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Elizabeth Steele

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A Change of Villains: Hugh Walpole, Henry James, and Arnold Bennett

by ELIZABETH STEELE

"To the great author of The Turning of the Screw.*"*
Hugh Walpole

I

IN 1951, coincident with the publication of Rupert Hart-Davis's excellent biography *Hugh Walpole*,[1] an article by Mr. Leon Edel titled "Hugh Walpole and Henry James: The Fantasy of the 'Killer and the Slain' " appeared in *American Imago*.[2] It was written, the author explained (p. 367), in response to a query raised in conversation with Mr. Hart-Davis, namely: Why had Hugh Walpole dedicated his last novel, *The Killer and the Slain* (1942), with the words "To the great author of *The Turning of the Screw*," omitting the name of Henry James and misquoting the title?[3]

The question assumes that slips of the tongue, or in this case the pen—"Turning" was not a printer's error—are significant psychologically. "The . . . form of the dedication . . . is both curious and suggestive," stated Mr. Edel. "Dedications do reveal certain things. They originate in a relationship between two or more persons; they reflect certain wishes, states of mind, intentions on the part of the dedicator" (pp. 351–52). Proceeding on this assumption, Mr. Edel outlined an ingenious hypothesis bestowing the Oedipal roles of "killer"-son on Hugh Walpole and "slain"-father on Henry James.

While the Walpole-James friendship was not always idyllic, this hypothesis has seemed to me an erroneous one. Mr. Edel afterward confessed his own doubts about it to the late Mrs. Hart-Davis.[4] Yet in the last volume of his impressive life of Henry James, he alludes again, in two passages, to the article's main thesis, though without giving the name of Walpole's novel, calling it simply "a primordial fantasy."[5]

1. (London and New York: Macmillan, 1951; New York: Harcourt, Brace and World ["Harvest Book"], 1952).
2. VIII, 351–69. (Page references appear in the text.)
3. (London: Macmillan, 1942). "Turning" was corrected to "Turn" in the American edition (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1942).
4. The late Mrs. Ruth Hart-Davis, in 1966 at her Yorkshire home, told me that Mr. Edel was dissatisfied with the article; and a note in his handwriting on an offprint in Sir Rupert Harr-Davis's files, dated April 10, 1952, states that he had trouble making his argument "convincing."
5. *Henry James, The Master: 1901–1916* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1942), pp. 403, 405. Under pressure of composition, perhaps, the novel's name is omitted in both text and index, though it occurs in the bibliographical note in the back (p. 575); the *American Imago* article is not cited.

Indeed *The Killer and the Slain*, published posthumously, is the most unusual of Walpole's "Parables of the Time," four novels written between 1932 and 1941 to protest the encroachments of Fascism. A product of the nightmare of the London Blitz, the novel's allegory equates the "villain," James Oliphant Tunstall, with Mussolini and Hitler in some of their cruder aspects. The protagonist, John Ozias Talbot, narrates the tale until the last chapter when Tunstall's widow, Leila, takes over after Talbot's suicide. The novel's main premise is an unusual one: that an individual who kills another may become that other. Thus Talbot, the killer, finds after he has murdered Tunstall that he is becoming exactly like him. The allegorical inference is that he prefers committing suicide to becoming a kind of proto-Nazi. As a literary artifact, however, *The Killer and the Slain* owes less to the allegorical framework imposed during its composition in 1940–41 than to the basic plot first conceived by Walpole in the early 1930's,[6] which depicts the characters' struggle in sex-related terms. This basic narrative is the one Mr. Edel deals with.[7]

Until recently it might have been advisable to recall here the basic facts of the Walpole-James friendship, from their first meeting in London, February 1909, till James's death in 1916 while Walpole was serving as head of the Anglo-Russian Bureau in Petrograd. Now however, with Mr. Edel's biography of James available (supplemented by Hart-Davis's of Walpole), such a survey seems unnecessary. Instead we can turn directly to the biographical inferences made by Edel to support his thesis that in writing *The Killer and the Slain*, Walpole saw himself subconsciously as "the killer" and James as "the slain."

He states, for instance (p. 361), that the spirit of James hovered large in Walpole's mind while he was writing his novel during the first months of World War II, because their mutual friendship had "reached its height and culmination during the First World War." In support, he quotes a statement from Walpole's personal journal (January 8, 1941): "This book I had to write. In all my long literary life I have never known anything so like automatic writing. I simply put down what I *had* to put down." These lines Mr. Edel feels are important because "they show the compulsive character of the writing" (p. 368). Yet anyone who has perused Walpole's diaries, covering forty years, knows that the author said similar things about some of his other novels.[8] The diaries

6. The novel "has obsessed me . . . three years and more" (Walpole, Journal, Sept. 8, 1937). Walpole's journals and diaries are at the University of Texas, which has given me permission to quote.

7. For a detailed plot summary see Elizabeth Steele, *Hugh Walpole* (New York: Twayne, 1972), pp. 69–71. The original plot was distilled from German *Schauerromantik* novels, one of which (*Siebenkas* by Jean-Paul Richter) Walpole was rereading in January 1934 when he conceived his own terror-tale; see reading list at the back of his 1934 diary. Ralph Tymms, *Doubles in Literary Psychology* (Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1949), first alerted me to Walpole's debt to the German romantics.

8. E.g., *The Secret City* (1919): "I'm being carried forward and writing what I'm told so that I hope it will turn out fair . . . it's wonderful when it comes like this as though it were from another's hand" (Diary, Jan. 15, Apr. 1, 1918).

also show that his friendship with James crested early, prior to World War I, before declining into a slow, albeit amiable denouement. Certainly its "height" was past by 1911, when Walpole dedicated his famous novel *Mr. Perrin and Mr. Traill* to costume designer Percy Anderson, "because you have more understanding and sympathy than anyone I have ever met"—words which hurt James, as a letter from him to Walpole testifies.[9]

Three years later, James's, literary appraisal "The Younger Generation" appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*.[10] Mr. Edel in his article quotes some of its condescending remarks about Walpole—remarks that despite their convoluted style, showed that James regarded his thirty-year-old friend as still a callow artist. "To have one's work, however youthful, thus elaborately characterized by the man whose appreciation is sought above all, can be both flattering and extremely painful," Mr. Edel suggests (p. 362).

That summer Walpole spent in Cornwall; war erupted in August and by September he was with the Red Cross in Russia. He wrote to James several times and talked to him by phone once when home on leave, but it is not recorded that they saw one another again before James's death.

II

ALTHOUGH Walpole was twenty-five when he met Henry James, he was introduced to him in adolescence through the pages of the literary journals. A voracious reader, he digested everything James wrote, returning oftenest in later years to the macabres. A collateral cousin of Horace Walpole, Hugh had a special gift for the macabre and he appreciated the gift in others. Thus there was no reason why he should not dedicate *The Killer and the Slain* to his old friend and admired fellow-writer—whether he actually named him in the process or not. Edel, who points out but does not analyze the omission, seems to agree. It was Walpole's practice not to use the same dedicatee twice, and he had already dedicated a book, his autobiographical memoir *The Apple Trees* (1933), to "Henry James As He Knows with Love."

Linking *The Killer and the Slain* with *The Turn of the Screw* was for him an act of bravado based on pure evaluation. In his diaries he calls *The Turn of the Screw* one of the world's "best" macabres.[11] Similarly, of his own *Killer and Slain* he predicted in his journal as early as September 8, 1937: "It will undoubtedly write itself and should be *my*

9. "Who the devil is the Dedication wretch of 'Mr. Perrin' who has—the brute—'more understanding . . . '?" etc. James to Walpole, Apr. 15, 1911, quoted in Edel, *Henry James*, *op. cit.*, p. 404; original letter in Walpole files, University of Texas.

10. Apr. 2, 1914, pp. 157–58 especially; rptd., slightly revised, in James, *Notes on Novelists* (New York: Scribner's, 1914).

11. Diary, Apr. 30, 1915; Journal, May 14, 1941—note the date span. In 1937 Walpole included *Turn of the Screw* in *A Second Century of Creepy Stories*, which he edited for Hutchinson (London).

best Macabre and one of the best ever" (italics his). The day after completing it, he wrote (January 8, 1941): ". . . technically at least it is, I think, the best of my macabre. Very difficult, but the difficulties, I fancy, are not evident." By invoking James's work in his dedication he was blessing his own. Of superstitious bent, harassed by ill-health and the exigencies of the war (parts of the novel were written in a bomb shelter), Walpole probably seemed to himself in "most need of blessing." It was braggadoccio too: if others did not think to mention James's macabre in the same breath with his, he would do it for them.

As for the slip of "Turning" instead of "Turn," Walpole's friends would have found it wholly natural. His was not a clerical mind. Bombed out of his London apartment and writing under the pressure of wartime duties, including weekly broadcasts to America, he was more liable than ever to make such mistakes.[12] Thomas Mark, his editor at Macmillan's, could have testified to the frequent errors in Hugh Walpole's manuscripts. In 1922 Mark had been appointed to oversee Walpole's work after his publishers found themselves embarrassed by the carelessness of their then new author. While some memorialists have overrated Mark's role, his keen eye caught most of Walpole's mistakes in the next two decades. (Following the "slip-of-the-pen" theory, might we not assume, then, that "Turning" reflected "certain wishes, . . . intentions" on Mark's part toward Henry James?)

Thus, while I agree with Mr. Edel that the relationship of John Ozias Talbot to James Oliphant Tunstall in *The Killer and the Slain* is one of "killer"-son to "slain"-father, I cannot grant his main thesis: that James Tunstall is Henry James. In place of "James," let me offer the name of another novelist, older than Walpole but younger than James—Arnold Bennett (1867–1931)—with the understanding that I am more intent on proving the unlikelihood of Tunstall's being James than the certainty of his being Bennett.

III

THE assumption that Walpole is similar to the "killer," Talbot, is well-founded. Talbot is a writer who owns an antique shop. Hugh Walpole possessed a rich collection of *objets d'art*: oils, etchings, expensive rugs and tapestries, Spanish chests, Epstein busts, T'ang horses, even a scarab ring which, he claimed, Oscar Wilde wore in the courtroom while on trial for sodomy.[13] In the novel, first Tunstall, then, after his death, Talbot wears such a ring.

When the novel opens, John Ozias Talbot and James Oliphant

12. His 1939–41 journals abound in misdatings and misnumbered pages.

13. "Proteus" [Frank Singleton], "Remembering Hugh Walpole," *Bolton Evening News*, Apr. 5, 1952. On July 14, 1938, Walpole wrote to A. J. A. Symons, "I'd like to buy Oscar's scarab if it isn't too costly"; original letter in Turnbull Library, Wellington, N.Z.

Tunstall are exact opposites—one a caricature of so-called "feminine" traits, the other of "masculine" ones—in all but their initials. Concerning Tunstall's middle name, Edel in his article quotes from several of James's letters to Walpole referring to himself as "the old elephant." He also quotes Walpole's description, in *The Apple Trees*, of James as an "elephant pursuing a pea"[14]—proof, says Edel, "that the elephant image was unforgettably planted in Walpole's mind—that image of the novelist as stout, stocky, ponderous, obese. The old Henry James, appearing to Walpole heavy, elephantine, bloated . . . must have filled him at times with a kind of loathing" (p. 364). Admitting for a moment the possible subconscious linking of "Oliphant" with "elephant," we might note certain details of Arnold Bennett's appearance as described in 1936 by Frank Swinnerton, probably his best friend. "When he danced he looked heavy and clumsy," Swinnerton writes. His step was "slow, stiff, and very serious," and he had a "funny way of pushing out a wrinkled chin and pursing his lips."[15]

Quite possibly another reason Walpole used "Oliphant" was that *The Blind Man's House*, the novel he had completed a week before starting *The Killer and the Slain*, contains a slippery, "oily" character named Oliphant; and thus the name was already in his mind.

"Tunstall" is a more complicated matter. Edel (p. 365) offers two analogies: with "Turnscrew" (i.e., *Turn of the Screw*) or a combination of *tun* ("a vat or cask, thus again large, bulky, elephantine") and *stall* ("where an elephant might be tethered"). This time the answer, however, lies in the London newspapers which, shortly after the novel-planning entry in Walpole's journal,[16] featured the trial of one John Tunstall, accused not of murder but of assault and battery against his wife's lover. Walpole's perennial interest in crime is well documented. An interviewer in 1924, for example, noted "a couple of shelves" in his apartment "devoted to various chronicles of crime and learned dissections of the motives which inspired them."[17] When the famous Scots lawyer and writer on crime, William Roughead, compiled *Bad Companions* (1930), he asked his friend Walpole to write "A Little Foreword." "In these days Crime is the thing," Walpole wrote; "we have in our time an especial attitude to Crime and Mr. Roughead is our prophet. How full of blood do the most pinched and peevish facts become under his care. . . . Some say that these interests are morbid. I reply that under Mr. Roughead's hand they become human, eloquent, and instructive" (pp. vii, ix).

It is easy to envision Walpole with these convictions following the Tunstall case in 1938 as it unrolled, and fitting it to his plans for *The*

14. A typically careless restatement, as Mr. Edel notes, of H. G. Wells's famous epithet, in his novel *Boon*, of James as a "hippopotamus resolved . . . upon picking up a pea."
15. *Swinnerton, An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1936), pp. 154, 147, 155.
16. Sept. 8, 1937; see note 6, *supra*.
17. Gladys Beattie Crozier, "Hugh Walpole," *Strand Magazine*, LXVII (April 1924), 362.

Killer and the Slain. The *Daily Express* on February 17, for instance, reported that Ms. Louise Tunstall—like Talbot's wife, Eve—was apparently quite attractive to men. On the witness stand she announced that her husband, John, "got on her nerves." The judge, in turn, described John as "spiteful and vindictive." And Ms. Tunstall at one point had written to her husband, "I am possessed of the Devil"—a provocative statement, especially to an author about to embark on a novel based on the very idea of supernatural possession.

Given these elements, plus the fact that Tunstall becomes Eve's lover in the novel, why is the name Tunstall applied to the "Slain," not to the "Killer"? The Arnold Bennett hypothesis again provides an answer. One of the towns in Staffordshire famous as a setting for Bennett's best works was Tunstall (Bennett in his novels changed it to "Turnhill"). In 1920, Walpole dedicated his novel *The Captives* to Bennett, and one of its characters, the heroine's favorite uncle, is named Turnstall. Taken together, these may seem to be firmer clues than the tun-plus-stall suggested by Mr. Edel as a link to Henry James.

From "Tunstall" Mr. Edel (p. 365) moves briefly to "Talbot," noting the "congruity" between *-albo* and *-alpo* (Walpole). Where did the surname "Talbot" actually come from? Assuming that the choice of "Tunstall" was made first and that Walpole related the second surname closely to himself, we might examine the author's personal copy of *The Later History of the Family of Walpole of Norfolk* by Walter Rye (1920), now in the Walpole files at the University of Texas. Page 33 refers to a Ms. Tunstall who, in the eighteenth century, married a Walpole. Occurring at the end of a line, her surname catches the eye, as my own was caught recently during a casual glance through the book. Also easily accessible on page 1, in a footnote at the bottom, is the statement: "In this very town . . . there were several important families, such as the de la Poles, . . . springing from local traders as did the local family of Talbots. . . ." Early in *The Killer and the Slain* John Talbot makes the point that he inherited his antique shop from his father. Caught by the coincidence of finding a Tunstall in his own family, Walpole's wandering eye very probably lighted on "Talbot" (near "de la Pole") and the choice was made.

IV

MR. EDEL thinks that "for Walpole," Henry James was "a strong, creative figure, productive and fertile. Walpole . . . could thus put some of his feelings about James into the super-masculine character" Tunstall (p. 362). Offhand such a statement seems to mix creative with physical vitality. As Mr. Edel notes (p. 356), not only does the novel give Tunstall "robust qualities and a rugged physique," but "Tunstall's manliness consists of addiction to the classical vices attributed to the

male, drinking, cursing, women—accompanied by aggressive swagger and boast of masculine prowess." Surely his biographer does not mean to attribute these qualities to Henry James?

On the other hand, allowing for the extreme characterization necessary to the allegory in *The Killer and the Slain*, some of Bennett's personal habits provide reasonable echoes of Tunstall's "defects." Though later he made a point of abstaining, in youth at least Bennett liked to drink; and when his favorite brother, Frank Bennett, died of alcoholism in 1938, Walpole pasted the obituary in his scrapbook.[18]

Tunstall has a mistress, and Arnold Bennett left his wife in 1925 to live with a mistress. That the cause of the breakup was his wife's alleged infidelity was not generally known at the time, and Walpole may or may not have known it. Ms. Bennett refused a divorce and turned to her husband's friends, including Walpole, for sympathy, much as Leila Tunstall in the novel comes to Talbot for sympathy after her husband disappears. James Tunstall is a painter; Bennett, who hesitated between painting and writing as a career, made painting his hobby.

The basic relationship between Tunstall and Talbot is likened by Edel to one between father and son (p. 266); and thus, as he believed, between James and Walpole: "Walpole . . . identified him as a father-surrogate. For this image Walpole had feelings of admiration, warmth, affection, and at the same time there were (probably suppressed) feelings of resentment and hate. They may have arisen in part from Walpole's emotional dependence on James who tended . . . to reject his (Walpole's) work. This meant, to the young man, a rejection of himself." Of Arnold Bennett, Osbert Sitwell meanwhile wrote, years after Bennett's death: "I felt a little frightened of him. And his physical presence, which combined that of a Midlands businessman with the rather solid panache of a great French novelist . . . did nothing to diminish this fear. . . . his corpulent habit of body, natural both to the vigor of his type and to a sedentary way of life . . . made him seem further removed in age than actually he was."[19] The implication is that the prolific Bennett, 25 years older than Sitwell and 17 older than Walpole, was a powerful father-figure.

As for Tunstall's "aggressive swagger," Sitwell comments of Bennett (pp. 320–21): "Certainly, he liked looking in mirrors, and one could often, as he passed them, see him preen himself and observe his own reflection." He notes that Bennett's bed was surrounded by "large mirrors"! Sitwell's essay on Bennett is not unkind, quite the contrary. But his objectivity reveals traits in his subject that another observer, motivated by the distrust Walpole came to feel for Arnold Bennett in later years, might use to form a literally damning portrait.

18. "Collapsed in Hotel. Brother of Famous Author was 'Heavy Drinker.' " Source not shown; Walpole's scrapbooks are at the University of Texas.
19. *Noble Essences* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1950), p. 319.

After James's death Walpole tried to place Bennett in the empty niche the older man had once occupied—as in the following effusion: "I'd been thinking that maybe there'd be a word of greeting from you but my love for you leads me into exaggerated expectations! As [a male guest] said at Marguerite's lunch the other day: 'Why shouldn't men be affectionate? I remember I used to kiss *my old dad*' "[20] (italics mine).

Bennett gave such yearnings short shrift. When three years later Walpole dedicated *The Captives* to him "With Deep Affection," the dedicatee, far from being ravished, read the novel and wrote: "In spite of my brotherly admonitions and my fatherly threats apropos of previous books there are at least as many grammatical slips in this one as in any. . . . And as regards careless writing, there are tons of it." Mixed praise and blame followed, terminating with "Such imperfectly, respectfully, and fragmentarily are my views about this history which you so affectionately dedicated to the aged one."[21] Walpole's reply began "My dear father in God."

During their twenty-year friendship the two exchanged hundreds of letters. Through 1916 (the year James died) Bennett's usual salutation was "Dear Hugh." Afterwards, it was "My dear Hughie" or "My sweet Hughie," a patronizing flippancy intermittently resented by its recipient. Resentment was fanned again in February 1938, during the Tunstall trial, when Walpole read in a book of memoirs that Bennett had referred to him among fellow-writers as "the child."[22]

Still, during Bennett's lifetime their relationship might have continued relatively unclouded had not Somerset Maugham in 1930 published his witty *Cakes and Ale*, which satirized Walpole as the odious novelist Alroy Kear. During the gossip and fuss that followed, Walpole kept a stiff upper lip, pretending not to care; but inwardly he was devastated, and most of his friends rallied to his side. For reasons known to himself, Bennett did not, but appeared instead to take Maugham's part, "saying that it wasn't in the least a malicious portrait . . . but thoroughly just, accurate and benevolent," one of Walpole's friends reports.[23] Three months later Walpole, employing fake names, wrote a satire on the whole situation.[24] "I discovered that even Uncle Arthur, who started [Jack] Robinson on his career[25] and has always been most kind to him, although he can't read his books, couldn't help but murmur, with a

20. Dec. 13, 1917; the Bennett-Walpole letters are in the Arnold Bennett Museum, Stoke-on-Trent. ("Marguerite" was Ms. Bennett.)

21. Oct. 14, 1920. In James Hepburn, ed., *Letters of Arnold Bennett*, III (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970). pp. 132–34.

22. Walpole, Journal, Feb. 6, 1938; the memoir was W. B. Maxwell's *Time Gathered*. Proof is lacking that Walpole read Bennett's *The Ghost* (1907), but plot coincidences between it and *The Killer and the Slain* (see Bennett, *Letters*, I, p. 53, n. 23) bear noting.

23. Jessica Brett Young, *Francis Brett Young* (London: Heinemann, 1962), p. 172.

24. "Spotting One's Friends," *Week-End Review*, II (Dec. 6, 1930), 824.

25. Early in Walpole's career Bennett wrote a laudatory essay, "Hugh Walpole, A Familiar Sketch," *Book News Monthly*, XXXII (April 1914), 271–72. He also persuaded George Doran to become Walpole's American publisher. (Doran, *Chronicles of Barabbas* [New York: Rinehart, 1952], p. 168.)

gratified chuckle, on every occasion when the book was mentioned: 'Oh yes, it's Jackie all right.' " Tunstall in *The Killer and the Slain* calls John Talbot "Jacko."

Thus while mixed jealousy of Bennett's creative gift and anger at his unwillingness to praise Walpole's own work may have led to the murder of Tunstall in *The Killer and the Slain*—the postulate urged by Mr. Edel with Henry James in mind—a more important cause was probably Bennett's desertion during the *Cakes and Ale* affair, the biggest emotional crisis of Walpole's adult life.[26]

James Oliphant Tunstall, of course, may not "be" Arnold Bennett. When one reflects that by the close of Walpole's unusual novel, Tunstall and Talbot are in effect one man, the question of "Which was who to start with?" seems superfluous—had it not been raised before and answered, I believe, incorrectly.

In any case, it is good to know with Mr. Edel (pp. 367, 369) that in causing Talbot to destroy himself, the author made partial amends for the murder of James Oliphant Turnstall, whoever he was or is.

The University of Toledo
Ohio

26. Details in Beverley Nichols, *A Case of Human Bondage* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1966); Robin Maugham, *Somerset and All the Maughams* (New York: New American Library, 1966); Alec Waugh, "The Nail in the Coffin," *Harper's Magazine*, CCVII (July 1953), 32–37, rptd. in *My Brother Evelyn and Other Profiles* (London: Cassell, 1968), pp. 128–40; and Somerset Maugham, "Introduction," *Cakes and Ale* (Modern Library ed.; New York: Random House, 1950). See also Hart-Davis, *op. cit.*, and Steele, *op. cit.*, *passim*.