

# Kilometers or Miles? Translating Social Distances in *The Turn of the Screw*

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## ABSTRACT

My essay focuses on the linguistic and cultural problem inherent in the translation of the forms of address (*tu, Lei, Voi*) from English into Italian, a case-study being provided here by Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Although much critical ink has been spilled to resolve its opacity, *The Turn of the Screw* finds itself precisely on the ambiguous nature of its narrative. A resolution of this ambiguity is, however, what Italian translations have to accomplish as a consequence of the re-modulation of James's dialogues through the multi-levelled combinations of Italian forms of address. As English and Italian speakers know well, contemporary English has only the general form of address *you*. Therefore, the process of translating from English into Italian implies choosing the most suitable form for the communicative situation originally envisaged by the author. My aim is here to focus on a very specific feature of James's *The Turn of the Screw*, namely on the relationship between the ten-year-old Miles and the twenty-year-old governess and, consequently, on the Italian translations and their way to render it.

*Keywords:* forms of address, Governess & Miles, translation, tu/Lei/Voi.

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This essay focuses on the linguistic, and cultural, problem of the translation of the forms of address from English into Italian. As far as literary texts are concerned, one should note at the beginning that not all of them are equally responsive, in translation, to the variety of modulation of the forms of address that Italian offers. Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) provides, in this respect, a paradigmatic instance of "strangeness", of that Freudian *Unheimlich* that clashes noisily against the imperatives of

Italian translation and address disambiguation. Although much critical ink has been spilled to resolve its opacity, *The Turn of the Screw* finds itself precisely on that peculiar, shadowy quality of the governess' narrative that features an essential attribute of a tale of the fantastic and is not intended to be resolved (Curtis 1984, 23). A resolution of this ambiguity is, however, what Italian translations are forced to accomplish as a consequence of the re-modulation of James's dialogues through the multi-levelled combinations of Italian forms of address.

### 1. TU, LEI, VOI. UN PO' DI STORIA

As Italian speakers know well, there is a marked distinction in the Italian language between the informal pronoun *tu* and the formal pronoun *Lei* (or *Voi*), while contemporary English has only the general form of address *you*. Therefore, translating from English into Italian implies choosing the most suitable form for the communicative situation originally envisaged by the author.

The *Voi* form first appeared in late Latin (*vos*) as a way of addressing superiors among the Romans, while the *Lei* form took hold in Renaissance Italy, initially linked to spreading nominal forms such as *Vostra Eccellenza*, *la Signoria Vostra*, etc. Since these forms were feminine, *Ella* o *Essa* (i.e. *lei*) was the pronoun to accompany them, which rendered the morphology of the Italian forms of address increasingly baroque and confusing. As late 1756, the monumental *A New Italian Grammar* by Ferdinando Altieri, "Professor of the Italian Tongue in London", felt the need to state that "Although *voi* is the plural of *tu*, 'tis used for a single person, which is used also in *English*; as, *voi sete molto ardito*, you are very bold" (Altieri 1756, 67).

Progressively, the *Lei* form supplanted in Italy the *Voi* one, especially in northern areas, even though the situation remained geographically, and socially, fluid. In a sequence of Giovanni Verga's short stories first published between 1889 and 1890 and later collected in *I ricordi del capitano d'Arce* (a sequence conceived by Verga as an attempt at extending his *Vinti* cycle to the *beau monde*), Ginevra's would-be lover feels miniaturized when the woman returns to the *Voi* after some *Lei* ("Soltanto mi dava del voi", 158). When love is finally, and mutually, declared, the *tu* seems more natural ("– Anche voi!... anche tu... giurami!...", 160), even though d'Arce's subsequent lover, with whom he hopes to sooth the pain

of Ginevra's memory, still uses the *Voi* form after their first kiss and also later, when the liaison proceeds in Genova ("– Sapete, povera Ginevra [...] S'è lasciata cogliere dal marito, la sera stessa che partimmo, vi rammentate?"; 169). This fluidity seems to imply, in certain cases, the existence of a kind of 'ranking' in the expression of courtesy, with the *Voi* form for those cases where the *Lei* is not perceived as formal or respectful enough, and/or when the speaker wants to make clear his devotion to or his admiration for the addressee. In *Demetrio Pianelli*, for instance, a 1890 novel by Emilio De Marchi all set in Milan and in the *bassa lombarda*, Demetrio uses the *tu* with children, adolescents and intimate (male) friends and colleagues ("Dammi la mano, Paolino", 138; "Guarda, Bianconi. Ho appena riscossa la mesata...", 224), the *Lei* with all other adults and colleagues ("A lei, che ride e che canta, guardi: posso regalare al signor cavaliere...", 225), but the *Voi* with Beatrice, his beautiful sister-in-law he is secretly in love with ("Che... che miracolo? [...] Siete a Milano?", 268). Curiously enough, Melchisedecco Pardi, the aged, well-off businessman perennially in search of his erring wife, addresses the porter of Pianelli's house with the *Voi* ("Avete detto che la signora Pianelli è a Milano", 287) while receiving some *Lei* instead ("In quanto al signor Cesarino, saprà bene che...", 287).

As is well known, the *Voi* form became forcibly fashionable in Italy during Fascism. It all started at the beginning of 1938, when an ex-disciple of Gabriele D'Annunzio, Bruno Cicognani, wrote in *Corriere della Sera* about this "aberrazione grammaticale" come from Spain (quoted in Spinosa 1981, 191) "[S]i torni, anche in questo", he advocated, "all'uso di Roma, al tu espressione dell'universale romano e cristiano. Sia il voi segno di rispetto e riconoscimento di gerarchia" (*ibid.*). Achille Starace, Mussolini's right-hand man, was so favorably impressed by Cicognani's article that he presently mentioned it to the Duce during a routine meeting in Palazzo Venezia. Less than two months later, Italy began to be flooded by a series of *disposizioni Fasciste* all aimed at reaching the impervious goal to eradicate a linguistic habit old of five centuries. Typically, the officers' zeal was boundless. The feminine magazine *Lei* precociously distinguished itself by changing its name, with durable effects, in *Annabella*, and the *Lei* form – together with another scourge of the new male Fascist prototype, the shaking of hands – vanished from all forms of narratives adopting a dialogical form, including comics and films. In his first film *Ossessione* (1943), Luchino Visconti replied tongue-in-cheek to the new fashion, when the attorney's refusal to shake hands with Gino and Giovanna, after their dubious accident on the road, could either be read as the intention

to avoid contact with such reprobates or, more likely, as the officer's stolid response to their *gaffe* of putting hands. Contemporarily, foreign Christian names became Italianized, exhuming the old nineteenth-century habit that gave birth, for instance, to the immortal hybrid Guglielmo Shakespeare. Needless to say, these congeries of linguistic, and postural, impositions generated some remarkable sarcasm. In one of his review sketches, Totò bore the brunt of the attack by joking about the necessity of calling the national astronomer Galileo Galilei, according to the new rules, *Galivoi*, and the quip was discussed at length on the phone between an outraged Mussolini and the general director of Fascist theatre censorship, Leopoldo Zurlo (Guspini 1973, 122-123). Benedetto Croce, one of the Italian intellectuals notoriously more averse to Mussolini's regime, reportedly forced himself to shift from his habitual use of the Neapolitan *Voi* to the disgraced *Lei* only to displease the Fascist *maître à penser* (Spinosa 1981, 193). In the more optimistic instances, the unnatural stiffness implicit in this new formal system of address was perceived as ephemeral or transient. When Giambattista Vicari, the editor-in-chief of the review *Lettere d'Oggi*, contacted Cesare Pavese for the publication of the novel *La spiaggia* (1942) stating he felt forced to replace the manuscript *Lei* with *Voi* so as not to "compremettere l'uscita della rivista" (Pavese 1966, 613), Pavese replied *obtorto collo* he had not realized the presence of "speciali lei nel testo – comunque, non mi dispiacerebbe se di tanto in tanto ne affiorasse qualcuno. Servirà così di punto di riferimento per ristabilire il testo in avvenire. Anzi, l'idea mi piace molto e le sarei grato se ce li lasciasse" (622)<sup>1</sup>.

In all this, the *tu* was uncommon between strangers and adults unless in situations of close friendship and intimacy. If during the first historical encounter at a streetcar-stop in Milano between Giorgio Strehler and Paolo Grassi (future co-founders of the Milano Piccolo Teatro), in A.D. 1938, Strehler paid very much attention not to slip to the *tu* with that stolid sixteen-year-old chap, their meeting with Franco Parenti only some time later was dangerously impaired by Parenti's buoyancy ("Prego, mi dia del lei", Grassi is said to have said; Pozzi 1977, 96-97). Likewise, in Alberto Moravia's "Banca dell'amore" (1959), the slip into the *tu* form pre-

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<sup>1</sup> The italics is in Pavese's original. It is worth noting how Pavese writes *lei* without capital l, while he uses the capitalization with forms such as "Le sarei grato" ecc. (now out of habit). Above all, it is noteworthy how the correspondence between Pavese and Vicari does not depart from the *Lei* practice even when discussing the coercive adoption of the *Voi* norms.

cipitates an already tense situation (“Forza, coraggio, vediamo... e intanto non mi dia del tu, non siamo fratelli, mi pare”, 40). It was the gust of fresh air brought about by the Sixties, and nothing else, that extended considerably the use of *tu* among Italian adults.

With the demise of Fascism, *Lei* regained its pole position as a courtesy form, but it would be simplistic and erroneous to think of the *Voi* form as dead with the black-shirts or confined, from then on, to Italian Southern areas. In fact, the dubbing practice in the cinema and the world of comics in general has shown a persistence of the *Voi* with a disambiguating intent, the *Lei* form being identical, in verb conjugation, with the female third person singular *lei* (she). Italian *Topolino*, for instance, has preserved the *Voi* form since Fascism alongside with its infantile target audience. Comparing a 1934 strip with a contemporary one, the persistence of the obsolete form is evident: in the first, we read a “Principessa Minnie! Voi dunque eravate la principessa farfalla?”; in the latter (2012), “Non ci avete chiamato solo per la mostra, vero, Professor Zapotec?” (sources: the net).

Although Italian Bonelli comics have veered, in recent times, towards a more audacious rendering of Italian speaking practices, frequently casting off *Voi* in favor of *Lei*, the general approach remains rather conservative for the aforesaid reasons, and not at all regular or constant between the same Bonelli heroes. While, among the youngsters, Dylan Dog or Julia tend to fall frequently back on the *Lei* form (and this in tune with the recently launched project of re-boosting the characters), the well-seasoned Tex and Zagor still persist in their formal speaking practice adopted as early as, respectively, 1948 and 1961.

## 2. UNHEIMLICH, UNHEIMLICH

This said, my aim is now to focus on a very specific feature of James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, namely on the relationship between the ten-year-old Miles and the twenty-year-old governess and, consequently, on the Italian translations and their way to render it.

Indeed, very little attention, not to say none, has been devoted to the principles that regulate their deictic behavior, and in particular to the forms of address which Miles and the governess use in their communication, even though the translators’ choices have a considerable impact on our perception of their relationship. “[S]celta [...] sempre delicata”, that

of “del tu o del voi per lo *you* inglese” (Perosa 2002, 90), it aggravates particularly on a translator distanced in space and time from the SL text<sup>2</sup>. If a major problem is to reproduce not only “the general meaning” of it but also “to account for other elements that contribute to its specificity” (namely “sociolinguistic and cultural components”, Costantini 2002, 103), the translation of the forms of address proves itself a decisive issue in rendering those “cultural details and social habits” (*ibid.*) that make the spirit of an age. As anticipated before, *The Turn of the Screw* is one of those texts where the norms of address adopted by the Italian translator contribute in defining more relevantly the characterization process and the interior shaping of the characters’ personality – a confirmation, on a lesser scale, of the general feature now attributed to the translational space as one of the areas where subjective identities are built and transformed (Nergaard 2009, 511-512). An ocular proof of this relevance is given by the fact that there are nearly as many different uses of address forms as the number of the Italian translations of *The Turn of the Screw*, a clear sign that Miles and the governess’ dyad is not perceived as a given fact in terms of social distances but, indeed, a rather fluid, indecisive one. In general terms, a “dyadic relationship can be hierarchic in that one of the participants is able to exercise a greater degree of control (or power) over the other; or non-hierarchic, in which case the relations are of peer-hood as in those of friendship, rivalry, acquaintanceship and indifference” (Ulrych 1998, 272). A survey of the various linguistic forms adopted by the Italian translators, however, demonstrates the relativity principle underlying such assumptions and go as far as including the translator as a powerful deviser of grammatically interchangeable forms to add up to the speaker’s social and linguistic background.

The first Italian translation of *The Turn of the Screw* dates back to 1932 (revealingly, the title was *Il segreto dell’istitutrice*); it was soon doubled, two years later, by another one, decidedly more imbued with the Fascist *Weltanschauung* as shown by the fact that the novelist is now called *Enrico*

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<sup>2</sup> Referring to the first Italian translation of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Perosa (2002, 90) also notes: “Il traduttore [...] sceglie il voi, ma fa strano, anche per l’Ottocento, che Touchett padre dia del voi al figlio (il figlio potrà dare del voi al padre: ma viceversa?), e alla moglie (qui forse può essere più plausibile, dati i costumi anche linguistici dell’epoca, l’esempio francese). Ma poi a Isabella (che naturalmente dà del tu alle sorelle) viene dato del tu: perché è ‘parente povera’, o perché è donna, si potrebbe maliziosamente arguire, visto che anche i seguito nella traduzione [...] Isabella avrà a scontare il fio della duplice condizione?”.

James (and Quint, *Pietro Quint*). And then a sequence of almost regularly cadenced translations followed. In this list,

- there are translations where Miles uses the *Voi* form with the governess, and she the *tu* form with Miles (Tasso 1959; Maraone 1974; Cialente 1985; Fusini 2004; Mochi 2007);
- others where Miles uses the *Lei* form with the governess, and she the *tu* form with him (Valli 1973; Falzon 1989);
- cases when they mutually use the *Voi* form (Lazzeri 1934; Pavesi 1962);
- one case when they mutually use the *tu* form (Zannino 1987).

(Incidentally, the governess and Mrs. Grose, the maid, always use either the *Voi* form or the *Lei* form, reciprocally). As is easily noted, there is no linear, diachronic progression from the *Voi* to the *Lei/tu* form, another evidence of the persistence of the *Voi* form in the general translation practice (Mochi 2007 still uses the *Voi* form, while the *Lei/tu* form appears as early as 1973).

The choices at the root of the translation process produce effects throughout the novel, the most eloquent instance being provided by Miles's last famous words ("Peter Quint – you devil!", James 2011, 124), a monument to ambiguity in James but actually an epitome of disambiguation in Italian. Famously, the question is: who is Miles talking to (or screaming at)? To the ghost of Peter Quint, or to the governess? What does that dash mean – is Miles turning his head from the window, and from Peter Quint, to the governess, changing register in his dialogue with his governess and tormentor, or, rather, is he directing his rage directly towards the ghost? Although it is true that, "Oltre che impossibile, sarebbe un peccato rispondere" (Mochi 2007, 348-349, n. 69), translators find themselves compelled to give, albeit unwillingly, a kind of answer. The translation *impasse* is here significant and ripe of consequences. At the antipodes of disambiguation can be located Pavesi's version, where the repetition of "Peter", as well as the interjection, gives the sentence an almost vocative quality:

– Peter! Peter Quint! Oh, tu, demonio! – (1962, 305)<sup>3</sup>

and Valli's, which, unlike Pavesi, openly and unmistakably puts the finger on the governess as the sole agent of Miles' forced insight:

"Peter Quint... strega!" (1973, 100)

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<sup>3</sup> I have been faithful here to the original punctuation and also to the various editorial choices regarding direct speech (i.e. inverted commas or en/em dashes etc.). The distinction, perhaps equally noteworthy, between " " and « » of the Italian has not been preserved.

Naturally enough, if Miles and the governess have been mutually using the *tu* form, the final “tu” of Miles’s words seems a direct prolongation of their dialogue, finding therefore in the governess, rather than in Quint, the devil cursed by Miles, as in Mochi’s translation:

“Peter Quint... tu, demonio!” (2007, 335)

Likewise, and even more so, the use of the *Voi* form, associated with the translation of “devil”, seems a natural prolongation of the dialogue with the governess if Miles has been using the *Voi* form with her since the beginning:

“Peter Quint... demonio che non siete altro!” (Maraone 1974, 167)

A feeble strategy to preserve a quantum of the original ambiguity might reside in *not* translating the personal pronoun “you”. A kind of “playing safe” which gives more elbow room to the Italian translator (and reader) and which, here again, crosses transversally the whole spectrum of translations:

– Pietro Quint! Ah! Demonio! – (Lazzeri 1934, 186)

“Peter Quint! Ah demonio” (Tasso 1959, 196)

“Peter Quint... demonio!” (Falzon 1989, 319)

The kind of allocutives chosen, however, has relevant implications also in the more general arch of Miles and the governess’s relationship. As has been repeatedly noted, and with an abating degree of inhibition by subsequent generations of critics, the relation between the ten-year-old Miles and the twenty-year-old governess is tainted by a measure of moral ambiguity and mutual seductiveness. This danger-zone has been trespassed, both fictionally and critically, with the spread of the general awareness of pedophilic issues on the one hand and the abandonment of paradisiac vision of infancy on the other. In this sense, a crucial role is played by Miles’ expulsion from the college, which cannot be explained otherwise if not relating it to the domain of the “sessualmente abietto” (Andreoli 2002, 27). Cyril Connolly, a friend of George Orwell’s at St Cyprian prep college in the years preceding WWI, was to remember bitterly how an habitual practice for alumni in those schools “typical of England before the last war” was “reporting their best friend for homosexuality and seeing them expelled” (quoted in Stansky and Abrahams 1972, 27). Miles’ unorthodox behavior might have been a consequence of his prolonged



exposure to Miss Jessel and Quint's influence, but, Dickens *docet*, growing up in absence of a reliable parental guidance was far from exceptional in 19th-century Britain. And, on the other hand, what we nowadays would straightforwardly assign to the domain of pedophilia could easily pass as little more than peccadillos in social conurbations founded on the systematical exploitation of the poor and the socially alienated. In June 1882, Verga wrote from London to Luigi Capuana (using the *tu* form) of his bewilderment at encountering so many teen prostitutes in the streets, heavily joking on his friend's epicurean disposition ("In compenso la sera sotto gli occhi dei *policemen* delle ragazzine da 10 a 12 anni... Ah, se tu ci fossi, canuto e calvo, vecchio peccatore!", Verga 1882, 196-197).

In such context, the character of the governess was often asked to play an intermediary role between different realms of discourse and experience. Historically, this profession was one of the few available to gentlemen's daughters in the Victorian era, especially when they came from impoverished but genteel families. Theirs was "a niche somewhere above the servant's class, which sheltered women who were not necessarily inferior to their employers in education or 'gentle' manners" (Bell 1991, 223). Governesses' obligations involved a peculiar intimacy with their employer, and with the child or children in their care, and it was not unlikely for Victorian upper-class men to be sexually and routinely "initiated" by maids or governesses (*ibid.*, 226). This intermediary function is multileveled and shows the governess (both in general terms, and in *The Turn of the Screw*) walking on a tight and thin rope. If, on the one hand, in *The Turn of the Screw* the governess mediates between sanity and insanity, perception and hallucination (as well as between her employer and the children, and, ideally, between the group of friends exchanging ghost stories by the fire and the tale itself), on the other contemporary records indicate that in 1840 governesses accounted for the single largest category of female patients in English asylums for the insane (*ibid.*, 225).

Alone in the mansion after Mrs Grose's departure with little Flora (whose decisive breakdown has been, incidentally, provoked by the governess herself), Miles and the governess are finally free to share their embarrassed silences, the governess writes, "as some young couple who, on their wedding-journey, at the inn, feel shy in the presence of the waiter" (*ibid.*, 252). "Well - so we're alone", in Miles' words. Here again, the choice of Italian forms of address is crucial in either enhancing or nipping in the bud the nature of Miles and the governess' chronically repressed language. Besides a rather neutral level of a *tu/tu* dialogue (where the use of the simple *tu* form by Miles in addressing the governess concurs

in reminding us his infantile condition), translations offer also a more *risqué tu/Voi* exchange where the use of the *Voi* form by Miles, in that peculiar state of prolonged, repressed intimacy that the novel outlines, seems more compatible with adult speaking. Interestingly enough, the adoption of a kind of grade zero, *tu/tu* communication, seems to influence also Miles's overall register and vocabulary, which in this case betrays the signs of infancy as a product of the straightforwardly binary communicative choice. In other words, the adoption of the *Voi* form imposes alone a general elevation of register, with all the consequences that this may entail. Compare

“Non c'è niente di più delizioso del tuo modo di prendere la cosa, perché naturalmente se adesso siamo soli insieme sei tu a essere più sola. Ma spero” aggiunte “che non ti dispiaccia troppo!”. (Zannino 1997, 232)

with

– Non c'è niente di più amabile del modo in cui voi la prendete, perché naturalmente se ora siamo soli, la più sola siete voi. Ma spero – disse d'un fiato–, che la cosa non v'importi in modo particolare. (Cialente 1985, 164)

In the first quotation, the limited range of words employed (evident in the repetition of “soli/sola”), the oxymoron (“soli insieme”) and the preservation of the exclamation mark of the original, assign the sentence unmistakably to the domain of infancy, whereas the rather elliptic structure of the initial clause of Cialente 1985, together with the mild inverted parallelism of the two middle clauses, and the suppression of the exclamation mark (as well as, incidentally, the adjunctive detail of a breathless Miles), deliberately concur in locating the couple on a more sophisticated, adult level of closeness. A closeness echoing with morbid resonances if the *Voi/Voi* form shapes, as it does, also the governess's memory of her recent violation of Miles' intimacy. Compare

“Avete dimenticato ciò che vi dissi, quella notte, quando si scatenò quel temporale così violento ed io venni nella vostra camera e mi sedetti accanto a voi, sulla sponda del letto? Vi dissi che non c'era cosa al mondo che io non avrei fatto volentieri per voi. Ricordate?”. (Pavesi 1962, 288)

with

– Non ricordi ciò che ti dissi la sera del temporale, quando venni a sedermi sul tuo letto, che non c'era niente al mondo che non avrei fatto per te? (Cialente 1985, 164)

Needless to say, these choices bear enormous consequences on another crux of the novel, i.e. if the governess is to be seen more in terms of a hysteric or of a medium, more in terms of a potential patient of Dr. Freud's or of an unconscious "percipient" dropped out of the Society of Psychical Research proceedings, often replete with testimonies of people who claimed to perceive the presence of the dead. In fact, the line between this two categories is more difficult to draw than it has been normally acknowledged, since a quantum of super-powers must be granted to some gifted hysterics as well like, for instance, Bertha Pappenheim, the famous "Anna O." from Freud and Breuer's *Studien Über Hysterie* (1895). "One had only to hold up an orange before her eyes", Freud writes, "[...] in order to carry her over from the year 1882 to the year 1881. But this transfer into the past did not take place in a general or indefinite manner; she lived through the previous winter day by day. I should only have been able to suspect that this was happening, [...] had it not been that a private diary kept by her mother in 1881 confirmed beyond a doubt the occurrence of the underlying events" (Freud and Breuer 1966, 33). In a way, it is as if the historical battle between Wilsonians (from critic Edmund Wilson, the first to credit Freudian symbolism in the *Turn of the Screw*) and anti-Wilsonians should continue along a translational line, revealing perhaps now more about the translator than about Henry James<sup>4</sup>. The more is language repressed and, consequently, eroticized, as in the diffused loving skirmish that proceeds from a diffused *Voi/Voi* dyadic relation, the more the governess is condemned to *Verdrängung* and hysteria; the more is Miles elementary in his form of address, the more the governess seems in control of the situation and with it, of the series of apparitions and in particular of the last one of Quint behind the window, timely conjured at the climax of Miles's forced insight.

In conclusion, I wish I could avoid saying that it is always advisable to read literature in the original. It is curious to note, however, that if *traduttore, traditore* is a maxim as old as the profession of translation itself, the first quality that makes a good translator is, as unanimously recognized, faithfulness. It is as if, in other words, in every translating work were also inscribed the signs of an unavoidable failure. Like the governess in James's novella, we may go a long way from home – but our ghosts may do, and even more easily, the same.

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<sup>4</sup> An accurate recapitulation of the *querelle* between Wilsonians and anti-Wilsonians is in Curtis (1984), who also cites Elizabeth A. Sheppard's 1974 *Henry James and The Turn of the Screw* for an expanded discussion of the issue.

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