The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James

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Chapter 4 Psychoanalytical Significances

The Use and Abuse of Uncertainty in *The Turn of the Screw*

There are those who want a text (an art, a painting) without a shadow, without a "dominant ideology"; but this is to want a text without fecundity, without productivity, a sterile text (see the myth of the Woman without a Shadow). The text needs its shadow: this shadow is a bit *of ideology,* a bit *of representation,* a bit *of subject: ghosts, pockets, traces, necessary clouds: subversion must produce its own chiaroscuro.*
—Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

JAMES'S LITERARY AMBIGUITY is much abused by his most dedicated interpreters. Generally considered a sign of his genius, James's ambiguity is often made to serve the same authoritarian purposes that his works anatomize as arbitrary and immoral. But before we can approach the issue of the use or abuse of literary uncertainty in the interpretation of Henry James, we must examine the issue of literature's strategic and perhaps fundamental indeterminacy, which figures so centrally in recent debates concerning the aims of literary interpretation. What Barthes has termed literature's "extravagance of signification," its *systematic* suspension or exemption of meaning, haunts our critical controversies and is one means of gauging the distances between formalists committed to a work's unity and those determined to locate the text's *aporia*.[1] Even among critics of the latter group, there is considerable disagreement concerning the text's gaps, margins, blindnesses. For Barthes, the "seams" of the text are also "semes," in which literature's subversive powers are coded and the reifications of the existing social order—God, reason, science, law—are undone.[2] For others, the antiformal characteristics of textuality argue against any such distinctive *literary* intention and cause "literature" to be reconceptualized in terms of the collective linguistic and representational acts that constitute culture. Thus the literary text's undecidability is viewed merely as a sign of the vanity of literature's claim to self-sufficiency and autonomous form. Literature's undecidability is always a measure of its dependence on the larger language of the culture, including both those social forces that have prompted the literary work and those that will in turn attempt to appropriate it.

In view of the modern mythology of literature as a distinctive mode of discourse that appeals to our yearning to be free of the constraints of conventional society, we should not be surprised by the evolution and power of formalist schools of criticism. Emerson's romantic conception of poets as "liberating gods" depends upon the notion that "every thought is also a prison; every heaven is also a prison."[3] The Symbolistes' and early moderns' resistances to the epistemological claims of modern science and rational philosophy belong to this tradition of the imaginative author as the heroic agent of a certain Keatsian "negative capability" that argues for a uniquely human capacity for wonder, surprise, and doubt "without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."[4] On these foundations, the American New Criti-

cism would transform literary devices of paradox and irony into the ontological principles of literary form, in a manner not too dissimilar from the Russian Formalists' transformation of the literary technique of "estrangement" (*ostranenie*) into the constitutive principle (both *archē* and telos) of literary function.

What is surprising is that deconstructive criticism, especially in its Anglo-American versions, should tend to repeat this binary opposition of "literature" and "society." It is surprising, because the basic linguistic principles on which deconstruction depends argue so forcefully and designedly against the principle of binary opposition basic to the various structuralisms that the deconstructive strategies of Lacan and Derrida have attempted to supersede. The tendency among many American poststructuralists to valorize *literary indeterminacy* still represents the aftereffects of a romantic mythology of art that establishes too simple and too strict a distinction between the self-conscious "playfulness" of the imaginative writer and the self-serving will to power or authority of the society's ruling class. When Derrida argues that "writing is unthinkable without repression," he does not exclude a self-conscious mode of writing that might master its own unconscious. "The subject of writing is a *system* of relations between strata: the Mystic Pad, the psyche, society, the world," Derrida continues; this play of differences is the effect of the history of the culture's representations, of its language.[5] Relations between the active forces of this system (that is, Freudian cathexes) are established only as a consequence of repression, so that the "subject" of literary discourse already represents a certain economy facilitated by the repression of other, nonliterary forces. Literature thus partakes of the willful drives for exclusion, limitation, and thus semantic determination that govern the more substantial representations of the culture.

The critic's unwillingness to acknowledge this complicity of literature in the system of cultural representation often is expressed in the simple assumption that social authority manifests its law by foregrounding the signs of its right to rule. Authoritarian power thus appears to be an explicit, a martial seizure of governance that would seek to institute its own usurpation as the law. The ceremony, insignia, and military strength of a dictator would be appropriate metaphors for the style of such social law, which seeks to disguise its lawless origin behind the facade of such appearances. Although the dictator may be difficult to overthrow, at least he designs his power

to be recognized. Given Derrida's conception of the system of differences through which the culture expresses itself, a subtler and more troublesome sort of authority would be that which *disguises* its power, effectively displacing the signs of its rule to others: both other agents and other orders of discourse. Unable to command the complex cultural forces that have permitted it to exist, such authority might assert itself paradoxically by means of its very claim to impotence, irresponsibility, even triviality. By transferring its most fundamental distinction —the binary of ruler and ruled, of master and servant—to those apparently discrete discourses for which it would disown all authority, such power would reside precisely "nowhere" and, like some medieval definition of God, "everywhere." This principle of difference, of arbitrariness, of nondetermination, of excess would thus remain the origin and motive for all determinate discourses, every will to meaning that would succeed only by excluding its governing law. As the absolute "other" of such discourses, this principle would remain unchanged to declare the limits of those discourses, the boundaries of their repressions.

Let me say clearly at the outset that such a strategic manipulation of linguistic differences for the sake of a political authority of *difference,* itself a concept relying on its exclusion by the ordinary functioning of social significations, should not be confused with Derrida's neologism *différance.* Derrida is careful to figure *différance* as neither a word nor a concept but a descriptive generality that in its own right has no more than a tautological meaning. *Différance* is a sort of shorthand counter for the *function* of ordinary signification that can be "understood" only by active and directed interpretations, which would themselves perform in particular ways the relation between expression and repression suggested by the counter *différance.* Nevertheless, other modern conceptions of linguistic, philosophical, and psychic "difference" often result in conceptualizing and even hypostasizing such a function. Derrida's interpretation of Saussure in *De la grammatologie* turns on a demonstration that the Saussurean difference between *signifier* and *signified* is little more than a hierarchy subordinating *signifier* to *signified.*[6] In a similar sense, the ontic-ontological difference in Heidegger epitomizes the sort of conceptualization of "difference" that I have described above as a covert will to political power. Insisting upon Being as that which reveals itself to beings only in terms of its essential withdrawal and self-concealedness,

Heidegger provides an excellent philosophical justification for a power (political or metaphysical) that would claim its authority by virtue of its dispersion and displacement.[7]

Henry James's writings both anatomize the subversive power of this sort of social artistry and are implicated in the general rhetoric of such artistry by virtue of their appeal to literary ambiguity. Many of James's fictional données depend upon the absence or effacement of the actual social and economic authorities. Mrs. Newsome's authority in *The Ambassadors* is a function not only of her absence from the dramatic action but also of Strether's insistence upon his independence from her ambassadorial charge. In the first volume of *The Wings of the Dove,* Maud Manningham supports financially Kate Croy, Lord Mark, and others, but she permits them to act out her social drama as if they were its true authors. In the second volume, Milly Theale becomes the absent hostess of the dinner she gives in Venice and, more generally, employs her silence and eventual death to force a drama of recognition between Kate and Merton Densher. In *The Golden Bowl,* Maggie Verver transforms the "innocent" authority of her father in the first volume into her own artistry of denial and negation in the second volume. Indeed, much of her secret power over the two marriages is represented by her challenge and appeal to Prince Amerigo: "Find out for yourself!" In *The Sacred Fount,* the host of the weekend party, itself a complicated series of arranged meetings and liaisons, plays no role in the drama, except in his very absence. My examples have been taken from the writings of the Major Phase, because these works seem to follow the thematic of absent authority that plays such a seminal role in *The Turn of the Screw.* In that work, the Uncle's contract with the Governesss is based on his single and seemingly absolute prohibition: "That she should never trouble him—but never, never: neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything; only meet all questions herself."[8]

The transference of authority from ruler to ruled in James's writings is especially interesting because it seems regularly to result in the displacement of political and economic issues into psychological concerns of individual characters. Both *The Turn of the Screw* and the history of its interpretations are excellent illustrations of this sort of transference; both the narrative structure and diverse critical views of this work seem to concentrate on the psychology of the Governess to the significant exclusion of the work's wider social implications.

Edmund Wilson's analysis of the Governess, of course, represents best this tendency among the early Freudian analyses. Wilson, to be sure, does not disregard the few sociological details and hints provided by James, but he equates the Governess's psychology with the central and controlling values of the culture:

> Her somber and guilty visions and the way she behaves about them seem to present, from the moment we examine them from the obverse side of her narrative, an accurate and distressing picture of the poor country parson's daughter, with her English middle-class class-consciousness, her inability to admit to herself her natural sexual impulses and the relentless English "authority" which enables her to put over on inferiors even purposes which are totally deluded and not at all in the other people's best interests. Remember, also, in this connection, the peculiar psychology of governesses, who, by reason of their isolated position between the family and the servants, are likely to become ingrown and morbid.[9]

For Wilson, the anomalous character of the Governess's position in society all the more emphatically makes her representative of its gravest prejudices and ills. The critical argument that pits good against evil, governess against ghosts, has not won much support recently, and this argument also tends to trivialize the social issues in the work. Because the Governess's social standing is so ambivalent in Victorian society, whatever moral good she may be made to represent must be all the more archetypal and distinct from the particular values of a culture that may well have lost the controlling moral righteousness that she represents.[10] The narrative itself certainly seems to encourage this concentration on the "psychology" or "morality" of the Governess in the closed circle of romance that is Bly. The frame tales that introduce the Governess's manuscript (which focuses exclusively on the events at the country house) provide the reader with abundant ambiguities but precious few facts and details about anything or anyone outside the magic circle of Bly. Yet if the principal purpose of these diverse narratives is to effect the sort of transference of concerns of social and political authority that we have discussed above onto the psychological concerns of characters like the Governess and Mrs. Grose, both of whom have no real social power, then the ambiguities involving all that lies beyond the estate of Bly would appear to be perfectly designed, to be "facts" in their own right.

Before attempting to read this relation of transference between the "inside" of the narrative (Bly, country, psychology of Governess, family of orphans) and its "outside" (frame tales, Harley Street Uncle, London, society, power), I must return to the complicity of literature itself in what thus far has been considered a *theme* in a particular literary work. James's own literary authority often seems to function in the manner of those "absent authorities" in his works or those subversive social powers I have described above. James's mastery of his form is accomplished by characters and by readers (always implicit "characters" in his work) who appear all the more true to their forms as they seem to escape the control of other "authors." Read thematically in James's writings, this issue of authority seems to be worked out rather unproblematically in the protagonist's educational progress toward self-consciousness and independence. Interpreted in terms of the reader's response to the work, this issue seems to argue for the reader's following the dictates of the text to achieve his/her own interpretation of the ambiguous human problems presented. The implicit relation between the epistemological themes of a literary narrative and the hermeneutic processes prompted in the reader is maintained by many modern theories of literature (notably the New Criticism, Russian Formalism, the Geneva School, and those *Rezeptionstheorien* based on phenomenological models) that have followed the principal aims of idealist philosophy from Hegel to Sartre. On the other hand, such a literary intention might be read as the strategic effort of the author to employ the apparent "freedom" and "self-realization" of character and reader alike to disguise and defend that author's own will to power. The usual response to this charge that the literary author shares the political ruler's subversive strategies is that a work of fiction always announces its author and never ceases to declare its fictionality, whereas social authorities use all their power to disguise their art as law, their styles as truth.[11] Literature is nevertheless as much a mode of psychic defense as one of exposure, revelation, and confession. Literature's appeal to its fictionality may be read as the subtlest of all ruses, because it so often transforms its fictionality —its ephemerality—into a claim for unique insight into and understanding of reality.

James considered Shakespeare's genius in terms that recall Coleridge's conception of Shakespeare as a protean, metamorphic figure, who is recognized only in his various disguises. In his introduction to *The Tempest,* James writes: "The figured tapestry, the long arras

that hides him, is always there, with its immensity of surface and its proportionate underside."[12] James's image is strangely ambivalent, recalling as it does Polonius hiding behind the curtain in the Queen's bedroom and Hamlet's mistaken murder of the veiled figure he considers to be a hidden king. Indeed, James figures the critic as just such a Hamlet: "May it not then be but a question, for the fullness of time, of the finer weapon, the sharper point, the stronger arm, the more extended lunge?"[13] The artist is also a Polonius—hypocrite, voyeur, speaker of others' wisdom—who hides himself precisely to be mistaken for the king. Our most violent critical lunges, prompted by our suspicion of a king, will undo both us and the hidden Polonius. Such "undoing," however, such "uncanniness," belongs neither to reader nor to "author," both of whom seek to master the text: the first by uncovering its hidden depths, the second by hiding himself *within* the distracting folds, the wayward patterns of his woven style.

Secrecy is one of the principal devices of such social and literary artistry. Secrets in James appear at first to be lures for the reader and devices of suspense and drama, but the revelation of a secret in James almost always ends in radical ambiguity. Even in an early novel like *The American,* the central secret of the old marquis's murder at the hands of his wife, Madame de Bellegarde, is "revealed" in Newman's conversation with Mrs. Bread in the most profoundly ambiguous manner. Tina's possible illegitimacy in *The Aspern Papers* is as paradoxical in its "revelation" as the discovery of Aspern's private letters to Juliana: a "discovery" confirmed only by Tina's announcement to the narrator that she has burnt all evidence.[14] The incriminating letter that Graham Fielder locks up in the ivory tower in the beginning of *The Ivory Tower* is deliberately unread by him or Rosanna Gaw, and their knowledge of its contents seems a function of their preservation of it as secret. James's literary strategy is often to demonstrate how a character's very desire to know the truth of such enabling secrets reveals the secret of that character's personality rather than the truth of the ostensible secret in the plot. In this use, the secret is merely a device James borrows from the popular romance and ironizes for the sake of his psychological themes. On the other hand, the radically ambiguous secret is also a means of *disguising by displacing* an original arbitrariness in the power structure; its ambiguity prompts those who "read" its truth to assume responsibility for it. The very ambiguity of the secret may be considered a strategy that initiates the

sort of interpretive activities that will transfer its authorship to others, especially those whom it would rule. Thus Newman's ambiguous knowledge of the Bellegardes' family secret implicates him in that secret, so that he ends by perpetuating it. Mrs. Tristram understands this "aristocratic" manipulation of honor and respectability quite well: "My impression would be that since, as you say they defied you, it was because they believed that, after all, you would never really come to the point. Their confidence, after counsel taken of each other, was not in their innocence, nor in their talent for bluffing things off; it was in your remarkably good nature! You see they were right."[15] Mrs. Tristram's ironic characterization of Newman's "good nature" equates social honor and respectability with an essential morality, which has now been made to serve the perpetuation of those aristocratic pretensions that mark the authority of the Bellegardes. Indeed, the "services" performed by Newman's "good nature" are precisely what exclude him from the secret power of the Bellegardes. Even so, Newman is left with the knowledge of his own complicity, his own ambivalent sense of what he has done, and confusion concerning his own psychic motives. On the one hand, James's characters do become implicated in the secrets of their cultures, insofar as they refuse initially to discover in themselves the sin, illegitimacy, and weakness represented by such secrets. Such a theme is a common concern in many critical studies of Henry James. On the other hand, these characters are also forced to perform in response to such secrets in ways that will preserve them, but displaced into uncanny and ultimately undecidable hieroglyphs of human psychology and "nature." One of the consequences of this narrative secrecy is the interesting drama of James's psychological experiments; another equally important effect is the preservation of the secret as an artistocratic "privacy" that governs the public events of the narrative.

In *The Turn of the Screw,* the children's uncle represents this sort of aristocratic *and* literary "secrecy" in the most explicit and complicated way. The critics' concentration on the psychology of the Governess (or her "morality") may be read in terms of the Uncle's originating transference of his authority to her, itself a complicated strategy for maintaining his power while keeping it from exposure. Critics have by no means ignored the Uncle, but their attention has been governed principally by his ostensible irresponsibility and extravagance. Even those critics who insist that the Uncle's employment of the Gov-

erness involves a subtle seduction, whose sexual implications are manifest in her subsequent behavior, maintain that his primary motive is to escape the unpleasant family obligations posed by the little orphans, Miles and Flora. Introduced in Douglas's prologue to the Governess's manuscript as "a gentleman, a bachelor in the prime of life, 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," the Uncle appears as little more than a literary convention of the well-mannered, aristocratic rake, who is always "rich" and "extravagant" and exudes "a glow of high fashion, of good looks, of expensive habits, of charming ways with women" (*TS,* 4). Although his money, property, and position would seem to entitle him to a certain mastery in this culture, the Uncle's refusal to assume any direct responsibility for the care and education of his younger brother's children makes it easy for critics to trivialize his power as that of some *deus absconditus* who leaves the field to the Governess. His power in the subsequent narrative is almost exclusively a function of his taboo against communication from the Governess. "He" figures in the text only to the extent that the Governess fears breaking silence, a fear confirmed by his only communication with her: "The postbag that evening—it came late—contained a letter for me which, however, in the hand of my employer, I found to be composed but of a few words enclosing another, addressed to himself, with a seal still unbroken. 'This, I recognise, is from the head-master, and the head-master's an awful bore. Read him please; deal with him; but mind you don't report. Not a word. I'm off!'" (*TS,* 10). By virtue of his irresponsibility, the Uncle confirms all the more his secret power—itself a power of secrecy and censorship—over the actors at Bly and their audience. Invisible and silent in the course of the dramatic action, with the exception of his one appeal *for* silence, the Uncle prompts a psychodramatic struggle between masters and servants at Bly that he has already inscribed and continues to control in and by his absence.

James's own will to power in *Hawthorne,* "Greville Fane," and, more generally, his career as an international modern may be addressed adequately by means of Bloom's anxiety of influence. The dispossessed identities of such characters as Olive Chancellor, Mrs. Gereth, Fleda Vetch, and Tina Aspern are understandable in relation to the particular men (Basil Ransom, Owen Gereth, the narrator and Jeffrey Aspern) who control them by various legal means. Nevertheless, these

issues remain "psychological themes," which are little more than the chief stocks of many traditional approaches to Henry James. The Uncle in *Turn of the Screw,* however brief his appearance, provides us with an occasion to carry such themes beyond their interpersonal horizons and still maintain the larger social relevance of the particular issues they represent. The Uncle is never characterized in the manner of James's customary realism; instead, he is merely allegorized, so that we understand him only as a sign of larger social forces. In ultimate and practical service to the Uncle, the Governess gathers in her character the feminist issues of the preceding chapter. In her competition with others for authority at Bly, the Governess thematizes any "author's" struggle for a voice and especially Henry James, Jr.'s, own anguished bid for novelty. Viewed in this way, then, the Uncle in *The Turn of the Screw* provides us with the means of continuing the narrative of our study of James by carrying both poetic influence and the social role of woman over to a more direct confrontation with the rhetoric of those ideological forces that subordinate poet and woman alike.

In order to read the Uncle, I must allow myself to be duped by the text's ambiguities and commit myself to a reductive allegory, in which "overlooked" and "surprising" details about him are offered as determinate facts. Shoshana Felman's brilliant reading of *The Turn of the Screw* depends upon her assumption that critics (like Wilson, like me) will refuse the uncanniness of the text and insist upon substituting their own conclusive meanings at the very moment that they would argue for the most radical literary ambiguity.[16] Felman's deconstruction of Edmund Wilson's psychological interpretation of the tale concludes that the reader lacks James's mastery just in proportion as the reader asserts mastery over the text: "James's very mastery consists in the denial and in the deconstruction of his own mastery." In this same context, Felman makes a significant association between James and the Uncle: "Like the Master in his story with respect to the children and to Bly, James assumes the role of Master only through the act of claiming, with respect to his literary 'property,' the 'license,' as he puts it, 'of disconnexion and disavowal.' . . . Here as elsewhere, 'mastery' turns out to be self-dispossession."[17] Elsewhere Felman reads the Uncle as the Lacanian other, the signifier of the unconscious, and thus the source of the indeterminacy of the text: "Constitutive of an aporia, of a relation of non-relation, the Master's discourse is very

like the condition of the unconscious as such: Law itself is but a form of Censorship. But it is precisely this censoring law and this prohibitive contract which constitute, paradoxically, the story's condition of possibility."[18] And still elsewhere, the Uncle is associated with the reductive impulse of psychoanalysis to control and master literature: "In its efforts to master literature, psychoanalysis—like Oedipus and like the Master—can thus but blind itself: blind itself in order to deny its own castration, in order not to see, and not to read, literature's subversion of the very possibility of psychoanalytical mastery."[19] In her own effort to demonstrate the ways in which literary undecidability deconstructs the mastery of such determinate forms of discourse as psychoanalysis, literary criticism, and social authority, Felman personifies in the Uncle both the paradoxical genius of James and the mystified drives for completed meaning characteristic of the criticism and psychoanalysis that would "master" James and literature. Thus *any* reading of the Uncle must end in its own allegorical displacement of his protean power, if we accept the diverse functions he serves in Felman's analysis.

As the differential other of the Governess's own efforts to read, the Uncle is metaphorized by Felman as that which remains "unreadable," the "hole" constituted in all the letters (including James's) that circulate in quest of their "proper" meanings. Felman argues, however, that the relation between "readable" and "unreadable" is not to be understood in terms of opposition, in the same sense that the relation of the Freudian unconscious to consciousness is not to be construed as bipolar. Felman reformulates the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis—the larger issue of her work—in terms of the readable as "*a variant of the unreadable*": "To read on the basis of the unreadable would be, here again, to ask not *what* does the unreadable mean, but *how* does the unreadable mean?"[20] Just how the "unreadable" Uncle's mastery means in the course of this narrative is precisely a study in the ways in which the "unreadable" maintains its sway. The Uncle's social power (of the aristocracy, law, censorship) is to be understood only in its *deviance,* in its *perversion by* transference to the "individual psychology" of the Governess and even the children, who represent notably marginal classes within the social hierarchy: the daughter of a country parson, the orphaned children of a younger brother in a culture governed principally by primogeniture.

These details concerning class, inheritance, and legal guardianship

are given in Douglas's prologue to his reading of the Governess's manuscript. This fine technical discrimination between prologue and manuscript allows James to offer the Governess's "own" handwritten account in such a way as to represent the Uncle only in his absence. The information that Douglas provides is offered as essential to an understanding of the story, but it is nonetheless information that must be left out of the Governess's manuscript. Yet it is information that Douglas could have received from none other than his sister's tutor, the Governess herself, following the events of the narration. I would contend that the prologue is the delayed effect of narration itself, the *Nachträglichkeit* that the displacements of the narrative constitute as an "unreadable" background that may be read as such only in terms of its exclusion from the narrative "proper." This prologue becomes a necessary introduction once it has been determined as that which the Governess's written narrative seeks to exclude. And what her narrative principally excludes is the *fact* of the Uncle's potent and active authority that governs her own bid for mastery as the guarantee of the Uncle's secret power.

Because Douglas's prologue is oral and based on his reconstruction of what the Governess has "told" him, it excludes itself from the narrator's (the "I") suspect claim that the narrative he gives the reader is "from an exact transcript of my own made much later" based on the Governess's manuscript which "poor Douglas, before his death—when it was in sight—committed to me" (*TS,* 4). Based as it must be on a chain of oral transmissions (Governess, Douglas, "I"), this prologue either distinguishes itself from the "exact transcript" of the manuscript or questions the narrator's claim to have made an "exact transcript" of a manuscript "in old faded ink and in the most beautiful hand" (*TS,* 2). If the prologue is a necessary introduction to the narrative, then no transcript would be "exact" without it. Yet because the narrative cannot be transcribed "exactly," its imperfect telling by its various narrators already argues for the substitution of the term "translation" in the place of "transcription." Unless, of course, we are supposed to read "from an exact transcript of my own" as the narrator's ironic suggestion that the *only* "exact transcript" of any story is the narrator's "own" story, its exactness assured by his appeal to however feeble a memory. Indeed, Douglas answers the narrator's question "And is the record yours? You took the thing down?" by claiming: "'Nothing but the impression. I took that *here*'—he tapped

his heart. 'I've never lost it'" (*TS,* 2). We should recall here Socrates' objections to writing in the *Phaedrus,* in which he rejects Thoth's invention on the grounds that writing "will implant forgetfulness in their souls" and supplant the living truth "veritably written" in the soul of philosophical man.[21] The Governess's manuscript is, in fact, transmitted by her own bequest to Douglas and then by Douglas to the narrator as something each in turn "possesses." Yet the possession of writing occurs only in the appropriations one makes of its signs, which is to say that there can be no "exact transcript" of writing except in those willful interpretations that would offer themselves as the "living truth," the "speech" of an author.

For these reasons, it is all the more important that what little we learn of the Uncle should be given in this oral prologue, itself an explicit instance of a speaker's will to become author, to substitute his/her own "impression" for the texts that have commanded him/her to exist. In the midst of these narrative problems, we are introduced to the Uncle's story and circumstances:

> He had been left, by the death of his parents in India, guardian to a small nephew and small niece, children of a younger, a military brother whom he had lost two years before. These children were, by the strangest of chances for a man in his position—a lone man without the right sort of experience or a grain of patience—very heavy on his hands. (*TS,* 5)

The interpolation of the prepositional phrase "by the death of his parents in India" immediately after the verb "left" causes the reader momentarily to understand "left" as referring to his own orphan status. The complete predication of the verb, however, explains that he has been "left . . . by death . . . guardian," which suggests a legal title conferred by default. In legal terms, such lineal descent of guardianship in a landed family is quite appropriate in nineteenth-century England: the grandparents would have first obligation to care for the children, followed on their deaths by the oldest surviving son, heir to the family estate. Because the children's father was the Uncle's "younger, . . . military" brother, the reader should assume that this military vocation indicates that the usual primogeniture governs inheritance in this family and that the Uncle is the principal heir to the land. As William Blackstone states the custom of English inheritance laws: "And, among persons of any rank or fortune, a competence is

generally provided for younger children, and the bulk of the estate settled upon the eldest, by the marriage-articles."[22] Despite the general application of primogeniture to the majority of the estate, most nineteenth-century English gentry devised some means (generally during the father's lifetime) of settling a "suitable" inheritance on younger sons, especially those who had married and had children. In any event, it is most likely that Miles is heir to some competence or other inheritance descending from his father, the Uncle's younger brother.

More important than the possible estate Miles stands to inherit from his father is Miles's status as the next in line to inherit from his Uncle the family estate, unless the Uncle marries and has children of his own. This circumstance complicates the Uncle's legal claim to Bly, "his country home, an old family place in Essex" (*TS,* 4). English law distinguishes between two basic claims to property: *possession* of property and the *right* to property. According to Blackstone, a "title completely legal" depends upon the joining of the right of possession and the right of property.[23] The most basic right of possession is "the mere *naked possession,* or actual occupation of the estate."[24] The younger, military brother, by virtue of his military service, would have had no occasion to establish any claim even to mere "naked possession" of Bly. His son, Miles, however, might begin to establish such a claim on the basis of his residency in the ancestral home. The Uncle, faced with the choice of keeping the children in his London residence or at his country estate, risks his reputation as "a gentleman, a bachelor" on the one hand and (however remotely) his full title to Bly on the other hand. Given the legal significance of the term "possession" as well as its diverse connotations in the rest of the narrative (ghostly visitation, knowledge, mastery, intuition), the description of the Uncle's choice to send the children to Bly is curious: "He had put them in possession of Bly, which was healthy and secure" (*TS,* 5). Even in the nonlegal idiom "to be put in possession of," there is in the word "possession" a strong suggestion of what one owns but still only at the grace of a donor. Further, the Uncle chooses Bly as the "proper" place, both "healthy and secure," because it is in the "country." By implication, the city where he resides is improper, unhealthy, and insecure, at least as far as children are concerned. In legal terms, the Uncle's employment of a governess to represent his guardianship at Bly enables him to maintain his "right of possession" without requiring his physical presence. The legal propriety of the

Uncle's strategy masks his improper motives, just as the health and security of the country estate disguise the source of their maintenance in the urban world of the Uncle.

Still other improprieties may be masked by the establishment at Bly that the Uncle contrives so carefully, so seductively. John Clair has already uttered one of the "horrors" that Douglas's spare prologue tempts us to read in its silences: that the children are the illegitimate offspring of the Uncle and Miss Jessel.[25] In a similar vein, we might be tempted by the description of the Uncle's brother as one "whom he had *lost* two years before" (*TS*, 5). Given the prologue's care with respect to the legalities involved in the Uncle's position and the children's relations, it is curious that no mention is made of the brother's wife, who would be the natural guardian. Such a significant omission encourages us to read the brother's "loss" as a "fall" resulting from some prodigality, rather than as a literal death. Indeed, the word "loss" is used only one other time in the prologue: "There had been for the two children at first a young lady whom they had had the misfortune to lose" (*TS*, 5). Although the next sentence refers explicitly to the former governess's "death," the children's "loss" and Uncle's "loss" bring the former governess and the younger brother into some stylistic association prompted by our own quest for "general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain" (*TS*, 2). This perversely reductive reading of the children as the illegitimate offspring of the younger brother and Miss Jessel certainly would be reinforced by the Victorian literary conventions concerning the romantic exploits of soldiers. Confronted with such circumstances, the Uncle might well be inclined to maintain the respectability of his family name by hiding these bastards and their "natural" mother away at Bly, in the care of servants well trusted or at least seduced into silence.

These imagined illegitimate dealings of the younger brother with Miss Jessel would find a curious association in the Uncle's identity as "a gentleman, a bachelor," whose extravagance involves both "expensive habits" and "charming ways with women." Even the modifiers describing the identities of the brother are parallel in construction: "a gentleman, a bachelor"; "a younger, a military brother." The Uncle, too, is associated with martial exploits that confuse the military, the sexual, and the natural: "He had for his town residence a big house filled with the spoils of travel and the trophies of the chase" (*TS*, 4). Even the parents, who have died in India, are associated with mili-

tancy, since British colonial rule in India at the time of their deaths (roughly 1845) was being consolidated and strengthened by social and economic reforms increasingly dependent on the force of the army.[26] Indeed, were the style of the prologue the "proper" evidence for arguing the secret and tragic affair of the younger brother and the former governess, then we would be forced to conclude that the signs of such illegitimacy contaminate the entire family: parents as well as the two sons.

Let me now abandon this allegory of reading, which has stretched the barest hints of the prologue to suggest the more particular sorts of legal, sexual, and political illegitimacies disguised by the artistry of the aristocracy. Allowing myself to have been duped by the text in my quest for a reductive meaning, a governing secret, that would transform the prologue into the formal boundary enclosing the subsequent narrative's meaning and truth, I may now swerve from this inevitable compulsion of interpretation and insist that precisely what the prologue maintains is the *essential ambiguity of illegitimacy*. Displaced from uncle to brother to Miss Jessel to children, the hints of illegitimacy seduce the reader into repeating that transference which is the actual "illegitimacy" of this ruling class. By particularizing the arbitrariness of authority as the "extravagance" of an individual character, the "excess" or "imbalance" of a neurotic psychology, the interpreter reenacts and thereby *serves* the power of the master. For convenience and for certain strategic reasons, I shall continue to refer to this authority and mastery as "the Uncle," recognizing that this name—like that other name, "the Master"—is employed only in the *written* narrative by characters explicitly involved in the process of transference. In Douglas's prologue the Uncle is only a pronominal function, a "he" or "him," the grammatical character of whose identity reminds us of the presence of a speaker, a narrator, an author: Douglas, governess, "I."

In fact, the name "Uncle" is appropriate for "him" only in relation to these children—and then only on the condition that they are in fact the legitimate offspring of his brother. And yet this name "Uncle" functions only in relation to those with whom "he" will have nothing to do, except by way of assigning his authority, transferring his "name." All of this might encourage the interpreter to understand what I have termed the "essential ambiguity of illegitimacy" as the absolute arbitrariness of all claims to social authority. As I have suggested above,

this is a common conclusion in many deconstructive approaches to literature and culture. Just as the transference of social authority's illegitimacy into the madness of an individual character preserves and disguises such illegitimacy, so the abstraction of a particular kind of arbitrary social rule as the essential arbitrariness at the origin of all rules hides its illegitimacy. The Uncle's ambiguous identity and ambivalent claim to authority are themselves the truths of a very particular and thus historical social power. This power is the power of extravagance and "freedom": from labor, service, other masters.

As "a gentleman, a bachelor," the Uncle is "figured" by the Governess "as fearfully extravagant," and as living in a "big house" "filled with . . . spoils . . . and . . . trophies" (*TS,* 4). Everything she "sees" in him seems to suggest that his only "affairs" involve the design and maintenance of his own "image": "Saw him all in a glow of high fashion, of good looks, of expensive habits, of charming ways with women" (*TS,* 4). Indeed, his "extravagance" seems defined by its intransitivity: that is, the product of this expense of vision is nothing other than an expensive vision. The Uncle's fashionable appearance seems in direct contrast with the "respectability" of his servants at Bly. Indeed, any argument concerning the former governess's hidden identity as the natural mother of Miles and Flora would have to contend with her characterization in the prologue: "She had done for them quite beautifully—she was a most respectable person" (*TS,* 5). The word "respectable," however, is rendered ambivalent in the very next sentence: "Mrs. Grose, since then, in the way of manners and things, had done as she could for Flora; and there were, further, a cook, a housemaid, a dairywoman, an old pony, an old groom and an old gardener, all likewise thoroughly respectable." As if to emphasize that Douglas's tone has further qualified the meaning of "respectability," someone in the audience asks: "And what did the former governess die of? Of so much respectability?" In the superlative form and modifying "person," "most respectable" signifies moral quality and social propriety. When applied to "an old pony," however, "respectable" describes the functional rather than the moral value of the noun. "Respectable," used to mean something "serviceable" but not necessarily of the best or newest (as in the idioms "a respectable suit of clothes" and "he does a respectable job"), seems to apply to the other nouns in the series, all of which denote people in terms of their jobs rather than their personalities or moral natures. The former governess,

whose "respectability" the subsequent narrative will question, is identified as respectable in close association with others whose respectability seems more dependent on their modestly adequate performance of contractual tasks than on their social standing or moral distinction. Such an interpretation is strengthened by the use of the adverb "likewise" to suggest an equivalence of respectability among the items in the series *and* with the previous use of "most respectable person" to describe the former governess: ". . . all likewise thoroughly respectable."

The prologue's irony regarding the term "respectability" depends upon an ambivalence that emphasizes the division between labor and title, service and property, servant and master. In a culture in which labor has some relation to both economic and moral value, the "respectable" services of "an old gardener" would be the measure of his social "respectability." Indeed, the highest aim of such labor might be generalized as the production and maintenance of the common social well-being or good. The division within the term "respectability" in Douglas's prologue marks the essential divisions in a class society. Every reader of James's novels knows that the rare character who works for a living is viewed by the others as eccentric to that hermetic aristocratic world where position and social standing are measured principally by one's freedom from labor. James was fascinated by this aristocratic extravagance, because it justified itself in terms of its sheer style and artistry, whose apparent ephemerality was capable of exercising profound social power. The "art of life" that seems the ultimate labor of James's aristocrats is, in fact, an artistry akin to the rhetoric involved in the production of capital, the "style" of what Marx termed the "theory of surplus value." In a capitalist system of economics, the very identity of the capitalist depends upon his ability to generate a "surplus" product in excess of the cost of the laborer's maintenance. In one sense, the capitalist's own labor is precisely the artistry required to exploit his workers to produce such a surplus. One of the reasons James developed the character of the art-collecting businessman (Newman, Mr. Touchett, Adam Verver) may have been his sense that the apparent "leisure" of the dilettante disguises a subtler kind of economic and social manipulation, which produces an extravagance or surplus. Even though these businessmen are most often represented as mere collectors rather than artists, their business is precisely the production of "art." Just as James renders ambivalent the

apparent oppositions in his fiction between the worlds of business and society, America and Europe, male and female, reason and imagination, so he subverts the opposition between economics and art.[27]

The rhetorical strategies of the ruling class in a hierarchical society follow generally the process of psychic transference I have described above as governing the narrative of *The Turn of the Screw.* Such transference serves to produce the indeterminacy of both its origin and end, and it is precisely this indeterminacy that is the surplus (an *I*) by which the ruler stakes his claim. The contractual relation between the Uncle and Governess depends upon his singular, determinate prohibition: "That she should never trouble him—but never, never; neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything; only meet all questions herself, receive all moneys from his solicitor, take the whole thing over and let him alone" (*TS,* 6). On the one hand, this censorship of any intercourse between master and servant is the absolute necessity of a system in which ownership and labor are divided. On the other hand, the effect of this prohibition, this dispossession of the servant, is the assignment to the Governess of "supreme authority" and full possession. The Uncle's prohibition may be quite specific, but its governing principle is its ambiguity: the ambivalence of "possession"/"dispossession." The seductive power of the Uncle resides in just such duplicity: "She promised to do this, and she mentioned to me that when, for a moment, disburdened, delighted, he held her hand, thanking her for her sacrifice, she already felt rewarded" (*TS,* 6). The periodic sentence reinforces the reader's sense of equivocation between "sacrifice" and "reward." We have seen already how such sacrificial gains are common to James's female characters, whose very identities in a patriarchal society compel them to interpret sacrifice as reward and fetishize surrender or self-denial as their own property.[28] Such surrender becomes "will to power" in its most extreme formulations, as in May Bartram's manipulation of her surrender to John Marcher and his beast in order to preserve a secret control of another who ostensibly "rules." At its furthest extreme, then, this characteristically feminine "surrender" in James's writings repeats the secret authority of the Uncle, which is expressed best in his extravagance, uselessness, irresponsibility, willful castration, and general ambiguity. Yet in the Uncle's seductive contract, he has already transferred such "qualities" to the Governess, whose only token of reward should be that fleeting contact—"he held her hand"—whereby sexual flirta-

tion and the "honorable" conclusion of a business contract are so beautifully confused.

Thus the "seduction" accomplished by the Uncle cannot be reductively explained as sexual or economic or legal or political. These separate discourses constitute a chain of metonymies, whose links are forged by the transferences and displacements occasioned by the extravagance, the surplus, the undecidability that constitute the Uncle's property and propriety. Felman characterizes the shared will to mastery of Edmund Wilson and the Governess as their mutual denial of the essential undecidability of sexuality: "In their attempt to elaborate a speech of mastery, a discourse of *totalitarian* power, what Wilson and the governess both *exclude* is nothing other than the threatening power of rhetoric itself—of sexuality as *division* and as meaning's *flight*, as contradiction and ambivalence; the very threat, in other words, of unmastery, of the impotence, and of the unavoidable castration which inhere in *language*."[29] Felman's analysis transforms the impotence and castration of the Uncle ("a gentleman, a bachelor") as well as his duplicitous and threatening power into the essential undecidability of the rhetoric of sexuality, of sexuality as rhetoric. And yet the "totalitarian power" Felman attributes to Wilson and the Governess is merely a cruder and more explicit version of the totalitarianism of the Uncle, who appropriates the essential undecidability of language and transforms it into his own proper "name." Because he identifies himself with all that exceeds the determinate meanings of culture (represented in the narrative by written "letters") and thus all that escapes consciousness, he does indeed become identified with the "unconscious," with the other that is the ultimate and elusive object of all significations. As the one who refuses to read and writes only to refuse to read, he excludes himself from the central and inevitable labor of the culture to "produce" meanings. In his extravagance, he becomes the figure of what cannot be read, in such a manner that every image of mastery in the remainder of the narrative is merely a simulacrum or fetish representing him. Interpreting the episode in which Flora fits a mast into a toy boat, Felman notes the phonic and sexual associations between "mast" and "master": "While the governess thus believes herself to be in a position of command and mastery, her *grasp* of the ship's helm (or of 'the little master' or of the screw she tightens) is in reality the grasp but of a *fetish*, but of a simulacrum of a signified, like the simula-

crum of the mast in Flora's toy boat, erected only as a filler, as a stopgap, designed to fill a hole, to close a gap."[30]

Seducing the Governess by prohibiting her any further intercourse with him, assigning her *duty* as "supreme authority," communicating with her only by means of unread letters, the Uncle preserves his paradoxical identity: the authority of castration, the power of impotence, the presence of absence. He is the subtlest of all Scheherazades, who avoids seduction by virtue of his seductive narrative, which is "itself" only when it is told by another. The relation between the Uncle's extravagant authority and the characters' and critics' respectable labors is thus one of exclusion and negation, whereby the dialectic of master and servant is effectively barred and the threat of usurpation forestalled indefinitely.

It is not necessary to interpret in detail the Governess's obedience to the Uncle's authority in the subsequent narrative. Felman's analysis of the Governess's will to meaning in sexual, familial, social, and finally linguistic terms serves as a remarkably complete commentary on this idea. I would note here only how uncanny doublings control the narrative structure of the Governess's manuscript and thus serve as ghostly simulacra of the basic contract between the Uncle and the Governess. The critical argument that insists upon the Governess's insane projection of her own repressed fears in the form of the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel often cites as evidence the Governess's systematic reenactment of each ghostly visitation. Peering through the window where Quint had appeared, sitting at her own table where Miss Jessel had appeared to be writing, the Governess dramatizes these ghostly visitations as if to give them body, to reify them. Her repetition represents her competitive struggle to substitute her own body for their ghostly presences, but this is merely a conflict among the master's servants and thus merely another instance of the uncle's transference, which by now has assumed the power of law. The war that is waged between governess and ghosts, children, Mrs. Grose is itself "ghostly," the simulated conflict between master and servant that has been disguised in the initial contract, in which the Uncle figures himself as undecidable, indeterminate, "extra-vagant," even "improper."

I shall offer only one exemplary instance of this displaced and displacing aggression, which effectively transfers the conflict between master and servant to one between servant and servant. In a discussion with Mrs. Grose in which the Governess considers the appropri-

ateness of informing the Uncle that Miles has been dismissed from school, the Governess actually blames the Uncle:

> "I'll put it before him," I went on inexorably, "that I can't undertake to work the question on behalf of a child who has been expelled—"
>
> "For we've never in the least known what!" Mrs. Grose declared.
>
> "For wickedness. For what else—when he's so clever and beautiful and perfect? Is he stupid? Is he untidy? Is he infirm? Is he ill-natured? He's exquisite—so it can be only *that;* and that would open up the whole thing. After all," I said, "it's their uncle's fault. If he left here such people—!"
>
> "He didn't really in the least know them. The fault's mine." She had turned quite pale. (*TS,* 61)

I interrupt the passage at this point only to note that the Governess charges the Uncle with the responsibility for having *left* such servants at Bly: that is, for his inaction. Even so, Mrs. Grose immediately defends him precisely on the grounds of his ignorance, assuming full responsibility herself. The effect is to turn her quite ghostly: "She had turned quite pale."

> "Then what am I to tell him?"
>
> "You needn't tell him anything. *I'll* tell him."
>
> I measured this. "Do you mean you'll write—?" Remembering that she couldn't, I caught myself up. "How do you communicate?"
>
> "I tell the bailiff. *He* writes."
>
> "And should you like him to write our story?"
>
> My question had a sarcastic force that I had not fully intended, and it made her after a moment inconsequently break down. The tears were again in her eyes. "Ah Miss, *you* write!" (*TS,* 61–62)

Mrs. Grose's defense of the uncle in terms of his ignorance and absence does not quite accord with what is said in the prologue: "He . . . had done all he could . . . parting even with his own servants to wait on them and going down himself, whenever he might" (*TS,* 5). Mrs. Grose forgets the Uncle's former relations with his servants and his earlier visits to the children at the very moment that she

assumes responsibility for the children—a "forgetfulness" that itself repeats the Uncle's prohibition. Yet, her assumption of responsibility also involves her commitment to "tell him," which would involve a violation of that taboo (properly the *Governess's* contract). Mrs. Grose's bold move to assume responsibility and authority can be realized only by writing to the Uncle—indeed, the transformation of "telling" into "writing" is a function of his absence. And writing is that task of which she is incapable, and it is an incapability often cited by critics as a sign of her lowly station in the class structure. Mrs. Grose's bid for authority immediately invokes yet another master: "I tell the bailiff. *He* writes." Whether this bailiff is the administrative official of the district in which the estate of Bly is located or, more likely, overseer or steward of the estate itself (the English term "bailiff" was commonly used in both senses in the nineteenth century), he represents a legal mediation between public and private, social and family law. The Governess's sarcastic response is thus all the more significant: "And should you like him to write our story?" In this crucial moment in the narrative, the Uncle's responsibility for the children is uttered in a form that threatens to violate his law, but it is precisely this threat that produces a series of defensive gestures that effect a movement from Mrs. Grose to the bailiff back to the Governess: "Ah Miss, *you* write." Mrs. Grose's sentence is itself ambivalent, suggesting the imperative mood (and thus Mrs. Grose's subtler authority) as well as a mere assertion, "you are capable of writing," that would mark Mrs. Grose's surrender of authority and confession of subservience to the Governess. Thus the threatened rebellion against the Uncle is defused by a displacing movement from Governess to Mrs. Grose to bailiff and back to Governess. Felman comments on this passage: "Clearly, what the letter is about is nothing other than the very story which contains it. What the letters are to tell is the telling of the story: how the narrative, precisely, tells itself *as an effect of writing*. The letters in the story are thus not simply *metonymical* to the manuscript which contains them; they are also *metaphorical* to it: they are the reflection *en abyme* of the narrative itself. To read the story is thus to undertake *a reading of the letters*, to follow the circuitous paths of their changes of address."[31] What those changes of address constitute is, as Felman makes clear, the genesis of the story itself, which she would have us believe is the "unconscious" of language. Yet that genesis must be said to be traceable to the Uncle as master, who has

made himself over according to this idea of language, so that the *mise en abyme* of the manuscript is an effect of the Uncle and his disguised power. The narrative thus speaks his name endlessly, even though that name is nothing other than the chain composed of its surrogate, fetishized, "assigned" authorities: Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, Mrs. Grose, the bailiff, Governess, Douglas, "I," audience around the fire, reader, formal critic.

The interpretive effort to master *The Turn of the Screw* is the deployment of the Uncle's power, producing merely displaced images of his repressive authority, his authority as repression and censorship. Any allegorical reading of the hidden sexual or moral drama that governs the narrative serves to hide his mastery from view, to ascribe responsibility to another agent, who is always in the Uncle's secret service. What does this say, then, about reading *The Turn of the Screw* as fundamentally concerned with uncertainty, with the *aporia* that is language: the rhetoric of sexuality and the psyche? I am in complete agreement with Felman's assertion of language's essential undecidability, of its originary indeterminacy and arbitrariness, just as much as I am in agreement with her Lacanian extension of "language" to the functioning of the psyche. My own argument regarding the "abuse" of uncertainty in *The Turn of the Screw* does not derive from some formalist desire to discover a determinate or reductive meaning for the text, even though I have "played" with such an intention as a means of demonstrating my own complicity in such an ineluctable will of interpretation. My own interpretation of the Uncle's "secret power" may be applied quite democratically to any agent of such undecidability, whose goal would remain the maintenance of a certain "extravagance" that would exempt his work from the determinations of more willful readings. Such a "position" would provide textuality (of society, of the psyche) with an "outside" free from the possession and aggression governing the power struggles of language, history, and culture. Felman ultimately equates the Uncle and Henry James as the true ghosts haunting the space of literature: "It is because James's mastery consists in knowing that mastery as such is but a *fiction,* that James's law as master, like that of the Master of *The Turn of the Screw,* is a law of flight and of *escape.* It is, however, through his escape, through his *disappearance* from the scene, that the Master in *The Turn of the Screw,* in effect, *becomes a ghost.* And indeed it could be said that James himself becomes a phantom master, a Master-Ghost *par excellence.*"[32]

The transformation of mastery into ghostliness does not subvert or undo mastery, because the text itself tells us quite explicitly that *ghosts haunt,* even as they appear to be no more than the fictive projections of disturbed dreamers. Ghosts haunt precisely because we recognize them as impossible fictions, whose power we assume must derive uncannily from ourselves. The "supreme fictionist" argument, so prevalent in the modernism of Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, William Faulkner, and other ostensible heirs of the Jamesian tradition, transforms the world into a fiction of language only to disperse the authority for such fiction making to "everyman." Such a strategy, however, merely disguises the sources of social and political power that would have us believe that their nightmares are our dreams. Our invention of their fictions has already been motivated by those who discover their immortality as a function of their displaced circulation through the psyches of their characters, readers, dreamers. The law of the Uncle remains powerful insofar as the Governess remains true to herself; the law of Henry James persists in the reassertion of his mastery, his genius, in the most triumphant interpretations of his readers. Felman's textuality "proves" that we cannot know, that we are forever "dupes" of the language that employs us: "It is with 'supreme authority' indeed that James, in deconstructing his own mastery, vests his reader. But isn't this gift of supreme authority bestowed upon the reader as upon the governess the very thing that will precisely *drive them mad*?"[33] Literary authority as much as social authority has the power to drive us mad, precisely because such authority is capable of compassing those differences and duplicities that constitute madness as external, as the other of cultural normality. Yet such a concept of madness depends upon our ability to *isolate* it analytically from the willful intentions of language and communication. It would not differ substantially from Kant's conception of esthetic intransitivity, since it would maintain itself precisely as the remainder or surplus of what cannot be made to perform "useful" work or "respectable" service of our needs and appetites. Such intransitivity would escape the determinations of society, politics, law, history, and psychology, by means of its own law of self-preservation and repetition. The law of the Uncle is the repetition of his absence as a presence, the repetition of his prohibition against transgressing the boundary separating master and servant. In the struggles for authority prompted by this censorship in the course of the narrative, each of the charac-

ters serves to preserve the Uncle from action, sustaining him as an image of intransitivity, extravagance, and surplus.

Similarly, uncertainty, indeterminacy, ambiguity, and irony cannot as "concepts" escape their destinies as laws or "centers" in the purely classical sense that Derrida has defined: "Thus it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted the very thing within a structure which, while governing the structure, escapes structurality."[34] As such, these concepts reinstate the metaphysics and politics they would escape: self and other, master and servant, legislator and citizen, unconscious and conscious, "literature" and ordinary language. Linguistic undecidability is not itself a concept or a content, in fact ceases to be "itself" the moment that it is made to serve as a concept, a center, a principle. Undecidability is merely what echoes in every act of communication, every will to determine meaning and form, the echo of the will to utterance and at the same time the supplement of interpretation. In this sense, undecidability is always implicated in the labor that is performed, always itself a product of the repression and forgetting that are the motives for additional work. Insofar as it is working to be worked, linguistic undecidability, the necessity of the supplement, is never the same and has no "name" outside those differences constituting history and society. Insofar as it is excluded, *abstracted,* from the labor of culture and history, outside of and remote from every mystified will to meaning and truth, undecidability preserves itself as sheer denial, pure negation: the *death* of Hegel's *Verneinung.* As the agent of such denial, as the abstraction or extravagance that refuses complicity in the lies of human language, undecidability merely reasserts that Nietzschean ressentiment against time and becoming that is the stammer of the nihilist, the arbitrary power of the aristocrat and mystic, the "genius" or "madness" of art.

There is no "proper" undecidability; it is always the effect or product of a certain forgetting of motives and drives that have awakened interest. The particular, determinate, and eminently *historical* circumstances governing the production of literary, social, and political uncertainties are what we wish to study. On the one hand, we might consider the "history" of interpretations prompted by *The Turn of the Screw* to argue in favor of this work's strategic and finally irreducible indeterminacy, itself the measure of its "literariness" and thus its endurance as an immortal classic. On the other hand, I would ar-

gue that the history of this work's interpretations is the history of the production of ambiguities—of conflicting readings—that point clearly to their specific social and historical determinants. The endurance of *The Turn of the Screw* is precisely this historicality, which is a timeliness forever displacing its author, forever remaking the name of "Henry James."