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# Designed Horror: James's Vision of Evil in *The Turn of the Screw*

DAVID S. MIALL

**H**ENRY JAMES'S tale of the supernatural has been the subject of intense critical attention ever since it was written. As all students of the story know, the presence of ghosts in it has presented a serious challenge to modern orthodoxy, but perhaps we are now less exercised by this aspect of the story. As a result, the narrative and aesthetic implications of the ghosts are not much considered. Explications of the story continue to appear with some frequency, but most of these are addressed to the status and assertions of the main narrator: for example, H. Robert Huntley's diagnosis of hysteria in the governess, Howard Faulkner's questioning of the fictionality of her narrative, or Linda S. Kauffman's argument that the governess's narrative is an extended love letter to the absent master. Two other more subtle approaches, those of Christine Brooke-Rose and Marcia M. Eaton, take for granted the ambiguity of the story (are the ghosts real or not?) and study the narrative strategies which sustain the double meaning.<sup>1</sup> What the ghosts themselves may mean, if

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<sup>1</sup>Huntley, "James' *The Turn of the Screw*: Its 'Fine Machinery,'" *American Imago*, 34 (1977), 224-37; Faulkner, "Text as Pretext in *The Turn of the Screw*," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 20 (1983), 87-94; Kauffman, "The Author of Our Woe: Virtue Recorded in *The Turn of the Screw*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 36 (1981), 176-92; Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981); Eaton, "James's Turn of the Speech-Act," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 23 (1983), 333-45.

they *were* intended to be seen as a reality and not just a hallucination of the governess, receives little attention.

Following Martha Banta's helpful discussion,<sup>2</sup> I wish to argue that James intended us to take the ghosts seriously but that this does not commit us to the reality of the supernatural. The paradox here is only an apparent one. Coleridge, no believer in supernatural phenomena, prepares us to accept the supernatural as an *aesthetic* premise in his account of the genesis of *The Lyrical Ballads*. Regarding the supernatural poems that he was to write, he says:

the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in *this* sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency.<sup>3</sup>

Coleridge's interest, then, is that of the emotions. The truth that James offers in his tale of the supernatural is also that of the emotions, for which the supernatural is a sufficient but not a necessary cause. As James observed in his other preface to tales of the supernatural, his interest was in the effect of his supernatural phenomena, in "showing almost exclusively the way they are felt, by recognising as their main interest some impression strongly made by them and intensely received."<sup>4</sup> To explain the ghosts away is to obscure the emotional truth they present and to miss the point of the tale, since *as ghosts* they embody symbolically the main concerns of James's story. What they present is the state and condition of ultimate evil, the paralysis of consciousness. The story is concerned with the progressive emotional registration of this intractable threat.

The governess, I shall suppose, sees the ghosts and records their objective presence. She then interprets what she has seen, and of course soon builds a theory about the relation of the ghosts to the children, discovering as a direct result her own role as the children's savior. In this she misleads herself; the threat is not ex-

<sup>2</sup>Henry James and the Occult: *The Great Extension* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 116–17.

<sup>3</sup>S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross, 2 vols. (1907; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1954), II, 5.

<sup>4</sup>*The Art of the Novel*, introd. Richard P. Blackmur (New York: Scribner's, 1934), p. 256; hereafter cited in my text as *AN*.

actly what she supposes. This twofold perspective on the ghosts, that of recording and interpreting, has been amply demonstrated in the structure of the story by Donald P. Costello;<sup>5</sup> it also has a good warrant in James's preface:

It was "déjà très-joli," in "The Turn of the Screw," please believe, the general proposition of our young woman's keeping crystalline her record of so many intense anomalies and obscurities—by which I don't of course mean her explanation of them, a different matter. (AN, p. 173)

Both the factual presence of the ghosts and their interpretation present problems, but to answer these by either declaring the ghosts a reality or a hallucination is to blur the force of the story; so, too, is the recourse to a so-called Freudian explanation of the governess's condition. The main point of the story, as James himself proposed in his preface, is the question of evil. Here the mode of operation of the ghosts is the key factor, together with the reading of them and their intentions that the governess makes. The threat of the ghosts is a profound one: a principal part of the story's power lies in the fact that the governess feels the threat; she registers its reality at the emotional level, but is never able in full consciousness to articulate its precise nature. The existence of this threat beyond the level both of speech and effective counteraction is the principal *raison d'être* of the story. As Susan Crowl shows, there is a certain claustal quality to the story, initiated by the sense we have of Douglas' reluctance over the tale: a prefiguring of its central evil lies in this breaking of the ice that is required to begin at all.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the story depends on a certain view of language and a type of psychology far from the (as it might be termed) vulgar Freudian approach of Edmund Wilson.<sup>7</sup> Modern critical diminution of interest in psychological matters is perhaps partly responsible for current views which circumvent the question of evil. But an evil such as that shown by James, operative and undefeated, requires the closest attention. My intent here is to examine the

<sup>5</sup>"The Structure of *The Turn of the Screw*," *Modern Language Notes*, 75 (1960), 312–21.

<sup>6</sup>"Aesthetic Allegory in 'The Turn of the Screw,'" *Novel*, 4 (1971), 110, 112.

<sup>7</sup>*The Triple Thinkers: Twelve Essays on Literary Subjects*, rev. and enl. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1948), pp. 88–95.

question of James's presentation of the main carriers of evil, the ghosts, by developing further Banta's argument about their aesthetic function in the story. I then wish to explore the nature of the evil which they present. To this enterprise, Freud turns out to be interestingly relevant, but not because a psychiatric diagnosis of a putative repression is required. Rather it is his grasp of the uncanny that offers an indispensable insight concerning the question of evil. In order to obtain a grasp on the precise nature of James's ghosts, however, it is useful to compare them with the ghosts of early psychical research, and, in particular, with a well-authenticated case of an apparition probably known to James, which exhibits some striking similarities to *The Turn of the Screw*.



Francis X. Roellinger issued a study of James's tale in relation to contemporary interest in psychical matters in 1949; other more recent studies have been made by E. A. Sheppard in her book on the story, and by Martha Banta. Roellinger and Sheppard both found interesting parallels between James's ghosts and cases of haunting reported in the literature of the Society for Psychical Research and elsewhere; there are, for instance, several cases on record of children seeing ghosts who have "come for" someone.<sup>8</sup> James's own account of how he conceived the story is based on a similar anecdote, told him by the Archbishop of Canterbury some two years before he wrote *The Turn of the Screw*. James, of course, disclaimed in his preface any close parallel with the literature of contemporary hauntings. Such "ghosts," he said, are

as little expressive, as little dramatic, above all as little continuous and conscious and responsive, as is consistent with their taking the trouble—and an immense trouble they find it, we gather—to appear at all. . . . I had to decide in fine between having my apparitions correct and having my story "good"—that is producing my impression of the dreadful, my designed horror. (AN, pp. 174–75)

<sup>8</sup>Roellinger, "Psychical Research and 'The Turn of the Screw,'" *American Literature*, 20 (1949), 401–12, rpt. in *The Turn of the Screw*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: Norton, 1966), 132–42; Sheppard, *Henry James and "The Turn of the Screw"* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press; Auckland: Auckland Univ. Press, 1974).

James's disclaimer, however, may address the passivity and inconsequentiality of the recorded ghosts rather than their narrative potential. In this respect, most of the actual cases in the literature certainly seem arbitrary and uninteresting so far as the motivations of the apparitions are concerned—nothing comparable to the case of Peter Quint, in which James has his eye on something much more significant. But as Roellinger claims,

For readers today who approach the story with preconceptions still largely derived from the familiar phantoms of Gothic fiction, it is important to realize that the ghosts of "The Turn of the Screw" are conceived to a surprising extent in terms of the cases reported to the Society.<sup>9</sup>

Sheppard's examination of the *Proceedings* of the Society led her to the same conclusion.<sup>10</sup> With respect to the apparitions' sudden and arbitrary appearance, their normal dress, their uncommunicativeness, James does indeed follow the literature of contemporary hauntings. This is relatively uninformative, however, in relation to James's purposes in *The Turn of the Screw*. A much more illuminating view is obtainable from a consideration of one particular case not noticed by Roellinger and only briefly mentioned by Sheppard.<sup>11</sup>

The Morton case was first published in 1892. It is very probable that James knew about it, either from the pages of the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*<sup>12</sup> or from his friend F.W.H. Myers, one of the founders of the Society, who investigated the case at first hand in 1886. Myers became known to both William and Henry James several years before the writing of *The Turn of the Screw*.<sup>13</sup> (Myers was later to write to James about the story and receive an evasive reply), and it seems most probable that Myers would have talked to them about the case, which he described later as "one of the most remarkable and best authenticated instances of 'haunting' on record."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup>"Psychical Research," p. 136.

<sup>10</sup>Henry James and "The Turn of the Screw," p. 157.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 206–8.

<sup>12</sup>Miss R. C. Morton, "Record of a Haunted House," *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 8 (1892), 311–32; hereafter cited in the text as *Proceedings*.

<sup>13</sup>James probably met Myers in 1878; see Sheppard, *Henry James and "The Turn of the Screw"*, p. 120.

<sup>14</sup>Frederic W. H. Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, New ed., 2 vols. (New York and London: Longmans, Green, 1954), II, 388–89.

The case concerned a family living in a large house in Pittville Circus in Cheltenham.<sup>15</sup> The daughter of the house, Miss Morton (a pseudonym), then nineteen, was the principal witness and the author of the account that appeared in the *Proceedings*. There were a number of other children in the family both younger and older, some of whom occasionally saw the ghost, including her six-year-old brother. The servants of the house also reported a light and noises associated with the visitant. The ghost frequently appeared on the first-floor corridor, descended the stairs, went into the sitting room, and took up a position behind a sofa by the window. Here she would stand, sometimes for up to half an hour, then go out along the hall and disappear by a door into the garden. The appearance of the ghost is described by Miss Morton:

The figure was that of a tall lady, dressed in black of a soft woollen material, judging from the slight sound in moving. The face was hidden in a handkerchief held in the right hand. . . . the whole impression was that of a lady in widow's weeds. . . . a general effect of blackness. (*Proceedings*, pp. 313–14)

Miss Morton, who showed much determination in her dealings with the ghost, attempted to speak to it several times, but the figure only gave a slight gasp as if about to speak, then passed on. She also eluded Miss Morton's attempts to touch her. The description of the case is full of such remarkable details, which persuade the reader of the truth of her account. A number of other witnesses are also on record who support the testimony of Miss Morton with sightings of their own.

In a number of ways the case is reminiscent of James's fictional ghosts. The comparison is important for aesthetic reasons, leading as it does to certain conclusions about what the significance of the ghosts might be in the light of James's declared purposes in writing his story. It must be said at once, however, that Miss Morton's apparition was a perfectly harmless one. It frightened some of the family and the servants, but this was incidental and had no relation to any purpose the figure might be conceived to possess (in fact, no purpose could be assigned to its manifestations).

<sup>15</sup>For a recent account of the Morton case and its subsequent history, see Andrew MacKenzie, *Hauntings and Apparitions* (London: Heinemann, 1982), ch. 3.

Perhaps the most immediately striking resemblance between the Morton case and *The Turn of the Screw* is that the principal witness is a young woman of determined character. She later trained to be a doctor. The governess, as James remarked in the Preface, “has ‘authority,’ which is a good deal to have given her” (*AN*, p. 174); so does Miss Morton, who was nineteen to twenty at the time of the haunting (James’s governess is twenty). As noted before, the governess and Miss Morton both try to pursue or outface their apparitions. Miss Morton tried to speak with and touch the figure in black, but to no avail. In order to test its immateriality she even stretched small threads across the stairs and saw the apparition walk through them.

Miss Morton’s youngest brother, age six, clearly saw the ghost (we recall that Miles is ten; Flora is eight):

On or about December 18th, 1883, it was seen in the drawing-room by my brother and another little boy. They were playing outside on the terrace, when they saw the figure in the drawing-room close to the window, and ran in to see who it could be that was crying so bitterly. They found no one in the drawing-room. (*Proceedings*, p. 314)

In his own account the brother adds to this that “on looking up at the drawing-room we both saw a tall figure in black, holding a handkerchief to her face with her right hand, seated at the writing-table in the window, and therefore in full light” (*Proceedings*, p. 325). The governess, it will be recalled, surprised Miss Jessel, who, also—notably—dressed in black and presenting an aspect of utmost woe, was “seated at my own table in the clear noonday light.”<sup>16</sup>

One of the special circumstances of the governess’s predicament is that only she can see the ghosts, apart from (she supposes) the two children. Miss Morton reports that even when her father stood in the same room as the ghost and went up to the place where it stood, he could see nothing. Such differences in ability to see an apparition are common in the literature. It is a point to which I shall return.

<sup>16</sup>“*The Turn of the Screw*,” in Vol. 12 of *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, New York Edition (New York: Scribner’s, 1908), p. 256; hereafter page numbers are cited in the text.



The apparition was, significantly, also seen *looking in* at a window (another point in the Morton case which links it with a highly important scene in James's narrative):

On the evening of August 11th we were sitting in the drawing-room . . . my eldest sister, Mrs. K., and myself both saw the figure on the balcony outside, looking in at the window. She stood there some minutes, then walked to the end and back again, after which she seemed to disappear. (*Proceedings*, p. 317)

The strange gust of frozen air which ends the governess's interview with Miles in chapter 12 also has a close parallel in Miss Morton's account. Five servants standing on the landing heard the footsteps of the ghost walking up and down between them, and "as they passed they felt a sensation which they described as 'a cold wind,' though their candles were not blown about." In another incident Edith Morton, age eighteen, described how she was sitting alone at the piano one July evening "when suddenly I felt a cold, icy shiver, and I saw the figure bend over me, as if to turn over the pages of my song" (*Proceedings*, pp. 320, 325). This feature is similar to one of Roellinger's cases, where the witness testified to having experienced "an icy wind and a feeling of being 'watched.'"<sup>17</sup> It is, again, another feature of apparitions common in the psychical literature, as Sheppard points out.<sup>18</sup>

The governess's awareness of the sound of footsteps, which turn out to be supernatural, is also paralleled by Miss Morton's account (she is quoting the second sentence from one of her own letters):

During these two years the only *noises* I heard were those of slight pushes against my bedroom door, accompanied by footsteps; and if I looked out on hearing these sounds, I invariably saw the figure. "Her footstep is very light, you can hardly hear it, except on the linoleum, and then only like a person walking softly with thin boots on." (*Proceedings*, p. 315)

Another major similarity (and this is a much more significant one, aesthetically speaking) is the inability or unwillingness of the ghosts at Bly to communicate. Miss Morton tried several times to communicate with her apparition, but to no avail:

<sup>17</sup>Roellinger, "Psychical Research," p. 140.

<sup>18</sup>Henry James and "The Turn of the Screw," p. 241, n. 216.

The first time I spoke to her was on the 29th January, 1884. [Quoting from a letter:] "I opened the drawing-room door softly and went in, standing just by it. She came in past me and walked to the sofa and stood there, so I went up to her and asked her if I could help her. She moved, and I thought she was going to speak, but she only gave a slight gasp and moved towards the door. Just by the door I spoke to her again, but she seemed as if she were quite unable to speak. She walked into the hall, then by the side door she seemed to disappear as before." (*Proceedings*, p. 314)

Finally, the key passage in *The Turn of the Screw* in which the governess's description of Quint is recognized by Mrs. Grose—one of the main pieces of evidence against the hallucination theory—also has a close parallel. The Cheltenham house had originally been occupied by a Mr. S. and second wife, who are said to have quarreled bitterly and eventually separated in 1876, when Mrs. S. left the house to live in Bristol. She died two years later, the body being returned for burial to Cheltenham at a church within a quarter of a mile of the house. The first sightings of the apparition may have begun almost at once, according to the testimony of other witnesses collected by Miss Morton. She first saw the apparition herself shortly after her family moved into the house in 1882, and the apparition seemed to be that of Mrs. S., as determined from various clues, the most persuasive of which was this:

Although none of us had ever seen the second Mrs. S., several people who *had* known her identified her from our description. On being shown a photo-album containing a number of portraits, I picked out one of her sister as being most like that of the figure, and was afterwards told that the sisters were much alike. (*Proceedings*, p. 322)

Here, then, are a remarkable set of similarities between the Morton case and James's story:

1. the ages and characters of Miss Morton and the governess as well as their attitude toward the ghosts are similar;
2. the ghosts are seen by young children, but an adult who is present is unable to see anything;
3. a tall apparition, dressed in black is involved and on one occasion is found seated at a writing table;
4. an apparition is seen looking in at a window;
5. the apparition is associated with a cold wind;

6. a sound of light footsteps is heard;
7. the uncommunicativeness of the apparitions is observed;
8. the identity of the apparition is established from a witness's description.

Given all that this list offers, itself almost a prospectus for *The Turn of the Screw*, there is yet one overwhelming difference. Compared with James's ghosts—the “hovering prowling blighting presences,” “the evoked predatory creatures” (*AN*, p. 175)—the Cheltenham apparition is quite without malevolence. Nor is the case unusual in that respect. Malevolent ghosts appear to be a fantasy of Gothic fiction and popular fear. They are notably absent from the pages of the *Proceedings*. Myers himself went to some pains to dissociate the cases he knew from the aspersion of evil. In the conclusion to the long chapter “Phantasms of the Dead” in his magnum opus, where he discussed over forty accounts of apparitions, Myers had this to say about the usual superstitious view of ghosts:

I cannot recall one single case of a proved posthumous combination of intelligence with wickedness. . . . all that world-old conception of Evil Spirits, of malevolent Powers, which has been the basis of so much of actual devil-worship and of so much more of vague supernatural fear;—all this insensibly melts from the mind as we study the evidence before us. . . . In that faintly opening world of spirit I can find nothing worse than living men; I seem to discern not an intensification but a disintegration of selfishness, malevolence, pride.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, it would seem, James took the evidential aspects of contemporary hauntings, but gave them a moral coloring peculiarly his own. The Morton case, if indeed it was known to James, supplied a wealth of vital circumstantial detail, despite James's disclaimer, which under James's hands, however, underwent a sea change to something grotesque and terrifying. What is the nature of the change? And what precise suggestions concerning that change do the details of the Morton apparition supply? The Morton case offers in one rich narrative all the most interesting details of the standard apparition in psychical literature, together with one or two less usual aspects, and in this respect it touches just those points

<sup>19</sup>*Human Personality*, II, 78.

which James's transforming genius needed. His tale is then able to suggest a level of profound fear, a universal horror, which, although anchored in the specific details of a ghost story, is at the same time independent of the question of whether the ghosts are "really" there or not.

In order to explore the nature of the evil that James creates in *The Turn of the Screw*, then, it is necessary to see what the Morton case, all ingenuously, proposed to an imagination such as James's.



Banta shows in detail how James rejected the scientific attitude to the supernatural represented by the Society for Psychical Research: it lacked the aesthetic dimension. Their version of the supernatural offered only fragments, as James said in his preface, "washed clean of all queerness" (*AN*, p. 169). The science of his brother William, of Myers and Sidgewick, in Banta's words, heaped up facts "without accompanying them by that grace-giving sense of context and continuity that grants them significance." For James, the significance of the supernatural lay in its symbolic value, in the light it could cast on human consciousness. "The Jamesian artist's datum," Banta observes, "is symbolic; it is a sign that stands for something at a transcendent remove from the facts." It is not enough merely to wonder, however; the supernatural story must be *about* something: "the revelation of 'aboutness' . . . joins the source of his art (the wondrous) and the emotional effect of his art" in creating a meaningful whole.<sup>20</sup> What meaning was James presenting, then, in *The Turn of the Screw*, that carries both wonder and emotional conviction?

Banta argues that the point of the story is given in the set of relationships within which the governess finds herself. Our understanding of the governess, according to Banta, resides mainly in her relation to the other characters, both real and supernatural: "James was more interested in portraying the governess's relationship to 'the Others' since they are in effect her own nature." The others, including the ghosts, represent aspects of herself with which she must negotiate. Her consciousness is shaped by those relation-

<sup>20</sup>*Henry James and the Occult*, pp. 43, 49, 44.

ships, and thus the story becomes peculiarly the plight of her consciousness. "James's ghosts personify the latent evil of the world . . . that finds its hiding place within the living, not an abstract, dismissable evil that vanishes when the dead return to their otherworldly dwelling place." Banta believes it is the governess's consciousness that gives the ghosts their potency; they become the symbol for something hidden in her. The ghosts are there to show us as readers what the governess is, "what she ought to be able to realize about her deepest nature, and what she refuses to admit she is."<sup>21</sup> The governess, however, stands for all of us in this; she is not a distorted reflection from which we can afterwards look away in relief that we are *not like that*. The story concerns more than a failure to control the moral will, which is Banta's main diagnosis.

The facts draw a circle around some unspecified symbolic meaning, but in this the face at the window, the woman in black, and the other "facts," such as are seen in the Morton case—all carry a depth of suggestion beyond any *Proceedings* case history. But it was James's declared intention to leave the evil unspecific, and it must be accepted that he has been wholly successful. Those attempts in the critical literature of this story to find the governess guilty of murder, some suppressed sexual pathology, or whatever, fail to convince precisely because they locate in some limited and, eventually, uninteresting sin an evil that was deliberately left mysterious. James's preface is quite clear on this point:

Portentous evil—how was I to save that, as an intention on the part of my demon-spirits, from the drop, the comparative vulgarity, inevitably attending, throughout the whole range of possible brief illustration, the offered example, the imputed vice, the cited act, the limited deplorable presentable instance? (AN, p. 175)

The vulgarity of a named transgression, whether that of the governess, Peter Quint, or Miss Jessel, is just what the story is not concerned with. The evil, though mysterious, is not beyond specification, but the evil is that of a *state*, not any given *act*. The Morton case, because it carries an implicit aesthetic dimension, is of con-

<sup>21</sup>Henry James and the Occult, pp. 122, 126, 130.

siderable use in exploring the ramifications of evil in James's story and in underlining the major differences between reported apparitions and the meaning of *The Turn of the Screw*.

Take the fact that Miss Morton could plainly see the ghost while her father could not. In *The Turn of the Screw* the major crisis of the story before the final disaster turns on the same situation. But here it involves the overthrow of the governess as a figure of "authority" with control both over Flora and over Mrs. Grose's understanding of events:

With this hard blow of the proof that her eyes were hopelessly sealed I felt my own situation horribly crumble, I felt—I *saw*—my livid predecessor press, from her position, on my defeat, and I took the measure, more than all, of what I should have from this instant to deal with in the astounding little attitude of Flora. (p. 280)

That "more than all" shows the deceptive priorities of the governess's consciousness, since Flora is shown to be quite beyond her reach or control. Since she has never really been in control of the children, the weight of the significance of this particular incident falls on the situation of the governess, on her "defeat" by Miss Jessel. In this respect the incident is only the latest in a series in which the governess is shown to read a situation correctly but to misread its significance for herself. The principal significance here, as throughout the story, is her increasing isolation.

Being able to see the ghosts gives the governess a special insight into the nature of affairs at Bly, which is denied the duller-witted Mrs. Grose. But such privilege sets her apart; it also fails to give her more than half the wisdom needed to cope with what she learns. The danger to herself, amidst the moral enterprise of protecting the children, goes unacknowledged except at one or two rare moments. Even when she does adopt a perspective on her own role, however, it is far wide of the real danger. During Miles's moments of half-confession before the final catastrophe the consciousness of the governess is filled with the victory of bringing Miles to confess, and little attention is paid to the threatening undercurrent of the situation: "I was infatuated—I was blind with victory, though even then the very effect that was to have brought him so much nearer was already that of added separation" (p. 306). The implications

of this for Miles are obvious, but for the governess much less clearly observed by her. The situation, she suddenly thinks, may in some profound sense be wrongly conceived by her—"if he *were* innocent what then on earth was I?" (pp. 306, 307). But the question only "paralyses" her momentarily before she resumes the inquiry with Miles.

Here the difficulty of her case approaches its tragic and unanticipated climax. Most cases, like the Morton apparition, yield no such point to them; the closest enquiry must remain inconclusive, faced with the given, arbitrary facts. Miss Morton's repeated challenge to the apparition of her house to state its business, to declare if it needed help, elicited no response. The isolation of the figure, if it consisted in a sentient being at all, is complete; either it resists or cannot comprehend attempts to communicate, or its own tentative movement, leaning over the piano as if to turn the page, is thwarted by an understandable human fear. It is as the symbol of a given predicament, the imprisonment of consciousness, that the ghost, such as that which haunted Miss Morton, is eloquent: it possesses this quality whether or not the ghost is "really" there. So with James's story. Under certain circumstances the reality or otherwise of the ghosts would be intensely important; but the implication of this story is the effect on the governess's consciousness of the ghosts' threat. What the encounters with the ghosts and her limited comprehension of them increasingly press on our attention is the unnoticed evil inhering in her situation.

Having endowed his ghosts with intentions—at least in the eyes of the governess—James can then imbue the details of the ghosts' appearances and behavior with much unspecified felt significance. The most obvious aspect of this is that the ghosts represent an attack on the moral center of the governess's character, a trial of her "authority." Power exercised rightly is a dynamic, progressive thing, and it must be assumed that this is what the governess would have shown under normal circumstances. The tragedy (for this is what James called it in his preface) is that the power of the governess is turned back on itself, nullifying its own sources and reducing her unwittingly to an agent of the children's destruction. Her strength is challenged in specific ways by the ghosts, all of which leads to a general moral evil: that evil, it can be inferred from the presentation of the ghosts, is a kind of paralysis or stasis. The ghosts,

already in that predicament, now invade the governess's moral sphere and infect her with their own condition. In a sense, the children are their disposable agents: from the readers' point of view the ghosts' real victim is the governess herself. It is the state of her very existence which is brought into question by her response to the events, not any forbidden act or item of knowledge. Again, James offers a hint to this effect in the preface when he observes of previous fictions about evil that "one had seen . . . some grand form of wrong-doing, or better still of wrong-being, imputed" (*AN*, p. 176). The ghosts of *The Turn of the Screw*, then, precipitate the governess into a state of wrong-being. They do so by making her a trespasser, by isolating her, and by making themselves designedly the object of the governess's cause. For this latter purpose the fine moral sensitivity of the governess, of course, offers the perfect medium. Susan Crowl observed of the governess that "those minds capable of greatest original force and vision are often those capable of greatest self-delusion."<sup>22</sup> This much overstates the position, but it suggests that given the intelligence of the governess, her development of a forceful view about the ghosts prevents her from putting other equally immediate questions about them.

Another feature of the Morton case, as it is described to us, is the simultaneous alienation yet at-homeness of the apparition. As (presumably) a previous inhabitant of the house, Mrs. S. in her new manifestation now moves from corridor to living room, standing as if in contemplation by the sofa for lengthy periods, or moves out towards the garden, just as she might have done when at home. At the same time, she cannot or will not talk; to some percipients she carries with her an unnatural swirl of icy wind to which no candle responds; and she hides her face perpetually behind a handkerchief as if possessed by some unknown grief. Again, like Miss Jessel, she is seen sitting at a writing desk, suggesting possession and a secure familiarity with the furnishings of her home, yet in a position which, to the boys outside, makes her look as if she is crying bitterly. It is the Mortons who are "at home," however, and the apparition which is out of place; after a spate of sightings, in fact, the apparition begins to fade, and over the three years up to 1889 it gradually disappeared altogether. James reverses this pro-

<sup>22</sup>"Aesthetic Allegory in 'The Turn of the Screw,'" pp. 108–9.



cess. It is the ghosts who are definitively "at home," while the governess is increasingly forced into alienation.

The governess's position as a trespasser is signaled even at her first encounter with a ghost. It is, she reasons afterwards, probable that an intruder has found his way into the house to survey her from the tower. But the rhetoric of the passage makes it seem just as probable that she is the real intruder. As she comes into view of the house she is "arrested" by the sight. She is the one who is put out by the confrontation, while he stands up there in possession of the moment, as if he *were* the owner of the house whom she first briefly supposes him to be, with "a touch of the strange freedom . . . in the sign of familiarity of his wearing no hat" (p. 177). Most importantly, Quint stands *on top* of the house, showing mutely but forcibly his command over what has been and is yet to happen in the territory below. This is the meaning of his elevation—it is a kind of advance sign of his moral superiority.

Outfacing Quint, then, becomes a chief part of the governess's crusade, fatally so at the end, it seems. The struggle is not so much about the souls of the children but about territorial position. When she next sees Quint looking in at the window, her immediate impulse is to hurry around to the terrace to confront him (he isn't there). When she meets him halfway up the stairs at night, she outfaces him until he turns to go down again. It seems absurd to say that this is what Quint "wants," but from a certain point of view the governess's response is exactly what Quint, were he able to have such a thing as a motive, could wish for: it fixes the governess, puts her at a given impasse in relation to each event. If she cannot outface each visitation, she and the children are lost. The screw that is turned ever tighter is that of the governess's own moral intransigence; she becomes as implacable as the things she thinks she faces.

Looking in at the window can then be read as a symbol of the governess's imprisonment: Quint is gazing through an aperture at his captive, although appearing to seek something else. Similarly, Miles's predicament near the end (his case now closely parallels that of the governess) is suggested by the prison imagery of the description of the window before which he is standing: "The frames and squares of the great window were a kind of image, for him, of a kind of failure. I felt that I saw him, in any case, shut in or

shut out" (p. 299). Finally, the recurrence of Quint's face in the window in the closing scene intensifies the effect and makes it more explicit: "Peter Quint had come into view like a sentinel before a prison" (p. 303). This induced stasis of the governess's position is underlined by other associations of Quint's visitations. There is a paradoxical double sense of both death and familiarity, which intensifies her sense of isolation. At Quint's first appearance on the tower the place becomes "a solitude." Within this, she says, "It was as if, while I took in, what I did take in, all the rest of the scene had been stricken with death" (p. 176). At the second sighting through the window, she remarks that "it was as if I had been looking at him for years and had known him always" (p. 184). The evasion in James's account of both occasions is subtle: "while I took in, what I did take in" makes a plausible reading until it is noticed that *what* is left indefinite. "Take in" here implies both a deception and, perhaps, some kind of infection or blight—both fit the governess's case. Thus even at the second occasion the governess's sense of familiarity allows her afterwards to read the shrubbery with certainty for Quint's presence: as she surveys the garden from the terrace all is "empty with a great emptiness. There were shrubberies and big trees, but I remember the clear assurance I felt that none of them concealed him. He was there or not there: not there if I didn't see him" (p. 185). Already it is as if she is in a symbiotic relationship to Quint, her familiarity with him a sixth sense for his presence.

Another major feature of the Morton case, the uncommunicativeness of the figure in black, becomes another profound point reinforcing the governess's isolation. The ghosts at Bly are impressive partly because they do not speak. The nature of the communication that passes between them and the governess (or infection, perhaps) is nonverbal, but nonetheless persuasively there for being unspecified: "He appeared thus again with I won't say greater distinctness, for that was impossible, but with a nearness that represented a forward stride in our intercourse and made me, as I met him, catch my breath and turn cold" (p. 184). Again, as she encounters Miss Jessel at the writing table, feeling that she, the governess, is the intruder, Miss Jessel "looked at me long enough to appear to say that her right to sit at my table was as good as mine to sit at hers." The governess calls out in protest, and "she

looked at me as if she heard me" (p. 257). But for the most part the ghosts glare, either at her or the children. In its admixture of the senses of death and familiarity, it is this uncanny intimacy of the relationship with the ghosts, beyond actual language, that hints at the depth at which the relationship exists for the governess. The governess, however, misreads the nature of the visitations (it is crucial to the story that she does so): the real meaning of the ghosts develops, not in the threat to the children, but unconsidered within her. It is that state of "wrong-being" which James himself noted indirectly in the Preface. A closer view of what this implies will require a more considered return to Freud as well as a review of some other rhetorical suggestions implanted within the story.



Only make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough, I said to myself—and that already is a charming job—and his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy (with the children) and horror (of their false friends) will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars. Make him *think* the evil, make him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications. (AN, p. 176)

The understanding of the evil that the story presents is, according to this well-known statement of James, sufficiently available to the reader without the specific instance. In some way, James seems to be saying, the grasp of evil is already within the reader; the purpose of the story, which appears to have been realized most successfully, is to make the reader conscious of that potential vision, to make him conscious of what may exist unconsciously. The resources of language would not seem to be directly available for this task—I have already pointed to one of the narrative's key moments of evasion—but to require the tapping of realms of symbolic expression, structures of feeling that make present the source of the evil to the reader as an operative power without the limitations contingent upon naming it. In this work the simultaneous senses of death and familiarity provide a significant clue.

Freud begins his essay "The 'Uncanny'" with this point: "the uncanny," he says, "is that class of the frightening which leads back

to what is known of old and long familiar.”<sup>23</sup> Freud’s explanation for this, as Banta notices, is that the uncanny represents a residue of the primitive childhood belief in animistic powers.<sup>24</sup> This in itself might be thought frightening enough to account for the ghosts at Bly: as Freud goes on to say, in a comment apposite to James’s story, a part of our fear of apparitions would seem to imply “the old belief that the dead man becomes the enemy of his survivor and seeks to carry him off to share his new life with him.”<sup>25</sup> This, of course, is just what the governess comes to believe of Quint and Jessel. Of Miss Jessel, for example, she describes to Mrs. Grose the “fury of intention” with which she looks at Flora at her first appearance by the lake, her intention being “to get hold of her” (p. 206). This, if it were all, would make the governess a psychological curiosity, but it explains little of the power of the story. Freud has another more interesting explanation.

The sense of the uncanny, according to Freud, is also conveyed by coincidences and repetitions. Supposing a man comes across the figure 62 several times in one day—on the door of a hotel room, the number in an address, the compartment of a railway train. He may begin to feel a superstitious fear that the number 62 has some special meaning for him: perhaps it indicates the limit of his lifespan. The source of this fear actually lies in certain primitive instinctual impulses, the “compulsion to repeat,” a compulsion which is “powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character.” To be reminded in whatever way of this “compulsion to repeat” is to sense the uncanny.<sup>26</sup> Freud’s main account of the instincts behind this aspect of the uncanny (left somewhat obscure in this essay) is set out in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Here he first elaborated his conception of the death instinct, whose aim is to restore the organism to the inanimate state from which (at the earliest time) it came. Such an impulse is discerned by Freud behind the “compulsion to repeat.” Freud’s concept of the death instinct is a for-

<sup>23</sup>“The ‘Uncanny,’” in Vol. 17 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), p. 220.

<sup>24</sup>*Henry James and the Occult*, p. 128.

<sup>25</sup>“The ‘Uncanny,’” XVII, 242.

<sup>26</sup>“The ‘Uncanny,’” XVII, 238.

bidding and little-explored aspect of his later psychoanalytic theory. As J. C. Flugel remarks, in one of the few examinations of it in the literature, "it has a certain awe-inspiring quality" whose "profound implications . . . can be dimly felt though its precise significance as yet escapes clear consciousness."<sup>27</sup> For present purposes two aspects of Freud's complex discussion will suffice.

Freud claims that the compulsion to repeat seems to be something "more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides." It is manifested, for example, in dreams which repeat a traumatic experience, which Freud concedes fall outside his earlier principle that all dreams originate in impulses of wish fulfillment. Here the impulse is described by Freud as the attempted mastery of a stimulus (that is, the original trauma) which proved too strong for the system. The dream has the purpose of "developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis."<sup>28</sup> The attempt to master a stimulus by the induction of anxiety may thus be a major purpose of the uncanny, although Freud does not say so specifically in his essay on the topic.

The anxiety that is induced in the reader of *The Turn of the Screw* arises specifically from the recurrence of the ghosts, whose appearances are attended by images of silence, death, and immobility. Such a *repetition* of an apparition is, of course, a feature of many recorded hauntings, notably the Morton case. It is this particular feature that is responsible for the ghosts' disturbing power: the image of stasis, of imprisoned consciousness, the doomlike repetition of the same routine over the apparition's territory. Where James's story departs most distinctly from the standard case is simply in its conversion of a passive to an active threat. His ghosts, like the vampires of traditional legend, are endowed with the will to draw others to follow their fate. Now the governess has not, so far as we know, been subject to a trauma before her arrival at Bly; the ghosts that she sees represent nothing directly relevant to her personal history. Their threat, if Freud is correct, cannot relate to her repression of sexuality: rather, they arouse a fear of something that is prior to the establishment of the pleasure principle itself, the

<sup>27</sup>*Studies in Feeling and Desire* (London: G. Duckworth, 1955), p. 96.

<sup>28</sup>*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in Vol. 18 of *The Standard Edition*, pp. 23, 32.

primeval urge of the instincts to “restore an earlier state of things.” Such instincts, Freud says, are “the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life.” He continues:

This view of instincts strikes us as strange because we have become used to see in them a factor impelling towards change and development, whereas we are now asked to recognize in them the precise contrary—an expression of the *conservative* nature of living substance.<sup>29</sup>

It is this inertia that seems to lie at the root of the uncanny, the death instinct (normally latent or repressed) in its untrammelled operation. Freud also notes that people’s fear of analysis may have the same source, “a dread of rousing something that, so they feel, is better left sleeping,” so that “what they are afraid of at bottom is the emergence of this compulsion with its hint of possession by some ‘daemonic’ power.”<sup>30</sup>

The appeal of the uncanny, it could be argued, thus lies in its address to the most primitive aspect of all instincts, the compulsion to repeat and, in this respect, the expression of the tendency to death. The readers’ pleasure in the uncanny represents a type of effort at mastery—it is not he, after all, but the governess who has to deal with the irruption of ghosts. In the reading of *The Turn of the Screw* we can rehearse in safety our anxiety in the face of the final enemy, whose source turns out to be rooted in our own unconscious (hence the sense of familiarity).

The evil that James leaves unspecified is the stasis of death, but this death is not the inorganic inertia of Freud’s account; it is the inertia of the prison inmate or the vampire’s life-in-death, a state of immobility or paralysis. Death itself is perhaps inconceivable, as Freud observed elsewhere,<sup>31</sup> so that another of the animistic survivals tapped by the uncanny is likely to be the buried belief in the immortality of consciousness. What the uncanny brings into question, particularly in the case of James’s tale, is the *state* in which

<sup>29</sup>*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, XVIII, 36. An explicit literary example of a traumatic neurosis and ensuing repetition compulsion is provided by Coleridge: see David S. Miall, “Guilt and Death: The Predicament of the Ancient Mariner,” *Studies in English Literature* (in press).

<sup>30</sup>*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, XVIII, 36.

<sup>31</sup>“Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” in Vol. 14 of *The Standard Edition*, p. 289.

that consciousness survives. To be suspended like the Sibyl at Cumae, or fixed in ice like the figures at the bottom of Dante's "Inferno," in a state of perpetual, unmoving consciousness—this seems to be the final, the "designed horror" which lies in wait for the reader of *The Turn of the Screw*.

Other features of the story, if this is correct, fall into place in support of this account. The poignancy of the story, the extra turn of the screw, is given by the fact that ostensibly the chief victims of the predatory ghosts are children. Not only does the possible premature knowingness of Miles and Flora disturb, but even more unsettling in such a setting is the presence of children, prime symbols of growth and development (suggested by the name "Flora"). Their lack of a personal history, apart from Miles's enigmatic behavior at school, intensifies the sense that they are dislocated from normal childhood processes. In this respect, also, they succeed in overturning the authority of the governess, becoming instead the governors of events until the final episodes of the story. The stasis threatened by Peter Quint and Miss Jessel is carefully suggested by their placement in the scenery of Bly. That Quint first appears on top of the house shows, as I have mentioned, that his authority is to supersede that of the governess. Appearing again (and at the end) framed in a window implants the notion of a blocked perspective, windows elsewhere (as, for example, in James's own image of the house of fiction) symbolizing rather some view of the future or a realizable potential. The staircase is another and more specific image related to the progressive in human potential: Quint is encountered and outstared on the staircase at Bly, a key moment of fixity that cancels the usual symbolic meaning of stairs. So with Miss Jessel: she is seen for the first and last times standing at the end of the view, blocking the farther reach of the path that has just been followed, whether on this or the other side of the lake. The setting itself, finally, turns out to represent a prison rather than the promised Garden of Eden of the governess's first sight, a *hortus conclusus* from which there is no escape (even letters somehow cannot make their exit). This rigidly enforced isolation of the governess offers the ideal conditions within which the challenge of the ghosts can develop.

This is the unspecified evil which James's story, according to his preface, was intended to arouse in the reader. It was left un-

specific because it supersedes all particular occasions or instances of it, and is the more powerful for that reason. The ghosts are the dramatic and highly effective agents of that evil, but their existence is not in the end the main point of the story; Quint and Jessel are the givens, the premises of something much more serious. The ghosts are only agents. The real source of the designed horror lies, since she is susceptible to it, in the governess; but by implication it lies much more significantly in ourselves.

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