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The Turn of the Screw

A tale that “turns”

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Abstract – This article offers a new interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw*. The reader is not asked to choose between ghosts and hallucinations, but rather to understand that James’ intention was to include a ghost story in a story of hallucinations. These two stories intertwine and transform into one another. Nonetheless, the mental dimension remains prevalent: *The Turn of the Screw* is a tale of identity or rather of the dissolution of the *principium individuationis* and the consequent establishment of a “confusive regime”. The rise in personal pronouns is the detail that points to and confirms this interpretation.

Keywords – *The Turn of the Screw*, Lacan, Heidegger, Freud, Hermeneutics.

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The Turn of the Screw. A Tale that “Turns”

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1. Foreword

Is it possible to understand a text without interpreting it? We would be inclined to answer in the affirmative although with the necessary clarifications: if by *understanding* reference is made to the possibility of accessing the bare fabric of facts, a sort of narrative synthesis that can be shared due to the rarefaction to which the text has been subjected, then why should we deny this possibility? Why should we not reserve the term *interpretation* for processes that tend to recover, at least ideally, the integrity of the work, but inevitably accentuate one perspective rather than another? No interpretation is “zero-perspective” so to speak. Literary works that appear to allow this distinction, in other words the occurrence of two moments, the sufficiently “objective” one of understanding and the undoubtedly more “subjective” one of interpretation, are manifold, although they are perhaps less numerous than is commonly thought. However, there are some texts in which the entire process of understanding seems subordinate to that of interpretation and these include *The Turn of the Screw*. In this case, any objective synthesis or paraphrase is impossible (unless it is reduced to a plot of insignificant dimensions). The enigmatic nature of literature must not be emphasised – it is the field of opinions that is infinite, not that of interpretations –, and, in any case, it should never be forgotten: refusing the obviousness of understanding, Proust said that “Les beaux livres sont écrits dans une sorte de langue étrangère” (1971). He was referring to all beautiful books – even those written in our own mother tongue.

The fact remains that some texts are particularly enigmatic: and when dealing with them it is almost impossible not to agree on the supremacy of interpretation. As far as *The Turn of the Screw* is concerned, there are at least two ways of understanding this tale that are incommensurable when compared with each other. My thesis, according to which interpretation holds sway over understanding, is further strengthened by the need to decide on the reliability of the narrator. Assessing credibility not only depends on the presence or absence of internal contradictions or lapsus, but on the theory of the psyche one intends to adopt. It hardly needs to be said, I believe, that a naïve psychology or anthropology, which literary studies continue to draw on, would not be neutral at all; neutrality is impossible. Insofar as *The Turn of the Screw* is a “mental” tale, and the problem of whether the governess is mad is unavoidable, reference must be made to a theory of the psyche (or of the mind) that is neither naïve nor outdated. However, we need to proceed delicately from a “diagnostic” point of view, without evoking any extra-textual facts.

Finally, no character exists without an identity, but what is identity? Once again, we cannot settle for a naïve concept. That identity must be investigated through its *modes* is one thesis to

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be put to the test, especially with complex texts that challenge the decidability of interpretation.¹

2. “You’ll easily judge!”

A story which is apparently undecidable begins with a decision. An enigmatic story begins with an enigmatic decision which is obscure even for the person taking it; and, owing to this obscurity, interpretation risks taking the wrong path straightaway (the turn mistaken, we could say, using one of James’ expressions). Why does Douglas decide to tell the tale? This is the first enigma of *The Turn of the Screw*, and we must not underrate its relevance just because it belongs to the frame of the story. A manuscript recounting a terrifying story will be taken from a drawer in which it has been locked for twenty years: and the contents that are too painful to be recounted – and for which all this time Douglas considered himself sole legitimate depositary – will be revealed to an audience that does not seem endowed with that perspicacity, nor even that delicacy of soul that the narrative requires: above all, it is the female members of the audience who appear to lack that subtlety, that acumen, which could be made to appear deceptively superfluous by the emotional effect. Curiously, this case of incomparable dreadfulness is presented, or perceived, first of all as a love story:

“Mrs. Griffin, however, expressed the need for a little more light. “Who was it she was in love with?”

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

“The story won’t tell, “not in any literal vulgar way”.

“More’s the pity then. That’s the only way I ever understand”. (637)²

However, it is not on this point that the tale will appear reticent: does it not seem that the fact that the young governess is in love with the Master is stated almost too explicitly? (He struck her, inevitably, as gallant and splendid, 639). The story will not say: what will it not say? What will it not be able to say, in any way, and not only in any literal vulgar way? The previously mentioned enigma returns: why does Douglas break his silence that could, and perhaps should have remained definitive, in front of an inadequate audience, in other words one that is only able to understand stories with simple plots? Is it perhaps because he senses the possibility that the story will be understood by at least one of the listeners? “You’ll easily judge!” (He continued to fix me: “You’ll easily judge,” he repeated: “you will” (637).

Here the adverb easily (repeated for the second time in just a few lines) does not refer to the matter in its entirety, but only to its secrecy, to the fact that it had never been told before it was recounted to Douglas. Nonetheless, the statement that it contains seems to select a privileged addressee. Perhaps someone is able to understand, but what? What really happened at Bly. “You’ll easily judge” is the utterance that accompanies the narration of this story, right from the first time, when it meant to say: “if I went mad that summer; if I am responsible for Miles’ death”. So, can we believe that that sort of taboo in which this horrible matter was imprisoned has dissolved just through a simple association? Through a similarity regarding the protagonists? Did Douglas break his long silence simply because someone had just told a story

¹ As far as my research perspective is concerned, I am taking the liberty of referring readers to Bottirolì (2013; in particular, with regard to the problem of identity in the third chapter), and to Bottirolì (2016a and 2016b), that are more quickly accessible.

² Reference is made to Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* in *Complete Stories 1892-1898*, edited by D. Bromwich - John Hollander, The Library of America, 1996. The quotations are given with just the page number in brackets.

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in which the leading character was a boy? Did he at that point “relaunch” or rekindle the listener’s interest, so to speak, by stating that he knew of a tale in which there were two children? The hypothesis appears quite unlikely. Not that their age is unimportant; but the reason why the tale of Bly is literally disinterred from the drawer, in which it had been conserved like as if in a tomb, must be sought elsewhere. Perhaps it is necessary to reread the first lines of *The turn of the screw* carefully; but only once the entire story has been examined.

Finally, the statement “you’ll easily judge” seems to appeal directly to the readers, rather in the same way as a film when an actor turns his gaze directly towards the camera, interrupting the narrative fiction for a moment (to create an ironic interlude, or for other reasons). We must take up the challenge yet again.

3. An unavoidable question

I do not think that it is necessary to recall, unless very briefly, the two interpretative traditions that have contested James’ text: on one side, there are those who believe that it is a ghost-story, a tale in which everyday life is invaded by the supernatural, by evil and corrupting forces, represented by the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel; on the other, there is the position of those who attribute the apparition of the ghosts to the disturbed mind of the governess. However, defining this interpretation as “Freudian” is not really correct: not only is the symbolic-sexual decipherment of Flora’s game inexorably outdated, but so too is the clinical hypothesis formulated by Edmund Wilson: “My theory is that the governess who tells the story constitutes a case of neurosis of sexual repression and that the ghosts are not real ghosts but her hallucinations” (1934). As is well known, Freud formulated his clinical theory mainly as a theory of neurosis, without clarifying adequately its differences from psychosis and perversion. Taking up this differential approach, from the nineteen fifties onwards, Lacan emphasised the different mechanisms generating clinical structures that are not comparable: in particular, while neurosis is characterised by repression (*Verdrängung*) and by the return of the repressed, psychosis stems from foreclosure (from the *Verwerfung*, a term already used by Freud in the clinical case of President Schreber); for Lacan, it consists of the rejection of a fundamental signifier, the Name-of-the-Father. Readers of *The Seminar, Book III* are led to believe that hallucinations belong to the realm of psychoses. This, then, is the first clinical hypothesis: no neuroses, no return of the repressed, but rather a gap in the Symbolic, the absence of the Name-of-the-Father (Lacan 1993). In *The Turn of the Screw*, such an absence does not seem to be caused by a refusal: but the absence or lack is undeniable. The Master has retired to far-off places, has made himself inaccessible. However, we could follow a second, perhaps more cautious clinical hypothesis and attribute a dissociative disorder to the governess.

I have not wanted to shy away from questions of a diagnostic nature, given that one must not limit oneself to a naïve psychology and avoid now outdated theoretical references: according to the perspective that I have taken from Lacan, attributing the origin of the ghosts to the governess’s repressed sexuality seems to be completely untenable. However, my interpretation should not to be judged on clinical grounds, but rather as an attempt to recover the integrity of the text.

Let us now complete the reconstruction of the debate. Having clarified it, what makes the interpretation that we can continue to call “psychoanalytical” (or clinical) plausible? Without a doubt, the fact that it is only the governess who sees the ghosts. In her completely honest account, she does not attempt to hide the contradiction that not only comes from Flora, from little, diabolical Flora, but also from Mrs. Grose when she sees or believes she sees Miss Jessel on the shores of the lake: “What a dreadful turn, to be sure, Miss! Where on earth do you see anything?” (720). In the denial of the housekeeper the governess finds an indirect confirmation: “her eyes were hopelessly sealed” (721). The result is a contradictory effect: on one side

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we are more certain than ever that the young woman is telling “the whole truth” – the truth of the facts perceived, that is, the truth that also includes the statements made; and the fact that the protagonist is authoritative at least with regard to sincerity is a conviction that forms in the reader right from the respectful, devoted introduction made by Douglas; on the other hand, it is difficult not to attribute to the governess from this moment on the status of “unreliable narrator”, at least as far as the apparitions of the ghosts are concerned. *The Turn of the Screw* would not seem to tell a ghost-story but recount a prolonged episode of madness.

One obstacle remains, that seriously hampers the “clinical” interpretation. It concerns the so-called “acknowledgement scene” that takes place between the governess and Mrs. Grose after the second apparition of Peter Quint. The description of the mysterious individual is so detailed as to enable the governess to recognise the traits of the servant, who had been found dead some time before on a winter’s day at dawn, victim of a banal accident. Peter Quint had slipped down a steep, icy slope. The causes of death had, therefore, been “the icy slope, the turn mistaken at night and in liquor” (667). The similarity between the figure of the dead servant that the governess did not even know had existed, and Quint’s second apparition seems to be completely inexplicable. Just one line of defense remains for the “hallucinationists”: that is to make a prior knowledge plausible, be it fragmentary (perhaps the governess had heard mention of him in the village) or, more subtly, postulate a convergence between the governess’ description and the housekeeper’s reaction³. In fact, the acknowledgement process does not occur with the clarity that the situation would require: the decisive factors are the initial detail (“He has no hat” 662), which in its vagueness stirs a precise point in the older woman’s memory and perhaps produces gaps of attention, and the final detail (“In somebody’s clothes”, *ibidem*), which is less vague, but not adequately selective.

These then are “the facts”: constantly interpreted by the narrative voice, which, set against the horizon of certainty, committed to sincerity, also refers to what is clearly disproven by the coherence of its narration; instead, its certainty of being the representative of Good is never refuted, nor is the fact that it holds the right point of view on the series of events. My eyes – it is as if the protagonist constantly repeats the idea – were not sealed.

If we consider once again the debate over the “proof” (for or against the existence of the ghosts), it has to be admitted that the scales tip, even though very slightly, in favour of their inexistence. Mrs. Grose does not see Miss Jessel on the shores of the lake: this fact can only be overridden by a delirious belief. On the contrary, the scene of recognition of Peter Quint is not entirely irrefutable proof; however, it has to be admitted that it can only be undermined by inferences which are not given adequate support by the text. Therefore, it seems that James wanted to offer us an undecidable text.

Is *The Turn of the Screw* a story about ghosts or hallucinations? The question remains unavoidable, so much so that, apart from intermittent subtleties, it makes the attempts to move the interest in this tale towards the metanarrative level irrelevant⁴. Without doubt, James’ work, like every complex work, is also a perspective on literature, on the problems of sense and interpretation. But the presumption that we may tackle these problems overstepping the narrative fabric in its integrity and leaving what renders us literally breathless in the background, seems no less dated than the coarsest content-based readings. This wonderful tale requires much more than an elusive intelligence. Yet it must not be reduced to the series of episodes that are constantly mentioned in the debate between apparitionists and “hallucinationists” and which could be summarised in just two or three pages.

³ Cfr. Harold G. Goddard, «A Pre-Freudian Reading of *The Turn of the Screw*», 1957, in R. Kimbrough (ed.), *The Turn of the Screw, an Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism*, Norton, New York 1966.

⁴ From Blanchot to Felman, etc.

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It is the result of this rarefaction that is undecidable: not James' text that we must begin to re-read.

4. The confusive regime reigning at Bly – The ascent of personal pronouns

Whatever the facts, everything originates from the absence of the Master. It is hard to harbour any doubts on the matter. It does not only concern the absence of a physical presence, which could have been mitigated by establishing some form of communication, but this is explicitly forbidden in the contract stipulated with the young governess. She was to deal with the education of the two children who, owing to the Master's inexperience and impatience, had been relegated to a country house; and above all (this was the main clause) "she should never trouble him – but never, never"; she was to handle every problem by herself, take everything upon herself ("take the whole thing over") and leave him alone (641). A challenging and perhaps disconcerting contract that had already discouraged other aspiring governesses, but which the young woman accepts: not *although* the difficulties of the task were perceptible ("it was a vision of serious duties and little company, of really great loneliness", 640-41), but *because* these difficulties produced in her the beginnings of an exaltation.

We will find innumerable confirmations of this. As for the contract, it belongs, like every stipulation agreed upon, to the field of language, of society: generally, a contract is binding on two parties (is this not ultimately the reason why it was accepted? As the only possible bond between those two persons); in our case, though, it has more the function of "releasing" the Master from his role. His absence produces catastrophic consequences. I think it is of interest to point out the convergence of analyses that could derive from two completely different authors, Girard and Lacan. Girard would refer to a crisis of "Degree", destined inevitably to produce a horizontal unleashing. In Lacan's view, we are dealing with a partial dissolution of the Symbolic, of the Big Other (that is of socially stable ties) and, thus, an ascent of the Imaginary, the regime of similes and doubles. The weakening of a hierarchy produces an aberrant mixing of levels, in other words *confusive effects*. Is this not what actually happens, however we wish to describe it?

Or better still – this will be the governess' awful discovery – that which *has already taken place* at Bly. In the rather obsolete language of ethics, the incursion of the confusive corresponds to the infiltration of Evil; in a language that aims to expose the logical functioning of the texts and the identity, the confusive is a regime that weakens and tends to dispel all the distinctions. All the boundaries on which our daily certainties rely, are nullified. The boundary between master and servant disappears and even that between the living and the dead.

The confusive regime has already established itself in the house at Bly and has been present for some time: this is the revelation that gradually makes its way with a shocking strength into the governess' mind. The supreme agent of the dissolution is Peter Quint: he is, to all effects, the one who replaces the Master, his "double". Let us retrace the fundamental moments of a revelation that begins the instant Mrs. Grose informs the governess that Quint used to wear the Master's clothes. We learn that:

- after the Master left, Quint was in charge alone (663);
- Quint "was much too free", with Miles, with everyone ("Too free with everyone!"), hence even with the master;
- the servant had the last say, even with the children ("he had everything to say. Yes ... even about them", 666)

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- in short, he did what he wanted ("He did what he wished", 673). The Master no longer had any authority over him;
- and one of the most ominous consequences of this ascent was the possibility for Quint to spend many hours with Miles, as though he were his tutor (677).

Everything becomes confused at Bly. Here nothing seems to be in its rightful place. The fading of the Symbolic, or better of the *separative regime*, with everything that it encompasses (social hierarchy, ethics, proprieties) leads to the ascent of the servants – not only of the evil ones, but even of those who are called to represent an absent authority. They are the ones who do battle, in a climate propitious to mental confusion, to which (and the hypothesis begins to seem plausible to us) the fragile governess will fall victim.

However, the dissolution of the separative regime is not only visible in the narrative structure. James wished to impart a perfect coherence to this process, extending it to linguistic usage: in this tale, the reader witnesses not only the ascent of the servants, but also of the personal pronouns. Normally, the pronoun replaces a noun, it has an economic function and does not create confusion. In *The Turn of the Screw* something different occurs: the pronoun can divest the proper noun of its authority and cause misunderstandings. For example:

"The last governess? She was also young and pretty – almost as young and almost as pretty, Miss, even as you".

"Ah then I hope her youth and her beauty helped her!" I recollected throwing off. "He seems to like us young and pretty!"

"Oh he *did*" Mrs Grose assented: "it was the way he liked every one!" She had no sooner spoken indeed than she caught herself up. "I mean that's *his* way – the master's".

I was struck. "But of whom did you speak first?"

She looked blank, but she coloured. "Why of *him*".

"Of the master?"

"Of who else?"

There was so obviously no one else that the next moment I had lost my impression of her having accidentally said more than she meant". (648-49)

The frequency of the italics here, as in other places, is not limited to the pronouns, but it extends to other verb forms. There is, in any case, something peculiar about the use of the personal pronouns, as their proliferation leads to double entendre, ambiguity: a confusive effect that seems to mirror the ontological regime of Bly, namely the weakening of the *principium individuationis*, the usurpation of roles, the loss of distances that undermines the social hierarchy – and the "mental hierarchy", we could say, which is normally followed. Whether we like it or not, it is the separative that confers stability, good boundaries and relaxing uniformity to our daily lives.⁵

In my opinion, this dialogue has not been acknowledged with the importance it deserves. Is it not strange that the protagonist recalls it in such a detailed way? Let us consider though the place that this minor misunderstanding has in the unfolding of the story: here the overlapping of Quint and the Master *manifests itself* for the first time. Before receiving first-hand information about Quint's arrogance and the liberties that he took with everyone, it is the ambiguity of a pronoun that reveals him to be a usurper. The governess tends to play down the matter:

⁵ The ascent of personal pronouns and the reduction in proper names can, undoubtedly, also be seen in other texts, apart from James' ghost stories, and in other authors: it should not be limited to the specific role that it assumes in *The Turn of the Screw*. I believe that, in general, the increase in the use of pronouns tends to weaken the *principium individuationis*, and, therefore, the placing of the character in the sphere of actuality. This "dematerializing" effect which, insofar as it generates uncertainties, slows down or suspends the referential function of deictic pronouns, should be analyzed in its different uses.

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she tells herself that obviously there could not be anyone else. However, in the quiet stillness of the Eden that she thought she had found herself in, the duplicity of the one who "seems to like us young and pretty" designated by the pronoun "he", starts to produce a change: it anticipates the spring of a beast (652).

The dialogue is prior to – and this does not surprise us – the first apparition (or intrusion) of Quint: although, at this point, in the terms in which we have presented him, it would actually be his second appearance. With regards to the perceptual conditions in which the apparition on the tower occurs, the tale is a little reticent; but perhaps it provides us with all the necessary information. We must imagine that the mysterious figure is too far away to be described in finer detail ("we were too far apart to call to each other", 654), and only the outlines could be distinguished; we are told that the man was not wearing a hat, and it will be this detail alone ("a touch of the strange freedom") that will be remembered, together with his fixed, stubborn and overt stare. In fact, the intrusion seems to be reduced to this: "Only standing there and looking down at me" (660).

5. An illogical contract

This scene gives a first "turn of the screw" to the story, whatever viewpoint the reader takes. For the time being, the mysterious figure is simply a stranger: his appearance is upsetting, but at the same time discrete. Nature conserves its laws; and if it were not for the spreading of a silence in which nature itself seems to hush or quieten too brusquely its usual murmuring, the change would only be atmospheric: the background is cloaked in death, the enchantment of the evening yields to a sense of desolation (653). For the apparitionists, this is a remarkable scene in which the supernatural is even more fascinating as it does not exceed muffled boundaries. Instead, this scene is traumatic and awkward for followers of the hallucination theory to explain as they are forced to move onto a psychological plain and only to the extent allowed by the text. How could such an episode occur in the mind of a character, whose interior equilibrium had not been doubted, or at least not until that moment? What clues escaped us? In fact, it seems implausible that the author failed to introduce them, even if covertly, in order to justify the hypothesis of madness, it being no less worthy of consideration than the hypothesis oriented towards the supernatural. We are still a long way from the scene of the lake which will constitute the strongest evidence of the psychological interpretation. For the moment, we can only gather clues.

One clue has just been mentioned: the ambiguity of a pronoun, like an entrance door not only for the Master, but for a second mysterious person. We can believe that the governess' mind was tormented by this hypothesis: but in order to do so the picture must be enriched.

Let us start again from the beginning, in other words from the contract. How can we deny its destabilizing effects? The governess describes them as "a succession of flights and drops, a little see-saw of the right throbs and the wrong", emphasised by the turning of the carriage into the avenue when "my fortitude revived and [...] took a flight that was probably but a proof of the point to which it had sunk" (642). The swing in mood is transferred definitively from the imagination to reality in the days to come and it is a swing that can no longer be described as *little*. The greatly feared place and duties are transformed into an atmosphere that is at first pleasant and then exhilarating. She had been entrusted with onerous responsibilities: the Master had been perceived to be an extremely demanding person. However, the work proves to be incredibly easy: the two children are adorable, they show complete openness towards the governess. Their angelic beauty completes an enchanted atmosphere.

Yet this wonderful setting presents a negative twist: if the duties are so "easy", if the responsibilities are so light, it becomes impossible to gain the Master's approval. In retrospect, the Master's relief at having received her promise ("She promised"), the gratitude that he

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shows her by shaking her hand ("thanking her for the sacrifice"), that same handshake which for the young woman took on the dimension of a reward ("she already felt rewarded", 641), are all paradoxically coloured by a strange feeling of disappointment. For there is literally *no more room* for the look of approval that the governess imagined she would have felt by performing her difficult tasks painstakingly. At least not in reality.

The ascensional movement brings with it its opposite, the dysphoria of the fall. Inversely, the delusion caused by the Eden, namely by a situation in which the overabundance of Good prevents the gaining of approval, opens the way for the possibility of heroic behaviour. The adjective does not appear hyperbolic: it belongs to the lexis of the self-exaltation with which the protagonist will describe herself (as we shall see below). But, first of all, we have to admit the possibility of an "overturned" Eden.

Evil has to penetrate where its presence will remain inexplicable, and for this very reason it appears shocking. Such penetration takes place in the subtlest of ways, through uncertainty: it will never be perceptible in a concrete form. Its metaphysical status requires one last condition: the process of corruption must have taken place prior to the present.

All these conditions are found at Bly: or perhaps we should say in the mind of the governess. The meeting with Flora has created an atmosphere of freshness, of fragrance that Miles' arrival can only confirm, if not emphasize. How can his purity be doubted? "What I then and there took him to my heart for was something divine that I have never found to the same degree in any child – his indescribable little air of knowing nothing in the world but love" (650). Nonetheless, the boy has been expelled from college, although the reasons for it are unclear. How long can his angelic beauty dispel all suspicion? In any event, the letter from the headmaster of the college announcing his expulsion causes the governess "a second sleepless night" (646). The first sleepless night was the result of her excitement at the good fortune that had brought her to the country house where everything proved to be beyond her every hope and expectation ("I slept little that night – I was too much excited", 642). How many sleepless or near sleepless nights will the governess have? There will be others, many others.

There is more than one reason for her uneasiness: the immediate sensation that Mrs. Grose was extraordinarily happy at the arrival of the new governess: "so glad ... as to be positively on her guard against showing it too much" (643); Miles' inexplicable fault; the misunderstanding over the person who wishes women to be "young and pretty". Apprehensions or fears do not persist but seem to dissolve completely. If this does not happen, if the cracks widen to such a degree as to allow the entry of a threatening otherness, it is because paradoxically they are supported by a positive force: the desire to be equal to that difficult task with which she had been entrusted by the Master – an *impossible* task because there are no obstacles to be tackled, no difficulties to be overcome! How can she be heroic where no dangers exist?

The assumption that the evil at Bly is perfectly camouflaged is destined to become the "most logical", in other words the most coherent with the governess' desire for glorification. Obviously, this hypothesis would not be strong enough to assert itself unless it were somehow borne out in reality. According to Freud, every delirium contains a part of reality without which it cannot establish itself. To triumph, delirium (as every symptom) has to be upheld by two forces which, although contrary to one another, find a possible way of compromising: on one side doubt, suspicion, fear that appearances hide something dangerous and maleficent and that outward innocence, being so bright, is the veil of corruption; on the other side, the desire for the danger to really exist because if it does not exist it cannot be fought and defeated. Danger is desired as the supreme opportunity to show one's courage. The presence of evil is yearned for because there could be no greater justification for the need for good. It is the paradox of every theodicy, as a sense-making device: only the enemy gives meaning to what would otherwise be an empty, purely "natural", asemantic and gratuitous existence, like that of a flower or a stone.

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Delirium is, in fact, a psychic disorder which tends to saturate sense: each thing, each event has a meaning and has *to have meaning*. Everything can be explained and must find an explanation. In *The Turn of the Screw* sexuality does not play a significant role (one might be tempted to say, perhaps a little controversially, bearing in mind the importance that various interpretations have given it, that it does not play any role at all)⁶: what determines the issue in all its essential aspects is *the desire for a justified life*, on that is ethically justified.

In most cases, educational relationships do not promote self-exaltation in those responsible. A governess may correct, guide and improve her charges with results that will be all the more appreciated if measured against the shortcomings and errors of the children entrusted to her. But how can one improve or perfect what already appears to have the traits of perfection? How can we fail now to perceive something derisive, almost mocking in the seriousness of the Master's requests and in the picture that he had presented? "the prospect struck her as slightly grim ... it was a vision of serious duties and little company, of really great loneliness" (640-641). What requests could emanate from that stern look, represented by the Ego Ideal, by which consciousness feels itself constantly observed?

Now the contract no longer appears uncanny, or better it is no longer the situation that the contract seemed to allude to that is disturbing, but its *illogicalness*. Why did it appear to be a request for help and not a promise of happiness? And yet this is the life that opens up in front of the governess on her arrival at Bly and after meeting the two children: perfect, congenial days, enlightened by Flora's voice ("her morning music", 645), by her bright, childlike expression ("a great childish light", 647), by Miles' beauty: an enchanted time, in which the roles even seem to be reversed, because it is the young woman who learns from her pupils (651). There is only one possibility for restoring a logical coherence to that sort of unexpected paradise: that perfection hides imperfection, or indeed corruption; that a profound crisis has already upset all the personal and social relationships; that the Master has not been equal to his role; that Miles is *an injury* to the other boys (647).

Is it just a possibility or the truth behind the contract? To be sent there where the master had less authority than a servant, where Peter Quint and Miss Jessel exerted an evil power of seduction over Miles and Flora. If this possibility gains ground quickly, if the interpretation absorbs the facts that should contradict it with a striking speed and ease, if the doubt becomes indisputable certainty, is it not perhaps because it is upheld and driven by logical coherence? In fact, if everything that has just been stated corresponds to reality, then the contract with the Master regains its value. The young governess has been entrusted with a mission.

The spirit with which she performs her mission can be perceived in the continuous self-celebration of her own qualities. To give some examples:

- "I dare say I fancied myself in short a remarkable young woman and took comfort in the faith that this would more publicly appear" (652);

- "I was in these days literally able to find a joy in the extraordinary flight of heroism the occasion demanded of me" (667);

- "It was in short a magnificent chance" (668);

- "Then, with all the marks of a deliberation that must have seemed magnificent had there been any one to admire it ..." (682).

⁶ This does not mean that a subtly erotic dimension of the tale is excluded, but it is in a much wider meaning of Eros than the sexual sphere.

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6. An upturned tale

When the facts *challenge* logic, well, so much the worse for the facts: is this not the workings of every delirium? Can we still doubt that *The Turn of the Screw* narrates the story of a disturbed mind? Yet my analysis does not conclude in this way – and in not doing so, it distances itself from the “hallucinationist” tradition. Rather it could be said that only now do we enter the heart of the analysis and begin to understand the complexity of James’ tale.

And its oscillations that do not only concern the mood swings of the governess who alternates exaltation and despondency at an increasingly exasperated rate; the reader too finds himself on a swing whose movements seem unstoppable. At the beginning, he believed he was reading a ghost-story: the “scene of recognition” assures him that it was an apparition. Instead, in the second part the hypothesis that the ghosts may be hallucinations appears with the same force as the previous conviction. Each re-reading offers an alternative that seems impossible to unravel, unless it is based on subjective preferences. Freud confessed frankly that he could not be moved by those stories which involved the “return of the surmounted”, that is the resurfacing of beliefs that belonged to remote stages of humanity and which, in our times, we encounter only during infancy in relation to supernatural events, resurrections, the return of the dead, ghosts, etc.⁷. As far as I am concerned, I must admit that my resistance is less uncompromising than that declared by Freud, but it still prevents me from experiencing the intense pleasure that others derive from ghost stories.

However, there is another reason, not of a subjective nature, that justifies my resistance to the hypothesis of the apparitions and that is the disparity between being and acting. The ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, supposing that they are actually ghosts, do not perform any action: their movements are reduced to a minimum⁸. Undoubtedly, their very apparition is so shocking that it does not require any further development. They limit themselves to watching. Is this not surprising in a relatively long story like *The Turn of the Screw*? Such a narrative immobility would be justified in a short story: what prevents this story from appearing repetitive, redundant and monotonous? The reactions provoked by the presumed ghosts: the narrative dynamism, in other words the engine behind the event – does not lie in the ghosts, but in the psyche of the governess.

Is the immobility of the ghosts not perhaps a sign of their impotence? They are unable to exert any influence unless someone confers on them a power to which they aspire in vain. Perhaps they really do dwell in that place, but as virtual presences: they cannot penetrate the place unless someone acts as a go-between. The governess’ madness does not consist so much of seeing the ghosts, but of opening the door to them. The young woman wishes to be a protective figure, a screen for Miles and Flora: “I was a screen – I was to stand before them. The more I saw the less they would” (668). But what actually happens? *The more she sees, the more the children see* – because she makes them see. She is the one who points out Miss Jessel to Flora on the shore of the lake, and Peter Quint to Miles. Thus, the governess becomes a persecutory figure: she herself becomes the persecutor that the ghosts could never become.

From a screen she becomes a go-between: this is the tale’s true “turn of the screw”.

Consequently, it can be defined as “a tale that turns”, a tale of transformation. Something takes the wrong turn (*the turn mistaken*); not only Peter Quint, but, above all, the governess. Even the interpretation takes the wrong turn: at first the children were only threatened, but

⁷ For the difference between the return of the repressed and the return of the surmounted, reference should be made to Freud, *The Uncanny*, 1919.

⁸ It has been brought to my attention that immobility is a characteristic of Victorian ghosts described and theorized by Modern Spiritualism. To my mind, James rendered them even more disturbing for the very reason that he declined to provide them with a capacity to act that belongs to “naïve” tales and has transferred their dynamism to the governess’ mind.

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then they become part of the game: “They *know* – it’s too monstrous: they know, they know!” (750). Finally, they become accomplices: their behaviour will be increasingly misunderstood. The governess will convince herself that their very nature is corrupt and false.

All this is frightening. “Nobody but me, till now, has ever heard”, Douglas had said. “It’s quite too horrible” (635). But to what event does this judgement refer? To the effects of deprivation that have never been clarified, caused to two children by two despicable individuals? To a moral contamination that persists after the death of the man and woman? Even if we were to force ourselves to adopt the ethical viewpoint that was common at the time James wrote the text, even if we were to adopt it in the strictest form, Douglas’ judgement would sound disproportionate, excessive. Another possibility is more horrible: that in the solitude of a country house two children found themselves at the mercy of a mad governess to whom they abandoned themselves with absolute trust, only for her to become a pitiless persecutor; that they perhaps perceived the young woman’s growing madness, the development of her suspicions, did they have to suffer the cruelty of her delirious inquisition (“Where, my pet, is Miss Jessel?” (719).

Yet there may be something even more frightening which sets this story apart from all others of the same genre. “It’s beyond everything (...) For general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain” (636). Not only is the destiny of the two children horrible as they are left at the mercy of a mad woman and are forced to undergo a mental torture which, according to Mrs Grose’s words, literally ages Flora (“It has made her, every inch of her, quite old”; 723); it is horrible not simply because a woman has hallucinations, but because she actually manages to convey them! This is exactly what happens at the end of a story which had begun with *the same tale*, although in reverse. Let us re-read the beginning of *The Turn of the Screw*:

The case, I may mention, was that of an apparition in just such an old house as had gathered us for the occasion – an appearance, of a dreadful kind, to a little boy sleeping in the room with his mother and waking her up in the terror of it; waking her not to dissipate his dread and soothe him to sleep again, but to encounter also herself, before she had succeeded in doing so, the same sight that had shaken him. (635)

A boy manages to convey his hallucination – an oneiric image has a hallucinatory status – to a woman: this is the story that urges Douglas to tell a similar and even more terrible one and not just because it involves two children! Instead, it is because it is about an adult who conveys her hallucination to a child. She puts it before his eyes with merciless resolve. She wants to save him and yet she kills him.

7. The lesson of the Master

The whole debate regarding *The Turn of the Screw* now appears inadequate in its rarefaction: discussions have continued to hinge on the choice between the apparition of the ghosts and the explosion of madness. And when it was impossible to decide, we thought to pay homage to the refinement of the tale by asserting its undecidability. We did not realize that the aesthetics of the undecidable, which also has some merits insofar as it refuses to conceive the significance of a text as a linear development, like water running in a pipe, poses old prejudices once again. Once more we refuse to think of the cognitive potential of literature and it is simply reduced to a game of opinions: because, if the interpretations are infinite, they return to being products of doxa.

Knowledge is not an unlimited multiplicity of perspectives (in the same way as the statement “tomorrow it will rain or it won’t rain” has no cognitive value); it is not emphasizing the possible, but the *possibility of distinguishing* between fertile and sterile perspectives. There is only

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one hypothesis that can account for the complexity of *The Turn of the Screw*, and it does not concern the choice between hallucinations and ghosts, but rather the *inclusion* of a ghost-story in a story of hallucinations. This is the Master’s lesson: two stories that do not exclude each other but intertwine and turn into one another.

Without doubt, the “hallucinationist” interpretation prevails. “You’ll easily judge” – if I have gone mad or not. The fact that the tale has been locked away for twenty years in a drawer and that Douglas’ reluctance to reveal it has lasted for such a long time, are clues as to just how painful the truth actually is of a story that the custodian fears having to disclose. A cruel story, a cruel truth, as it reveals the inadequacy of the Symbolic. It will be objected that this version is too anonymous as the Symbolic is always embodied in its representatives and it is they who all show themselves to be inadequate: the Master, absent, a quitter and usurped; the governess, too fragile to bear the weight of an “illogical” contract. This, in fact is exactly how it is, although the weaknesses of the individuals reveal the impersonal side of the story even more. The Symbolic fails in its role as protector and abandons the individuals to the glare of the others. It condemns them to the confusive.

Two children become the stake in the fight that takes place in the world of servants, between the governess and the ghosts. Is it a fight between Good and Evil? This melodramatic format that has been attributed to James (cf. Brooks), is overturned. In a melodramatic narrative, Good and Evil are clearly distinct while here they coincide in the same person. The one who fights to take possession of Miles to the point of killing him, dispossessing him – “his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped” (740), is one and the same person and her alone, the governess.

Here we see the identity of the antagonists in a divided subject (in the psychoanalytical meaning). The identification of the governess with the ghosts who are attributed with the desire to possess which manifests itself emphatically in the young woman:

- “Quint was much too free” (...) “Too free with *my* boy?” (665)
- “but it was n’t the visitor most concerned with my boy” (687)
- “What does he matter now, my own? – what will he *ever* matter? *I* have you” (740)

So, the governess does not keep her distance: no less than the other servants had. And the lack of distance is the most important characteristic of the confusive regime. Everything is confused at Bly. Paradoxically, this restores dignity to that *ghost story* that we tended to judge as a little infantile. “You devil”: you are your own devil.

8. Believe and desire

I would like to resume and clarify the methodological perspective behind my attempt to reinterpret *The Turn of the Screw*. In brief:

(a) it is difficult, for those dealing with James’ ghost stories, to completely ignore Freud’s essay on the uncanny (1919). Nevertheless, any references to it are generally made hastily and demonstrate an inadequate understanding of this essay which must, in any case, be acknowledged for its pioneering role. There is a tendency to forget, or underestimate, the distinction between the return of the repressed (*Wiederkehr des Verdrängten*) and the return of the surmounted (*Wiederkehr des Überwundenen*): these are the two sources of the uncanny⁹. The first relates to the dimension of desire, the second to the dimension of beliefs: the latter, as has already

⁹ For example, there is no trace of this distinction in the collective volume edited by Anna Despotopoulou and Kimberly C. Reed, *Henry James and the Supernatural*.

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been mentioned in para. 6, is characterized by the reappearance of beliefs that belonged to remote stages of humanity and which, in our era, we re-encounter in infancy in relation to supernatural events, resurrections, the return of the dead, ghosts and so on. On entering adulthood, those who belong to a rationalist culture like our own abandon these beliefs, although not completely and not all to the same degree. Therefore, it may happen that a bizarre event (a strange coincidence, etc.) manages to revive beliefs that modern society refers to the world of the supernatural.

It is based on this distinction that Freud justifies his “coolness” towards narratives favouring the return of the surmounted: in such tales something irremediably infantile dominates, inhibiting the aesthetic pleasure and, in any case, reducing it considerably. Therefore, the distinction between the two sources of the uncanny lends itself to considerations of an aesthetic nature: the hypothesis – which is worth discussing – is that tales of the “surmounted” cannot achieve the complexity of those that have their source in the “repressed” and, consequently, in the sphere of desire. However, it can be noted that the two possibilities may not necessarily be mutually exclusive: a writer may choose the path of desire, relying on plots belonging to the sphere of the surmounted: for example, a ghost story. Is this not perhaps the narrative construction of *The Turn of the Screw*?

(b) Another prejudice that has to be overcome concerns the reference to psychoanalysis as the “toolbox” for interpreting literary texts. Too often there is a tendency to forget the distinction between the desire to have and the desire to be (in the language of Freud: the investment of libido in objects and the identification process). And yet research into the desire to be, in other words into the types and means of identification, is a contribution to psychoanalysis (that of Lacan, as well as that of Freud) which is no less relevant than the theory of sexuality. Readers of this article will be aware that the desire to have has not been considered pertinent: mention has never been made of the Oedipus complex, castration anxiety, the Phallus and so on. The character of the governess has been analyzed from the perspective of the desire to be.

(c) The desire to be characterizes an entity, whose way of being (*Weise zu sein*) consists not in property, but in possibility. This entity, which Heidegger calls *Dasein* to disengage it from every form of anthropological thought, is thrown into the world, thrown into possibility: its identity is fundamentally in relation to otherness. «Initially “I” “am” not in the sense of my own self, but I am the others in the mode of the they (*in der Weise des Man*) [...] Initially, *Dasein* is the they and for the most part it remains so»¹⁰. Perhaps it is worth noting that this concept is radically different from every thought of alienation, according to which an undivided subject would transfer out of himself and would nostalgically desire a return “to his own home”. Conversely, for Heidegger, as for Freud and Lacan, the subject is incomplete and flexible, and only defines the modes of his identity in relation to an *alter* (Bottioli, “The possibility of not coinciding with oneself” and “Il perturbante è l’identità divisa”).

Identity itself is an object of desire – this point is often overlooked. The desire to be, is not permitted (unless illusorily) to desire a lost origin, because that origin never existed. The desire recognizes itself only *après coup*, in other words as the result of an uncertain construction without any guarantees.

¹⁰ “Initially, “I” “am” not in the sense of my own self, but I am the others in the mode of the they (*in der Weise des Man*) [...] Initially, *Dasein* is the they and for the most part it remains so” (Heidegger 125).

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(d) The desire to be forces the subject to experiment his identity in three different ways: that of models (or ideals), that of objects and that of *das Ding*.¹¹ In *Der Sandmann*, Freud’s favourite tale in the essay on the uncanny, we observe the irresistible attraction exerted by the Thing (the *Sandmann*) on the torn personality of Nathanael. In *The Turn of the Screw*, the protagonist wishes to be her own ideal¹², and receive a look of unconditional approval: the peculiarity of this matter originates in an enigmatic contract owing to which the governess loses the way. Her desire takes the wrong path. As a result, the dimension of the Symbolic weakens while the Imaginary, the regime of doubles and of similes triumphs: the regime of the servants, fighting amongst themselves.

(e) In the perspective that I have now tried to summarize, *The Turn of the Screw* belongs neither to the realm of the supernatural – nor to that of the “natural”! This alternative is traditional and stereotyped. For Heidegger, as for Lacan, human beings are not rational animals (ironically, Heidegger observed that this is a “zoological definition” of man). In any case, our identity is defined not so much by properties (natural or cultural), as by relationships: for example, the relationship between the governess and the Master. A relationship with language, that may be fatal for the identity, when the word of the other renounces every form of authority and abandons the subject in front of his or her own enigmas.

Knowledge is not an unlimited multiplicity of perspectives (in the same way as the statement “tomorrow it will rain or it won’t rain” has no cognitive value); it is not emphasizing the possible, but the *possibility of distinguishing* between fertile and sterile perspectives. There is only one hypothesis that can account for the complexity of *The Turn of the Screw*, and it does not concern the choice between hallucinations and ghosts, but rather the *inclusion* of a ghost-story in a story of hallucinations. This is the Master’s lesson: two stories that do not exclude each other but intertwine and turn into one another.

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¹¹ The model may be explained in different ways: Don Quixote wants to be Amadigi di Gaula, Emma Bovary wants to be one of the romantic heroines that she has read about in books and so on. In these works, the relationship between subject and model appears in its transparency.

¹² The *Ego-ideal*, which is a form of the Symbolic, and not the *ideal Ego* that belongs to the Imaginary (in Lacan’s conception).

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