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THE ARTIST IN THE WORK OF
HENRY JAMES

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

McMaster University

October 1965

MASTER OF ARTS (1965)

McMASTER UNIVERSITY

(English)

Hamilton, Ontario.

TITLE: The Artist in the Work of Henry James

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SUPERVISOR: Dr. F.N. Shrive

NUMBER OF PAGES:

SCOPE AND CONTENTS: A study of Henry James's presentation of writers and artists in seven tales and in The Tragic Muse. The first chapter discusses James's belief in the artist's power of execution to embody his vision in form, as shown in "The Madonna of the Future". This tale is contrasted with Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful". Chapter II considers James's elaborate notion of art as imitation in the work of the actor. The three sections of chapter III analyse the artist in four relations: with Society, with scholarship, with the reading public, and with the critics.

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INTRODUCTION

In modern times European writers have increasingly found their own art a fruitful subject. Artists on the theme of art form a distinguished creative line since the Nineteenth Century: Proust, Mann, Yeats, Joyce, Eliot (in the Four quartets). James belongs in their company. Two of his novels, Roderick Hudson and The Tragic Muse, have artists and actors as their main figures, and there are some three dozen stories peopled by writers or artists.

James's view of the ways in which fiction could be used to render experience gives the artist a special place in his work. There is implicit in his novels and stories, and elaborated in the prefaces to the New York edition of his works, a conception of fiction in terms of the relation between consciousness and reality. The novel, in James's view, is not a description of reality or a relation of action but the dramatisation of the interaction between the world and the minds and sensibilities of the fictional characters. The account of experience in a novel, therefore, must be anchored to the experiences of the characters in it. For James, the interest in a work of fiction is the degree of consciousness exhibited by the characters in their relations with the world.

For the novelist holding this view, the choice of characters is a matter of special importance, for the breadth

of life in the novel depends almost entirely on the breadth of sensibility he endows them with. James discusses this point in his preface to The Princess Casanoviana as follows:

The figures in any picture, the agents in any drama, are interesting only in proportion as they feel their respective situations; since the consciousness, on their part, of the complication exhibited forms for us their link of connection with it. But there are degrees of feeling - the muffled, the faint, the just sufficient, the barely intelligent, as we may say; and the acute, the intense, the complete, in a word - the power to be finely aware and richly responsible. It is those moved in this latter fashion who 'get most' out of all that happens to them and who in doing so enable us, as readers of their record, as participators by a fond attention, also to get most.

The significance of the artist in James's work is that, if he is truly an artist, he "feels his situation" more acutely than anyone else. He is aware, exposed and reflective. He is therefore the ideal centre around which to weave the themes of awareness and exposure, both successful and defeated.

I

EXECUTION VERSUS IDEALISM

"The Madonna of the Future" and Hawthorne's

"The Artist of the Beautiful"

"The Madonna of the Future", James's first successful tale on the subject of the artist, was published in the Atlantic Monthly for March, 1873, when the author was in Europe. The story is the first to explore in depth the situation of the artist of the new world as he confronts the old.

The story was written and published during James's third journey to Europe. This was actually the second of his adult life, for his first visit with his family had ended when he was seventeen. He described this second visit as his "passionate pilgrimage", and as the fervor of the phrase indicates that first adult experience of Europe was something too overwhelming for him to be very concerned about analysing in any detached spirit. His letters of the period reveal that his enthusiasm for things European, and in particular for the English, was equalled only by his despair at the Americans he came across.

A letter written to his mother from Florence in 1869 contains the following passage which shows how little, at this stage, he was willing to extend his sympathy to the difficulties of his compatriots in Europe. His brother William had

asked whether individual Englishmen " 'kill' the individual American".

To this I would say that the Englishmen I have met not only kill, but bury in unfathomable depths, the Americans I have met. A set of people less framed to provoke national self-complacency than the latter would be hard to imagine. There is but one word to use in regard to them--vulgar, vulgar, vulgar. Their ignorance--their stingy, defiant, grudging attitude towards everything European--their perpetual reference of all things to some American standard or precedent which exists only in their own unscrupulous windbags--and then our unhappy poverty of voice, of speech and¹ of physiognomy--these things glare at you hideously.

But then, after inveighing against the lamentable provinciality of the American tourists--they are evidently tourists rather than "pilgrims"--he rounds out his picture with a reflection that shows how early he had established the terms of his contrast between America and Europe. His letter continues:

On the other hand, we seem a people of character, we seem to have energy, capacity and intellectual stuff in ample measure. What I have pointed at as our vices are the elements of the modern man with culture quite left out. It's the absolute and incredible lack of culture that strikes you in common travelling Americans. The pleasantness of the English, on the other side, comes in a great measure from the fact of their each having been dipped into the crucible, which gives them a sort of coating of comely varnish and colour. They have been

¹The Letters of Henry James, Vol.1, ed. Percy Lubbock, pp. 21-23.

smoothed and polished by mutual social attrition. They have manners and a language. We lack both, but particularly the latter.

With his return to America in April, 1870, distance lent detachment to his view of Europe. "I enjoy America", he wrote in a letter of that year, "with a poignancy that perpetually surprises me..."² And it was during this visit to his home that he wrote the memorable sentence: "It's a complex fate, being an American, and one of the responsibilities it entails is fighting against a superstitious valuation of Europe".³

When he again visited Europe, early in 1872, the complexities of his fate as an American weighed more heavily on him than before. To judge from the published letters from this period (there are very few for the years 1872-74) it began to seem to him that for all his letters of introduction and evident cultivation he was almost as much an outsider on the continent and in England as were the most

²Cited by Lubbock, Letters I, p.12, but not included in full in that collection.

³Cited Letters I, p.13, but again not included in full. Lubbock dates it as early in 1872.

chauvinistic American tourists. The letters of 1874 (the year of his return) show him weighing up the difficult decision of whether or not to go back to "Cambridge the Brilliant".⁴ He felt, he wrote to his mother in May of that year, that his "three years in Europe (with much of them so maladif) were a very moderate allowance for one who gets so much out of it as I do".⁵ Yet there were two factors that tilted the balance in favour of return to America. The first was the friendly circle of his remarkable family awaiting him in Cambridge, which must have seemed attractive when his loneliness in Europe grew too great. The second was his growing realisation that a writer, no matter where he might live, had a peculiarly intimate relationship with his country of origin, and that he had, at some time, to come to terms with his homeland. For an American the problem was made the more acute by the terms of the special link between the old world and the new continent. In a letter to Grace Norton of January 1874 he sums up these

⁴Letters I, p. 37.

⁵Ibid., p. 38.

reflections:

The great fact for us all there [he presumably means Cambridge] is that, relish Europe as we may, we belong much more to that than to this, and stand in a much less factitious and artificial relationship to it. I feel forever how Europe keeps holding one at arm's length, and condemning one to a meagre scraping of the surface. I have been nearly a year in Italy and have hardly spoken to an Italian creature save washerwomen and waiters... even a creature addicted as much to sentimentalising as I am over the whole mise en scène of Italian life, doesn't find an easy initiation into what lies behind it. Sometimes I am overwhelmed with the pitifulness of this absurd want of reciprocity between Italy itself and all my rhapsodies about it.⁶

The gradual turning towards America again is thus far from being a purely patriotic, or even theoretical, shift of attention. Its cause is the sheer difficulty of penetrating the surface of European life. From this viewpoint the decision to revisit America which followed later that year seems more like a retreat than a return. If Europe holds the visitor off from her riches, America appears to James at this point as a very open, but very empty, ground. The letter just quoted continues:

But pity our poor bare country and don't revile. England and Italy, with their countless helps to life and pleasure, are the lands for happiness and self-oblivion. It would seem that in our great unendowed, unfurnished, unentertained and unentertaining continent, where we all sit sniffing, as it were, the very earth of our foundations we ought to have leisure to turn out something handsome from the very heart of simple human nature.⁷

⁶ Letters I, pp. 36-38.

⁷ Letters I, p. 37.

Such, in brief, were the movements of James's thought on the subject of himself, as an artist, living outside his own country. This is the background to his early tale, "The Madonna of the Future". The tale is not simply James's own story in fictional terms; but that experience of Europe that his letters sketch in so incisively is the ground from which this story, and so many others, sprang. The letters are commentary: the tale is dramatic. That is what James meant by 'art'.

The subject of "The Madonna of the Future" is an artist's failure, a topic that must fascinate any young writer wondering for how long he can continue to produce. The causes that underlie the young painter's failure to paint his masterpiece are threefold: one might call these three: the American theme, the theme of the Ideal, and the theme of the Past.

It should be observed that James's remarkable skills at construction and characterisation are already well developed in this quite early work. The tale is constructed in the form of a narrative within a narrative. It is introduced by an unnamed speaker who briefly sketches a scene after a dinner party of the past as the men were discussing in a general way the painters who had achieved only a single masterpiece. This speaker describes one of the company, H--: "a clever man who had seen much of men and manners..." In this way we are quietly informed of the narrator of the "inner" narrative--the tale of

the failed painter. The scene is very deftly set, and in fact resembles the description of an opening of a play. The second narrator is the medium through which the whole action is conveyed to us. We learn not what actually happened, but how H--experienced and interpreted what happened. The story is an early and accomplished example of James's great fictional device, the point of view, and one notes what a great reliance this method places on the author's power of rendering character. There is nothing of the "objective" in the telling of the tale, for the aim is to convey someone else's experience of the action. The narration is thus imbued with the suave irony of the teller, H--.

H-- relates how late one evening, while visiting Italy in his youth, he stood before the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence gazing at Michaelangelo's David and the graceful figure of Perseus by Cellini, (these two monster-killers are in ironic contrast to the young artist). As he stands there he is joined by a man who asks him for his "impressions" of the place. He appears, says H--, the narrator, like "the genius of aesthetic hospitality", and indeed launches out into a rhapsodic praise of the Florentine past:

"This was the prime of art, sir. The sun stood high in heaven, and his broad and equal blaze made the darkest places bright and the dullest eyes clear. We live in the evening of time.

We grope in the gray dusk, carrying each our poor little taper of selfish and painful wisdom, holding it up to the great models and to the dim idea, and seeing nothing but overwhelming greatness and dimness".⁸

Rather baffled by this outburst, the urbane H-- (himself a New Yorker) is quickly enlightened when the speaker commends him for his artist-like devotion to the beauties of Florence: "The mystery was suddenly solved; my friend was an American! He must have been to take the picturesque so prodigiously to heart".⁹

The choice of character for the narrator is a fine stroke. Few fictional qualities lose their freshness sooner than pathos, and that is the quality of the painter's situation as it exists, as it were, in an objective sense. Related without the mediation of a narrator the "plot" could achieve nothing more than pathos, while the narrator's pervading presence and tone gives the story a dramatic quality of interaction between two very different personalities.

The painter acknowledges his own American origin--
sadly:

"We are the disinherited of Art!" he cried.
"We are condemned to be superficial! We are excluded from the magic circle. The soil of

⁸"The Madonna of the Future", p.13 in the Collected Tales of Henry James, ed. Leon Edel. Edel's text is taken from the earliest book version.

⁹"The Madonna of the Future", p.14.

American perception is a poor little barren, artificial deposit. Yes! We are wedded to imperfection. An American, to excel, has just ten times as much to learn as a European. We have neither taste, nor tact, nor force.... We poor aspirants must live in perpetual exile.¹⁰

This image of the American soil, barren and thin, is one of James's favorite ways of suggesting the poverty of American life as a subject for the artist, as compared with the richness of the European scene. There is the letter quoted above in which he speaks of "our great unendowed, unfurnished...continent, where we all sit sniffing, as it were, the very earth of our foundations..."¹¹ In a letter to Charles Norton (January 1871) he writes that though the nature and civilisation of America provides a reasonably sufficient field, yet "it will yield its secrets only to a really grasping imagination...To write well and worthily of American things one needs even more than elsewhere to be a master".¹²

H-- rallies poor Theobald with a vigorous exhortation to "Invent, create, achieve!" As he points out in his American way, "There's no law in our glorious Constitution against that".¹³ The contrast between these two Americans has

¹⁰"The Madonna of the Future", p.15.

¹¹See page 6 above.

¹²Letters, I, pp.30-31

¹³"The Madonna of the Future", p.15.

already provided a subtle qualification of Theobald's disconsolate remark that as a people they have "neither taste, nor tact, nor force". The narrator, it is clear, possesses all these qualities, and regards the older man as by no means an American of his own kind.

Theobald proclaims his national origin by the extravagance of his admiration for Europe. He has become established in Florence: "I owe her everything...it's only since I came here that I have really lived, intellectually. One by one, all profane desires, all mere worldly aims, have dropped away from me..."¹⁴ It is true that he has "really lived, intellectually". He has enjoyed, admired, appreciated; he has arrived at a fine discrimination of the art of the city. But it becomes apparent that he has lived only "intellectually", and that his ideas have come to have a life of their own, unrelated to the real world, or to the practice of his art. Above all, the idea of refined excellence, inspired by the art around him, has taken up a dominating position in his mind.

"And have you been very productive all this time?" I asked, with amenity.

He was silent awhile before replying. "Not in any vulgar sense!" he said at last. "I have chosen never to manifest myself by imperfection".¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid, p.16.

¹⁵ "The Madonna of the Future", p.16.

In fact he has never sold a picture. In his revolt against American values he has reached the furthest extreme, at which practicality, doing, is equated with vulgarity. At this point, the ideal is the only object of contemplation. His conviction that this is his true aim amuses the narrator:

Everything was a pretext for some wildly idealistic rhapsody or reverie. Nothing could be seen or said that did not end sooner or later in a glowing discourse on the true, the beautiful, and the good. If my friend was not a genius, he was certainly a monomaniac; and I found as great a fascination in watching the odd lights and shades of his character as if he had been a creature from another planet. He seemed, indeed, to know little of this one, and lived and moved altogether in his own little province of art.¹⁶

H-- is perfectly aware that Theobald shows himself to be profoundly un-European in every word he speaks. The very intensity and loftiness of his aestheticism reveals that he is not a native-born inhabitant of the "Palace of Art". In his devotion to "the good and the beautiful" he loses all sense of proportion. In valuing only the best his standards of criticism become hyperbolic; he has no sense of gradation and measure. As the narrator phrases it: "The small change of admiration seemed to him no coin for a gentleman to handle..."¹⁷

¹⁶"The Madonna of the Future", pp.24-25.

¹⁷Ibid., p.25.

When H-- is introduced to the salon of Mrs. Coventry, the social leader of the cultivated foreigners in Florence, he learns that his friend is something of a joke among them. Mrs. Coventry's wit makes short work of him; "His strong point, he intimated, was his sentiment; but is it a consolation, when one has been painted a fright, to know it has been done with peculiar gusto?"¹⁸ The great work on which he is engaged is well known to them, and they doubt whether such a picture exists at all.

It is H-- who discovers the truth when he is eventually invited by Theobald to visit his lodgings. There he finds a statuesque Italian woman, of middle age, placidly sewing church vestments. The true situation quickly becomes apparent. The woman is the madonna; there is no painting. Theobald has dreamed over his model while she has grown older, until his ideal is to him more real than the reality his eyes can see. It requires the firm tact of the narrator to show him the extent of his pathetic blindness.

The tale clearly implies that the painter has abdicated the true function of the artist. His dream, which appears to him as the true artistic vision, excludes the real world which it is his business to work on. As H-- perceives, he knows very

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"The Madonna of the Future," p. 27.

little of the world in which he lives; instead he has shut himself up in "the province of art". James is not here attacking the dedication to art in itself. The point is that Theobald has lost his own power of creation in his admiration for the art of others. The province of art is not his own; the practice of that he has altogether lost. For James, the true artist embodies two qualities, both of which are essential to his being an artist at all. He must be both a visionary and a craftsman; a seer and a doer. The great labour of artistic work lies in making some independent record of what the artist has felt and seen. The vision itself, however, fine, is a private matter which no one but the artist need concern himself with. If the artist demands attention on this basis alone, as Theobald does, he cannot complain of ridicule. His business is to embody what James calls his "felt life"¹⁹ in a novel or picture or whatever, so that it can stand in the public eye. When that is done, the artist's experience is no longer his own; the "life" passes into the work and from then on belongs to it alone. At that stage the public is called on to exercise its finest powers of appreciation.

The artist is then no longer claiming attention for himself, but for his creation.²⁰

Theobald represents the would-be artist progressively deprived of his skill in execution. He becomes, after his first sketch of Serafina and her dead baby all the dreamer and nothing of the maker. At the end of "The Madonna of the Future" James introduces a character who represents the reverse-- the clever craftsman in whom the vision is dead (or perverted, it comes to much the same thing). While Theobald had worshipped Serafina as the pure idea of the madonna, this jaunty Italian had known her as a woman. This "Juvenal of the chimney piece" makes his living as a satirist in sculpture, producing durable little figurines of people in the attitudes of animals. When H-- meets him he is not impressed:

"What do you say to my types, signore? The idea is bold; does it strike you as happy? Cats and monkeys, --monkeys and cats,--all human life is there! Human life, of course, I mean, viewed with the eye of the satirist".²¹

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After a meeting with Taine, James noted with great approval the French critic's remark that Turgeneff (whom James admired immensely) had "so perfectly cut the umbilical cord that bound the story to himself". See entry in The Notebooks of Henry James, ed. F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth Murdock, p.101. Hereafter cited as Notebooks.

²¹"The Madonna of the Future", p.44.

What is implied here is that the abundant skill of this craftsman is immoral because it is not under the control of a responsible view of life. The Italian's claim to be a satirist is probably cynical and certainly mistaken, for the true satirist refers the perversions of human behaviour to a superior standard. Indeed the distortions can be recognised as such because of the existence of real values. But the "art" of the Italian is purely a matter of distorting the superficial appearance of things, so that human beings appear to mimic the antics of animals. There is no reference here to any real order or standard of judgment. The narrator comments that "their imitative felicity was revolting". This phrasing, we must imagine, has the author's authority behind it. Mere imitation is to James essentially vulgar, for it is a matter of mimicking appearances only. It requires no understanding of the depths underlying the outward surface--whether of physical appearance or of action.

The pattern revealed by the tale, therefore, is of the disturbing result of the unequal development of the artist's gifts. On the one hand is Theobald, the expatriate, rootless dreamer whose contempt for imperfection leads to the atrophy of the power of creation itself, and to an extreme aesthetic idealism. On the other hand stands the Italian craftsman whose powers of execution have outrun, and in the end debauched, his

view of life.

James's clear appreciation of the dangers of this division of artistic power was an important achievement so early in his career. It appears more striking by contrast with the difficulties that beset Hawthorne when he approached the same subject. Hawthorne's influence on James's early work is well known. In the matter of style and tone it was soon outgrown, but it is not too much to say that James's lifelong concern in fiction with the problems of the artist was a lasting inheritance from Hawthorne. Hawthorne was an example that no succeeding American writer could ignore—that James recognised him as such is witnessed on every page of the book that he devoted to him.

Hawthorne's conception of the artist makes of him a focus for a theme so strong in his work as to be obsessive: the danger of the intellectual part of man overmastering the affections, the "heart", by way of a pride that leads a man to withdraw from his society. The artist is primarily an observer, and for Hawthorne the observer is in peril of becoming an inhuman manipulator of others. The artist's link with other men is his finished work, which draws an audience into contact with the man behind the work. It is Hawthorne's curious ambivalence on the importance of the "work" in art that provides a striking contrast to James. "The Madonna of

the Future" might have been written explicitly as a criticism of Hawthorne's idealist view of the relative importance of vision and technique to the artist. The clearest exposition of that view is in "The Artist of the Beautiful".

Owen Warland, the artist of Hawthorne's tale, is a young watchmaker. Hawthorne spares no pains in insisting that his sole interest is the creation of beautiful things. He possessed "the love of the beautiful such as might have made him a poet, a painter, or a sculptor, and which was as completely refined from all utilitarian coarseness as it could have been in either of the fine arts".²² Warland's freedom from worldly taint is further emphasised by contrast with the robust village blacksmith.

One day a friendly visit from the blacksmith so agitates Warland that his hand crushes the delicate piece of machinery that is his secret work. Force overcomes delicacy.

"Thus it is", Hawthorne writes,

that new ideas, which grow up within the imagination and appear so lovely to it and of value beyond whatever men call valuable, are exposed to be shattered and contaminated by contact with the practical. It is requisite for the ideal artist to possess a force of character that seems hardly compatible with its delicacy; he must keep his faith in himself while the incredulous world assails him with its utter disbelief.²³

²²"The Artist of the Beautiful", p.213 in The Portable Hawthorne, ed. Malcolm Cowley.

²³"The Artist of the Beautiful", p.218.

At this point in the tale the reader may well pause to ask whether the anxiety that Hawthorne is expressing for the well-being of the artist does not leave something important out of account. Are we to place no reliance on the natural strength of the artist, on the supporting inspiration that he alone possesses? Warland is shown as the blacksmith's victim; we are encouraged by the author's tone of compassion to feel that the watchmaker is being actively persecuted by the surrounding world. Yet the truth of the situation as Hawthorne relates it (and he does not explicitly mention persecution) is that what is opposed to the artist's delicate vision is not philistinism as such, but the values of the ordinary work-a-day world. We are being edged into believing that the enemy of the art is not active hostility but the "practical", which "shatters" and "contaminates" it.

If at this point we resist Hawthorne's persuasion it is because of our feeling that a certain deception is involved. For it is not too much to say that "the practical" in truth includes all that we might describe as "life" or "experience".

To fence with experience in this way is not possible for any artist without a considerable strain, which Hawthorne's extraordinary integrity does not allow him to conceal. The development of the tale presents, in symbolic form, the con-

sequence of Warland's remoteness from the real.

After the shock of the blacksmith's visit, Warland settles down to the dull performance of his routine tasks. But all the while his strength is returning, and with the advance of summer his vision returns also. He wanders after butterflies in the woods:

The chase of butterflies was an apt emblem of ideal pursuit in which he had spent so many golden hours; but would the beautiful idea ever be yielded to his hand like the butterfly that symbolised it?²⁴

The butterfly becomes not only the symbol but the actual object of his art. He begins in secret to fashion a mechanical butterfly. At this point the emblematic values of the tale begin to shift somewhat. From the light and gaiety of the summer fields Warland retreats at the approach of darkness into his workshop where he labours at his art.²⁵ The strongly mechanical nature of his "art" is imbued with a slightly sinister significance, as of magic. The evidence is not all in the suggestive symbolism of darkness; Hawthorne

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"The Artist of the Beautiful", p.221.

²⁵

For a detailed discussion of the symbolism of light and dark in Hawthorne (as well as in Melville and Poe) see Harry Levin, The Power of Blackness.

emphasises the point: "Daylight, to the morbid sensibility of his mind, seemed to have an intrusiveness that interfered with his pursuits".²⁶ The curious wavering here between the ideas of "sensibility" (the artist's positive gift) and that of disease is characteristic of Hawthorne. Nothing could be further from James's implied view of the artist's task in "The Madonna of the Future", where the hesitant painter is exhorted to "Invent, create, achieve!" Hawthorne's view of the artist is less confident, more anxious than this. "The Artist of the Beautiful" is fully representative of all his tales which deal with artistic work in that an atmosphere of anxiety, even fear, is thrown over the artist's way of life.

Warland's secret work forces him to reject the young girl who loves him, thus driving him into still deeper isolation. The climax of the tale comes when, after several years, he calls on the girl, who is now married to the blacksmith, to bring a present to their young child. The girl and her husband have produced something in their image, sturdy and substantial, and alive. Warland triumphantly produces his own masterpiece: "This spiritualised mechanism, this harmony of motion, this mystery of beauty".²⁷

²⁶"The Artist of the Beautiful", p.222.

²⁷"The Artist of the Beautiful", p.223.

His bridal gift is a mechanical butterfly, encrusted with jewels, which is able to flutter about the room. But as it flies it touches the blacksmith's hand and begins to falter; then rises again and alights on the finger of the child. Again the jewelled creature seems to lose strength--its sparkle grows dim. It rises, then falls and with a snatch the baby reduces it to a heap of fragments.

To the reader it appears that the real has vanquished the artificial. At the very least, it seems that, in a symbolic fashion, the vigour of life has proved false a construction of the mind. Yet this is not Hawthorne's intention. For him the butterfly is the emblem, however inadequate, of Warland's ideal, his vision. The closing lines of the tale allow no other interpretation:

And as for Owen Warland, he looked placidly at what seemed the ruin of his life's labour, and which was yet no ruin. He had caught a far other butterfly than this. When the artist rose high enough to achieve the beautiful, the symbol by which he made it perceptible to mortal senses became of little value in his eyes while his spirit possessed itself in the enjoyment of reality.²⁸

Thus, the explicit burden of "The Artist of the Beautiful" is the purest kind of aesthetic idealism. Owen Warland's task (and we may take him as the "type", for Hawthorne, of

all artists) is to seek and apprehend the idea of the beautiful, which is a "form" that eternally exists, whether or not he pursues it, whether or not he apprehends it. That is for Hawthorne the artist's highest aim. His secondary task is to bring this beauty down to earth; and in this he is always frustrated. As Hawthorne writes in the tale:

Alas that the artist, whether in poetry, or whatever other material, may not content himself with the inner enjoyment of the beautiful, but must chase the flitting mystery beyond the verge of his ethereal domain, and crush its frail being in seizing it with a material grasp.²⁹

For Hawthorne the "madness or Art"³⁰ does not lie, as it does for James, in the inexplicable power of the artist's vision to shape his material. It is found, rather, in the overwhelming disparity between the artist's vision of the ideal (which, as the final lines of "The Artist of the Beautiful" indicate, is in fact the Real) and the material means that he must use to embody it.

James's opinion of the consequences of extreme idealism for the artist is dramatised with admirable detachment

²⁹"The Artist of the Beautiful", 221.

³⁰Dencombe's phrase in James's "The Middle Years".

in "The Madonna of the Future". As he went further in his art he widened his application of the folly of an idealism such as Hawthorne's tale presents, until it became the cornerstone of his conception of the artist's task. This subject will be developed in a later chapter: it is enough to say here that the lesson of "The Artist of the Beautiful" constitutes, by James's standards, a desertion of the artist's prime obligation-- to give both substance and form to his experience; to embody for the public eye that which begins in the privacy of the mind.

II

ART AND IMITATION

"The Real Thing" and The Tragic Muse

James, as we have seen, dissents sharply from Hawthorne's conception of art as the pursuit of a transcendent idea of the beautiful. He regarded Hawthorne as a strange and fanciful man, too much given to rather cold conceits;¹ and from James's point of view such idealism might be seen as a product of the fancy rather than of the imagination. It is attractive and paradoxical but it results in the end in the bafflement rather than the nourishment of the imaginative power. For Owen Warland the work of art itself is unnecessary as long as he has his private vision of beauty. James took Hawthorne, for the most part, for what he always claimed to be, a writer of "Romances" rather than a novelist in the traditional sense. The term "romance" is not in

¹In his Hawthorne, James takes issue with a French critic in the following terms: "Hawthorne was all that M. Montégut says, minus the conviction. The old Puritan moral sense, the consciousness of sin and hell, of the fearful nature of our responsibilities and the savage character of our Taskmaster -- these things had been lodged in the mind of a man of fancy, whose fancy had straightway begun to take liberties and play tricks with them -- to judge them (Heaven forgive him!) from the poetic and aesthetic point of view, the point of view of entertainment and irony....I am often struck, especially in the shorter tales...with a kind of small ingenuity, a taste for conceits and analogies, which bears more particularly what is called the fanciful stamp". Hawthorne, pp.61-62.

current critical use: indeed in Hawthorne's case, "symbolism" is the word that has largely supplanted it.² James himself sometimes related the two terms, but they were to him the signs of a deficiency in Hawthorne's art, and therefore, in his sense of life. He alludes to this quality, for example, while discussing The Scarlet Letter in his book on Hawthorne.

The faults of the book are, to my sense, a want of reality and an abuse of the fanciful element of a certain superficial symbolism. The people strike me not as characters, but as representatives, very picturesquely arranged, of a single state of mind...³

James was always highly critical of allegory and symbolism, not because their use involved elaboration, or indirectness, or suggestion, (these were his own ideals) but because they frequently seemed to him to betray "a want of reality". The distinction between the "Romance" and the "Novel" was not for James an absolute one. The distinction depended on the relation of each to the real world--the realm

² Nevertheless, until quite recently there has been little attention paid to the significant fact that James's view of Hawthorne differed radically from the prevailing modern view. The question was discussed by Lionel Trilling in "Our Hawthorne", an address given at the Hawthorne centenary celebrations in 1964. It is included in the Hawthorne Centenary Essays.

³ Hawthorne, p.114.

of the possible as opposed to the fanciful and speculative. The preface to The American set out the difference in the following terms:

The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly not know, sooner or later, in one way or another; it being but one of the accidents of our hampered state, and one of the incidents of their quantity and number, that particular instances have not yet come our way. The romantic stands, on the other hand, for the things that, with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we never can directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire.⁴

Obviously any novel might contain elements of "romance". Looking back on The American it seemed to James that what had been intended as a "novel" had, because of a certain unreality in his attribution of motives to the characters, actually been a romance.

In respect to their execution, the "art" they involved, there was no distinction--they must measure up to precisely the same standard. The "real" was for James the only subject of art. To say that, alone, is perhaps not to say very much. But, as I hope my consideration of Hawthorne has shown, it was by no means inevitable that an American writer of James's time should insist on "the real" as his subject. The example of Hawthorne might instead have appeared to encourage the develop-

⁴The Art of the Novel, Critical Prefaces by Henry James,
ed. R. F. Blackmur, New York, 1911, p. 10.

ment of a tradition of "Romance" and fantasy.⁵

Nevertheless, for all his devotion to the real, James was not in the usual sense a realist or a naturalist. He did not believe that his business as a novelist was to hold up a mirror to life, or to provide a transcription of the flow of experience. Throughout his life he wrote frequently on this subject in his critical essays; and the end of his career he summed up his reflections in the Prefaces to the New York edition of his work. At this point an examination of one of James's finest tales, "The Real Thing", published in 1892, will illustrate the nature of his conception of the relationship the artist and life - the "real thing". "The Real Thing" is a dramatization of the ideas and impressions that occupied the author throughout his career. It touches on, for example, the contrast between imaginative representation and literal realism; the question of art as imitation; the spirit of the actor; and the limitations of the "real" as a subject for the artist. The first appearance of the idea for the story is an entry in the Notebooks for February 22, 1891, when James was in Paris.⁶

⁵ Philip Rahv has given a brilliant account of American attitudes to the "real" in his essay "The Cult of Experience in American Writing", included in his book, Image and Idea.

⁶ See Notebooks, p. 102.

The pages devoted to the story are rich in interest; the entry is more substantial than the brief jottings of a fleeting idea that so frequently tantalise the reader of the Notebooks. As James recalled the conception of the tale in the Preface to Daisy Miller (the volume in which the tale appeared in the New York edition), it "sprang at a bound" from a "momentary fond consideration" of an anecdote told him by George du Maurier. This anecdote was extremely simple, as James preferred the germ of his stories to be, but at the same time highly suggestive. quite simply, it was that du Maurier had been called on by a rather faded couple, the husband being a former army officer, who were looking for work as models after failing to find any other kind of employment.

James was immediately struck by three aspects of their situation: "the pathos, the oddity, the typicalness".⁷ That the couple appeared both "odd" and "typical" is best explained in relation to their social background. It is their significance as a peculiar product of English society that James touches on first. He sees, to begin with, their personal tragedy which is, in a terrible sense, their reward for having

⁷ quotations are from the entry in Notebooks, beginning p. 102.

served society so well. The entry continues:

The utter tragedy of good-looking gentlefolk who had been all their life stupid and well-dressed, living, on a fixed income, at country houses, watering places and clubs, like so many others of their class in England, and were now utterly unable to do anything, had no cleverness, no art or craft to make use of as a gagne-pain -- could only show themselves, clumsily for the fine, clean, well-groomed animals they were, only hope to make a little money by -- in this manner -- just simply being.⁸

The couple have done, like many others, just what was expected of them; they have "played their parts" in the ironic sense that they had no part to play but themselves -- they could "only show themselves". They are, as it were, matter without spirit, confined in a rigid and graceless "being". They are incapable of becoming anything but what they already are, which is the creation, not of their own imagination, but of the pressure of their society. By saying that they lack "art", James is implying a limitation of their consciousness; they lack the artist's power to extend himself into other ways of being, of behaving and feeling.

It is only after dwelling on this pathetic couple that James considers the artist in the story. The quality that he possesses appears all the more vital by contrast with their deficiency. For he possesses, above all else, a shining skill. This aspect of the situation is given more prominence in the Notebooks entry than in the finished story, so it is worth

⁸Notebooks, p. 102.

emphasizing here. James is particularly interested in the illustration of "the everlasting English amateurishness-- the way superficial, untrained, unprofessional effort goes to the wall when confronted with trained, competitive, intelligent, qualified art -- in whatever line it may be a question of"⁹. The contrast is interesting but it lacks tension. To point up the contrast further, another couple is imagined --" a couple of little vulgar professional people who know..."¹⁰. To discover what they "know" (for James does not elaborate the word in the Notebooks) we must turn to the tale itself.

The essential outlines of the story are given in the Notebooks. James closed the entry with the advice: "It should be a little gem of bright, quick, vivid form". In giving "form" to his original idea, James made of the tale a rich parable of artistic creation. ~~From their entry into the artist's~~ studio, Major and Mrs. Monarch are unaware of the vast gulf that now separates them from their own social world. Their idea of "modelling" is simply to present themselves as they really are while the artist transfers their image to the paper: "We thought", says, the Major, "that if you ever have to do people like us we might be something like it. She particularly -- for a lady in

⁹Notebooks, p. 103.

¹⁰Ibid.

a book, you know".¹¹ "The artist recognizes their "points" but they strike him as "preponderantly social; such as for instance would help to make a drawing-room look well".¹² They are so perfectly representative of their type that he has no difficulty in imagining every detail of their country-house life. They must have been, to perfection, the admitted decoration of every house party. "They looked so well everywhere; they gratified the relish for stature, complexion and 'form'¹³. They are, in fact, works of art in themselves; society has given them "form", and they have provided observers with a delight such as others might find in a play or a picture. Society has given them what it could -- that they are clumsy and stupid, though highly polished, is the fault of their maker. Only the fine mind can make finely. The "art" that made them what they are is secondary. They are the best that "society" can do, and they know it "without fatuity or vulgarity"; but they are not good enough for art. The artist of the tale provides the reason:

...somehow with all their perfections I didn't easily believe in them. After all they were amateurs, and the ruling passion of my life was the detestation of the amateur. Combined with this was another perversity-- an innate preference for the represented subject

¹¹"The Real Thing", p.171, in Stories of Writers and Artists, ed. F.O. Matthiessen. This text is from the Revised Edition, published by Macmillan of London, 1921-23.

¹²Ibid., p.170.

¹³Ibid., p.173.

over the real one: the defect of the real one was so apt to be a lack of representation. I liked things that appeared; then one was sure. Whether they were or not was a subordinate and almost always a profitless question.¹⁴

The speaker is an illustrator, and James naturally makes his terms appropriate to a graphic artist, but the conviction expressed is James's own.

What then is this conviction? In the first place we must note that the artist is talking about his "subject", that is, the limited aspect of experience that he chooses to work with. He is not expressing a preference for art over life in a general way. What he wants in his subject is appearance rather than authenticity; and by appearance, as the tale goes on to make clear, he means a vividness, a collection of salient and suggestive characteristics. This appearance does not necessarily correspond to the actual identity of the thing which appears, because it is a result of "representation".

The power of representation is the essence of art, and in the tale it is possessed not only by the narrator but also by the two young models he employs for his best work -- the "vulgar professional people". These two, a young Italian and the cockney Miss Churm, are as it were, an extension of the artist's imagination; almost a personification of it. They possess no striking personal qualities, and the narrator never draws them

"as they are". Their great ability is the dramatic faculty-- they can become, they can assume other identities, other appearances than their own:

She was a meagre little Miss Churm, but was such an ample heroine of romance. She was only a freckled cockney, but she could represent everything, from a fine lady to a shepherdess: she had the faculty as she might have had a fine voice or long hair. She couldn't spell and she loved beer, but she had two or three "points", and practice, and a knack, and mother-wit, and a whimsical sensibility, and a love of the theatre, and seven sisters¹⁵, and not an ounce of respect, especially for the h.

The artist's statement that he likes things that "appear" must be understood in this context, as must his next sentence: "Whether they were or not was a subordinate, and almost a profitless question". He is speaking, it is clear, about the making of the work, what happens (in the painter's case) in front of the object. (Unless we understand him in this sense it might appear that he is valuing the surface of the finished work at the expense of its inner truth-- this idea is so foreign to James that it must be rejected). The narrator has already noted that the Monarchs have a "form", and this is perhaps their major inadequacy. The form that they have ~~has~~ been impressed on them by society, which has moulded them once and for all. They are therefore useless for the artist, for it is his task to impose form on his subjects. The following incident will illustrate the

¹⁵"The Real Thing", p.176.

point. Miss Churm arrives while the Monarchs are still with the narrator. She is to model for the illustration of a Russian princess:

I mentioned that she was quite my notion of an excellent model--she was really very clever. "Do you think she looks like a Russian princess?" Major Monarch asked with lurking alarm.

"When I make her, yes."
"Oh, if you have to make her--!" he reasoned, not without point.

"That's the most you can ask. There are so many who are not makeable".

"Well, now, here's a lady"-- and with a persuasive smile he passed his arm into his wife's-- "Who's already made!"

"Oh, I'm not a Russian princess," Mrs. Monarch protested a little coldly. I could see she had known some and didn't like them. There at once was a complication of a kind that I never had to fear with Miss Churm.¹⁶

More than most writers, James deserved the old Scottish name of "maker". The self-command to make, to "do" appears throughout the notebooks. It remained with him until the end, and was perhaps most finely uttered in the last years of his life in a famous letter to H.G. Wells, of July 1915. There he wrote:

"It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process."¹⁷

¹⁶"The Real Thing", p.177.

¹⁷See Henry James and H.G. Wells, ed. Leon Edel and Gordon Ray, p. 267.

The artist's task is, quite literally, to make something of his subject, and for this the subject must have vitality, interest, and variety. When the narrator tries to use Major and Mrs. Monarch as models their acute lack of all these qualities becomes apparent in his sketches--they all look photographs, or copies of photographs. They are, that is, simply literal transcriptions of the real. If the professional models are, as I have suggested, a "personification" of the dramatic power of the imagination, then the Monarchs are the type of reality untouched by the imagination. They lack "interest" and "importance"; they do not compel attention as the transfigured reality of art does. The couple are in a curious way both too positive in their nature and too negative. Their importance is essentially self-importance; they claim interest for what they are (which does not attract the artist) and not for what they can represent.

I placed her [i.e. Mrs. Monarch] in every conceivable position and she managed to obliterate the differences. She was always a lady certainly, and into the bargain was always the same lady. She was the real thing but always the same thing. There were moments when I rather writhed under the serenity of her confidence that she was the real thing. All her dealings with one and all her husband's were an implication that this was lucky for me.

The positive aspect of their nature is that they are obstinately one thing only; they are so completely and rigidly "types" that they cannot bend into any other attitude. The "form" given them by society is ineffaceable. Their negative aspect is that by being so utterly "typical" they have no room for any real character. They do not exist as individuals, with the variety and flexibility that any true individuality possesses. This lack is particularly resented by the narrator who, like James himself, is devoted to capturing individual essences, and not types:

I adored variety and range, I cherished human accidents, the illustrative note; I wanted to characterise closely, and the thing in the world I most hated was the danger of being ridden by a type. I had quarrelled with some of my friends about it; I had parted company with them for maintaining that one had to be, and that if the type was beautiful--witness Raphael and Leonardo--the servitude was only a gain... but I held that everything was to be sacrificed sooner than character. When they claimed that the obsessional form could easily be character I retorted, perhaps superficially, "Whose?" It couldn't be everybody's--it might end in being nobody's.¹⁹

In the social comedy the Monarchs have played not characters but roles, and they have done so with utter seriousness. They have been relied on to remain "in character", always to do what is expected of them. The world

¹⁹"The Real Thing", p.189

distrusts the faculty of imitation, of getting inside another character's skin and playing another part, for then the established codes of behaviour are shattered. In society, as the Monarchs' contempt for Miss Churm reveals, the "real thing" must never be imitated; to do so is to question its authenticity (which is why society shuns the actor). But Miss Churm belongs to the province of art. Her social position is so low, and therefore so little hardened into conventions, that her supreme gift for imitation can flourish. She is in fact an accomplished little actress:

Her usual appearance was like a curtain which she could draw up at request for a capital performance. This performance was simply suggestive; but it was a word to the wise--it was vivid and pretty.²⁰

The tale is resolved with an ironic reversal of roles. As Miss Churm and the young Italian act out the lady and gentleman, Major and Mrs. Monarch, having failed to satisfy the artist with "the real thing", take on the job of servants. The encounter has taught them a harsh moral-- "the lesson that in the deceptive atmosphere of art even the highest respectability may fail of being plastic".²¹

²⁰"The Real Thing", p.180

²¹Ibid., p.189.

James had already linked the question of representation and the art of imitation in a novel, The Tragic Muse, published in 1887. As a novel the book is not a complete success, but it contains a great deal of interesting discussion of art and artists. As Professor Dupée remarks: "The theme of art versus politics is explored with almost the consistency of a formal debate".²² The plot is based on the conflicting interests of art and politics. The political camp is represented by the Dormer family, and that of art by the actress, Miriam Rooth, and the strange figure of Gabriel Nash. The two factions are related by the artistic interests of Nick Dormer, a young member of Parliament who would prefer to be a painter, and his cousin, a diplomat, who has a passion for the theatre. For the present discussion, Nash and Miriam are the important figures.

Miriam Rooth is a Miss Churm raised to the level of genius. Like the young cockney model, she is, by her origins, utterly excluded from "society"; that is the tiny portion of the social fabric represented by the proud and narrow Lady Dormer. The fact that she is Jewish, besides providing a touch of historical veracity (she is following in the footsteps of the great Rachel) is a confirming emblem of her

outsider's position in English society. As an actress she represents the qualities of the artist at their highest pitch, while at the same time, by the nature of her work, she is, as it were, a living symbol of the work of art itself. The actor's life and work are more intimately bound together than those of any other kind of artist. In the case of the painter, writer or musician, the final work exists in its own objectivity, detached from its maker. He gives it what life it possesses, but it alone is the container of that life, it alone achieves the form. With the actor the situation is quite different: he must literally embody his own art. He draws from life in order to make of himself the receptacle; his own person provides the form. He is a living artifact.

The training of an actor is therefore a peculiarly fascinating subject (as Hamlet found). In The Tragic Muse, Miriam's training and the growth of her genius play an important part, although we may perhaps regret that James is more often suggestive than detailed about her development as a performer.²³

²³ James was aware of a certain deficiency on this point. He wrote in the preface to the New York edition of the novel: "processes, periods, intervals, stages, degrees, connexions, may be easily enough and barely enough named, may be unconvincingly stated, in fiction, to the deep discredit of the writer, but it remains the very deuce to represent them, especially to represent them under strong compression and in brief and subordinate terms..." The Art of the Novel, p. 94.

Any other kind of artist may preserve, perhaps for the sake of his sanity, a certain distance between himself and his production. Ultimately he may choose, in Yeats's words, "perfection: of the life or of the work". Miriam, as an actress, cannot make this distinction and this places her in a position that can easily be misunderstood as narcissistic self-admiration by those who do not understand the nature of her art.²⁴ Such a person is Peter Sherringham, the diplomat, who is throughout the novel caught in a dilemma: he is in love with the actress, yet he cannot overcome his upbringing to the extent of imagining her a suitable occupant of an embassy. When it comes to the point, as James emphasises in his preface to the novel, he does not take Miriam or her art seriously:

If he and she together, and her great field and future, and the whole cause they had armed and declared for, have not been serious things they have been base make-believes and trivialities which is what in fact the homage of society to art always turns out so soon as art presumes not to be vulgar and futile.²⁵

²⁴ See The Tragic Muse, chapter VIII. Miriam is talking to Sherringham: "It bores you, and you think it disagreeable", she said in a moment - "a girl always talking about herself". He protested that she could never bore him, and she went on: "Oh, I don't want compliments - I want the truth. An actress has to talk about herself; what else can she talk about, poor vain thing!"

"She can talk sometimes about other actresses".

"That comes to the same thing. You won't be serious. I'm awfully serious".

²⁵ The Art of the Novel, p.95.

Nevertheless, before he fails this test, which is to say for most of the novel, Sherringham is an intelligent observer of Miriam's transformation.²⁶ While she as yet shows only promises of achievement he recognises the signs:

he remained conscious that something surmounted her failure something that would perhaps be worth taking hold of. It was the element of outline and attitude, the way she stood, the way she turned her eyes, her head, and moved her limbs...In short the plastic quality of her person was the only definite sign of a vocation.²⁷

With the extremely rapid maturing of Miriam's talent, Sherringham is acute enough to realise that the girl is not merely the normal person with the addition of a special talent. His reaction, (which is all of the situation conveyed to the reader, thanks to James's method of construction) is that of the cultured man who is not himself an artist, familiar with the product but not with the processes of art.

²⁶~~The book is constructed in such a way that we are never allowed inside the mind of the actress; as James puts it in the preface, we never "go behind" her:~~

~~"only poor Sherringham goes, a great deal, and Nick Dormer goes a little, and the author, while they waste wonderment, goes behind them...". The Art of the Novel, p. 91~~

²⁷The Tragic Muse, chapter VII

It came over him suddenly that so far from there being any question of her having the histrionic nature, she simply had it in such perfection that she was always acting; that her existence was a series of parts assumed for the moment, each changed for the next, before the perpetual mirror of some curiosity or admiration or wonder--some spectatorship that she perceived or imagined in the people about her. Interested as he had ever been in the profession of which she was potentially an ornament, this idea startled him by its novelty and even lent, on the spot, a formidable, a really appalling character to Miriam Root. It struck him abruptly that a woman whose only being was to "make believe", to make believe that she had any and every being that you liked, that would serve a purpose, produce a certain effect, and whose identity resided in the continuity of her personations, so that she had no moral privacy, as he phrased it to himself, but lived on a high wind of exhibition, of figuration--such a woman was a kind of monster, in whom of necessity there would be nothing to like, because there would be nothing to take hold of.²⁸

Sherringham is looking for the identity of a woman, which by his own standards must be a simple thing, a "centre of interest". That he finds no such singleness in Miriam he takes to be a monstrous quality, something unnatural. In this he is correct, for the identity she has belongs to art, not to nature. Indeed her "natural" self, as he sees on further reflection, is curiously uninteresting:

The expression that came nearest to belonging to her, as it were, was the one that came nearest to being a blank--an air of inanity when she forgot herself, watching something. Then her eye was heavy and her mouth rather comical; though it was perhaps just at such a moment the fine line of her head told most. She had looked slightly bête even when Sherringham, on their first meeting at Madame Carré's, said

to Nick Dormer that she was the image of the Tragic Muse.²⁹

The "fine line of her head" is constantly impressive, since it is a purely physical attribute, whereas the face, normally the register of the inner state, is in moments of inattention totally inexpressive. The description of Miss Churn in "The Real Thing" comes to mind here, and it is appropriately an image of the theatre: "Her usual appearance was like a curtain which she could draw up at request for a capital performance".³⁰

The unique circumstance of the actor, in that he is at the same time the artist and the product of his own art, makes the "lesson" that The Tragic Muse imparts rather difficult to apply to the art of the writer. We can, however, be sure that the quality of the imagination that James attributes to the young actress is, in his view, shared by all other artists alike. ~~Miriam Roeth's genius for "imitation" is, we may venture,~~ symbolic of the creative imagination, while her "natural" self, represented by the blank expression of her face in unguarded moments, corresponds to the world of natural appearances, of raw experience. The latter is, of course, the material for the artist, but in James's view it gives to the artist, even when it is made up of human beings, the appearances of matter rather than of spirit-- it is, as a subject, inert, featureless,

²⁹The Tragic Muse, Chapter X.

³⁰"The Real Thing", p.180.

formless, unresponsive. When he wrote to Wells that "art" makes life"³¹ he was placing the imagination in exactly this relation to experience. In art the subject, what the piece is about, is the given, the *donnée*. As it first appears to the writer it may be a mere hint of interest (to judge from the Notebooks this was generally James's case), or it may be a full and tangled situation: however it may come, it is of no artistic importance until it has been fashioned by the artist--fleshed out, extended, shaped. Consequently, the word "form" is simply the term that we use to signify the result of the artist's "making". A close paraphrase of James's statement from which I have quoted above would be that "form gives life, gives interest, gives importance--"; for without the specific form given by the artist, the subject (pure experience) has no particular significance, no structure, and hence no interest. It resembles what William James liked to

³¹See above p. 36.

call a "big blooming buzzing confusion..."³²

This relation suggested here between the world of experience and the creative imagination appears, as has been suggested above, in "The Real Thing". The Monarchs are the authentic stuff of life; they are "lady" and "gentleman" and that is exactly what the artist wants for his illustrations. Yet, although they are, in this sense, the "correlative" of his inner vision, they prove intractable, dull and lifeless, because they do not share in his imaginative power. They are, as it were, fallen Nature. On the other hand, the professional models, possessing the dramatic gift, are resurrected by sharing the artist's imagination which allows them to create for themselves new forms of appearance. The artist himself, of course, possesses the greatest freedom for he can produce the

³²There is a striking parallel between the novelist's conception of "form" and the imagination, and his brother's theory of knowledge. William James saw our mental activity as a process of conceptualising the formless flux of experience. This he calls making "cuts" into nature: "The cuts we make are purely ideal. If any reader can succeed in abstracting from all conceptual interpretation and lapse back into his immediate sensible life at this very moment, he will find it to be what someone has called a big blooming buzzing confusion..." And again:

"Out of this aboriginal sensible muchness attention carves out objects, which conception then identifies and names forever...We may say what each part of the sensible continuum is, and all these abstracted whats are concepts". William James, Some Problems of Philosophy. The high value here placed on the interpretative power of the intelligence is extremely close to that of Henry James. It is the main reason for his preference for telling a story from the point of view of a single person, who interprets the action as it appears to him.

"represented subject" fully, and give it an independent life.

The artistic counterpart of Miriam Booth is Nick Dormer, the heir to a great political tradition whose aim is to cultivate his great talent as a painter. Yet James makes little of Dormer's artistic powers (their main importance is simply to provide motivation for his dislike of politics) and instead establishes him as a foil for Gabriel Nash, who finds in him a sympathetic and rather puzzled audience for his aesthetic view. The figure of Gabriel Nash, so gaily mysterious, has prompted almost every critic of the novel to search for his original. No one seems willing to accept tout court the clear suggestion in the Notebooks that Nash may be a close portrait of Herbert Pratt, a passionately independent traveller whom James had met in Venice.³³ The original has variously been suggested as

³³"He was a most singular, most interesting type, and I shall certainly put him into a novel. I shall even make the portrait close and he won't mind. Seeing picturesque lands, simply for their own sake, and without making any use of it--that, with him, is a passion--a passion of which if one lives with him a little (a little, I say; not too much) one feels the contagion....A good deal might be done with Herbert Pratt". Notebooks, p. 31. The entry is dated November, 1881; that is, six years before the publication of The Tragic Muse.

James himself (by Lyall Powers);³⁴ Pratt plus a strong touch of Oscar Wilde (by Oscar Cargill);³⁵ and even Henry James Senior (Quentin Anderson).³⁶

The main interest of these diverting speculations is that, while testifying to the fascination of Nash's character, they propose originals for it which are so very unlike each other. The fact that both James's father and Oscar Wilde can be seriously suggested as models is certainly a strong indication of the enigmatic quality of the character, for

³⁴See his "James's The Tragic Muse-- Ave atque vale" PMLA, LXXIII (June, 1958), 270-273; and "Mr. James's Aesthetic Mr. Nash--Again", Nineteenth Century Fiction, XIII (March, 1959) 341-349.

³⁵See Cargill, The Novels of Henry James, and two articles: "Mr. James's Aesthetic Mr. Nash", and "Gabriel Nash--Somewhat less than Angel", in Nineteenth Century Fiction, XII (December, 1957) 177-189, and XIII (December, 1959) 231-239.

³⁶See Anderson, The American Henry James.

James admired his father greatly and thought little of Wilde's work.³⁷

The central fascination of Gabriel Nash is that he is an "artist in life"; he has no medium but experience itself. He provides, therefore, in the novel a counter-point to Miriam Rooth, whose art is to transfigure the forms of experience by "imitation". Nash enjoys the arts--Miriam's acting and Dormer's painting--as manifestations of beauty, but they are less important to him as "art" than as evidence of the personal freedom of those who practise them. He values Miriam's presence off-stage quite as much as when she is "acting" on it, and he encourages Nick Dormer's wish to paint before he knows (as he discovers later) that he has great gifts. The following conversation between them indicates Nash's tone:

"Do you think I can do anything?" Nick inquired.
"Paint good pictures? How can I tell till I've

³⁷ For James's recollections of his father see his volumes of autobiography, collected and edited by F.W. Dupee under the title The Autobiography of Henry James. His opinion of Wilde is indicated in a letter to Edmund Gosse at the time of Wilde's trial: "But the fall--from nearly 20 years of a really unique kind of 'brilliant' conspicuity (wit, 'art', conversation--"one of our 2 or 3 dramatists, etc.') to that sordid prison cell and this gulf of obscenity over which the ghoulish public hangs and gloats--it is beyond any utterance of irony or any penny of compassion! He was never in the smallest degree interesting to me--but this hideous human history has made him so--in a manner". The Selected Letters of Henry James, ed. L.Edel, pp.142-143.

seen some of your work? Doesn't it come back to me that at Oxford you used to sketch very prettily? But that's the last thing that matters".

"What does matter, then?" Nick demanded, turning his eyes on his companion.

"To be on the right side--on the side of beauty".

"There will be precious little beauty if I produce nothing but daubs".

"Ah, you cling to the old false measure of success. I must cure you of that. There will be the beauty of having been disinterested and independent; of having taken the world in the free, brave, personal way".

"I shall nevertheless paint decently if I can," Nick declared.

"I'm almost sorry! It will make your case less clear, your example less grand".³⁸

Even Nick Dormer, who, we are to understand, is a true artist, is baffled by his friend's opinions. Indeed the fact that he is an artist makes it especially difficult for him to understand, for Nash's views imply, in a subtle and paradoxical way, a devaluation of art and the artist's work.

The heart of what Nash calls his "little system", difficult as it is to summarize, is that he claims in a very personal sense the artist's power to give form to experience. The prerequisite of all the arts is a medium--paint, words, instruments in music, or in the very special case of the actor, the ability to make of one's own person a mimetic object. The presence of Miriam Rooth in the novel illustrates the problem in its most striking terms, for many of the other characters, thoroughly mistaking the nature of her "medium", take her for

merely a pushing and narcissistic upstart. The artist defines his relation to experience by his use of his medium, and from this derives the "morality" of his art. James's view of the moral sense in the work of art is a profound one, and the fairest way to convey it, is simply to quote from his formulation in the preface to The Portrait of a Lady. There he writes:

There is, I think, no more nutritive or suggestive truth in this connexion than that of the perfect dependence of the "moral" sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it. The question comes back thus, obviously, to the kind and the degree of the artist's prime sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs. The quality and capacity of that soil, its ability to "grow" with due freshness and straightness any vision of life, represents, strongly or weakly, the projected morality. That element is but another name for the more or less close connexion of the subject with some mark made on the intelligence, with some sincere experience. Here we get exactly the high price of the novel as a literary form--its power not only, while preserving that form with closeness, to range through all the differences of the individual relation to its general subject matter, all the varieties of outlook on life, of disposition to reflect and project, created by conditions that are never the same from man to man (or, so far as that goes, from man to woman), but positively to appear more true to its character in proportion as it strains, or tends to burst, with a latent extravagance, its mould.³⁹

All art, then, has a containing form, and the novel is unusual (and for James, preeminent) only in that its form is so capacious and can be more "rammed with life" than any other.

³⁹The Art of the Novel, pp. 45-46.

But, while Gabriel Nash accepts the forms and media of art, he sees them interposing a third entity between the personal sensibility and the world of experience. His own "system" is to exercise his imagination by giving "form" to his own life, thereby putting himself in the directest possible relation to experience. Life consists, for him, of "the personal experiments of each of us"; we are all taking up some attitude towards life. Unfortunately, most people's experiments lack a guiding intelligence and end up by defeating their purpose, which is to develop each person's potentialities. For most people this aim is thwarted, and far from developing themselves they become the tools of others, and developed by them. (The Monarchs in "The Real Thing", might be taken as a prime example of this failure: they are, in the end, no more than what "society" has made of them). Nash stands firmly behind the idea that we owe "a duty to ourselves", and he recoils in mock horror from Dormer's sense of "duty"-- which is that it is an impersonal matter. After seeing Dormer's paintings, and finding them admirable, he enquires of his friend:

"Don't you recognise in any degree the elevated idea of duty?"

"My dear fellow, duty is doing, and I inferred that you think rather poorly of doing--that it spoils one's style".

"Doing wrong, assuredly".

"But what do you call right? Where's your canon of of certainty there?"

"The conscience that's in us-- that charming, conversible, infinite thing, the intensest thing we know. But you must treat the oracle civilly if you wish to

make it speak...One must do one's best to find out the right, and your criminality appears to be that you have not taken common trouble".

"I hadn't you to ask," smiled Nick. "But duty strikes me as doing something. If you are too afraid it may be the wrong thing, you may let everything go".

"Being is doing, and if doing is duty, being is duty. Do you follow?"

"At a great distance".

"To be what one may be, really and efficaciously," Nash went on, "to feel it and understand it, to accept it, adopt it, embrace it-- that's conduct, that's life".⁴⁰

In Nash's system, the place that the medium occupies in relation to form in the work of art is taken by the self, James attributes to form the power of giving individuality to experiences that are otherwise unstructured and amorphous. We may well recall that in "The Real Thing" the artist's preference is for the "represented" object over the real one, and that he values individuality manifested in "character" rather than the generality of the "type". This belief contributes a great deal to Nash's concern for form. In a similar way, he believes that only by giving himself a genuine "form" can a person achieve an existence that is individual and not merely an aspect of general, undifferentiated experience. He expresses this view to the puzzled Nick Dormer:

"And suppose one's a brute or an ass, where's the efficacy?"

"In one's very want of intelligence. In such cases one is out of it - the question doesn't exist; one simply becomes part of the duty of others. The brute, the ass, neither feels, nor understands, nor accepts, nor adopts. Those five processes in themselves classify us. They educate, they exalt, they reserve; so that to profit by them, we must be as perceptive as we can. We must re-

cognise our particular form, the particular instrument that each of us - each of us who carries anything - carries in his being. Mastering this instrument, learning to play it in perfection - that's what I call duty, what I call conduct, what I call success.⁴¹

The recognition and cultivation of "our particular form" is the equivalent of possessing an individual style of life. Everyone's experiments in life have a particular "style" in the common sense of the word. As Nash puts it: "what we contribute is our treatment of the material, our rendering of the text, our style"⁴² The particular value of a style such as Nash claims to have is that it is based on an individual relation to the world. His style is founded on acceptance, as he advises his friend that one must "understand...accept...adopt". He takes the world, again in the words he uses to Nick Dormer, "in the free, brave, personal way".⁴³ Yet although his way is personal it is not selfish. Like Herbert Pratt in James's notebook entry, he does things "simply for their own sake, and without making any use of it".⁴⁴ This is the significance of his exchange with Nick Dormer:

" "I go about my business, like any good citizen - that's all".

⁴¹The Tragic Muse, Chapter XIII

⁴²The Tragic Muse, Chapter IX.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Notebooks, p. 31.

"And what is your business?"

"The spectacle of the world".

Nick laughed out. "And what do you do with that?"

"What does anyone do with a spectacle? I look at it." ⁴⁵

Nash, therefore, refuses to appropriate life, including experience in general and the lives of others; and the fact that our sense of him finds expression in these terms indicates how closely, in this respect, his view corresponds to James's own. Nothing, in James's novels, is a greater sin than to take over another's life and use it for one's own ends: it takes the place for him that the "unpardonable sin" occupies in Hawthorne's scheme of values. An important consequence of Nash's refusal to "take over" experience is his pragmatic view of the significance of opinions and points of view. His use of the word "system" to describe his own attitude to experience is whimsically deprecating, for he believes himself to have no fixed structure of conceptions and ideas. To have such a thing would be yet another example of spiritual greediness, of twisting things to one's own needs. He has, he tells his friend, "no interest of my own to push, no nostrum to advertise, no power to

⁴⁵

The Tragic Muse, Chapter IX.

conciliate, no axe to grind."⁴⁶ He pictures the world at one point, in a typically fanciful light, as a sea littered with people in little boats, paddling for their lives:

Our opinions, our convictions, and doctrines and standards, are simply the particular thing that will make the boat go - our boat, naturally, for they may very often be just the thing that will sink another.⁴⁷

Most of the critics who are concerned about identifying the model on which Nash may be based are actually anxious to provide an interpretation of his views. This is the reason why Quentin Anderson tries to establish that the original is Henry James Senior, for he can then interpret Nash's opinions in terms of the strange philosophy of the elder James.⁴⁸

⁴⁶The Tragic Muse, Chapter IX.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸The entire argument of Professor Anderson's The American Henry James is an attempt to establish, in the words of the Foreword, that James "was, after all, a thinker, and he had a secret relation to a body of thought: his father's combination of philosophy and psychology." His chapter on The Tragic Muse is based on the premise that: "Gabriel Nash is both an affectionate portrait of the elder James's 'tone' or style, and an implied criticism of his personal mode of advocating his system." (p.101) As almost all the books, many critics have pointed out, the evidence presented in favour of this argument is extremely thin. Nevertheless, although the book does not achieve its avowed purpose, it contains many pages of penetrating criticism.

In similar fashion, those critics who trace Nash's origin in Wilde do so to claim him as an Aesthete, pure and simple. Such a critic is Professor Cargill, who describes him as "a symbol of pure aestheticism--the rage of the moment on stilts."⁴⁹ The coarseness of this description is unfortunate, for Nash's view of the world is more than simply a modish attitude from the heyday of the Aesthetes; and there is nothing in the novel to suggest that we are not intended to give Nash a serious hearing. Nash is not an aesthete in the sense that he values art above life; his "system" is not Art for Art's sake. Instead, he holds a view of life which has many connections with that of the artist. Neither has a stake in the world, neither interferes with life or amasses people and objects for his own profit. The main concern of each is to deepen experience, to value what he sees, and to celebrate it by giving it a form, a true individuality--the artist through his medium, and Nash by giving his life a personal style. Professor Anderson⁵⁰ throws light in this connection by quoting from James's Preface to The Golden Bowl; (the extract that follows is slightly longer than Professor

⁴⁹The Novels of Henry James, p.191.

⁵⁰The American Henry James, p.114.

Anderson's):

The "taste" of the poet [i.e. the creative artist] is at bottom and so far as the poet in him prevails over everything else, his active sense of life...It has befallen him most frequently [i.e. the title of "poet"], I recognise, when the supersessive terms of his expression have happened to be verse; but that doesn't in the least isolate his case, since it is clear to the most limited intelligence that the title we give him is the only title of general application and convenience for those who passionately cultivate the image of life and the art, on the whole so beneficial, of projecting it. The seer and speaker under the descent of the God is the "poet", whatever his form, and he ceases to be one only when his form, whatever else it may nominally or superficially or vulgarly be, is unworthy of the god: in which event, we promptly submit, he isn't worth talking of at all. He becomes so worth it, and the god so adopts him, and so confirms his charming office and name, in the degree in which his impulse and passion are general and comprehensive...⁵¹

The image of the descent of the god recalls Gabriel Nash's figure for the conscience when Dormer asks him: "What do you call right? What's your canon of certainty there?" His reply indicates that the word "conscience" signifies less a narrowly "moral" principle or voice, than what the preface to The Golden Bowl calls the "active sense of life." Nash replies to Nick Dormer's question:

The conscience that's in us - that charming, conversible, infinite thing, the intensest thing we know. But you must treat the oracle civilly

⁵¹The Art of the Novel, p. 340.

if you wish to make it speak. You mustn't stride into the temple in muddy jack-boots, with your hat on your head, as the Puritan troopers tramped into the dear old abbeys.⁵²

The close connection between James's view of the "poet" and the opinions he gives to Nash, suggests that to dispose of the latter as a "symbol of pure aestheticism", as Professor Cargill does, is to slight the novelist's own conception of those who "cultivate the image of life." That ^{he} is "an ambiguous being", as the novel describes him, is not due to his "aestheticism," if this is taken to mean that he values art above life - for he does not. It is rather due to the fact that he claims the privileges of an artist without possessing a medium. He is not able, therefore, to create as the artist does a representation of the real that is detached from his own person. His ambiguity lies in the fact that he is suspended between the dreaming idealist (such as the painter in "The Madonna of the Future," who has a vision but no power to give it form) and the true artist, who imposes form on his medium.

⁵²The Tragic Muse, Chapter XXIII.

III

The Artist, the Critics, and the Public

There have always been readers to whom James's relation to his own society has been an obstacle to appreciation. To these people, his enormous sociability, his inveterate dining-out and appearances at country weekends, only confirm their sense of his being, as a writer, marked by a "portentous snobbery." (The phrase is Stephen Spender's¹.)

James was certainly no bohemian, but it is difficult not to recognise in his work a firm distinction between the forms of society and those of art. "The Real Thing" makes this point clearly. The "atmosphere of art" is deceptive and not what society takes it for. Conversely, the values of social forms as they are embodied in Major and Mrs. Monarch are not

¹He uses it in his article on The Golden Bowl (1936) collected in The question of Henry James, ed. F.W. Dupée. It is only fair to point out that Spender's aim in the piece is to show that, beneath the snobbery, "there lurk forms of violence and chaos"--which is the saving grace of the novels. quite apart from the charge of snobbery, this seems to me an unsatisfactory way to make a "case" for James. He did, of course, see the violence in experience ("The Beast in the Jungle" dramatises his sense of it) but his adumbrations of "chaos" are inextricably linked to conscience and social life. Unless we appreciate the value he recognised in social behaviour--the interrelation of manners and morals--we can have only a distorted sense of the place of "forms of violence" in his work.

amenable to the work of the artist. James compresses the distinction into a single word, in that tale, by saying that the social forms are not "plastic". Society is in his view the natural subject for a writer, and its very existence is a prerequisite for most writer's achievements. This is indeed the prevailing note of his writings on Hawthorne: "It needs a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion".

The artist, then, must draw from the topics and examples of life offered him by the society he knows. Yet he must guard himself against it; he can hardly, in fact, avoid doing so, for society is, not always consciously, hostile to him.²

²I use "society" as a term for a conglomeration of individuals, not for an impersonal "force". Quentin Anderson has suggested the need for this distinction: "James, however, unlike Flaubert, for example was quite incapable of conceiving of society as a set of alien powers arrayed against him or against art. He never thought society in that degree 'conscious' (and in this respect he may have been quite right). Society might heave (as it does in The Princess Casamassima), but it was not as an entity truly going anywhere; it might change, but if it did, the change would be due to persons rather than blank forces, and it would represent a good or bad use of the creative imagination...We must put quite aside the notion that James was engaged, together with his European conferees, in preparing a stronghold from which the artist might carry on a warfare with organised philistinism." The American Henry James, pp.6 - 7.

1. The Artist in Two-Worlds--"Benevolio"

The tales of the '80's and '90's, such as "The Death of the Lion" and "The Next Time", are increasingly informed by James' detestation of the squalid and journalistic manifestations of society's "interest" in art. Although their tone is generally ironic, and even comic, their situations are tragic for the artist involved. One of the earliest tales, however, in which the relations between the artist and society are dramatized, takes the form of a gay and fanciful allegory. This is "Benevolio", first published in 1875, and excluded from the New York edition. In view of James's subsequent opinion of allegory,³ his choice of this form is sufficiently remarkable, although it is no doubt a reflection of the pervading influence of Hawthorne on his earlier work. (It may be, of course, that writing the tale hastened his disenchantment

³See Hawthorne (1879), pp. 62ff: "allegory, to my sense, is quite one of the lighter exercises of the imagination.... it is apt to spoil two good things--a story and a moral, a meaning and a form; and the taste for it is responsible for a large part of the forcible-feeble writing that has been inflicted upon the world. The only cases in which it is endurable is when it is extremely spontaneous, when the analogy presents itself with eager promptitude. When it shows signs of having been groped and fumbled for, the needful illusion is of course absent and the failure complete."

with the allegorical form; perhaps this is why the tale was omitted from the New York edition). It must be said at once that the allegory in "Benvolio" is not laboured and shows no sign of having been "fumbled for". The correspondences are clear and simple, and James puts into perfect practice his evident belief that the function of allegory is not to complicate issues but to freshen and lighten them.

Although the ironic voice of the narrator insists that this is not a "fairy tale", Benvolio is gifted like the story book prince. The reader (especially the female reader) is encouraged to "suppose that he corresponded to your ideal of manly beauty..."⁴ Yet he possesses "certain little peculiarities and anomalies" of character, as a result of his having the "poetic temperament". As the narrator explains: "It is rather out of fashion to describe a man in these terms; but I believe, in spite of much evidence to the contrary, that there are poets still; and if we may call a spade a spade, why should we not call such a person as Benvolio a poet?"⁵ Here we have the explanation for James's choice of allegory: it is

⁴"Benvolio", p.351. Quotations, unless otherwise specified, are from the text of "Benvolio" printed in The Complete Tales of Henry James Vol. III, ed. Leon Edel.

⁵"Benvolio", p.352.

essentially a device of irony (enforced by the narrator's tone); a humorously defensive way of treating an otherwise portentous theme. (Other "defensive" uses of irony are discussed later in this chapter). His poetic imagination gives him (unlike the fairy tale prince) a "divided self", which is reflected in the way he dresses and talks and occupies his time. Sometimes he is the complete man of fashion; at others he appears, withdrawn and grave, in the dress of a scholar. The rooms in which he lives are in keeping with his two personalities: the one where he receives his friends is huge, book-lined and hung with pictures; the one where he works and cultivates his dreams is "as bare as a monastic cell", with a large window by which he writes. This window strengthens the emblematic significance of the two rooms. "It was here that his happiest thoughts came to him--that inspiration (as we may say, speaking of a man of poetic temperament), descended upon him in silence, and for certain divine, appreciable moments stood poised along the course of his scratching quill."⁶ The image of the window recurs in

⁶"Senvolio", p. 354.

James's work as a symbol of the artist's activity as an observer. In his elaborate development of this figure, in the preface to The Portrait of a Lady, the window represents the particular point of view of each artist in the world:

The house of fiction has in short not one window but a million--a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the instrument individual will....at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other....

Benvolio's salon, on the other hand, which is the social meeting ground, is full of books and pictures, and "decorated with a multitude of ingenious devices"--that is, it contains the products of art, which function in society largely as a backcloth or setting for cultivated gatherings.

In spite of his gifts, however--his friends, his sociability, his fine looks and his imagination--Benvolio becomes discontented, or as the narrator says, "blasé". At this point the reader can hardly be blamed for taking the tale as, in Professor Edel's words, "an unashamed personal allegory".⁸ This impression is strengthened by the description of Benvolio's solution to his boredom. In terms of James's own situation at the time, it would seem to be a problem of finding use for an abundant but fundamentally purposeless

⁷The Art of the Novel, p.46.

⁸Introduction to The Complete Tales, Vol.3, p.10.

power of observation. The narrator describes the solution in the following way:

There was a way of never being bored, and the wise man's duty was to find it out. One of its rudiments, he believed, was that one grows tired of one's self sooner than of anything else in the world. Idleness, everyone admitted, was the greatest of follies; but idleness was subtle, and exacted tribute under a hundred plausible disguises. One was often idle when one seemed to be ardently occupied; one was always idle when one's occupation had not a high aim. One was idle therefore when one was working simply for one's self. Curiosity for curiosity's sake, art for art's sake, these were essentially broken-winded steeds. Ennui was at the end of everything that did not multiply our relations with life. To multiply his relations, therefore, Benvolio reflected, should be the wise man's aim.

The influence of Hawthorne, it is clear, extends to more than simply the choice of the allegorical form. Here it is notably present in the careful explicitness of the presentation of Benvolio's dilemma, and the sensitivity to the insidious power of the mind to delude itself: "idleness was subtle, and exacted tribute under a hundred plausible disguises...." Indeed the terms in which Benvolio's problem is presented, the necessity of establishing a clear relation between art and society, relates immediately back to Hawthorne.

Throughout Hawthorne's work, society plays the part of an absolute value-- men owe it allegiance even when, as in

⁹"Benvolio", p. 356.

The Scarlet Letter, it is pitiless and hard. For all its faults, society, as it is, is the source of love and right conduct. It is far more than a collection, the individual multiplied by thousands, for its source of strength is the interrelation of its members. Those who alienate themselves from it find themselves in a condition approaching madness, which Hawthorne sees, with great prescience, not as a form of inspiration but as the cruellest state of isolation. Such a person is Wakefield, in the curious fragment of that name. On a strange whim he decides not to return to his home, and lives alone for twenty years in disguise, in a room near his own house where he can observe his wife. Hawthorne writes of him:

The singularity of his situation must have so moulded him to itself, that considered in regard to his fellow creatures and the business of life, he could not be said to possess his right mind. He had contrived, or rather he had happened, to dis sever himself from the world--to vanish--to give up his place and privileges with living men, without being admitted among the dead.¹⁰

The point that fascinates the author is that Wakefield possesses all the normal instincts of a man, and is yet pulled apart from society by his perverse decision, a decision which was made in the spirit of an experiment: "It was Wakefield's unprecedented fate to retain his original share of human sympathies, and to be still involved in human interests, while he had lost his reciprocal influence on them."¹¹

¹⁰The Portable Hawthorne, p.145.

¹¹Ibid.

Wakefield is not an artist or a man of intellect, but his story is a parable of the situation that such men are in particular danger of lapsing into. This is the fate of Ethan Brand or Rappaccini. Brand is Hawthorne's most terrible indictment of the power which the artist possesses in the highest degree. (Though he is not named as an artist his is plainly symbolic of the type).

He had lost his hold of the magnetic chain of humanity. He was no longer a brother-man, opening the chambers or the dungeons of our common nature by the key of holy sympathy, which gave him a right to share in all its secrets; he was now a cold observer, looking on mankind as the subject of his experiments, and, at length, converting man and woman to be his puppets, and pulling the wires that moved them to such degrees of crime as were demanded for his study. Thus Ethan Brand became a fiend. He began to be so from the moment his moral nature had ceased to keep the pace of improvement with his intellect.¹²

"Ethan Brand" has the subtitle "A Chapter from an Abortive Romance", and, as Professor Levin has remarked, it is obviously the chapters leading up to this one that have aborted.¹³

It seems reasonable to suggest that the reason the "Romance" was not completed must be related to the intolerable strain inherent in this view of the "cold observer" for one who is himself a writer. Such a view is perhaps the reverse face of the extreme idealism proclaimed in "The Artist of the Beautiful" and which

¹²The Portable Hawthorne, p.257.

¹³Harry Levin, The Power of Blackness, p.62.

I discussed in chapter one.

The significance of the comparison between James and Hawthorne on this point lies in the difference of their solutions to the dilemmas in which they place their characters. For Hawthorne the moral consequences of the separation from society are so great that the name "sin" is used to describe them. Isolation represents estrangement from the source of true humanity. James presents the problem in "Benvolio" in terms of aimlessness and selfishness on the one hand, and useful dedication on the other. The end of "curiosity for curiosity's sake", which induces in Hawthorne's tales a profound fear, is for Benvolio "ennui". In "Benvolio", then, the problem is the use to which one can put the powers of the self, without "working simply for one's self", which is a form of triviality. Quentin Anderson writes that "the young James...was chiefly occupied, it appears, with the question of the 'right' and 'wrong' uses of European experience by a young American writer",¹⁴ and a reading of "Benvolio" together with "The Madonna of the Future", confirms this insight.

Acting on his decision to put himself in touch with society, Benvolio forms an attachment with a beautiful woman,

¹⁴The American Henry James, p.38

known to us in fairy-tale fashion only as the Countess. During one of their meetings he bursts out with a declaration of his admiration:

You represent the world and everything that the world can give, and you represent them at their best-- in their most generous, most graceful, most inspiring form. If a man were a revolutionist you would reconcile him to society. You are a divine embodiment of all the amenities, the refinements, the complexities of life! You are the flower of urbanity, of culture, of tradition! You are the product of so many influences that it widens one's horizon to know you...¹⁵

If the Countess represents the world at its best, and in the ironic mode of the tale this statement is naturally not quite what it seems, she is described in images that suggest a creation--she is a cultivated "flower", and "product" of many influences. We are, at the least, alerted to the possibility of an intended contrast between her created form and the actively creating force of Benvolio's imagination. This suggestion is strengthened by an earlier passage describing the Countess's imaginative efforts:

She was by nature a trifle cold; she rarely lost her head; she measured each step as she took it; she had had little fancies and incipient passions; but on the whole she had thought much more about love than felt it. She had often tried to form an image of the sort of man it would be well for her to love--for so it was she expressed it. She had succeeded but indifferently, and

¹⁵"Benvolio", p. 364.

her imagination had never found a pair of wings until the day she met Benvolio. Then it seemed to her that her quest was ended--her prize gained. This nervous, ardent, deep-eyed youth struck her as the harmonious counterpart of her own facile personality... She had beauty, ancestry, money, luxury, but she had not genius; and if genius was to be had, why not secure it, and complete the list?¹⁶

The Countess had tried (like the artist) to "form an image", but she has done so for a selfish end, for it was an image not of someone to love, but of a fitting receptacle of her affection. She is, therefore, "idle" in Benvolio's sense that she is working simply for herself. The essentially predatory nature of her mind is revealed when on the failure of her imagination she seizes on Benvolio as a "harmonious counterpart". Her idea is to appropriate him, the representative of the creative imagination: "a woman who was in her own right a considerable social figure might give such a man a place in her train as an illustrious husband". She is an early sketch, ironically handled, of the type of cold "appreciator" of art and appropriator of individual lives that James was later to develop into a Gilbert Osmond and a Prince Amerigo.

The Countess's attempt is resisted by Benvolio, who cannot bring himself to declare a constant affection. His efforts to "multiply his relations with life" are guided by

¹⁶"Benvolio", p.360.

a wavering instinct for independence. When the Countess is away he becomes attracted to the nun-like daughter of an old scholar, Scholastica. While he is in conversation with this retiring couple, the Countess, and with her society and the world of experience, fades into the background.

Benvolio, when he was fairly launched in a philosophical discussion, was capable of forgetting that there was anything in the world but metaphysics; he revelled in transcendent abstraction and became unconscious of all concrete things--even of that most brilliant of all concrete things, the Countess. He longed to embark on a voyage of discovery on the great sea of pure reason.¹⁷

Scholastica does not symbolise, as Professor Anderson thinks, simply "his committment to his muse".¹⁸ The ending of the tale makes this plain, but there is sufficient indication before the close that the girl represents nothing so simple as this. Although she is devoted to study and speculation, her imagination is as inactive as that of the Countess. They both resemble mirrors who can only reflect what is put before them; neither has the artist's creative power to transform what he sees. Scholastica is more harmonious and constant than the Countess because her way of life contains these qualities, but they do

¹⁷"Benvolio", p.375.

¹⁸The American Henry James, p.39.

not originate in her.

The passion for knowledge, of its own motion, would never have carried her far. But she had a perfect understanding--a mind as clear and skill and natural as a woodland pool, giving back an exact and definite image of everything that was presented to it.¹⁹

Benvolio is not faced with a plain choice, as he might be if Hawthorne had conceived the story, between a good angel and a bad one. The world that the Countess represents, however, limited, is as real and attractive as the devotion to pure reason of Scholastica and her father. Consider, for example, the following passage (Benvolio is on a visit to the Countess, accompanied in the carriage by the Countess's dame de compagnie, who is the "her" referred to):

Yesterday he thought her, with her pale, discreet face, and her eager movements that pretended to be indifferent, a finished specimen of an entertaining genus. Today he could only say that if there was a whole genus it was a thousand pities, for the poor lady struck him as miserably false and servile. The real seemed hideous; he felt homesick for his dear familiar rooms between the garden and the square, and he longed to get into them and bolt his door and bury himself in his old arm-chair and cultivate idealism for evermore.²⁰

¹⁹"Benvolio", p.377.

²⁰"Benvolio", p. 381.

The pointed antithesis here between the real and the ideal is a clear enough indication that the Countess and Scholastica are held in a balanced relation. (It is helpful, though not at all essential for an interpretation of the tale, to remember the criticism of "the ideal" embodied in the earlier story "The Madonna of the Future".) Right up to the end of the tale, Benvolio swings in imagination from one woman to the other; his moods are, in Professor Maurice Beebe's words, of "contraction and expansion".²¹ The Countess represents not merely "society" but life a large, the world of experience, Benvolio's separation from her at the end of the tale signifies a retreat from the only world that can nourish the artist's vision. The break is caused, it is true, by the Countess's demands on him--the rapacity of the world's desire to annex the artist and his productions for its own purposes. In her frustration she arranges for the departure of her rival, Scholastica. Benvolio, at this, finally states the principle that has guided his apparently unstable moods:

"Don't you see," he said, "can't you imagine, that I cared for you only by contrast? You took the trouble to kill the contrast, and with it you killed everything else. For constancy I prefer this!" And he tapped his poetic brow. He never saw the Countess again.²²

²¹ Maurice Beebe, Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts, p.202.

²² "Benvolio", p.401.

The ending of the tale takes the curious form of a hypothesis, in which the narrator describes what would happen if this story were a fairy-tale (which of course the narrator tells us it is not). In the fairy-tale, then, Benvolio misses both the Countess and Scholastica and leads "an extremely fretful and unproductive life". Eventually he brings Scholastica home and begins to write again: "only, many people said that his poetry had become dismally dull." We can willingly accept the narrator's assurance that this is no fairy-tale-- it is so clearly the true story of a writer's dilemma.

ii. Public Demands--"Greville Fane", and "The Next Time"

After the disappointing reception of The Bostonians and The Princess Casamassina in the second half of the 80's, and while he was still finishing the serialised version of The Tragic Muse, James decided to turn his main energies to producing for the theatre and to write only short fiction.²³

²³ See the entry for May 12th., 1889 in Notebooks, p.99. "I had practically given up my old, valued, long cherished dream of doing something for the stage, for fame's sake, and art's, and fortune's: overcome by the vulgarity, the brutality, the baseness of the condition of the English-speaking theatre today. But after an interval, a long one, the vision has revived, on a new and very much humbler basis, and especially under the lash of necessity. Of art or fame il est maintenant fort peu question: I simply must try, and try seriously, to produce half a dozen--a dozen, five dozen,--plays for the sake of my pocket, my material future. Of how little money the novel makes for me I needn't discourse here." He had been approached by the actor Edward Compton about putting The American on the stage. It was eventually staged, with the addition of a "happy ending", and was not a success.

A week after writing of his decision to attempt the theatre he confided to his journal "the desire that the literary heritage, such as it is, poor thing, that I may leave, shall consist of a large number of perfect short things, nouvelles tales, illustrative of ever so many things in life--in the life I know and see and feel--and of all the deep and delicate-- and of London, and of art, and of everything...²⁴ This marks the beginning of his great production of short tales and nouvelles, including those which are considered here--"Greville Fane" (1892), and "The Next Time" (1895). Each of these reflects his disgust at the vulgarity of the public revealed in the state of the theatre²⁵ and the "best-sellers" of the time. His correspondence with Robert Louis Stevenson, whom he valued by contrast, and no doubt excessively, for his elegance and craftsmanship, is full of complaints at the literary scene: "The vulgarity of literature in these islands at the present time is not to be said, and I shall clutch at you as one turns one's ear to music in the chatter of the marketplace."²⁶

²⁴ Notebooks, p.101.

²⁵ It was not easy for James to see his own Guy Donville go under while Wilde and lesser men were having great success. He wrote to William: "On the basis of their being plays, or successes, my thing is necessarily neither." Letters I, p.228.

²⁶ March, 18th., 1892, Letters I, p.188.

"Greville Fane" is a delightful story of a "lady novelist" who caters exclusively for the market-place. This makes it unusual in James's work, for he was seldom interested in painting a detailed picture of the third-rate artist, or indeed of the third-rate in any field. Surprisingly enough, in view of the feelings displayed in his letters of the time, it is a sympathetic portrait, as the serious young writer who narrates the tale has frequently enjoyed her company, for the characteristic reason that she "rested (him) from literature." The venom is reserved for the lady's son and daughter, who despise her while profiting from the proceeds of her "art".

The germ for the story was the report of Jennie Thackeray that her father, the redoubtable William Makepeace, had conceived the idea of bringing up his son in the novelist's trade, just as he might have made him a clergyman, or a lawyer. The experiment failed with the son, who became a sheep-farmer in Australia, but Miss Thackeray herself did become a novelist.²⁷ The idea appealed to James at the time and he recalled it again in his notebook eleven years later (1889), adding that Miss Thackeray, now Mrs. Ritchie, was planning the same profession for her own little daughter. This time the idea took fire; no doubt the fate of the innocent daughter struck a chord in the now rather worn and

²⁷ Notebooks, p.10.

thoroughly professional novelist. The report, wrote James "suggested to me the figure of a weary battered labourer in the field of fiction attempting to carry out this project with a child and meeting, by the irony of fate, the strangest dis-comfiture".²⁸ He then recounts the skeleton outline of the tale that became "Greville Fane".

The tale is in the form of the recollections of Mrs. Stormer (for such was Greville Fane's name in the lending-libraries) by a clever young writer who has been asked for "half a column" about her as she lies dying. He has no illusions about the worth of her talent, which is so far beneath his own that his feelings are not complicated by jealousy or even contempt. "I didn't admire but liked her", he writes, "and had known her so long that I almost felt heartless in sitting down at such an hour to a feast of indifference".²⁹ On arriving at the house to ask about her he finds her already dead, and is faced with her son Leolin and her well-married and supercilious daughter, Lady Luard, who are principally concerned with telling

²⁸ Notebooks, pp. 93-94 .

²⁹ "Greville Fane", p.152. quotations from the tale are from the text printed in Stories of Writers and Artists, ed.F.O. Matthiessen (New Directions--no publication date given). This text is from the Revised Edition published by Macmillan (London: 1921-23).

him of "mamma's birth" and with the profit to be wrung out of the three completed manuscripts she has left behind her. He retreats to a cigar by his own fireside and reminisces about the woman he had known: "the dear woman had written a hundred stories, but none so curious as her own".

Greville Fane had the qualities of the robust English novelists of a generation before James--the Dickenses, Trollopes, and Thackerays--who poured out novel after novel for an eager public, reflecting little in print on their techniques and aspirations in fiction. All their qualities, that is, except their genius.

The young narrator, whom the Notebooks characterise as a novelist of "the modern psychological type"³⁰ belongs to a more self-conscious generation for whom art is a matter for speculation and suffering. He even has a theory about poor Mrs. Storer, which is the characteristically Jamesian one that she took her undoubted gifts too lightly.

To myself literature was an irritation, a torment; but Greville Fane slumbered in the intellectual part of it even as a cat on a hearthrug or a Creole in a hammock. She wasn't a woman of genius, but her faculty was so

³⁰ Notebooks, p. 94

special, so much a gift out of hand, that I've often wondered how she fell below that distinction. This was doubtless because the transaction, in her case, had remained incomplete; genius always pays for the gift, feels the debt, and she was placidly unconscious of the call.

Greville Fane was an entertainer, she could "spin a yarn", and she had emotions--large ones--but she could not write. The critics were, naturally, discriminating in their usual fashion: "she was worth a couple of columns any day to the weekly papers, in which it was shown that her pictures of life were dreadful but her style superior"³² In private life she is dull, comfortable and very proper, but there is no passionate depravity that escapes her pen. It is hard not to imagine that James is parodying himself in the narrator's description of her work:

Passion in high life was the general formula of this work, for her imagination was at home only in the most exalted circles. She adored in truth the aristocracy, and they constituted for her the romance of the world--or, what is--~~some~~ to the point, the prime material of fiction. Their beauty and luxury, their loves and revenges, their temptations and surrenders, their immoralities and diamonds were as familiar to her as the blots on her writing-table...Her types, her illustrations, her tone were nothing if not cosmopolitan. She recognised nothing less provincial than European society, and her fine folk knew each other and made love

³¹"Greville Fane", p.154.

³²Ibid, p.155 .

to each other from Doncaster to Bucharest. She had an idea that she resembled Balzac....She was expert and vulgar and snobbish, and never so intensely British as when she was particularly foreign.³³

How fortunate for James, we may feel, that he was an American. The narrator is human enough to half-envy her for her facility and her greedy public. His own laboured perfection seems almost barren by the side of her fertile talent; art is long, but she it appears, could have gone on forever. His paradox provides slight consolation: "It's only real success that wanes, it's only solid things that melt." On one occasion, he recalls, when she had been worried that might write herself dry, he had retorted: "Ah, you open straight into fairyland, and the fairies love you and they never change....With me its different; I try, in my clumsy way, to be in some direct relation with life." To this favourite Jamesian phrase she had replied simply with "Bother your direct relation to life," for she used the phrase herself only "as a note of elegance" and not in serious conversation.³⁴

³³"Greville Fane", p. 155.

³⁴This exchange brings to mind the contretemps between James and H.G. Wells in 1915, which was brought on by the latter's succumbing to the Greville Fane in his make-up and including a caricature and parody of James in his novel, Boon, the Mind of the Race. The victim was not amused, and replied, in a letter from which I have already quoted, to the effect that "art...makes life..." Documents relating to their friendship and quarrel can be found in Henry James and H.G. Wells.

Mrs. Stormer, with her formless prose and good heart is fêted by the public and oblivious of what the young novelist calls her "debt" to art. Nevertheless, life takes its toll on her unawares in the persons of her children. Her daughter, who marries the inarticulate Sir Baldwin Luard, with whom she converses "mainly in prim ejaculations", resembles a character from her mother's books--titled, ridiculous, and contemptuous of "trade", including her mother's, while remaining very willing to batten on its profits. Her reasons for condemning her mother's art are idiosyncratic: "she deplored the 'peculiar style' to which Greville Fane had devoted herself, and wondered where a spectator with the advantage of so ladylike a daughter could have picked up such views about the best society. 'She might know better, with Leolin and me', Lady Luard had been heard to remark."³⁵ The son, Leolin, is the subject of an unfortunate experiment such as Thackeray had proposed for his offspring--with the difference that he sees in the novelist's profession a perfect way of evading the obligation to work. Greville Fane writes purely out of her heated imagination, and indeed is too humble to venture into the world of society she writes about and which her daughter has entered by marriage.

³⁵"Greville Fane", p.158.

Her son has the wit to play upon her weakness for vicarious glamour, and insists, to her delight, that in order to write he "must see life". At his mother's expense, therefore, he puts himself into a "direct relation with life".

If his parent accepted the principle that the intending novelist can't begin too early to see life, Leolin wasn't interested in hanging back from the application of it. He was eager to qualify himself and took to cigarettes at ten on the highest literary grounds. His fond mother gazed at him with extravagant envy and, like Desdemona, wished heaven had made her such a man.

Of course very little literature springs from Leolin's cultivation of life. Greville Fane never sees through her son's little game, although with her thorough professionalism she makes it work for her. Leolin becomes her contact in high society; at last she is able to give her books the authentic touch. With his help, paid for by the item, the details of hunting and yachting, wine and cigars have at least the merit of accuracy.

The story is essentially the ironic confrontation of two kinds of professionalism—that of the narrator, and that of Greville Fane. Both take pride in their workmanship, but the difference is that Greville Fane sees her function as that of providing a commodity for the market, and in consequence looking to that for her standards. The tale is a vignette of the advent of the best-seller in literature. But it is worth noting that

James regards the Greville Fanes as a corruption of an honourable tradition- what is missing in her is a sense of the cost of achievement in art. James himself took pride in his strenuous and professional achievement- this was one reason why he could never belong to the Aesthetes.

The world of the best-seller and popular journalism provides an ironic background again in "The Next Time" (1895), the story of a writer of genius who attempts to use his pen to provide a living for himself and his family. James's artists are, as a rule, tough-minded men (one must add "women" to include Miriam Rooth), strong in the practice of their art and shrewdly aware of the limitations of their appeal to the public.³⁶ The pathos of Ralph Limbert's case is that his genius carries with it no sense of its rarity, no awareness of the limitation it imposes on his success. As the narrator writes:

If to the day of his death, after mortal disenchantments, the impression he first produced always invoked the word 'ingenuous', those to whom his face was familiar can easily imagine what it must have been when it still had the light of youth. I had never seen a man of genius

³⁶ That this represents James's own view can be gathered from the following: "Art should be as hard as nails--as hard as the heart of the artist--a person, who qua artist, is an absolutely Roman father." Letters to A.C. Benson and Auguste Monod, ed. E. F. Benson (Scribner's Sons: New York, 1930) p.7.

show for so passive, a man of experience so off his guard.³⁷

Limbert is ingenuous enough to write for the public at large in emulation of his sister-in-law Mrs. Highmore, who is a rather more intelligent and self-aware Greville Fane. Mrs. Highmore has known every success the great novel-reading public can bestow, except for the very highest, beyond even their power--failure, which is now the one thing she craves. "She impressed on me that for the last ten years she had wanted to do something artistic, something as to which she was prepared not to care a rap whether or not it should sell....She yearned to be, like Limbert, but of course only once, an exquisite failure. There was something a failure was, a failure in the market, that a success somehow wasn't."³⁸ With a string of quite indecently successful works behind her, she tries, time after time, for that elusive failure, the very hallmark, as she recognises, of an artist's authenticity. And each time her inimitable gifts make of her new book a resounding success. The narrator, a critic for the intellectual magazines, plays his part in the tale as a touchstone for Mrs. Highmore and Ralph Limbert, both of whom are his friends. James makes of him an ironic symbol of the judicial critic. At his word, reputations rise and fall remorselessly.

³⁷"The Next Time", p.248. quotations from "The Next Time" are from ~~Stories of Writers and Artists~~, ed. Matthiessen, representing the text of the Revised Edition published by Macmillan (London) 1921-23.

³⁸"The Next Time, p.245.

It is not his fault that it is his praise which damns. The public which devours Mrs. Highmore volume by volume has no use for his critical pointers, but it is her dearest wish that they should, just once, listen to him.

A failure now could make--oh, with the aid of immense talent of course, for there were failures and failures--such a reputation! She did me the honour--she had often done it--to intimate that what she meant by reputation was seeing me toss a flower. If it took a failure to catch a failure I was by my own admission well qualified to catch the laurel.³⁹

The failure in the market-place which Mrs. Highmore pursues as an unattainable luxury comes to Ralph Limbert in spite of all he can do to evade it. At each appearance his friend, the narrator, devotes an article to him, and, just as regularly, his book refuses to sell. His unfortunate Midas touch is Limbert's despair:

Mine was in short the love that killed, for my subtlety, unlike Mrs. Highmore's, produced no tremor in the public tail. She hadn't forgotten how, toward the end, when his case was worst, Limbert would absolutely come to me with an odd shy pathos in his eyes and say: 'My dear fellow, I think I've done it this time, if you'll only keep quiet'.⁴⁰

³⁹"The Next Time", p.245.

⁴⁰Ibid., p.246.

As each work of Limbert's dies to the sound of critical trumpets he attempts to support his growing family by joining the Blackport Beacon (no doubt the Manchester Guardian of the time) as their London correspondent. He, like James himself, is not ashamed to regard himself as a craftsman as well as an artist, turning his skill to the humbler journalistic tasks. Indeed he enjoys the new work as an exercise of skill in catching the "lively" tone required in his "letters" from London. The narrator is quite disconcerted at the skill with which Limbert seems to catch the right tone--he is an "chatty", surely, as anyone could be. "The tone was of course to be caught, but need it have been caught so in the act? The creature was even cleverer, as Maud Stannace said, than she had ventured to hope." But Limbert's child-like delight in his new skill, and the narrator's rather guarded satisfaction, only reveal the gulf that separates them from the public, respectable as it is. For all Limbert's efforts to please, the proprietors of the Beacon are unsatisfied: his genius still shows through and he is turned away.

"They don't like his letters--they're not the style of thing they want."

My blankness could only deepen. "Then what style of thing, in God's name, do they want?"

"Something more chatty."

"More?" I cried, aghast,

"More gossipy, more personal. They want journalism..."⁴¹

With this contact with the public gone, Lambert tries even harder to give his novels a wide appeal. He tries conscientiously to write down to the majority, but he can never give his work the authentically popular touch of Mrs. Highmore. Only at the very end, when sheer overwork has brought him to the point of death, does his impulse to court the public leave him. The end of the tale moves beyond irony; the narrator

⁴¹"The Next Time", p.252. James is here making comic capital of his own experience in journalism. In the late 1870's he became Paris correspondent for the New York Tribune. He was shortly informed by his editor, Whitelaw Reid, that his "letters" were not quite the thing the Tribune had in mind. He replied to Reid on August 30th., 1876: "I quite appreciate what you say about the character of my letters, and about their not being the right sort of thing for a newspaper... They would, as you say, be more in place in a magazine. But I am afraid that I can't assent to your proposal that I should try and write otherwise. I know the sort of letter you mean- it is doubtless the proper sort of thing for the Tribune to have. But I can't produce it- I don't know-how I couldn't learn how. It would cost me really more trouble than to write as I have been doing (which comes tolerably easy to me) and it would be poor economy for me to try and become 'newsy' and gossipy... If my letters have been 'too Good' I am honestly afraid that they are the poorest I can do, especially for the money!" Selected Letters of Henry James, ed. Edel, pp.63-64.

watches Lambert during his last few months go beyond the world in which success, or indeed criticism, matters, and enter an untroubled relation with his art:

he had floated away into a grand indifference, into a reckless consciousness of art. The voice of the market had suddenly grown faint and far: he had come back at the last, as people so often do, to one of the moods, the sincerities of his prime... he had quite forgotten whether he generally sold or not. He had merely waked up one morning again in the country of the blue and had stayed there with a good conscience and a great idea.⁴²

That phrase "the country of the blue" has been used by the late R.P. Blackmur as the title for an article on James's treatment of the artist. Blackmur wrote there that: "James made of the theme of the artist a focus for the ultimate theme of human integrity, how it is conceived, how it is destroyed, and how, ideally, it may be regained."⁴³

In "The Next Time" it is shown, as clearly as possible, that for the artist integrity cannot be won by supplying the world with what it demands. The artist works for and in his art, not for society. The demands of art are far more exacting than those of society, although in this tale society claims a life. Art is a harder master in that it demands only the best.

⁴²"The Next Time" p.279.

⁴³R.P. Blackmur, "In the Country of the Blue", reprinted in "The Question of Harry James", ed. F.W. Dug e.

The artist's support is that his work, at best, is founded on "a good conscience and a great idea."

iii Some Practical Critics-- "The Figure in the Carpet"
and "The Aspern Papers"

In his preface to volume XV of the New York edition of his works⁴⁴ in which "The Figure in the Carpet" appeared, James recalled that he had been asked "where on earth, where round-about us at this hour, I had 'found' my Neil Paradays, my Ralph Limberts, my Hugh Vereckers and other such supersubtle fry."⁴⁵ He admitted that he could not "give chapter and verse" for the originals of these artist-heroes, (it needs no insisting that he himself must have been one "supersubtle" model) but he explained why this did not disconcert him. On looking back on these tales of artists it struck him they were all ironic, and were so, he considered "to their great enrichment, their intensification of value,"⁴⁶ "The strength of applied irony", he went on,

⁴⁴This volume included the following five tales about writers: "The Lesson of the Master", "The Death of the Lion", "The Next Time", "The Figure in the Carpet", and "The Coxon Fund".

⁴⁵See The Art of the Novel, p.221.

⁴⁶The Art of the Novel, p.222.

being surely in the sincerities, the lucidities, the utilities that lie behind it. When it's not a campaign, of a sort, on behalf of the something better (better than the obnoxious, the provoking object) that blessedly, as is assumed, might be, it's not worth speaking about. But this is exactly what we mean by operative irony. It implies and projects the possible other case, the case rich and glorifying where the actuality is pretentious and vain.

The insight given here into James's very personal use of "irony" is pertinent to "The Figure in the Carpet", but its relation to the tale has often been misunderstood. (Since the tale hinges on a question of "interpretation" a certain amount of unravelling of the carpet is in order here). F.O. Matthiessen, for example, spurred on by James's description of the tale in his preface as "a significant fable", writes:

This story was designed as a plea for such mature criticism, as the prefaces were to be another. In it the ideal readers are those for whom 'literature was a game of skill', since 'skill meant courage, and courage meant honour, and honour meant passion, meant life'.⁴⁸

The words quoted are those of the narrator, a critic himself, and Matthiessen takes them at their face value. He feels encouraged to do so by James's account of the birth of the tale, which was the impression of "our so marked collective mistrust of anything like close or analytic interpretation--appreciation, to be appreciation, implying of course some such rudimentary zeal."⁴⁹ The

⁴⁷The Art of the Novel, p.222.

⁴⁸ See Matthiessen's introduction to his collection, Stories of Writers and Artists, p.6.

⁴⁹The Art of the Novel, p.227.

difficulty is to decide whether the narrator and the other critics in the tale are equipped with anything more than this "rudimentary zeal" in their efforts to decipher the figure in Hugh Verecker's fictional carpet. A further passage from the preface will suggest, as the tale itself, I think, bears out, that this is not the case. The passage is this:

Verecker's drama indeed--or I should perhaps rather say that of the aspiring young analyst whose report we read and to whom, I ruefully grant, I have ventured to impute a developed wit--is that at a given moment the limpness begins vaguely to throb and heave, [the 'limpness', that is, of critical appreciation] to become conscious of a comparative tension. As an effect of this mild convulsion, acuteness, at several points struggles to enter the field, and the question that accordingly comes up, the issue of the affair, can be but whether the very secret of perception hasn't been lost. That is the situation, and "The Figure in the Carpet" exhibits a small group of well-meaning persons engaged in a test. The reader is, on the evidence, left to conclude.⁵⁰

James's narrators in the tales are usually sympathetic characters, and this no doubt encourages those critics who, like F.O. Matthiessen, take the words of the narrator at their face value. Yet although the double-edged irony of the tales is unusual it is not unique, for "The Aspern Papers", the other tale that I shall discuss here, also directs its irony at the narrator, rather than dispensing it through him. The passage in the preface from which I have quoted above gives us the first clue, in the

⁵⁰The Art of the Novel, p.229.

description of "The aspiring young analyst...to whom, I ruefully grant, I have ventured to impute a developed wit." We must assume then that his wit is a part of his function as narrator, rather than an aspect of his intelligence, as it is in the other tales. It is an aid to James's story-telling, keeping the tale moving along. This clue is a useful one, but not essential to our interpretation, for the double irony is clear enough in the tale itself. Consider, for example, the tone of the following, from the first page of the tale:

I had written on Hugh Verecker, but never a word in The Middle where my dealings were mainly with the ladies and the minor poets. This was his new novel, an advance copy, and whatever much or little it should do for his reputation I was clear on the spot as to what it should do for mine.⁵¹

None of the other young writers who narrate the tales are as blatant as that about their interest in the great. The young man does his piece for the periodical and is, naturally, pleased with it. His troubles begin when he goes down for the week-end to a house where Hugh Verecker is also to be staying, expecting an intimate and mutually admiring meeting with the master. It turns out that the novelist has not read the review and, after being cajoled into doing so by his hostess, declares

⁵¹"The Figure in the Carpet", p. 280, in Stories of Writers and Artists, ed. Matthiessen. This text is from the Revised Edition published by Macmillan of London, 1921-25.

at dinner that the article is "all right--the usual twaddle." A young lady at the table challenges him with being "deep", and he replies:

"As deep as the ocean! All I pretend is that the author doesn't see--"...

"Doesn't see what?" my neighbour continued.

"Doesn't see anything."

"Dear me--how very stupid!"

"Not a bit," Verecker laughed again. "Nobody does."⁵²

The young critic's immediate reaction is to regard Verecker as "cruelly conceited". "I had thought him placid, and he was placid enough; such a surface was the hard polished glass that encased the bauble of his vanity."⁵³ This mood, which reflects more on his own character than on Verecker's, is quickly reversed when Verecker charmingly explains that he has just learned the reviewer's identity, and to make up for his rudeness takes the young man off for a quiet talk. The critic describes it in these words: "To make things right he talked to me exactly as an equal and on the ground of what we both loved best." It is difficult, however, for us to see the subsequent talk in these terms. Verecker explains that the critics invariably miss his point, and relentlessly praise him for the wrong things:

Whenever since I've happened to have a glimpse of them they were still blazing away--still missing it, I mean, deliciously. You miss it, my dear fellow, with inimitable assurance; the fact of your being

⁵²"The Figure in the Carpet", p.284.

⁵³Ibid.

awfully clever and your article's being awfully nice doesn't make a hair's breadth of difference." 54

The critic's mistake is to conceive of the "point" of Verecker's work as a kind of secret, or a key to the mystery. He asks the novelist what it might be as if it were something he could be told--a formulation, or an image that could be handed over. Verecker responds to this by asking: "Have I got to tell you, after all these years and labours?" This is exactly what the young man wants; for having been unable to detect the "figure" in the novels he expects to be handed the clue by the author. In this he resembles those characters in the stories of writers who are more interested in the writer than in his work, and who see all art in terms of personality. He tries to go behind the works and to seize their "secret" by interrogating their author, as if the author could give an authority to his message that the works could not. Verecker repulses every advance on these lines by referring the critic back to his work. When the young man asks: "Can't you give a fellow a clue?" He replies:

My whole lucid effort gives him the clue--every page and line and letter. The things as concrete there as a bird in a cage, a bait on a hook, a piece of cheese in a mouse-trap. It's stuck into every volume as your foot is stuck into your shoe. It governs every line, it chooses every word, it dots every i, it places every comma." 55

54 "The Figure in the Carpet", p.286.

55 "The Figure in the Carpet", p.288.

Our reading of the tale depends very much on how we interpret this conversation between Verecker and the narrator. This is the only place where the novelist is allowed to speak for himself and to confront his critics. Verecker is throughout the interview tolerant and kindly--this at least is the impression given by the narrator's comments, and it must be remembered that the incident is given through his consciousness alone. If, however, we pay attention to what he actually says, it is difficult to sustain interpretation of the tale such as Matthiessen offers. When the critic asks "Is it a kind of esoteric message?" and Verecker replies "Ah, my dear fellow, it can't be explained in cheap journalese!" the reply permeates our sense of what the critic stands for, which has been encouraged from the opening of the tale. The young man blunders on in increasing incomprehension, suggesting that the "secret" must be "some idea about life, some sort of philosophy", when it is clear that the "organ of life" that Verecker talks of is the life in his novels and not something outside them to which they merely refer. In the end the narrator goes so far as to suggest that Verecker is unfair to expect the critics to explain what he cannot do himself, and the novelist replies: "Can't do?... Haven't I done it in twenty volumes? I do it in my way... Go you and do it in yours."

The narrator is unable to take Verecker's advice. Indeed, he is so humiliated by his failure that he consoles himself for

a while with the thought that "the buried treasure was a bad joke, the general intention a monstrous pose." He becomes, instead, an observer of the efforts of the other critics in their attempts to solve the puzzle. The remainder of the tale is largely devoted to the complicated romance of George Corvick, a reviewer, and the girl who eventually marries him. If the tale is, as it is commonly taken to be, the story of several passionately concerned critics to plumb their author to the depths, it is difficult to explain why the personal affairs of Corvick and his fiancée are given such a prominent place, and why there are so many suggestions of deceit in their relationship. If, however, we read the tale as a record of perverted curiosity, the apparent irrelevance of this section is explained. Corvick and the girl approach the problem of Verecker's "secret" as a game of chance. Consider, for example, the following passage, in which the lines that Matthiessen quotes approvingly are set in context:

For the few persons, at any rate, abnormal or not, with whom my anecdote is concerned, literature was a game of skill, and skill meant courage, and courage meant honour, and honour meant passion, meant life. The stake on the table was a special substance and our roulette the revolving mind, but we sat round the green board as intently as the grim gamblers of Monte Carlo.⁵⁶

In another place the narrator compares Corvick to a "chessplayer bent with a silent scowl...over his board and moves", the other player being Verecker. In these images from gambling and games of skill light is thrown on the motives of these critics--their aim is to win, to beat the author at his systifying game. This is a far cry from the conversation with Verecker, in which he describes the "point" which the critics have missed as "the particular thing I've written my books most for".

The narrator moves further and farther away from Verecker's novels. The hunt of Corvick and his fiancée turns into an unpleasant maneuvering for the possession of the novelist's "secret". Their imminent marriage comes to depend on the possession of the truth, and the narrator broadly hints that they are using this as a device to deceive each other. Such an atmosphere of trickery is laid down by the narrator's hints that when Corvick cables that he has discovered the secret, and that this has been confirmed by Verecker himself, we are strongly inclined to suspend judgment, although the narrator accepts his friend's claim.

The fact that the "figure in the carpet" remains enigmatic and that it never becomes the object of any really serious discussion by any of the characters, combined with the proliferation of complications in the personal lives of these aspiring critics,

may suggest that Verecker's "Secret" is not, in itself, the subject of the tale. The rather murky behaviour of the "critics" in turn makes it seem unlikely that they are intended to be paragons of critical virtue. This view is borne out by the ending of the tale. Verecker dies, leaving Corvick the only person who can claim to have solved the enigma. Corvick then returns to his fiancée and marries her, telling her, the narrator supposes, what he has found out. Soon after, he himself is killed in an accident, and his widow is left alone with the secret. She declines to reveal it to anyone, even to her second husband, whom the narrator attempts to persuade to divulge the clue. By this stage, the "design" of which Verecker spoke has degenerated into a kind of personal talisman, a comfort to the person who holds it but not to be shared. The fact that we cannot be sure whether Corvick and his wife have indeed fathomed the novelist's meaning does not affect the significance of the tale. If they have not, which is what we must suspect, then they have deceived themselves about their aims, and others about their alleged "find". If they have succeeded then their secretiveness is conclusive proof of the impurity of their critical spirit- they are not critical but merely curious. The true critic does not hoard his discoveries but shares them to the general profit.

We have seen how in the Preface to "The Figure in the Carpet" James introduced the notion of "Operative Irony".

"It implies and projects the possible other case, the case rich and edifying where the actuality is pretentious and vain".⁵⁷ The "other case" in "The Figure in the Carpet" is the disinterested critical inquiry into an author's work, of which the actual behaviour of the critics in the tale is a shabby distortion. "The Aspern Papers" dramatises the distortion of historical scholarship.

As in the previous tale, the story hinges on the degree of control which the narrator exercises on the reader. The meaning and content of the story cannot properly be taken separately from the personality of the literary scholar who narrates it. He is significant for two reasons: in the first place he is a critic; and in the second he is a representative of the New World, and in both of these functions he is of doubtful value. He has come to Venice to seek out the personal papers of the dead poet Jeffrey Aspern, which have been kept by his now elderly mistress Miss Bordereau. She had been the subject of his love poems, and had retreated into obscurity after his death. This story was suggested to James by the realisation that Jane Clairmont, who had borne a child to Byron, had been living in Florence, and that he might possibly have met her. When he came to write he changed the poet and his mistress into Americans, like the narrator, chiefly, he later wrote, to throw a kind of strangeness

⁵⁷The Art of the Novel, p.222.

over American social facts. Miss Bordereau is American only in origin, for she has lived for three-quarters of a century in Europe. Europe is her past, and through her it is revealed as intensely living. Her cache of private papers represents the survival of a past that was once a personal present. It is a precarious thing to preserve; her treasure is vulnerable to the devious researches of the present. She is nevertheless extremely tough and has no intention of giving up the papers. Instead she tries to take as much money from the visitor as possible and eventually to marry her niece to him. In her the past is by no means powerless; it continues to baffle and elude the present, and is quite strong enough to bargain with it for its own terms. Miss Bordereau's famous eyes, celebrated by Aspern's poetry, are shielded by a green eyeshade- as Dupée points out, like a gambler's.⁵⁸

The narrator is a barbarian come to plunder the old world, but he is a cultivated one. He is a literary man, the editor of Aspern's works. The rather repulsive figure he reveals himself to be constitutes a criticism of the type of literary appreciator, the parasite on real writers, that occurs in other stories of this period - notably in "The Death of the Lion", where a writer is hounded to his death by his genteel and uncomprehending admirers. Beneath his scholarly and disinterested facade he is merely an inquisitive marauder, interested more in literary gossip than in the feelings of Aspern's old love. By attempting to violate her

⁵⁸ F.W. Dupée, Henry James.

secret he is betraying the man he professes to admire. James is not interested in the problems of literary researchers; we are not invited to sympathise with the critic, or to consider how he might have completed his edition in a gentlemanly way. It is the manner of his search which is forced upon us. He does not realise that the impurity of his interest inevitably conditions and limits his awareness of the past. He speaks at one time of his "literary concupiscence" - a phrase that suggests James may intend him to represent the type of the writer rather than of the parasitic critic. In "The Lesson of the Master", published in 1888, the same year as "The Aspern Papers" he presents the dangers of the artist's work to his own life. In some cases, the practice of writing, of creating life on the page, insulates the writer from real life: the problem of "Vivre ou raconter". In other cases the writer is seen to prey upon life, to regard it only as raw material for transmuting into art. In both cases the effect on his art may be disastrous. In a similar way we might take the narrator of "The Aspern Papers" as representing the writer's devotion to an impersonal aim of re-creating the past. To this aim, private interests are irrelevant or even an obstruction.

CONCLUSION

When James was working on the set of prefaces to the New York edition of his works, he suggested that they might be useful to younger novelists as a vade mecum of their craft. They are quite as useful to the critic, not because they provide a method to be followed, but because they show better than anything else the terms in which James approached the work he had done earlier. Few writers have examined their own work in such detail and at such length. In these prefaces James evaluates his growth from beginning to end. But he is even more concerned to reach back in memory and reconstruct, sometimes in elaborate detail, the processes by which he built up his works from the seminal jotting, reminiscence or anecdote, into the firm structure of a novel or tale. His special concern is to recapture the process of growth, and to give a scrupulous account of the transposition of the work from life into art. Each preface is the record of the imposition of form on idea and experience. It is for this reason that they are concerned so largely with questions of technique- with the novelist's innumerable strategies (sometimes unsuccessful) for organising and shaping his material in the order and with the emphasis that best displays its significance.

No treatment of James's stories of writers and artists could claim to be exhaustive without an examination of the late prefaces. Although such an examination is beyond the scope of this paper, I have

taken the cue for my topic and for my treatment of it from the prefaces. The question of the artist in James' work inevitably becomes involved with the question of form. For form is what differentiates art from life.

The first tale considered here, "The Madonna of the Future", deals with an artistic defeat resulting from the peculiar weakness of the painter who is the subject of the story. The tale adds a further attribute to the artist--he must have not only a fuller consciousness than the ordinary man, but also the power to give form to his imaginative discoveries. He must have technique, in its widest sense, the skill to make something, quite literally, of his dreams. The painter in the tale is quite lacking in this power and he remains, therefore, something less than an artist; he remains a man of sensibility. The tale has a peculiar interest as a criticism of the view of the artist of James' great predecessor in American fiction, Hawthorne. Hawthorne's influence on James' early work is frequently noted, but it is important to recognize how early in his career he elaborated his criticism of Hawthorne's view of the relation between imagination and technique. The discussion in chapter I of James' "The Madonna of the Future" and Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful" indicates how sharply James differed from Hawthorne's aesthetic idealism. This extended comparison sets the scene for the following chapter with its theme James' conception of the embodiment of vision in form. Hawthorne's tale, a fully representative piece, elevates the importance of

imagination over that of execution to such an extent that the sublimest artist is shown to be the one whose vision is so fine as to baffle completely the power to give it form. At the end of the story, Owen Warland retreats from the world around him into a purely private dream of the Beautiful. In James's view this represents a defeat of the artist's power to give a public form to his personal experience.

"The Real Thing" and The Tragic Muse, discussed in chapter II, are the two works in which James is most explicit about the form-giving power of the artist's imagination. Both are permeated with the idea of art as mimesis, of imitation of action and emotion as the true rendering of experience. The Tragic Muse presents the artist under the type of the actress. Miriam Rooth is a girl unremarkable save for the genius for imitation that makes her an actress. The novel shows how this mimetic power, which is clearly a symbol of the imagination, transforms her entire being. Other artists have a medium, they work in paint or notes or words. The actor's "medium" is his own person, voice and gestures. The metamorphosis of Miriam Rooth from a rather dim and dowdy girl into a brilliant and accomplished woman is a parable of the power of the creative imagination to shape and vivify raw experience in the work of art. "The Real Thing" dramatises the same truth in the space of a few pages, again by means of the dramatic analogy. The illustrator is provided by chance with two sets of models for his drawings for a novel of high society. The first pair, a retired colonel and his wife, present themselves confidently as "the real thing", society people for society illustrations. Their abject failure as models

provokes the artist into an inquiry about why he prefers the professional pair as models in spite of their total lack of the social graces. His explanation hinges on the distinction between the "real" and the "represented" object. The real, in this case the society couple, is what is enclosed in a rigid form, having no plastic quality; it is that which lacks imagination. The professional models, standing for the represented object, have no personal form, but are instead endowed with an imaginative grace that allows them to assume any form that the painter requests. The artist works best from them because they present to him a represented reality; reality enhanced by selection and emphasis.

Chapter III discusses five tales which explore the artist's relation to the world of non-artists. The first, "Benvolio", is a fanciful allegory of the temptations of extremes, the world of society and that of the intellect, as they affect the artist. Both the Countess and Scholastica make claims on Benvolio and he enjoys the company of both. But both are shown as lacking the power to initiate new forms of reality. Society, in the person of the Countess, attempts to appropriate the artist, just as it takes up his works, essentially for decoration. Scholastica, the scholar's daughter, is shown under the figure of a woodland pool, which reflects without distortion anything that is presented to it. As an emblem for the intellect she is essentially passive, adept at understanding the given forms of reality and of works of the mind, but incapable of creating new ones.

The second and third sections of chapter III each deal with a pair

of tales linked by a common theme. The first pair, "Greville Fane" and "The Next Time", are studies, one comic and the other tragically ironic, of the impact of a middle class audience on the writer. Greville Fane's mannish pseudonym points up the rather monstrous aspect of her success. She is a curious "sport" because she exploits a quite real talent without coming into the clutches of real art, whose price she refuses to pay in terms of concentration and anguish. There is a notable contrast between the facile Greville Fane and the witty young narrator, whom James characterises as "one of the modern psychological type". The narrator of "Greville Fane" is not the fastidious aesthete we might expect as counterpoint to the best-selling novelist. He is more nearly James himself, emphasising the cost and labour of true achievement in art.

In "The Next Time" he again turns his attention to the vulgarity of the contemporary public. In the preface to the New York edition of the tale (Volume XII) he takes some trouble to justify his attention to this subject.

, The difficulty here, in truth, is that, from the moment a straight dependence on the broad-backed public is a part of the issue, the explicative quantity to be sought is precisely the mood of that monster which, consistently and consummately unable to give the smallest account of itself, naturally renders no smallest grain of help to enquiry...Herein resides, as I have hinted, the anxious and easy interest of almost any sincere man of letters in the mere vicinage, even if that be all, of such strained relations as Ray Limbert's. They speak of the public, such situations, to whomever it may concern.

The final pair of tales considered here, "The Figure in the Carpet" and "The Aspern Papers", continue the theme of the artist and his public

in more specialised relation--that of the artist and his critics. It is notable that the two tales about the critics are those in which the author's irony is directed at the narrator rather than dispensed through him at the other characters. The reason must be that the critic incurs special responsibilities towards the artist, which are more often than not unfulfilled. The critic can be seen as an invader, ransacking the writer's fiction or his life for clues to the "deeper meaning", perhaps at the expense of the works themselves. These two tales dramatise each case: the invasion of the work and of the life. It may be objected that this description of "The Figure in the Carpet" is a false one. Certainly my discussion of the tale has polemical intention, aimed at opening the story to a different kind of interpretation than that usually offered.

Underlying this discussion of James's stories of writers and artist is the notion of "form". James was nowhere concerned to offer a "theory of Form": his treatment of the subject both in his fiction and in his prefaces and critical writing generally is embodied in the treatment of specific works, characters and situations. My aim has not been to supply such a theory, but to select and juxtapose his more striking treatments of the theme in the hope of throwing some light on his concern.

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