery of nature" (p. 34).

Then she catches sight of the stranger on the tower, and the mocking echo of her thoughts in the "strange freedom" and "sign of familiarity of his wearing no hat," is only one entry in what will be a varied catalogue of ironic inversions on the theme of expanse and impasse. The freedom and familiarity here, to be sure, are an upstart freedom and an impudent familiarity, and just the reverse of her thoughts of space and air and the handsome face of "someone." But the terms are chosen for their ambiguity, and a subtle taint of *déjà vu* and a fascination suggesting desire are connected with every appearance of the ghosts.

Accompanying every ghostly manifestation in "The Turn of the Screw" is, to the governess' sense, a suspension of nature, "a drop of all sound and movement"; to ours it is as if the action of her natural senses rebounds in swift contraction from the evidence of her eyes. Her vision, her point of view, is in effect a usurpation of her other senses.

It was as if, while I took in—what I did take in—all the rest of the scene had been stricken with death. I can hear again, as I write, the intense hush in which the sounds of evening dropped. The rooks stopped cawing in the golden sky and the friendly hour lost, for the minute, all its voice. But there was no other change in nature, unless indeed it were a change that I saw with a stranger sharpness. The gold was still in the sky, the clearness in the air, and the man who looked at me over the battlements was as definite as a picture in a frame.
(pp. 36–7)

By the reference to "picture" and by others like it the governess, it seems to me, is here likening her visions to her point of view as narrator, as stylist. Another time she remarks, "I saw him as I see the letters I form on this page" (p. 37). That is just how clearly we see him too, as clearly as we can read her picture, her imaging of her experiences. The governess' suspensions of physical sensation help to define what is at issue in "The Turn of the Screw." The rich and promising environment of Bly in effect emphasizes her solitude. Sense perception is the mind's primary anchor in the stream and flux of consciousness; it represents a basic realistic orientation within the departures both of reasonable inference and romantic impulse. "The place . . . had . . . become a solitude. To me at least, making my statement here with a deliberation with which I have never made it, the

whole feeling of the moment returns. It was as if, while I took in—what I did take in—all the rest of the scene had been stricken with death. I can hear again, as I write, the intense hush in which the sounds of evening dropped. The rooks stopped cawing in the golden sky and the friendly hour lost, for the minute, all its voice."

The governess' visions, her exercises in self-exploration, are a struggle against solitary confinement, confinement in solitude discovered against an ironic setting of liberation. Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" viewed as a parable of the human condition bounded by contracting time and space would provide some suggestive parallels and contrasts for this reading of "The Turn of the Screw." But "The Turn of the Screw" ends in a death, "The Pit and the Pendulum" with a *deus ex machina*; there is a deep-seated, unstated orthodoxy in Poe, as in Hawthorne, for all the shock-as-blasphemy of the one, or the fearful attraction to doubt of the other. Poe's blasphemy is often a symbolic mode of confession, thus of reconciliation, just as the Reverend Dimmesdale's sermons, empowered as they are by a compensatory combination of corrosive guilt and sophist's pride of service are a symbolic heresy. Their interests in a specious mischief and hypocritical motives are not as unlike as Poe and Hawthorne at first appear.

But at the center of Henry James's stylized surface there is a radical skepticism, a skepticism associated somehow with stillness, unnaturalness, and finally, with evil. The guilt of the radical and irreducible self is the governess' block; Peter Quint is the unshakable reality of self, the governess' stone of Sisyphus that she can move but not balance anywhere. Yet paradoxically we feel that a great part of the beauty of her poise, her balance—if, with Douglas, we grant her that beauty—is owing to her sense of acting as a stave against chaos, real, subjective, or imagined, it does not much matter for the strength and grace of her attitude. Insofar as the governess questions her vision, insofar, that is to say, as the pattern of motives outlined here occurs to her, she calls the possibility madness, total unbalance, total exchange between self and nature or the natural. But she is not unbalanced, to her own sense finally, nor, I hope to show, to ours. The themes of introverted vision and grace achieved by balance between vision and nature are combined in the passage which gives us the title of the tale; it says, in effect, that the governess will screw up her courage, her will, to present a "fair front" before the intimate face of evil. The reaction is similar to Milly Theale's in *The Wings of the Dove*, first to her private vision of death, later to the fact of her betrayal by life; and it is similar to Maggie Verver's response in *The Golden Bowl* to the loss of balance, or "proportion" in the marriages of that novel. It is the last night of the recounted events at Bly, the night of Miles's death:

Here at present I felt afresh . . . how my equilibrium depended on the success of my rigid will, the will to shut my eyes as tight as possible to the truth that what I had to deal with was, revoltingly, against nature. I could only get on at all . . . by treating my monstrous ordeal as a push in a direction unusual, of course, and unpleasant, but demanding, after all, for a fair front, only another turn of the screw of ordinary human virtue. (p. 127)

The moral blackout that the governess is here proposing to herself by her resolution to "shut her eyes tight" is still another ironic reversal of the terms that generally accompany her revelations. The imagery of expanse and impasse is most vividly and insistently sustained in the figure of sealed and unsealed vision. It occurs when the governess sees Miss Jessel in the schoolroom: "I opened the door to find again, in a flash, my eyes unsealed" (p. 96); when Mrs. Grose fails to confirm her vision to Flora at the lake: "With this hard blow of the proof that her eyes were hopelessly sealed I felt my own situation horribly crumble" (p. 115); when in the final scene she fights for Miles's soul: "'Is she *here*?' Miles panted as he caught with his sealed eyes the direction of my words" (p. 137). Here Miles's sealed eyes are a mark of the governess' triumph; she has long since made her own unsealed vision the test and the figure for the children's ignorance or shielded innocence. "The more I saw, the less they would" (p. 53).

...by offering myself bravely as the sole subject of such experience, by accepting, by inviting, by surmounting it all, I should serve as an expiatory victim. . . . The children . . . I should thus fence about and absolutely save.
(p. 50)

This assumption by the governess that she can seal off the vision of the children by unsealing her own is clearly given as gratuitous, and the idea of martyrdom that accompanies it is thus as clearly perverse. We ought to be prepared by this running assumption of hers for the futility and actual harm of the prescriptive Victorian notion of the relation of vision to virtue, of knowledge to action. Miles represents, in his very name, the dream of freedom, of moral and imaginative expanse, and the force of the ambiguity of his death; his exclamation "You Devil!" (is it addressed to Quint, or to the governess?) is that it does not really matter whether he dies damned by evil or dammed by prescriptive good; each is a kind of suffocation. "I was there to protect and defend the little creatures in the world the most bereaved and the most loveable," but "I don't do it! . . . I don't save or shield them!" (p. 60). To save by shielding, to defend by protecting; such is the governess' notion of her office, and by extension, of the office of imagination.

If the governess thinks her relation to the children is that of a savior, her idea of the right tone with the housekeeper Mrs. Grose is to convert her to her own vision. Mrs. Grose, too, is to be a "victim," the governess' "victim of my confidence" (p. 59). The spatial metaphors continue to refer us to the underlying theme of things open and closed: the governess can escape from "the inner chamber of my dread" to "take the air in the court, at least, and there Mrs. Grose could join me" (p. 49).

Mrs. Grose is an extraordinary literalist; she offers her mind to the governess' "disclosures" as she might "have held out a large, clean saucepan." In determining to "open her mind" to Mrs. Grose, the governess instinctively regards the housekeeper as a sort of sounding board or test audience against which to try the strength and validity of her vision. Mrs. Grose, "stout, simple, plain, clean, wholesome woman" though she is, is by her own conspicuous absence of style unsusceptible to the beguilements and ramifications of another's point of view

as persuaded through style. Mrs. Grose can ratify a certain rudimentary correspondence of the governess' vision to reality as she has known it, and she can be swept up in it as fantasy, but her relation to the governess' revelations is irreducibly dual. She is extremely suggestible and responsive to the governess' confidences and innuendoes. But her imagination is divided from her prosaic, commonsense side; she plays accomplice to the governess' visions but censor to factual analogies between those visions and Bly—and indeed censor to her own responsibility for confirming those visions in any form. She is a simple version of the Jamesian *ficelle*, represented at her most sophisticated, but not less ambivalent, by Fanny Assingham of *The Golden Bowl*. On a deductive plane Mrs. Grose's grasp of abstraction is limited and stereotyped; on an inductive, her view of experience is largely simple and functional. The "large, clean saucepan" is the governess' figure for the latter aspect of her attitude and her style; for her qualities of understanding we must look to her own use of language. She speaks in parables, in clichés that are at once empty idioms and very literal comments on the quality of her mind. "What in the name of goodness is the matter?" (p. 43) she asks after the second appearance of Peter Quint. When with Flora at the last and crucial appearance of Miss Jessel she denies sharing the governess' vision, her idiom is a stylistic reproduction of her simple, literal temperament, her "hopelessly sealed" powers of vision. "What a dreadful *turn*, to be *sure*, Miss! Where on *earth* do you see anything?" (Emphasis mine.)

We have been prepared for Mrs. Grose's denial. She can neither read a written page, nor read out from the given appearances of her setting. She refuses the governess' offer of the letter announcing Miles's dismissal from his school with a once again generalized "Such things are not for me, Miss" (p. 28). In answer to the governess' speculation on what harm Miles may have done to be expelled, she exclaims, "Master Miles!—*him* an injury? . . . See him, Miss, first. *Then* believe it! . . . You might as well believe it of the little lady. Bless her . . . *look* at her!" (p. 29).

Semblance is substance and substance is absolute in Mrs. Grose's world; irony of appearance, intuitive induction, detail suggestive beyond itself are, simply as unredemptive concepts, out of her ken. One can feel her in spirit offering the governess advice similar to that received by Henry James from a faithful if incorrigibly empiric critic, his brother William. A characteristic letter advised Henry that in his *next* book he put "no twilight or mustiness in the plot, great vigor and decisiveness in the action, no fencing in the dialogue, no psychological commentaries and absolute straightness in the style."⁸ "Such things are not for me," we might translate.

The comparison is not merely whimsical; it is not Mrs. Grose's quantity of intelligence which disavows the governess' vision, but a quality of mind. She is fleshly sister under the skin to Henry James's empiricist brother, as the governess is, one feels, sister in spirit to Henry in many of the attributes of their quality of vision. James might almost be describing his heroine of some years hence and

⁸ *The James Family*, p. 339.

her special consciousness in his comments in "The Art of Fiction" on the quantity of access to reality a writer ought to impose on himself, and the quality of access to reality we ought to expect back again from him. James's reference is to Walter Besant's prescriptions in "Fiction as One of the Fine Arts."

That the novelist must write from his experience, that his "characters must be real and such as might be met with in actual life"; that "a young lady brought up in a quiet country village should avoid descriptions of garrison life," . . . that English Fiction should have a "conscious moral purpose"; that "it is almost impossible to estimate too highly the value of careful workmanship—that is, of style"; that "the most important point of all is the story," that "the story is everything": these are principles with most of which it is surely impossible not to sympathize. . . . At the same time, I should find it difficult positively to assent to them. . . . It goes without saying that you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality; but it will be difficult to give you a recipe for calling that sense into being. . . . It is equally excellent and inconclusive to say that one must write from experience. . . . Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; It is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative . . . it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations. The young lady living in a village [a Hampshire parsonage?] had only to be a damsel upon whom nothing is lost to make it quite unfair (as it seems to me) to declare to her that she shall have nothing to say about the military. . . . The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it—this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience, and they occur in country and in town, and in the most differing stages of education. If experience consists of impressions it may be said that impressions are experience, just as (have we not seen it?) they are the very air we breathe. . . . I am far from intending by this to minimise the importance of exactness—of truth of detail. One can speak best from one's own taste, and I may therefore venture to say that the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel—the merit on which all its other merits (including that conscious moral purpose of which Mr. Besant speaks) helplessly and submissively depend.⁹

An air of reality that rests on "solidity of specification," but specifications that may be gained through impressions and inferences—this is the reality I find the governess commanding.

⁹ *The James Family*, pp. 358–60.

IV

I think that in "The Turn of the Screw" the governess' "intensity of impression" transfers itself to ours, so that the very "weakness of specification" James with explicit intention gives us regarding the evil of the ghosts is—not paradoxically—supportive evidence of the governess' powers of induction. Once again, I do not consider the truth of the ghosts, the actuality of their scandalous lives or their power to draw out a latent sexuality in the children, to be incompatible with the personal suppressions and even a kind of "madness" in the governess. That madness, as I see it, derives from a felt, radical imbalance between the envisioning self and the environing world. It is possible, certainly, that James was writing a kind of self-parody in "The Turn of the Screw," creating "intensity of impression" around a vacuum, but I do not think it is demonstrable, certainly not by the line of argument resorted to finally by the compilers of the most exhaustive study to date of views on the governess' point of view. The "non-apparitionist" school (those who think the ghosts are unreal), argue Cranfill and Clark in *An Anatomy of "The Turn of the Screw,"* offers a more subtle, therefore more affective and viable reading of the tale, than does the apparitionist school.¹⁰ The argument has a certain appealing Jamesian backwardness to it, but it is a way of prejudicing judgment by importing an assumption; so also, on the apparitionist side, is such a comment as E. E. Stoll's that "it is the way of ghosts in general to appear only to one person," a way of importing data by making a necessary assumption of an available convention. These are only two examples of a certain kind of argument that begins by abandoning the story; I cite them because they represent frontal and basic approaches. There are similar lapses by these and other critics who have otherwise subjected themselves carefully (not to say slavishly) yet with creative responsiveness, to the text. To speculate, for instance, whether the governess' defense would stand up in a court of law¹¹ is not just beside the point, it is (by my reading) precisely *not* the point; the legitimacy of her vision actively depends on her impressionistic, necessarily circumstantial, methods; its evidence only "gleams and glooms" at her as at us. Or to argue that given real fears "a well balanced twenty-year-old. . . would . . . quit Bly forthwith,"¹² is to prejudice the question again by a very straitened concept of sanity. The governess is unjust and unbalanced only by our own normative and prescriptive terms, not by the dynamics of the story.

The story will not allow us to legislate, to make our own priorities of public and saving truths those of fiction. Neither will it allow us fully to ratify the governess' own legislation of belief. Are we, then, thrown back on Edmund Wilson's recognition that the story can be read in either of two opposing ways, and that we must choose?

¹⁰ Thomas M. Cranfill and Robert E. Clark, *An Anatomy of "The Turn of the Screw"* (Austin, Tex., 1965), p. 35.

¹¹ Cranfill and Clark, p. 104.

¹² Cranfill and Clark, p. 53.

The clash between the two possible readings of "The Turn of the Screw" refers us by necessity to a description and investigation of the style of the tale. The tale demands a flexible reading of the kind I have described; it disallows the application of terminologies deriving from a fixed set of psychological, philosophical, or even realistic premises. Readings of the story forewarned by psychology or philosophy as a study of social alienation or a solipsistic *tour de force*, do violence to it and injustice to their proper subjects. "The Turn of the Screw" is not primarily a psychoanalytic case history of an authoritarian character, a documentary of the egocentric predicament, nor, on the other hand, a pre-Freudian study of infantile sexuality. It is a brilliantly self-conscious piece of fiction, assigning its own criteria and defining its terms, and incidentally, distinguishing them from those of other disciplines.

The peculiarly Jamesian achievement of "The Turn of the Screw" is the attention it forces on style and form. The defining characteristic of the style is an imagery deflecting between expanse and impasse. The form of the story, an introductory frame and tale within a tale, is similarly consistent and repetitive in the nested inversions of reality and story-book romance which are the governess' attempts at a perspective on her shifting experiences at Bly. The selection and instruction of audience in the frame is likewise exercised in the body of the story. The seriousness of James's concern with the authority of style in "The Turn of the Screw" almost threatens the weight and scale of the tale itself, just as have the volume and density of critical response to it over the years. The writing of "The Turn of the Screw" reflects James's awareness of a turning point in both his life and his art—after his failure in the theater, before his remove to Lamb House—and external context helps to resolve the oddly major-minor stature of the tale in James's canon, as well as specific discordances within it, such as the death of Miles. The governess' tendency to equate nuance and revelation is in fact a critical instance of James's own "cobweb of consciousness," and his repudiation of the governess expresses in a more conscious way what her indictment of self through Miles expressed implicitly: a mood of uncontainable self-examination and self-doubt. The governess proposes an equivalence between the world of potentiality for good and evil she finds at Bly, and herself, that is like the identification the heroines of James's late novels make between their limited private experience, assumptions, or hopes, and the dangerously broad and foreign worlds in which they move. Perhaps farthest in of the nested forms and coiled ironies of "The Turn of the Screw" is James's own confessed creed of the symbolic reach of style beyond the grip of passion or of doubt, and his pity of the cost of that conversion.