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(In)compatible Interpretations? 
Contesting Readings of The Turn of the Screw

Willie van Peer and Ewout van der Knaap

1. Introduction

The small community of listeners gathered around the fire in Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw expect to hear a real ghost story, and with them we modern readers can share the same horizon of expectations—if we want to. It is not only the very text itself that makes the reader think in terms of a ghost story; in a real linguistic sense, it is the reader who is free to deal with the “‘pure fantastic’ mode” of one of the most ambiguous texts of all times. Theoretically, texts allow an indefinite number of meanings. The ambiguity in The Turn of the Screw turns out to be not only at the narrative level, but also at the level of discourse, both being “inextricably interrelated.”

On the other hand, interpreting literary works (and maybe artworks in general), appears to be affected by claims of truth and by attitudes exclusive of other interpretations. Roman Jakobson already made it clear in 1921 that artists tend to break the barriers of convention. In interpreting an artwork we are undertaking a similar process. After a period of becoming accustomed to the work, and after having been immersed in the traditional ways of looking at it, we feel the urge to ‘really look’ at it again as a work of art: our need for aesthetic experiences makes the process of defamiliarization perpetual. In practice this process is not without conflicts between ‘conservatives’ and ‘progressives.’

In the case of James’s story it is hardly possible to discuss the work
without at the same time highlighting the ongoing debate between the opposite camps. The oldest one claims that *The Turn of the Screw* is nothing else but a ghost story. The name Edmund Wilson has become associated with notions of a careless reading for the defenders of this interpretation, ever since his 1938 essay tried to establish that the work should be read in a Freudian way. It is interesting to observe that today’s critics are still guided by their loyalty to one of these two views. Even when interpretations like that of Felman (1977), denouncing the Freudian reading as a one-dimensional frame, try to overcome the dichotomy, no solution is offered for the problem of how to fit the older interpretation into the new view.

Following the apparent deadlock in the debate, Freundlieb (1984) has called for “an entire paradigm shift—away from the practice of interpretation towards an explanatory analysis of the processes of understanding” (p. 81). Since according to him “interpretive statements have no truth value” (p. 83) and hence are “neither true nor false but nevertheless plausible or acceptable” (p. 82) his proposal can only be carried out by juxtaposing the results of the processes of text-comprehension. This could, for example, start from a confrontation of two conflicting groups\(^7\) of interpretation: an analysis of the claims and arguments of a group G (various people claiming that *The Turn of the Screw* is a ghost story) and of a group F (those claiming that the work requires a Freudian reading). The moment for such an analysis may have come, since the sheer number of arguments (on either side) has accumulated to such extent that a systematic analysis of them may yield interesting results. In what follows, the arguments of each group will be studied and a comparison of their respective weights be made. A letter code will be used for main claims and an accompanying number for the arguments themselves. Our analysis will concentrate on the question of whether the arguments are (in)compatible.

2. **Claims and Arguments**

Interpretation G is straightforward in its claim that *The Turn of the Screw* is a ghost story. The defense of this interpretation makes use of the following arguments:

\[G_1:\] James’s story fits into the literary tradition of the ghost story genre and its conventions.\(^8\)
G2: Defenders claim to know that James wrote out of an interest in the supernatural, and reason that his preoccupation with ‘ghostly tales’ is proof enough.10

G3: James himself mentions the origin of the story in his Notebooks: he learned it from E. W. Benson, the Archbishop of Canterbury and his personal friend; in this reference, the kernel of the story as taken down by James is clearly a ghost story.11

G4: The children are corrupted by the ghosts: for instance, Miles is expelled from school, he steals the governess’s letter.12

G5: Reference is made of James’s connection with the SPR (the Society for Psychical Research), a group devoted to research-like investigations of ghostly appearances. It is asserted that the experiences of the governess in The Turn of the Screw resemble those of people who claimed to have seen ghosts.13

G6: Referring to the SPR, the possibility is offered that the governess could be a clairvoyant and, consequently, could be receiving messages from deceased persons, the appearance of whom she could perceive and interpret as ghosts.14

G7: Even if there is no case of ‘real’ ghosts in The Turn of the Screw, the suspense that comes with the suggestion is already sufficient to interpret and classify The Turn of the Screw as being a ghost story.15

According to interpretation F, The Turn of the Screw is a story about hallucinations. The interpretive paradigm of the Freudian reading of James’s work started with Edmund Wilson’s essay in 1938.16 His view involves two basic sub-claims (1963: 115), a weak (Fw) and a strong (Fs) one:

\[ F_w: \text{"the ghosts are not real ghosts but hallucinations of the governess,"} \]

\[ F_s: \text{"the governess \textquoteleft is a neurotic case of sex repression."} \]

In practice it is often unclear whether a Freudian critic supports either or both of these claims. Nor is it always clear which of the claims is actually intended by Freudian critics. More worrying yet is the fact that in general little clarity is provided as to whether the weak and strong versions exclude each other or not. In other words, must we consider interpretation F as consisting of two conjunct or rather as two disjunct claims? \( F_{w \& s} \) or \( F_{w \lor s} \)? Pending any clarification of this issue, we shall in this article consider the claims to be in a relationship of implication: \( F_s \supset F_w \). Hence the strong Freudian claim is taken to imply the weak one. This reduces the number of arguments in favor of F, because under this interpretation any significant defeat of \( F_w \) will necessarily invalidate \( F_s \) (but, of course, not
the other way round.) For the time being, let us consider the more
general arguments in favor of $F$.

$F_1$: The governess is unreliable and is not a stable personality; she lacks
integrity.

$F_2$: She is frustrated about her gender$^{17}$ and sexually fixated on her
employer.

$F_3$: In the Preface to his story, James emphasizes that the ghosts are not
real: “This is to say, I recognize again, that Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are
not ghosts at all . . .”$^{18}$

$F_4$: The children are absolutely innocent and honest; that this is not
something to be challenged derives from the fact that it is the governess
herself who believes this to be the case.

$F_5$: James used autobiographical facts.$^{19}$

$F_6$: The Turn of the Screw is based upon a case from Freud’s practice.
James's interest in neurotic personalities / narrators is attested in several
of his other tales too.

$F_7$: At some crucial moment in the narrative (notably chapter 20),
other characters do not perceive the ghosts, in spite of the governess’s
emphatic claims.

3. Interpretations

The important thing to notice about the difference between inter-
pretations $F$ and $G$ is not the fact that they exist. What is striking is
that these differences are perceived as opposites, representing two
claims that mutually exclude each other. Joseph Margolis sums up
the prevailing view when he writes about the characteristic feature
of interpretation: “philosophically most interesting is its tolerance
of alternative and seemingly contrary hypotheses” (1962: 116). In-
terpretative pluralism does not, however, entail the co-existence
of contradictory interpretations. Our claim is precisely that if multiple
interpretations can lay claim to the truth, then contradictory inter-
pretations cannot both be true. When they are proposed, one of
them must be wrong. This does not mean, however, that it is always
possible to demonstrate the falsehood of one. Nor does it follow
that a false interpretation will automatically be eliminated. The abil-
ity to maintain a false interpretation in the face of decisive evidence
against it seems to be one of the remarkable features of literary
criticism. But that fact does not prevent some interpretations from
being false. In our view, oppositions construed between interpretive
claims are to be understood in terms of differences, of dissimilarities that are not mutually exclusive.

Let us now take a look at the nature of the claims put forward by the two camps in interpreting James’s story. The comparison is a fair one, since each view is supported by the same number of arguments. Nor are certain types of arguments privileged under either interpretation. For instance, both interpretations make use of text-immanent arguments (e.g. \(G_1, G_4\) and \(G_7\), and \(F_1, F_2, F_4\) and \(F_7\) respectively) and of text-external ones (\(G_2, G_3, G_5\) and \(G_6\) on the one hand, and \(F_3, F_5\), and \(F_6\) on the other). Thus it would seem that we have here an almost ideal case for studying the nature of the general opinion on interpretive matters, in that there is a balance in the amount and kind of evidence on both sides. The opposition being construed in terms of a contradiction, it mirrors the received theory that the law of non-contradiction need not apply to interpretations of works of art. This opinion, we believe, is unfounded. If it can be invalidated in the case of James’s story, being perhaps the most prototypical case of incompatible interpretations, then presumably many, if not all, such oppositions are to be framed not as contradictions but only as differences.

In order to judge the possibility that interpretations \(G\) and \(F\) are incompatible, we must be able to assess the truth value of their respective claims. We shall look at the individual arguments in a moment, but wish to point out beforehand that any such assessment should be done with an awareness of the kind of phenomenon one is looking at. Since we are dealing with a (presumably fictional) text, it is imperative to distinguish between reality as described within the text, and reality as we know it in daily life. Evidently, claims about ghostly appearances will have to be judged differently when talking about a literary work or about everyday experiences. It is important to keep this in mind, for in the discussion of James’s story the distinction is sometimes blurred, and this is in part the origin of the confusion. An assertion that the text is a ghost story, for instance, is not an admission of the existence of ghosts in real life. Nor should it be thought that the denial of this assertion by Freudians casts doubt over the existence of ghost stories.

Let us first study the interpretations that are possible at the level of the text. Clearly it cannot be denied that on the basis of textual information one must admit that the governess witnesses ghostly appearances. She turns out, however, (again on the basis of the same textual description) to be the only character in the story to
have these perceptions. Since in at least one instance she believes she has such a perception in the presence of other characters who fail to see the ghost, this has implications for the nature of her observations. It will be remembered that in chapter 20 the governess actually ‘sees’ the ghost of the late Miss Jessel while Flora and Mrs. Grose are with her. After she has marked the apparition, however, Mrs. Grose’s reaction

blotted out everything but her own flushed face and her loud shocked protest, a burst of high disapproval. ‘What a dreadful turn, to be sure, Miss! Where on earth do you see anything?’ (Penguin edition, 1987, p. 239)

After a renewed attempt at drawing Mrs. Grose’s attention to the apparition, the reaction is even more explicit:

‘She isn’t there, little lady, and nobody’s there—and you never see nothing, my sweet! How can poor Miss Jessel—when poor Miss Jessel’s dead and buried? We know, don’t we, love?’—and she appealed, blundering in, to the child. ‘It’s all a mere mistake and a worry and a joke—and we’ll go home as fast as we can!’ (ibid., p. 240)

Flora’s rejection is no less ardent: “I don’t know what you mean. I see nobody. I see nothing. I never have” (ibid).

This means then that we must categorize the appearance of the ghosts as the governess’s individual perceptions, perceptions that are not shared by others in the world of the story, unless one has reasons to suspect other characters of being imperceptive. (No evidence to this effect—except perhaps an allusion contained in Mrs. Grose’s surname—has been forthcoming. This conclusion does not deny the reality of the experience for the governess herself. From her perspective, it is even possible that part of the trick played on her by the ghosts is precisely that the others cannot see them while she can. Hence for her the ghosts are real, in the same sense as they are unreal for the others. This implies that if we adopt the perspective of the governess, the G-interpretation is the only possibility. She is not in the position to conclude otherwise; at least on the basis of the information given us by James, she seems to have no alternative. (This does not, of course, preclude the possibility that an individual may become aware of being the victim of hallucinations. If James had, however, wished us to leave that possibility open, he would have provided clues in that direction.) As far as we can see, no such evidence is present in his text.) Similarly, according to the other characters in the text, some form of the F-interpretation is the only
possibility that is open. It need not be Freudian in the strict sense as 
described by argument $F_2$, but that the governess is involved in 
some kind of hallucination, along the lines of argument $F_1$, for 
instance, is inevitable from their perspective. Thus our conclusion 
must be that within the universe of discourse represented by the 
text, the governess herself will favor interpretation $G$, whereas the 
other characters must adhere to some form of $F$.

So much for the situation within the fictional world. But how must 
readers, who are outside the story, come to terms with this textual 
opposition? Since they cannot fail to be aware that the governess’s 
view is limited, and that the other characters do not share her 
perception of the ghosts, the reader cannot avoid the conclusion 
that what the governess sees is in fact nothing but an illusion. 
To conclude otherwise would be to neglect crucial information 
provided by the text. And an inevitable corollary of this line 
of argument is that an informed reader must prefer $F$. By this argu-
ment, however, interpretation $G$ would be defeated, and the dispute 
between the two camps would be settled. No informed reader could 
resist the pull of interpretation $F$; to insist on the correctness of 
$G$ would be an indication of sloppy reading, and would lead to 
defeat.

But is it that simple? Our question, it will be remembered, is not 
which interpretation is better, but whether they exclude each other. 
From that point of view, the fact that a reader is under the virtual 
obligation (given the information structure of the text) to renounce 
any naive version of $G$ and to favor $F$, does not yet prove that $G$ and $F$ 
are incompatible. Clearly under the Freudian description what the 
governess perceives from her own point of view are ghosts, nothing 
more, nothing less. Alternatively, the literary genre of the ghost 
story does not affirm the existence of ghosts in real everyday life. 
This paradox was already solved by Miall (1984: 306), who proposes 
“that James intended us to take the ghosts seriously but that this 
does not commit us to the reality of the supernatural.” The appari-
tions are but a literary strategem, allowing for a Freudian explana-
tion of supernatural apparitions in clinical terms. This may be dem-
onstrated with an example of how the Freudians defend their claim 
that the governess is a neurotic case of sexual repression. The argu-
ment turns on the fact that in the story phallic symbols turn up 
frequently, for instance in the passage describing Flora’s attempt to 
fit a little stick into a hole in a piece of wood:
She had picked up a small, flat piece of wood which happened to have in it a hole that had evidently suggested to her the idea of sticking in another fragment that might figure as a mast and make the thing a boat. This second morsel, as I watched her, she was very markedly and intently attempting to tighten in its place. My apprehension of what she was doing sustained me so that after some seconds I felt I was ready for more. Then I again shifted my eyes—I faced what I had to face. (p. 55)

The argument that the governess shows some fixation on sexual matters here does not conflict, however, with the fact that the text is written according to the conventions of the ghost story, that James was interested in the supernatural, or that the governess may also have the powers of a clairvoyant. This also holds for the argument that the towers (a favorite place for the ghost of Peter Quint to show up) may be interpreted as phallic symbols. The psychoanalytic perspective leads to a symbolization of things and occurrences that are in themselves quite stereotypical in ghost stories. In other words, the fact that towers are part and parcel of the typical ghost story setting does not exclude their being interpreted as phallic symbols. There thus would not seem to be, on close analysis, a logical contradiction between the two interpretations: both may be true at the same time.

Barnes (1988: 123) lays out a different route in arriving at a somewhat similar conclusion. She proposes that when critics of G (in our terminology) fail to rule out a 'relevant counterpossibility' (which could be F in this case), this challenges their claim to know the meaning of the work. This is a position quite congenial to our own, and Barnes's book has been a source of inspiration for our work. We also share her conviction that "critical practice both tolerates a plurality of sometimes incompatible interpretations of artworks and nevertheless allows that confrontation and significant defeat may take place between critics." (p. 1) Our position is different in that we think that (real) incompatibility of interpretations is much more exceptional than generally thought. Also, in the case of James's story, we think that interpretations G and F do not challenge each other, as Barnes proposes. Instead, we argue that they are both true. To acknowledge this is difficult only for the governess herself. But for readers outside the world of the story, as well as for the other characters in the fictional universe, no choices are blocked. A preference for interpretation G ('the governess perceives the ghosts') does not exclude the possibility of F ('the governess hallucinates'), and vice versa: the truth of F ('the ghosts are not real') does not in
itself undermine the truth of $G$ (‘this is a story about ghosts’). A look at the truth-value of the (counter)arguments of both groups will show more.

4. Truth

If the previous analysis is right in claiming that interpretations $G$ and $F$ are compatible, then an important question is whether they are true. Indeed, many attempts to avoid the confrontation and defeat of incompatible interpretations consist in redesigning the nature of interpretive statements, by denying them the possibility of taking truth-value; critics associated with this view are Matthews (1977) and Scruton (1974). Margolis (1980) in particular has argued that interpretations should be conceived of as assertions involving claims that are logically weak and that do not rise above the threshold of plausibility. In such a view, interpretations can be ‘plausible’, but not ‘true’. This is not, however, the method followed in the present article. We wish to argue, by contrast, that both interpretations, though “seemingly contrary”, are both true. Our aim is not to curtail the truth value of interpretations in order to rescue them from either defeat or logical contradiction. Rather we wish to emphasize their essentially assertive nature, so that we can fully confront their respective truth claims. Only in this way can we defend our view that interpretations $G$ and $F$ are not incompatible. Hence our analysis must now show that interpretations $G$ and $F$ are both true.

4.1 Truth of $G$ Let us start with $G$. Some arguments are clearly very weak. $G_4$ is such an argument. Certainly, the children act in strange ways, and Miles’s behavior is a source of serious worry to the governess and those around her. But even if some wickedness on his or on Flora’s part is recognized, this in no way proves that the children are in contact with or under the influence of ghosts, even if such ghosts frequent Bly. Note, moreover, that interpretation $F_4$ claims exactly the opposite, asserting that the children are completely innocent. Certainly this claim is much harder to defend, even if the governess herself originally holds it to be true. Obviously Miles is not innocent at all in some of his behavior, for instance in stealing her letter to his uncle. The point, however, is that, even when $F_4$ is admitted, this is not—again—an argument in favor of $F$
at all: the children’s (admitted) innocence in no way disproves the tale’s being a ghost story. Indeed, even if the children have a perfect alibi, they still may be corrupted, and may collaborate with the ghosts. Precisely when this would be the case, one would expect the ghosts’ supernatural powers to provide them with such an alibi. Thus, if we wish to establish the truth of claims $F$ or $G$, certain arguments, notably $F_4$ and $G_4$, may be discounted. Both are supportable, but neither can be shored up as firm evidence of its respective claims.

Other arguments, such as $G_2$, $G_5$ and $G_6$ may bring interesting biographical material to the debate, but cannot by themselves prove beyond doubt that $G$ is true. Even if James was a member of the SPR and had a genuine interest in the supernatural, this does not yet make *The Turn of the Screw* a ghost story. If such facts were really sufficient conditions, then obviously they would force us to apply interpretation $G$ to all works by Henry James. Similarly, $G_6$ only offers a possibility, not a piece of proof. $G_3$ should be taken more seriously. If the entry in the *Notebooks* indeed establishes James’s intention to write a ghost story, and granted he had the ability to do so (something hard to deny) and was successful in carrying out his intention, then obviously this argument unequivocally establishes the truth of $G$, at least within the limits of argument from authorial intention. The difficulty is whether the *Notebooks* entry confirms James’s intention. Even if this could be shown to be the case, the final judgment would still hinge on the question whether the execution of the intention has been successful. The answer fundamentally depends on intra-textual qualities. Hence $G_3$ in itself remains powerless in its defense of $G$ in the absence of intra-textual proof. What would such a proof look like?

The first fact is fairly evident and rather trivial, though essential: it must be a story about ghosts. With respect to this criterion, James’s story manifestly fits the bill. Whether these ghosts are real or not, is not at issue. Since it cannot be denied that ghosts form part of the central semantic material of the tale, we must say that *The Turn of the Screw* complies with the first requirement. We take it that this is what argument $G_7$ attempts to establish. By identifying the crucial thematic material upon which the generic categorization must be based, the argument can be said to determine $G$’s truth. It does not, however, require much reflection to discern that this characteristic is not enough, for there are many tales in which ghosts turn up, which nevertheless are not normally categorized as ghost stories.
The *djinn* in “Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp” is certainly a ghost, as is the venerable Montesinos in chapter 22 of *Don Quijote*, Part II. But it would be dubious to call these texts ghost stories. Hence the presence of ghosts is not a sufficient, albeit a necessary condition. In order to allow the classification of the ghost story genre, another characteristic is required: in such stories we expect a typical atmosphere. The ghosts must be mysterious, and provoke anxiety and fear in those who witness their appearances. The apparitions must take place within an everyday, not a fairy-tale setting, yet be strange and create an evil spell over those who encounter them. The atmosphere evoked in James’s story certainly meets such a requirement, and few readers will be able to resist the pull of the sinister terror approaching the governess and the children alike. Argument $G_7$ tries to capture this aspect of the genre by pointing to the eerie suspense created by the narrative’s unfolding. This characteristic (when the previous necessary condition is fulfilled) is clearly a sufficient condition for calling James’s work a ghost story. In other words, the genre classification of the ghost story applies *if and only if* the narrative is about ghosts who appear within a setting initially characterized as ordinary, but in which their appearance creates an eerie atmosphere. In this sense, argument $G_7$ leaves little doubt about the status of interpretation $G$. If $G_7$ holds—and there can hardly be much doubt about this—it establishes the truth of $G$. The importance of this point may be gauged when we recall the other stories in which ghosts occur. After having been exposed to 73 chapters of Quixotic antics, we have little doubt that the spirit of Montesinos in his cave is yet another twist of the Don’s weak mind. And Aladdin’s ghost is so much an evident part of the fairy-tale world, unpretentious in its appearances and disappearances, whose status and function are absolutely clear and unproblematic, that we hardly grant it much attention in our reading. With the Victorian country house of Bly, however, things are different. We do not expect ghosts to turn up in such circumstances. Except, that is, in ghost stories! Other characteristics may further contribute to the qualities we typically associate with the ghost story: the fact that the house is isolated, that few people inhabit it, that there is talk of deceased people who lived in it, that inexplicable things happen, or that strange events take place at night. All these may strengthen our conviction that we are reading a genuine ghost story, but ultimately it is the two most essential characteristics pointed out, summarized in arguments $G_1$ and $G_7$, that establish unequivocally that the ge-
meric classification applies. Together these two arguments establish the truth of G.

4.2 Truth of F Let us now look at the arguments in favor of interpretation F, recalling that we have already discredited F₄. Next, F₅ and F₆ also carry little weight. Take F₅, for instance: the biographical facts referred to here are that James knew hysterical women, among others his beloved sister, Alice, who had died of cancer six years before the publication of the tale, and who kept a diary (which has also been published). The rivalry between James and his brother William resulted, according to this interpretation, in the character Miles, whose wish to be amongst boys is punished by the governess. In the character of Quint, who feels attracted to the boy, James's tragedy of repressed pedophile sexual inclinations are supposedly being represented. These tendencies are the alleged foundation for the fact that the governess transfers her feelings for her employer to his niece, and especially to his nephew. However, even when we accept as true the proposition that James made use of autobiographical material such as his sister's pathological history, this does not in itself prove that the governess in The Turn of the Screw is also an hysterical character. True, such evidence may add some plausibility to interpretation F, but plausibility is not truth. In the same way, the link between the story and Freud's work should be viewed with reservation. According to Wilson, The Turn of the Screw is "primarily intended as a characterization of the governess" and is a portrait of a sexually blocked, poor vicar's daughter with middle-class ideas, who, behaving with typical English authority, terrorizes the house (Wilson 1963: 121). But even if it can be shown that James's story was influenced by Freud and Breuer's Studien über Hysterie (published in 1895, just three years before The Turn of the Screw), F₆ may do nothing more than add some further plausibility to claim F, not final proof.

F₃ refers to James's intention. Note that the argument contains the opposite of what was asserted in G₃. It may be that oppositions of this kind have led critics to assume that contradictory interpretations of literary works may exist side by side. If James himself admits to contradictory intentions in writing his story, how else could we conclude? A literary work emanating from two contradictory intentions may still carry the traces of this opposition, and the reader may—in picking up these clues—genuinely conclude that the work
means two contradictory things at the same time. But how is this possible? How can James have entertained the possibility of writing a ghost story which is not about ghosts? In other words, how can someone aim at $x$ and at $not\ x$ at the same time and in the same sense? Should we not rather decide that this is not really possible, and that no one can entertain such contradictory intentions? The answer is, of course, that there is no contradiction here at all. If the statements by James seem to involve an opposition, there can be no question of their being contradictory if a third possibility is available. This is clearly the case, for James may have had another, super-ordinate intention.\textsuperscript{22} For instance, he may have wanted his readers to believe both his statement in the Preface and the one in the Notebooks in order to make them uncertain about the whole business. There is nothing mysterious in writers’ acting strategically in such ways, as has been amply demonstrated by Hjort (1993). James may have explicitly wanted his readers to think that he had written a ghost story (to which he alludes in his Notebooks), and at the same time have them think otherwise, by hinting at a different possibility in the Preface. He may truly have subscribed to both intentions, may have carried them both out successfully, so that his ultimate intention to create ambiguity in the story (and hence uncertainty in the reader) was achieved. Thus, even if $G_3$ were true, there would be no problem in asserting that $F_3$ is true, too. The law of non-contradiction has not been violated. Our acceptance of both arguments will have implications, however, for the kind of intention we can now ascribe to James. If the entries referred to in $G_3$ and $F_3$ both carry the weight of truth, then James did not intend to produce a story that could be interpreted exclusively as either $G$ or $F$. Rather he must have wanted his readers to believe both $F$ and $G$.

We have not yet determined the value of argument $F_3$, however, in relation to the general interpretation. This value is ultimately the same as that of $G_3$. Even in the face of its truth, a lot will depend on whether James has also successfully executed his intentions according to the general norms for stories in which unreliable characters operate. That is, the proof of the pudding is still in the eating, and the eating tasted a lot like a ghost story! If it can be shown unambiguously that $F_3$ represents James’s genuine intention to deny the reality of the ghosts in his story, then $F$ must be true. As long as that aim is not fulfilled, however, the uncertainty surrounding the truth of $F$ cannot be alleviated by $F_3$. It is not clear how in the present circumstances any certainty as to James’s real intention may be
gained. Consequently, we must admit that $F_3$ does not establish the truth of $F$.

Arguments $F_1$ and $F_2$ seem to promise more. Indeed, in order to prove that the ghosts are not real, we must be able to disprove the governess’s testimony. One way of doing this is to establish that her account is untrustworthy. That is what $F_1$ and $F_2$ attempt to do. Are they ‘proof’ that the governess hallucinates? That would mean (in the everyday world) that anyone with such characteristics reporting ghostly appearances should be thought of as hallucinating. But is not anybody talking about such apparitions already under suspicion in that world? In other words, what do arguments $F_1$ and $F_2$ really prove? The truth of $F$? That would depend on certain definitions. Given a particular definition of what is a stable and/or reliable personality, depending also on how one defines ‘gender frustration’ and ‘sexual fixation’, and provided criteria are at hand for testing these definitions, it can in principle be established whether the governess answers to the descriptions given in $F_1$ and $F_2$. Suppose we are able, on the basis of existing psychological theories, to provide such definitions. Suppose also that on the basis of a close textual analysis, we may conclude that the description of the governess, offered us by the story, contains enough convincing traits to categorize her as in $F_1$ and $F_2$. Have we then incontestibly shown $F$ to be true? Have we, in other words, positively shown that the ghosts are not real ghosts when we have established that the governess is unstable and unreliable, and that she suffers from some form of sexual hysteria? That would mean that persons who are prone to hallucinations, as unstable or unreliable personalities may be, are always hallucinating, that they are never able to perceive things as they are. Clearly, this is counter-intuitive. Even if the governess is an unstable person, her report on the ghosts need not be false. Nothing of the sort follows from the observation that she suffers severely from hysteria. Such a characterization may, of course, provide us with grounds to be cautious in our treatment of her narrative. It may render her suspect as a witness, and we certainly have reasons for not believing at face value everything that she reports. But all this is still a long way from absolute proof that what she reports is false. On the other hand, such suspicions are needed if we want to establish that the ghosts are not real. That is, arguments $F_1$ and $F_2$ present necessary but not sufficient conditions that must be fulfilled in order for $F$ to be true, where $F_1$ covers the weak version $(F_w)$, and $F_2$ the strong version $(F_s)$ of interpretation $F$. What, then, would a
sufficient condition amount to? That condition is the presence of trustworthy testimony within the world of the text that the governess is not only unreliable, but that her account of the facts is wrong. Obviously, that is what argument $F_G$ does. We have no reason to disbelieve Mrs. Grose’s account of the events in chapter 20. Given that, along with the instability of the governess’s character, which she herself partially acknowledges, this combination determines the truth of $F$.

5. Contradiction?

Given the fact that both $G$ and $F$ have been established as valid interpretations of *The Turn of the Screw*, we now must ask ourselves if their simultaneous truth does not confront us with the question whether one of them must be ruled out. Section 3 of the present article has shown how interpretations $G$ and $F$ may co-exist, both at the level of the fictional world (i.e. the ‘interpretation’ of story events by the characters themselves) and at the level of the act of reading (the interpretations formed by real readers of the story). It is important to realize the consequences of this observation; the contradiction could easily be resolved if one could show one of the interpretations to be wrong. This seems to have been the basic attitude underlying the conflict between Wilsonians and anti-Wilsonians. In trying to defeat the claim of their opponents, advocates of each camp have tried to rule out contradiction. If our analysis holds, however, one is no longer justified in ruling out either $G$ or $F$, both interpretations being true.

But if the contradiction cannot be resolved by eliminating one of its terms, then presumably this is proof that in the realm of interpretation contradiction may be tolerated? The problem that looms behind the opposition between $F$ and $G$ is whether the genre of the ghost story allows for narratives in which ghostly appearances turn out to be the product of false perceptions, hallucinations, and the like. If it does not, then clearly our analysis does not hold, and we would indeed return to the situation in which $F$ and $G$ are to be constructed as contradictory claims. There is, however, no need to come back to this view, for some of the texts that unmistakably belong to the genre of the ghost story turn on such false perceptions. Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), one of the well-known manifestations of the genre, contains several instances in which ghostly appearances are rationalized as optical illusions, dreams, or delusions.23 If such prototypical ghost stories tolerate
some rational explanation of the apparitions, then we are forced to conclude that there is nothing wrong in saying that The Turn of the Screw is a ghost story, and that the ghosts here are the product of the protagonist’s hallucinations. Indeed, as we have seen, asserting that the governess is a victim of delusions (claim F) does not preclude categorizing the narration of these delusions as ghost stories (claim G). These interpretations are, in Margolis’s words, only “seemingly contrary hypotheses” (1962: 116), since both are true. They are not incompatible because they relate to different aspects of the work and its meaning, aspects that complement rather than exclude each other. Their complementarity is trivial in a sense, in that it corresponds to everyday life, where we almost constantly experience significant divergences in viewpoints and emphases. Widely different interpretations of political events, of financial fluctuations, or of social strife, are to be found each morning in the newspaper headlines and commentaries. There is nothing mysterious in the existence of such differences, as long as the things interpreted are sufficiently rich in meaning or complex in structure. We would argue that James’s text, and perhaps most literary texts, do possess this richness and complexity as cultural artefacts, thereby inviting different interpretations. Hermeneuticians who want to make much of such divergences are involved in mystifying what is essentially a banal, everyday fact known to everyone, hardly in need of would-be-profound initiation.

If the inevitable conclusion is that both interpretations F and G are true, and if they are not a contradictory pair, then the problem is solved: there can be no question of fundamental incompatibility in the debate surrounding The Turn of the Screw. Nor can its interpretations, F and G, be evidence of the tolerance of contradictory views in interpreting a work of art in hermeneutics or aesthetics. The law of non-contradiction holds for interpretations of art works just as in the world at large. It may be that literary critics think the art world better off if the law isn’t there to stare them in the eyes. But to mistake one’s own wishes for reality is to show signs of a penchant well-known in the circles surrounding The Turn of the Screw: it is ‘hallucination.’ Any effort to cling to the view that the law of non-contradiction does not apply to the interpretation of literary works of art is merely, in the words of Hans Albert, “Eine Fortsetzung der Theologie mit anderen Mitteln.”

24
NOTES

1 Rimmon-Kenan (1977: 124). Please see “References” for full bibliographic citations. The authors would also like to express their gratitude to the editor and an anonymous reviewer for suggestions toward revisions of this essay.

2 Freundlieb (1984: 85), trying to put an end to the stream of interpretations, helps us on our way by pointing out some of the essential Chomskyan viewpoints, going back to the role of the reader.


4 Macleod (1988), committing himself to the question, whether The Turn of the Screw can be interpreted, comes to the conclusion, that “we can never be sure, in a wide variety of ways, of the status of what we are being told. The Turn of the Screw is a ‘ghost’ story in more than just the usual sense.” (154) If the reader is haunted with meanings, this might mean, of course, that the text itself makes the haunting possible.


6 It is still standard practice to start from this division in studying The Turn of the Screw. The Penguin 1987 edition, by Anthony Curtis, is unambiguous about this: “The critics may be divided into two camps: Wilsonians and anti-Wilsonians.” (p. 17).

7 One could, if one wanted to, give the name ‘interpretive community’ to such groups. However, in the absence of any sociological work validating this notion, and given the looseness of the term as well as Fish’s (1980) failure to provide a clear definition of it, we wish to refrain from using it. For an incisive critique of the notion, both from a methodological and from a political perspective, see Anderson (1993).

8 Curtis (1987: 8).


11 See Matthiessen and Murdock (1947).


16 This should be compared with Wilson (1963), the essay we used. It was, however, Harold C. Goddard who around 1920, before Freud became known to a wider public and before Wilson proposed his interpretation, wrote a lecture in which he treated The Turn of the Screw in a psycho-analytic way; for his article—not published, however, until 1957—see Willen (1963: 244-272).

17 The arguments $F_6$, $F_2$ and $F_4$ derive from Wilson (1963: 116-119).


19 Both $F_5$ and $F_6$ are mentioned by Curtis (1987: 19-22).

20 We do not claim, of course, that our selection covers the full range of arguments exhaustively. The burden of proof, however, rests with anyone who would wish to extend the present list.

21 A strong version of this kind of argument has been developed by Levin (1979). We think it has not been invalidated so far. For more recent views on intention in literary interpretation, see Harker (1992), Iseminger (1992), Livingston and Mele (1992), and Van Peer (1992b).
22 For an illuminating treatment of this aspect of authorial intention, see Livingston (1991: chapter 2).

23 It will be appreciated that such rationalizations form part of the universe of the text. No such explanations are offered at the textual level in the case of James's story. Rather, they turn up in the results of the reading act, namely as interpretation. F. Acknowledging this difference does not invalidate our argument, however, because the typical ghost stories by Radcliffe have explicitly constituted such inferences as legitimate, precisely by incorporating them within the text.

24 *i.e.* "a continuation of theology by other means" (Albert 1991: 158).

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