Getting Fixed: Feminine Identity and Scopic Crisis in "The Turn of the Screw"

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Getting Fixed: 
Feminine Identity and Scopic Crisis 
in The Turn of the Screw

BETH NEWMAN

Is there no satisfaction in being under that gaze that circumscribes us, and ... which in the first instance makes us beings who are looked at, but without showing this?

Jacques Lacan

... looking was food enough to last. But to be looked at in turn was beyond appetite....

Toni Morrison

Like narrative, the "gaze" has become an object of suspicion, especially within feminist discourse. One source of this suspicion has been Laura Mulvey's ground-breaking article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which argued that narrative in classic Hollywood cinema works together with cultural and cinematic codes of looking to sustain a phallocentric cultural unconscious. Foucault's discussions of surveillance, "panopticism," and the "clinical gaze" have from another direction contributed to more general suspicions of what is being called the "gaze." In a critical climate that frequently represents the gaze as something sinister, as a sign of power and a means of control, it is easy to forget that being the object of someone's look can in some circumstances be pleasurable—even sustaining and necessary.

What makes this easy to forget, at least for those of us concerned with the position of women in society, is that women (according to Mulvey's influential argument) have been tethered to the passive side of looking. As Mulvey observes, "[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female," a "division of labour" that defines woman as spectacle, man as bearer of the look. Others have argued that in various forms of representation (novels, film) and in the discourse of psychoanalysis, women's active participation in looking is represented as castrating or otherwise threatening to male subjectivity and is therefore...

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punished. Breaking out of the gendered positions of looking might therefore seem more important than claiming that what a woman wants might be, in certain circumstances, precisely to be seen. Yet I intend here to make such a claim.

The words look and gaze that will recur in my argument require some preliminary unpacking, especially since the meaning of gaze, in anything like a technical sense, is far from settled. Partly through the influence of Sheridan's translations of le regard in both Lacan and Foucault, the word gaze is now often used casually in contemporary literary criticism to refer to almost any kind of looking. But in some feminist film theory of the 'seventies and 'eighties (which has provided much of the impetus for the term's adoption by literary critics) one is more likely to meet with the word look: Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure" article, for example, uses this word almost exclusively. More recently, Kaja Silverman has argued for a distinction between look and gaze, the former referring to an embodied seeing and the latter to an "unapprehensible" seeing that is "by no means coterminous with any individual viewer, or group of viewers." Look is thus to gaze as penis in psychoanalytic theory is to phallus; therefore "the look ... may masquerade as the gaze." She concludes that "[t]he gaze ... remains outside desire, the look stubbornly within" ("Fassbinder and Lacan: A Reconsideration of Gaze, Look and Image," Camera Obscura 19 [1989], 59). Silverman derives her distinction from Lacan's insistence on the difference between eye and gaze in Four Fundamental Concepts. In an effort to honor what seems to me a theoretically useful distinction (one difficult to sustain, however, in practice), I use look whenever an embodied mutual seeing is in question. I reserve gaze for three other aspects of visual relations: to refer to a phantasmatic psychical structure—an internalized or introjected seeing of oneself as if by some other; to denote a visual relation in which the mutual, intersubjective aspect is obscured or mediated by a function of supervision (since in Foucault's account of the Panopticon and panopticism more generally, the goal is the introjection of the observer's gaze by the objects of surveillance); and finally, to invoke the abstract structure of visual relations as an object of fantasy or (as in this essay) of discourse, i.e., the relations of looking abstracted from its embodied local specificity.

I focus here on a single text: James's The Turn of the Screw, a text whose explorations of the visual dimensions of power, pleasure, and self-definition have already been remarked. The governess's crisis, as I read it, arises in her struggle to define herself (as we all must) in terms of the gaze—the interplay of

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6 Shoshana Felman, for example, discusses the "seductive play of glances" in her famous "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 131-32. More recently, Terry Heller, The Turn of the Screw: Bewildered Vision (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989) considers the importance of the visual in The Turn of the Screw, often in ways similar to my consideration of the same issues.
her own look with that of others, both real and imagined. Part of this struggle involves a certain ambiguity about which side of the gaze the proper middle-class woman is supposed to be on. I shall argue here that nineteenth-century social codes produced two competing and mutually exclusive definitions of femininity, each placing the woman on the opposite side of the gaze. The situations of many nineteenth-century heroines—the rivalries that structure their stories, the tensions that divide them from themselves—may be understood as attempts to work out the contradictory relations of looking in which nineteenth-century middle-class women found themselves. The Turn of the Screw suggests, moreover, that the gaze is not necessarily the controlling, pernicious enactment of (patriarchal) power it is sometimes understood to be (though it may be that, too). It is better understood as one aspect of the visual dynamics in which we are all produced as subjects, and through which we achieve, however problematically, the sense of identity. Though another’s look can be experienced as threatening—as a bid for mastery or an assertion of power—that other’s look is also necessary to one’s sense of self. It can therefore be desired as much as dreaded or resented. In a culture where relations of looking and being looked at are inevitably burdened with gendered meanings, however, the stakes of that desire will be different for women than for men.

I.

Because James so assiduously withheld any decisive signs about the gender of the nameless narrator in the story’s frame, it is striking that professional readers of The Turn of the Screw have until recently assumed this narrator to be male.7 The paucity of female narrators in James’s oeuvre, together with the convention of presuming masculinity in the absence of feminine markers, are no doubt behind this assumption, but perhaps another more subtle reason is the narrator’s behavior when he is “fixed” by Douglas’s penetrating look:

He continued to fix me. “You’ll easily judge,” he repeated: you will.”
I fixed him too. “I see. She was in love.”8

[Notes]

7 I specify “professional” readers because my experience in the classroom has taught me that the assumptions made by literary critics in this regard may not be shared by the general reading public (whatever that may be). Students of mine several years ago all assumed that the unnamed narrator of James’s tale was female. My attempts as a knowing, “jaded” reader (as James puts it in the tale’s preface) to persuade them that the narrator was male, and the flirtation between “him” and Douglas therefore subtly homoerotic, were undermined by my students’ arguing persuasively that I had no reason to assume a male narrator other than the absence of feminine markers. Recently critics have made similar arguments; see e.g. Michael J. H. Taylor, “A Note on the First Narrator of The Turn of the Screw,” American Literature 53 (1982): 717-22. Linda Kaufman similarly considers in her chapter on The Turn of the Screw “the ways in which the tale is transformed if one reads as if [the unnamed narrator] were female” (Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986], 230); and Benjamin Newman, though aware of the lack of textual markers indicating the narrator’s gender, assumes that the narrator is female because “Everything fits just right if she is” (Searching for the Figure in the Carpet in the Tales of Henry James: Reflections of an Ordinary Reader [New York: Peter Lang, 1987], 92). “Everything” in the context provided by this self-styled “ordinary reader” refers to the narrator’s apparent intimacy with Douglas.

The narrator does not assume a demure "feminine" passivity but "fixes" him in return, suggesting that he (she?) regards him(her?)self as Douglas's equal in status and power. Yet when Douglas looks at the narrator it is "as if, instead of me, he saw what he spoke of"—that is, "general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain" (2). What Douglas sees as he looks at the narrator who assertively looks back—horror, pain, and an ugliness described as "uncanny"—recalls the male spectator's responses to the sight of Medusa's head in Freud's reading of it as a signifier of castration. It is tempting therefore to "read into" this flirtation between Douglas and the narrator the gendered dynamics of looking whereby a woman's returning look paralyzes ("fixes," in a sense) the male subject with horror. (And if such a look threatens castration, the second "fixed" begins to resonate for the modern reader, as it probably would not for James, with the sense of "neutered," "castrated.")

But since the text steadfastly refuses to specify the narrator's gender, such a reading would surely be an over-reading. And since criticism has had no trouble seeing both parties to the flirtation as male though it has had no textual reason to do so, this subtle flirtation should instead discourage us from invoking any simple formulae about gender and the "gaze." Though it is possible to argue that Douglas's penetrating look "feminizes" the narrator—that is, places a putatively male figure in a feminine "subject position"—the persistence with which this figure has nevertheless been presumed male reveals that serving as the object of the look is not reserved for women alone. What the flirtation in the frame of The Turn of the Screw suggests is that a man can indeed be the object of a libidinal and even mastering look—that the association of that position with the woman is conventional, but neither essential nor exclusive.9 Thus The Turn of the Screw begins by unsettling any easy equation of bearing the look with masculinity, or of being the object of the look with femininity.

I have already called attention to the word fix in this scene, which recurs later in the text to refer to the act of staring intently at another person. The syntax in which this word appears here and elsewhere, while not absolutely unidiomatic, stretches slightly the more usual English usage, and reveals some of the issues at stake for both sexes in the relations of looking. According to the OED, the word was first used in English in expressions like "to fix (one's eyes) upon an object," a usage reflected in two of the relevant modern definitions of the word: "[t]o direct steadily and unwaveringly, fasten, set (one's eyes, attention, affections, etc.) on, upon, and to (an object)," and "to direct upon [someone] a steady gaze from which he cannot escape." But most of the examples that illustrate this meaning include a word like "eyes" as the object of the verb, which in English is almost always used reflexively.10 (Thus a more idiomatic phrasing would be "He fixed his eyes upon me ... I fixed mine upon him too." ) Nevertheless, the narrator is not alone in the story in using the word

10 The salient exception is a quotation from Coward Conscience, an 1879 novel by Frederick W. Robinson. It reads: "Ursula ... 'fixed' Mrs. Coombes with a steady, searching stare." The quotation marks around "fixed" register some discomfort with this usage.
this way. The governess uses the same word and syntax in her own narrative to describe Peter Quint’s stare:

[T]his visitant, at all events ... seemed to fix me.” (17)

The governess’s habit of dropping the reflexive reference to eyes and using the verb transitively—a usage more typical of French, and thus perhaps too learned or genteel to make immediate sense to the unlettered Mrs. Grose—is unusual enough to puzzle the housekeeper when the governess describes her sighting of Miss Jessel:

“She only fixed the child.”
Mrs. Grose tried hard to see it. “Fixed her?” (32)

When the narrator in the tale’s frame silently adopts the governess’s idiom, he or she signals some kind of identification with the woman whose story he or she retells, and offers a testimony to Douglas’s powers as a storyteller. The narrator signals this identification, moreover, while recounting a moment of special insight into the governess’s actions (“I see. She was in love”). The process of identification, in which the narrator implicitly claims “I am like that” (i.e. like the governess or some aspect of her), leads to a subtle self-alteration; the narrator adjusts his or her self-presentation so that in some small way (here, through diction) it more nearly approximates that of the governess. Through this seeping of the governess’s language into the narrator’s, the text suggests that identity is always being constituted and reconstituted, continually bolstered—but also altered, remade, hence potentially undermined—by forces that lie “outside” the self. These forces include not only other people’s stories, as in this example, but also images—particularly those of other people, or even oneself, seeing oneself.

My claim is, then, that identity and its stability (or its tenuousness) are precisely at stake in the intense looks that Douglas and the narrator exchange, and more specifically in the word fix as it occurs in The Turn of the Screw. Indeed, the meaning of fix that the OED lists first is “to make firm or stable”—a meaning invoked, just a few lines after the exchange of glances between Douglas and the narrator, with reference to “the ladies whose departure had been fixed” (3, my emphasis). This use of the word fix so soon after Douglas and the narrator have “fixed” one another in searching, insistent looks, together with the syntactical anomaly that confuses Mrs. Grose, might permit us to collapse the two meanings into one. The resulting pun would suggest that “to direct ... one’s eyes, attention, affections, etc.” upon another is in some way to “fix” that other in the sense (more usual in the transitive use of the verb) of making him or her in some way firm or stable. When the narrator remarks of the governess’s employer a few paragraphs later that “[o]ne could easily fix his type” (4, my emphasis), he or she means that the employer is easily recognizable as a particular kind of character; but the turn of phrase again
invokes identity as something which, whatever shifts it may undergo, can seem susceptible of being pinned down, held fast, “fixed.”

The word “fix,” then, captures the potential dangers that the other’s look poses for one’s sense of self. Potentially erotic (as in a flirtation), that look may nevertheless threaten a paralysis that goes beyond mere firmness or stability. Yet other moments in the text suggest that certain kinds of looks can reassuringly if problematically “fix” an identity that seems dangerously fleeting and uncertain. The prototype of such scenes occurs soon after the governess’s arrival at Bly when, alone in her room, she surveys herself in the mirror—“the long glasses in which, for the first time, I could see myself from head to foot” (7). Some contemplation of self and image seems the logical response to a young governess’s situation. Her sense of her identity has just sustained some shocks: uprooted and displaced, she has been removed from the confirming and familiar images of herself reflected back to her at home. Moreover, she is required to assume an unaccustomed authority, and yet the lavish surroundings where she is to exercise it make this poor clergyman’s daughter keenly feel her own social insignificance. As such, the governess’s confrontation with her image in the mirror might be understood as reassuring at a moment when she needs reassurance, especially because it shows her an unfragmented image of herself—an image of self as whole and complete—“for the first time.”

Such reassurance, though, is surely ambivalent. In returning to the governess an unfragmented image, the full-length mirror invokes not simply a confrontation with the self, but more specifically a return to the Lacanian “mirror stage,” a time when a small baby (aged six to eighteen months) whose previous experience of the body is one of fragmentation, recognizes its image in the mirror and so gains a sense of wholeness and identity (“Mirror Stage,” 2-4). But in Lacan’s analysis of the mirror stage, this experience of wholeness is undermined by an alien and alienating quality of the mirror image, which always remains irreducibly outside of, and different from, the self: the child, after all, does not yet experience the wholeness and completeness it sees in its mirror reflection. James’s rendering of this confrontation too makes the governess’s experience of wholeness and self-possession before the mirror potentially as threatening as it is reassuring. First of all, the image of a whole, coherent self that the governess sees in the mirror would be undermined by its own multiplication in the “long glasses” (plural), which would produce multiple images and possibly, though the governess does not say so

11 The “mirror stage” has been invoked in relation to this scene in Christine Brooke-Rose, A Rhetoric of the Unroll: Studies in narrative and structure, especially of the fantastic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 161, and in Heller, Bewildered Vision, esp. 43-48). The governess’s ambivalent confrontation with the mirror may in this light be a telling convention of governess fiction. For example, when the title figure of Anne Brontë’s Agnes Grey (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988) confronts herself in the mirror on arriving at the home of the Bloomfield family, her first employers, she too experiences a sense of physical insufficiency: The terms of this experience seem more “superficial” (that is, more explicitly concerned with the accidents of her dress than with something like “self” or “being”), but may register a similar crisis of identity in response to felt social inferiority: “I was somewhat dismayed at my appearance on looking in the glass … the cold wind had swelled and reddened my hands, uncurled and entangled my hair, and dyed my face of a pale purple; add to this my collar was horribly crumpled, my frock splashed with mud, my feet clad in stout new boots, and as the trunks were not brought up, there was no remedy, so … I proceeded to clamp down the two flights of stairs … and … found my way into the room where Mrs. Bloomfield awaited me” (74).
specifically, even the dizzying *mise-en-abîme* effect of mirrors reflecting mirrors—the effect of the frame structure of the text as a whole with its multiple embeddings. The experience of wholeness, control, and authority might be undermined, moreover, by the daunting size and grandeur of the “long glasses,” which, along with the other furniture in the “large impressive room”—“the great state bed, ... the figured full draperies”—would dwarf the image they give back to her. Her image in the mirror might thus return her not only to an early anticipation of future wholeness but also to an experience of vulnerability, and so reinforce the anxieties produced by her new surroundings and in her new role: feelings of being lost, adrift, in charge of what she cannot maneuver.12

There is a related ambivalence in Lacan’s account of the mirror stage—an ambivalence associated with being “fixed.” The (French) word *fixer* occurs in Lacan’s essay “Le Stade du Miroir” in precisely the sense that James uses its English equivalent—to mean “to gaze at intently”; moreover, the vagaries of translation point to a convergence of this meaning with one of making stable. Lacan describes the infant jubilantly overcoming the constraint represented by his caretakers’ arms or the “trotte-bébé” that supports him “pour suspendre son attitude en position plus au moins penchée, et ramèner, pour le *fixer*, un aspect instantané de l’image” (i.e., “in order to suspend his attitude in a more or less forward-leaning position, and to bring back, in order to *fix* it, an instantaneous aspect of the image”—my translation of “Stade du Miroir” 94, and my emphasis). Translator Alan Sheridan is surely correct in rendering this *fixer* in English not as “to fix” but rather as “to hold ... in his gaze” (“Mirror Stage” 2). But the word “fix” does not disappear entirely from the English sentence; it has merely migrated to an earlier phrase where it translates “suspendre” and provides the sense of holding still or stabilizing. (Sheridan’s translation reads: “[the baby], *fixing* his attitude in a slightly leaning-forward position, in order to hold it in his gaze, brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image” (“Mirror Stage” 2, my emphasis). Thus the translation registers both meanings of the word *fix* exploited by James—and implicit in the French as well.

The two meanings of “fix” underscore the ambivalence of the “mirror stage” for the subject who has passed through it. On one hand, the subject gains a sense of a stable self, an identity; the image it sees and recognizes is stable, partly because of the “fixed” attitude with which the baby contemplates it: yet this same stability contrasts sharply with the subject’s experience of itself as it looks at its image. For what it has been experiencing is not only fragmentation, a sense of the body in bits and pieces, but also turmoil: the “flutter of jubilant activity” that accompanies his approach to the mirror, and the “turbulent movements that [he] feels are animating him” as he looks (1, 2). Being “fixed,” then, offers the promise of a future stability and wholeness. On the other hand, such fixing also exacts its price, marking the beginning of the constitutive self-

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alienation of the subject. Lacan writes (and Sheridan translates): “the image of
“the total form of the body ... appears to [the subject] above all in a contrasting
size (un relief de stature) that fixes it [le fige] and in a symmetry that inverts it”
(2). Thus the whole image “by these two aspects of its appearance, symbolizes
the mental permanence of the I, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating
destination” (2). The “fixed” image, that is, is a misrepresentation, showing
stability where there is turbulence, and simultaneously shrinking and inverting
the body it gives back to the subject as a picture of itself. (Hence one’s
recognition of oneself in it is always a misrecognition.) The price we pay for a
sense of a coherent self is that we must accept what is always a misconstruction;
yet such a misconstruction is nevertheless what enables identity and serves as
its foundation. More ominously, it ultimately serves also as a kind of prison—
“the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure
the subject’s entire mental development” (4). This reference to identity as a
rigid armor emphasizes the negative side of what it means to be “fixed”—
whether by one’s own look at oneself, or by that of others. It suggests forced
conformity to an image or structure supplied by something outside the self,
something to which the self is then molded.

I am not arguing that all of this “fixing” happens to the governess as she
holds her image in Bly’s “long glasses.” I want to suggest rather that The
Turn of the Screw, through its peculiar use of the word “fix” and its emphasis on
specular relations, accords with some of the claims that psychoanalysis makes
about the relationship between subjectivity, identity, and vision. In Lacan’s
text, an image of oneself “fixed” or objectified, and then internalized from
outside oneself, is both a necessary condition of identity and a trap in which one
becomes caught. The Turn of the Screw suggests that the other’s look is another
source “outside” the subject of an image of the self necessary for identity—for a
sense of who or what one is when one says I—and a threat. Moreover, this
need for the other’s look, I shall argue, is complicated by the way gender
relations in the nineteenth century were structured around the gaze, and by a
contradiction that inhabited the definition of (middle-class) femininity in the
nineteenth-century. For the narrator of James’s tale, an already complicated
need to see herself seen is further exacerbated by her social position.

II.

Studies of the governess in mid-nineteenth-century England—the period in
which James carefully places his governess—point to a confusion about how to
categorize the woman forced by economic necessity to pursue the only calling
open to “respectable” women. The social position of the Victorian governess was
inherently unstable, marked by what M. Jeanne Peterson has termed “status

13 The first insertion of French (in parentheses) is Sheridan’s; the one in square brackets is mine. Figer, the word “fixes” here
translates, means to clot, congeal, or freeze. Perhaps what all these words (including “fix”) mean, in this context, is “reify.”

14 One could say of The Turn of the Screw what Kaja Silverman says of Fassbinder’s films: “subjectivity is ... shown to depend
upon a visual agency which remains insistently outside” (“Fassbinder,” 57.)
incongruence." Governesses occupied an ambiguous divide between middle-class women, whom they usually resembled in manners and origins, and working-class women who—like the governess but unlike the middle-class wife—had to support themselves by working outside the home. Worse still, in caring for children they did for pay what the middle-class wife and mother did for free, a fact that brought the governess perilously close to the figure of the prostitute. In the middle-class Victorian imagination, then, such women belonged to no clear category or social class; we might say that it was difficult to “fix” them, though one solution was to place them alongside the working-class woman, the “fallen woman,” and the madwoman or lunatic as another of the “deviant” female figures against which the middle-class wife and mother was defined as the female norm. The Turn of the Screw invokes this perceived proximity of the fallen woman and the madwoman to the governess by suggesting that Miss Jessel, the previous governess, left Bly to have Peter Quint’s child, and by raising the possibility of the governess-narrator’s madness. It emphasizes the problem of “status incongruence” by relating Miss Jessel’s “fall” to violations of class boundaries as well as to sexual impropriety—whereas “She [Miss Jessel] was a lady,” according to Mrs. Grose, Quint was “so dreadfully below” (33). The governess-narrator’s unspecified difficulties at home, whence she receives “disturbing letters” (20), hint at the downward mobility of her own family, headed by a poor parson burdened with several daughters.

The problem of social identity compounds the more personal onslaughts to the governess’s sense of self—her youth and inexperience, her isolation at Bly, her unrequited love for her absent employer, the problems with the family from whom she is separated, and so on. Her self-contemplation in the mirror, along with the sometimes frenzied scopic activity in which she sees things not seen by other people or alternatively, imagines herself being seen, may be partially understood as responses to this crisis of identity. While there is nothing inherently gender-specific in these responses, gender enters the picture—and complicates it—in the governess’s ambivalence about being the object of a male gaze. Furthermore, gender relations produce another, more profound ambivalence about which side of the gaze she wants to be on.

This ambivalence emerges in the contrast between her pleasure in indulging in a certain fantasy, and her horrified response when she finds that “my imagination had, in a flash, turned real” (16). Describing what she calls her “own hour,” a quiet time when, Miles and Flora having been put to bed, she is alone, she recalls:

One of the thoughts that, as I don’t in the least shrink now from noting, used to be with me in these wanderings was that it would be as charming as

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16 For the argument about the proximity in the mid-century discourse of the governess to the working class woman, the lunatic and the fallen woman, see Mary Poovey, “The Governess and Jane Eyre,” Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 146-63.
a charming story suddenly to meet some one. Some one would appear there at the turn of a path and would stand before me and smile and approve. (15)

Thoroughly versed as she is with romance novels, the governess constructs here a romance of her own—one perhaps conditioned by Jane Eyre’s encounter with Rochester as she walks the grounds of Thornfield.17 Though she denies “shrinking” from what she here confesses, her elliptical pronouns betray some reluctance to confess it just as her wording suggests that she had once found the confession harder to make. She makes it no real secret, however, that the “some one” in question is her employer, the absent master; she has already recalled the pleasure she felt at such moments in imagining “that by my discretion, my quiet good sense and general high propriety, I was giving pleasure—if he ever thought of it!—to the person to whose pressure I had yielded. What I was doing was what he had earnestly hoped and directly asked of me, and that I could, after all, do it proved even a greater joy than I had expected” (15). As a daydream, the governess’s “charming story” of meeting the master on the path is subject to all the mechanisms of secondary elaboration, to the ego’s demands for coherence and a limited credibility, demands that the governess meets by making her daydream a modest one: “I didn’t ask for more than that [his smile and approval]—I only asked that he should know” (15). But the very modesty of the scenario she depicts expresses another fantasy embedded in, or supporting, the conscious one: that she is the object of the master’s look, a look imagined (masquerading, Silverman might say) as an all-seeing gaze that regards her as discreet, quietly sensible, highly proper, competent, and in control.

Significantly, the governess wants to be seen: she wants to receive the recognition of an important other as a confirmation of her identity. Her isolation in a place that offers “little company [and] really great loneliness” (6) sharpens her desire for such recognition. Sequestered in the provinces and confined there to the domestic sphere, she has only two young children and the servants, especially Mrs. Grose, from whom she can receive confirming images of herself, those necessary supports from the other of one’s internalized sense of self.18 But the children and the servants can only confirm her in her socially unstable and insignificant identity as governess. Moreover, even though Mrs. Grose does remark to the governess that she is “young and pretty” (12), her inmates at Bly necessarily deprive her of images of herself as a sexual being. Such images would be especially important to her now, when she has just fallen in love, presumably for the first time.

Seeing herself seen and approved at least in fantasy, she gains some tenuous support for her uncertain authority, her shaky identity. So long as she sustains the illusion she gains a sense of the mastery over her situation that she otherwise feels lacking: “I could take a turn into the grounds and enjoy, almost

18 Heller usefully discusses the governess’s need for approving reflections of herself not only from the inhabitants of Bly but also from Douglas, and makes this need the motivating force behind her storytelling ( Bewildered Vision, 45).
with a sense of property that amused and flattered me, the beauty and dignity of the place. It was a pleasure at these moments to feel myself tranquil and justified ...” (15). The fantasy of the approving look of the other, and specifically of a masculine other (a “master,” someone endowed with power and authority), converges with the consciously elaborated fantasy of a romance with the master to bestow a sense of “property” upon the governess. That is, being seen and approved by the master is tantamount in her fantasy to becoming the lady of the manor, almost the owner of the estate upon which she knows herself to be merely a dependent employee.

Such moments of illusory wholeness and mastery, of course, are prone to deflation. Predicated on the misplaced certainty of self-contemplation, the experience of “seeing oneself seeing oneself” denies or conceals, at least in the Lacanian account of subjectivity, one’s lack of complete self-knowledge—given that parts of the self will always remain unconscious, precisely outside of one’s knowledge. It conceals as well (or rather, at the same stroke) the desires by which one feels oneself incomplete, lacking. Predictably, what disturbs the governess’s moment of satisfied self-observation is her sudden sense of someone else on the scene watching her, whom she later identifies with Mrs. Grose’s help as the dead Peter Quint. His presence indicates a blind spot in her own seeing—she thought she was alone and unobserved—and so arrests her “with a shock much greater than any vision had allowed for” (16). It opens a chink in the closed and complete self-image she has been constructing by imagining her employer’s approval, and moreover, brings the desire motivating this fantasy closer to consciousness—catches her in the act of desiring, so to speak. The shame of a desire she cannot consciously acknowledge expresses itself in her shock and lingers in her equivocation, as she writes her story years later, between the claim that she does not “in the least shrink now from noting” her fantasy of meeting someone, and her coyness, even as she divulges that conscious fantasy, about its object.

If we understand the governess’s desire to be seen precisely as repressed, then Quint’s “bold hard stare” (18) falls into place as the return of the repressed, with all the uncanniness—that combination of strangeness and familiarity—such a return implies. “[I]t was as if I had been looking at him for years and had known him always,” she writes as she records his second appearance (20). The uncanniness of Quint’s look is emphasized by her eventual discovery that Quint is dead, that she has seen and been seen by a ghost.

Moreover, when she perceives that she is being looked at by someone she immediately recognizes is not a “gentleman,” the governess confronts the sexual component of the imagined look she has been investing with such benign omniscience. The loss of social status that the gaze undergoes when it appears in a “base menial” rather than in the fantasized master at once demystifies and re-mystifies it. That is, in Quint the master’s gaze is turned back to an embodied look, but one that (to recall Silverman’s account of these issues) nevertheless masquerades as the gaze—more precisely, as the voyeuristic, appropriating “male gaze” that has been the object of feminist critique. Associated with a “base menial,” the gaze transferred from the master is thus
subject to a kind of debasement: a reduction to the sexual of what seemed, in the
governess’s fantasy of being seen, to have the more heroic, less directly erotic
associations of being “a remarkable young woman” (15). As a prop for this
appropriating “male gaze,” Quint’s look evokes all of the unpleasure bound up
with the governess’s ambivalence towards being the object of a scopic relation.
Here we can perhaps detect a hint of the harassing, aggressive attitude
familiar in any society where men regard looking women over as their
prerogative. What strikes the governess is Quint’s “strange freedom” and undue
“familiarity” (17) as he stands “very erect” on the tower (17). His look seems
not only phallic and sexually aggressive but even somewhat sadistic in the
control over its object implied by his moving deliberately “from one of the
crenellations to the next” while never taking his eyes from the governess, who
remains “fixed” on the grounds below. Quint’s look thus not only returns to the
governess the repressed fantasy of herself as the object of the gaze and the
libidinal aspect of that fantasy, but also causes her to revise the fantasy, when
it enters consciousness, as an unpleasurable one. Put differently, Quint’s look
represents the risks to self for women of heterosexual relations in a world
ordered by a sexual hierarchy. The consciousness of being the object of a male
look can entail the feeling of being claimed as property as surely as the
governess’s fantasy of being under the master’s approving look provides her
with a “sense of property” experienced more positively as being in charge.

Given the importance of seeing and being seen in the constitution of
subjectivity, the governess’s wish to be seen—a wish powerful enough to
influence almost everything she says, does, and thinks, as manifested by the
various permutations upon this wish that govern her narrative—is not itself
gender-specific. Partly an index of her social invisibility, this wish expresses
the desire for the recognition of the other that all subjects share, as well as a
wish to see herself whole and in control. The erotic pressure of unrequited love
intensifies this desire in the governess, but it too is something that both men
and women suffer. Why, then, is the desire to be seen so problematic for the
governess, and why does she repress it? And what have the checks upon this
desire to do specifically with the situation of the middle-class woman of the
nineteenth century, at least as she is (problematically) represented by the
governess?

Freud explains that repression occurs when the satisfaction of an instinct
becomes “irreconcilable with other claims and intentions” and “would,
therefore, cause pleasure in one place and unpleasure in another” (“Repression”
147). Elsewhere he elaborates slightly those “other claims” as one’s ethical
or cultural ideals (“On Narcissism” 43). A wish to be seen would be subject to
repression if it conflicted with “other claims and intentions” such as one’s

19 Seeing and being seen function as aspects of an “instinct” (treib) Freud discusses as scopophilia (Schaulust) in Three Essays in the Theory of Sexuality. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955), vol. 7, 156-57, 169. Lacan renames this drive or instinct the “scopic drive” (Four Fundamental Concepts, 180-84). For him the object of this drive has not the body or body-parts but the gaze itself—a structure of “seeingness” or “voyeur” (82)—as its sought-for object, as that which the subject (unconsciously) imagines will
dose a hole in being. I am arguing not that the entire scopic drive is repressed in the governess, but that the wish it
produces of being seen undergoes repression.
acceptance of current cultural mores demanding self-effacement, a placing of oneself on the side of the not-seen.

The burdensome presence of such a cultural force operating upon women is articulated in the diary of an actual nineteenth-century woman James knew well, one whose “case” has even been seen as the inspiration for the governess’s story.20 Alice James recorded in her diary for 14 December 1889 the following observation, offered without pretext or comment: “The negro lad who prayed, when leading a revival, ‘Lord, make Thy servant conspicuous,‘ isn’t bad!”21 Her tacit “amen,” with its mingled admiration for and condescension towards the black preacher, wryly protests against an imposed invisibility. Despite the vast social gulf separating her from the anonymous (and possibly apocryphal) black preacher, and though she herself was by her own account “hopelessly relegated among the smug and the comfortable” (12 August 1889), Alice James evidently understood that invisibility can perpetuate powerlessness and marginality. In seconding the black man’s desire for conspicuousness, she seems to respond not only to the social and cultural forces that rendered most women’s work and achievements invisible, but also to an alignment with the unseen experienced more personally or intersubjectively (or more strictly so) as a demand for self-effacement, for an inconspicuousness willingly assumed as a part of one’s self-presentation—worn, almost, like an article of clothing.

Thus elsewhere in her diary Alice James described herself as “absorbing into the bone that the better part is to clothe oneself in neutral tints, walk by still waters and possess one’s soul in silence” (19 February 1890). Here she explicitly links the demand for inconspicuousness with the cultural imperative enjoining women to suffer and be still. The references to clothing and neutral tints make clear that the inconspicuousness she protests is no metaphor, but pertains very literally to visual presence. Such moments in the diary articulate not only a code of conduct, but also a gendered code of visual relations. This code defines woman not as the object of the gaze, as most accounts of women and the visual might lead us to expect, but rather as she who offers to disappear before it. Internalized as a set of ethical norms, such a code would conflict with a wish to be seen, and perhaps result in the repression of that wish.22

III.

In Desire and Domestic Fiction Nancy Armstrong offers extensive evidence for the existence of a code of conduct requiring feminine invisibility. Surveying eighteenth-century conduct books and some domestic novels of the eighteenth

20 See Oscar Cargill, “The Turn of the Screw and Alice James” (1963); rpt. in the Norton Critical edition of The Turn of the Screw referred to throughout this article.

21 The Diary of Alice James, ed. Leon Edel (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982).

22 In strictly Freudian terms, repression of a wish often depends upon other factors such as infantile wishes and memories of the kind we are not usually granted in literary texts. But my intention here is not to “psychoanalyze” the governess—though I must plead guilty to doing that—but rather to see the governess as a figure representing larger cultural patterns. And though a wide social gulf separates this poor parson’s daughter from the far more socially privileged Alice James, with the ascendancy of the middle classes and their values, both would be to some degree governed by the same social codes.
and first half of the nineteenth centuries, Armstrong discovers a shift in the attitude towards women that accompanied the middle class’s accession to power. She argues that the middle classes, in order to distinguish themselves from the aristocracy and claim for themselves the moral high ground, constructed their sense of what made a woman desirable by emphasizing “depths”—characteristics such as moral uprightness, thrift, and heightened sensibility or emotional intensity—rather than “surface,” such as the aristocratic manners and sartorial finery by which upper-class women functioned as signs of wealth. As a corollary, the prevailing moral economy that the conduct books and novels together helped to consolidate made it a kind of “crime” for a middle-class woman “either [to] want to be on display or simply allow [herself] to be ‘seen ‘...”23 According to Armstrong, “It is a woman’s participation in public spectacle that injures her, for as an object of display, she always loses value as a subject.” Though it is public spectacle and display that damage the woman in this account, the argument implies that the middle class woman risks losing her value if she presents herself in any way as an object of visual pleasure. As such an object, she sacrifices “the quality of subjectivity” that defines the desirable woman according to middle class mores from the late eighteenth-century through the nineteenth. (“Desirable,” as Armstrong uses it, means above all both suitable and appealing as a wife [Armstrong, 76-77].)

Armstrong claims, then, that strong cultural forces obliged nineteenth-century women like James’s sister and his fictional governess to renounce the scopic position by which women had previously been defined: that of object of the look, or spectacle. She argues that the ideal middle-class woman was instead retiring, inconspicuous, even invisible. Not only that, she embraced this “invisibility” (the term is Armstrong’s) precisely so that within the domestic sphere over which she presided, she could more effectively exercise the powers of supervision: “[S]he cannot be ‘seen’ and still be vigilant” (77). Later in her book Armstrong claims that Richardson’s Pamela depicts a “shift of the gaze from male to female,” and that this shift “changes the very nature of the gaze from voyeurism to supervision” (278 n42). Likewise, she finds in a conduct book written by Erasmus Darwin a call not for “a woman who attracts the gaze as she did in an earlier culture, but [for] one who fulfills her role by disappearing into the woodwork to watch over the household” (80). We might say that in the discourses of domesticity as Armstrong represents them, the ideal woman was valued for and defined by her failure or refusal to display the quality Mulvey calls “to-be-looked-at-ness” and which Armstrong, using somewhat different terminology, attributes to the aristocratic woman against whom the middle class woman was being defined. In Armstrong’s narrative the newly created ideal woman, no longer the object of the look, became its bearer, but not by turning voyeurism back on men. Instead she was idealized as a moral presence

23 Nancy Armstrong, Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 77. Subsequent citations will be given in the text.
whose *supervisory* gaze imposed order on the household and made possible “the economic behavior that ... ensures prosperity” (81).24

Armstrong’s reading of conduct books and novels usefully historicizes visual relations. But it does so at the cost of neutralizing a tension between the psychical and the social forces that jointly construct the subject—that is, a tension between the intersubjective relations through which one’s sense of identity, of self, is both produced and undermined, and a social order that produces the subject through other kinds of relations, such as those obtaining between individuals and institutions or the relations of social class. Critics pursuing a Marxian or Foucauldian model of the subject (Armstrong falls into the second category) and those privileging a psychoanalytic one seem often to be talking at cross-purposes because each wants to reduce the other to a version of itself—the socially-oriented critic to absorb psychical reality into the social, the psychoanalytic critic to explain the social as the psychical writ large.25 The tension between these approaches may articulate a tension in subjectivity itself, or rather, may point to the foundation of subjectivity in forces that do not necessarily coincide with respect to their interests or their effects.

Looked at another way, the narrative logic Armstrong’s argument implies—of a historically prior voyeuristic male gaze giving way to a supervisory female gaze—is too monologic. It excludes the resistances to what is socially mandated that are expressed (or repressed) in (unconscious) desire, an exclusion determined by Armstrong’s preference for Foucault over psychoanalysis. (In this regard, the meaning of *desire* in her book as desirable in marriage—an entirely *licit* and social sense of desire—is symptomatic.) Moreover, it seems more likely that the earlier scopic regime that defined woman as the object of the gaze endured, if in an attenuated form, despite the dominance of the later one—a possibility that seems all the likelier when we consider the force of those earlier conventions in our own time. Social and medical discourses beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, particularly in the panic about prostitution that culminated in the Contagious Diseases Acts, continued to make women (mostly the working-class women against whom the domestic woman was defined) into the object of a gaze—now a clinical, disciplinary one, but one perhaps never

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24 I should emphasize that Armstrong’s point about the shift in the nature of the gaze is only one point in a much larger, and to my mind very persuasive, argument about the history of the novel and the construction of femininity. I seize upon it nonetheless, and not only because of its usefulness for my own argument. Armstrong’s reading of the gaze (a misreading, as I argue below) is related to a problem with the book’s larger argument about the power of the domestic woman. In stressing “the particular power that our culture does give to middle-class women” in preference to extending “the rhetoric of victimization” (which she is careful, nevertheless, not to reject entirely), Armstrong tends to elide the ways in which this very limited power ultimately served the interests of the male head of the household. (It was limited, for example, by legal convention of coverture that made married women non-persons legally and therefore powerless in their invisibility.)

25 I am adapting an observation made by Joan Copjec, in “Cutting Up,” in *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan (New York: Routledge, 1989). Addressing the difficulty, especially for feminism, of “articulating the relation between psychoanalysis and politics,” she writes: “Too often these difficulties entail either the elimination of psychical reality, its virtual absorption by the social, or the elimination of social reality, which is conceived merely as a realization of a given psychical relation between men and women. Each alternative foredooms feminist analysis, which depends on the existence of a psychical semi-independence from patriarchal structures” (244). The “elimination of psychical reality,” its “absorption” by the social, is precisely what limits Armstrong’s account of the gaze in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*. 
entirely free of a libidinal, voyeuristic impulse.26 Existing alongside or "beneath" the dominant ethos of the inconspicuous but vigilant woman as a counterdiscourse, the older set of relations that defined woman as spectacle would surely come into conflict with that ethos. The conflict would be exacerbated by the fact that for women as for men, seeing oneself seen by others is necessary to the constitution of identity, though this (seeing oneself) being seen can probably never be disentangled from the web of gender relations in which it is caught.

The major works of nineteenth-century British fiction abound with evidence of a conflict between two definitions of ideal femininity as one of the main contradictions they seek to resolve. Charlotte Brontë addresses it in Jane Eyre—or rather, there smooths over a contradiction she will explore in her later fiction—by setting up Blanche Ingram as the spectacular woman and Jane herself as the retiringly vigilant one who ultimately triumphs over her flashier rival. Several crucial events in that novel, including the charades in which Jane participates only as spectator, emphasize that she wins her man because she knows how to position herself as the subject of a supervisory gaze who can even see in behalf of the master when Rochester is blinded and maimed. But by the time she writes Villette, Brontë seems less content with this simple division of women into object of display and subject of the gaze. Lucy Snowe's fascination with the actress Vashti, and her own brief foray onto the stage, articulate some dissatisfaction with the ideal inconspicuousness of the middle-class woman. Moreover, her peculiarly self-effacing narrative expresses formally a contradiction Brontë blithely ignored in writing Jane Eyre, a tension between self-revelation before some Reader and an insistence upon the value of feminine invisibility. One might read a similar narrative in George Eliot's oeuvre, beginning with a fairly simple denunciation of the woman-as-spectacle in Adam Bede's Hetty Sorrel (though Dinah's preaching, a kind of performance, complicates the equation), and moving towards a much more complex treatment of the problem in Daniel Deronda. There, a tension between two versions of the desirable woman—one represented as a cynosure, an object of visual display, and one who refuses that definition—is expressed as an almost agonistic struggle between the novel's heroine and her rival. This struggle pits the limelight-seeking Gwendolen Harleth against Mirah Lapidoth, a singer and actress who shuns the stage to which she was bred for the more domestic venues of the family and the genteel drawing room where she continues to perform privately. Mirah wins the love of the hero and the novel's explicit approbation, but the history of the novel's reception reveals that readers have found Eliot's flamboyant heroine the more attractive of the two.27 In Dickens,

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26 See Jacqueline Rose, "George Eliot and the Spectacle of Woman," Sexuality in the Field of Vision (London: Verso, 1986), on the "sexual fantasy" underwriting the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s, a fantasy that involved "the relentless and punishing scrutiny of the woman" (111-12).

27 James knew Daniel Deronda well; it is often regarded as the precursor text for The Portrait of a Lady, another novel about a naive young woman who makes a disastrous marriage to a worldly and world-weary man. More to the purpose, it inspired a commentary in dialogue form that registers James's awareness of Eliot's interest in the relations of seeing. See Henry James, "Daniel Deronda: A Conversation," Partial Portraits (New York: MacMillan, 1911). Toward the end of the conversation the following remarks are exchanged:
paired female figures like Esther Summerson and Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House* or Dora Spenlow and Agnes Wickfield in *David Copperfield* make even clearer a split between the woman as the object of a libidinal look and the subject of supervision, and also reveal the continued fascination and desirability, in the male imagination, of the first.

IV.

*The Turn of the Screw* does not develop a contrast or sexual rivalry between two female characters to express the incompatibility between two ways of defining women, as do most of the novels mentioned above. Rather, it explores what we might call a crisis of scopic positioning as a conflict besetting a single character, the governess. Unlike most of the inconspicuous heroines in Brontë, Eliot, and Dickens, and rather more like Alice James, the governess in James’s tale registers some discontent with her inconspicuousness. “I now saw that I had been asked for a service admirable and difficult,” she writes after recording her second encounter with Quint; “and there would be a greatness in letting it be seen—oh in the right quarter!” (28). She recalls feeling that to be seen thus at her “extraordinary flight of heroism” might enable her to “succeed where many another girl might have failed” (28). Yet as the events in her narrative unfold, she becomes less concerned with being seen—by the master or anyone else—than with maintaining an untiring surveillance over her two charges. This surveillance even becomes part of her “extraordinary flight of heroism.” Ostensibly the means by which she hopes to “save” the children from the torments of the damned, it expresses her determination to install herself in the subject-position dictated by nineteenth-century bourgeois society as the one appropriate to the properly domestic woman.

If we provisionally “decide” what *The Turn of the Screw* makes undecidable and read the ghosts as hallucinations, they highlight the psychical consequences of the crisis in which the governess is caught. The nightmarish apparitions she encounters—particularly Peter Quint, who repeatedly “fixes” her with his aggressive, bold stare—may perhaps be understood as ironic and self-punishing projections answering to an unacceptable desire, on the part of a genteel woman who finds herself cast as a kind of servant, to be conspicuous.28

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28 The argument that the text makes it impossible to determine whether or not the ghosts are real was made almost simultaneously by Felman and Brooke-Rose. More recently, some critics have sought to historicize the notions of undecidability and indeterminacy as concepts produced in a specific critical moment. See John Carlos Rowe, *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James* (London: Methuen, 1985); Vincent Pecora, “Of Games and Governesses,” *Perspectives on Contemporary Literature* 11 (1985), 28-36, and Elliot Schrero, “Exposure in The Turn of the Screw,” *Modern Philology* 78 (1981): 261-74.
Quint in particular would seem then a projected self-punishment not so much for her desire for the master, which she admits, however elliptically, but more specifically for the way this desire manifests itself in the one she reveals more obliquely, the desire to be seen, to experience the pleasure of being looked at. Because this desire coexists uneasily with the domestic ideal that constructs the proper lady (and desirable woman) as vigilant but inconspicuous, as well as free from unambiguously erotic desire if she is young, unmarried, and inexperienced, it is incompatible with the ethical norms by which the governess evaluates herself and constructs herself as a potentially desirable woman. In other words, this desire is ripe for repression—and for symptomatic unconscious expression in the form of hallucinations.

But whether we interpret Quint as a hallucination or a “real” ghost, the effect of his appearance is the same, and entirely consistent with the ideal of the invisible but vigilant woman. It makes her recoil from being seen, and intensifies her supervision of the children. It is as though the governess’s earnest, conscious desire to be the ideal domestic woman (the better to please her employer and perhaps gain his love) forces her into a sharper, more stringent surveillance. Such surveillance was, moreover, the province of the governess even more than of the wife and mother, the “real” domestic woman. According to a popular mid-century treatise on the governess, “the eye of the governess must be fixed on her pupils from morning till night, every day of her existence: her duty is not confined to the school-room, nor to mere lessons on the subjects of study: it extends to every occupation—almost to every word and gesture.”29 Faced with such an onus, it is not surprising that James’s governess is at least as ambivalent about her supervisory role as she is about being the object of a man’s look.

Her response to Miss Jessel reveals her ambivalence about her supervisory role. Reporting her sighting of her predecessor to Mrs. Grose, the governess says: “She gave me never a glance. She only fixed the child.” To Mrs. Grose’s uncomprehending repetition of the word fixed, the governess adds for her further enlightenment, “Ah with such awful eyes! ... With a determination— ... a kind of fury of intention” (32). Miss Jessel’s “fixing” of Flora seems a malign parody of the governess’s own avowed intention “[t]o watch, teach, ‘form’ little Flora” (8). Even the word “fix,” emphasized by Mrs. Grose’s repetition of it, on the possibility that the ghosts are hallucinations, cf. Heller: “What if we interpret the ghosts as unconscious answers to [the governess’s] conscious desire to be seen?” (97). He stresses the governess’s fragmentation “under the pressure of the uncle’s refusal to look at or hear her” (99). I differ from Heller in regarding this desire to be seen as unconscious, and in calling attention to the interplay of this individual, psychical pressure with a social and historical one: the imperative towards inconspicuousness for middle-class women.

Sir George Stephen, The Governess, qtd. in Schero, “Exposure,” 269-70. Schero quotes this passage to argue that the governess, far from being the obsessional neurotic of much twentieth-century criticism on The Turn of the Screw, was simply doing her job as it was understood at mid-century as well as by James’s contemporaries. While I am sympathetic with Schero’s impulse to get the governess off the couch, so to speak, and thus out from under a critical/clinical gaze, I cannot agree with his larger argument. He argues that the notion of “undecidability” is an imposition onto James’s tale by late twentieth-century readers ignorant of the tale’s social and historical context. To this end he recontextualizes the tale in terms of middle-class fears about the presumably corrupting influences on children of working-class domestic servants and the atmosphere of sexual experimentation at public schools (such as the one from which Miles is expelled). The context Schero provides is illuminating, but to push his anti-deconstructive argument to the extreme that he does he must ignore the well-known ambiguities of James’s writing and assume a single, identifiable intention governing the meaning of the tale.
seems analogous to the more benign "form," emphasized by the quotation marks with which the governess sets it off.\textsuperscript{30}

The governess herself unwittingly acknowledges a treacherous similarity between Miss Jessel's "fixing" of Flora and her own intention to watch and form her. She claims that when she describes Miss Jessel's "awful eyes" to Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper "stared at mine as if they might really have resembled them" (32). Whether Miss Jessel is a "real" ghost or an hallucination, the governess unconsciously identifies with her, and the identification is negative. Invisible to everyone but the governess, Miss Jessel as apparition monstrously exaggerates not only the governess's own social invisibility but also the unremitting surveillance that all governesses were expected to exercise, and that James's governess herself sought to practice. At the same time, Miss Jessel in her character as the governess's "vile predecessor" (59)—the "infamous" woman who in life responded to her own sequestration at Bly by succumbing to the advances of Peter Quint—represents the temptation of refusing the burdens of domestic surveillance, and pursuing instead the recognition of oneself as a sexual being.

The governess, then, occupies a stress-point between two different scopic positions. Her role as domestic overseer requires that she assume a supervisory stance that she must not relax, at the same time denying her participation in the libidinal economy of seeing and being seen. Yet she is already defined by this economy, having internalized its structure and effects as part of her own self-definition. She has internalized as well a psychosocial structure at odds with the imperative towards female inconspicuousness—an older, persistent, still powerful set of visual relations that define woman as the object of a libidinal look. Caught between two definitions of ideal femininity—one valuing the inconspicuous but vigilant woman, the other representing the desirable woman as an object of visual pleasure—she consciously chooses the former. But she cannot divest herself of her unconscious desire to be seen, which influences her insistent seeing and possibly—if the ghosts are hallucinations—the content of what she sees.

One of the governess's remarks about her situation at Bly neatly expresses the contradiction in which she is caught. She concludes, after one of her consultations with Mrs. Grose, that "whether the children really saw or not—since, that is, it was not yet definitely proved—I greatly preferred, as a safeguard, the fulness of my own exposure" (52). In its context, the "exposure" she is willing to endure is her exposure to the ghosts, to the supernatural, to knowledge of "the very worst that was to be known," as though they were a kind of infection (52). But it might be possible to hear in her willingness to endure such "exposure" a disguised expression of her desire to be seen, a wish that she could best exercise her supervisory duties and prevent the children from seeing the ghosts by in some way "exposing herself."

\textsuperscript{30} In fact, one definition of "fix," according to the OED, is "To settle or determine the form of, give permanent form to," though the word is used this way only with relation to language or literature: e.g., fixing a version of a text, fixing the language, etc.
What she exposes herself to, though, turns out to be a reverse supervision, one that unsettles her surveillance of her two charges by deflecting her own supervision back upon herself. In fact, the requirement that she spend so much of her time confined to the children and the domestic sphere—an exaggerated version of what was expected of the domestic woman who was a wife and mother rather than a paid servant—functions as a mode of social control that works smoothly in the absence of any other supervisor. It produces a structure of self-regulation that insures no untoward behavior on the part of the woman unless she is willing to compromise the children as well, as Miss Jessel evidently was.

As we might expect in a Jamesian text, the imprisonment of the “gaoler” herself within this self-enclosed system is suggested in The Turn of the Screw by a verbal ambiguity. The governess refers to passing several days “in constant sight of my pupils” (38). The context suggests that she means that Miles and Flora remained constantly in her sight; as she tells us, she was “careful almost never to be out of” their company (39). But she reveals that in retrospect, she saw herself as fully scrutinized by them—as much in their sight—as she knows them to be in her own. Of their frequent requests for whatever autobiographical anecdotes she can supply, she remarks that “nothing else perhaps, when I thought of such occasions afterwards, gave me so the suspicion of being watched from under cover” (51). Though she compares herself to “a gaoler with an eye to possible surprises and escapes” (55), it is she who contemplates running away, in order not to have to explain her absence from church—an absence occasioned by her alarmed sense that Miles has bested her in a recent bid for power. She imagines her pupils chastising her for her absence: “What did you do, you naughty bad thing? Why in the world, to worry us so—and take our thoughts off too, don’t you know?—did you desert us at the very door?” (58). What horrifies her most in this imagined scene in which the disciplinary roles have been reversed is the children’s “false little lovely eyes”—the falsity of their pretended innocence as, in their precocious knowledge, they scrutinize the conduct of the person supposedly charged with supervising their own.

V.

Visual relations govern not only the content of The Turn of the Screw but also its enunciation. The governess’s first-person narration insures that the events in her story and her struggle to contend with them are presented without recourse to some external source of privileged knowledge. Such knowledge, though it would be revealed in the text discursively, would nevertheless imply a transcendant gaze: one capable (through the conventions of focalization) of seeing “inside” the governess and knowing what she is thinking. James’s use of homodiegetic first-person narration (the governess as teller of her own story) amounts to a refusal to endorse such a transcendent, disembodied gaze; so too does his appropriation of the romance conventions of framing, the word-forward repetition of the same story by other tellers whose voices raise the possibility of critical distance, of alternative and possibly privileged “points
of view," without ever providing one. Instead, as the exchange of erotically-charged glances between characters in the narrative frame suggests, James seems to insist through the form of his tale that such a privileged, transcendent gaze has no objective existence; there are only partial, embodied looks.

Nevertheless, the governess's own self-exposure through her confessional narrative makes her easily appropriated as an object of a critical gaze, a relentless scrutiny that seeks to expose the governess more fully than she confessionally exposes herself. Edmund Wilson's famous reading of the tale, which decisively conjures away the ghosts as the neurotic symptoms of a "thwarted Anglo-Saxon spinster," tinged this scrutiny almost from the beginning with a kind of hermeneutical voyeurism—a search for the "truth" about the governess and the discovery that it lies in her sexuality.31 Even where the governess's sexuality is not gleefully unveiled, the tendency is often for readers to sit in judgment upon her and declare her guilty: "The real Evil is the supposedly innocent gaze which perceives in the world nothing but Evil, as in The Turn of the Screw by Henry James, in which the real Evil is, of course, the gaze of the storyteller (the young governess) herself ...."32 What The Turn of the Screw reveals, though, is not so much the evil of any gaze as the complicated knot of visual relations in which the nineteenth-century middle-class woman might find herself caught.
