

## SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

“‘Innocence, you have corrupted me.’ The line is Myfanwy Piper’s own, not Yeats’s or James’s, so what did she mean by it? ‘I think that’s about the Governess’s own innocence, that she was a person who was innocent in all her approaches to everything, but she realized that you can’t *be* innocent, you can’t afford to be innocent, so that her innocence has let her down.’ It might be felt that Britten himself, by this stage of his life, was caught up, perhaps sexually, with the idea of innocence – that it was in this sense a corrupting influence. Myfanwy Piper says that she ‘did think of that, to some extent.’

The only sin which Miles definitely commits in the opera is his theft of a letter from the Governess reporting her suspicions to this children’s guardian. We do not know whether these suspicions are justified, whether Miles and his sister have really been corrupted. So why, at the end of the opera, and to a passacaglia in the orchestra, does Miles die?

It seems to be once again a victory of bourgeois convention over bohemianism. The Governess, like the Borough [*Peter Grimes*], stands for socially acceptable yet in some respects deplorable attitudes (her selfish possessiveness towards Miles). She has banished Quint, who in the end may be no more than a voice for her own unspoken desires. The consequence of this banishment is disastrous: the child, who surely stands for the visionary, the artist (Miles, a precocious pianist, could be Britten himself as a child), is destroyed by the struggle to subdue the personality’s own dark side.

Does Myfanwy Piper accept that, on one level, the opera is about the struggle between the two facets of Britten’s own nature? ‘I never thought of that. It seems to me that it may be the two sides of anybody’s sexuality. But that was in the story, and was why he chose to do it.’”

Humphrey Carpenter

“People have often said to me how absurd it was that the language I gave to Quint was so extremely un-evil. That’s not the point. The point is how he maintained his attraction. And the only way he could attract a comparatively innocent child was through the imagination, which is, if you like, why people were attracted to Ben.”

What is absorbing and fascinating about *The Turn of the Screw* is not the sin that lies beneath the fine mist of evil, nor yet the Governess’s unfulfilled love, which it was at one time the Freudian fashion to make responsible for the whole affair, but the vulnerability of innocence at all ages. The children’s inquiring innocence is assailed from outside, the young woman’s is attacked from within by her own fears and imagination and from without by the evidence of her bemused senses, which she constantly mistrusts.

Myfanwy Piper

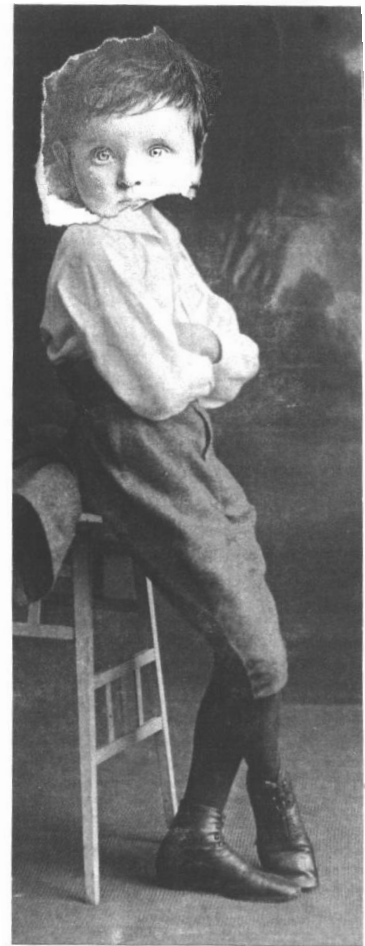
QUINT  
I seek a friend –  
Obedient to follow where I lead,  
Slick as a juggler’s mate to catch my thought,  
Proud, curious, agile, he shall feed  
My mounting power.  
Then to his bright subservience I’ll  
expound  
The desperate passions of a haunted  
heart,  
And in that hour  
“The ceremony of innocence is  
drowned.”

"It would seem to be the Governess, the only consciousness through whom the dire tale comes to us, who drives Flora into hatred and sickness, and who kills Miles.

Yet although the psychological explanation fits the facts and must be part of the truth, it is not the whole truth. In uncovering psychological motivations one explains nothing *away*, for the human psyche is infinitely mysterious. It would rather seem that James's point is that the Governess's neurotic obsession opens her senses to psychic realities that are normally hidden, especially in the socially respectable world to which she belongs. James's tale certainly implies that the children had some intimate communion with the *living* Quint and Miss Jessel, and remain in some sense haunted by them. Quint, the low servant, and Miss Jessel, the well-born previous governess, were creatures ravaged by passion and terrors alien to anything Mrs. Grose could comprehend, and remote from the social masks that people such as the Governess present to the world – except when, in going mad, they may have intimations of a deeper sanity. For although such passions and terrors may be 'bad', to use Miles's word, they are not necessarily and only bad since in representing the daemonic they embrace the heights along with the depths of human potential." Wilfred Mellers

#### GOVERNESS

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.  
Oh 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?...



"The Governess is desperate to prevent this 'growing up' and to preserve Miles's angelic innocence (which resembles the unblemished purity of the apprentice, Lucretia, Albert and Billy), a stasis which can only be achieved through death. She equates the physical process of aging with moral decay, just as Lucretia's blush and Billy's stammer are signs of their inner impurity, and she observes that Flora, who is initially 'a vision of angelic beauty', now becomes: 'not at these times a child but an old, old woman...her incomparable childish beauty had suddenly failed, had quite vanished...she was hideously hard; she had turned common, almost ugly...[like a] vulgarly pert little girl in the street'. From meager evidence the Governess construes a monstrous yet unspecified wickedness, equating knowledge with sexual experience and sin. Ignorance is the only possible salvation yet this ignorance suffocates and destroys life. In contrast, the ghosts' gift of knowledge can appear positively liberating, creative and life-giving." Claire Seymour

#### MILES

I'm growing up, you know. I want my own kind.

#### GOVERNESS

Yes, you're growing up.

#### MILES

So much I want to do, so much I might do.

"For they are children, their radiance suggests the primal and the universal. This provisional interpretation is supported by another verbal pattern which James uses to describe the children. Miles has a 'great glow of freshness,' a 'positive fragrance of purity,' a 'sweetness of innocence'; in him she finds something 'extraordinarily happy, that ...struck me as beginning anew each day'; he could draw upon 'reserves of goodness.' Then, as things change, the governess remarks, on one occasion, that 'He couldn't play any longer at innocence' and mentions, on another, his pathetic struggles to 'play...a part of innocence.' To the emphasis upon beauty, then, is added this emphasis upon brightness and freshness and innocence. What must come across to us, from such a context, is echoes of the Garden of Eden; we have the morality play story, as we have said, but altered, complemented, and given unique poignance by being told of mankind at its first radical crisis, in consequence of which all other morality stories are; Miles and Flora become the childhood of the race. They are symbolic children as the ghosts are symbolic ghosts. Even the names themselves have a representative quality as those of James's characters often do: Miles – the soldier, the archetypal male; Flora – the flower, the essential female. Man and woman are caught even before the first hint of maturity, dissected, and shown to have within them all the seeds – possible of full growth even now – of their own destruction."

Robert Heilman

MILES

You see, I am bad, I am bad, aren't I?

