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The Horror of Poison: The Representation of Anxiety in Henry James

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Introduction

Images of poison haunt Henry James. An obsession for using poison imagery as the representation of anxiety can be considered as one of the characteristics of his texts. From a biographical point of view, Richard D. Altick points out about James's interest in poison that "of all the major figures on the English literary scene as Victoria's reign drew to a close, the most sensitive connoisseur of murder [poisoning] was Henry James" (Altick 134). But my focus in this essay is not on physical poison itself but on James's uses of poison as a metaphor or figure. I would like to pay particular attention to one of his supernatural tales, *The Turn of the Screw* (to be abbreviated hereafter to *TS*), for the governess in this novel is obsessional about the rhetoric of poison. The juxtaposed discussion of *TS* with other works—novels and essays—written by him will reveal what is significant in his rhetoric of poison.

I. Ghosts as Toxins

James represents poison or disease as a ghost. In "The Middle Years" (1895), "illness and age rose before him [Dencombe] like spectres with pitiless eyes" (269). Dencombe is a very sensitive novelist; calamities of illness fall on James's delicate characters. The governess in *TS*, too, has extremely delicate feelings. She tells her story mainly about the supernatural, and is impelled to put stronger emphasis on the description of ghosts than on that of any other event at Bly. In the words of T. J. Lustig, "[t]o see Quint is to write him and to write him is to see him" (Lustig 108). Insofar as she is the author of memoirs, she

cannot but think about him (Lustig 108). A pattern of poison imagery can be seen in her delineation of ghosts.

What impression does Quint's ghost form on the governess? Miles confesses to her in the dining room that he has stolen her letters. Immediately thereafter, the ghost looks into the room from without; and it is her description of the apparition in that scene that I would like to focus on. She refers to the deceased Quint as a "scoundrel" (85) and then writes:

[...] [A]fter a second in which his [Miles's] head made the movement of a baffled dog's on a scent and then gave a frantic little shake for air and light, he was at me in a white rage, bewildered, glaring vainly over the place and missing wholly, though it now, to my [the governess's] sense, filled the room like the taste of poison, the wide overwhelming presence. (88)

The governess seems to be afraid of being infected with or murdered by the "poison" of Quint's ghost. "[T]he wide overwhelming presence" quoted above refers to that apparition which is recognized by her as the poison gas which accumulates in the air of the dining room. She is worried whether the air in which ghosts appear is clean or not. Her eyes, which ascertain whether "the air [is] clear again" (86) after Quint's ghost disappears at the window, express her close attention to his toxicity, and are considered a sanitary point of view. Furthermore, after Jessel's ghost disappears, the governess proudly feels that it is because she succeeds in "clear[ing] the air" (59) that "[t]here [is] nothing in the room [schoolroom] [...] but the sunshine and the sense that [she] must stay" (59). Miles, who breathes his last breath immediately after his shriek—"Peter Quint—you devil!" (88)—, makes gestures analogous to those of Quint's ghost: first, just as this apparition "glar[es]" (85) into the dining room, Miles does so as well; second, just as the former makes the movement of "a baffled beast" (85), so the latter does also. This juxtaposition of the dead Quint's gestures with Miles's suggests that the boy is possessed by the valet's spirit. Miles wears the look of a "convulsed supplication" (88), which seems to be due to

Quint's "poison."

As in *TS*, "the taste of poison," the miasma, rages in *Daisy Miller* (1878). James allows Winterbourne, who visits the Colosseum to meet Daisy Miller, to feel that it is filled with the poisonous air:

[...] [H]e [Winterbourne] remembered that if nocturnal meditations in the Colosseum are recommended by the [Romantic] poets, they are deprecated by the doctors. The historic atmosphere, scientifically considered, was no better than a villainous miasma. (46)

This medical discourse implies that as if gladiators at the bloody arena, violators—that is, Daisy and Winterbourne—of medical advice should be murdered by their enemy, "the miasma." James at first describes "the historic atmosphere" as a poetic mood; however he is then impelled to regard it as the poisonous air. This abrupt change of writing in the "Colosseum" scene reveals that James has a scientific eye for the atmosphere. The "Colosseum" appears as the filthy site into which Roman gladiators' blood sinks and from which their blood or corpses give out a foul odor. The kind of miasma which James describes evokes the dead and the past. His thinking about the miasma is thus based on ghost imagery.

James's ghost story, *TS*, is set in a Victorian country house haunted by ghosts as toxins; we find that this setting is timely when we think of the atmosphere of disease in the Victorian age. In the Victorian age, terrors of pollution were conveyed through ghost imagery, which could be found in cartoons as well. Let us consider *Punch*, published in the 1890s when *TS* appeared. There is a grotesque illustration entitled "The Smells (Edgar Allan Poe, Up to Date)" (Fig. 1) which satirizes the miasma—the air that rose from putrefaction and polluted rivers and was often believed to cause epidemic disease—and reminds us of "a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued" in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (233). There is a picture entitled "Back!" in *Punch* (10 September 1892), which depicts a ghostlike cholera germ eliminated by Britannia (Fig. 2). Britannia here is represented as a valiant warrior against her enemy, a

deadly virus: her attempt is to fence off the cholera-ridden area from Victorian England.



Fig. 1. The Smells
(*Punch*, 1 November 1890)



Fig. 2. "Back!"
(*Punch*, 10 September 1892)

The governess in *TS* believes that "everything [...] would have to be fenced about and ordered and arranged" (15) for Miles and Flora; by the words "fenced about and ordered and arranged," she seems to mean that her pupils' "health and happiness" (15) in the house (or on the inside) should be sheltered from various evils (or from the outside). Her deliberate arrangement reveals that the inside of which she thinks consists only of order and peace, and opposes good (the inside, lovely pupils, cleanliness) to evil (the outside, ghosts, uncleanness).

In the eyes of the governess in *TS* who conveys her terror of the ghosts as pollution imagery, even Miles's intellectual maturity is influenced by "the work of demons" (*TS* 49). She, who attempts to remove what happened during his school days out of him, feels that he has been secretly precocious:

It was extraordinary how my [the governess's] absolute conviction of his [Miles's] secret precocity—or whatever I might call the poison of an influence that I dared but half-phrase—made him, in spite

of the faint breath of his inward trouble, appear as accessible as an older person, forced me to treat him as an intelligent equal. (TS 63)

The governess here conceives that the ghosts poison the morals as well as the air. In the light of the collocation—"the poison of an influence"—the word "influence" which she uses seems to refer to the vice of the ghosts. Because she calls Quint's ghost "some criminal" (41) and Jessel's "[her] vile predecessor" (59) or an "infamous" (32) woman, the governess considers them degenerates. Her mind is preoccupied with anxiety or fear that Miles will meet the dead Quint and Jessel, by whom he has been secretly deprived of his innocence: she regards the "poison" of the "demons" as the kind of wickedness which depraves childlike innocence.

II. Poison as a Coup d'État

The governess, who feels anxiety that the dead Quint and Jessel who frequently appear to her may scheme to pervert Miles and Flora, discusses with Mrs. Grose, a "housekeeper" (TS 5) how to deal with the ghosts, meanwhile this steward proposes that she herself and the teacher ask for help from the master of Bly in order to protect his cousins against evil spirits; after listening to this proposal, her interlocutor is bewildered:

Standing there before me [the governess] while I kept my seat she [Mrs. Grose] visibly turned things over. "Their uncle must do the preventing. He must take them [Miles and Flora] away."

"And who's to make him?"

[...] "You, Miss."

"By writing to him that his house is poisoned and his little nephew and niece mad?" (TS 49)

The word "poisoned" here connotes "pervert morally" (*OED*) because the governess is convinced that the ghosts as toxins may drive her pupils mad. She persuades herself that it is the vice of the ghosts that poisons "his house," perverts her pupils, and makes them deny the

existence of specters that she thinks meet them secretly. For her, this bad influence itself exercised by the dead—Quint and Jessel—is terrible, but what seems more dreadful to her is her anxiety that she may violate (by writing to her employer) the terms of the contract that whatever happens, she must not contact him. She is afraid of giving him “worry” (50) and experiencing “his contempt for the breakdown of [her] resignation at being left alone” (50); therefore what impels her to confront the ghosts is also “how proud [she] had been to serve him and to stick to [their] terms [of a contract]” (50).

In James's texts, it is not the lower classes but the bourgeoisie that poison targets. In *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), Rose Muniment, both of whose parents are poverty-stricken laborers, does not contract “an epidemic of typhoid” (147). She refers to her medically inexplicable immunity to that disease: “[...] of course it [an epidemic of typhoid] must pass me [Rose] over [...].” (147). In *The American Scene* (to be abbreviated hereafter to AS), James deals with Jews in the New York ghetto and then focuses on their living environment: “I [James] remember the evolved fireproof staircase, a thing of scientific surfaces, impenetrable to the microbe, and above all plated [...] with white marble of a goodly grain” (103). Both of these texts serve to subvert the preconception that the lower classes in the slums are open to epidemics and live in insalubrious surroundings. In contrast, the rich in James's texts fall victim to epidemics. “The Middle Years” (1895) centers on a middle-aged novelist of high reputation, who spends his leisure time at a fashionable coast resort; he confesses that his son has been “carried off by typhoid” (269). In “The Author of Beltraffio” (1884), a bourgeois boy dies of “diphtheritic symptoms” (104). Epidemic disease thus threatens bourgeois peaceful life. One of the horrors which the governess in *TS* has of the ghosts as toxins, too, is that she herself is deprived of upper class life.

Poison in James is associated also with a monetary problem. He was confronted with materialistic America when he returned there after a lapse of approximately twenty years. The “restless analyst” (AS 46), James's AS records such a mental shock. Civilization in turn-

of-the-century America is virulent enough to provide him with a material for an illness narrative:

They [Images of reassurance at Harvard] glow, the humblest of them, to the imagination—the imagination that fixes the surrounding scene as a huge Rappaccini garden, rank with each variety of the poison-plant of the money-passion—they glow with all the vividness of the defined alternative, the possible antidote, and seem to call on us to blow upon the flame till it is made inextinguishable. (AS 46)

James here compares capitalistic America, which tends to stress its utility alone, to a botany covered in a miasma in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1846). Critical debates on this passage have centered on James's desire for romance: first, Mark Seltzer observes that "His [James's] art [...] is an attempt to project the ideal alternative and 'antidote' to a limited and limiting social scene" (Seltzer 138); second, Lustig insists that "The prosaic prosperous conditions of New York [are] a Hawthornean romance" (Lustig 224). But it seems to me that the "Rappaccini-garden" scene quoted above admits of a medical interpretation. In "Rappaccini's Daughter" as an intertext of AS, a scientist called Rappaccini "place[s] a kind of mask over his mouth and nostrils, as if all this beauty [of poison-plants] did but conceal a deadlier malice" (190). Like poison-plants in Rappaccini's garden, urban America in AS disguises itself as a beautiful scene, though it really hides its disdainful attitude toward the kind of inner life which James favors. Just as the miasma of Rappaccini's garden paralyzes one's senses, so urban America, which emerges as a "poison-plant," gives "the most restless of analysts," James hallucinations (AS 25): skyscrapers, represented by "the money-passion," seem like poisonous plants. For fear of suffering from commerce poisoning, he seeks refuge in the intellectual atmosphere of the Harvard campus; as the only antidote that sterilizes a kind of miasma of capitalistic vice, the image of "flame" passes through his mind.

"[T]he poison-plant of the money-passion" takes root also in *The American* (1877). An American businessman called Christopher Newman

attempts to marry a beautiful French lady, Claire de Cintré, (née Bellegarde) by means of his colossal wealth. He assumes that such a marriage will get her out of her melancholy; he makes figurative use of the word "antidote" in order to glorify himself as a fiancé:

He [Newman] felt, himself, that he was an antidote to [Claire's] oppressive secrets; what he offered her was, in fact, above all things a vast sunny immunity from the need of having any. (151)

Claire's "oppressive secrets" are that she has not been allowed to marry anyone for a decade after her former husband was survived by her. By proposing marriage to her, Newman attempts to break such a spell the Bellegarde family has cast over her. Since the members of the Bellegarde family make it a rule to marry aristocrats, his marriage to her—an alliance between a bourgeois and a peer—is simultaneously heterogeneous and subversive to the creed of aristocratic purity. As an "antidote," "the poison-plant of the money-passion" deeply rooted in Newman's temperament homeopathically neutralizes the harm of the Bellegarde convention and provides Claire with the "immunity" to her anxiety about making another marriage.

III. The Rhetoric of Poison

The trope of poison in *TS* is more closely bound up with dark aspects of the human psyche than "the poison-plant of the money-passion" in *AS* and *The American*. The governess in *TS* is in the grip of the use of poison as a metaphor. In the former half of her memoirs, she refers to her pupils as "antidote[s]" (*TS* 20) to her sufferings; in the latter half of hers, however, such an expectation of hers is marred by her excessive moral cleanliness. Tormented by the ghosts as "scoundrels" (*TS* 49), she attempts to guard her pupils, both of whom, strange to say, fall sick (or appear to).

Struggling with the ghosts, the governess often uses medical terms: for instance, she calls Mrs. Grose's and Miles's "loyalty" (*TS* 76) her "remedy" (*TS* 76). While she asks him why he does not refer to the school where he has studied, this governess is afraid that he is worried

about something; looking at her favorite male pupil who seems to be in distress, she feels as if he were a patient:

His [Miles's] clear listening face, framed in its smooth whiteness, made him for the minute as appealing as some wistful patient in a children's hospital; and I [the governess] would have given, as the resemblance came to me, all I possessed on earth really to be the nurse or the sister of charity who might have helped to cure him. (*TS* 63)

Attended with poison imagery, psychological vulnerability recurs in James's essays—for instance, he describes a battlefield where injured soldiers lie in World War I as “poisonous field” (“The American Volunteer Motor-Ambulance Corps in France” 132) and expresses the dreadful scene which has been seen by English soldiers in hospitals with the words “such visions [of war] must have poisoned their world” (“The Long Wards” 174). The governess here imagines that the whole house turns into a kind of hospital; besides, she calls Miles “a convalescent slightly fatigued” (*TS* 63). In her heart, there is a growing sentiment—that is, moral cleanliness—that it is she that can appease his anguish like a “nurse.” Considering her comparison of a ghost to “poison,” we may say that she considers herself to be a righteous person who confronts immoral “demons” (*TS* 49) as “scoundrels” (*TS* 49).

Let us determine the depravity of the ghosts of Quint and Jessel which the governess regards as evil. The corruption of these dead employees derives from their conduct in their lifetimes and is revealed by Mrs. Grose's harsh comment that despite the difference of “their rank, their condition” (33)—(Jessel had been recognized as “a lady” before she associated with Quint; and he was a “valet” [24])—they were very close. The governess vaguely calls the immoral relationship between Quint and Jessel “something” (33) and Mrs. Grose “everything” (33): both of them avoid referring to how the two dead household servants have kept company with each other. The past association between “a lady” and an “impudent, assured, spoiled, depraved” (33) valet appears to give both Mrs. Grose and the governess a great shock. What does

the governess mean by the word "something"? She repeatedly asks Mrs. Grose what Jessel died of (33) and calls her predecessor's ghost "poison"; taking these facts into consideration, we can assume that the governess suspects that her predecessor has contracted venereal disease such as syphilis, which fits the sickness of the fallen like prostitutes. Bruce Robbins considers the friendship between Quint and Jessel "the forbidden love," "their transgression," and "the social violation they committed" (Robbins 288); besides, he asserts that intercourse among different classes terrifies the governess. Given a hint as to the fact that Quint and Jessel had close contact with each other, the governess labels her dead predecessor a corrupt lady (33); when told by Mrs. Grose that he "play[ed] with him [Miles], [...] spoil[ed] him" and "was too much free [with everyone including him]" (26), she is overcome by "a sudden sickness of disgust" (26). Furthermore, the governess, who is told by Mrs. Grose that "he [Quint] had everything to say [...] even about them [Miles and Flora]" (27), professes that she "had to smother a kind of howl" (27). Quint behaved as if he had been Miles's "tutor" (36) and also "a very grand one" (36); he "did wear [...] [the] waistcoats [which his master had lost]" (24). For the governess, the immorality of Quint's and Jessel's private lives signifies the absence of cleanness.

As if under the influence of a medical discourse, the governess, who chases the ghosts as toxins which bring harm to her pupils, hates the apparitions so violently that she herself turns evil (of which the word "poison" is connotative). The governess's dichotomy between cleanliness (good) and uncleanness (evil) vacillates. In the latter half of her memoirs, she loses her aim of protecting her pupils against the immorality of the ghosts—restoring order in Bly—and her reason succumbs to her feelings. The more deeply she cares about them, the harsher she becomes to her pupils. I would like to turn to the poisonous governess.

When she focuses on Miles's behavior at school, the governess is exceedingly excited. She explains that it is because Quint's ghost appears to Miles that she "spring[s] straight upon him" (TS 87), but it

also seems that the boy's action of "avert[ing] himself" irritates her furiously. Furthermore, she seems to intensify a desire to make this male pupil confess what he has said while at school and why his chatter has forced him to leave school. Unexpectedly, Miles, who obstinately refuses to tell her what he has said at school, allows her to utter "an irrepressible cry" (87) and "spring straight upon him," triggering off those barbaric acts of hers.

Flora becomes emotionally unstable because, beside the pond at Bly, the governess closely questions her on Jessel's ghost. Mrs. Grose comes to the teacher to tell her that suddenly her female pupil has fallen sick:

Flora was so markedly feverish that an illness was perhaps at hand; she had passed a night of extreme unrest, a night agitated above all by fears that had for their subject not in the least her former but wholly her present governess. (74)

This compound sentence is interesting in that it suggests that there is a causal connection between Flora's raging fever and the governess's question about the dead Jessel's whereabouts. Upset by the governess's "Where, my pet [Flora], is Miss Jessel?" (70) and "She's [Jessel is] there [on the bank of a pond at Bly], you little unhappy thing—there, there, *there*, and you know it as well as you know me!" (71), Flora cries furiously: "Take me away, take me away—oh take me away from *her* [the governess]!" (73). This little girl's agitation is aggravated in the night and causes fever. The enumeration of the words—"feverish," "illness," "unrest," and "fears"—which are connotative of vulnerability is outstanding. Although she calls Quint's ghost "the hideous author of our woe" (88) in the last scene of *TS*, the governess turns villain in that she incurs Flora's neurosis. Flora is made to increase the governess's anxiety.

Just as, in the *The Golden Bowl* (to be abbreviated hereafter to *GB*), Prince Amerigo imagines the machine civilization—which represents his fiancée, Maggie Verver's native country, America—as "the antidote" (*GB* 52) to his ancestors' vices or in *The Wings of the Dove*

(1902) Merton Densher compares his lover, Kate Croy's kindnesses—which ease his frustration at being hardly able to meet her—to “antidotes” (189), so the governess in *TS* uses the word “antidote” as a metaphor for her spiritual salvation—for instance, she writes: “My [The governess's] charming work was just my life with Miles and Flora, and through nothing could I so like it as through feeling that to throw myself into it was to throw myself out of my trouble” (19).

Yet the governess, forgetting about her primary aim of protecting her pupils against the ghosts, curses Flora, and is beside herself with anger at this little girl's impudence. Flora denies the existence of Jessel's ghost, which appears at the edge of the pond; besides, she uses the term “of a vulgarly pert little girl in the street” (73)—“I [Flora] don't know what you [the governess] mean. I see nobody. I see nothing. I never *have*. I think you're cruel. I don't like you!” (73)—in front of the governess. These words sound coarse to the governess who prides herself on being in charge of respectable upper-class children and express their speaker's hostility to her interlocutor by the recurrent use of negatives. The governess abhors rude men/women; Flora's unexpected crude manner of speech deranges her tutor's fixed image of her: a genteel girl. The governess also calls Flora “the chit” (74); she cannot find innocence in her female pupil any longer. The discord between the governess and Flora which I have described above also reveals the governess's hatred toward the corrupt world: “The wretched child [Flora] had spoken exactly as if she had got from some outside source each of her stabbing little words, and I [the governess] could therefore, in the full despair of all I had to accept, but sadly shake my head at her” (73). The governess is overwhelmed by the idea that Flora, whom she compares to “a rosy sprite,” may secretly come into contact with profligate girls in the outside world, and her gesture—“but sadly shake [her] head at her [Flora]”—substitutes for her tutorial desertion of the corrupt Flora.

The word “poison” in James's later works frequently functions as a metaphor of discord between people. For instance, *GB* describes issues concerning the relationship between Europeans and Americans;

poison imagery is used as a disturbance of human relations:

‘[...] One saw the consciousness I [Fanny Assingham] speak of come over the poor things, very much as I suppose people at the court of the Borgias may have watched each other begin to look queer after having had the honour of taking wine with the heads of the family. My comparison’s only a little awkward, for I don’t in the least mean that Charlotte was consciously dropping poison into their cup. She was just herself their poison, in the sense of mortally disagreeing with them [Amerigo and Maggie]—but she didn’t know it.’
(177)

Fanny compares Charlotte Stant—Maggie’s old friend and mother-in-law and Amerigo’s ex-lover—to “poison” because she thinks Charlotte is not congenial with him and his wife. Interestingly enough, Fanny also likens Charlotte to one of “the Borgias” notorious for their criminal poisoning; this rhetoric suggests that the way Charlotte has the impudence to become familiar with Amerigo and Maggie despite the fact that she was closely associated with him is similar to the cruelty—poisoning—of “the Borgias.”

To the governess in *TS* who finds it difficult to communicate with her pupils owing to the ghosts as toxins, the decline from decency to indecency means toxin contamination. Her respect for respectability is evident in her speech, which centers on the question of whether Miles is mischievous or not. From the principal at the school where this boy has gone, she receives a letter to the effect that he has been expelled from school; she discusses her male pupil with Mrs. Grose who does not believe that it is because of his naughtiness that he has been forced to leave school:

[...] “You [Mrs. Grose] like them [boys] with the spirit to be naughty?” Then keeping pace with her answer, “So do I [the governess]!” I eagerly brought out. “But not to the degree to contaminate—”

“To contaminate?”—my big word left at a loss.

I explained it. “To corrupt.” (*TS* 12)

What I would like to notice in this passage is that the governess uses the words "contaminate" and "corrupt" as synonyms for "poison." What she means by the words "contaminate" and "corrupt" is that Miles is "an injury to the others [at his school]" (11). It seems to me that as early as this conversation, her intention to associate degeneracy with the poison image forms itself in her mind.

The repetition of poison imagery gives us the insight into the meaning hidden in the governess's rhetoric. She needs to define immoralities in order to emphasize her moral cleanliness; therefore, she uses poison imagery in describing corrupt (or vulgar) forces: the ghosts of Quint and Jessel. She heatedly attempts to pursue the ghosts as toxins, but is harassed by them; her pursuit of the trope of poison is endless as long as she is obsessional about moral cleanliness.

Note

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