

### **Warning Concerning Copyright Restrictions**

The Copyright Law of the United States (**Title 17, United States Code**) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted materials. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If electronic transmission of reserve material is used for purposes in excess of what constitutes "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

## THE GHOST OF LANGUAGE IN THE TURN OF THE SCREW

By DARREL MANSELL

### 1

A word cannot be meaningless; to be a word it must have meaning.<sup>1</sup> So-called syncategorematic words (such as "if") may be a special case. These are said to have no meaning in themselves but only in the context of the sentences in which they figure.<sup>2</sup> Demonstratives ("this"), pronouns, and proper nouns ("Napoleon," "Icarus") are also special in that the meaning they do have is usually said merely to refer outward to a referent; the referent itself is then the word's actual meaning.<sup>3</sup> Other than these cases, to whatever extent they are considered special, words have *meanings*.

A meaning is an idea. What the idea is of can be considered in either (or indeed both) of the following ways. The idea can be

<sup>1</sup> See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (Paris: Payot, 1916), pp. 99-100; Bertrand Russell, *The Principles of Mathematics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1903), p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> See William P. Alston, *Philosophy of Language* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> On the general subject of referring meanings, see Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), 2 (*Elements of Logic*, 1932): 160-65; Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), pp. 163-64. For demonstratives, pronouns, and proper nouns, see Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay, 2 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 1:328 and 2:684-85; Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art*, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 245; Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Structure of the World*, trans. Rolf A. George (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 48. But proper nouns are held to be unique in language and essentially different from demonstratives and pronouns in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations" Generally Known as the Blue and Brown Books*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 82.

considered to consist of certain attributes, aspects, or features (for instance, those in a dictionary definition of "tree") of whatever is meant. The idea that is the meaning is not the idea of any particular tree which exists in space and time (the gnarled oak on grandfather's farm), but only a *type* consisting of what all the subsumed particulars are considered to have in common;<sup>4</sup> or the meaning is such a type of which any particular must have some,<sup>5</sup> but not necessarily all, of the attributes. "Tree" means a type made up of the attributes considered more or less common to all trees.

The meaning or type (usually called a reference or *designatum*)<sup>6</sup> may indeed have particular instances of itself in space and time. These are instances in that they have all, or some of, the attributes of the meaning itself.<sup>7</sup> Such particular instances of a meaning (the gnarled oak) are its referent, extension, or *denotatum*.<sup>8</sup> A meaning's extension actually exists in the world as a particular object or the object's state of affairs.

A word's meaning can also be considered in a somewhat different way. Here the relation of meaning to particular object is reversed. The object does exist in the world. Whoever is to have a meaning of it is introduced to the object by an ostensive act (such as pointing)<sup>9</sup> accompanied by the word for the object. The learner conceives his own meaning consisting of attributes he himself imputes to the object,<sup>10</sup> a meaning that is his personal means of referring back to the original object or another like it.<sup>11</sup> His meaning (unlike the type

<sup>4</sup> Peirce, 2:168-69; Charles W. Morris, *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> For an account of this so-called cluster concept, see Saul A. Kripke, "Naming and Necessity," in *Semantics of Natural Language*, ed. Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman, 2nd ed. (Boston: D. Reidel, 1972), pp. 280, 327.

<sup>6</sup> On reference, see C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, 2nd ed. rev. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927), pp. 10-11. On *designatum*, see Morris, pp. 3-5.

<sup>7</sup> For an account and criticism of how an extension is judged to be of a meaning, see Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning,'" *Philosophical Papers*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975-83), 2 (*Mind, Language and Reality*, 1975): 234-35, 245. See also Kripke, p. 300.

<sup>8</sup> For referent, see Eco, pp. 59-60; Ogden and Richards, p. 11. For extension, see Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), p. 144. For *denotatum*, see Morris, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> On the vexed question of objects that are absent or otherwise not capable of being pointed at, see Keith S. Donnellan, "Speaking of Nothing," *PhR*, 83 (1974): 8 (the "historical explanation" theory). See also Putnam, p. 246; Kripke, pp. 298-302 (the "initial baptism and causal chain" theory).

<sup>10</sup> See Kripke, pp. 328, 319 ("paradigmatic instances"); Putnam, p. 234 ("indexical component").

<sup>11</sup> For a general account of the meaning as itself a *reference* (like a proper noun), see Stephen P. Schwartz, "Introduction," in *Naming, Necessity, and Natural Kinds*, ed. Stephen P. Schwartz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 29.

meant into no existence at all. "There is no king" will not do. The meaning does not posit his nonexistence. The meaning brings him *into* existence so as to attribute to him, not baldness, but the attribute of not being there. He exists with the attribute *not*. Thus Wittgenstein's observation that the propositions "p" and "~p," while they have opposite senses, have corresponding to the propositions one and the same state of affairs.<sup>21</sup>

A negative, hypothetical, or condition otherwise contrary to fact is not in language truly such a contrary but (as Wolfgang Iser says) the inducement to *realize* the very thing meant not to be. Language, he says, can never be about nothing.<sup>22</sup> This ability of language to talk about nonexistent things as if they did exist has been called a defect.<sup>23</sup> Language can never quite get rid of the thing it says does not exist. The thing is still there haunting the sentence—language creates *ghosts*.

## 3

Literary statements positing the nonexistence, the non-inner-extension (as discussed above), of their types or objects thus have a way of turning into statements that do seem to posit such an extension. It is possible to read Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" as meaning that the altar (line 32) and the little town or citadel (35, 36) are actually depicted *on* the urn itself<sup>24</sup>—that these little details are posited as extended in the poem's inner world. This is because, while the interrogatives in which these details are embedded mention them as merely where the sacrifice *might* (hypothetically) be going to and where the people *may* (hypothetically) have come from, the posited details seem nevertheless now "fact" themselves, *there*, as if they were extended on the urn itself—language's unavoidable ghostly presences now as if "on" the urn.

Criticism of this poem can be said to have progressed over the years as extension has properly been taken away from more and

<sup>21</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 45 (4.0621). See Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 115-16.

<sup>22</sup> *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp. 37, 268.

<sup>23</sup> Frege, p. 95 (in reference only to certain "special cases").

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, Sidney Colvin, *John Keats* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917), p. 417. Stephen A. Larrabee, *English Bards and Grecian Marbles* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), p. 223, comments on how Keats "took liberties with the Antique in carving a town" on his urn.

more of the detail. The poem as *ekphrasis*, description of a real urn extended in real space and time, has given way to the poem as description of an imaginary urn extended only in the poem's inner world; this in turn has given way to the poem as partly detail without even inner extension<sup>25</sup>—types generated by language's might's, may's, and not's with no *there* at all to exist in.

*The Turn of the Screw* is another such case. Henry James's story was first read as a ghost story in which the governess describes ghosts which exist, have extension, in the story's inner world of a country house. The story then came to be read as a psychological one in which the ghosts are in the governess's mind—thus still have inner extension but now "in" a character extended in the story's inner world. There ought to be a further stage in which some of the details turn out not to have any inner extension at all but to be merely scared up into being by language defectively going about its job of meaning (and being meant by its author to *be* thus defective in meaning) that something is negative, hypothetical, or otherwise contrary to fact.

Consider, for instance, the following passage, severely edited down so as to string together by ellipsis marks the crucial words positing where if anywhere the types are meant to be extended:

. . . the conviction I from one moment to another found myself forming as to what I should see straight before me and across the lake as a consequence of raising my eyes. They were attached at this juncture to the stitching in which I was engaged. . . . There was an alien object in view—a figure. . . . meanwhile . . . I transferred my eyes straight to little Flora. . . . then . . . I was determined by a sense that . . . within the minute she had . . . turned her back to the water. This was her attitude when I at last looked at her. . . . Then I again shifted my eyes—I faced what I had to face.<sup>26</sup>

Unless mistakenly edited, the above does not mean that the figure is there; does not even mean that the governess imagines it there though it is not; but means that *if* (hypothetical) she *should* do so—and-so she *would* see (or imagine) it there (the final "faced what I had

<sup>25</sup> See my "Keat's [sic] Urn: 'On' and On," *Lang&S*, 7 (1974): 235-36.

<sup>26</sup> *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, New York Edition, 26 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907-17), 12:201-2 (chap. 6).

to face" being followed by the hiatus preceding the next chapter, which is set in a different time and place). Furthermore, the above passage does not mean that Flora turned her back to the water; does not even quite mean that the governess imagines Flora did though actually Flora's back was to the water from the beginning; but means that the governess *senses* that Flora had turned her back but only says how Flora actually was when the governess at last looked at her.

Here is language with its negatives, hypotheticals, and conditions otherwise contrary to fact scaring up types that have no inner extension, no *there*, whatever. Below, in turn, are passages from critics whose interpretations of the story belong not to stage one (the ghosts at Bly) but to stage two (the ghosts in the governess's mind)—and have yet to go on to stage three (the ghosts in language):

Lifting her eyes from her sewing, the governess *perceives* a specter across the lake. . . .<sup>27</sup>

. . . it is she—always she herself—who sees the lurking shapes and heralds them to her little world. Not to . . . Flora, but, behind Flora and facing the governess, the apparitional Miss Jessel *first appeared*. There are traps and lures in plenty. . . .<sup>28</sup>

The critics have indeed in the italicized words fallen into a trap—seen a ghost. The text does not mean that the figure did appear; nor does the text even quite mean that the figure was imagined by the governess to appear; only that *if* the governess had lifted her eyes she would have seen (or imagined) it. Yet a third example:

When she looks up, the child *has turned her back* to the apparition on the far side of the lake. . . .<sup>29</sup>

Here not only has the hypothetical and unseen figure been given inner extension as seen; so also has Flora's hypothetical and unseen turning of her back.

<sup>27</sup> Oscar Cargill, "The Turn of the Screw and Alice James," *PMLA*, 78 (1963): 242 (my italics).

<sup>28</sup> Edna Kenton, "Henry James to the Ruminant Reader: The Turn of the Screw," *The Arts*, 6 (1924): 254 (my italics).

<sup>29</sup> Francis X. Roellinger, Jr., "Psychical Research and 'The Turn of the Screw,'" *AL*, 20 (1949): 409 (my italics).

*The Turn of the Screw* is thus amenable to stage three criticism so as to take away even inner extension from those of its meanings that do not properly have any extension at all. Indeed, this story is more than amenable; it *asks* for such treatment (a relevant article on the story by Shoshana Felman is referred to below). *The Turn of the Screw* begins as extended in an ample enough inner world: London's Harley Street, the grounds and rooms of Bly, the governess's inner thoughts as she walks and sits there. But little by little this extension is taken away. By the end the story has reduced itself to a *text*, with only a text's dimensions: no as-if "real" three-dimensional inner world, no such *there* for the meanings to extend themselves in—merely words themselves. *The Turn of the Screw* creates itself a text (the governess's manuscript) in the midst of the story's inner world, then takes away that world and leaves itself—a text.

## 4

The story begins in an inner world extended in space and time just as the external world is extended. The reader looks through a window into this word-world which is like his own. There Douglas and his auditors exist in the before and after of "inner" time (he writes to London for the manuscript, they wait, then listen to it read word by word). His auditors in turn are made to "look" through another window into the governess's word-world, which too is extended like their own and like the reader's. The governess exists in the before and after of "inner-inner" time (she goes to Harley Street, she waits, she goes to Bly, where summer turns to autumn). Likewise all the worlds are extended in three-dimensional space. Douglas's is (he gets up, presents his back to the fire). His very manuscript is so extended in three dimensions ("a thin old-fashioned gilt-edged album").<sup>30</sup> Also the governess's world (its gravel drive and rooms).

Thus when she "sees" the apparition outside the dining-room window, there is indeed an *outside*, an outside to which she then goes so as to be where the apparition was (chap. 4). A window with extension beyond it into a third dimension—that is the world in which the story begins. By the end, as Miles stands framed in the same window (chap. 24), the third dimension of an outside has all

<sup>30</sup> The prologue preceding the first chapter (p. 156); hereafter designated as "prologue."

but disappeared. *The Turn of the Screw* has become "flat" like the text on a page, or flat like a text which has given up projecting any inner extension, any *there*, that is "real" like the world seen through a window. There is next to nothing anymore beyond the story's flat, two-dimensional window to be walked into or seen.

A world extended in three dimensions with time passing—that is our real world and the inner world conventionally projected by the window of a text. Such an inner world, less one dimension and time, turns into that other kind of inner world projected by the graphic arts such as painting. Portraits and scene-painting are the real projected in two dimensions. *The Turn of the Screw* is a strikingly *malerisch* text intent on flattening itself out by presenting some of its objects not as three-dimensionally "real" but as paintings.

The governess notes the portraits on the walls at Bly (chap. 4), and she likens the children themselves to paintings (for instance, the reference to Raphael in the first chapter). She seems to conceive herself not so much as writing up the reality of her ghostly presences as painting them into existence. She expresses her satisfaction at bringing Mrs. Grose "stroke by stroke" (chap. 7) to see in her Peter Quint "a touch of picture" (chap. 5). She notes that the housekeeper "filled out my picture" (chap. 16). She congratulates herself on having created of her presences a "picture" down to the "last detail," a "portrait on the exhibition of which" Mrs. Grose "had instantly recognised and named them" (chap. 8).

Her presentation of Peter Quint's first appearance is that he is there "as a picture in a frame"—against a background of no sound, no movement, as if time has stopped (chap. 3). When he appears again, framed in the dining-room window, he is presented, as he was on the tower, only from the waist up as a half-length portrait (chap. 4); the same again when he appears on the staircase having ascended "halfway up" and with a window as frame behind him (chap. 9).

Does his presentation *have* inner extension into the third dimension? Does he have a back to present as does Douglas? The following passage seems to give him one:

I can't express what followed . . . save by saying that the silence itself . . . became the element into which I saw the figure disappear; in which I definitely saw it turn, *as I might have seen*

the . . . wretch to which it had once belonged turn . . . with my eyes on the . . . back. . . . (chap. 9; my italics)

But the back is not *there*—merely a ghost back created by language's hypothetical "as I might have." Does Miss Jessel have a third dimension? As she is presented sitting on the stairs, her back to the governess, does she have a front?

I had been there but an instant . . . when she vanished without looking round at me. I knew, for all that, exactly what dreadful face she had to show. . . . (chap. 10)

Here, too, no extension into the third dimension—merely a ghost front created by the governess's saying that she knows what the face *would have* looked like.

*The Turn of the Screw* thus presents itself as a strange inner world projected some places in three dimensions, some places in two. Bly is not "real" so as to be walked through, yet with portraits propped on towers and leaning against staircases; rather, Bly is real in some places, but in others two-dimensional and painterly so as to baffle the idea of *through*. "Baffle": a word used in reference to Miles in the final scene as he tries to look through the window and finds nothing there.

A portrait is three-dimensional reality projected on the two-dimensional plane of the canvas through or behind which nothing is signified; the same is true of a story as a text. There is nothing through or behind the two dimensions of the text. The gilt-edged album can indeed be leafed through. But opened to a page, the album becomes a text with no *through*. *The Turn of the Screw* is not only painterly but textual in its presentation of objects given no other side, no third dimension.

Do *any* of the objects and characters in the governess's narration have a dimension that pulls them free of the flat page on which they are put down as text? She seems to be writing not *about* her subject but to be writing the subject itself. She refers to the "grey prose of my office" (chap. 4) and even accuses one of her characters of having behaved under the "dictation" of another (chap. 20). The bachelor is "such a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel" (prologue). Peter Quint comes into existence as the governess is thinking that to meet a certain someone "would be as charming as a

charming story" (chap. 3). When he appears, where *is* he? ". . . I saw him as I see the letters I form on this page" (chap. 3). Then in the dining room he is *in* the (flat) window. Could he actually be in the third dimension of the shrubbery *behind* the window? She purports to search for him there, knowing "He was there or was not there: not there if I did n't see him"—and indeed he is neither seen nor there (chap. 4). *The Turn of the Screw* is *flat* both like a painting and like an opened text.

## 5

Most of the objects and characters in the governess's text are at least *there* to the extent that they are written up into the three or two dimensions of Bly's inner world. But some, while written, are not there at all. These are sheerly ghost objects scared up by her language<sup>31</sup> and (like Keats's little town mentioned earlier) having no provenance whatever in the inner world of Bly. There is, for instance, a waiter who does not exist at Bly, nor does he exist merely as a figure of speech in the governess's thoughts at Bly; he exists in the text itself—a ghost waiter created by language.

We continued . . . 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. He turned round only when the *waiter*<sup>32</sup> had left us. (chap. 22; my italics)

Most of the story's ghosts-in-the-text are pronouns. Again and again there are pronouns with mistakable and mistaken referents:<sup>33</sup>

"That's what he wants!" . . .

"The child?"

"Heaven forbid! The man." (chap. 6)

"Take me away . . . oh take me away from *her!*"

"From *me?*" . . .

"From you—from you!" (chap. 20)

<sup>31</sup> A similar point is made by David A. Cook and Timothy J. Corrigan, "Narrative Structure in *The Turn of the Screw*: A New Approach to Meaning," *SSF*, 17 (1980): 64 (citing Tzvetan Todorov's observation that the "supernatural is born of language").

<sup>32</sup> As originally published in *Collier's* the text reads "maid"; changed to "waiter" in the New York Edition.

<sup>33</sup> Shoshana Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," in *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 154, remarks on this aspect of the story. See also John Carlos Rowe, *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), p. 132.

Indeed, nothing is more characteristic of the story than the perverse reluctance of its pronouns to settle on unambiguous referents. The story's way of going about its business is evident in an early interrogation of Mrs. Grose by the governess—"But of whom did you speak first?" (chap. 2)—and again in the tense words she directs at Miles in that phantasmagoria of mistakable pronouns the final scene: "Whom do you mean by 'he'?"

A pronoun independent of a referent can be said to have no meaning (as discussed in the first section)—like the bachelor's letter communicating nothing but its reference to an enclosed other letter which is nevertheless still sealed as yet unread.<sup>34</sup> A pronoun in this state brings into existence a "he," "she," or "someone" which hovers without any extension in the Bly-world to attach itself to.

There are, for instance, pronouns which the reader temporarily attaches to a mistaken referent. The pronoun, thus attached, extends itself or "sends" itself into Bly's inner world to take on life there—subsequently to be proved *not* extensible or deliverable as addressed. The pronoun as mistakenly addressed has proved itself to be extended or living only where Russell's King of France lives: in the very text itself that has brought "him" into being rather than in an imaginary or real world referred to *by* the text.

Thus the governess describes herself as wishing to meet a "some one" clearly in reference to the bachelor, and then as looking at the tower: "He did stand there!" The bachelor is now *there* in the "he" for the reader up to "was not the person" (chap. 3), where the pronoun finds its proper referent, the "there" of the "he" proves nowhere, the "he" a ghost-bachelor only in the text and not on the tower. The same for the governess's saying in the final scene that "I saw him" meet "my leap." To the reader a possible referent is the ghost of Peter Quint described as in the window. But the referent subsequently proves to be Miles, the ghost of Peter Quint left to inhabit only the sentence itself.

Some of the story's pronouns simply have no certain referents to be discovered:

<sup>34</sup> On this letter-within-a-letter as the separation of "signifier from signified," see Felman, p. 145. She sets up the equation "*to see ghosts = to see letters*" (pp. 151, 166), and avers that "'seeing ghosts' and 'seeing letters' both involve the perception of ambiguous . . . signifiers" (p. 154). But finally she is not making a linguistic point like mine by a psychoanalytic one: the story's letters are undeliverable to the uncle, who represents the unconscious; the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel represent some of the content of the undeliverable letters.

"You thought I might be walking in the grounds?"

"Well, you know, I thought some one was." (chap. 10)

"Of course we've the others."

"We've the others—we've indeed the others." (chap. 23)

Flora in the first example and Miles in the second may be considered to have or not to have in mind a certain referent; and the referent may be considered to be or not to be that of the governess. These pronouns *have* no certain referents as unmistakable entrees into the Bly-world. Such pronouns are free to take on whatever life the reader chooses to give them. But the life, the extension, is not—cannot be—in the world referred to *by* the text but only in the world *of* the text. The same is true of the following:

"It's *he*?"

.....

"Whom do you mean by 'he'?"

"Peter Quint—you devil!" (chap. 24)

Miles's "you" as he stands facing into the dining room has no certain referent (Peter Quint? the governess?). The pronoun does not—cannot—attach itself unmistakably to anything extended in the inner world of Bly. The "you" scared up into life inhabits not Bly but the *text*—a ghost in the text.

## 6

The above features have the effect of turning the story from a text describing an inner world to a text describing merely itself. The story's own most prominent terms for this effect are, first, that Bly begins as an inside which has an outside, and ends merely an inside; and, second, that the story begins as a mailable or sendable letter, and ends an unsendable one.

Bly's windows at the beginning are open (chap. 1). The governess can go to an outside which is beyond the window (chap. 4). Indeed, she can apparently go to the village (chap. 5). She knows "space and air and freedom" (chap. 3). But the constrictions of painterliness and textuality seem progressively to close off any beyond, any outside. The governess comes not to be able to imagine those pictures of perfection Flora and Miles as being, as extended, beyond or outside Bly itself: "the only form that in my fancy the after-years

could take for them was that of a romantic . . . extension of the . . . park" (chap. 3).

Bly comes more and more to be not a window with a *beyond* but a mirror. Among its furnishings to confront the newly arrived governess are full-length mirrors and (in the next sentence) a Mrs. Grose (chap. 1). That worthy is described offering her reflective self (her "mere smooth aspect") to the governess's fancies as a "large clean saucepan" (chap. 11). When the governess looks "prodigious things," she gets "the . . . reflexion of them" in Mrs. Grose's face (chap. 7). Mrs. Grose presents "the plain assent of her experience to whatever . . . I found credible" (chap. 12). Many of the housekeeper's replies are merely repetitions and echoes ("she echoed" [chap. 5]) of the governess's own words (some examples appear in chapters 1, 2, and 5). The governess has every reason to feel "that we should on every question be quite at one" (chap. 1).

By the story's baffling final scene there is next to nothing through or beyond the Bly-window to be seen or heard—merely reflection and echo, the open-windowed Bly now a "prison." The face once beyond the window is now described (and once repeated) as "against the glass"—the face now as it were *in* the plane of the glass rather than through it. There *is* no beyond.<sup>35</sup> The governess, who had faced Miles away from the window lest he see, can at the last let him turn to face it: "I had nothing now there to keep him from." There is next to nothing any longer outside the flat plane of the text, no objects, nothing but the "quiet day."

The story presents this effect in yet another way. Here the story is a letter rather than a window; the "dimension" gradually taken away is not what is *through* the window but what is *beyond* the letter as any recipient. In the prologue the text's inner world has busy communication by means of print and letters with a "beyond." Douglas successfully writes to London for the manuscript, a manuscript that is successfully communicable to his auditors in the reading and to Henry James's readers by means of the narrator's exact transcript. In the manuscript itself the bachelor publishes into the beyond of Hampshire a newspaper advertisement; and the prospective governess successfully writes to London in response.

<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Jacques Derrida remarks that *all* literary texts make themselves into prisons with no beyond; for his discussion of Jacques Lacan's seminar on a story that raises all the issues I have discussed above—"The Purloined Letter"—see "The Purveyor of Truth," *YFS*, no. 52 (1975), pp. 101, 110.

Bly itself at the beginning still precariously has this communication with a dimension beyond itself. The governess is in receipt of letters from home (chap. 4). She is also in receipt of a letter from the London bachelor. But this letter begins the fading away of Bly's communication with anything in an extra-Bly dimension beyond.<sup>36</sup> The bachelor's letter is disturbing (the governess's letters from home were "disturbing" as well [chap. 4]) in cutting off further communication outward on the part of its receiver: "Not a word" (chap. 2). (She had previously been told that she must "neither appeal nor . . . write about anything" [prologue].) This valedictory letter (he never writes to his wards [chap. 13]) is thus a prologue which cuts off references to a beyond and refers meaning exclusively inward to the words of a text ("Read him, please; deal with him" [chap. 2]), just as the story's own prologue also cuts off reference to Douglas himself and refers meaning instead to the words of the governess's own text ("The story itself will tell").<sup>37</sup>

Such meaning-as-reference is baffling in putting off meaning itself onto a document still sealed unread and hence meaningless to the referrer, unreadable by Mrs. Grose (chap. 2), less than communicative to the governess herself (who does not know what to make of it [chap. 2]), and never finally communicated to the reader. The bachelor's communication, that final dimension of beyond or outside the sheer text of *The Turn of the Screw*, is merely a reference to a sealed text swallowed up into the self-referring text of the story itself—locked up in one of the drawers in the governess's room (chap. 3). The governess's text, unlocked and referred inward to Douglas's auditors, itself presents a text referred inward only to be locked up again. "The story itself will tell"—only what the *story itself* will tell. Outside, beyond, has come in for the last time only to be locked away out of sight.

The story then goes about its job of making certain *nothing* escapes outward from the prison of its text. Flora sets busily to practicing the writing of her O's, but distracted, stops (chap. 2). That portrait of tragedy Miss Jessel is described sitting at the schoolroom table as if a housemaid writing a letter to her lover—but interrupted, stops (chap. 15). The children write letters outward to their uncle, but the

<sup>36</sup> Felman notes this undeliverability of letters (p. 141).

<sup>37</sup> And vice versa the story can be seen as cutting off reference to the prologue; thus Rowe comments that the prologue "becomes a necessary introduction once it has been determined as that which the Governess's written narrative seeks to exclude" (p. 131).

letters are never posted (chap. 13). Mrs. Grose proposes writing to him herself via the bailiff, but refers the communication to the governess (chap. 16), who does indeed write a letter—never posted (chap. 21). All communication at Bly flags. At the Sea of Azof the governess enters into the children's game by playing "something . . . very quiet" (chap. 6). Scenes occur in an "intense hush" (chap. 3), a "still hour" (chap. 6), the "quiet day" of the last sentence. Flora's interrupted *O*'s turn into the "nothing" Miles finds in the governess's unposted letter (chap. 24).

*The Turn of the Screw* ends a picture with no third dimension, a window become blank or a mirror, a letter unsendable beyond itself—*flat* like that two-dimensional place Flatland<sup>38</sup> so as to allow its imprisoned figures no view, no communication, no reference beyond the plane of their own restricted existence.

## 7

The prologue brings into being the governess's narrative; the narrative in turn brings into being—nothing possible beyond itself, no epilogue. This story perversely turns away from verisimilitude—away from the window—and turns itself into a text with no reference beyond its literal self. Words themselves, not the dimensions of reality they can be made to refer to, are the story's power. Words, even words that are saying what is *not* and that are extended *nowhere*, can scare up ghosts to haunt the printed page itself. Words have that power. That stolid, unimaginative nonreader Mrs. Grose, offered the bachelor's letter, puts her hands behind her back (chap. 2) as if being handed a bomb. Hidden at the dead center of this story is what Miles *did* that is the root-evil of which the story is the flower—words, "I said things."

*Dartmouth College*

<sup>38</sup> For a brief account of such a mathematical structure, see Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 262.