Ten years later, in the 1908 Preface to the New York Edition, James insisted once again as he had been saying from the beginning, that it was merely an amusette, this little novel of 1898, readers having seemed one way and another to be taking it seriously. So the ten years earlier, to various correspondents, James had been protesting that like In the Cage, of the same year and of similar length, The Turn of the Screw had been composed for the popular market and for the money. And of course James was right, he would have known. The story had been serialized in a popular magazine, Collier’s Weekly. Nevertheless both in the moment and ever since almost everyone has known, James himself after all not excepted, that there was more to it, that this amusement has unaccounted-for and eruptive and surplus energies, that within the well-turned little ghost tale there is deep instability. That the story doesn’t really fully contain itself, that it presses for explanation, not to say relief.

Few other fictions in English, if any, in any event, in modern times, of similar modesty (with respect to the manner in which it offers itself, and with respect to its length), have solicited any greater amount of speculation and scrutiny and unearthing of clues, commentary laid upon commentary upon excursus, so that by now The Turn of the Screw is a kind of continuously aggregating palimpsest of itself. And that is the case although almost all of the criticism since the early 1930s has been based on either one of just

1 In 1995, writing what had been intended to be a critical survey, the late Wayne Booth said that he had counted more than five hundred titles of books and articles about The Turn of the Screw, in English alone, before he had got too bored to go on. In Henry James: The Turn of the Screw: Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism, ed. by Peter G. Beidler (Boston, 1995), p. 163.
two premises of interpretation: whether or not the ghosts are “real” or are, rather, the invention of the sexually-repressed governess.

If the ghosts are to be taken to be real, as according to fictive convention, so goes the one way of reading, then perhaps the surplusage of energy in the tale is to be discovered by figuring the tale as moral allegory, with Christian bearing. The governess seeks to protect Innocence, that of the children, against the predatory Evil of the ghosts. She is a savior figure using words like “atonement” and speaking of herself as an “expiatory victim.” The founding document is a 1948 essay, “The Turn of the Screw as Poem,” by Robert Heilman, who reads symbolically and regards the battle between the governess and the demons as the stuff of a modern morality play.

On the other side, not actually the founding but the most influential document for the “Freudian” reading, as it is usually called, is Edmund Wilson’s essay of 1934, “The Ambiguity of Henry James.” (A critic, Edna Kenton, had proposed the hallucinating governess a decade earlier.) It proceeds by eliciting secret motives as revealed by careful limning of the plot—but then and therefore encounters a frustration much grappled with in the history of the criticism. After the governess sees her first ghost, the red-headed stranger standing on the tower, she describes him for the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, and Mrs. Grose immediately identifies him as the valet Peter Quint, deceased. If Mrs. Grose is able to identify this ghost, then it must be the case that the governess has not hallucinated and that at least one of the two ghosts is “real,” and if so, then it is likely that so will be the other one, the governess’s predecessor, Miss Jessel. Edmund Wilson himself twenty-five years later in a postscript to his 1934 essay found a way of getting around the sticking point. He had discovered the answer in an article in American Literature in 1937 in which John Silver had pointed out that just before encountering Quint on the tower, the governess had been talking to people in the village, and it was likely that she would have been given general descriptions of Quint and an account of his death. This, said Wilson, was so clear that it was a wonder that one had missed it.

A great and mostly neglected authority with respect to late James is Theodora Bosanquet. She was James’s typist in his late years and was a person of fine literary sense. She would later write a study of Paul Valéry. Better than anyone else, taking dictation as
he composed, she would have known the very tenor and rhythm of James’s mind along with his sense of his craft, and she was peculiarly privy to his remarks about his own writing. Particularly, in a memoir published in 1924, she would point out that James’s late characters often lied. “Most novelists,” wrote Miss Bosanquet, “provide some clue to help their readers to distinguish truth from falsehood,” but not, necessarily, James. And so in fact it is with the governess; that sticking point in the plot becomes unstuck but is resolved into more interesting complexities. The governess’s story occurs as a first-person narrative, but, as will be seen, there are deliberate clues enough in the short tale that what for the reader is to be taken as the givens of plot is for the governess a field for self-serving, and obsessed, invention. Particularly, we are to see that the governess is driven to confirm the reality of her ghosts especially because it might be suspected that they were not real—and James’s characters do tell lies whether or not they know that they do.

James’s late heroines do, moreover, frequently fantasize. The governess, particularly, is one of a quick trio of lettered but indigent very young Jamesian women. Constrained by their poverty, each of them is teased, just once, by the beckoning of a greater world, by which at the end they will of course be rejected. Each is imprisoned, one way and another, while just beyond is the soliciting glamour, which, for each of them, is intricate with sexual desire, and what is told of each of them is their frustration, which they express by inventing fictions. The governess was preceded by Fleda Vetch, the heroine of *The Spoils of Poynton*, the year before, in 1897. In a passage of that text, James refers to Fleda as “the palpitating girl.” The epithet applies just as well to the governess. Like Fleda, furthermore, the governess, in charge of two orphaned children, will be cast ironically and impossibly in the role of “a nice old Mummy,” as it is said of Fleda. In the time of her story the governess is twenty years old, all but technically a teenager. Just a few months later, in autumn of 1898, the governess will be followed by the unnamed telegraph girl of *In the Cage*, another tale in which, like Fleda and like the governess, the heroine is effectively imprisoned—Fleda by the poverty of her situation which makes her dependent on Mrs. Gereth, the governess in the remote country house, circumstances having been invented for her so that communication with London will
be precluded. And now the telegraph girl who quite literally is in a cage.

Like, it may be added, the character Rose Armiger in James's novel *The Other House*, published just two years before *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess will murder a child, perhaps for love. And there is information, or perspective, to be had in noticing, moreover, that this theme of imprisonment combined with frustrated sexual desire is a material for comedy, really for farce, in James's play *The Reprobate*, of 1891.

What happens is that very nice persons in all of the major fictions of the moment, mostly virginal young girls (who will be still younger in fictions to follow: *What Maisie Knew* and *The Awkward Age*) are given their rope and are thereby made available to adventure ranging all the way to horror.\(^2\) If the governess hallucinates, that is one kind of a flight of "the winged imagination," a phrase which James uses with respect to the telegraph girl, and at the same time is just one more turn of the screw.

For all of the immense amount of interpretation that has been put upon the little novel—Christian, "Freudian," more lately "Lacanian," Marxist, gendered, queer, and so on—James's own insistencies obviously, however, are to be considered both first and last, and so it is interesting to determine just what it was that James considered he was cooking up in this potboiler of his, and wherein was the amusement.

What James chiefly recalled when he came to write his Preface to the tale for the New York Edition was the freedom he had experienced in the composition, particularly as he remembered his problems with *The Aspern Papers*, with its allusion to a real story, having to do with Lord Byron. Unlike *The Aspern Papers*, *The Turn of the Screw* had raised no questions for him, or possible objections, on the grounds of historical or cultural realities. It was in this sense that, as he said, *The Turn of the Screw* was a "perfectly independent and irresponsible little fiction" which for its strength and ease had "a perfect homogeneity." There had been

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\(^2\) Edna Kenton directed attention to the passage in James's "The Lesson of Balzac" in which (quoting Taine) James remarked of Balzac's treatment of a character that, unlike Thackeray with his Becky Sharp, Balzac had left his character free, providing her with "the long rope, for her acting herself out, that her creator's participation in her reality assures her." Edna Kenton, "Henry James to the Ruminant Reader: The Turn of the Screw," *The Arts* VI (November 1924), repr. *A Casebook on Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw,"* ed. by Gerald Willen (New York, 1960), pp. 102–114.
no necessity for considering any kind of outside linkage. He had not found himself responsible even to “ghosts” as in any reality they might be, according to—clearly he was skeptical—“the today so copious psychical record of cases of apparitions.” And as for that, these “recorded and attested ‘ghosts’” he had found to be too little expressive to be useful for a fiction, “as little expressive, as little responsive, as is consistent with their taking the trouble—and an immense trouble they find it, we gather—to appear at all.” Real ghosts were tiresome. They didn’t seem actually to do anything. “I had to decide in fine,” said James, “between having my apparitions correct and having my story ‘good.’”

“The thing had for me,” said James further, “the immense merit of allowing the imagination absolute freedom of hand,” leading to “my impression of the dreadful, my designed horror.” He was insistent that what he had made was “a piece of ingenuity pure and simple, or cold artistic calculation, an amusette to catch those not easily caught,” particularly, considering that it was a ghost story, to catch those who were “the jaded, the disillusioned, the fastidious.” And in the time immediately following publication of the tale, he was saying much the same to correspondents. “As regards a presentation of things so fantastic as in that wanton little Tale,” he was writing, “I can only rather blush to see real substance read into them.” (The correspondent, Dr. Louis Waldstein, whose own letter is not extant, seems to have been concerned for the preservation of the innocence of little Miles and Flora.) To H. G. Wells James was writing that “the thing is essentially a pot-boiler and a jeu d’esprit.” To another correspondent, Frederic Myers, he was saying, again, that “The T. Of the S. is a very mechanical matter . . . a merely pictorial subject & rather a shameless pot-boiler.”

While, however, the tale had allowed James freedom from linkages to history, society, culture, and, as well, from the “copious psychical record of cases of apparitions,” there were other and deliberately invoked constraints, which did clearly figure for him. Several pages of the Preface are given to distinction between ghost stories and fairy tales and then to distinctions between types of fairy tales. Peter Quint and Miss Jessel were not “ghosts” at all “as we now know the ghost,” James said, but goblins, elves, imps, of the sort of “fairies of the legendary order.” The Turn of the Screw was an adjustment between the orders of Cinderella and
Blue-Beard on the one hand and the Arabian Nights on the other. Cinderella and Blue-Beard and their like were marked by compactness of anecdote, while the tales of the Arabian Nights were long and loose and copious and endless. In *The Turn of the Screw*, James had aimed, so he said, at the free working of imagination but within bounds so as to achieve an “absolute singleness, clearness and roundness,” and he considered that he had succeeded. The tale, he said, “is an excursion into chaos while remaining, like Blue-Beard and Cinderella, but an anecdote.”

All of this was to say, by way as it were of ground rules, that *The Turn of the Screw* alluded to conventions of storytelling, that it invoked certain and ancient genres, in which the author had found a field for play. Against accepted literary conventions, or, better, against accepted conventions of reading, he had made a fairy tale not for children but specifically a ghost story intended to capture “the jaded, the disillusioned, the fastidious.” Blue-Beard and Cinderella are no doubt also replete with sexual innuendo and otherwise propose horrors, so James might also have said, but not (perhaps paradoxically) for the jaded.

And James was writing as well, with conscious intent, within a tradition of the gothic, with his ghosts and the remote locale of the action, and given Bly with its crenellated structures and battlements and the cawing of the rooks, and the mystery and the fear. After the first of her encounters with the redheaded stranger, the governess wonders, “Was there a ‘secret’ at Bly—a mystery of Udolpho?” Being considerably tutored, the governess wonders if perhaps there was at Bly “an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?,” for of a certainty, governess that she is, she has read *Jane Eyre*. Writing, moreover, within the conventions—or, better, continually alluding to the conventions—of ghost stories and fairy tales and the gothic, James, as Millicent Bell has pointed out, was also composing a version of what since the 1840s had been called the “governess novel.” For the governess in actuality, says Bell, “her respectability and her obligation to uphold the purity of the nursery often meant celibacy; the world of courtship and marriage was closed to her. . . . Yet she was often shut off from the rest of the world as well.” Such being the case, the governess was ready made for fiction.3

Once again as a matter of literary conventions, the secluded country estate was, as Steven Marcus has pointed out and as James had to know, a typical locale for nineteenth-century pornographic literature.\(^4\)

But, accepting and exploiting the conventions, James did say and seemed after all to know that he had conducted, exactly, an excursion into chaos.

II

That the governess’s tale is put forth as being just that, a tale, an instance of traditional artifice, a story in a line of storytelling, is clearly implied, indeed clearly stated, by James’s elaborate preparations for the presentation of the tale, excepting only that the reader is to be prepared to know that when it comes, the governess’s tale will be “beyond everything.” The initial scene of *The Turn of the Screw* is itself so deliberately a standard device, so much a convention of fiction, as to be parodic, as it establishes an audience for what is a storytelling contest. The scene is one of coziness. It had been on a Christmas Eve. A number of us, it is said, had been gathered round the fire listening to a story recited by one, Griffin, which, if gruesome, was “gruesome, as on Christmas Eve in an old house a strange tale should essentially be,” which is to say that if gruesome, the tale was also and appropriately a Christmas Eve entertainment. And then James has someone tell a second tale, and does so because the scene is one of storytelling and is not otherwise an introduction to an action. The second tale for itself is dismissed—it was “not particularly effective,” it is said—with the effect, however, of confirming the scene in itself. And then there will be the main event, the third story, which, it is promised, will be one better than the first, Griffin’s, because while the first had been about the appearance of a ghost to a child, this third story, says the new contender, Douglas, will be about *two* children, with “the effect of another turn of the screw.”

Douglas, moreover, who will bring forth the governess’s manuscript and read from it, is a storyteller of superior cunning.

It is observed that Douglas had not been following the telling of that second story, with the effect thereby of his claiming attention to himself. (“This I took for a sign,” says the narrator, “that he had himself something to produce and that we should only have to wait.”) Douglas, risen and with his back to the fire and his hands in his pockets, looks down upon his audience and promises something really new and never before heard, and, we read, “our friend, with quiet art, prepared his triumph by turning his eyes over the rest of us and going on: ‘It’s beyond everything.’” He passes his hand over his eyes, making a little wincing grimace, and promises that his tale will surpass everything “for dreadful—dreadfulness!” whereupon one of the women in his audience, speaking no doubt for them all, cries out, “Oh, how delicious!” but Douglas, master of the situation, takes no notice of her. Now he makes his audience wait an additional four nights, when he will read from the ancient and hitherto secret manuscript. Numbers of the ladies have meanwhile departed owing to previous arrangements but have departed “in a rage of curiosity, as they professed, produced by the touches with which [Douglas] had already worked us up”—with the result that the remaining audience was the more compact and select, seated round the hearth, “subject to a common thrill.”

This elaborate preparatory scene is just that and is not a frame. James had presented himself with a variety of interrelated stock materials, both subject and form: ghosts and ghost story, and fairy tale, and the furniture of the gothic, and the governess, and little children, all identified by the mechanism of the initial scene as material for an entertainment, a direction as to the spirit in which what follows is to be read. This story will be just what James claimed, namely an amusette, which as such, as comedy—in a way typical of James’s fictions especially in the nineties—would offer fine opportunity for discovery of genuine human dreadfulness.

More particularly, he had here presented himself with opportunity for exploration and radicalization of the potentialities of character of the governess-as-trope. So, according to the likelihood of a governess newly arrived, this governess will be young, frightened, lonely, “privately bred” and therefore uncertain—the tale hints at the fact that this governess is not a good teacher, that she does not know enough—and that she will be sexually nervous. As would be a likelihood for a new governess, this governess
will be thrust into an established household which has, inevitably, a history which the other servants (for she is a servant herself) are to be presumed to know. As a servant she will be nominally superior to the other servants, but as a practical matter, not. As a governess, moreover and most urgently, she will be confronted with necessity to assert authority over young children who are her social superiors, whom she serves. She has reason to fear them. She will have to take control in a situation of complicated and contrary challenges, in which as a practical matter she controls very little. Her one available tactic as a practical matter, is to make others like her, which is to say to charm, to seduce—failing which, however, she may fabricate her own narrative of events.

A few “facts” are established in the introduction to the governess’s tale, which is to say that some elements of the story to come are established, which, being outside of the story, have an authority prior to what is related in the first-person narrative to come. There had been a governess, the youngest daughter of a poor country parson, who, at the age of twenty, not having had any previous experience and seeking employment, had been interviewed by the handsome bachelor in Harley Street, who had had children to dispose of, his orphaned little nephew and niece. It is a matter of considerable emphasis in these introductory pages that in all probability the governess had succumbed to the charms of the splendid bachelor, whose charms also are emphasized, and, it is said, the governess’s passion had probably been sharpened by the fact that she was to have seen him only twice. We are to know that it was a stipulation of her employment that the governess was never to trouble the bachelor of Harley Street. We are to know as well that at Bly, to which the governess is dispatched, there had been a housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, an excellent woman, and—a matter of some importance—several other servants: a cook, a housemaid, a dairywoman, an old groom (for an old pony), and an old gardener. Previously, there had been the governess’s predecessor, a most respectable person who had done beautifully till her death. There is no mention of a valet.

In the same way that James puts these few facts into play, so then in a manner does the governess, but from her position within the facts. Like Fleda Vetch and like the telegraph girl in In the Cage, and for that matter like a line of James’s heroines going back to Catherine Sloper in Washington Square, the governess is a
vulnerable young girl who is susceptible to her own fancies. As is not the case with those others, however, we have the governess in first person, without mediation. Furthermore, she is much more fiercely creative than those other girls.

The famous ambiguity (and the density) of *The Turn of the Screw* is entirely a function of the fact that the governess herself is the author of her tale. Virginia Woolf commented on the silence of *The Turn of the Screw*, where everything—the twitter of the birds at dawn, the far-away cries of children, faint footsteps in the distance—goes to make for an accumulation of quietness. But it is the governess who suppresses the background. Bly does come equipped with a staff of servants, so Douglas has told us, and the governess does refer now and again to the presence of maids and particularly of a servant named Luke, but except for the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, these others have scarcely any presence in the action of the tale—except possibly in one instance, and in that instance they figure as a negation. Near the end of the tale, after Mrs. Grose has left with Flora, the governess protests to Miles that after all they are not alone, “We’ve the others,” but Miles points out correctly that “Yet even though we have them . . . they don’t much count,” which altogether is to say that fortuitousness and distractions are thus canceled, as the governess seeks to impose the absolute of her own presence.

Her tale then describes an adventure in exorcism, meaning not only the getting-rid of her own ghosts but also the elimination of all impediments to a controlling consciousness. Everything is to go, all intrusions upon her creativity. Bly in her telling is indeed remarkably still. The governess prepares for the appearance of Peter Quint by invoking a complete silence: “I can hear again, as I write, the intense hush in which the sounds of evening dropped. The rooks stopped cawing in the golden sky and the friendly hour lost for the unspeakable minute all its voice.” The servants, throughout the action, are present only enough to mark their absence. The governess begins in separation first from her family and then from her employer, the handsome bachelor, and resists requests from both Mrs. Grose and Miles to be in touch with him. That leaves the principals, but as the governess comes to her climax, first Mrs. Grose and Flora are forced by her to

remove themselves, and then Miles dies, leaving the governess alone—climax indeed—with a dead boy in her arms.

There can after all be little doubt that the governess invents both her ghosts and their story. She is a palpitating young girl placed by her author in a situation which will invite romantic imaginings with erotic content, which the ghosts will enact. Since the related tale is a first-person account of those imaginings, it does however become a nice question as to what other than the ghosts is imaginary and whether anything, any action not previously vouchsafed in the introductory chapter of *The Turn of the Screw*, is “real,” as in the ordinary conventions of fiction. And to press that question is indeed to discover postmodernist vertigo, of a sort which is indeed fully anticipated in James’s fiction, here and elsewhere. The question will become demanding in *The Sacred Fount* and *The Sense of the Past*. But it is not yet here quite so obligating. We can find slippages and fractures in the governess’s attempts to make her story, and then it is exactly her imposition upon resisting realities, with consequences, that is the story of *The Turn of the Screw*.

The governess is nothing if not self-absorbed, and that becomes the matter of crucial information about her. We do, that is to say, despite something James says in the Preface, overhear her in “her relation to her own nature.” (James’s point seems to be that she does not see herself from the outside, but in fact she does, only not objectively.) Arriving at Bly and delighted by the unaccustomed luxury of her new surroundings, in her second paragraph the governess records her looking into the long mirrors and seeing herself, for the first time ever, head to foot, and what follows is in good part an elaboration of the instance. “I was wonderful,” she will observe of herself on the occasion when she is first confronted with the problem of what to do about Miles’s dismissal from school, and “oh I was grand” she says when, near the end, she lies to Miles about Flora’s disappearance from Bly, with many self-approving expressions of her performance in between. At the same time she is a virtuoso valetudinarian, persistently recording her ups and downs. In the first sentence of her tale she confides, “I remember the whole beginning as a succession of flights and drops, a little see-saw of the right throbs and the wrong,” and what follows is a transcription of the same; that succession of flights and drops is the rhythm of her tale. She
is also a persistent insomniac, right from the time of her arrival at Bly and quite prior to the coming of Peter Quint, and that too is a part of her record of herself.

This “suppositious author,” as James calls her in the Preface, is created to say, as we can know, both less and more than the truth of her encounters, which truth however we can also know. For one very large matter we can know the truth of Mrs. Grose’s estimation of the governess, apart from the matter of whether or not she believes in the governess’s ghosts, and we can know the truth exactly by the amount that the governess’s account of Mrs. Grose’s affection, by James’s doing, is patently misleading. From the beginning, in her first meeting with Mrs. Grose, the governess is wonderfully pleased to realize that Mrs. Grose likes her, except that her expression itself of the ascribed pleasure undermines the flat statement. “I felt within half an hour,” she says, “that [Mrs. Grose] was so glad—stout simple plain clean wholesome woman—as to be positively on her guard against showing it too much. I wondered even then a little why she should wish not to show it,” a reflection which, as she goes on to say, might have made her uneasy, but the matter is dropped. The overt irony, or at least the sense of it, is then repeated throughout the tale. “Please, Miss,” says Mrs. Grose, “I must get to my work,” and the governess writes, “Her thus turning her back on me was fortunately not, for my just preoccupations, a snub that could check the growth of our mutual esteem.” Dialogue between the two consists as frequently as not of the governess interrupting Mrs. Grose mid-sentence, for the sake precisely of preventing dialogue, which would thwart her creativity. So she takes control:

“Would you mind, Miss, if I used the freedom—.”
“To kiss me? No!” I took the good creature in my arms. . . .

She visibly tried to hold herself. “But he is handsome?”
I saw the way to help her. “Remarkably!”
“And dressed—?”
“In somebody’s clothes. They’re smart, but they’re not his own.”

She was still vague. “And what is your remedy?”
“Your loyalty, to begin with. And then Miles’s.”
She looked at me hard. “Do you think he—?”
“Won’t, if he has the chance, turn on me? Yes, I venture still to think it.”

As with Mrs. Grose, so with Flora and Miles. “I felt quite sure
she would presently like me,” the governess says at her first meeting with Flora, and by the second day at Bly is asserting “the affection she had conceived for my person.” (Flora, on that first occasion, faced with the prospect of sleeping in the governess’s bedroom, had been “timid,” according to the governess, which would be to say that she had been afraid, and “in the oddest way in the world, had been perfectly frank and brave” about it.) Both children, she says, were “extravagantly and preternaturally fond of me,” at the time when she has begun to watch them for signs of their being secretly engaged with ghosts. She does say that she wonders that the children do not guess that she is thinking strange things about them and that they are not disturbed by her suddenly now and again, in little outbreaks of passion, catching them up and pressing them to her heart—and it is a matter of clear implication that indeed they would be, and are, indeed, disturbed. Here and in actions to follow the children clearly are engaged in humoring the governess, just as she says that she suspects, but for motives entirely explicable by her strangeness, and it is testimony to the completeness of her self-engagement that even as she suspects, she takes comfort in what she insists is the affection Miles and Flora have for her. During schoolroom hours, even as she is on the watch for their guile, the children, the governess says, “had a delightful endless appetite for passages in my own history to which I again and again treated them,” and, she says, “it was in any case over my life, my past, and my friends alone that we could take anything like our ease,” which is to say that ease comes upon her—she cannot speak for the children—only when she talks about herself.

All of her estimations are clearly extravagant when not fantastic. Flora “was the most beautiful child I had ever seen.” Miles was “incredibly beautiful,” and from the first, like his sister, he had emitted a “fragrance of purity.” If Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are also immoderately described, that of course has an aptness—Quint the satyr, with his close-curling red hair and queer red whiskers, Jessel dark as midnight in her black dress, with her haggard beauty and her unutterable woe. Given ghosts, they will be gothic, extreme, ravaging or ravaged.6 The governess’s ghosts

6 But see Joyce Carol Oates, “Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly,” Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque (New York, 1994), pp. 254–283. In Oates’s lovely amusette Quint is a randy but good-willed fellow, understanding but embarrassed by Miles’s affection, while Jessel, who in life had been a sweetly modest girl and impeccably groomed, is embarrassed by her current state.
are derivative and literary. “Real” ghosts, as James was to suggest, would have been boring, and they would have been useless as well.

Clearly the governess does have use for her ghosts. She makes them so as to enact an illicit love affair on her behalf and so at the same time as to make it frightening. The ghost who will be Peter Quint is summoned for the first time just as (as Edmund Wilson first pointed out) she is thinking about the handsome bachelor of Harley Street, who subsequently will be known as “the Master.” Miss Jessel, her predecessor who has died, clearly is in line to be her surrogate, and it is likely at a level of reality just outside of the governess’s mind that Quint had indeed been free with Miss Jessel. “He did what he wished,” says Mrs. Grose, to which the governess says with abrupt and revealing candor, “It must have been also what she wished.”

But the governess is much more richly inventive than all of that just as the potentialities of her character, for her author, are more far-reaching. Peter Quint stands in for the Master, but then, also clearly, so does “the little gentleman” “Master Miles,” as he is called, whom Peter Quint seeks to possess, which is to say, to corrupt, which certainly means to sexualize, while Miss Jessel stands in for the governess herself the while she seeks to possess, which is to say corrupt, which is to say to sexualize little Flora, who then in this amusing arithmetic also stands in for the governess. The ghosts have no designs on herself but only on the children, so the governess early on determines (by way only of a sudden “shock of certitude”), but with the consequence that there will be a play of indirection which in turn will permit the governess to regard her little charges as being sexually charged, with implied permission for her kind of relationship to them—the while, however, that she is attempting to be surrogate herself for the children by offering herself, as she says, to be “expiatory victim” of the ghosts. The governess is soon certain that the children carry on secret correspondence not only with the ghosts but with each other, and thus it becomes her purpose, necessarily beyond her knowing, to replace Flora with herself—thereby in effect to resolve, to bring clarity to the erotic confusion she has created.

Or, to do so insofar as possible. The Master remains unavailable but the little Master is on the premises. Flora and Mrs. Grose
are to be removed. The governess has frightened them and off they go. There are the other servants at Bly but, again, as Miles says, they don’t much count. Conditions for romance have been concocted. And at the end there will be liebestod.

The governess’s “dreadful liability” to ghostly impressions, as she puts it, is a constant. Insomniac that she is, she hears, or believes that she hears, ghostly presences her first night at Bly, quite prior to Quint. “There had been a moment,” she says, “when I believed I recognised, faint and far, the cry of a child; there had been another when I found myself just consciously starting as at the passage, before my door, of a light footstep.” Her own perception that she might also be crazy is also a constant, discernible in the chinks of her own expressions of fear. It takes her three days to tell Mrs. Grose about the apparition on the tower. She says, “It wasn’t so much yet that I was more nervous than I could bear to be as that I was remarkably afraid of becoming so.” The children, she says, had only her to stand between them and the ghosts, and so she “began to watch them in a stifled suspense, a disguised tension, that might well, had it continued too long, have turned to something like madness,” and of course it does continue. The children, she says to Mrs. Grose, are talking about their correspondence with the ghosts. “They’re talking of them—they’re talking horrors!” she says. “I go on, I know, as if I were crazy; and it’s a wonder I’m not.”

And then there is little Miles himself, the Victorian schoolboy, virtually a trope. It is no great mystery as to why Miles has been expelled from his school. The governess herself certainly seems to have an idea of the truth of the matter. As much as she protests his angelic innocence, she wants him to be “bad,” a matter which in this context will not mean playing tricks on Aunt Polly. Prior to the first meeting with Miles but after she has knowledge of the expulsion, she will tell Mrs. Grose that she likes boys “with the spirit to be naughty,” adding the significantly unsolicited proviso, “But not to the degree to contaminate....” She will soon be certain that Miles has been expelled “For wickedness. For what else—when he’s so clever and beautiful and perfect? Is he untidy? Is he infirm? Is he ill-natured? He’s exquisite—so it can be only that.”

At the end, forced to confess the reasons for his expulsion, Miles will say only that he “said things” and those things to only a few, “Those I liked.” Which is as a literal matter to leave every-
thing undefined: naughtiness and badness and wickedness and the nature of the "things." With respect particularly to the corruption to be imputed to the ghosts, James would say in the Preface, "Only make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough... and his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy (with the children) and horror (of their false friends) will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars." Specification would weaken the case. And so it is, by implication, for Miles's own and inherent wickedness, except that one—the reader, the governess—would be likely to know what would be the particular of the wickedness to be suspected of school-boy friendships in Victorian public schools.

There is nice suggestiveness in the fact that James's source for the story was an anecdote told him one evening in 1895 by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Edward White Benson. Prior to his becoming Archbishop, Benson had been a public-school headmaster who was famously zealous for trying to protect boys from bad habits, of which he was aware. He had opposed cubicles and had encouraged flogging. As Archbishop he was engaged particularly in efforts to promote sexual morality in national life, as surely James would have been aware. The telling in itself of the anecdote, this is to say, would have had associations of an illicit sexual sort. In any event, the suspicion of homosexual practices within the public schools was currently widespread, especially as between older boys and younger pretty ones. And Miles is both young and pretty.

The governess, however unwittingly, reveals her purpose to possess Miles. She is excited early on by the prospect of dealing "with a boy whose education for the world was all on the point of beginning," but in fact, as she knows from the beginning, Miles's education has already advanced, he is only somewhat virginal.

7 See J. R. de S. Honey, *Tom Brown's Universe: The Development of the English Public School in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1977). Honey writes: "... in the course of the nineteenth century the terms vice, immorality, wickedness, corruption, evil and sin with which public-school headmasters promised that their schools would infect their pupils, together changed their connotation. In the first half of the century the emphasis was on 'rebelliousness.' Only by around 1860 did a mainly sexual connotation become common, and this reflected in the first instance fears about masturbation rather than homosexuality, which were not to intrude until after about 1880, and whose dominance by the end of the century involved a complete reversal of the early Victorian attitude to schoolboy friendships." (p. 194) See also James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York, 1992).
This is to say that Miles offers his own possibilities for narrative exploitation. The governess terrifies him. Unable to leave Bly, as he wishes to do (and as he cannot do because the governess has imprisoned him), he placates the governess and does so, as the climax gathers, in the way not only that she clearly wishes but, to the point, in the way he knows. He flirts. He acts the cavalier. He proffers sexual innuendo.

“You know, my dear,” he says to the governess, “that for a fellow to be with a lady always—!” and she reflects, “His ‘my dear’ was constantly on his lips for me, and nothing could have expressed more the exact shade of the sentiment with which I desired to inspire my pupils than its fond familiarity.” That “my dear,” this is to say, both is and is not here simply a convention of address.

The governess visits Miles’s bed at night, at first standing over him with her candle, then moving to sit down on the edge of the bed and taking hold of his hand. “Then you weren’t asleep?” she asks, and “What is it . . . that you think of?,“ to which Miles replies, “What in the world, my dear, but you?” He thinks also, he says, of “this queer business of ours . . . the way you bring me up. And all the rest!” What, asks the governess, does he mean by “all the rest,” and he answers, “Oh you know, you know,” the while she continues to hold his hand and while their eyes meet, until she throws herself upon him. “Dear little Miles, dear little Miles,” she says, and kisses him, and again, “Dear little Miles, dear little Miles, if you knew how I want to help you”—and he answers appropriately, by blowing out the candle.

On an evening after dinner, Miles plays at the piano for the governess. Again of an evening he comes to sit with her before the fire in the darkened schoolroom; and after two hours, so the governess tells Mrs. Grose, they kissed good night. At the dining table after Mrs. Grose has left with Flora, alone except for the maid, the two are silent, “as silent,” so the governess muses, “as some young couple who, on their wedding-journey, at the inn, feel shy in the presence of the waiter,” but Miles is equally attuned. “Well—so we’re alone!” he says when the maid finally leaves. “Don’t you remember,” says the governess, “how I told you, when I came and sat on your bed the night of the storm, that there was nothing in the world I wouldn’t do for you?,” and “Yes, yes!” Miles says. “Only that, I think, was to get me to do something for you!” What finally he does do, at least prior to submitting to
the governess's fatal embrace, is to confess that at school he had "said things" to those he liked, which things it is evident that the governess very much wants to hear for herself.

III

This was to be an amusing little thing which would "catch those not easily caught . . . the jaded, the disillusioned, the fastidious," perhaps the "fastidious" most of all—which was to say that this ghost story was to secure some kind of a belief from readers who were not likely to believe in ghosts. In fact the ghosts do not actually play much of a role. When they are present in the story—the exactly eight times that they are—they are there very briefly, and the most that they do is to stare, and mostly less than that. They do not squeak and gibber. The ghost story quickly gives way in the reader's apprehension to a story about a governess who sees ghosts, which is where the question of belief will be found to reside.

One of James's readers, H. G. Wells, seems to have objected that James had failed to elucidate the governess's own "subjective complications," and in the Preface James would refer to a reproach made by one of his readers, perhaps Wells, that he had not "sufficiently 'characterized'" his young woman, to which he might have replied that the tale is one of characterization entirely. Characterization is what is done to little Miles, too, offered as a more-or-less typical Victorian schoolboy, but that as another turn of the screw. James was not solicited by the charms of children. The governess, as the main event, sequestered as she is in her circumstances and virtually immured as she is in her own mind, is a character so remarkably present as to be a horror. James goes on in the Preface to protest that in the governess "we have surely as much of her own nature as we can swallow in watching it reflect her anxieties and inductions." Which is the case. The snare for that fastidious reader for whom the tale was designed is in the fact that what is offered explicitly as being just a story created from a stock of story conventions, has become indeed, as according to James's own judgment, "an excursion into chaos." Hers, this governess's, is so extreme a case of loneliness, frustration, entrapment, and desire, that this governess—
pretty much a typical governess—sees ghosts. It could happen. Might very well. Except perhaps for the extremity, almost inevitable that it would. That's where the credibility is.

And it has been a trick, and that's where the amusement is, but there is more, a leftover terror. The governess has been at the business of imposing a form upon her anxieties and inductions. She has composed her hallucinations into a story, a ghost story, by which her horrors are to be contained, but she has been only almost successful in doing that, and because there have been chinks in her tale allowing the madness to peep out even as it has beckoned, which is to say that because we can know now that we have been seduced into participation in insanity, the abyss opens anew.