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Postgothic Fiction: Joyce Carol Oates Turns the Screw on Henry James

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I: "Suffering is infinite *and will not diminish.*" —Oates

Readers of James's classic gothic conundrum, "The Turn of the Screw," have been asking themselves essentially the same questions since the tale appeared in 1898. That is, the central puzzle has been to understand the psyche of the governess, and, if she is insane, as the reader increasingly suspects, then how does one read a text that is completely occluded, inseparable from her self-serving strategies of deception and paranoia?¹ Certainly critical opinion has focused on the governess, or the children, or Douglas and the narrator—the living, in other words—in order to comprehend the meaning and significance of the events in the story. But focusing on the living alone has led these same critics to the proverbial dead-end of interpretation: how can one interpret a text that is riddled with suppressed hysteria, perhaps insanity so profound that it appears as a manifestation of normative behavior? Or, as Oates would claim, is there any such thing as "normative" behavior? How does one understand a narrative voice when it is so clear that it is actually impenetrable while all the time appearing completely penetrable? And so we are back at the beginning; it would appear that we cannot understand the events in this story if we attend only to the living. There is, in fact, an entire layer of meaning to the tale that is buried in the dead lives whose ghostly presence continues to motivate the actions of the living.

Another way of approaching the mysteries of the story has been taken by Joyce Carol Oates, who has rewritten the tale twice. The first time was in a

¹Readers who have struggled with the vexed and vexing narrative and thematic issues in James's tale are legion. Shoshana Felman has summed up the "trap" that the reader of James's text falls into quite succinctly: "The reader can choose either to *believe* the governess, and thus to behave like Mrs. Grose, or *not to believe the governess*, and thus to behave precisely *like the governess*. Since it is the governess, who, within the text, plays the role of the suspicious reader, occupies the *place* of the interpreter, to *suspect* that place and that position is, thereby, to *take it*" (190; original italics).

story entitled "The Turn of the Screw," published in 1972 in her collection of stories *Marriages and Infidelities*. In this early rewrite of James she writes in a double-column format and essentially puts the main characters from Mann's *Death in Venice* in something like a homosocial nexus of obsession. The story is not particularly successful, nor is it an important rewrite of its source in James. Twenty years passed, however, and Oates must have felt the need to revisit the issue. In 1992, she published a rewrite of both James and herself from the point of view of the ghosts and entitled it "The Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly" (1992; rpt. 1995). This story attempts to answer the conundrums that have plagued critics for generations. Is the governess insane and imagining the ghosts? What happened between the children and their dead governess and valet? And what force is so strong that it can draw the dead back to the living? What haunts the living and the dead? This essay will place James and the second Oates text in some sort of juxtaposition in an attempt to answer the first questions by posing a second set of questions: in reading Oates's story, what does the reader see from the point of view of the dead that one did not see in James's text? And in reading Oates's rewriting of James, what does it mean to read from a postmodern position that acknowledges the architectonic nature of the narrative voice? What, in short, constitutes what I would call the "postgothic position"? Can one write from beyond genre the same way one can speak from beyond the grave? Can one read either text with both tales simultaneously in one's head and see, not a partial vision of the "screw," but the whole perspective? This essay will attempt to answer these questions, all the while recognizing the fictiveness of the critic's position, the self-reflexive futility of trying to decipher the indecipherable.

James's tale is notoriously subtle on one level, or hopelessly transparent on another. That is, the governess is either insane or she is not.² The governess—the only major character who is unnamed in the story—is either hysterical, sexually perverse and repressed in her attraction to the Master and the children, or she is not. The ghosts have to be manifestations of her madness, her repressed and oedipally inflected sexuality writ large for only her to see, because there are no such things as ghosts, no one else sees them after all, and therefore she cannot be seeing anything except her own psychotic projections. And so she is insane, you see. But she has told the tale to a family friend, Douglas, who passes the story on to a narrator (gender unspecified), who in turn regales a group of women with the events as a Christmas time fireside chat. And the governess, unlike the majority of insane

²The governess's insanity or psychic problems have been discussed by numerous critics, including Paula Marantz Cohen and Stanley Renner. Lacanian readings of the causes of the governess's neuroses have included those by Christine Brooke-Rose and Beth Newman.

people who insist that they have seen ghosts and who are believed to be responsible for the death of a child in their charge, has lived out her life in respectability and credibility. These are the basic problems in reading James's "Turn," a work that has puzzled, baffled, annoyed, and enraged its readers since its publication in 1898.³ If the governess is mad, then somehow the patriarchal system that has propped her up and placed her in charge of innocent lives is also perverse and corrupt. Somehow that aloof "Master," living in splendid isolation in London and untouched by the tragedies occurring in his family, stands finally as a representative of Empire, or a clockmaker God or, most damning of all, the omniscient author who sees all but fails to intervene with a moral or a lesson.

If the governess is not mad—if ghosts have appeared to her—then what exactly is the story about? Are the ghosts evil and seeking to claim the children? Or are the ghosts themselves victims and doomed for some reason to haunt the environs of their crimes? And what exactly were those crimes? In other words, whose story is it? These are the starting points for Joyce Carol Oates's second rewrite of the story, collected in her *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* (1995). In a collection that contains several unforgettably strange and perverse tales (most noticeably "The Doll" and the lead story, "Haunted"), "The Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly" is memorable for its very precise and detailed rewriting of James. In the tradition of post-modern rewrites of earlier classic works, Oates's story stands out as both a creative and a critical response to her source in James. For Oates answers the questions the reader cannot resolve after reading James. She answers them in ways that are not comfortable or pleasant, but she is, I think, honest about the dark and unspoken urges in James's text. I speak, of course, about pedophilia, trauma, and fantasy. And in addition to pedophilia, Oates explores erotic melancholia, the kind of frustrated, infinite erotic suffering, the kind of loss and pain that is so intense that it exists even after death, the kind of insatiable longing that would constitute hell should there be such a place.

2: "that turn, and turn, and turn upon the hope" —Oates

It is necessary, however, to begin by focusing our discussion on an examination of the three sightings of the ghosts that occur in James's text, each of which is then carefully recrafted—turned over and over again in her hands—and finally and slyly commented on by Oates. The first sighting in James occurs only a few weeks after the unnamed governess's arrival at Bly to take up her duties to two orphaned siblings, the eight-year-old Flora and the ten-year-old Miles. The Jamesian reader recognizes that the smugness and

³Critical controversy has raged around James's text, and the most famous (or infamous) critical statements are readily available in a number of sources: see Gerald Willen, Terry Heller, Peter Beidler, and Deborah Esch and Jonathan Warren.

the self-deception of this young woman will be her undoing, but the reader also participates in the story on more than this first level: that of character critique. The postmodern position that Oates provides us in her story places the governess within a fictitious universe of literary intertextuality that is implicit in James, explicit in Oates. The Victorian narrative convention is turned over once in James, twice in Oates. In its ironic and twisting perversion of a young governess's fantasies, both James and Oates reveal the persistent power of master narratives to turn our heads not simply once, in the initial reading of them, but twice, in our futile attempts to impose their fantasies on our actual lives. Hence, James has the self-satisfied governess describe herself in these terms:

It was plump, one afternoon, in the middle of my very hour: the children were tucked away and I had come out for my stroll. One of the thoughts that, as I don't in the least shrink now from noting, used to be with me in these wanderings was that it would be as charming as a charming story suddenly to meet some one. Some one would appear there at the turn of a path and would stand before me and smile and approve. I didn't ask more than that—I only asked that he should *know*; and the only way to be sure he knew would be to see it, and the kind light of it, in his handsome face. (James 15; original italics)

The reader recognizes the self-referentiality of the governess fantasy operating here—the governess herself is in the grip of the *Jane Eyre* narrative of the well-meaning, scrupulously diligent, oh-so-good and deserving young woman who wins the Master (and his estate and income) away from the evil and dark woman (read: mother-substitute). The root of the fantasy is oedipal, and the power and persistence of the narrative bespeak its hold over the female imagination. In Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, this incident actually does occur. On one of her meditative nocturnal rambles, Jane suddenly encounters Rochester, the Master, and the unexpected sight of her—so good, so pure—throws him from his horse. James rewrites *Jane Eyre* much more darkly, because the male figure who suddenly appears to the governess is not the longed-for master, but the ghost of his servant, Quint, the randy and promiscuous valet who chooses as the locale for his first haunting the towers of the old house. And lest we miss the phallic significance of the man's threat, we are told of his appearance as it occurred to the governess: "We were too far apart to call to each other, but there was a moment at which, at shorter range, some challenge between us, breaking the hush, would have been the right result of our straight mutual stare. He was in one of the angles, the one away from the house, very erect, as it struck me, and with both hands on the ledge" (16).

Oates's postmodern spin on this same scene is revealing for the explanatory context she provides. Here is her much more cynical rendering of

the psyche of the first and doomed governess, a woman who allowed her head to be fatally turned by the governess-fantasy. And in succumbing to this fantasy, Miss Jessel became easy pickings for Quint, who was merely a poor substitute for his Master:

Days and weeks passed in an oblivion of happiness. For what *is* happiness, save oblivion. The young governess from Glynngden with the pale, rather narrow, plain-pretty face and intense dark eyes, who had long forbade herself fantasy as a heathen sort of indulgence, now gave herself up in daydreams of little Flora, and Master, and yes, she herself. (For, at this time, little Miles was away at school.) *A new family, the most natural of families, why not?* Like every other young governess in England, Miss Jessel had avidly read her *Jane Eyre*. (Oates, "Accused" 260)⁴

So Jessel was expecting, according to the structure of her well-studied fantasy narrative, the sudden appearance of the Master, his love, marriage, and an instant family of children that she would not have to soil her body to bear. Instead she was easily seduced and impregnated by the Master's valet, Quint, and destroyed, not redeemed by her body. According to Oates, the fantasy of marrying the Master leads not to the happy ending that Brontë provided, but a much more ordinary and typical narrative closure, the suicide of the pregnant and disgraced young woman.

And, in an uncanny bit of repetitive turning, Oates presents the current governess as yet another clone in the grip of the *Jane Eyre* saga, blatantly comparing her to Jane: "[she was] a skinny broomstick of a girl, in a gray bonnet that does not flatter her, and a badly wrinkled gray traveling cloak; her small, pale, homely face is lit from within by a hope, a prayer, of 'succeeding'" (266). But Quint is now dead, perhaps murdered, perhaps accidentally drowned in a drunken rip, and so he is forced to turn again to the same scenario, the seduction of a virginal governess, but this time it cannot be in the flesh, but through the spirit. And hoping for a sudden visit from the Master, the new governess instead receives a full frontal of Quint, who stages his haunting as a display of masculine preening. Appearing to her on the battlements of Bly, Quint feels nothing but "bliss" at the governess's shock and terror: "The poor thing takes an involuntary step backward. She presses a tremulous hand to her throat. Quint gives her the full, *full* impact of his gaze—he holds her fast there below on the path, he wills her to stand as if

⁴All quotations are from the 1995 version published in *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* (New York: Plume, 1995), pp. 254–83, and will be cited in parentheses in the text. Alice Hall Petry has explored all of the allusions to the presence of *Jane Eyre* in James's tale and argued that they reveal that James's intention was to write "a remarkably clever parody" of the Brontë classic (75).

paralyzed. . . . *You do not know me, my dear girl, but you can guess who I am. You have been forewarned*" (269; Oates's italics). Forewarned, that is, by the saga that is operating in lieu of the *Jane Eyre* narrative: the seduced maiden tradition. In the latter narrative, the woman is victim, not victor. Seduction can never be avoided, and the body is fate or doomed or a stinking tomb from which women can never escape. Oates's version of this scene concludes on a highly literary and allusive note, reminding her readers not simply that she is rewriting James, but that she is a woman author rewriting a male author's turn on a distinctly female literary tradition.

**3: "How otherwise to know what power we wield,
except to see it in another's eyes?" —Oates**

The second appearance of Quint to the governess occurs with the medium of glass between them, as in the biblical sense: we see through a glass darkly now. The specular intensities of both James's and Oates's tales lie not simply in the three ghostly appearances, but in the way these "performances" are also manifestations of the frustrated and diverted erotic impulse of the dead. In James's version of this second haunting, the governess comes upon Quint one late Sunday afternoon, staring at her from the outside of the dining-room window. The description of him again focuses on his body, but this time in an even more displaced manner:

He was the same—he was the same, and seen, this time, as he had been seen before, from the waist up, the window. . . . His face was close to the glass, yet the effect of this better view was, strangely, just to show me how intense the former had been. He remained but a few seconds—long enough to convince me he also saw and recognised; but it was as if I had been looking at him for years and had known him always. (20)

And how, we might ask, could the governess have known the man "always"? The standard critical explanation is that the man in the window is a manifestation of her oedipal fixation on her "whimsical" or "eccentric" (1898 text) curate-father (shades of Brontë père).⁵ She sees, that is, her frustrated oedipal longings diverted first from her father, then from the substitutive Master, and then fixed murderously on Miles as the ultimate and unlucky love/death object. This interpretation has led many critics to see the hauntings as a form of self-haunting, a descent into insanity.

But the face in the window can also be read as an image of one form that narcissism can take. In her construction of Quint the governess sees herself

⁵William Veeder discusses the revision of "whimsical" for "eccentric" and also analyzes the governess's case as one of arrested emotional development caused by the absence of her mother and the "whimsical" presence of her oedipally-desired father.

because she reads in him her own interest in the children. Because she experiences this interest as unnatural, she projects onto Quint her own anxious evasions and her fear of perversion. Despite her best efforts, however, we sense in the unnamed governess a perverse sexual interest in the children, in their activities, in their secrets. As Milton notes, "nocent" is buried in "innocent," and "nocent," a nonce latinate pun, literally means "(guilty) knowledge." The governess, like Eve, wants this "guilty knowledge," with Quint as the tempter she must invent in order to obtain vicariously and perversely.

In Oates's version, however, we are brought face to face with the dark and hidden acts that bound Jessel and Quint to the children: group sex. And we are confronted with this scene, not directly, but filtered as a particularly delicious memory of Quint. It is the sex, the need to touch and fondle both children's bodies as the two adults engaged in sex themselves, that holds Jessel and Quint to them. While Quint amuses himself with his startling appearances to the new governess, Jessel is revealing herself to Flora across the lake, compelled to make herself known to the little girl, whom she considers "my soul, I will not give her up" (258). In James this incident is muted, with the governess only vaguely aware that there is "a third person" present in her dyadic rambles with Flora (28). Later the governess tells Mrs. Grose that the woman appeared to them as "a figure of quite an unmistakable horror and evil: a woman in black, pale and dreadful—with such an air also, and such a face!" (30).

In Oates's tale Jessel's facial contortions and desperation are explained by her frantic attempts to get at Flora, and equally explicit is Flora's longing to be reunited with her dead governess: "Jessel appears to little Flora in emboldened daylight, daring to 'materialize' on the farther shore of the placid Sea of Azouf . . . is not little Flora in her innocence, as in her need, necessary to the vision?" (275). For Oates, Flora and Jessel feed each other in their excessive and mutual need for each other, just as Miles and Quint do. But where does that leave the governess? She is the third wheel in every configuration, the screen onto which both frustrated pairs project their longings. As the term that signifies excess as well as lack, the governess must be eliminated for the two pairs to reunite, and yet the governess refuses to go quietly. She refuses to erase herself because in James's text—at least, this is her story.

By this time in both tales, however, Quint also recognizes that he is connected with Miles in the same sort of intense manner. In Oates's story, when Quint remembers Miles it is as a "child starved for affection," a child who hugged and kissed Quint, "seizing him around the hips, burrowing his flushed little face into the elder man as a kitten or puppy might, blindly seeking its mother's teats" (262). And it is her mother that Flora seeks in her infatuation with Jessel: "Flora must have seen, yes, here was her lost young

mother restored to her, at last!" (259). The visual dimensions of seeing and being seen form the dominant motif in both tales, but in Oates the visual is blatantly intertwined with the question of sex and power. So there are two levels of ghosts haunting both tales: Jessel and Quint, the substitute love objects, as well as the earlier, dead biological parents, abruptly swept away by disease in India two years before the events in the story began. The originating wound for the children is the death of their parents, but then they are traumatized again by the sudden and violent deaths of their parent substitutes. The unnamed governess steps into this morass of unresolved mourning, of grief so intense that it swerves away from *thanatos* to *eros* in a desperate bid to deny its power and existence.

4: "Is there Another whose face we cannot see and whose voice we cannot hear, except as it echoes in our own thoughts?"

—Oates

Voyeurism, exhibitionism, as well as oedipal desire and mourning are operating in both tales, but Oates chooses in her story to make these compulsions blatant. That is, what was implied in James is spoken in Oates. And what was whispered in James was the narcissistic basis of all human affections. We love in others what we project onto them, hence the heavy use of glass, mirrors, eyes, lake surfaces, and polished wood in which we see ourselves, not anything else. When Oates's Miss Jessel says that Flora is her "soul," that she cannot live without possession of the girl, what she is actually saying is that she sees in Flora her younger, pure self. She loves herself as an unspoiled beautiful girl; hence her "love" for Flora is simply a manifestation of her narcissism. And the same can be said of Quint's attraction to Miles, in his eyes ultimately a younger and more innocent version of himself. And so when Jessel and Quint involve the two children in their sexual acts, they are not so much seducing others as making love to split-off manifestations of idealized aspects of themselves. The fact that they had easy access to these orphaned and unprotected children constitutes the horror of their crime, a perversion of the trust that was placed in them by the uninvolved "Master."

In James's tale we are teased, as it were, with hints and innuendos. When the governess tells Mrs. Grose that she is certain the apparition had come with the purpose of finding Miles, she is then told by Mrs. Grose that yes, the two were "great friends": "It was Quint's own fancy. To play with him, I mean—to spoil him. . . . Quint was much too free" (25). The governess does not need to hear anymore; she is sufficiently disgusted and determines at that moment to function as a "screen—I was to stand before them. The more I saw the less they would" (27). And so while appearing to position herself as a sacrifice, the one who will take the suffering on herself in lieu of the children, the governess actually positions herself at the keyhole, peeping, peering, blocking the views of others so that she can see it all. A visual mania, a scopo-

philia possesses this woman, who ultimately represents every reader who has wanted to see the unseeable, who has wanted to invade the primal scene of textuality/sexuality.

We move now to this scene in Oates's version of the tale, the scene that we have been forming vaguely, fearfully, perversely in our own minds. What we are afraid to put into words even in our heads, Oates presents in stark terms:

It had been Miles's habit, charming, and touching, perhaps a bit pitiful, to seek out the lovers Quint and Miss Jessel in just such trysting places, if he could find them; then, silky hair disheveled and eyes dilated as with an opiate, he would hug, burrow, twist, groan with yearning and delight—who could resist him, who could send him away? And little Flora, too. (273)

What we learn from this description is that the children are active participants with their parent-substitutes in sexual acts. They do not simply fantasize the primal scene: they live it. Eyes enlarged and reflecting their desire, the children "burrow" into the adults, as if in a futile attempt to return to the womb. The description is sad as well as horrible, and yet the reader of Oates who has also read James's cryptic story now has the sensation that yes, the crime has finally been uncovered. There surely could be nothing worse that we could imagine. What the unnamed governess wanted so much to uncover and have confessed is here, these acts of desperate erotic grief.

All of this, of course, leads us to Freud's theories about the interrelation of fantasy and trauma. In his *Interpretations of Dreams*, Freud claims that a dream is not a phantasmagoria, but a text to be deciphered, and he observes that it is in the very nature of sexuality to have a traumatic effect on the ego; therefore, he justifies the connection between sexuality, trauma, and defense. For Freud, fantasies are the conscious articulations of a lack, a loss of the psychic plenitude we experienced in childhood, while in both fantasies and dreams the Ego dominates and determines all the actions and consequences so that the lack is denied. Most fantasies, therefore, center on scenarios of self-aggrandizement and are structured around a narrative in which the ego regains a protective home, loving parents, and autoerotic objects suitable for affection. James's governess does struggle toward establishing an idealized family of her own, but she spectacularly fails in the attempt—not giving birth to a son, but instead costing him his life.

Freud would later in his career resort to an explanation of fantasy that he called "primal fantasies of phylogenetic endowment," claiming that all fantasies are not individual, but traces of racial or primeval experiences. For Freud the primal fantasies that recur in all individuals—and by extension, the human race—are all narratives of origin: the primal scene and voyeuristic

fantasies, fantasies of seduction and the upsurge of sexuality, and the origin of the difference between the sexes and its manifestation in the fantasy of castration.⁶ In both versions these primal fantasies are revisited in more or less explicit terms: seduction (Quint and Jessel; the governess and the children), sexual difference (the children's sexual interest in the adults), castration (the suspect deaths of both Quint and Miles), and the attempt to recreate a family of origins (the governess's futile gestures toward "mothering" the children). Both authors' persistent recourse to fantasy formations alerts us to the residual presence of trauma in the text, and as the research on trauma makes clear, there is no final resolution or successful rationalization of trauma. Its effects linger like scars on a body, like markings on a blank page.

We can also, however, examine the governess's conduct in light of Freud's definition of hysteria: the hysteric suffers from a psychic trauma whose origin she does not know or has repressed, yet which has remained as a memory trace in her psyche. Freud labels these memories "parthogenic," and he notes that hysterical patients suffer from incompletely abreacted psychical traumas. Secondly, the gap in conscious knowledge between the trauma and the partial memory of it causes what Freud calls the "hysterical conversion": that is, the somatization of conflictual unconscious representations. According to Freud, "hysterical symptoms are nothing other than unconscious fantasies brought into view through 'conversion.'" All of which is another way of saying that the body is compelled to act out its psychic overload either through excitation (tears, fits, hallucinations) or various forms of inhibitions (melancholy, paralysis, catatonic depressions). The gap, then, between knowledge about the trauma and the ability to process it consciously, constitutes the very origin of hysteria.⁷ But that same gap between the experience of a trauma and our ability to work through and out of it can also be seen as the very impetus of the need to write. By writing a literary text we transform the trauma, but we never process it to the point that the trauma can or ever will disappear. The residue of trauma as the origin of a literary work persists in repeated imagery patterns that we begin to recognize as excessive, obsessive, delusional, hyperbolic, indeed, hysterical. In both versions, the governess appears to swing between excessive emotional overload and catatonic melancholia. The narrative oscillations in the text can be explained largely through the struggle to both act out the trauma and at the same time to attempt futilely to understand or rationalize the memories of the pain.

Finally, all of this brings us to Freud's late essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Here he speculates on the nature of psychic trauma, connecting it to both hysteria and the persistence of fantasies as survival mechanisms in all

⁶My discussion of Freud's theories of fantasy is drawn from the analysis by Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis.

⁷My discussion of Freud's theories of hysteria is indebted to Elizabeth Bronfen.

human beings. We might conclude, in fact, that trauma is the outgrowth of one particularly virulent fantasy, the persecutory or beating fantasy that stems, for Freud, out of unresolved incestuous feelings toward the father. But Freud did not attempt to explain trauma merely as an outgrowth of castration anxieties. Instead he complicated the issue by introducing a particularly literary example of his theory, Tasso's *Jerusalem Liberated*. When Freud chose to relate the story of Tancred and Clorinda, derived from Tasso's epic, he did so in order to illustrate the peculiar tendency of some people to wound and be wounded over and over again by the same agents, through a sort of fate that appears to be entirely beyond their own control (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*). Freud writes that Tasso's hero Tancred

unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again. (Freud 18: 3)

By using this particular narrative to illustrate his theory of trauma, Freud highlights the paradoxical nature of psychic woundings, that the experience of trauma repeats itself over and over again through the unconsciously motivated acts of the survivor. In other words, if a psychic trauma is experienced too suddenly or unexpectedly, it cannot be fully known or available to the consciousness until it imposes itself yet again, in fact, repeatedly in the nightmares and compulsively repetitive actions of the traumatized and traumatizer. Cathy Caruth summarizes Freud on this point, noting that it is the second wounding that finally allows the trauma to be located on the body of the victim: "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 4).

With these theories in mind I would suggest that the original childhood traumas for the governess were the emotional eccentricity of her father (code for sexual abuse?), the complete absence of her mother (never once mentioned during the governess's narrative of her childhood), and the presence of numerous siblings vying with her for scant attention and resources. But the second wounding, the "adult" version of the same trauma—rejection by the Master and the sudden appearance of sexually active "ghosts"—was even more psychologically devastating, a trauma so severe that she was compelled to replay her own childhood, this time with orphaned children surrounded by four dead "parents." It is no surprise that the tale could only end in disaster and death; one initially wonders, in fact, why only

one of the children (the boy) dies. But then one realizes that Miles is the only living male within reach, the unfortunate sacrifice. The wounds that one detects while reading *The Turn of the Screw* are the scars left by desertion, betrayal, and abandonment. Like scabs lightly covering a deep gash, both tales dissect this particular wound—sexual betrayal and abandonment—over and over again.

We can recall that Freud queried about the very core of surviving a deep psychic wound: is trauma to be understood as the direct and immediate brush with death, or is trauma the experience of surviving that near-fatal disaster and yet to be forced to relive it repeatedly in dreams and painful memories? As Cathy Caruth has noted, “in the oscillation between the crisis of death and the crisis of life” we get “a kind of double-telling,” a narrative that exists “between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (7). The theories of Nicolas Abraham are relevant here as well, particularly his notion of the “phantom,” which he labels an “invention of the living” designed to objectify “the gap that the concealment of some part of a loved one’s life produced in us. The phantom is, therefore, also a metapsychological fact. Consequently, what haunts is not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others.” The governess, therefore, would appear to be pursued by the phantoms of the two dead servants, but in actuality she is haunted by the gap in her father’s consciousness, his secret sexual dislocations. The case studies of Abraham have identified this syndrome and his description bears an uncanny resemblance to the metapsychological dynamics of the governess’s psyche:

Because the phantom is not related to the loss of a loved one, it cannot be considered the effect of unsuccessful mourning, as is the case of melancholics or of all those who carry a tomb within themselves. It is the children’s or descendants’ lot to objectify these buried tombs through diverse species of ghosts. What comes back to haunt are the tombs of others. The phantoms of folklore merely objectify a metaphor active within the unconscious: the burial of an unspeakable fact *within the loved one*.

What is the unspeakable fact within the father? The text informs us only that he was “whimsical.” But James revised that description from the earlier one—“eccentric”—suggesting something more sinister about his character. The mother, as noted above, is completely absent from the governess’s version of her childhood, a fact in itself that is more than suspicious. Both of these facts allow us to recall another aspect of Abraham’s theory of the phantom yet once more. Children are haunted by the unresolved and secret sexual and psychic history of their parents in such a way that the children themselves come to embody the tombs that are enclosed within the psyches of their parents:

The phantom is a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious—for good reason. It passes—in a way yet to be determined—from the parent's unconscious into the child's. . . . *The phantom which returns to haunt bears witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other.* A surprising fact gradually emerges: the work of the phantom coincides in every respect with Freud's description of the death instinct . . . the phantom is sustained by secreted words, invisible gnomes whose aim is to wreak havoc, from within the unconscious, in the coherence of logical progression. Finally, it gives rise to endless repetition and, more often than not, eludes rationalization. (Abraham 287; 289; 291)

If anyone is in the grip of the death instinct it would appear to be the governess, who ends up substituting the boy—rather than herself—as her offering to the death-instinct.

5: "How am I, who is love, evil?" —Oates

As the memories of their shared intimacies increase and actually haunt the dead, Jessel is ever more anxious to claim Flora, who she sees now as not simply her soul, but as "her own little girl, the babe cruelly drowned in her womb, hers and Quint's, in this very pond" (275). As she silently communes with Flora, drawing her closer to her and into the world of death, the new governess, called "St. Ottery" in mockery by Jessel and the Quint, suddenly leaps up and saves Flora, snatching her from the imploring arms of what she sees as a ghoul: "'My God, what a —horror! Hide your eyes, child! Shield yourself!'. . . Don't look at her, Flora! The horrid, obscene thing! You're safe now" (276). Death and insatiable longing have turned Jessel into a ghoul, a cravening thing with "hard-shelled beetles" infesting her pubic hair. Salvation for her can only arrive through her capture of Flora, because in seducing Flora and gaining her love, Jessel redeems herself, returns symbolically to her virginal and pure self, her "flower" of femininity restored to what it was before she was deflowered by Quint.

The love Jessel has for Flora has held her to the catacombs of the dead that encircle the house of Bly. Jessel cannot claim Flora as her own because of the vigilant and obsessive surveillance of St. Ottery, a "terrier" of a woman, as dogged in her pursuit of the ghosts as the ghosts are determined in their pursuit of the children. In such a struggle, one is tempted to label it a life or death struggle, someone has to lose, and, unfortunately, it is the weakest who will crack "when a bubble bursts at last in Flora's brain" (278). Driven by St. Ottery to confess about the ghostly appearances of the woman at the lake, Flora disintegrates and is taken away to London, and, according to Oates, she is accompanied there by Jessel, who no longer has any need to continue to haunt the house of Bly. Jessel's disappearance allows Quint to come to terms

with his prey, Miles. And the story of Quint and Miles is not shrouded in any soothing mother-daughter imagery. Nor is it presented as the quest of one soul for another. The tie between the two is purely sexual and physical, making it all the more dangerous for Miles.

6: "We must have imagined that, if Evil could be made to exist, Good might exist as rightfully."—Oates

The connection between Quint and Miles is the core of both James's and Oates's texts. We have in this relation the association between an older servant and a young, upper-class boy who is desperate for a father, his love and acceptance being crucial for the boy's identity. In James we learn that "for a period of several months Quint and the boy had been perpetually together" (34). The climax of James's tale occurs in a series of gothic clichés that we are almost forced to read as jokes. First, the governess reads Fielding's *Amelia* to try to calm herself as she keeps vigil by Flora's bed. Roused by a vague premonition, she ventures forth down a dark hallway with only a candle for assistance. The candle is immediately extinguished and the defenseless woman—much like her literary predecessor Amelia—finds herself besieged by the spectre of male power:

I knew that there was a figure on the stair. I speak of sequences, but I require no lapse of seconds to stiffen myself for a third encounter with Quint. The apparition had reached the landing halfway up and was therefore on the spot nearest the window, where, at sight of me, it stopped short and fixed me exactly as it had fixed me from the tower and from the garden. He knew me as well as I knew him. (39)

Again we have in James this ocular fixing, this attempt at control through visual domination. The dueling continues as the two joust to the death for the possession of Miles.

Hints are dropped in James about the exact relationship between Quint and Miles, but in Oates we are given the full spectacle, the evidence that Quint has engaged with the boy in oral sex and that Miles has bragged about the acts to his closest friends at school—hence his immediate and disgraced expulsion. In Oates, the final scene, the struggle for Miles, is a confrontation that neither side could avoid. St. Ottery has been called "Fate" by Jessel, and such is her role in Oates's version of the disaster. To capture the moral ambiguity of the situation, Oates places us inside Quint's mind, not the governess's:

Quint, with trembling fingers, readies himself for the final confrontation. He perceives himself as a figure in a drama, or it may be an equation, there is Good, there is Evil, there is deception,

there must be deception, for otherwise there would be no direction in which to move. Squinting at his sallow reflection in a shard of mirror, plucking at his graying beard to restore, or to suggest, its old virility; recalling with a swoon in the loins, poor Miles hugging him about the knees, mashing his heated face against him. How is it evil, to give, as to receive, love's comforts? (279-80)

Why, we might ask, is the word "deception" used twice? Because all of the moral categories we construct in order to explain our lives' events are for Oates ultimately built on necessary self-deceptions. No one, in other words, thinks that he or she is evil. All of us are capable of vast amounts of rationalization, of deception, without which we would not be able to function. For Oates, it is not evil to give or receive any of love's comforts. It is only human. In the world of Bly, all of the inhabitants—those living as well as the dead—are accursed by their longings and their persistent need for love's "comforts." In the catacombs of the dead, where Jessel and Quint rattle around, plucking beetles from their bodies and preening before the shards of broken mirrors, the same emotions play out. They are just as jealous, needy, narcissistic, and perverse as are the living. There is, in other words, no peace in death, only a continuation in a higher key of the same psychology, the same deceptive emotions.

In Oates's tale the climactic scene occurs in the family library, where Miles has curled up one evening to read a particularly appropriate volume, the *Directorium Inquisitorium*, an inventory in Latin of sins that are unforgivable in the eyes of the Church.⁸ St. Ottery confronts him, demanding a confession, and Miles denies all. St. Ottery goes so far as to point to Quint, who is pressing his "yearning face" against the glass, but Miles still demurs, claiming that he is unable to see Quint: "'There, I say—*there!*' In a fury, the governess taps against the glass, as if to break it. Quint shrinks away." As Miles flees the room, St. Ottery and Quint are left to "regard each other through the win-dow, passionless now, spent as lovers who have been tortured to ecstasy in each other's arms" (282). Oates concludes her tale with Miles's suicide in the lake, and the eerie rationalization: "We must have imagined that, if Evil could be made to exist, Good might exist as rightfully" (282). The postmodern morality of Oates positions both the living and the dead as victims. Her ideology goes something like this: in James's moral

⁸Oates's childhood Catholicism rears its head more than occasionally in her works. Although there is no analysis of "The Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly," there are some useful discussions of Oates's persistent interest in Henry James and her attraction to male fictional masters like Kafka, Joyce, and Chekhov. See Greg Johnson (*Invisible Writer*) for a discussion of her Catholic background, and Johnson's *Joyce Carol Oates* for analysis of Oates's first attempt to rewrite James (75-77).

universe, the unnamed governess needed to believe that those who had died were "Evil" so she created its manifestations in order to convince herself that she inhabited a wholly different world, the world of the living that was by its very nature "Good." A tremendous anxiety toward death actually motivates James's text, as well as an almost pathological fear of sex in any of its forms. Oates makes plain the forces driving James's text; at the same time she puts forward her own alternative view of morality—there is no sharp demarcation between "good" and "evil." They exist, if they exist at all, on a continuum where we will all at some time in our lives find ourselves. Oates does not mystify nor does she coddle her readers. She slaps them in the face with the realization that at some point all of us will be prey to obsession, to an erotic mania and nostalgia that is so intense and irrational in its object-choice that will wish ourselves dead.

James's tale has famously persisted to enthrall and puzzle readers who are drawn to its glossy surface and its unspoken depths. Oates, on the other hand, begins her story in those depths. She forces her readers to confront the polymorphous perversity that is implicit in human relationships, and she portrays a world that has no neat boundaries, either in morality or mortality. In an essay in which she attempted to define "The Short Story," Oates observes that years earlier she believed that "art was rational, at bottom, that it could be seen to 'make sense,' that it had a definite relationship with philosophical inquiry, though its aim was not necessarily to resolve philosophical doubt." Now, however, she thinks such is not the case: "the short story is a dream verbalized, arranged in space and presented to the world, imagined as a sympathetic audience; the dream is said to be some kind of manifestation of desire, so the short story must also represent a desire, perhaps only partly expressed, but the most interesting thing about it is its mystery" (Oates, "Short Story" 214). "Postgothic" fiction brings us precisely to this point, the place where the reader is forced to realize—like Oates—that there is no reality outside the fictional, no truth beyond the constructions, no death, and finally no life apart from the pain. Postmodern gothicists like Poppy Z. Brite take us just to the edge of life. Oates takes us over the edge so that the dead speak and feel and yearn and we postgothic readers, in turn, know that there will be no final escape for any of us—only more texts.

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