MEDICAL PRACTICE

*Occasional Survey***Neurology in Fiction: The Turn of the Screw**

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FIG. 1—Henry James (1843-1916). (Painting by Philip Burne-Jones. Reproduced by courtesy of the National Trust.)

When I first read *The Turn of the Screw*¹—I don't know how many years ago—I realized that the heroine suffered from temporal lobe epilepsy and that Henry James, (fig. 1.) with great skill and imagination, had used this syndrome as the basis of his horror story. Recently having had occasion to go back to Hughlings Jackson's original papers it occurred to me to re-read the story, and I was struck with the excellence of the governess's descriptions; apart from a few sentences that are required to further the plot practically every word is of medical significance.

John Hughlings Jackson (1835-1911) (fig. 2.), the founder of the modern British School of Neurology, moulded our ideas of the functional organization of the brain into the form which they have retained since. His achievements were recognized in his lifetime and he was made a Fellow of the Royal Society. His greatest individual object of study² was fits, and his name is retained in medical parlance to denote one variety of fits—convulsions beginning unilaterally—which is known as "Jacksonian epilepsy"; but he made almost equally his own another variety³ which is now known as temporal lobe epilepsy or uncinat fits, the latter term deriving from the shape of a convulsion on the inner and anterior surface of the temporal lobe (uncus, a hook). This variety of attack, in which the paroxysms are often very slight, was at that time not known in Britain, though it had been recognized in France as a form of epilepsy. Jackson collected many cases and was eventually able to show that it was due to a disturbance (in some cases a recognizable lesion) towards the anterior end of the temporal lobe of the brain.⁴

The feature of these attacks about which Jackson wrote most⁵ was what he called the "dreamy state," a condition of brief duration in which the patient has a visual hallucination—a vision, a dream, very often a reminiscence (he thinks) of something he has seen before or of circumstances he has been in before, and in many instances very vivid. What he sees varies from incident to incident but may have a good deal of sameness, and even though in reality he may see only a black shadow he inevitably puts an interpretation on it. This phenomenon had previously been known as an "intellectual aura." Most typically though by no means always the attack is heralded by a sensation

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of a smell. Though the turns are in some ways similar to petit mal—what the French call “absence”—the patient is not unconscious; though not fully conscious he is aware of what is going on around him. Jackson talked of the patient having a double consciousness or “mental diplopia.” He also emphasized that during the time that the patient was not fully conscious the defect of awareness might take different forms, producing negative or deficiency symptoms.

An equally interesting feature of these turns is the emotional state that often accompanies them—shock, anxiety, fear, dread, horror—though Jackson noted that the emotion may sometimes be pleasant and that the patient may even try to encourage the turns for that reason. Dostoevsky wrote of his aura: “a terrible thing is the frightful clearness with which it manifests itself and the rapture with which it fills you.”⁶

As with other epileptic phenomena the patient usually goes pale—observers may say “deathly pale,” “livid”—and afterwards may flush.

The third, equally fascinating feature of these events is the occasional remarkable sequelae. As the paroxysm develops it may go on to full unconsciousness and a fit (convulsion), from which the patient will take some time to come round. Of much greater interest are cases in which the vision passes off but the patient is left in a condition in which he is not fully conscious and, in particular, his memory is disturbed. We now know that the temporal lobes have a lot to do with memory, and in states of temporal lobe disturbance active memory, in the sense of recording happenings as they occur, is in abeyance and lacking from the remaining consciousness. The patient behaves more or less normally but has no recollection of what he does during an attack; he has what one of my patients called a “time gap.” Jackson related that on one occasion he accompanied a patient, a Harley Street physician, to his own house and had some talk with him about making alterations; even he thought the patient was normal at the time, but afterwards the patient had no recollection of these events. On the other hand, the patient’s conduct (and evidently his state of consciousness) may be very abnormal during an attack, and in particular it may be greatly affected by the emotion which has seized him, so that he may try to get away or, in fear, may resist and, as he thinks, defend himself with violence; in rare instances he may even be homicidal.

The Turn of the Screw (What a dreadful Turn, to be sure)

Jackson’s most important paper on this subject was published in 1888,⁷ and Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* appeared 10 years later. I suspect Henry James of a play on the word “turn”; the expression “turn of the screw” is used in the introductory chapter, and then “two turns”; of the governess’s many “turns” only one is so named.

The story is told with great artistry. It is narrated in the first person and is an account of the personal experiences of a young woman of 20. There is a prefatory chapter which works up a great atmosphere of expectation of horror and also gives us to understand that the events described happened a good many years previously. It is perhaps significant that the story begins in Harley Street.

The youngest of several daughters of a poor country parson, had, at the age of twenty, on taking service for the first time in the schoolroom, come up to London, in trepidation, to answer in person an advertisement that had already placed her in brief correspondence with the advertiser. This person proved, on her presenting herself, for judgement, at a house in Harley Street, . . . a gentleman, a bachelor in the prime of life . . . handsome, and bold and pleasant, off-hand and gay and kind . . . but what took her most of all . . . was that he put the whole thing to her as a kind of favour, an obligation he should gratefully incur.

She saw him only twice but, of course, fell in love with him, a fact that has some bearing on the subsequent story.

FIG. 2—John Hughlings Jackson, F.R.S. (1835-1911).

In short, he had been left the guardian of his dead brother’s two small children and simply did not know or want to know how to cope with them. They were then at his country house in Essex in the charge of a housekeeper—or rather they had been, because the boy, the elder, had recently been sent away to school. He wanted someone to take complete charge of them and on no account to bother him about them.

Since the narrator’s account is written many years afterwards the description of her first impressions is, perhaps, to some extent rationalized. At any rate, her description of the little girl, her charge, is “gushing,” and at the outset we are given a suggestion of instability or neurosis in the writer; the child is . . .

a creature so charming as to make it a great fortune to have to do with her. She was the most beautiful child I had ever seen . . . the deep, sweet serenity indeed of one of Raphael’s holy infants . . . anything so beautiful as the radiant image of my little girl, the vision of whose angelic beauty . . .

Next day, when she meets the boy, she discerns in him “the same positive fragrance of purity;” she is dazzled by the loveliness of the two of them.

THE FIRST TURN

In the first weeks the days were long and at the end of the day she could take a stroll alone in the grounds and enjoy both the beauty and dignity of the place and her own reverie.

One of the thoughts that . . . used to be with me in these wanderings was that it would be as charming as a charming story suddenly to meet someone . . . (who) would . . . smile and approve . . . I only asked that he should *know*; and the only way to be sure he knew would be to see it, and the kind light of it, in his handsome face.

That was exactly present to me—by which I mean the face was—when, . . . at the end of a long June day, I stopped short on emerging

from one of the plantations and coming into view of the house. What arrested me on the spot—and with a *shock much greater than any vision had allowed for**—was the sense that my imagination had, in a flash, turned real. He did stand there!—but high up, beyond the lawn and at the very top of the tower . . .

It produced in me, this figure, in the clear twilight, I remember, *two distinct gasps of emotion*, which were, sharply, the shock of my first and that of my second surprise. My second was a violent perception of the mistake of my first; the man who met my eyes was not the person I had precipitately supposed. There came to me thus a *bewilderment of vision* of which, after these years, there is no living view that I can hope to give . . . the figure that faced me . . . I had not seen it in Harley Street—I had not seen it anywhere. The place, moreover, in the strangest way in the world, had, on the instant, and by the very fact of its appearance, become a solitude . . . it was as if, while I took in—what I did take in—all the rest of the scene had been stricken with death . . . the intense *hush* in which the sounds of evening dropped. The rooks stopped cawing in the golden sky and the friendly hour lost, for the minute, all its voice.

. . . The man who looked at me over the battlements was *as definite as a picture in a frame* . . . So I saw him as I see the letters I form on this page; then, exactly, after a minute . . . he slowly changed his place—passed, looking at me hard all the while, to the opposite corner of the platform . . . He stopped at the other corner . . . still markedly fixed me. He turned away; *that was all I knew*.

I can't say how long . . . in a confusion of curiosity and dread, I remained where I had had my collision: I only recall that when I re-entered the house darkness had quite closed in.

Agitation, in the interval, certainly had held me and driven me, for I must, in circling about the place, have walked three miles . . . the impression, as I received it on my return, . . . of the good surprised look of my friend (Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper), which immediately told me she had missed me. It came to me straightway, under her contact, that, with . . . mere relieved anxiety at my appearance, she knew nothing whatever that could bear upon the incident I had there ready for her . . . I somehow measured the importance of what I had seen by my thus finding myself hesitate to mention it . . . I . . . offered a vague pretext for my lateness and, with the plea of the beauty of the night and of the *heavy dew and wet feet*, went as soon as possible to my room . . .

I felt sure, at the end of three days and as the result of mere closer attention, that I had not been practised upon by the servants nor made the object of any 'game.' *Of whatever it was that I knew nothing was known around me.*

Notice her "dreamy" state at the onset, the feeling of familiarity of what, at first, she seems to see, the bewilderment of vision (requiring a new interpretation), its vividness—"as I see the letters I form on this page;" "as definite as a picture in a frame"—and the abrupt ending: "he turned away; that was all I knew." She cannot say how long it lasted—"with the quickness of a dream"; also her emotional symptoms—"a shock much greater than any vision had allowed for;" "a confusion of curiosity and dread"; and then the "negative" effects, the loss of awareness—"the intense hush . . . the rooks stopped cawing . . . and the friendly hour lost for the minute, all its voice."

Whether, after the incident and her first agitation, she had a period of amnesia—a "time-gap"—is not clear. If she had, naturally she cannot tell us that, except circumstantially. Her expression "that is all I knew" is suggestive because it is exactly what a patient says when he is going on to tell what further "must have" happened that he did not know about. "When I re-entered the house darkness had quite closed in," and the relief of the house-keeper, "heavy dew and wet feet" tell us how late it was, and in writing about it afterwards she rationalizes about how she had filled in the time.

Finally, there is her reluctance to talk about her experience—a point which Jackson had mentioned but which is by no means constant.

In "whatever it was that I knew, nothing was known around me," the author gives a hint of the personal nature of what had happened, and similar hints are given elsewhere as the story unfolds.

*All the italics in this and the subsequent quotations are mine.—J.P.M.

THE SECOND TURN

It was less than a month before she had her next turn. One Sunday evening, preparing to go to church, she went into the dining room to retrieve a pair of gloves; again the attack occurred in the twilight:

. . . the afternoon light still lingered, and it enabled me, on crossing the threshold, not only to recognize, on a chair near the wide window, then closed, the articles I wanted, but to become aware of a person on the other side of the window and looking straight in ("double consciousness") . . . He remained but a few seconds—long enough to convince me he also saw and recognized; but it was *as if I had been looking at him for years and had known him always*.

She bounded out to the front of the house; the visitor had vanished but she gave him time to reappear.

I call it time, but how long was it? I can't speak to the purpose to-day of the duration of these things. *That kind of measure must have left me*; they couldn't have lasted as they actually appeared to me to last. The terrace and the whole place, the lawn and the garden beyond it, all I could see of the park, were *empty with a great emptiness* . . . I remember the clear assurance I felt that none of them concealed him. He was there or was not there: *not there if I didn't see him*.

She looked in through the window and saw Mrs. Grose, who came running out.

What in the name of goodness is the matter?—She was now flushed and out of breath . . . *you're as white as a sheet*. You look awful.

Did I look very queer?

Through this window? Dreadful!

This attack was shorter and in some other ways a little different from the previous one but again typical of temporal lobe epilepsy. Medically there is no fault to be found in it. Her change of colour might have been due simply to fright, but the emphasis placed on it shows that it is meant to be taken as part of the attack. The most significant typical new feature introduced in this description is the feeling of familiarity, the *déjà-vu* phenomenon—what Hughlings Jackson called "reminiscence"—"it was as if I had been looking at him for years." This imagined familiarity is one of the most remarkable features of temporal lobe epilepsy, and Jackson wrote quite a lot about it as part of the "dreamy state," pointing out that it represented a greater psychological disturbance than merely seeing a spectre.

The governess is driven to action by the emotion of the attack. It is made clear to us that after she is outside the turn is not altogether over, for the negative symptoms persist and she is confused, but at this moment she seems to realize the unreality of what she has seen—"he was . . . not there if I didn't see him." The narrator realizes afterwards that during the turn she had no reliable sense of time, but evidently it was not long before Mrs. Grose found her. From then not only was she able to carry on a conversation but she remembers it, and after their talk she seems to realize definitely that it is only she who sees the spectre. The vividness and the feelings of conviction are very strong, and the idea which has been planted—that the spectre was looking for someone else—is an important element in the subsequent story.

"IMPRESSIONS"

It took of course more than that particular passage to place us together in presence of what we now had to live with as we could, my *dreadful liability to impressions* of the order so vividly exemplified . . . She herself had seen nothing, not the shadow of a shadow . . . and ended by showing me an awestricken tenderness.

"Impressions" is a strange word for Henry James to have put into the mouth of the governess to denote her frightening experiences. The author—he was a great purist—gives no further indication of what it meant for him, but for Hughlings

Jackson it had a special significance, because it was a word to which he had tried to give a scientific meaning namely, the physiological activity aroused in a sensory receptive organ, such as the eye or ear, by an appropriate stimulus. In 1888⁷ he had written "I must remark on the term impression. It is sometimes used for a kind of mental state, as in the couple 'impressions and ideas.' I always use it as a name for something purely physical, for a state of sensory nerve 'endings' (properly beginnings); for activities of peripheral structures from which afferent nerves pass to the central nervous system. It is not a good term, but I must have some word, which does not imply anything psychical, for what occurs at the sensory periphery. I can think of no better term than 'impression,' which, when any psychical implications are eliminated by definition, will serve to go with the term 'movement.'"

This suggested meaning of the word did not gain general acceptance but if the governess (or her creator) knew of it and intended the word in this special sense then it would be quite apt.

THE THIRD AND LESSER TURNS

The third attack was a relatively mild one but important in the story because it introduces the second horror, Miss Jessel. The governess is with the little girl in the garden in the middle of a hot (dreamy) summer afternoon, and with a gradual awareness she sees a female figure in black across the lake. When they go back to the house she tells the housekeeper that the episode was two hours ago and that by this time she has "thought it all out" and is convinced that the apparition was her predecessor, Miss Jessel. We are not told directly how long it had taken her to recover her normal state: "I can give no intelligible account of how I fought out the interval." It is clear that during the attack she had a consciousness both of what the child was doing and of the apparition, and as before there were negative symptoms—"I was determined by a sense that within a minute all spontaneous sounds from her had dropped."

Whereas after the previous attack she seemed convinced that the "impression" was peculiar to herself, now she cannot believe that the other person present, the child, was unaware of it.

Other attacks occur, the descriptions of which, though mostly less detailed, are medically irreproachable. One began as she sat in her room long past midnight reading Fielding's *Amelia*; she takes up her candle and meets the spectre, again the man, on the stairs and bravely confronts him: "the silence itself . . . became the element into which I saw the figure disappear . . . down the staircase and into the darkness in which the next bend was lost."

On another night she momentarily sees the female figure on the stairs. There may have been other slight epileptic manifestations, because one day the housekeeper throws out a hint that if they ask the guardian to come it may indeed be to see her.

THE HUSHES

As time goes on she begins to have other, very slight turns in the schoolroom, in the course of which her sense of hearing is suppressed or possibly she is momentarily unconscious:

One of our prodigious, palpable hushes occurred—I can call them nothing else—the strange, dizzy lift or swim (I try for terms!) into a stillness, a pause of all life, that had nothing to do with the more or less noise that at the moment we might be engaged in making . . .

What the children notice we are not told; nevertheless, it is conveyed to the careful reader that only the governess is directly involved in the frightening occurrences.

THE SHRIEK

She had an attack of a different kind while having what was for

her a very emotional talk with the boy. This is the only one of the series in which there is no spectre or other visual hallucination. It is remarkable that she remembers so much about this fit, in which she feels "a shake of the room so great as if, in the wild wind, the casement had crashed in." At the same time she experiences "a loud high shriek," which naturally she attributes to the boy. We are not told whether she actually lost consciousness, but: "I jumped to my feet again and was conscious of darkness;" the drawn curtains were unstirred and the window was tight, which tell us that the violent phenomena were her own feelings in the fit. The boy is evidently relatively composed and sympathetic; he says in answer to her cry about the candle, "It was I who blew it out, dear" (though why he did so we are not told).

A shriek is heard at the beginning of the attack in this turn and the next one, and something similar occurs in a late stage of the final one. Jackson, in his analysis, wrote about the occurrence of "crude sensations" in different sensory systems at the beginning of attacks and also "formed sensations." A crude sensation in the visual system is a flash or balls of fire or coloured lights, but a spectral face would be a formed sensation. A shriek would be a crude sensation in the auditory system, in contrast to hearing voices or words, which would be a formed sensation. A crude sensation of smell may also occur. In Jackson's experience it was exceptional for crude sensations of hearing⁸ to be associated with the dreamy state, and in this first instance in which the governess experienced the shriek no dreamy state occurred; in the subsequent, more critical attack, however, both were present.

WHAT A DREADFUL TURN

There is one other serious attack before the climax and the author draws again on his knowledge of the variations that may occur. Mrs. Grose and the little girl are present and the governess again sees the female figure; as before, she identifies it as Miss Jessel. The first thing that is mentioned is "the cry that Mrs. Grose (she thinks) uttered over my violence." Vividness and emotion were things of a few seconds and the governess exclaimed: "She's there, she's there," and pointed across the lake; she was again hurt that the little girl took no notice of the prodigy but only stared at her, but: "my elder companion, the next moment, blotted out everything but her own flushed face and her loud protest with a burst of high disapproval. 'What a dreadful turn, to be sure, Miss. Where on earth do you see anything?'" Then she, reassuring the child, said, "We'll go home as fast as we can," and the child wants to be taken away from the governess.

After this there is quite a long, though possibly broken, "time gap":

Of what first happened when I was left alone, I had no subsequent memory . . . I must have thrown myself, on my face, on the ground . . . when I raised my head the day was almost done.

The suggestion here surely is that she had a fit in which she fell to the ground; it may well be that she came to after a little and then either slept or spent the rest of the afternoon in a state of (otherwise) impaired consciousness of which she had little or no memory.

Immediately after this incident Mrs. Grose took the little girl away from the narrator's bedroom and eventually, by agreement, she and the child went off to London, leaving the boy with the governess.

THE CLIMAX

I felt sure she would kill the boy, and so, of course, it turns out.

On the very first afternoon that she is alone with him she has an attack in which, as once before, she sees the male figure at the window. Mingled with her fear and horror she has an obsession

that she must guard the boy from the apparition and if possible prevent him from seeing it, and so she takes him in her arms to protect him. Her account—and she wrote it long afterwards—is naturally confused.

The attack begins as:

something that I can describe only as *a fierce split of my attention*—a stroke that at first, as I sprang straight up, reduced me to the mere blind movement of getting hold of him, drawing him close and, while I just fell for support against the nearest piece of furniture, instinctively keeping him with his back to the window . . . It was like fighting with a demon for a human soul, and when I had fairly so appraised it I saw how the human soul—held out, in the tremor of my hands, at arm's length—had a perfect dew of sweat on a lovely childish forehead.

In her dreamy state a whole conversation seems to go on, based on her fears and suppositions, so that it is hard, as it was for her, to know what belongs to one consciousness and what to the other.

At this, after a second in which his head . . . 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 . . . the wide overwhelming presence . . .

But he had already jerked straight round, stared, glared again, and seen but the quiet day . . . he uttered *the cry of a creature hurled over an abyss*, and the grasp with which I recovered him *might have been* that of catching him in his fall. I caught him, yes, I held him—it may be imagined with what a passion; but at the end of a minute I began to feel what it truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped.

The description is admittedly heightened for effect but not beyond what is medically defensible: "A fierce split of my attention"—Jackson's "double consciousness"—the confusion, the maniacal emotion, the glimpses of reality, the boy's struggle, and her protective smothering. "At the end of a minute I began to feel . . .," but in reality she would have no idea of the lapse of time; as she regained her memory, "we were alone with the quiet day." It seems so peaceful; how long was it after the crisis?

Henry James's Secrecy

James was always very secretive about the nature of the governess's apparitions and never disclosed what he must have known, let alone the source of his medical information. Leon Edel, in *The Treacherous Years*,⁹ the third volume of his detailed biography of Henry James, states that after the publication of *The Turn of the Screw*: "as inquiries from mystified and fascinated readers poured in, James was careful not to give away his secret. Like all artists, he did not like to explain his art, and he was determined not to spoil the mystification he had created." He told Sir James Mackenzie "as soon as the veil is lifted, all mystery disappears, and with it the sense of terror." Both in the introductory chapter and subsequently he preferred to divert readers' attention to a very vague tale of two children involved in a ghost story.

Ten years after its first publication he wrote a preface for this story, and in the course of eight pages of laboured prose he contrived almost to ignore the governess, stating merely "We have surely as much of her own nature as we can swallow in watching it reflect her anxieties and inductions"—with no mention of the events which frightened her and their immediate sequelae; and he commented that she seemed to remember very clearly all that had occurred—"keeping crystal-line her record."

How Henry James may have become acquainted with Hughlings Jackson's papers is for conjecture. One of his friends was his London publisher Frederick Macmillan,¹⁰ and Macmillan also published *Brain*, of which Jackson was one of the editors and in which papers on temporal lobe epilepsy appeared in 1888, 1889, and actually in 1898, the year of *The Turn of the Screw*; it is probable that Frederick Macmillan would have known these papers and considering James's great interest in everything eerie, would have told him about them in the course of conversation. Macmillan also knew Jackson.

A less likely intermediary was his brother, William, professor of psychology at Harvard and a frequent visitor to Europe; William would have known Hughlings Jackson as a matter of course and he quoted him in his textbook.

Hughlings Jackson was a great reader of novels, and if Henry James had visited him at his home in Manchester Square I have no doubt he would have got all the help he required; and, in so far as the basis of the governess's behaviour was a secret, I think it is most likely that Dr. Jackson was a party to it.

After all the horrors it is pleasant to know that by the time she wrote her memoir the governess had recovered from her "dreadful liability to impressions." Perhaps we can guess who treated her. She resumed her work as a governess and developed into "the most agreeable women I've ever known in her position; she would have been worthy of any whatever."

For the photograph of Dr. Hughlings Jackson I am indebted to the Department of Medical Illustration of the Institute of Neurology, Queen Square, W.C.1.

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