THE BOOK TO COME

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§ 14 The Turn of the Screw

When one reads Henry James's *Notebooks*, one is surprised to see him preparing his novels by very detailed plans, which he of course modifies when he writes the book, but which he sometimes follows faithfully.

If one compares the *Notebooks* to those in which Kafka sketched out his stories, the difference is striking: in Kafka's *Notebooks*, there is never a plan or any preliminary analysis; there are many drafts, but these drafts are the work itself—sometimes a page or a single sentence, but this sentence is involved in the profundity of the story, and if it is an experiment, it is an experiment of the story itself, a way that the unforeseeable movement of the novel's prose can alone open up. These fragments are not materials that are later used. Proust uses scissors and glue; he "pins here and there an additional leaf," the "*paperoles*" with which he puts his book together, "not with myriad details, like a cathedral, but quite simply, like a dress." For other writers, the story cannot be composed from without: it loses all strength and all reality if it does not contain within itself the forward movement by which it discovers the shape of its completion. And that does not necessarily signify, for the book, an obscure and irrational coherence: Kafka's books are, in their structure, clearer than James's, less difficult and less complex than Proust's.

"THE SUBJECT IS EVERYTHING"

The example of James is still—be it understood—not as simple as it seems. In his *Notebooks*, he accumulates anecdotes, sometimes interesting, sometimes extremely mediocre, that he collects in the salons. He must have subjects. "The subject is everything—the subject is everything," he

writes with timorous confidence. "The further I go, the more intensely I realize that it is on the solidity of the subject, the importance, the capacity of emotion of the subject, on that alone, hereafter, that I should dwell. Everything else crumbles, collapses, comes to a sudden end, turns out poorly, turns out badly—betrays you miserably." That also surprises us. What is the "subject"? A writer as refined as Borges asserts that modern novelistic literature is superior not because of the study of characters and the development of psychological variety, but when it invents fables or subjects. It is an answer to Robert Louis Stevenson, who observed sadly, against himself—around 1882—that English readers disdained the novelist's plotting, and preferred the cleverness of writers able to write a novel without a subject "or with a tiny, atrophied subject." Ortega y Gasset declares, fifty years later, that it is "very difficult, today, to invent an adventure that can interest our superior sensibility." According to Borges, our superior sensibility is more happily satisfied than it has ever been. "I think I am free from any superstition of modernism, from any illusion that yesterday differs profoundly from today or will differ from tomorrow, but I think that no other era possesses novels of a subject as admirable as *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Trial*, or *Le voyage sur la terre*; or as the novel that, in Buenos Aires, Adolfo Bioy Casares has achieved" (*Morel's Invention*). The love of truth ought to have led Borges to name in the privacy of his memoir also his own *The Circular Ruins* or *The Library of Babel.*

But what is a subject? To say that the novel is valuable because of the rigor of its plot, the attractive power of its motives—this assertion is not as reassuring for tradition as tradition would like to think; it is saying, in fact, that it is not valuable because of the truth of its characters or for its realism, psychological or physical, that it should not count on imitation, either of the world or of society or of nature, to retain interest. A story with a subject is thus a mysterious work, removed from all matter: a narrative without characters, a story in which the storyless day-to-day and eventless intimacy, those resources always at hand, stop being a resource. Moreover it is a story in which what happens is not content with occurring through the play of superficial or capricious succession, episodes that would follow episodes, as in picaresque novels; rather it forms a unified whole, rigorously ordered according to a law all the more important because it remains hidden, like the secret center of everything.

"The subject is everything—the subject is everything," this cry of James, is pathetic, and the help that Borges generously offers him is not

easily used. When Borges names *The Trial* among the modern works more admirable for their subject than any other, that makes us reflect. Is the subject of this novel of such a surprising invention? Vigny had already formulated it in a few grave lines, as had Pascal, and perhaps each one of us. The story of a man grappling with himself as with an obscure tribunal before which he cannot justify himself because he cannot find it is indeed worthy of interest, but it is scarcely a story, even less a fiction and, for Kafka, it was the given of his life: this guilt that is all the heavier because it was the shadow of his very innocence.

But is that the subject of the *Trial*, this abstract, empty theme, this dry sentence with which we summarize it? No, certainly not. What is a subject, then? Borges cites *The Turn of the Screw*, a narrative that seems to us in fact to shine, starting with an impressive and beautiful story that would become its subject. In the *Notebooks*, three years before writing the work, James happens to report the anecdote that gives him the idea for it. It is the Archbishop of Canterbury who tells it: "very vague, confused sketch, without details," that the bishop himself has from a lady who had neither gift of expression nor clarity. "The story of young children (number and age undetermined), confided to servants in an old manor house in the country, no doubt upon the death of their parents. The servants, mean and depraved, corrupt and deprave the children; the children are bad, full of evil to a sinister degree. The servants die (the story is vague about the way of it) and their apparitions return to haunt the house and the children, to whom they seem to beckon, whom they invite and solicit, from the depth of dangerous recesses—from the deep ditch of a sunk fence, etc.—so that the children may destroy themselves, lose themselves by obeying them, by placing themselves under their domination. As long as the children are kept far from them, they are not lost; but these evil presences tirelessly try to get hold of them, and to draw them to where they are." James adds this remark: "All that is obscure and imperfect—the scene, the story—but there is, inside that, the suggestion of an effect, a strange shiver of horror. The story must be told—tolerably obviously—by a spectator, an observer from outside."

Is that the subject of *The Turn of the Screw*? Everything is found in it, and above all the essential part: some children, linked by a dominating relationship with figures that haunt them, that draw them, by the memory of evil, toward that space where they must lose themselves. Everything is in it, and even the worst part: that these children are perverted, but that they are, also, innocent ("as long as the children are kept far from the

specters, they are not lost"). From this motif, James will draw one of his cruelest effects: the ambiguity of this innocence, an innocence that is the purity of evil in them, the secret of the perfection of the lie that hides this evil from the honest people close to them, but that is perhaps also the purity that evil becomes when it touches them, the incorruptible ingenuity that they contrast with true evil, that of adults; or the very enigma of these apparitions that is lent them, the uncertainty that weighs on the story and makes us wonder if it is not entirely projected on them by the hallucinating mind of their governess—who torments them with her own hauntings until death.

When Gide discovered that *The Turn of the Screw* was not a story of phantoms but probably a Freudian narrative in which it is the female narrator—the governess with her passions and her visions—who, blind to herself and terrible with her lack of awareness, ends up making the innocent children live in contact with terrifying images that, without her, they would not have suspected, he was amazed and overjoyed. (But naturally a doubt remained in him that he would have liked to see dissipate.)

Would this, then, be the subject of the story, to which the archbishop would no longer have any rights as author? But is this indeed the subject? Is it even the one that James consciously decided to treat? The editors of the *Notebooks* fasten on this anecdote to claim that the modern interpretation is not definitive, that James indeed wanted to write a ghost story, with, as postulated, the corruption of children and real apparitions. Of course, the uncanny is evoked only indirectly, and the terrifying element there is in the story, the shiver of unease that it excites, comes less from the presence of specters than from the secret disorder that results, but this is a rule for which James himself gave the formula in the preface to his ghost stories when he emphasizes "the importance of presenting the wonderful and the strange by limiting oneself almost exclusively to showing their repercussion on a sensibility and by recognizing that their principal element of interest consists in some strong impression that they produce and that is perceived with intensity."

THE CUNNING HEART OF EVERY STORY

It is, then, quite possible that James was unable to answer Gide or to confirm him in the pleasure of his discovery. It is almost certain that his answer would have been witty, evasive, and deceptive. In truth, if the Freudian interpretation were imposed as an obvious decipherment, the narrative would gain nothing from it except a momentary psychological

interest, and it would risk losing everything that makes it a narrative—fascinating, indubitable, elusive—in which truth has the slippery certainty of an image—close, like it, and like it inaccessible. Modern readers, so cunning, have all understood that the ambiguity of the story is explained not just by the abnormal sensibility of the governess but also because this governess is also the *narrator*. She is not content with seeing ghosts by which the children might be haunted; she is the one who speaks of them, drawing them into the uncertain space of the narration, into that unreal beyond where everything becomes phantom, everything becomes slippery, fugitive, present and absent, symbol of Evil under the shadow of which Graham Greene sees James writing and which is perhaps only the cunning heart of every story.

After having noted the anecdote, James added: "The story should be told—with a sufficient amount of plausibility—by a spectator, an observer from outside." One can thus say that all he lacked was the essential part, the *subject*: the female narrator who is the very nucleus of the narrative, though it is true that her essence is an alien one, a presence that tries to penetrate to the center of a story where she remains nonetheless an intruder, an excluded witness, who imposes herself by violence, who distorts the secret, invents it perhaps, perhaps discovers it, in every way forces it, destroys it, and reveals to us only its ambiguity, which hides it.

Which brings us back to saying that the subject of *The Turn of the Screw* is—simply—James's art, the way he has of always circling round a secret that, in so many of his books, some anecdote sets in operation, and that is not only a real secret—some fact, some thought or truth that can be revealed—that is not even a detour of the mind, but one that escapes all revelation, for it belongs to a region that is not that of light.[1] Of this art, James has the liveliest awareness, although he remains strangely silent in the *Notebooks* on this awareness, aside from a few exceptions, like: "I see that my leaps and shortcuts, my drawbridges and my great comprehensive loops (in one or two lively, admirable sentences) should be of an impeccable, masterly boldness."

One can, then, wonder why this art, in which everything is movement, effort of discovery and investigation, fold, refold, sinuosity, reserve, art that does not decipher but is the cipher of the indecipherable, instead of beginning from itself begins often from an extremely coarse schema, with halting items, with numbered sections; why, also, he must start with a story to tell, which exists for him even before he tells it.

To this peculiarity, there are undoubtedly many responses. And this one first of all: that the American writer belonged to a time when the novel was written not by Mallarmé but by Flaubert and Maupassant; that he is preoccupied with giving his work an important content; that moral conflicts count for a lot with him. While this is true, there is something else. Obviously, James is afraid of his art; he struggles against the "scattering" to which James's art exposes him, rejecting the need to say everything, to "say and write too much," which risks dragging him to prodigious lengths, while he admires above all the perfection of a neat form. (James always dreamed of a popular success. He also wished to find this success in the theater, the models for which he seeks in the worst French theater. It is true that, like Proust, he has a taste for scenes, for the dramatic structure of works; this contradiction maintains equilibrium in him.) There is, in the form that is unique to him, an excess, perhaps a touch of madness against which he tries to protect himself, because every artist is frightened of himself. "Ah, to be able simply to let oneself go—finally." "The result of all my reflections is that I have only to give myself free rein! That is what I have told myself all my life. . . . Yet I have never fully done that."[2]

James fears beginning: this beginning, where the work is all ignorance of itself, is the weakness of that which is without weight, without reality, without truth, and yet already necessary, of an empty, ineluctable necessity. Of this beginning, he is afraid. Before giving himself over to the force of the narrative, he must have the security of a framework, a work that clarifies and plots the subject clearly on a graph. "God save me—not however that I am inclined to it! heaven is my witness—from relaxing from my profound observance of that strong and salutary method that consists in having a structure that is solidly constructed, strongly built and articulated." Through this fear of beginning, he comes to lose himself in preliminaries that he develops more and more, with a detail and detours where his art is already insinuating itself: "Begin, begin, don't delay by talking about it and detouring around it." "I have only to bite down and to put one word after another. Bite down and line up words, the eternal recipe."

THE "DIVINE PRESSURE"

However, that does not explain everything. As the years pass and as James moves in a more deliberate way toward himself, he discovers the true significance of this preliminary work that is precisely not a work.

Endlessly, he speaks of these hours of preparation as "blessed hours," "wonderful, ineffable, secret, pathetic, tragic" instants, or even as a "sacred" time, when his pen exercises "an enchanted pressure," becomes the "deciphering" pen, the magic needle in movement, whose turns and detours give him a premonition of the innumerable paths that are not yet traced. He calls the principle of the plot "divine," "divine light illuminating the ancient holy little virtualities," "divine ancient joy of the plot that makes my arteries throb, with its little sacred, irrepressible emotions." Why this joy, this passion, this feeling of a wonderful life, which he cannot evoke without tears, to the point that his notebook, "the patient, passionate little notebook becomes . . . the essential part of my life"? It is because in these hours of confiding in himself, he is grappling with the fullness of the narrative that has not yet begun, when the still undetermined work, pure of any action and any limit, is only possible, is the "blessed" drunkenness of pure possibility, and we know how the possible—this phantasmal and unreal life of what we have not been, these figures with whom we have always had an appointment—exercised over James a dangerous attraction, sometimes almost mad, that perhaps art alone allowed him to explore and plot. "The further I go, the more I find that the only balm, the only refuge, the true solution to the powerful problem of life consists in this frequent, fertile, intimate struggle with the particular idea, the subject, the possibility, the place."

We can say, then, that if this moment of preliminary work, so wonderful in his memory, is so necessary to James, it is because it represents the moment when the work, approached, but not touched, remains the secret center around which he devotes himself, with an almost perverse pleasure, to investigations that he can stretch out even more when they let loose the narrative but do not yet commence it. Often, all the anecdotal precisions that he develops in his plans not only will disappear from the work itself, but will be found again, in it, as negative values, incidents to which allusion is made as to that which precisely has not occurred. By these means, James produces the experience, not of the narrative that he must write but of its reverse, from the other side of the work, the one that the movement of writing necessarily hides and about which he is anxious, as if he had the anxiety and curiosity—naïve, moving—about what there is behind his work, while he writes.

What can then be called the passionate paradox of the plan with James is that it represents, for him, the security of a composition determined in

advance, but also the opposite: the joys of creation, which coincide with the pure *indeterminacy* of the work, which put it to the test, but without reducing it, without depriving it of all the possibilities that it contains (and such is perhaps the essence of James's art: each instant to produce the entire work present and, even behind the constructed and limited work that he shapes, to make other forms felt, the infinite and light space of the narrative as it could have been, as it is before any beginning). Yet this pressure to which he submits the work, not to limit it but on the contrary to make it speak completely, without reserve in its nonetheless reserved secret, this firm and gentle pressure, this pressing solicitude—what does he call it? With the very name he chose as title for his ghost story: *The Turn of the Screw*. "What can my case of K. B. [a novel that he will not finish] give, once submitted to the pressure and to the *turn of the screw*?" Revealing allusion. It confirms to us that James is certainly not unaware of what the "subject" of his story is: this pressure that the governess makes the children undergo in order to tear their secret from them and that they also perhaps experience on the part of the invisible, but that is essentially the pressure of the narration itself, the wonderful and terrible movement that the deed of writing exercises on truth, torment, torture, violence that finally lead to death, in which everything seems to be revealed, in which everything, however, falls back again into the doubt and void of the shadows. "We are working in darkness—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion, our task. The rest is the madness of art."[3]