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THE DEATH OF MILES IN *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*

BY MURIEL WEST

CRITICS have always been struck by the death scene that concludes *The Turn of the Screw* and, being struck, have given us a variety of interpretations—psychological, religious, poetic; but they have never accounted for the improbability that Miles—whose good health and sound heart are never questioned in the tale—should die of heart failure. In James's other stories concluding with the death of a young boy ("The Pupil" and "The Author of Beltraffio") we are prepared by earlier accounts of the boy's health to accept his final death. Not so with Miles. We are not even prepared to find him bewildered and demoralized by the series of embarrassing questions put to him by his governess: Miles is presented as remarkably well-poised for a ten-year-old.

Yet, critics continue to assume an implausible cause-and-effect relationship between (for instance) the governess' questioning and Miles's responses—including his death. For example, the governess is thought (by a recent critic) to be "indirectly responsible"; she is "in some sense, guilty" because of her sin of "Faustian pride": it is "her insistence that kills little Miles, . . . that dispossesses the heart of the child": she makes up her mind to "get all"—to force him to "a full confession of all his 'crimes' at a point when the child has been harrowed already to the furthest limit of his small resources, when he has gone as far as he can in the way of confession and repentance"; she is guilty of "harrowing a poor little soul beyond its powers of endurance, of pressing it to a degree of self-exposure that cannot but destroy it."¹

"A degree of self-exposure that *cannot* but destroy . . ."? The disproportion between the supposed cause and effect suggests that we follow James's advice to read *The Turn of the Screw* with more than "some attention."² By a sober and careful reading or rereading we may be able to illuminate some of the ambiguities in the governess' "crystalline . . . record of so many intense anomalies and obscurities"; we may even see our way around her "explanation of them"—explanation that James says is "a different matter" (p. xix)—and so be in a position to suggest a more satisfactory hypothesis in accounting for Miles's death than hitherto has been offered.

In the interest of clearer reading we may first observe that the subject matter of the last section of the tale may be roughly divided into what the

governess and Miles *say* and what they *do*. For the most part the conversation is simple, perfectly clear and dignified. She asks him if he took from the hall table her letter to his uncle; he admits he did; she asks him why, and he answers simply: "To see what you said about me" (p. 304). And so it goes. The so-called "harrowing of a poor little soul," the alleged "pressing [of] it to a degree of self-exposure that cannot but destroy it," is as easy to read as a child's primer. On the other hand, the governess' account of what she does, what Miles does, what Miles and the ghost of Peter Quint feel and think (as though she were in a position to know!) form an intricate, far from lucid, accompaniment to what may be called a simple—but curiosity-provoking—theme song. In other words, James presents at the same time (through the governess' confused hypersensitivity) the front and the back of the "tapestry"—but leaves it entirely up to the reader to determine how the governess' considerable physical and mental activity should be understood and how much her observations and her explanations should be accepted as fact. It is this part of her narrative that deserves our closest attention.

By examining a few of the long paragraphs that intervene between a simple question and a simple answer we may discover a good bit more about what happens in the finale of *The Turn of the Screw* than comes to light if we merely satisfy our curiosity about what Miles will say in answer to the governess' persistent probing into his "crimes."

In the first of these paragraphs (between her asking if he took the letter and his answer) she reports (1) her state of mind: "a fierce split of my attention" (p. 303)—a hint (perhaps) that we also should "split" our "attention" as we read her story. She continues (2) with an account of her physical behavior: "I sprang straight up, reduced. . . to the mere blind movement of getting hold of him, drawing him close, . . . while I just fell for support against the nearest piece of furniture, instinctively keeping him with

¹ Dorothea Krook, *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James* (Cambridge, England, 1962), pp. 125-127, 375 ff.

² Preface to Vol. XII of *The Novels and Tales of Henry James* (New York, 1908), xviii. This volume of this edition is used throughout this paper for references to the Preface and to the text of *The Turn of the Screw*.

his back to the window." Then she gives (3) her vision (with "unsealed" eyes): "Peter Quint had come into view like a sentinel before a prison. The next thing I saw was that, from outside, he had reached the window, and then I knew [sic] that, close to the glass and glaring in through it, he offered once more to the room his white face of damnation." She follows up (4) with an account of her mental-emotional behavior: "It represents but grossly what took place within me at the sight to say that on the second my decision was made; yet I believe that no woman so overwhelmed ever in so short a time recovered her command of the *act*. It came to me . . . that the act would be, seeing and facing what I saw and faced, to keep the boy himself unaware" (p. 303).

We may observe at this point that her impulsive "act" is not consistent with her earlier impulses to let Miles go his own way—these impulses following his defiance, gentle though it be, first, in being "bad" by going out on the lawn at midnight and, more openly, when he makes a declaration of independence on the way to church. The governess expresses her attitude most vividly when she and Mrs. Grose are about to set out for the lake in search of Flora. Mrs. Grose shows alarm: "You leave him—?" The governess answers: "So long with Quint? Yes—I don't mind that now" (p. 271). Obviously she is at the mercy of her "inspirations."

Next (to go on with the paragraph under consideration) she (5) vividly characterizes her "act" (that increases in intensity as time goes on) as "like fighting with a demon for a human soul," and follows (6) by combining a relatively mild example of that "fight" with a report on Miles's physical condition: "and when I had fairly so appraised it [the resemblance of her "act" to "fighting with a demon"] I saw how the human soul—held out, in the tremor of my hands, at arms' length—had a perfect dew of sweat on a lovely childish forehead. The face that was close to mine was as white as the face against the glass, and out of it presently came a sound, not low nor weak, but as if from much further away, that I drank like a waft of fragrance" (pp. 303–304). At this point Miles admits he took the letter.

We may reasonably ask if Miles's white face, the dew of sweat on his forehead, the seeming distance from which he replies, are signs of embarrassment at being made to confess, or signs, rather, of fright caused by the governess's sudden gymnastic behavior—behavior so rashly impulsive that she falls against a piece of furniture in getting hold of him, behavior so excited that

her hands tremble when she holds him out at arms' length.

In its complex weaving of actions, observations, feelings, and inspirations, the paragraph is typical of the governess' method of telling her story. Sometimes several questions and answers are grouped together, but the structural relationship between conversation and exposition remains the same: the serene, dignified dialogue (provocative, however, as a drawn-out bit of back-fence gossip) presents an easily followed narrative thread that tends to obscure the nervous excitement and rash physical activity constituting the more intricately woven background fabric of the tapestry. We may overlook, for instance, that after the governess' "mere blind movement of getting hold of him" (p. 303), she does not entirely let go her hold until the conversation reaches the point of Miles's admission that he said "things" only to those he "liked"; and that, even then, she lets him go merely "a little" (p. 307).

To get on now to the paragraph that follows Miles's admission that he took the letter. The governess surprisingly greets his simple statement with a "moan of joy" (p. 304); at the same time she enfolds him, draws him close—and so close she can feel "in the sudden fever of his little body the tremendous pulse of his little heart" (p. 304). We may pause to wonder how tight a young woman of twenty would have to squeeze a boy of ten to feel the fever in his body and the beating of his heart; hard enough, we may suppose, to hurt him and certainly enough to frighten him—since he is unaware that she has any reason for the bear-hug—for he does not see what she does, that the thing at the window in "its slow wheel" resembles now "a baffled beast." For her, the sight of the baffled beast is a signal for a "quickened courage," a "confidence" that she might now "defy him"—a double strength that makes her "go on." Go on to what—merely more questions or more of her fighting "act"? She does not specify, but, apparently with composure in her voice, asks him: "What did you take it for?" (p. 304).

When Miles has answered that and admitted he opened the letter, she describes, again in one breath, both what the next part of her "act" is and how Miles reacts: "My eyes were now, as I held him off a little again, on Miles's own face, in which the collapse of mockery showed me how complete was the ravage of uneasiness" (p. 304). Why is he ravaged with uneasiness? Because of his admissions about the letter or because he is bewildered and terrified by her persistent though

varied grip on his small body? We certainly get the impression by this time that her combination of questioning and manhandling resembles the time-honored practice of extracting damning confessions from a taciturn heretic or witch by stretching the rack a little further or giving another turn to the thumbscrew—continuing the process of physical “persuasion” until the victim admits that the devil himself prompted him to repudiate the particular religious or political orthodoxy then in power. Miles, we may remember, has defied the authority of his governess (possibly a similar attitude of defiance inspired the “things” said that brought about his expulsion from school); we may also remember that the governess’ expressed motive (like that of the old Inquisitors) is the salvation of his soul. Further, we may question, if we look back to the preceding chapter, whether her “act” is entirely a matter of “inspiration” or if her strategy of using physical force is in part rational and calculated. Before she corners him into the inquisition proper she suggests that he “tell” her “something” (p. 300); when he tries to stall for time, she says: “There couldn’t be a better place or time”; then she describes his reaction and how it “struck” her: “He looked round him uneasily, and I had the rare—oh the queer!—impression of the very first symptom I had seen in him of the approach of immediate fear. It was as if he were suddenly afraid of me—which struck me indeed as perhaps the best thing to make him” (p. 301).

And yet, in the final chapter, the governess so skilfully manages her “crystalline . . . record of so many intense anomalies and obscurities” (p. xix) that she fairly well succeeds in giving the impression that Miles is uneasy because his eyes are “sealed.” Inconsistently, too, she takes credit for what she feels is his loss of that remarkable power to see ghosts—forgetting (or ignoring) her earlier “extraordinary impression” that *she* was “not barred” but, by “direct perception,” she knew it was “positively *he* who was” (pp. 298–299). Inconsistently, she gives herself credit for a quite unmerited “triumph”: “What was prodigious was that at last, by my success, his sense was sealed and his communication stopped: he knew that he was in presence, but knew not of what . . . And what did this strain of trouble matter when my eyes went back to the window only to see that the air was clear again and—by my personal triumph—the influence quenched?” (pp. 304–305).

In a moment, she lets her “elation out” and almost shouts in her “joy”—why? Because he found “Nothing, nothing!” in the letter. She is

so ecstatically happy that—still having him close—she kisses his forehead and finds it “drenched” (p. 305). Thereafter, questions and answers following in fairly rapid succession are interspersed with remarks showing that Miles continues to be uneasy and befuddled: he appears to think of “something far off” that reaches him “only through the pressure of his anxiety”; he feels a “dreary little surprise”; he gives her “the longest and strangest look” (p. 305). What she has been *doing* in the meantime she does not say. But when Miles tells her simply that he did not steal, she describes her action again: “My face must have shown him that I believed him utterly; yet my hands—but it was for pure tenderness—shook him as if to ask him why, if it was all for nothing, he had condemned me to months of torment” (p. 306).

What does she mean by her pure “tenderness”? She has earlier used that word repeatedly in what seems to be an unconscious effort to gloss over the force of an action or an attitude. In a conversation with Mrs. Grose she admits to a “blush” in seeing “how much more unreservedly” the house-keeper forgives Miles (for his supposed sins) than her own “tenderness” can in “any way . . . do” (pp. 215–216). When she has brought Miles back to the house after his midnight escapade, she says: “I was of course thoroughly kind and merciful; never, never yet had I placed on his small shoulders hands of such tenderness as those with which, while I rested against the bed, I held him well under fire” (p. 233). Also when she visits him in his bedroom (after his declaration of independence), she “[let[s]]” herself “go,” and admits: “I threw myself upon him and in the tenderness of my pity I embraced him” (p. 266).

So, in the last chapter, when she follows her shaking (motivated by “pure tenderness”) with the question, “What then did you do?” we may tamely follow her implication that her *question* makes him look “in vague pain all round the top of the room” and draw “his breath, two or three times over, as if with difficulty” (p. 306). Or we may believe that her shaking is vigorous enough to make him short of breath and suffer from “pain” that is physical rather than mental. As we shall see, he continues to have difficulty in getting his breath and in making his answers. He appears “to weigh” a question, “but in a manner quite detached and helpless”; he tries to remember, but fails. For a brief interval the “desolation of his surrender” makes her question the rightness of what she is doing, for, as she says, it “was practically, by this time, so complete that

I ought to have left it there." But she is "blind with victory," "infatuated" (p. 306); and even when she asks herself the astounding question: "if he *were* innocent what then on earth was I?"—she brushes the question aside; but before she does she is momentarily "paralysed," and "let[s] him go a little," with the result that he, "with a deep-drawn sigh" turns away, and is "soon at some distance" from her, "still breathing hard and again with the air, though now without anger for it, of being confined against his will." Once again he looks up "at the dim day as if, of what had hitherto sustained him," nothing is left "but an unspeakable anxiety" (p. 307).

Although he is at "some distance" from her, his freedom lasts only until he says he "suppose[s]" that what he "sometimes said" was "too bad . . . to write home" (pp. 307–308). She yields to a fleeting leniency ("Stuff and nonsense!"), but then immediately asks him, with a sternness that she claims is not for him but for "his judge, his executioner" (apparently meaning the master who expelled him): "What *were* these things?" (p. 308). Her sternness, she says, makes him "avert himself again," and "that movement" makes *her*, "with a single bound and an irrepressible cry, spring straight upon him." She then attempts to cover up her admission (that his *movement* causes her gymnastic exuberance) by putting the blame on the reappearance at the window of "the white face of damnation." She bewails the "drop" of her "victory" and the return of her "battle"—adding that the "wildness" of her "veritable leap" only served as a "great betrayal." She lets the "impulse flame up to convert the climax of his dismay into the very proof of his liberation" (p. 308), implying that his "dismay" is caused by his inability to see what she thinks she sees. For our part we may believe, rather, that his dismay is caused by the wildness of her veritable leap—by her springing straight upon him. Like a cat playing with a mouse, she has recaptured the small creature that she "let . . . go a little."

Before pushing on to a conclusion we may pause to remind ourselves that James says her explanations are "a different matter"—not to be confused with facts. And to remember also that James wrote Paul Bourget—directly after taking him to task for explaining too much in his novels, insisting that to do so is "an injury to the patches of ambiguity and the abysses of shadow which really are the clothing—or much of it—of the *effects* that constitute the material of our trade"—that *The Turn of the Screw* is "an exercise in the art of not appearing to one's self to fail."³

The governess as governess has certainly failed: Flora is gone and Miles has defied her. We may take her vivid but confused and often contradictory account of her actions and feelings as *her* exercise in the "art of not appearing to one's self to fail." And we may be sure that James, as the guiding hand behind her "exercise," has taken care not to let her explain away the "patches of ambiguity and the abysses of shadow" in which her tale abounds.

Some of these patches try to the utmost our efforts at explanation. For instance, after talking about Miles's "dismay," she excitedly goes on: "No more, no more, no more! I shrieked to my visitant as I tried to press him against me" (p. 308). What does she mean by "him"—Miles or her "visitant"? Does she know which is which? From this point on her speeches lose a good measure of their earlier composure and clarity. Forgetting the whole purpose of her inspired "act" (to keep Miles "unaware"), she actually tells him where to look for the ghost: "But it's at the window—straight before us. It's *there*—the coward horror, there for the last time!" Next she tries to convince us (or herself?) that Miles's distress is caused by his inability to "see." But his continued struggle for air and, particularly, his being "at" her "in a white rage" (p. 309) forcibly suggest that the earlier "desolation of his surrender" has left him. We can picture him fighting her now, struggling to free himself from her clutches—whatever they might be subsequent to her "veritable leap." The abyss of shadow is too deep for us to make out an armlock, a scissors hold, a side chancery, or a full-or half-Nelson. Whatever she is doing (most probably her action shifts from moment to moment), she presents us with a strangely confused description of Miles's response: "His face gave again, round the room, its convulsed supplication" (p. 309). Is his "supplication" convulsed? Or his *face*?

As she continues, the ambiguities become even more complex—well-nigh indecipherable. She uses the word "launched" in a way that could be construed as a speech-label meaning "said vigorously," or as an action-word meaning "threw myself"; also, her wording is such that we cannot tell if she is speaking *to* Miles or to the "beast"—who is now, fantastically, diffused throughout the room "like the taste of poison." As a supreme example of James's "amusement" in creating reader wonder with ambiguity, the passage de-

³ *The Letters of Henry James*, ed. Percy Lubbock (New York, 1920), I, 289–290.

serves exact quotation: " 'What does he matter now, my own?—what will he *ever* matter? *I* have you,' I launched at the beast, 'but he has lost you for ever!' Then for the demonstration of my work, 'There, *there!*' I said to Miles" (p. 309). If she is speaking to the "beast," then she is saying that *she* "has" him; that is, she now is "possessed," and Miles at last is free of a supposed "possession" by an evil spirit. Oddly enough (or rather, we might say, with a curious consistency) her last words echo the possession-theme: "his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped." On the other hand, if she is speaking throughout to Miles, she says she has *him* (at the same time she gives the "beast" a kick or a push) and she consequently is the "possessing" agent—an end-result she has long desired. When he earlier rebuffed her (on the occasion of her visit to his bedroom), saying (though "ever so gently") that he wants her to "let" him "alone," she continues to "linger beside him" and question him. When she senses "a small faint quaver of consenting consciousness," she says: "it made me drop on my knees beside the bed and seize once more the chance of possessing him" (pp. 266-267).

In any case, just before his death Miles manages to jerk free enough to utter "the cry of a creature hurled over an abyss." Even then she will not let him go, but holds him at last with a "passion": "the grasp with which I recovered him might have been that of catching him in his fall. I caught him, yes, I held him—it may be imagined with what a passion; but at the end of a minute I began to feel what it truly was that I held" (p. 309). It seems inescapable that we reject the opinion that Miles dies because his little soul has been pressed to "a degree of self-exposure that cannot but destroy it." It is the violent behavior of his governess that brings about his death—whether directly or indirectly is scarcely possible to determine without more investigation than our present close reading brings to light. Everywhere we are prevented by ambiguities and abysses of shadow from reaching a position that permits flat-footed statements. We may suspect that she kills him with "psychopathic compulsive violence"; or that (in effect) he kills himself because he fights back and the exertion is too much for him; or that he simply dies from the strain and the fright; or that all of these contribute to the final "dispossession" of his little heart.

We may however reaffirm our position that the governess' violence is at least the indirect cause of Miles's death by observing that earlier in the

tale James prepares us for the violence of the ending. He covers his tracks (to use one of his own expressions) rather carefully: early symptoms of the governess' tendency toward violence are disguised by a great wealth of huggings and kissings scattered throughout. But—whenever she is in the peculiar condition of being able to "see" ghosts, a condition that carries with it a number of distinguishing marks (before, during, or after the actual "seeing")—a strange hush or cessation of natural sounds, a queer feeling of not being "in life," and so on—she displays a stronger than ordinary urge to grip or clutch someone. When Mrs. Grose comes round the house to find out what is wrong (after the governess has seen Quint at the window and is still shaken by the experience) the governess reports: "I put out my hand to her and she took it; I held her hard a little, liking to feel her close to me" (p. 187). Also, when she returns to her room after seeing Quint disappear into the "element" of silence on the stair, she grips Flora: "At that moment, in the state of my nerves, I absolutely believed she lied; and if I once more closed my eyes it was before the dazzle of the three or four possible ways in which I might take this up. One of these for a moment tempted me with such singular force that, to resist it, I must have gripped my little girl with a spasm that, wonderfully, she submitted to without a cry or a sign of fright" (p. 225). We may also suspect her of an excess of "tenderness" when, by her own statement, she "throws" herself on "dear little Miles" and kisses him: she says he simply takes it "with indulgent good humour" (p. 266). Such admissions, revealing the governess' propensity for clutching, gripping, throwing herself upon people, prepare us for her sustained and accumulative "act" of violence in the last section.

Further, we may learn more about how James wants her behavior to be understood if we turn to his later tale, "The Jolly Corner," and follow the thoughts of Spencer Brydon as he hunts for the ghost of his other self—the man he might have been if he had spent his life in America. For three nights Brydon has refrained from visiting the old house; as a result he thinks the ghost is now ready to defy him as "the fanged or the antlered animal brought at last to bay." Although Brydon rejoices that his other self has overcome his fear, he is afraid himself of an encounter, and his fear produces

the sense of a need to hold on to something, even after the manner of a man slipping and slipping on some awful incline; the vivid impulse, above all, to move, to act, to charge, somehow and upon something—to

show himself, in a word, that he wasn't afraid. The state of "holding-on" was thus the state to which he was momentarily reduced; if there had been anything, in the great vacancy, to seize, he would presently have been aware of having clutched it as he might under a shock at home have clutched the nearest chair-back.⁴

Brydon's "vivid impulse to move, to act, to charge," his need to seize *anything* within reach, suggest to us, in their resemblance to the governess' dynamic behavior, James's close study of human responses to a given state of fear. The governess, however, actually *does* what Brydon merely feels an intense impulse to do. Because of her fear, her strength is greater than ordinary. And what this increased strength amounts to may be guessed at by her earlier realization that her spasmodic grip of little Flora might have caused her to cry out in pain and fright, and by a few hints that she is a young woman of some size: first (but most delicately): "the long glasses in which, for the first time, I could see myself from head to foot" (p. 159); more firmly: she sounds "like a troop of cavalry" (p. 262) when she comes snooping at Miles's door; likewise, when she says it would be "too extreme an effort to squeeze beside him into the pew" (p. 255).

At this point a good many questions occur to us—questions that deserve study but that lead beyond the business at hand. For instance, is the governess "psychopathic," "hysterical," or is she telling a dream of what might-have been? Evidence—of a limited kind—can be produced in support of all these possibilities—even for the possibility that she is the victim of self-hypnosis.⁵ Of these various possibilities, perhaps the most illuminating in the present context is the likelihood that the governess' account of her own violence is merely a dream—*her* hideous experience that resembles in a number of ways James's own "most appalling and yet most admirable" nightmare. In describing his "dream-adventure" James uses the words *act, rush, bound, inspired, triumph, visitant* much as the governess does, and he reveals a delight, an elation, a joy in the adventure almost identical with hers:

The climax of this extraordinary experience—which stands alone for me as a dream-adventure founded in the deepest, quickest, clearest act of cogitation and comparison, act indeed of life-saving energy, as well as in unutterable fear—was the sudden pursuit . . . of a just dimly-described figure that retreated in terror

before my rush and dash (a glare of inspired reaction from irresistible but shameful dread), out of the room I had a moment before been desperately . . . defending by the push of my shoulder against hard pressure . . . from the other side. The lucidity, not to say the sublimity, of the crisis had consisted of the great thought that I, in my appalled state, was probably still more appalling than the awful agent, creature or presence. . . . The triumph of my impulse, perceived in a flash as I acted on it by myself at a bound, forcing the door outward, was the grand thing, but the great point of the whole was the wonder of my final recognition. Routed, dismayed, the tables turned upon him by my so surpassing him for straight aggression and dire intention, my visitant was already but a diminished spot in the long perspective, the tremendous, glorious hall . . . over the far-gleaming floor of which . . . he sped for *his* life.⁶

To pursue the comparison further would go far beyond our present purpose which has been, simply, to read *The Turn of the Screw* with more than "some" attention and so reveal the absurdity of the contention that Miles dies because his little soul is made to confess beyond its powers of endurance—pressed "to a degree of self-exposure that cannot but destroy it"; and to point out, on the contrary, that the physical violence of the governess—generally overlooked by critics—may much more reasonably be said to cause his death. We might force ourselves to conjure up plausible physical particulars of just how Miles dies, and force ourselves further to attempt a definition of what precisely ails the governess, thus tearing roughly (and futilely, perhaps) at the veils of ambiguity and abysses of shadow that form the "clothing—or much of it—of the effects that constitute the material" of Henry James's art. Let it suffice, then, to conclude by saying: In the final section of *The Turn of the Screw* the governess indulges in an exuberant debauch of violence that contributes to the sudden death of the little Miles—or she dreams that she did.

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⁴ *The Ghostly Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (New Brunswick, N. J., 1948), pp. 744-746.

⁵ For analysis of the self-hypnosis possibility and related ambiguities, see my *A Stormy Night with "The Turn of the Screw"* (Phoenix, Ariz.: Frye and Smith, Ltd., 1964).

⁶ Henry James, *Autobiography*, ed. Frederick W. Dupee (New York, 1956), pp. 196-197.