

**Britten's Bad Boys:
Male Relations in *The Turn of the Screw***

Philip Brett

There is a moment in Henry James's famous ghost story that gives away one of its secrets. The Governess, having seen a strange male figure around the house at Bly for a second time, elicits from Mrs. Grose that its features are those of Peter Quint, the master's dead valet. In her certitude that the ghost "had come for someone else" (than her), she jumps to a notable conclusion in her conversations with the kindly housekeeper:

"He was looking for little Miles." A portentous clearness now possessed me. "*That's* whom he was looking for."

"But how do you know?"

"I know, I know, I know!" My exaltation grew. "And *you* know, my dear!"

Mrs. Grose does not demur, and shortly after goes on to clarify:

"Quint was much too free."

This gave me, straight from my vision of his face—*such* a face!—a sudden sickness of disgust. “Too free with *my* boy?”

“Too free with every one!”¹

The “sudden sickness of disgust” in this context taps directly into the nineteenth century's discourse surrounding sexualities, and makes us realize that the haunting has a sexual purpose. The subject of male sexual practices has already been raised, indirectly of course, in the letter dismissing Miles from school for “an injury to the others.” As Michael Moon has argued, it is the antimasturbation tracts beginning with *Solitary Vice Considered* (1831) and rising to ever increasing heights of hysteria through the century in inveighing against a whole range of male practices for which “onanism” served as a label, that are the background to this “mystery (or nonmystery).”² Their resonance for James and his reader would also immediately suggest the nature of the haunting of the boy by his corrupter. But how do both these women know that Miles is its object? The hints are all there in the Governess's description of the apparition which tie into the terms of what Moon calls the “anti-onanist terrorist literature”:

“He gives me a sort of sense of looking like an actor.”

“An actor!” It was impossible to resemble one less, at least, than Mrs. Grose at that moment.

“I've never seen one, but so I suppose them. He's tall, active, erect,” I continued, “but never—no, never!—a gentleman.”³

1. Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, in *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel, vol. 10 (London, 1964), pp. 49-50.

2. Michael Moon, “Disseminating Whitman,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88 (1989), 256. See also Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Sex as Symbol in Victorian Purity,” *American Journal of Sociology* 84 suppl. (1978), 212-47. Other tracts named by Smith-Rosenberg are Sylvester Graham, *Lecture to Young Men of Chastity* (Boston, 1834); S. B. Woodward, *Hints for the Young in Relation to the Health of Mind and Body* (Boston, 1837); and R. T. Thrall, *Home-Treatment for Sexual Abuses: A Practical Treatise* (New York, 1856).

3. James, *The Turn of the Screw*, p. 47.

When we subsequently learn that he wears stolen clothes (“they’re smart, but they’re not his own”) and that he is handsome (“Remarkably!”), we too can pull the pieces together. Created in the 1890s—a period which saw also the writing of *Billy Budd* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the staging of the three trials of Oscar Wilde—*The Turn of the Screw* plays a part in the definition and treatment of an increasingly urgent social construction of the time, one which has shaped a good deal of Western culture in this century. Michel Foucault has shown how modern Western culture has put what it calls sexuality in a special relation to identity, knowledge, and power; and he has analyzed how the entire network of social relations, from the eighteenth century onwards, came increasingly to be sexualized—and thus subject to control—in terms of four major categories: the hysterical woman, the precociously sexual child, the Malthusian couple, and the perverse adult.⁴

Interestingly enough, *The Turn of the Screw* is organized around three of these charged figures. The Governess is all too obviously the first, the children, especially Miles, the second. The missing third one, the Malthusian couple, is, as it were, the ground from which the others spring, for in America at least, as the work of Moon and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg reveals, it is the publication of the first birth control books in the early 1830s, with their separation of sexual pleasure/indulgence from its hitherto supposedly inevitable biological consequences, that sparks off the anti-onanist literature and not only intensifies the effort to control the female body, but also contributes to a whole range of nonerotic discourses surrounding social matters.

But it is around the last Foucauldian category, represented by Quint, that the others are increasingly focused. As Moon sees it, the anti-onanist discourse “crystallizes around the figure of the depraved individual—servant, older relative, or older

4. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978), esp. pp. 103-14.

child—who, by teaching the young to masturbate, introduces sexual difference and sexual desire into what American moral-purity writers represent as the previously innocent—which is to say asexual—homosocial environments to which the young are committed.”⁵ (It is no accident that the Governess, on reading the Headmaster's cryptic letter, lights on the word “contaminate”—producing “corrupt” as a synonym for the uncomprehending housekeeper—rather than assuming that the “injury” is theft, bullying, or some other relatively straightforward schoolboy crime.)⁶ In the larger sphere, for whatever reason, the other categories, indeed the whole panoply of nineteenth-century sexual categorizations, not to mention the many kinds of genital activity, came at the turn of the century to be organized around the pair—anything but simple in their ramifications—determined by the gender of object choice. And, as Eve Sedgwick observes, “It was this new development that left no space in the culture exempt from the potent incoherencies of homo/heterosexual definition.”⁷ This pair of terms—not symmetrical and equal, but subsisting in a tacit arrangement by which the one term subsumes and excludes the other—has been, and still is, highly productive for art and literature. For, as Sedgwick has argued, they stand at the head of a number of pairs—e.g. private/public, secrecy/disclosure, minority/majority, foreign/domestic, even knowledge/ignorance—in which (as feminist theory has established) a pejorative use of one sets off the normative or privileged character of the other.⁸

Benjamin Britten occupies a special place in this cultural discourse. It is not so remarkable that he was a homosexual composer—a large number have been and still are—nor are the

5. Moon, “Disseminating Whitman,” 255.

6. James, *The Turn of the Screw*, p. 30.

7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990), p. 2.

8. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 11.

forms his homosexual impulses and engagements took of unusual interest—as biographical revelations appear thick and fast, these are likely to complicate his position but not to alter it.⁹ For what is so interesting about him is how he dealt at a public level, in his music and especially in his operatic works, with the concatenation of musicality and homosexuality. His own life was a curious mixture of publicity and privacy, the nature of his relationship to Peter Pears (“a congenial companion” he once called him) well-known, though never publicly acknowledged or discussed. It was an “open secret,” to give D. A. Miller’s name to a familiar mechanism by which the tensions around the closet are kept intact.¹⁰ His puritanical middle-class upbringing (he was the son of a dentist) predisposed him to reject the word “gay” and all it came to signify in his lifetime (we have it on the authority of Pears). And at some level, as a history of depressions and insecurities testifies, he was, as one of his librettists put it, “a reluctant homosexual, a man in flight from himself, who often punished others for the sin he felt he’d committed himself.”¹¹

Whatever his public reluctance, however, he perceived fairly early in his career (around his thirtieth year), that his ambiv-

9. *Letters from a Life: Selected Letters & Diaries of Benjamin Britten from 1923 to 1945*, ed. Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, 2 vols. (London, 1991), contains plenty of hints; Christopher Headington’s *Peter Pears: A Biography* (London, 1992) adds a further dimension; and a biography of Britten by Humphrey Carpenter, due from Faber as I write, promises many more details.

10. D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley, 1988), p. 206. As Miller notes, the point of the “open secret” is “not to conceal knowledge, so much as to conceal the knowledge of the knowledge.”

11. Ronald Duncan, *Working with Britten* (Welcombe, Devon, 1981), p. 28. The class connotations are made clear by Peter Pears, in an interview with Gillian Widdicombe in *The Observer*: “The word ‘gay’ was not in his vocabulary... Ben thought that decent behaviour, decent manners, were part of a fine life. Gracious living, if you like. But ‘the gay life,’ he resented that” (30 March 1980, 33); he also spoke those words in Tony Palmer’s ITV documentary, “A Time There Was” (1980).

alence towards, as well as his sense of, a homosexual identity would serve his art well. The immediate result of that realization was *Peter Grimes*, the opera which firmly established his reputation. What is remarkable about that work as an allegory of homosexual oppression is not so much the terrifying paranoia of the two manhunts, powerful though they are, but the realization of a musical process to mirror the internalized oppression which, as later became clear, is the most destructive aspect of minority social experience.¹²

Having mined this particular field, in *Grimes*, *Albert Herring*, and a few smaller works, Britten moved on in his collaboration with E. M. Forster over *Billy Budd* (1953) to dramatize not so much the effects of the minority social experience as the dynamics of desire itself in a same-sex, closed environment. Far in advance of *Grimes* in dramatic and musical technique, *Budd* perfectly captures the nuances and innuendoes by which Melville suggests that Claggart is homosexual, and moreover dramatizes to a fine point the place that "starry Vere" occupies in the homosexual constellation, and the moral consequences of his dealing with Billy.¹³

The Turn of the Screw (1954) moves into an even more private space to explore the very heartland of the modern construction of sexuality. Arnold Whittall has summed up one aspect of the work as follows: "for the first time in his operas there are no significant public resonances or social perspectives: the conflicts are not seen as conflicts within society, or of tensions between a single 'outsider' and the rest."¹⁴ So it may at first appear. But, as we have seen, the tensions that occur in the private area delineated in James's story play a determining if

12. See my "Britten and Grimes" and "Postscript," in *Benjamin Britten: "Peter Grimes,"* Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 180-96.

13. For a particularly fine recent account, see Arnold Whittall, "Twisted Relations': Method and Meaning in Britten's *Billy Budd*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2 (1990), 145-71.

14. Arnold Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett*, 2nd. edn. (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 158-59.

covert role in the organization of modern society. Though at one level Britten is clearly enjoying being able through the subterfuge of a literary ghost story to introduce same-sex attraction into his operatic world, he is also, at another level, equally preoccupied with the social concerns which are none the less social for being presented in this oblique guise.

The opera is presented in a series of sixteen scenes which closely follow the chain of incidents in the book, and preserve its episodic structure. Some events are telescoped, some omitted, but there are three scenes that are entirely (or almost entirely) new. The first of these is "the Lesson" (act I, sc. 6) which ends with Miles's song, "Malo." This concentrated, thematically obsessive tune, with its triadic harp accompaniment and plaintive viola/English horn countermelody, suggests very powerfully the abjection of the boyish masturbator—as if Britten sensed from his vantage point of half a century later exactly the resonances of James's tale. Every rising melodic figure suggesting awakening knowledge is complemented by a downward turn epitomizing abjection. Each occasion Miles and his harp accompaniment coincide on a common note is matched by one when he sings a seventh or ninth to the harp's root; the string of descending sevenths at the end of the third phrase provides a balancing languor to the notably clearer, more positive sounds of the consonant, rising second phrase. The inverted pedal of the viola and the quizzical interjections of the English horn add to the obsessive as well as melancholy quality of the music. Finally, there is a notable melodic correspondence between the opening of the song, rising from B flat to E flat through D flat, and the celesta flourish first heard in scene 3 (at fig. 15) when the Governess opens the Headmaster's letter, a flourish later associated with manifestations of Quint's presence. Needless to say, the "Malo" melody casts a long shadow throughout the rest of the score (ex. 1).

The other two added scenes are both in act II: the first scene of the act illuminates the psychological states of the three principal adult characters, Quint, Miss Jessel, and the Gov-

Slowly moving (♩ = 60)

51 MILES (to himself, hesitating)

Ma - lo, Ma - lo, Ma - lo I would ra - ther be

Vla. E.H.

Harp

Ma - lo, Ma - lo in an ap - ple tree Ma - lo,

Vla. E.H. Vla.

Ma - lo, Ma - lo than a naugh - ty boy Ma - lo,

E.H. Vla.

Ma - lo in ad - ver - si - ty

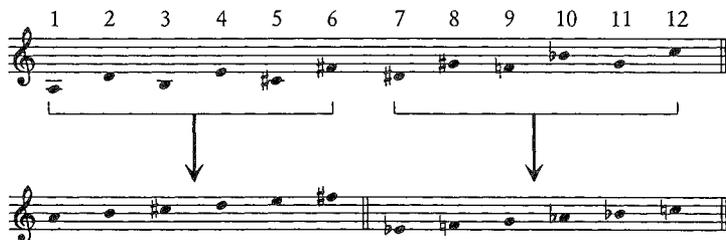
E.H.

Example 1

erness; and the fifth scene portrays Quint tempting Miles to steal the letter the Governess has written to his guardian. Both scenes serve to make the ghosts musically palpable in a way that contravenes James's subtle suggestiveness, but makes sense on the stage where unseen presences do not easily engage the audience's feelings.

The musical organization is closely, even obsessively, worked out throughout the opera. No other Britten score is so tightly ordered, no scheme of his more imaginatively devised to produce a musically claustrophobic quality. The fifteen interludes which punctuate the scenes consist of a set of variations on a theme that is announced at the beginning, immediately after the expressive Prologue. Consisting of three phrases of four notes each, this theme can be reduced to a set of falling fifths (rising fourths) followed by falling thirds (or rising sixths) which cover all twelve notes of the chromatic scale (ex. 2).

The first six notes, if laid out stepwise (in the order 1-3-5-2-4-6) can be heard as the first six notes of the A-major scale. The



Example 2

last six, if similarly arranged (7-9-11-8-10-12), suggest A flat. These are indeed the two polar keys of the opera, A major sig-

nifying, in the broadest terms, the Governess's world, A flat the influence of the ghosts (and in this connection we should note that the "Malo" theme is initially presented in an A-flat/F-minor tonal context). The tonality of the variations and scenes of act I ascend from the one to the other; those of act II descend by an exactly inverted path. Almost every other thematic aspect of the work is somehow derived from this main theme, often in a way that is deliberately ambiguous.

A special example of derivation of this kind is the theme immediately succeeding the main twelve-note theme. It is equally part of the section labeled "theme" in the score, but because it is heard in an inner part of the music that so interestingly suggests the movement of the coach in which the Governess travels to Bly, or perhaps because it is so obviously noteworthy but less abstract in its musical and dramatic effects, commentators tend to treat it as separate and not equal, even though the twelve-note theme functions in a larger view of the harmonic rhythm as an up-beat to the cadence from which this new music springs. This second theme (ex. 3) is derived from the symmetrical series that precedes it by filling in the inversion of the first five notes, as Peter Evans first pointed out.¹⁵



Example 3

Inversion is a technical process in music which Britten had used before, in *Peter Grimes*, to symbolize the protagonist's in-

15. Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (Minneapolis, 1984), p. 214.

ternalization of society's disapproval. It cannot be simply equated with the use of the word to mean sexual deviance in the language of nineteenth-century sexologists, but certainly the present theme operates along suggestive lines, and Peter Evans in his magisterial account of the structure of the opera concludes that its "crucial significance...is, clearly enough then, the corruption of innocence."¹⁶ It attaches itself in slightly different forms to the Governess, to Quint, and to the ghosts as a pair, and it will continue to be a matter of critical debate because its meaning is deliberately ambiguous.

The theme charts the important moments that reveal the Governess's state of mind, from her fear of her task in scene 1 and her arrival in scene 2 (where it hangs in the air on the high violins like a nervous thread) through her increasing awareness of the need to shelter the children to her ultimate realization, in scene 7 of act I, that she "neither shields nor saves them." In scene 5 (five measures after fig. 46) it occurs as the Governess enjoins Mrs. Grose to "See what I see, know what I know, that they [the children] may see and know nothing." This is the closest equivalent in the opera to the "I know, I know, I know!" of the tale. In act II, the theme accompanies the Governess's growing recognition of failure, and a sense of having become tarnished in her efforts: "I have failed, most miserably failed, and there is no more innocence in me." Finally it occurs, plainer and perhaps coarser without its ironic final twist, as she declares possessively at the opening of the passacaglia in the final scene, "O Miles, I cannot bear to lose you. You shall be mine and I shall save you" (ex. 4).

The other face of this motive is its refashioning in the melismatic, extravagant chant in which Quint calls to Miles. Mu-

16. Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 215. Some indication of its varying interpretation can be gained from the different names used to characterize it by various critics cited in this article—e.g. "catalyst" theme (Howard), "tutelage" theme (Hindley). Evans, as might be expected, prefers the music-analytical label, "y" motive.

Slow and regular ($\text{♩} = 60$)

121 GOVERNESS

f passionately

O Miles _____ I can-not bear to _ lose you. You shall be _

pp Timp. Db. (pizz.) Harp

mine, and I shall save you. _

Example 4

sically, then, the Governess and Quint are not only linked but also revealed as the central characters of the drama long before their final battle over Miles. And yet the most important appearance of this motive is in the first scene of act II, where its original association with the theme is reproduced, this time as a climactic conclusion to that theme. It is sung by the Ghosts in "their" key of A-flat to the words which the librettist, Myfanwy Piper, imported from Yeats's "Second Coming." The words of the entire passage are:

Day by day the bars we break,
 Break the love that laps them round,
 Cheat the careful watching eyes,
 "The ceremony of innocence is drowned."

Repeated in a fairly elaborate manner, the “ceremony of innocence” passage is immediately followed by the aria, “Lost in my labyrinth,” in which the Governess declares, “Innocence, you have corrupted me.” As Myfanwy Piper wrote: “The Governess’s good intentions were destroyed by her experiences, whether real or imagined, and her love of Miles was corrupted, in that it became possessiveness and she was aware of it. Hence the last words, ‘What have we done between us?’”¹⁷

In recent years there has been a solid attempt to reduce the ambiguity suggested by the free-flowing associations of ex. 3 (Peter Evans’s theme “y”) and other aspects of the score. In the wake of an influential essay by Vivien Jones, we have been asked to see Britten’s operatic adaptation as leaning towards one or the other of the “two stories” she discerns in the critical reaction to James.¹⁸ As the result, moreover, of the opening of discussion about Britten’s homosexuality and its effect on his music, there have been several attempts to characterize Quint’s portrayal positively—as, for instance, alluring—or, in one extremely gay-affirmative account, to make him the hero of the opera, and to represent the relationship between him and Miles as “positive and liberating.”¹⁹

The multiplicity of these accounts, and their different emphases, are a testimony both to the success of James’s technique and Britten’s musical adaptation of its essence. For what James

17. A letter to Patricia Howard quoted in her “Myfanwy Piper’s *The Turn of the Screw*: Libretto and Synopsis,” in *Benjamin Britten: “The Turn of the Screw,”* ed. Patricia Howard, Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge, 1985), p. 23.

18. Vivien Jones, “Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*,” in *Benjamin Britten: “The Turn of the Screw,”* ed. Patricia Howard, pp. 1-22.

19. Clifford Hindley, “Why Does Miles Die? A Study of Britten’s *The Turn of the Screw*,” *The Musical Quarterly* 74 (1990), 16. See also Wilfred Mellers, “Turning the Screw,” in *The Britten Companion*, ed. Christopher Palmer (London, 1984), pp. 144-152; Christopher Palmer, “The Colour of the Music,” in *Benjamin Britten: “The Turn of the Screw,”* ed. Patricia Howard, pp. 101-25; Mansel Stimpson, “Drama and Meaning in *The Turn of the Screw*,” *Opera Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (1986), 75-82.

set out to do was to liberate the old Gothic horror story from its reliance on apparitions and descriptions of horror by forcing the reader into the hot spot: "Make him *think* the evil, make him think of it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications," James wrote in his Preface to the story.²⁰ In pushing for resolution we are lost, whether we subscribe to the "first story" in which the children are corrupted by the ghosts or the "second story" in which the Governess in her hysterical condition conducts a battle for the children with ghosts whom she has imagined. The reader who accepts the "first story" creates the subjective horror of deceitful evil in innocent-seeming children; the one who accepts the "second story" creates a monstrous predator in the guise of womanly protector. The one springs from and endorses homophobia, the other misogyny. Between these two positions, moreover, there is little room to move.

As for the composer and librettist, well, the latter states unequivocally that "neither Britten nor I ever intended to interpret the work, only to recreate it for a different medium,"—and quotes a significant Jamesian statement in support: "There is for such a case no eligible absolute of the wrong; it remains relative to fifty other elements, a matter of appreciation, speculation, imagination—these things moreover exactly in the mind of the spectator's, the critic's, the reader's experience."²¹ The decision to personify the ghosts weights the opera perilously in the direction of the "first story," Vivien Jones reasonably suggests.²² But the way in which the composer suggests

20. *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James*, ed. Richard P. Blackmur (New York, 1934), p. 176. The argument in this paragraph is indebted to George Haggerty's discussion of the tale in *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1988), pp. 150-57.

21. Myfanwy Piper, "Writing for Britten," in *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*, ed. David Herbert (London and New York, 1979), p. 11. The word "absolute" is italicized in the New York Edition Preface; see *The Art of the Novel*, p. 176.

22. Jones, "Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*," p. 13.

the mounting hysteria of the Governess shows that he has not neglected this other story. One might point, for example, to the passacaglia of the final scene, where Miles's balanced utterances in the same rhythm as that of the upper instruments are countered by increasingly extravagant vocal outbursts from the Governess. Or one might hear the "second theme" (ex. 3), first heard in connection with her, as being a projection of her hysterical condition so powerful that it conjures up more than musical ghosts.

The new school of critics referred to above takes its starting point from Piper's admission that what Quint actually says to Miles in the opera (all of it, of course, absent in James) is "laughably lacking in evil."²³ Averting that there is nothing sinister in Quint's music either, they see the ghosts as signs of the children's sexual awakening, neither good nor bad in itself, but drawing out the repressive instincts of the conventional forces arrayed around and against them, and goading the Governess into her hysterical reaction. In this view the "ceremony of innocence" is drowned in the adults and in the uses to which they put sexuality. The strongly gay-male-affirmative reading of Clifford Hindley goes further still to portray Quint as representing a blameless "warmth of love" and as sharing a "mutually responsive relationship" with Miles, who is led by the Governess—"the victim of a destructive and...demonic delusion"—"to deny his love," to repress his "true nature" and thus to choose spiritual death; in this account Miss Jessel represents the only "palpable evil" in the ghostly apparitions.²⁴

The opera, then, prompts as many scenarios as the personalities of its critics: projection and identification is everything here. These varying interpretations show that, as Wilfred

23. Piper, "Writing for Britten," p. 12.

24. Hindley, "Why Does Miles Die?," 12, 15-17 and 4. This account takes to a further degree the view of the opera focusing on Miles's sexual awakening (represented most strongly in earlier writing by Stimpson in "Drama and Meaning in *The Turn of the Screw*") as a means of explaining the puzzle of Miles's death.

Mellers has rightly claimed, the Governess's and Quint's roles as heroine and villain remain ambiguous, and that "Britten's musical, encompasses James's poetic, vision."²⁵ They are also witness to the continuing potency as well as incoherence of the issues surrounding homosexuality, the closet, and the related questions of power and knowledge. Like the Governess, critics are always tempted to claim they "know" when knowledge is likely to consist of confused and uncertain categories sensed rather than known.

What, we might ask in conclusion, are the signs, if any, of Britten's own attitude to the story? A composer who preferred to let his music speak for itself, he was careful not to give away hints in writing or conversation. Quint's music to Miles might be taken as a point from which to proceed. It is only in recent years, since western ears have begun to recognize the full extent of the influence of Asian musics on Britten, that the sounds associated with Quint—the celesta flourish that announces his presence, for instance—have been traced to their source in the Balinese gamelan. Variation 7, preceding Quint's first scene with Miles, sets up a panoply of sounds—harp tremolandos, celesta arpeggios, gong strokes, and horn—which, as Christopher Palmer puts it, referring to Britten's subsequent ballet, *Prince of the Pagodas*, "all presage the Journey to Pagodaland."²⁶ And the cantilena in which Quint calls to Miles (ex. 5) is quite as exotic: its inspiration appears to have been the twelfth-century organum of Perotin rather than some specifically "oriental" effect, though it is heard by Wilfred Mellers as "recalling flamenco music and Moorish cantillation."²⁷

Orientalism in music is as heavily encumbered as it is in other aspects of western culture.²⁸ In his discussion of "the cult

25. Mellers, "Turning the Screw," p. 152.

26. Palmer, "The Colour of the Music," p. 105.

27. Mellers, "Turning the Screw," p. 149.

28. For a notable essay on this topic, see Ralph Locke, "Constructing the Oriental 'Other': Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 3 (1991), 261-302.

QUINT (unseen) *pp* *freely*
 Miles! Miles!
 Celesta *always pp* 5 5
pp *cresc.* *f*
 Miles!
pp *etc.*
etc.

Example 5

of the exotic” in music, which he dates from Glinka, the critic Constant Lambert concluded that in discerning the decline of the classic tradition in music it was necessary “to lay more emphasis on the fatality of that *femme-fatale* exoticism, than on her feminine charms.”²⁹ This bracketing of the exotic/oriental with the feminine throws into question its use in Britten’s mu-

29. Constant Lambert, *Music Ho! A Study of Music in Decline*, 3rd. edn. (London, 1934), p. 139.

sic. Mellers and Palmer see Quint's cantilenas as "open[ing] magic casements"; in addition, Mellers, who actually calls them "arabesques," writes of them ambivalently as "revealing realms wildly mysterious, remote from the pieties of the Victorian house, yet as inspirational as they are malevolent—if, in musical terms, they can be called malevolent at all."³⁰ Those magic casements, it seems fairly clear, look out for most critics onto a landscape of feminized ambiguity, of dread as well as allure. The "arabesque," moreover, also signifies a special status for those with whom it is associated. Like the Governess's description of Quint in James's story, it sets him completely apart as the Other, that which we, as audience, are (supposedly) not. There could be no clearer musical equivalent for the signs by which Quint is marked as "the homosexual." After hearing this, we can easily exclaim with James's Governess, "I know, I know, I know."

Britten's vision of innocence, of pre-nescience—an essentially nostalgic one—was tightly bound up with his discovery of the East. But the displacement of the ideal from the familiar is only too clear an indication that it was not somewhere he would ever feel entirely at home. And moreover, to propose the portrayal in this music of an ideal Miles-Quint relation without hearing Quint's thirst for power and dominance is also wishful thinking. If Aschenbach can give himself up to the vision of a lovely boy in Britten's version of *Death in Venice*, Quint's portrayal shows how predatory Britten feared such a "sacrifice" can become.

A possible answer to the Quint/Governess dichotomy in this opera lies in a much-quoted letter to Britten from the poet W. H. Auden on the eve of Britten's departure from the States during World War II. In the following excerpt, "Peter" refers of course to Peter Pears; "Elisabeth" is Elisabeth Meyer, the wife of the couple on Long Island with whom Britten and Pears went

30. Palmer, "The Colour of the Music," p. 105; Mellers, "Turning the Screw," p. 149.

to stay for a weekend at the beginning of their sojourn in the U.S.A. and who ended up taking care of them for three years:

"Wherever you go you are and probably always will be surrounded by people who adore you, nurse you, and praise everything you do, eg Elisabeth, Peter... Up to a certain point this is fine for you, but beware. You see, Bengy dear, you are always tempted to make things too easy for yourself in this way, ie to build yourself a warm nest of love (of course when you get it, you find it a little stifling) by playing the lovable talented little boy."³¹

Auden's words are borne out in the unusual emphasis on the boyhood of Britten in all the biographical accounts, inviting comparison, of course, with Mozart, one of Britten's heroes. In a striking recreation of Auden's prophecy, Miles plays mock-Mozart/Czerny to win the attention of his indulgent female wardens in a scene (act II, sc. 6) which conjures up visions of the young Benjamin doted on by his mother and sisters. Stories related by Britten to his librettists, and told by them to the biographer Humphrey Carpenter, show that present in the composer's imagination, if not in reality, were two serious episodes of male sexual abuse affecting either him directly or his playmates in childhood.³² Fancifully casting the composer as Miles for a moment throws light on the ambiguity of the whole opera and on the way in which Britten, the "reluctant homosexual," might have been readily able to see life from the vantage point of a knowing innocent who is caught between a threatening lover and a stifling mother and for whom adult male power is as ominous and menacing as it is alluring.

Another possible identification worth exploring is the one that Britten may have perceived with Quint. The composer's own attraction for boys between the ages of about twelve and sixteen was strong: David Hemmings, the Miles in the original

31. Quoted in Donald Mitchell, *Britten and Auden in the Thirties: The Year 1936* (London, 1981), pp. 161-62.

32. The book is forthcoming from Faber & Faber, London.

production of the opera (and on the London recording), apparently became the focus of one of the most powerful of his attachments, which, like many of their kind, were reportedly tender and fatherly, involving no physical activity beyond kissing and cuddling.³³ With his own childhood experiences in mind, Britten may have felt keenly the knife-edge balance on which such behavior rested. In *Peter Grimes* he had originally set out to portray a child abuser, a figure slowly but surely eradicated as work on the opera proceeded and supplanted by a worst-case scenario of another and more general kind—the outsider whom society hounds to death on no legal or moral grounds, an outsider represented most viably in his case by “the homosexual.”³⁴ By means of James's tale he was able to return a decade later to the original theme, and also at the same time to exorcise—as he had in *Grimes*—a darker side of his own reality.

As I have tried to argue, James's tale is also a good place for us to start work on reconstructing the specific manifestations in Britten's music of the category that, as Eve Sedgwick has warned, we are only too liable to fall into the trap of naming, without regard for the varied present conditions of sexual identity and practice, “homosexuality as we conceive of it today.”³⁵ The positiveness of a gay-affirmative reading is suspect not only because it side-steps the social and personal context of these works, the tale and opera. In positing, as a conceivable alternative to the ending, a “liberated” Miles, who, overcoming

33. Humphrey Carpenter, “The Boys Britten Loved Tell All At Last,” *The Observer* (London, 13 September 1992), 51 (excerpted from the forthcoming biography). On general patterns of behavior for paedophiles and “ephebophiles,” a category into whose broad outline Britten fits, see D. J. West, *Homosexuality Re-examined* (London, 1977; 4th edn. of *Homosexuality*), pp. 211–15.

34. For the process of transformation in this opera, see my “‘Fiery Visions’ (and Revisions): *Peter Grimes* in Progress,” in *Benjamin Britten: “Peter Grimes,”* pp. 47–87.

35. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, pp. 44–48.

the conventional forces of repression represented by the Governess and Mrs. Grose, accepts his "true nature" and goes on, say, to a cosy middle-class gay "lifestyle" (a softly lit portrait of Quint no doubt glowing on the apartment wall), it reduces the complexity of the tale and the opera in an essentialized reading. As we have begun to be aware, such readings ultimately put gay people of all sorts in collusion with the oppression we have suffered as a result of the dominant transhistorical notion of male homosexuality that has served so well the purpose of controlling our lives. It is rather, I would argue, in the specific nature of the homosexual images and personae—limited by class on the one hand and on the other by the discretion model that as a leisure-class homosexual male of his era Britten was almost bound to observe, but depicted so movingly in his music—that we may finally find our greatest source of inspiration. This is part of *our* history, and by pondering its meaning and coming to terms with it, by "telling the story in our own words" (and retelling it) rather than accepting the framework in which it is presented by critics from the non-gay majority, however sympathetic their intentions, we may be performing an even greater service for ourselves and others than that of affirmation.