

Doubt and Failure in Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*

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Benjamin Britten's chamber opera *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), based on the famous ghost story by Henry James, has already provoked a substantial body of interpretive criticism; this, however, is dwarfed by the unmanageable thicket of writings surrounding the original story.¹ Audiences for both story and opera have voiced a noisy and continuing disagreement over what is at stake in the young woman's account of strange events at Bly. An uncertain reader or listener seeking guidance will encounter a dismaying range of interpretations, of which the following represent some of the more dramatic examples. One of the novel's first reviewers, unable to find in it anything of redeeming moral value, brands it "a study in infernal human debauchery":

The feeling after perusal of the horrible story is that one has been assisting in an outrage upon the holiest and sweet-

¹A detailed bibliography on the opera, including unpublished theses and myriad reviews, can be found in *A Britten Source Book*, ed. John Evans et al. (Aldeburgh: Britten-Pears Library, 1987), 297-301. A volume of the Cambridge Opera Handbook series is devoted to *The Turn of the Screw* (ed. Patricia Howard, 1985); I will refer to this volume from now on as COH. Important collections of critical writings on James's story can be found in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Turn of the Screw*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: Norton 1966); and *A Casebook on Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw,"* ed. Gerald Willen, 2d ed. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1969). I will refer to these two collections from now on as Norton and Casebook, respectively.

est fountain of human innocence, and helping to debauch—at least by helplessly standing by—the pure and trusting nature of children.²

Edmund Wilson, in 1934, advanced a “Freudian reading” by which the tale becomes a study in mental illness, with the governess as the unwitting source of evil: “The theory is, then, that the governess who is made to tell the story is a neurotic case of sex repression, and that the ghosts are not real ghosts but hallucinations of the governess.”³

A host of others have come forward in support of the governess, some granting her a spiritual victory with greater certainty than she herself can claim: “Granted, the governess is not perfect; but her all-too-human frailty should not blind the reader to her great accomplishment. Standing resolutely at her own little Armageddon, she has routed the forces of evil.”⁴

Finally, in a recent article on the opera, Clifford Hindley places Miles at the center of sympathy, defining the operative conflict in terms of the expression or suppression of a forbidden sexual bond:

The opera . . . is about the conflict imposed on a sensitive nature poised between two forms of growth through love to maturity—the conventional path, represented by the Governess, and a relationship [with Quint] which, though conventionally illicit, nevertheless promises the richness of life that Miles yearns for. In repressing love, as society bids him, he is consigned to death.⁵

²*The Independent* (5 January 1899), 73; in Norton, 175.

³“The Ambiguity of Henry James,” in Casebook, 115.

⁴Alexander E. Jones, “Point of View in *The Turn of the Screw*,” *PMLA* 74 (1959); in Casebook, 318.

⁵“Why Does Miles Die? A Study of Britten’s *The Turn of the Screw*,” *Musical Quarterly* 74 (1990): 16. Hindley identifies the forbidden relationship as same-sex and intergenerational, severely downplaying its supernatural and necrophilic aspects.

The proliferation of contradictory interpretations testifies to the riddling, double-faced nature of the story. First, the completely subjective filter of James's original through the governess's perspective (only partially translated into the opera) allows us to recognize two different sequences of events, according to whether we trust her perception of the ghosts as "real."⁶ Second, the thorough vagueness and indirection as to what the portentous evil actually consists of gives the imagination free rein to supply particulars, and encourages an open-ended symbolism. This celebrated ambiguity and the attendant controversies of meaning have sparked a further level of criticism in which the novel together with its reception are construed as allegories of the difficulty of interpretation.⁷ As Peter Evans and others have pointed out, the operatic version specifies events more fully than the novel by having the ghosts speak, and by staging unearthly encounters where the governess is not present to observe (the nocturnal scenes at the very center of the work, Act I scene 8 and Act II scene 1, as well as when Miles steals the letter, II.5).⁸ But as we shall see, events in the opera still riddle, actions still resist moral placement.

I don't intend to add to the crowd of voices attempting to demarcate or fix the values, symbols, motives, or outcome of the story. Instead, I want to examine the very matter of its uncertainty. My lens will be trained on the governess, the focal character whose dealings are permeated with doubt, and the effect of this unstable dramatic perspec-

⁶The choice between these two opposing readings (are the ghosts evil apparitions, or neurotic projections?) is well explored in Jones, "Point of View" (for whom only one answer can be true) and Vivien Jones, "Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*," in COH, 1-22 (for whom the irresolvable nature of the question is crucial).

⁷Shoshana Felman, "Henry James: Madness and the Risks of Practice (Turning the Screw of Interpretation)," in *Writing and Madness*, trans. Martha Noel Evans et al. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 141-247; Paul B. Armstrong, "History, Epistemology, and the Example of *The Turn of the Screw*," in *Conflicting Readings: Variety and Validity in Interpretation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 89-108.

⁸Peter Evans, "The Turn of the Screw," in *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 205.

permeated with doubt, and the effect of this unstable dramatic perspective on the listener's identification with her story.⁹ In a way, I too will be reading *The Turn of the Screw*—of the forming and performing of self in a treacherous world. Though the allegory would seem to be cautionary, I am unsure of the scope or the ultimate import of its warning.

The Protagonist

In a story in which names assume extraordinary importance, the governess is conspicuous for never being named. The children's evocative names—Flora (“flower”), Miles (“soldier”)—become instrumental in the struggle over their souls.¹⁰ When the ghosts finally break silence (I.8), it is to summon the children, in an eerie, extended passage that dwells hypnotically on their names. Quint beckons Miles in elaborate melismas, agile and seductive (see Ex. 16); Miss Jessel calls to Flora in melodically tortuous cries (R79).¹¹ The adults, in turn, wield proper names with force in their efforts to patrol the children: notably the governess's wild reproach at the close of Act I (R88/10, “Miles! What are you doing here?”), and in the search for Flora by the lake (II.7). In their climactic confrontation, the governess wrests from Miles a “supreme surrender of the name” of his visitant, as a means of breaking the spell.¹² But she herself remains anonymous: “Miss” to Mrs Grose, “my dear” to Miles, and “she” to

⁹Moral and psychological ambiguity was a major preoccupation for Britten throughout his operatic career, from *Peter Grimes* to *Billy Budd* to *Death in Venice*; the choices faced by Grimes, Vere, and Aschenbach are never clear-cut or wholly commendable.

¹⁰Compare the comments by Palmer and Howard on name symbolism, in COH, 155 n. 34. Palmer notes that the guardian also remains nameless.

¹¹R79 denotes rehearsal number 79; R79/5 refers to the fifth measure of rehearsal 79 (counting the rehearsal number as m. 1).

¹²Her words on the final page of the novel; Casebook, 94.

Quint, her name is quietly but cunningly eluded. She alone neglects to introduce herself upon her arrival at Bly. From the start of the opera she is known by her social role: "governess to two children." But where is the sign of a personal identity behind the role? This blank, this omission subtly enters into her portrait.

Her position as focal character of the drama is established from the outset. As the Prologue explains, the "curious story" we are about to witness springs from "a woman's hand"; it is her account of events that we will follow. The Prologue ends by making us party to her thoughts: "She was full of doubts. But she was carried away: that he, so gallant and handsome, so deep in the busy world, should need her help."

These explicit characterizations have already been conveyed in musical gesture (Ex. 1). The mounting excitement of the arpeggio flourishes, as if in breathless fascination, at the description of the guardian's social obligations ("he was so much engaged," mm. 23-26); then the sudden timidity in the piano, and the disquieting harmonic misalignment between the piano and the static C# in the voice, as the special condition of her task is spelled out ("she was to do everything," mm. 28-31); both passages betoken a musical investment in the perspective of the governess.

In scene 1 (*The Journey*), the curtain rises on the young woman alone, on the way to her new home. The staging reveals the interior of the coach in which she is traveling, while her sung monologue pulls us into her inner thoughts. Thus our first viewpoint on the drama strongly orients us to her subjective position. This opening scene presents a concise sketch of her character as sincere but inexperienced and unsure of herself. The monologue is underscored by a relentless but irregularly stressed timpani pulse which manages to fuse the impersonal jolting of the coach ride and the woman's own nervous tension (Ex. 2). She seems to be an uncomplicated soul, voicing simple concerns: a desire to be liked, homesickness, fear of the unknown. A sincere compassion for the orphaned children wells up in one of the few lyrical moments of the scene ("Poor babies, no father, no mother," m. 3), made poignant by the special warmth of the sustained string chord, which presents a diatonic fullness (A-B-D-E-F#-G, including the soprano E)

Example 1. Prologue, mm. 21-30

Prologue, mm. 21-30 musical score with German and English lyrics.

System 1:

Prologue: *f* This, then, — would be her task. But there was one condition: *cresc.* he was so much engaged —
 So war — der Auf-trag klar. Doch es gab eine Be-din-gung: er hat so viel zu tun —

Piano: *f* *Red.* *

System 2:

Prologue: *f* *Red.* * *p* *cresc.* *ff* *Red.* always something, *f*
 af-fairs, tra-vel, friends, vi-sits, — im-mer et-was,
 Ge-schäft, Freun-de, Sport, Rei-sen, —

Piano: *f* *Red.* * *p* *cresc.* *ff* *Red.*

System 3:

Prologue: *dim.* *Slow* *mf* no time at all for the poor lit-tle things — she was to do eve-ry-thing — be res-pon-si-ble — for eve-ry-thing —
 hat kei-ne Zeit für arm-se-li-ge Mün-del — sie soll-te al-les tun, — ver-ant-wort-lich — für al-les sein —

Piano: *pp* (*)

System 4:

Prologue: *rall.* not to wor-ry him at all, No, not to write, but to be si-lent, and do her best.
 nicht mit Fra-gen ihn be-schwe-ren, — nein, nur kein Brief, und sie soll schweigend tun was sie kann.

Piano: *rall.*

Example 2. Act I scene 1, mm. 2-3

The musical score is divided into four systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment.

System 1: The vocal line begins with a fermata. The lyrics are: "Who will greet me? The chil - dren... the chil - dren." The German lyrics are: "Wer em pfängt mich? Die Kin - der... die Kin - der." The piano accompaniment starts with a dynamic marking of *p* and a *Str.* (string) marking.

System 2: The vocal line continues with the lyrics: "Will they be cle - ver? Will they like me?" The German lyrics are: "Wer - den sie klug sein? Gar mich mö - gen?"

System 3: The vocal line has the lyrics: "Poor ba - bies, no fa - ther, no mo - ther." The German lyrics are: "Die Ar - men, ohn' Va - ter, ohn' Mut - ter." The piano accompaniment has a dynamic marking of *mf* and performance instructions: *sweetly* and *express.*

System 4: The vocal line is marked *(spoken)* and has the lyrics: "But I shall love them as I love my own, all my dear ones left at home," The German lyrics are: "Ich werd sie lie - ben, als wä - ren sie mein, mei - ne Lie - ben dort zu Haus," The piano accompaniment has a dynamic marking of *più f*.

in a disposition that emphasizes the interval of the fourth (A-D-G/F#-B-E). These qualities of simplicity and compassion invite us to view her in a sympathetic light.

But one's overwhelming impression at this first encounter with the governess is of an inner character as yet unformed.¹³ Her broodings are fitful and tentative, projecting little conviction. Rhythmically, her music floats above the strong timpani pulse, without relating to it or establishing any firm metric pattern of its own. Her mulling thoughts are expressed in melodic bits that do not add up to any strong or extended shape. In their tonal course, her phrases follow a pattern of distracted drifting from an A center, until they are brought back into line by corrective nudges in the orchestra. Thus the governess ends m. 1 by tracing a C# major triad; m. 2, with a suggestion of Bb major; and m. 4, with the suspicion of a drift to an Ab (G#) area. This state of indefiniteness and disorientation in the governess's part is in emphatic contrast to the gripping cumulative progress of the theme (heard just prior to this scene; Ex. 4) which launches the opera proper, to which I will shortly turn. If the sleek muscular intelligence which inhabits that theme is the daemon that lies in wait for her, she is woefully unprepared.

Her murmured thoughts reveal her lack of experience, in any case, for the stated task of raising the children. Clearly, she is "full of doubts": her entire monologue is little more than a string of questions, a series of anxieties which she tries to allay. Her most eloquent outburst in this scene is born of her deepest misgiving. The increasing agitation which leads up to this passage begins at Rehearsal 2/3: "I must not write to their guardian, that is the hardest part of all. Whatever happens, it is I, I must decide. A strange world for a stranger's sake. O why did I come?"

At the high point of the passage ("A strange world," R3/5; Ex. 3), her musical expression attains a new breadth and a greater force of conviction, breaking free of the timpani's nervous figure. The melody has a more declamatory rhythm and a more extended shape, ending in

¹³It should be remembered that a woman taking the position of governess could be quite young.

Example 3. Act I scene 1, R3/2-7

Gov. *broadening*

..... it is I, I..... must de - cide..... A
..... ich al - lein, fass..... den Ent - schluss..... Die

Gov. *slower broadly* *freely*

strange world, for a stran - ger's sake. O why.....
Tutti Frem - de, weil ein Frem - der bat. O, wa - Str.

pp *pp* *pp*

Gov.

why..... did I come?.....
- rum..... kam ich her?.....
(long pause)

a lyrical melisma (motive y). This momentary burst of self-assertion serves to pinpoint her fear of the unknown situation she is about to enter. The threat of the strange is made musically concrete by the harrowing clash between the G# in the voice and the C major chord in the orchestra.¹⁴ When the soprano moves after two bars (R3/7) to G#4, and a tonal area compatible with the previous C chord, the orchestra makes a simultaneous, contradictory move to a C# minor chord, i.e., to G#. The strangeness is maintained through a gesture of harmonic exchange. Her words betray other causes of anxiety as well: not only the responsibility that is to rest on her shoulders, but the ambivalence of her connections to the absent guardian. She is forbidden to communicate with the man by whose charisma she was first “carried away” to accept the job. It is significant that he figures prominently in her one passionate outburst (“a stranger’s sake,” R3/6); he continues to occupy her thoughts in the following line, as she attempts once again to overcome fear: “No! I’ve said I will do it, and for him I will.”

This scene, which introduces us to the governess, supplies only sketchy details of her origin, her life up to now (“all my dear ones left at home, so far away”), adding to the impression of a character lacking in substance and delineation. The personal qualities most evident at this point are her sincerity and her diffidence, while we catch glimpses of a determination to succeed, an excitable temperament. At the same time, in her attachment to the guardian, in the cryptic musical gesture of exchange which emerges under stress, it is possible to detect deeper complications which may come to trouble her soul.

The Testing-Ground

At this point I will step back to confront a presence which I have acknowledged in passing; that is, the ominous opening theme of the opera. The Prologue relates how the young woman, though unsure, though “untried” (m. 8), chooses to accept the position offered to her.

¹⁴Compare the tonal signal for foreignness heard earlier in the drift to an A# area for “so far away, and so different,” sc. 1, m. 4.

Her decision (“‘I will,’ she said”), and the end of the Prologue, coincide with the inception of the musical theme which seems to convey a fateful presentiment of her personal trial. One is teased by the ambivalent suggestiveness of the overlap: does the theme, which begins covertly and with stealth, represent a hostile force lying in wait for the governess? Or are its sinister implications something she herself has prompted, with the first assertion of her will?

The Prologue is accompanied by piano alone. The theme also unfolds in the piano; as it unfolds, each note is sustained by a separate member of the orchestra, till all thirteen members are sounding (Ex. 4). The pitches of the theme derive from a regularly alternating cycle of descending fifths and ascending sixths (Ex. 5). This twisting intervallic structure houses a sly harmonic dexterity, arranging basic diatonic materials to form a twelve-tone aggregate. The rhythmic subdivision of the theme into three four-note segments highlights its ambiguous character. The first segment (A-D-B-E) establishes a strong A center, proceeding from tonic to subdominant to dominant, arranging its high and low points symmetrically around A. The melody pauses on this suspended dominant chord; so far the harmonic world is convincingly tonal. The next segment (C#-F#-D#-G#) continues to fill in an A major space until the appearance of D# disturbs the diatonic path. Again the melody pauses, on an almost pure diatonic fullness; but the intrusion of D# throws doubt on the integrity of the A major key, and allows one to rehear the second melodic segment as a harmonic unit to itself, not necessarily related to A. The final segment (F-Bb-G-C), completely extraneous to A major, confirms one's doubts about tonal center, in effect smothering tonality as it fulfills the theme's underlying logic of chromatic saturation.¹⁵ Even so, after a final melodic pause of excru

¹⁵Britten uses the total chromatic in this opera as an expressive gesture within a context of flexible tonal allegiance. His use is to be distinguished from that of twelve-tone composers for whom the total chromatic is a means of organization implying the elimination of pitch hierarchies (comp. Peter Evans's comments, *Music of Britten*, 206). For theoretical essays on Britten's use of tonality, see Arnold Whittall, "The Study of Britten: Triadic Harmony and Tonal Structure," *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 106 (1979-80): 27-41; and Christopher Mark, "Contextually Transformed Tonality in Britten," *Music Analysis* 4 (1985): 265-287.

Example 4. Theme

Very slow ($\text{♩} = 48$)

Pro1.

"I will," she said.
"Ich tu's," sagt sie.

Pft.

(Timp. trem.) *pp* (Hn. sust.) *cresc.* (Harp trem.) (Db. trem.) (Bsn. sust.) (Cl.)

broadening -

(Vc.) (Vln. II) (Ob.) (Fl.) (Vln. I)

mf cresc. *molto*

Example 5. Theme, intervallic structure

ciating internal tension, it is to an A center that the passage returns—a return dictated by the chromatic cycle itself.

Due to its twisting progress and mounting tension, this theme has come to be known as the Screw theme.¹⁶ Its effect is arresting, captivating, pregnant with foreboding—but of what? Coming *before* the beginning of the action, it stops us in our tracks, infecting our hopes for the story with an unnamed apprehension. Beyond this, the theme presents a harmonic profile which can be heard in two opposing ways. According to the logic of tonal center, we hear a gesture of transgression, a chaotic flouting of proper harmonic paths. According to chromatic logic, we hear a gesture of fulfillment, concentrated and deliberate. On the one hand we fear the fortunes of besieged tonality, on the other we are drawn into an expanded harmonic field, a saturated chromatic world. The tonal world introduced by the opening theme is thus a riddle from the start. Not only does it house a struggle between harmonic processes and fields of action, it houses a confusion between listening perspectives. We aren't sure from which angle to orient our perceptions, and our footing is treacherous as we slip from one perspective to another.

The influence of the Screw theme will extend over the entire opera. It provides the basis for the fifteen variations serving as orchestral interludes between scenes. As Patricia Howard has deftly shown, it is the source of the primary thematic material for the scenes as well (such as the γ motive), and its intervallic structure lies behind the harmonic idiom of the opera.¹⁷ The point I would like to stress here is the theme's importance as a gestural pattern—a pattern that is not yet warranted by any dramatic situation—that predisposes us to find its realization in the story that follows, but which already contains an essential equivocation. Beginning from a clear center, the theme takes us through a process of expansion—or is it distress?—only to return to the point of departure. The process is like a spiral, in that the tonal orientation, or our sense of it, is not the same upon return as it was to

¹⁶Howard, COH, 73.

¹⁷“Structures: An Overall View,” in COH, 71-90.

begin with, not as clear or as innocent. This experience, this complication, carries an ominous resonance at this stage; the nature of the omen remains to be discovered.

The pattern of a spiralling harmonic circuit will recur in different garb and with differing emphasis, not only in the variations on the Screw theme, but throughout the opera. In a sense, it is even played out at the level of tonal structure (Ex. 6). As Peter Evans has pointed out, the theme is progressively transposed for each variation; Britten generally uses the initial note of the theme as the tonal center for each variation and the scene that follows, as indicated by his key signatures. In the first act, the transposition moves up through the “white” keys starting on A, arriving on A \flat , however, in the final scene. The second act moves down from A \flat , following a path which inverts the transpositional sequence of Act I, eventually returning to A. But, in Evans’s words, “an uncertainty attends the final stages of the return”.¹⁸ The uncertainty, the final struggle between A and A \flat , provides the tonal drama for the fifteenth variation and the ultimate scene. The ambivalence of the “victory” of A will occupy us in a later section.

Example 6. Pitch centers of the variations

Act I

Theme Var. I II III IV V VI VII

Act II

VIII IX X XI XII XIII XIV XV Finale

(INVERSION)

no center

(b) k

For now we return to the governess at the beginning of her new life. In the interlude preceding her arrival at Bly we hear the first variation on the Screw theme, the first reappearance of its harmonic pattern. The melody is sweet and lyrical as it makes its way down

¹⁸*Music of Britten*, 207.

through the strings, establishing the key of B major at first. As in the theme, the orchestra sustains notes of the melody as a harmonic background; but this time only diatonic tones are sustained. The appearance of E# (m. 4) thus remains separate from the growing background chord. When the melody reaches its last tetrachord (G-C-A-D, m. 5), the foreignness of its relation to the starting key has the effect of souring the B diatonic accompaniment. Melody and harmony are separated into pungently incompatible strata; this conflict sets off a rocking in the woodwind accompaniment, which becomes increasingly agitated. As the melody completes the spiral, coming around again to B-E (R5/5), the foreignness and antagonism abruptly vanishes. The quick energy of the woodwind chords is suddenly nothing but innocent and playful. This tone of innocence will dominate the following scene (The Welcome). Yet our memory of the harmonic spiral registers a shadow of doubt, which has yet to be explained.

The lights go up, and we find ourselves at Bly. This is the place where the personal and moral resources of the heroine will be tested, where her confidence will begin to grow. Her entrance upon the scene (R9) is timid and shaky, retracing her motive of self-doubt (as in "O why did I come?") and faltering from the B major tonality which has been secure since R8 (Ex. 7). But the children's charm (captured in the elegant, sparkingly scored bowing and curtseying music, R8) and the loveliness and grandeur of the estate begin to stir a new confidence in her, apparent in the steady lyrical breadth of her exclamations (aloud, or to herself?) in the duet with Mrs Grose (R10, "How charming they are").

As the days go on, what do we learn about Bly? What kind of microcosm does it offer for the formation of her identity? First and most important is its isolation. The governess's days are spent on the grounds of a large country home with only the children in her charge and the housekeeper, Mrs Grose, as companions. She is denied the benefit of contact or appraisal from her employer. This situation is bound to foster the impression that one is operating in a vacuum—especially in an atmosphere of social discretion where many things remain unspoken or only hinted at, especially for an inexperienced person with a newly awakening grasp of inner resources.

Example 7. Act I scene 2, R8/11-9/12

Enter Governess. Gouvernante tritt auf.

9

GOVERNESS *p timidly*

You must be Mrs...
Sie sind wohl die Frau

Vins. *express. cresc.* *pp (always express.)*

Grose?
Gross?

Im so hap-py to see you...
Ach wie schön Sie zu se-hen...

So hap-py to
Wie gut hier zu

be here.
sein...

Mrs. GROSE (curtseying) *knixend*

This must be Flo-ra?
Dies ist wohl Flo-ra?

How do you do, Miss, Welcome to Bly!
Schön gu-ten Tag, Miss. Willkommen in Bly!

Harp *

Scene 3 (The Letter) offers the first example of the pitfalls posed by her situation. The governess receives a letter dismissing Miles from his school; she has no experience to help her judge this turn of events. "O, but for that he must be bad" (R15/7). Her moral categories are blunt and impoverished—merely "good" and "bad"; she is unequipped for subtle psychological distinctions or the troubled ambivalences of youthful behavior. This, combined with the indirection of the school official (who sternly but evasively reports Miles to be "an injury to his friends"), allows her to deny any significance to the incident. One suspects at this stage of the story that her concept of what it is to be "bad" has little actual content, merely standing for things unthinkable. To her, Miles is a sweet, charming boy who plays lovingly with his sister. Therefore, she "cannot think him really bad" (R16/7); in fact, "the child is an angel" (R18/9). Both goodness and badness are idealized, looming larger than life.

Musically, the letter's admission of doubt into an untroubled household is signaled in several ways. Mrs Grose's contented pronouncement ("Now all will be well") and cadence on C major are disrupted by the exotic tone color of the celesta, which intrudes in a brief flash, changing the mode to minor (R15). The accompaniment is abruptly pared down to solo viola, spinning out a version of the y motive, which first focussed the governess's doubts about her decision, and thus recalls and reintroduces those doubts. Largely due to the melodic isolation, the lack of orchestral context, the tonal situation is destabilized from a simple C minor. The turns of the viola melody present a concatenation of diatonic segments which by themselves are not enough to secure a key. The C minor profile of the first segment (R15/1-4, descending from E \flat to C), is weakened by the voices' tracing of a cycle of minor thirds. The second segment (R15/5-8, descending from C \sharp to G \sharp) has inched to a C \sharp diatonic area; again, the local harmonic touches added by the voices detract from any sense of a stable, durable center. The sustaining of G in the third segment (R15/9-12) appears to offer no greater stability than any of the previous sustained pitches, until it is harmonized for a moment with a cadence in C minor, by an adamant Mrs Grose ("I won't believe it") with support from the cello. That fuller C minor context is quickly thrown

back into question by the further course of the viola through F# and E. The melody in isolation is an unreliable guide; its single notes and scale segments teeter between harmonic readings. This passage repeats and intensifies the situation in the previous scene, at the governess's entrance (R9/4-18; Ex. 7), where the solitary melody's erosion of tonal center gives way to momentary resurgences of B major (R9/10, R9/15-17). Such a figure of musical unreliability points up the hazards in the heroine's position. She is confronted with deceptive appearances; without support, without a guiding context, it becomes an uncertain task to judge those appearances for their moral significance. From her limited experience, she cannot reconcile the imputation of wickedness with Miles's behavior. The harmonic contortions marking the following trio (R16/7-R20), as she and Mrs Grose affirm Miles's goodness, provide a measure of the energy she must call upon to bury her uncertainty.

However, uncertainty will deepen with future occurrences at Bly. When the evidence of her senses begins to defy rational explanation, when former tenants appear from beyond the grave, Bly becomes the object of darker suspicion (R44: "Is this sheltered place the wicked world where things unspoken of can be?"). It becomes a place of dangerous knowledge; behind its uncanny, unreliable appearances we begin to discern higher stakes. Not only moral categories, but categories of reality and truth are cast into doubt.

Taking Charge

In her isolation, the governess is thrown upon her own resources. From the first, she labors to fill a conventional role of tutor and overseer toward the children, supervising their classroom education as well as the development of character and discipline. That she should do this by becoming friends with the children and gaining their trust is evidence of her own kind, loving nature. Thus upon her arrival she responds to their excitement by letting them "drag her all over the park" (R13/4-5), an activity illustrated by the skipping C major clusters and the

melodic and chromatic wandering of the bass line in the following interlude (Var. II).

It is when obstacles arise, situations for which she knows no script, that the security of her assumed role is tested. She must fumble to find how she should act, what she ought to be. With the first obstacle—the implication that Miles might be “bad”—after the initial wave of doubt, her reaction is to shore up her belief in Miles’s innocence against erosion. This leads to a point of decision, the first in a sequence of such points which articulate the drama, where the turn of events, personal conviction and responsibility impel her to take a stand:

Mrs Grose: What shall you do then?

Governess: I shall do nothing.

Mrs Grose: And what shall you say to him?

Governess: I shall say nothing.

Mrs Grose: Bravo!

In this case (R20), she denies the need for action while affirming the self-sufficiency of her governing role. Her decisiveness is marked by a rallying of the full orchestra (save piano) in two assertive chords.¹⁹ The chords form a modulatory cadential progression which is completed by the beginning of Var. 3. The preceding trio (“Lavender’s blue,” R17-20) is built around a pedal G, the children’s song remaining true to the G center, while the two adults hover in a constantly changing dissonant relation to the pedal. With the first *tutti* chord (R20/5), built on F, the harmony begins an apparent return to C major, the main key of the scene. The second chord (an E dominant 7th), however, veers off in a new direction, in what will prove to be a Lydian cadence to D. The musical gesture thus reflects the heroine’s resolution, while its harmonic course stresses the new development her decision represents: one step taken towards a greater self-assertion, a deeper commitment.

Variation III paints a lush pastoral backdrop, with leafy rustlings and languid birdcalls. This version of the spiralling pattern is rich and

¹⁹This passage is gesturally related to the chords in R6/1-3 and R13/1-3, Mrs Grose at her most authoritative.

affirmative. Its coloristic harmonic language is centered on D major but expands to accept a move to F major (tempered by triadic flourishes on A \flat and G \flat) without threat to its tranquility. The only dark moment in the interlude is the stuttering call in the high bassoon (which Christopher Palmer hears as “cawing rooks,” COH, 115), with its minor ninth relation to the E dominant harmony, and the sudden non-vibrato chill in the strings (R22/7-11). In the bassoon’s rising and falling third one still hears an echo of the fear of “a strange world” (motive *x*). The music of this variation is continued and developed in scene 4 (The Tower). The governess strolls through the grounds of Bly, drinking in their beauty and serenity, rejoicing that her “first foolish fears are all vanish’d now” (R23/5). Her reverie is broken when a strange man appears on the tower, then vanishes (R26-27). His appearance is heralded by the same pitches and the same foreign tone color that accompanied the first omen of doubt, the letter (R15). The momentary flash of celesta, in the earlier instance, now becomes an extended presence; the motivic kernel B \flat -D \flat -E \flat is extended as well, and mirrored in the left hand, taking mesmerizing hold of the musical fabric (Ex. 8).

Example 8. Act I scene 4, R26/1-3

26 Quint becomes visible on the tower.
Quint wird auf dem Turm sichtbar,

Dev. -rene. -glücht. Ha! Ha! 'Tis he! Das ist er!

p Celesta *p* *cresc*

(9m)

Since this motive frequently appears in transposition and inversion, it will be convenient to follow post-tonal parlance, referring to its abstract intervallic structure: (0,2,5). The remainder of the scene, an agitated, nagging return of doubt (R27, “No! Who is it?”) is obsessively rooted to the (0,2,5) chord.²⁰ Significantly, though this passage establishes a home sonority (a kind of G minor chord in which D is spatially central: R27/1-4, R29/2-5), and follows some gestures of logical tonal relation (for instance, the transposition to a C chord as a subdominant move, R27/8-10; and eventual return to the G chord, R29/2), the mercurial progression of its linked motives defies diatonic space, slipping through chromatic cross-relations and stretching the intelligibility of a tonal center.

It is in the following scene (The Window) that the apparition is given a name and characterization. As the frolicking children ride their hobby horse out of the room, the governess enters, only to see the same strange man at the window. Fearful, she relates the sightings to Mrs Grose, who from her description is able to supply a name: Peter Quint, the former valet. In her censorious account of his character, we again sense the dangers inherent in a discretion which leaves specific misdoings unspoken, allowing the governess’s imagination—and the listener’s—to run wild.²¹ Quint had “dreadful ways” (R39); Mrs Grose “fear’d what he could do” (R42/5).

I saw things, elsewhere, I did not like, when Quint was
free with everyone, with little Master Miles!
Hours they spent together (R40/7-11).

²⁰The rising and falling contour of this “unknown identity” motive might be seen as related to the contour of motive x.

²⁰This situation indeed has its source in James’s original strategy, as recorded in the Preface to the novel: “Only make the reader’s general vision of evil intense enough. . . . Make him think the evil, make him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications” (*The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* [Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1984], 176).

But he had ways to twist them round his little finger.
He liked them pretty, I can tell you, Miss, and he had his
will morning and night (R41/8-11).

Her allegations are powerfully ominous, but entirely elusive. Ostensibly, the specter of sexuality haunting the latter insinuation refers to Miss Jessel, the former governess; does it extend to Miles as well?

The implications of the final revelation – that Quint is dead – impel the governess to a second moment of decision. She admits in a shocked whisper that such circumstances are beyond her ken (“I know nothing of these things,” R44). Yet she must do something (R46):

I see it now, I must protect the children,
I must guard their quiet, and their guardian's, too.
See what I see, know what I know,
that they may see and know nothing.

She determines to defend the children against ghostly advances. The thematic material in this passage is familiar (Ex. 9); the strings recall motive *x* (R46/1-4), then the soprano takes up motive *y* (R46/5-8). But what once signalled doubt now carries strong resolution. The governess sings motive *y* (“See what I see”) with the force of an oath; firmly rooted to a C pedal, strongly metric, supported by a regular rising scale in the strings. This is followed by the same type of assertive cadence which followed her resolution in scene 3.

Admirably, she musters strength in the face of the unknown. But given her innocence, given a hostile, unearthly presence, her decision is rash. The danger is great that she misjudges her own strength or that of her opponent. On the other hand, how sure should she (or we) be that there is a hostile presence? The governess has already shown a tendency to jump to conclusions: when she first spies Quint on the tower, she takes him for the guardian, who has been occupying her thoughts, crying out “’Tis he!” (R26). Her description of the stranger (R38) culminates in an extreme swerve of subjectivity:

Example 9. Act I scene 5, R46/2-8

Gov. child-ren I must guard their qui-et, and their guar-dian's, too.
schüt-zen, ich schütze ih-re Ru-he, die des Vor-munds auch.

Gov. See... what I see, Know... what I know, that they may see... and know
Seh!... was ich seh! weiss... was ich weiss, dass sie nichts seh'n... und nichts

Gov. no-thing
wie- sen.

The musical score consists of three systems. Each system features a vocal line for 'Gov.' and a piano accompaniment. The first system includes dynamic markings such as *f*, *p*, and *dim.*. The second system begins with a piano (*p*) marking. The third system is shorter and ends with a fermata over the piano accompaniment. The lyrics are provided in both English and German.

He was tall, clean-shaven, yes, even handsome,
But a horror!

Unquestioningly, she accepts the word of Mrs Grose that she has seen the lingering spirit of Quint; but her own imagination outruns the housekeeper's in attaching menace to the encounter. In another intuitive leap, she is convinced that "he came for Miles, I'm sure of that, and he will come again!" (R45/6-10), while Mrs Grose has clearly not followed her panicked line of thought (R46/9-10: "Lord, Miss, don't understand a word of what you say!").

And there are other signs that the governess's dim self-knowledge keeps her from realizing the full significance of her actions. As in scene 1, the guardian occupies her mind at the most critical moments. In the moment before Quint's first appearance, she yearns:

Only one thing I wish,
That I could see him
And that he could see how well I do his bidding (R24/8-11).

This passage reinforces the subtle association of *x* ("for a stranger's sake," heard here in the bassoon; Ex. 10) with her feelings toward the guardian. As in earlier moments, *x* is followed by *y*; this appearance of *y* is a brief, enigmatic flourish on "his bidding" (R24/12-13). Does its minor mode coloration reflect a mere wavering of confidence, or a subconscious premonition of something more sinister?²² The guardian surfaces again at the fervent climax of scene 5, once more in connection with *x* (R46: "I must guard their quiet, and their guardian's, too"; Ex. 9). At this point, her mindfulness shows signs of being a fixation, the extent and effects of which are not clear.

Confronting an uncanny intruder into her quiet world, the governess does not hesitate to take upon herself the role of guardian or heroic protector. It will soon become apparent, in her strained performance of this role, that her intentions have overreached her qualifications.

²²See Howard, COH, 87.

Furthermore, her behavior itself is not free from suspicion.²³ It is hard not to wonder if she herself is somehow implicated in the trap which is beginning to close around her.

Example 10. Act I scene 4, R24/8-13

Gov. *pp*
 On-ly one thing I wish, That I could see him— And that he could see how
Einzig dies ist mein Wunsch, dass jetzt ich ihn säh'— und dass er nun säh' wie
Bsm. ppp

Gov. *pp*
 well I do his bid - - ding, his bid - - ding.
tren ich ihm ge-folgt bin, ge - folgt..... bin.

²³In this regard it is interesting to compare Alexander Jones's enumeration of her personality flaws, in the course of his defense of her actions (and in reference to the novel): "She is often impulsive. . . . She tends to employ hyperbole rather than exact language. . . . She is nervous, fearful for her own sanity, and given to unusual mannerisms ('I had to smother a kind of howl') and eccentric flights of fancy. . . . She is quick to give up Flora as lost, abandoning her as . . . a 'vulgar, pert little girl' at the very time when the child presumably needs help most. . . . Also, it is not very charitable of her to say, 'Oh, thank God!' when she learns of Flora's appalling language, or to feel alarm that Miles might be innocent ('for if he were innocent, what then on earth was I?')" ("Point of View," 119-120).

The Logic of the Story

So far, events have presented a pattern of doubt followed by reassurance, then renewed and intensified doubt.²⁴ It is this logic of deviant and constricting progress that gives the tale and the opera their name. Until now, the children have been pictures of simplicity, playfulness and charm; the next turn of the screw will cast doubt upon their innocence.²⁵ They reveal an unexpected seriousness and sophistication in their solos. In scene 6 (The Lesson), the glittering suavity of Miles's Latin recitation gives way to a somber, enigmatic chant ("Malo," R51; Ex. 11), joining the dark tones of viola, English horn and harp in a texture of haunting parallel seventh chords. From one Latin word Miles pulls four translations, which taken together form a curious plaintive expression:

Malo . . . I would rather be
 Malo . . . in an apple tree
 Malo . . . than a naughty boy
 Malo . . . in adversity.

For the first time, the boy appears hesitant and vulnerable.²⁶ In scene 7 (The Lake), Flora's geography lesson ushers in her gently melancholy lullaby (R60), which uses a high-flown poetic diction beyond her years:

²⁴See Howard, COH, 41.

²⁵Subliminal flashes of suspicion are already planted in their nursery songs. In the growing atmosphere of paranoia, the antiphonal "While you and I, diddle diddle . . ." (R19/6-13) and the game of chasing, beating, and "stealing the pig" (sc. 5) are redolent of conspiratorial mischief and sexual precocity; see Howard, COH, 37.

²⁶"His 'Malo' song . . . discloses a half-awareness of the adult world . . . its tone touches on life's mysteries in its veiled intimations of tragedy and pathos" (Mansel Stimpson, "Drama and Meaning in *The Turn of the Screw*," *Opera Quarterly* 4/3 [1986]: 79).

Dolly must sleep wherever I choose.
Today by the dead salt sea,
Tomorrow her waxen lids may close
On the plains of Muscovy.

And now like a Queen of the East she lies,
With a Turk to guard her bed,
But next, when her short-lived daylight dies,
She's a shepherdess instead.

But sleep, dear Dolly, O sleep, and when
You're lost in your journeying dream,
The sea may change to a palace again,
For nothing shall stay the same. . . .

Example 11. Act I scene 6, R51/1-5

51 Slowly moving (♩. 66)
MILES (to himself, hesitating)

Ma - lo, Ma - lo, Ma - lo I would ra - ther be
Ma - lo, Ma - lo, Ma - lo ich würd lie - ber sein

cf. Ex. 8

Vla. R.H. pp

Harp pp

Behind the simple G major of the voice, the delicate, rocking harp and string clusters are more slippery, sliding in whole-tone motion (see verse 2, R61).²⁷ Nor is the tuneful melody as artless as it seems, being constructed rigorously from a tissue of fourths. Likewise, behind the metaphors of sleep—“her waxen lids may close,” “her short-lived daylight dies”—vibrates an undercurrent of mortality.

At this moment Miss Jessel appears, across the lake. Flora has turned away from the sight; the governess, in her horror, and with desperate haste, concludes that “Flora saw, I know she saw, and said nothing! They are lost!” (R68). If the children already know about the ghosts, and hide their knowledge, then her heroic vow of protection is a mockery. The music that expressed the courage and strength of will behind her vow (at R46) now ironically underlines her despair (R69):

I neither save nor shield them,
I keep nothing from them.
O, I am useless.

The melodic E \flat on which the earlier passage hinged is now harshly inappropriate to the D pedal. Moreover, the E \flat has been swallowed up in connotations of evil. The (0,2,5) chord on the pitches associated most strongly with Quint is superimposed on the G major chord from Flora’s innocent lullaby, in a graphic image of corruption. It is over the space of this E \flat chord that the governess moans “They are lost!” (R68/6-10, R70; Ex. 12).

In the final scene of the act (At Night), the ghosts speak. We overhear a nocturnal rendezvous in which Flora and Miles welcome the otherworldly influence of their spirit visitors. When the pair is discovered, and the governess demands to know what they are doing, Miles parries with the weapon of his charm. He replies, to the sweetly

²⁷This motion prefigures the appearance of Miss Jessel, with her whole-tone signature (R65). The whole-tone material is made thematically cogent when heard as derived from alternate notes of the Screw theme, thus sharing that theme’s transgressive character. The whole-tone path figures in Mrs Grose’s lamentations of corruption (“Dear God,” I.5, R39), as well as being embedded in motive y in many of its formulations.

Example 12. Act I scene 7, R70/1-3

70 *dim. (as she goes out)*

Oov. *They are lost! lost!... lost!...*
Sind ver - lorn! Beidel... Beidel...

Harp *ff dim. pp*

Example 13. Variation VIII (through R1/2)

CURTAIN

Slow (the cadenzas all free)

Cl. *pp*

express.

p *p*

Vln. I Vln. II

mocking tone of the harp, “You see, I am bad, aren’t I?” (R89; see Ex. 14). His oblique, insubstantial, but knowing reply reaches back to recall her earliest doubts about him, of which he was supposed to have no knowledge. So Act I ends with the governess’s intended roles of overseer and protector in shambles. Her discovery of the children’s complicity has brought on a crisis of renewed doubt for which she has no answer.

Example 14. Act I scene 8, R89/1-8

MILES *p simply*

89 (♩=60) You see— I am bad, I am bad,
 Du siehst— ich bin schlecht, ich bin schlecht,

Harp *p sweetly*

by the Governess as the lights fade.
 Gouvernante gefolgt. Das Licht erlischt.

arent I, I am bad, I am bad, arent I?
 siehst du? ich bin schlecht, ich bin schlecht, siehst du?

ppp

Events have unfolded as in a nightmare, with the governess's worst fears coming true; as James said of his story, "It is an excursion into chaos."²⁸ Each endeavor to contain wickedness has been upset by the discovery of deeper corruption. All innocence has proven deceptive. The peace of Bly is found to harbor lingering traces of a sinister past; the winning manners of the children conceal an involvement with the dead. Instead of preventing evil, the governess will finally find that she herself is corrupt.

Britten has presaged this chaotic excursion from the beginning by the harmonic pattern embodied in the Screw theme. In addition, the piece is suffused with the quality of a nightmare through the subtle effects of what might be called its gestural style. There is a strong use of tremolo throughout the opera, from the *tutti* cluster in the opening theme (Ex. 4) to the hushed finger-drumming on tympani at the end. Tremolo carries an aura of contained energy or agitation; in the context of the sharply defined sonority of the chamber orchestra it can have an effect of nerves set on edge, jangled. It accompanies the appearances of Quint (R26, R35), and grows in importance as his growing influence is revealed. Thus the nocturnal scenes showing Quint at the height of his power (Var. VII/Act I sc. 8 and Var. VIII/Act II sc. 1; Ex. 13) are permeated and overborne by tremolo; in the final scene between Miles and the governess, the tremolando gestures marking Quint's intrusions become more and more prolonged and insistent. Less obviously, tremolo animates the pastoral setting of Act I scene 4 ("those fluttering fears," R24); the hobby-horse music of Variation IV/Act I sc. 5; and the writing of the letter in Act II sc. 3 (R64-67).

Also important to the nightmare fabric of the opera are gestures evoking a quickened heartbeat or a shortness of breath. The primary examples are the questioning music associated with the governess in Act I ("Who is it?": R27, R36, R66, R88), and Quint's pulsing song to Miles, "On the paths, in the woods," at the end of each act (I. R83, II. R131). The clipped phrases and syncopation in these passages suggest an excitement strong enough to disturb rhythmic balance. It is highly significant in this case that the sign of the governess's fear so

²⁸*Art of the Novel*, 172.

closely matches that of Quint's desire, thus reinforcing the specter of subconscious desire that shadows the heroine throughout the opera. Related gestures include the irregular tympani in Act I scene 1 (Ex. 2), and the breathless, frantic perpetual motion that careens in the strings during the governess's Soliloquy ("Lost in my labyrinth," II.1). A third recurrent gestural type which contributes to the sense of a dreadful, fateful unfolding of events is the amassing of oppressive chordal densities. Again, this is introduced in the opening theme. A gesture of this type is associated with Miss Jessel (I. R65, R79). The opening of Act II (Var. VIII; Ex. 13) is a series of cadenzas punctuated by nine chordal masses; the final variation (XV) contains all twelve tones in each of its three chords. Such dense tonal and sonorous masses gather in one symbol three powerful connotations of the unfolding story: internal tension, menacing force and impenetrable obscurity.

The Struggle

Lost in my labyrinth I see no truth,
 Only the foggy walls of evil press upon me.
 Lost in my labyrinth I see no truth.
 O Innocence, you have corrupted me.
 Which way shall I turn?
 I know nothing of evil,
 Yet I fear it, I feel it, worse, imagine it.
 Lost in my labyrinth, which way shall I turn?

With this Soliloquy (II.1, R22), the governess admits to finding herself on dangerous ground. The evil she has sensed or imagined is vivid and threatening, but still obscure. The exact significance of the events at Bly still resists her grasp. Miles's facetious confession, "I am bad, aren't I?" is almost maddening in its ambiguity (Ex. 14). His apparent nonchalance is harmless joking—or pointed mockery; the gently shifting diatonicism of the harp accompaniment is sweet but entirely suspect, derived directly from the double Quint chord which permeates this scene, with its connotations of forbidden intimacy. Meanwhile, he tells

her nothing. What is the nature of her enemy and his influence? What is she to do?

It is worth taking a moment to consider the views of Clifford Hindley ("Why Does Miles Die?"), quoted earlier: he makes a case for the positive nature of the bond between Miles and Quint.²⁹

What, in the libretto, is "evil" about the offers Quint makes to the boy [Act I sc. 8]? In riddling words we sense ambition, adventure, wealth, a degree of double-dealing, admittedly ("the smooth world's double face"), but above all the realization of mysterious but deep desires. None of this substantiates the dark accusations of evil voiced by Mrs Grose and the Governess. (3)

Drowning the ceremony of innocence . . . while it *may* be taken to refer to a corruption of primal purity, may equally well signify the release of the convention-bound spirit into a world of more mature and sophisticated experience (5).

Though I have reservations about aspects of Hindley's argument,³⁰ I believe these issues deserve consideration if we are not to follow the governess's example of hasty and unsubstantiated judgment. Evil is everywhere adumbrated, nowhere caught. The libretto is so reticent about specific details of "corruption," while reactions run so intense, that the entire drama takes on a figmentary aspect—as if all the struggle, all the suspense were in one's head. Given that Miles is under ghostly influence, the worst we actually see him do is steal a letter, play a trick on his governess. Is it really evil that is at work, or is it

²⁹The same case, with different emphasis, is argued in Stimpson, "Drama and Meaning."

³⁰Hindley overlooks the exploitative strain in Quint's character, evident in his relationship with Miss Jessel (see Act II sc. 1, where he denies any responsibility for her fate). Meanwhile, he loads all connotations of evil unflinchingly onto the women of the story—painting Miss Jessel as a source of woe and menace, and the governess as the instrument of repression—with insufficient regard for their own status as victims.

that our view of the ghosts is skewed by the filtering mind of the governess, hijacked by her fear?

As we have seen, such an ambivalence is already prefigured by the Screw theme, and the harmonic pattern it incorporates. Its double trajectory is unsettling in its transgression of traditional tonal center, yet exciting in its pursuit of an expansive chromatic logic. Over the course of the orchestral variations, in which the dramatic aura of the harmonic spiral is constantly changing, this ambivalence is played out repeatedly, until it comes to pervade the piece, forming a backdrop for all the action. In Variation III, the expansive harmonic progression is at the service of a strong, peaceful D major. At the end of the consequent scene (The Tower), however, after Quint's first appearance, the sense of a harmonic center becomes brittle and tense, and the wayward element is no longer comfortably contained ("Who is it?" R27: esp. R28/6-29/1, "Some fearful madman"; R29/7-15). This is followed by an enigmatic turn of the spiral (Var. IV) in which the sense of key is shifty: always within grasp, but never quite materializing. The effect here is one of mischievous play rather than menace, with bass line and pizzicato strings bantering back and forth. At the opening of Act II (Ex. 13) each cadenza has its own center; the series of ominous tremolo chords between cadenzas serves as a kind of solvent from which the different centers emerge, and into which they dissolve. Though the chords are mostly diatonic or near-diatonic, their progression is purely impressionistic, evoking an expanse without orientation, a hovering abyss, as fits the setting for the Colloquy that follows ("Quint and Miss Jessel—nowhere"). Finally, in Variation IX we have another instance of a single tonal center (F#; Ex. 15). The harmonic departure from the home chord (m. 9) is sinister on the symbolic level, moving as it does to the double Quint chord from Act I scene 8. But even the home chord, the supposed point of stability, is kept queasy by the underlying piano trill (F#-G), and by its displacement of a root-triadic chord on F# with something not quite right (D# and E instead of C#).³¹ These few examples illustrate the fundamental ambivalence in the harmonic

³¹The home chord also appeared earlier, in the previous scene, associated with Miss Jessel (R15/2). See also Palmer's discussion of the present scene, in COH, 116-118.

Example 15. Variation IX (through R26/1)

The musical score for Variation IX (through R26/1) is presented in three systems. The first system begins with a piano (*pp*) dynamic and includes the instruction "with Ped." in the bass staff. The second system continues with a piano (*pp*) dynamic and includes a pianissimo (*ppp*) marking. The third system concludes with a piano (*p*) dynamic and features a boxed measure number "26". The score is characterized by intricate textures, overlapping lines, and various dynamic markings.

language of the opera. In a general sense, action is poised between the orienting influence of tonal centers and the liberating pull of an atonal field; meanwhile, the dramatic value accorded to the ensuing tension is shifting and inconstant. This is a world of slippery, unstable signs—as Quint boasts, a world with a “double face” (R76).

At the beginning of the paper, I quoted Hindley’s conclusion: for him, the opera is “about” the troubling choice Miles faces between the conventional path to maturity, represented by the Governess, and the transgressive but more authentic path, represented by Quint. His argument enriches our understanding of Miles’s position, but the shuffling of the governess to one side does wry justice to Britten’s presentation of the drama as focussed through a female consciousness.

With the same stroke, Hindley pulls the dreadful conflict into the light of day, removing all the shadows, all the drama of doubt. In displacing the governess, he bypasses the terror of her inconclusive, warring perceptions. He represses the *possibility* that she might be right. For the governess, the values of the conflict are not so simply or directly assigned. She mistrusts her own judgment. She sees her strange world, and herself, imperfectly; but somehow she must act.

Not surprisingly, the duplicity and deceit with which events mock her actions work back upon the governess in a manner erosive to her own self-image. In her attempts to establish herself as moral arbiter, the governess is dismayed to find that she too has undergone a kind of "corruption." She has gone from refusing to see anything bad, to seeing bad at every turn. She "know[s] nothing of evil," yet the evidence and detection of evil have taken hold of her perceptions. Britten makes us hear this creeping infection by his use of motivic saturation, whereby a tiny group of motivic cells pervades the musical fabric. One network of examples of such a pervasive cell involves the interval of the fourth. This interval is first given melodic importance in the Prologue, at the description of the special condition laid upon the governess (in the piano, mm. 27-30; Ex. 1); soon thereafter, that *soupeçon* blossoms into the Screw theme. The fourth is thus embedded in all the orchestral variations, that is, the music which elaborates the setting and background for each scene of the drama. Fourths are associated with the initial innocence of Bly: the children's noisy entrance in scene 2, as well as the duet between the two women later in the scene (R10), and the pastoral beauty of scene 4. But fourths also mark the intrusive appearances of Quint, and the nagging doubts about his identity and intentions ("Who is it?"). The resulting promiscuity of musical relation perpetuates a disturbing confusion of significance. The motivic material is overassigned; the fourth is somehow a sign of innocence *and* suspicion. When Flora sings her lullaby melodically saturated with fourths (I. R60); when Miles confesses his badness (I. R89; Ex. 14), turning the fourths of the governess's panicked outburst into a sweetly falling melody; these moments are further examples of the ambivalent musical world Britten has created. But they are also signs of a growing obsession focussed through the governess (and

communicated through her to the audience), a growing readiness to attach suspicion to the appearance of innocence.

This view of the governess as lightning rod for the intimations of evil at Bly, the oculus through which they gain focus and substance, brings her uncomfortably close to the figure of Pandora, loosing evil unaware and beyond recapture. (Pandora, "with her dreadful box," is also one of the sorrowful women invoked by Miss Jessel in Act I scene 8 ["All those we have wept for together," R81].) Britten exacerbates the uneasy suspicions infecting the governess and her involvement by directly identifying her with the ghosts, through thematic and tonal association. Motive γ (Ex. 3) has been prominently linked to the heroine, first as a sign of her weakness, then of her determination. Yet when Quint first sings (I.8; Ex. 16), in the shivery roulades of his siren song we recognize a version of her music. This likeness is intensified by the ghosts' brandishing of motive γ as their triumphant refrain in Act II scene 1: "The ceremony of innocence is drowned" (II. R17, etc.). Once again, the motive is overassigned; its meaning becomes confused and duplicitous. The point of the connection it makes between the governess and her opponent is obscure, enigmatic, part of the drama of doubt that constitutes her trial. Both the uncertainty and the suggestiveness of the association are borne out by the multiplicity of interpretations to which it has given rise. Patricia Howard finds a causal connection: "[Motive γ] can be called the 'catalyst' theme because it is continuously associated with the governess's coming to Bly and the impact this has on the events of the story" (COH, 82). On this view, the original self-doubt of the heroine may be said to open a (symbolic, musical) space for Quint to elaborate his designs. Peter Evans, on a different slant, finds a mirroring relationship:

The crucial significance of the γ theme is . . . the corruption of innocence, but at two levels—the directly exercised evil influence of the ghosts on the children and, through the terrifying spectacle of the increasing guile and malice that

floods their still childish natures, its extension to the Governess.³²

Clifford Hindley also finds a mirroring relationship, seeing in the thematic identification between the main characters a symbol of the “authority or control . . . which both . . . seek to exercise over the boy,” as they take responsibility for his “initiation . . . into the wider (and more perilous) experiences of adult life” (“Why Does Miles Die?” 10).

Needless to say, this identification is disturbing to the governess’s claim to moral probity as well as to the coherence of her identity. Equally disturbing are those moments when she is seen to occupy the tonal territory belonging to her enemy. The governess is given no specific key association in the opera; instead she adapts herself to the changing tonal environment as events unfold. In contrast, Quint is linked immediately with the pitch E♭, and the (0,2,5) chord, specifically on B♭-D♭-E♭ (I. 4, 5; Example 8). In Act I scene 5, where Quint’s identity is first revealed, the governess keeps returning as if in fascination to his E♭ (“I saw him before,” R37/12; “But a horror,” R38/12; “Peter Quint—who is that?” R39/3; “That man,” R45; “See what I see,” R46/5). It is the B♭-D♭-E♭ chord that lurks in the beginning of Miles’s “Malo” song (Ex. 11). It is also to this exact chord that the governess reverts (superimposing it on Flora’s lullaby chord) in her crisis of despair after the appearance of Miss Jessel (once again stressing the fourth, I. R68/6; Ex. 12). Her tonal capitulation leaves the way open for the potent encounter with Quint in the following scene (I.8), where his territorial influence is extended from its central pitch and chord to the key of A♭. This key still reigns in Act II scene 1: for the ghosts, an occasion for the celebration of their power, for the governess, a nightmarish vortex of fear. But most chilling are those passages after the heroine has regained her composure, when she is fiercely engaged in her attempt to rescue Miles, and yet it is Quint’s tonal ground that she occupies. This situation exists throughout Act II

³²*Music of Britten*, 215.

Example 16. Act I scene 8, mm. 5-11

QUINT *freely*

Miles!

Miles!

Example 17. Act II scene 4, R75/8-10

GOVERNESS *cresc.*

Miles, if you knew how I want to help you,
Miles, wenn Du wüss-test wie gern ich hel - fe,

Quint (unseen)

..... Miles, I'm wait - ing, I'm
Miles, ich war - te, ich

pp cresc.

Gov. *f*

how I want you to help me save you! ..
doch auch Du sollst Dich rei - ten hel - fen! ..
MILES (shrieking)

Quint (unseen)

wait - ing, wait - ing,
war - te, war - te,

scene 4 (The Bedroom), which proceeds from an E \flat center. The governess's own point of departure, with its potentially erotic charge ("Why Miles, not yet in bed? Not even undressed?") clearly traces the Quint chord (R71). Her melodic course presents no obstacle of dissonance against Quint's protesting entrances on E \flat (R75); in fact, she ends up competing with Quint for the same melodic space (R75/8-10; Ex. 17). This unintended concurrence will climax in the final scene of the opera, over Miles's dead body, when the governess's cries of triumph explode in the key of A \flat , exactly in tandem with Quint's cries of defeat (R134).

Quint began as an intruder, a foreign presence; but as the story continues his musical identity becomes linked with that of the governess. The external threat to the young woman and her charge becomes confused with her own intentions and actions. We are no longer absolutely sure of the distinction between herself and the other. That depth of confusion is a condition of madness, and indeed, the governess voices such a fear (II. R38). Moreover, the corruption she has projected upon Quint contaminates her own image as well, preventing her from ever quite being in the clear.

The intense uncertainty plaguing the heroine causes her to turn a severe eye upon her handling of the situation in a series of self-assessments which alternate with her points of decision ("I am useless," I. R69; "you have corrupted me," II. R23; "I have failed," II. R113; several of these critical passages—I. R46, R69, II. R113, R120/4—are linked gesturally and motivically). Yet she still manages to overlook a most important emotional undercurrent, which runs beneath her conscious control while exerting a determining influence on her actions. This is her infatuation with the guardian, which by the second act has been fully transferred to Miles.³³ Her behavior toward Miles now shows signs of an erotic investment which is strongly suggested yet

³³Alexander Jones, while scoffing at this interpretation, succeeds in amassing "an impressive amount of evidence" from James's tale to support it: "The governess obviously prefers Miles to Flora; in fact, she admits that she 'throws' herself upon him. Driven by the hope of 'possessing' him, she is constantly kissing him, folding him in her arms, or hugging him tightly 'to . . . [her] breast,'" etc. ("Point of View," 116-117).

never recognized. She chooses his bedroom, at night, as the scene of her first attempt to urge him to confess (II. 4). She listens entranced to his piano playing, issuing swooning cries: "Ah Miles! Miles!" (while tracing the Quint chord; II. R94-97). Her language in the final struggle (R121) is the language of passion: "O Miles, I cannot bear to lose you"; "Dearest Miles, I love to be with you"; "Miles, there is nothing I would not do for you." The exchange of the heroine's affection is confirmed musically by the narrative displacement of motive *x* (Ex. 3), associated with the guardian and prominent through Act I scene 5, by the Malo song (Ex. 11), introduced in scene 6, and prominent thereafter. The major third quality of motive *x* is exchanged for the mixed but predominantly minor thirds associated with Miles.³⁴ The common ground between the two objects of affection is underscored in the telling passage when the governess writes the letter to the guardian (II.3, R65). The contour of motive *x* returns, but in a new context of solely minor thirds; moreover, the melodic continuation of interlocking thirds is a direct assimilation of Miles's song (Ex. 18). In the languorous, lyrical warmth as she reads the letter ("dear Sir, my dear Sir," "I must see you"), her passion must be evident to all but herself.

Fuelled by this passion, and by her indignation at the increasing boldness of the ghosts, the governess overcomes her crisis of despair and regains her resolve ("I will never abandon them," II. R63). She is confident enough to break the guardian's interdict of silence. She comes to her next point of decision: protection is of no avail, she must actively rescue the children ("how I want you to help me save you!" II. R75/10). To that end she follows a new strategy of confrontation: first in her direct defiance of Miss Jessel (II.3), then her sparring matches with Miles (II.4, 8), and her challenge to Flora (II.7). No

³⁴This musical exchange has been obliquely foreshadowed by the continual pairing of motives *x* and *y* (begun in I.1, R3/4-7; cf. Ex. 3), where the major third of *x* gives way to a minor third at the beginning of *y*. A fine point of speculation is suggested by the fact that *x* is the only motive in the opera not recognizably derived from the Screw theme, while Miles's song is a direct distillation, using both intervals (minor thirds, fourths) and contour of that theme.

Example 18. Act II scene 3, R66/7-67/6

[67] Quieter (♩ = 72)
p GOVERNESS (reading) (learn'd)

"Sir
 Ach! "Ver -

relaxing - - -

Str. *ppp* *pp* but marked
 Harp

dear Sir— my dear Sir, I have not for-gotten your charge of si - lence, of
 - ehr - ter, nein, lie - ber, ich hab nicht vergessen, Sie woll - ten Schwei - gen, mein

pp

longer does she entertain doubts about her own strength or about the course she is following. The tentative elements have been banished from her music. One can compare, for instance, the wavering scalar inflections of her Soliloquy ("Which way shall I turn?" II.1) or her dazed passivity in Act II scene 2 (The Bells), with the new-found force and authority of her ironic remarks in the piano scene, in which she rises to biting dissonances without losing her rhythmic poise (II.6, R87, "We're all enjoying it"), or the reckless confidence of her call to action, bristling with aggressive fourths, when Flora disappears (R97).³⁵

³⁵See Howard, COH, 82-85, for a discussion of the governess's growing confidence as gauged by the transformations of motive y.

To challenge her ghostly opponents, the governess targets the vulnerable points of their influence: namely, the children. But in her new aggressive stance toward the children, she is placing herself precisely in the position of the ghosts. She is now the intruder, stealing into Miles's bedroom at his moment of vulnerability and doubt, forcing her way into Flora's tryst by the lake. She is driven by the need for possession: "They are mine, mine the children" (II. R63), "You shall be mine, and I shall save you" (II. R121). She becomes the "horrible" woman who destroys Flora's peace of mind. For, despite the governess's insistence, Flora makes no confession. Instead, she suffers a kind of breakdown, her winning manners suddenly and nastily degenerating into a full-blown tantrum, whose shrill dancing gait mocks the governess's good intentions (II. R106).³⁶

For good or ill, the heroine has put doubt behind her, and faced a deceptive, nearly undecidable situation by taking charge: deciding on a course of action, and throwing herself into her decision. Yet even if she is justified in her conviction of something terribly wrong at Bly, she is still mistaken in her understanding; her drastic measures stand condemned by their failure.

The Outcome

We now come to the final point of decision, when the governess is left alone with Miles. Despite her failure with Flora, she is determined to "stay and face what I have to face with the boy" (R120/4; Ex. 19). This moment is marked in the score with the utmost gravity, uprightness and tonal confidence. Her scale relates to those marking the previous moments of decision, while standing alone and completely diatonic, as if reflecting a greater purity of intent.

³⁶The percussive dance (often tinged with irony) is another example of a gesture used with motivic significance in the opera. Related gestures are the tympani in the opening scene (Ex. 2), the hobby-horse music (I.5; Ex. 20), the celebratory duo of the ghosts (beginning "I seek a friend," II. R16), Variation XII ("So! She has written"), and Miles's triumphant piano in Variation XIV.

Example 19. Act II scene 8, R120/4-121/5

Gov. *p*

All the same, go, and I shall stay and face what I have to face... with the boy....
Das ist gleich, geht, und ich bleib hier,-- be-reist, was auch kommt, be-reist..... mit dem Bub.....

[121] Slow and regular ($\text{♩} = 60$) Mrs Grose goes quickly to Flora and takes her off.
passionately Frau Gross geht schnell zu Flora und nimmt sie mit.

Gov. *f*

..... O Miles..... I can-not bear to... lose you. You shall be....
 O Miles..... ich kann Dich jetzt nicht las-sen. Du bleibst ganz

pp Timp. Db. (pizz.) Harp
 (with *ad.*)

Gov.

mine, and I shall save you....
mein, ich werd' Dich ret-ten.....

Once again, the governess urgently seeks a confession. While in previous encounters, Miles's cunning assertions of independence have caught her off balance,³⁷ she now maintains her poise, calmly but firmly commanding obedience. It is Miles whose confidence falters. When Quint appears to defend his claim, the confrontation becomes a struggle of wills, with Miles's young will the point of leverage between the two adults. The clashes in this duel are enacted in terms of musical gesture, tone color and tonality. The stately poise of the passacaglia initiated by the governess is repeatedly disturbed by the agitation marking Quint's entrances, heralded as before by the celesta. His insistence on E♭/A♭ makes for a strong antagonism to the well-established key of A, to which the governess has at long last returned. Meanwhile, the ground bass underlying the struggle unfurls in longer and longer fragments, pursuing the well-known harmonic spiral until it reveals the entire twelve-note pattern of the Screw theme on its original tonal level (R130).³⁸ Finally (R131) the theme itself materializes in its recognizable shape (setting off from A). The governess inhabits this shape magisterially—but to what accumulated portent and incoherence of implication—in simultaneous competition with Quint's breathless pleading ("On the paths") in A♭.

At this final turn of the screw, in which all the tensions of the work are brought to bear, Miles surrenders the name the governess is seeking. The ecstatic outburst which follows (R134), in which Quint's influence unravels as A♭ subsides into A, explodes and shimmers in waves of release that attest to the sexual energies which have lain coiled beneath the surface.³⁹ But the boy's desperate cry, with its ambiguous

³⁷As with the song that he "found" (I.6), his false confession (I.8), his "challenge" by the church (II.2), his interruption of the bedroom interview (II.4), and his entrancing performance at the piano (II.6).

³⁸See Evans, *Music of Britten*, 213-214, for a close analysis of the bass line's progress.

³⁹This culminating gesture can be traced all the way back to the swirling arpeggios at the opening of the opera, especially the exuberant passage of mm. 23-26 (Ex. 1). Related glissando gestures include the bowing and curtseying music (I.2), the harp

address (“Peter Quint, you devil!”), has still not yielded up the secret of where his loyalty and love really lie. Even the governess’s own words at her moment of victory (“Together we have destroy’d him”) show a double face, operating beyond her control, just as her actions have done. The deceptive “we” slips from her grasp to pair her with her enemy in a consummation she never meant (just as the unison climax on A_b has done). Only when she turns her attention to the young body she holds does she realize that all is not “well,” that her triumph has also been a fatal loss.

If we look for a moral in this bitter outcome we will be dismayed. The indirection and ambiguity permeating the story cause a fundamental uncertainty about what the struggle and its opponents might stand for, as witnessed by the multiple and contradictory interpretations which have been (more or less plausibly) advanced. My own retelling has emphasized the private drama of the young protagonist, the trial she must undergo in facing a deceptive world and fashioning a self sufficient to its dangers. Though ill-prepared, she risks commitment; she interposes herself. Her failure is thus of a different sort from, though mirrored by, my own failure to cross the interpretive distance I have maintained and commit myself to a judgment of her actions.

But rather than seeking the lesson to be learned, perhaps the more immediate responses pressed upon us are the *frissons* of the ghost story and the catharsis of sharing the young woman’s ordeal. We watch and listen, horror mixing with relish, as the screw tightens upon the governess with a wicked, inescapable logic. Our spirits are wrung with hers in the final tableau as speech fails her, and her sorrow and passion pour out to the phrases of Miles’s melancholy song (II. R137; Ex. 20). The brief grandeur of her lament speaks eloquently of the new maturity she has gained—but at what cost? Her parting question (“What have we done between us?”) reveals an intimation of the unintended alliance with her enemy; but, in a meek echo of former self-pronouncements, she has surrendered the weapon of her certainty. Her vehement pursuit

flourishes in the pig-stealing game (I.5), and most prominently, the refrain of the Colloquy (“The ceremony of innocence,” II. 1).

of (gestural) climax and (tonal) resolution have been complicit with Miles's death. Now she shrinks from her victory, yielding to that lowering sense of the undecidable which has proven the stronger adversary. Her submission registers in the fragmentation and ambivalence of her tonal path in this passage, which moves with subtle irresolution from A Lydian (R137) through a tonicized G# (Quint's key; R137/6) back to A. As her dirge brings the opera to a close (R139), the uncanny *frisson* of the finger tremolo on tympani blends with the tragic dignity of the harp cadences, while the governess's haunting deferral (through Miles's lowered seventh) of the underlying A major betrays the equivocation of one who has come through her trial but has not been able to deliver herself from doubt.

Example 20. Act II scene 8, R136/8-138/7

She lays him down on the ground.
 Sie lässt ihn zu Boden gleiten. 137

Gov. Ah! Miles! Ma - lo, Ma - lo! Ma - lo than a
 Ah! Miles! Ma - lo, Ma - lo! Ma - lo als ein

naugh-ty boy.
 bö - ser Bub.
 E.H.

Ma - lo, Ma - lo in ad -
 Ma - lo, Ma - lo in Ge -

mf *ff* *ff* *mf* *p* *fl.*

Tutti