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The High Altar of Henry James: The Tragic Muse and "The Art of Figuring Synthetically"

by DANIEL JAMES SUNDAHL

The grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery; its gift lies in the faculty of being happily inspired by a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas, when it finds itself in them; of dealing divinely with these ideas, presenting them in the most effective and attractive combinations,—making beautiful works with them, in short. But it must have the atmosphere, it must find itself amidst the order of ideas, in order to work freely; and these it is not easy to command.

Matthew Arnold
“The Function of Criticism at the Present Time”

H. G. WELLS wrote that a Henry James novel is much like “a church lit but without a congregation to distract you, with every light and line focused on the high altar. And on the altar, very reverently placed, intensely there, is a dead kitten, an egg-shell, a bit of string...And all for tales of nothingness...It is leviathan retrieving pebbles. It is a magnificent but painful hippopotamus resolved at any cost, even at the cost of its dignity, upon picking up a pea which has got into a corner of its den” (Boon, 109–10).

Wells’s mirthful criticism is not without point; admirers nevertheless understand that James’s technique required the utmost ingenuity. The exact picking and placing of fictional elements upon the “high altar” was neither an eccentric, artistic singleness of mind nor a “retrieving of pebbles.” In fact, James’s sense for the pressure of life and his advancing technical skill gradually compressed and solidified the essence of his early fiction.

His development was also complex. The prefaces testify to his unremitting preoccupation with technique, to perfect for himself a method that would allow for a delightful wreathing of the novel’s subject with its representation, execution, and rendering. With the publication of The Tragic Muse in 1890, James developed a narrative technique allowing him the means to elaborate his impressions according to his own sense. James argued that the novel’s art was achieved not by an analytic approach to experience but a synthetic approach: “Therein lies the secret of the appeal, to his mind, of the successfully foreshortened thing, where representation is arrived at, as I have already elsewhere had occasion to urge, not by the
addition of items (a light that has for its attendant shadow a possible dryness) but by the art of figuring synthetically, a compactness into which the imagination may cut thick, as into the rich density of wedding-cake” (NTHJ, VII, xiii).

This paper is an attempt to give an account of James's "art of figuring synthetically," a phrase fuzzily used by James but a paradigm for his technique in *The Tragic Muse*. There are some rules of method I classify as "figuring synthetically," e.g., framework principles drawn from the visual arts, suggesting James was not using the phrase haphazardly. The main thought behind the concept of synthesis, which suddenly rises in popularity about 1885, is antinaturalistic; greater attention was paid to the primacy of the artistic imagination over nature. The impressions from nature are wedded to the artistic imagination, but it is the imagination's aesthetic sentiment which selects, arranges, summarizes, and subordinates. To bring all impressions into a relation of equilibrium is synthetically to realize a formal unity in the work of art, which is also something more than a copy of what the eye may have seen. The formal unity attenuates when aspects lack specification. *The Tragic Muse* loses, in this respect, some of its formal unity because it lacks an urgent connection to a logical center; it happily gains formal unity through the scenic conditions in which characters "move," as James argues "in the light of alternation. This imposes a consistency other than that of the novel at its loosest" (NTHJ, VII, xv).

Still, in the partial success of *The Tragic Muse*, James is finding his way into a new means of novelistic expression, as well as a new formulation to the peculiar character of the novel's representation of reality. The novel could continue to be called a slice of life, or a chunk cut up and served as many ways as possible; for James, that did not dampen his conviction that narrative had to be represented under some guiding principle allowing him to exert maximum "pressure." His conviction was that the novel had to be "done" with the writer's own sense for synthetic unity. If the novel merely pretends to be an analytical slice of life, James sweetly asks, why is it that we so avidly watch the "attempt of the slice of life to butter itself so thick?" "Its explanation that it is a slice of life," he adds, "and pretends to be nothing else figures for us, say, while we watch, the jam superadded to the butter. For since the jam, on this system, descends upon our desert, in its form of manna, from quite another heaven than the heaven of method, the mere demonstration of its agreeable presence is alone sufficient to hint at our more than one chance of being supernaturally fed" ("The New Novel," HJ, 144).

Closely aligned with James was Robert Louis Stevenson, who argued that the interweaving of substantive and grammatical narrative elements is synthetic: "In the change from the successive shallow statements of the old chronicler to the dense and luminous flow of highly synthetic narrative, there is implied a vast amount of philosophy and wit. The

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philosophy we clearly see, recognizing in the synthetic writer a far more deep and stimulating view of life, and a far keener sense of the generation and affinity of events. . . . The web, then, or the pattern [is] a web at once sensuous and logical, an elegant and pregnant texture: that is style" ("Essays and Reviews," SW, IX, 271-72).

There is also a sharp distinction in the synthetist movement generated by Gauguin and his circle, who struck new paths about 1890. The term "synthèse" abounds and suggests a kindred climate of ideas. Principally, art does not copy nature; it has its own laws. Such an argument forces its way against naturalism and empiricism. Thus, in much the same way as Gauguin and his circle saw painting, James's sense of "synthèse" saw the novel in a new way, not as a jumbled and pedestrian assemblage of positivistic, analytical data, but as a spontaneous totality, an immediate temporal apprehension of form and space, a carefully studied and arranged "picture," a self-contained and balanced synthetic whole.

*The Tragic Muse* was therefore to have been James's great leap; he was also leaping into an uncertain artistic area by virtue of the novel's ambitious scope, its complex form, and its experimental technique. As James pointed out, "the affair would be simple enough if composition could be kept out of the question; yet by what art or process, what bars and bolts, what unmuzzled dogs and pointed guns, perform that feat?" (*NTHJ*, VII, ix-x).

The feat would demand "system," one which would eliminate "the baseness of the arbitrary stroke, the touch without its reason, but as payment for that service, the process insists on being kept impeccably the right one," and "is ever so considerably the interest of the system on which the whole thing is done" (*NTHJ*, VII, xiv).

A portion of that system James had at his disposal: the use made of a center of interest, the initial grasping of the idea that would form the basis of the novel. This initial grasping was not the result of any analytical process; James saw it as a synthetic transmutation of all impressionistic morsels to a savory fusion (*NTHJ*, XV, xvii). The "great truth," James noted, "in the whole connexion...is, I think, that one never really chooses one's general range of vision—the experience from which ideas and themes and suggestions spring" (*NTHJ*, XIV, viii). It was not the singularity of the "germ" or "picture" that was important; the interest came from seeing beneath the surface of the picture to the variety of analogues flying about the germlike impression. Thus the first stage of "figuring synthetically" was to control and transform the appropriate impressionistic material, gathering it into a thick and illustrative bunch. No analytical logic could explain that transformation; it depended upon James's own sense for the unity and direction in which his subject could most completely synthesize itself.

If the analogues were there, then it was possible for James to "figure," to set up a series of representations, starting with the image itself, then
presenting the analogues which accompanied or illustrated the mental image. This representation was the work of the synthesizing power of the imagination which completed the work of perception, combining the initial mental image into a synthetic whole. The task involved in that process was reproductive; it took the fragmentary nature of the analogues, combining them into forms free from materiality.

In the “Preface” to *The Tragic Muse*, however, James confessed a “certain vagueness of remembrance” with respect to when, exactly, “the productive germ” of the Muse had evolved: “I fail to recover my precious first moment of consciousness of the idea to which it was to give form; to recognize in it...the effect of some particular sharp impression or concussion.” What he could make out was a matter of conjecture: “the happy thought of some dramatic picture of the ‘artist-life’ and of the difficult terms on which it is at the best secured and enjoyed, the general question of its having to be not altogether easily paid for” (*NTHJ*, VII, v).

Not to have had this single unified mental image is to establish a cause for a demerit in the novel: for all James’s incomparable power to make the English language do what he willed, there is no organizing center in the novel proper, no clear vision of what he intended; and without that vision no straight measure of what he succeeded in doing. *The Tragic Muse*, as James admits, was cheated “of its indispensable centre” (*NTHJ*, VII, ix).

That “centre” is the pinhole of perspective. Its use was governed by two principles James held sacred: one relates to the subject of the novel; the other to the treatment or the way in which the parts give unity to the structure of the whole novel. If there is no citadel of interest, enabling the reader to see how the arrangement, distribution, and alternation of the fictional elements are focused, the elements cannot synthesize into a compositional center, leaving an aesthetic cleavage between the novelist’s intention and the reader’s perception.

James had, as he explains in the “Preface” to *The Tragic Muse*, been “haunted” for some time by the possibility of doing a novel which employed the “consistency of the multiplication of aspects.” The “point of the affair, would be in showing them beautifully becoming one” (*NTHJ*, VII, xv, xiv). He was concerned, however, that the novel’s structure would develop into the “large loose baggy monsters” of Thackeray, Dumas, and Tolstoi, or follow his “so frankly panoramic and processional” practice in *The Princess Casamassima* (*NTHJ*, VII, x, xv). Unhappily, it is difficult to say which of the “aspects” in *The Tragic Muse* provides the center of interest.

Those multiplied aspects thematically portray the dilemma of the artist in an ungenial world inhabited by a public fundamentally inimical to art. The Tragic Muse of the title is an actress, a portrait of her, and an idea in the minds of three other characters, each of whom represents a portion of the conflict between ordinary life and the demands of art.

Interest in the career of Nick Dormer stems largely from the tension
between the duty he feels to accept the role of public servant as a member of the House of Commons and the impulse he feels to be driving him to accept the role of portrait artist. His dilemma is made more acute by the sense of duty imposed upon him by his family's political tradition—his formidable mother, Lady Agnes, the impoverished widow of Nick's father, a Liberal politician, and by his fiancée, Julia Dallow. In pursuing a political career by election to the House of Commons from the district of Harsh, Julia Dallow's home and constituency, Nick cannot help feeling that his real duty is to himself. He is supported in this by the aesthetic dilettante Gabriel Nash, an old Oxford friend with whom Nick had recently become reacquainted in Paris.

Nash had also introduced Nick and the members of his family to Mrs. Rooth and her daughter Miriam, whose aspirations were toward a dramatic career on the stage. Nash subsequently arranged an audition for Miriam with a notable retired French actress, whom Peter Sherringham, a rising young diplomat and Nick's cousin, also knew. The audition was not successful, but Peter was intrigued, and increasingly became involved with Miriam, paying for her private lessons with the old French actress. Eventually he realized that he had been in love with Miriam all along.

The characters thus revolve around one another in a kind of tantalizing minuet. Nick is elected to the House of Commons and his plans to marry Julia are developing when Nash once more appears on the scene and encourages Nick to give up politics for art. Nash suggests that Nick paint Miriam as the Tragic Muse; when Nash brings her to the studio, Nick becomes excited about her possibilities as a portrait subject. Julia, calling to surprise Nick, is stunned to find him at his studio with Miriam. Their engagement is broken, and Nick subsequently resigns his seat in the House of Commons for the privacy of the artist's studio.

During the course of this, Peter Sherringham has pursued Miriam, urging her, finally, to give up her career as an actress for the greater role as the wife of a rising diplomat. She refuses, saying that she would accept him only as the husband of an actress. Defeated, Peter accepts a promotion to a diplomatic post in a remote country and withdraws.

Miriam's rise, on the other hand, is swift, and she establishes herself as a success and as a public figure, enjoying public recognition from the usually imperceptive world. When the novel concludes, she is playing Juliet to a sold-out audience. James brings, at this point, his two other characters to the theater. Miriam performs, Nick observes, and Peter, who has returned from abroad to declare again his love for Miriam, suffers, having learned of Miriam's marriage three days prior to Basil Dashwood.

Miriam, at the conclusion, seems destined to have her way in the theater. Peter, in a somewhat hasty and easy courtship, marries Nick's sister and returns to his diplomatic post. Nick paints a portrait of his former fiancée, Julia, which attracts favorable critical attention; but, as
the novel ends, there remains the question as to whether he will achieve success in the artistic career for which he has sacrificed so heavily and whether Julia and he will become reunited and married.

This account describes the interplay of the multiplied aspects. By seeing the major characters in continual relation, there is much to engage our sympathies; the only exception is the lack of a continual relation to a central perspective.

James, on the other hand, does involve us intimately with the inner struggle of Nick Dormer coming to terms with the consequences of his decision. This aspect of *The Tragic Muse* is adequately done, but the point of my first criticism here is that there is no major interest; James gives only the exposition and general idea of the conflict between art and the world, and the novel remains in disequilibrium by not having found its center or point of synthesis. One of Gabriel Nash's roles in the novel, to illustrate, is to serve as a kind of physical manifestation of the artistic essence in which the artist participates:

Gabriel consented to sit; he professed he should enjoy it and be glad to give up for it his immediate foreign commerce, so vague to Nick, so definite apparently to himself; and he came back three times for the purpose. Nick promised himself a deal of interest from this experiment, for with the first hour of it he began to feel that really as yet, given the conditions under which he now studied him, he had never at all thoroughly explored his friend. His impression had been that Nash had a head quite fine enough to be a challenge, and that as he sat there day by day all sorts of pleasant and paintable things would come out in his face. This impression was not gainsaid, but the whole tangle grew denser. It struck our young man that he had never seen his subject before, and yet somehow this revelation was not produced by the sense of actually seeing it. What was revealed was the difficulty—what he saw was not the measureable mask but the ambiguous meaning. He had taken things for granted which literally were not there, and he found things there—except that he couldn't catch them—which he had not hitherto counted in or presumed to handle. This baffling effect, eminently in the line of the mystifying, so familiar to Nash, might have been the result of his whimsical volition, had it not appeared to our artist, after a few hours of the job, that his sitter was not the one who enjoyed it most. (*NTHI*, VIII, 409-10)

Nash's role here is to suggest one of James's thematic views on the artist as a contemplative being. The passage illustrates the kind of ambience and evaporated scent that surrounds the whole of the novel. There is no doubt that Nash provides an important role in activating and provoking this type of contemplative thinking in Nick Dormer's mind. In terms of the action of the whole novel, Nash's motives for appearing and disappearing are never explained. When James desires to articulate a particular quality of his theme, however, Gabriel Nash appears, provides the needed contemplation or statement, and then leaves, only to hover in the wings until more thematic information is required.

One could develop from this a decent case for Gabriel Nash as center. He is certainly suggestive and assumes a leading role in the exposition of the theme and in the progress of the narrative. He arranges meetings among Miriam, Peter, and Nick and turns the tide in Nick's personal situation. Still it is dubious to suggest that Gabriel Nash provides the kind
of central perspective around which the three other characters thematically converge and synthesize. He seldom provides anything more than an alter-ego echo for Nick Dormer, and nowhere are Peter Sherringham or Miriam Rooth regarded as aspects developing, relating, or converging on Gabriel Nash. Far from being the center, Nash is only ambient gas, more essence than existence, an occasional bit of chiaroscuro in a loose and rambling mural.

The “Preface” contains, nonetheless, special pleading; James imposes on the reader his insistence that Miriam is the center. His argument is interesting, but open to his own criticism:

The emphasis is all on an absolutely objective Miriam, and, this affirmed, how—with such an amount of exposed subjectivity all round her—can so dense a medium be a centre? Such questions as those go straight—thanks to which they are, I profess, delightful; going straight they are of the sort that makes answers possible. Miriam is central then to analysis, in spite of being objective; central in virtue of the fact that the whole thing has visibly, from the first, to get itself done in dramatic, or at least in scenic conditions—though scenic conditions which are as near an approach to the dramatic as the novel may permit itself and which have this in common with the latter, that they move in the light of alternation. (NTHJ, VII, xv)

James is open here since he elsewhere discusses his conception of a center as subjective adventure. From what James wrote in the well-known preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*—“place the centre of the subject in the young woman’s consciousness”—one is surprised to find him attributing absolute objectivity to a central character, disregarding in this later novel his argument that the center of interest must have depth, passion, and an existence that is more than a general idea, an exposition of the theme, or absolute objectivity.

If the richness of James’s theme was to demonstrate the “conflict between art and the world,” how much more interest could have been gained by swelling the poignancy of the sacrifices Miriam Rooth makes and extorts? The center of the novel would then have been the personal complications that result from her extreme passion for her art, with Miriam as the subjective center, Nick and Peter as satellites, and Nash as a character who possesses the ideal consciousness but not the motivation or means actually to create the manifestations of that consciousness.

At the end, we do not know what Miriam’s personal cost was. The result is no deep, central, psychological interest; the psychology of Miriam Rooth is developed inadequately for the purposes James usually demands of his center of interest.

The novel should be appraised, however, in terms of James’s success. “The art of figuring synthetically” as James considered it in *The Tragic Muse* was also the system he intended to use in joining together indirectly the “three general aspects” of his story (NTHJ, VII, xiv). He could present effectively a single aspect and then another aspect, chronologically composing each aspect, within the parallel outlines of a ladderlike plot. He wished, though, to present each aspect in situations linked together.
primarily by variations in the arrangement. The representational difficulty he faced was that in alternating the movement from one situation to another he “might, all disgracefully, betray the seam” (NTHJ, VII, ix).

The Venetian painter Tintoretto served here as James's cicerone. Tintoretto, James observes in the “Preface,” created unity through the multiple fusion of suggestive contrasts. There was a “measureless Crucifixion in especial, which showed without loss of authority half a dozen actions separately taking place” (NTHJ, VII, ix). Tintoretto had achieved a synthesis of content, form, and color “so that the virtue of the composition had somehow thereby come all mysteriously to its own.” No one figure was detachable; the “half a dozen actions separately taking place” were not isolated objects but continuous in space. There were no “seams” or observable lines to detract from the affinity of one action to another. Tintoretto saw his subject whole, but the alternation from one action to another was achieved by formal arrangement, dilating light and dark; one action appears to dissolve into another without abandoning the unity of the whole dramatic combination.

Tintoretto, James knew, had disguised the “seam” through the associative movement of light and color. Unity had been preserved because an observer’s eye passes from one scene to another through the kinetic, mobile links of light and color. The observer finds it difficult to pluck one scene from the whole picture; the association of light and color creates a cohesive force, guiding the imagination to synthesize one scene with another. What James needed, then, was to find the fictional equivalents for Tintoretto's movement of light and dark, producing in the novel the same sense of completion and closure, artfully synthesizing the aspects into one organic whole.

James spoke of his solution to his representational problem as an ordered variation of dramatic and scenic conditions; in theory, he would alternate the three general aspects of his story, focusing on one small area and then another, accommodating, finally, the development of the whole subject through a developing synthesis of the general aspects.

There was always an entrancing range of questions: “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 exactly how does the novelist “represent them under strong compression and in brief and subordinate terms” (NTHJ, VII, xix)?

The problem James faced in synthesizing this novel, then, was to devise the technical manner of representing his subject and theme. He needed to devise the structural means he could use to control the variation and alternation. James also knew that the grammar of painting was more exact than the novel's; still, he believed he could achieve similar effects in his own medium, dissolving one scene into another without abandoning the whole composition, following the principles of alternation and variation,
ordering the growth of the narrative by selectively presenting events that parallel and contrast each other.

Ideally the novel was to assume the shape of an equilateral triangle, with Miriam at the apex and representing Art. Nick Dormer, who represents another angle, would in the course of the novel devote himself completely to Art, but Peter Sherringham will not make the necessary sacrifice. One method of representation would simply have been to narrate the story of Nick, followed by the story of Peter, followed by the story of Miriam—a thesis, antithesis, synthesis paradigm. But as James suggests in the “Preface,” he was not content with this paradigm:

...the pleasure of handling an action...is at the worst, for a storyteller, immense, and the interest of such a question as for example keeping Nick Dormer's story his and yet making it also and all effectively in a large part Peter Sherringham's, of keeping Sherringham's his and yet making it in its high degree his kinsman's too, and Miriam Rooth's into the bargain; just as Miriam Rooth's is by the same token quite operatively his and Nick's, and just as that of each of the young men, by an equal logic, very contributively hers. ...(NTHJ, VII, xiv)

The first scene which introduces Nick, his sisters, Grace and Biddy Dormer, and his mother, Lady Agnes Dormer, is set in “the annual exhibition of the Salon” in “the department of statuary” (NTHJ, VII, 3). Nick’s sensibility is heightened by this exposure, as is Biddy’s, but to Lady Agnes and Grace everything “seems very dreadful” (NTHJ, VII, 8).

As the scene indicates, James has successfully aligned four of his characters, judged by their attitudes toward the usefulness of art. Thesis and antithesis, art and world, are presented as extended reactions to the exhibition. At one end of the scales are Nick and Biddy; at the other end are Lady Agnes and Grace. These elements of thesis and antithesis, then, are juxtaposed and intertwined throughout the novel as the sensibilities of various characters are exposed one to another.

What we see throughout the first half of the book, furthermore, is the gradual lengthening of the various aspects of this theme or the lengthening of the three lines of the triangle. The twenty-one chapters of the first volume are broken into four books, equally and alternately divided between Nick, who dominates approximately ten chapters, and Peter, who dominates eight chapters, approximately six of which are shared with Miriam; three chapters are shared between Nick and Peter.

That makes up the quantity of the first volume, but it does not describe more fully James’s method of synthetic alternation and variation. Books three and four, for example, are remarkable for their resemblance and contiguity. They resemble one another in length—five chapters and four chapters—but more importantly, they resemble one another in content. Book Three, to illustrate, is almost exclusively devoted to the Nick Dormer/Julia Dallow complication. Book Four follows that illustration and is devoted to the Peter Sherringham/Miriam Rooth conflict.

James’s method here is contiguous in that two particular angles of his representation are similar in content and near one another in sequence, ef-
effectively reinforcing one another; hence, James is able to make his theme more synthetic by alternating points of view ("multiplication of aspects"), a singular and bright advantage over previous novels.

None of this explains, however, the particular technique James devised to disguise the "seam" between one scene and another. Tintoretto had disguised his "seam" through chiaroscuro, preserving harmony and unity through the general effect of color with light and shade.

Part of James's solution to his particular problem lies in his suggestion that "the whole thing has visibly, from the first, to get itself done in dramatic, or at least in scenic conditions" (NTHJ, VII, xv).

James's emphasis was on creating living, moving pictures, composed in such a manner to cause the reader to experience the internal, physiological processes of vision. The reader scans the surface of the living picture and follows the motion of the characters. Characters may stroll about or remove themselves a sufficient distance from other characters; the reader, following the activity of one character, remains visually aware of other movements within the confines of the "frame." Any scene is framed if through visual imagery it is circumscribed or set apart from the remainder of the narrative. To make the transition from one scene to another, James needed only to stay within the confines of his frame, integrating and synthesizing the action and description of the previous scene with the scene that followed. The reader need only follow the movement or change his glance, while also staying within the confines of the frame. The transition between Scenes I and II of Book One bears this out:

"Ah mother, mother!" he exclaimed again—as if there were so many things to say that it was impossible to choose. But now he stepped closer, bent over her and in spite of the publicity of their situation gave her a quick expressive kiss. The foreign observer whom I took for granted in beginning to sketch this scene would have had to admit that the rigid English family had after all a capacity for emotion. Grace Dornler indeed looked round her to see if at this moment they were noticed. She judged with satisfaction that they had escaped.

Nick Dormer walked away with Biddy, but he had not gone far before he stopped in front of a clever bust, where his mother, in the distance, saw him playing in the air with his hand, carrying out by this gesture, which presumably was applausive, some critical remark he made to his sister. Lady Agnes raised her glass to her eyes by the long handle to which rather a clanking chain was attached, perceiving that the bust represented an ugly old man with a bald head; at which her ladyship indefinitely sighed, though it was not apparent in what way such an object could be detrimental to her daughter. Nick passed on and quickly paused again; this time, his mother discerned, before the marble image of a strange grimacing woman. Presently she lost sight of him; he wandered behind things, looking at them all round. (NTHJ, VII, 16–17)

These two passages (the concluding paragraph of Scene I and the introductory paragraph of Scene II) illustrate James's habit of seeing a particular moment as being so composed as to resemble a living, moving
picture. In the above instance, James even calls upon a "foreign observer . . . to sketch the scene." Thus the observer must pause in the course of the reading and fully capture the impressions and overtones that will communicate the immediacy and "feel" of the picture, sensitizing the observer to a particular quality of the scene otherwise difficult to define, since for a moment the reading process must be suspended until the substance of the picture is sketched in the observer's mind.

Perhaps the best analogy, though, is to think of this activity as cinematic but without cinematic breaks and cutting. There is, nonetheless, the particular focusing and framing activity, and in pausing to create his framed sketch the reader circumscribes or sets apart his vision from activity external to the scene. Transition is achieved by the mobility of broadening or narrowing the focus. The camera's eye follows the action and movement; transition is performed by forcing the mind's eye to follow the movement and pass over space.

There is also dramatic action in the form of dialogue and gesture. While the observer is pausing to sketch his particular impression of the scene, he is also aware that Nick Dormer is walking out of the foreground and into the distance. By having his eye turned to the living, moving picture and following the movement, James has succinctly and vividly forced the reader to make a transition without disrupting the continuity and without at all disgracefully betraying the "seam."

In other instances, James presents the questioning thought of one character about another character and allows the action of a following scene to contain the answer. Scene II of Book One, for example, presents Biddy Dormer pondering over what her mother, Lady Agnes, "would make" of Gabriel Nash. Scene III, however, does not consist of an explicit, narrative explanation of what Lady Agnes in fact does make of Gabriel Nash, nor is there an authorial intrusion explaining what Lady Agnes thought of Gabriel Nash. In that scene Lady Agnes is the authoritative figure dominating the action. James's intention is to allow the reader's interpretation to emerge by following Lady Agnes's dramatic activity in that scene.

There is, for example, an instance in the course of Scene III during which Lady Agnes and Grace Dormer order lunch. The picture is vivid enough and the talk is the usual table talk; the waiter, however, suggests a specific item from the menu, to which Lady Agnes replies:

"You'll give us what I tell you," said Lady Agnes; and she mentioned with distinctness and authority the dishes of which she desired that the meal should be composed. He interjected three or four more suggestions, but as they produced absolutely no impression on her he became silent and submissive, doing justice apparently to her ideas. For Lady Agnes had ideas, and, though it had suited her humour ten minutes before to profess herself helpless in such a case, the manner in which she imposed them on the waiter as original, practical and economical, showed the high executive woman, the mother of children, the daughter of earls, the consort of an official, the dispenser of hospitality, looking back upon a lifetime of luncheons. She carried many cares, and the feeding of multitudes—she was honourably
conscious of having fed them decently, as she had always done everything—had ever been one of them. "Everything's absurdly dear," she remarked to her daughter as the waiter went away. To this remark Grace made no answer. She had been used for a long time back to hearing that everything was very dear; it was what one always expected. So she found the case herself, but she was silent and inventive about it, and nothing further passed, in the way of conversation with her mother, while they waited for the latter's orders to be executed, till Lady Agnes reflected audibly: "He makes me unhappy, the way he talks about Julia."

One can assume from this "distinctness and authority" that Lady Agnes would in fact think very little of Gabriel Nash. But as for transition and continuity, the expectation and wonderment posed at the end of the previous scene have been effectively synthesized through the dramatic and scenic impression.

Transition, therefore, is an appeal to the reader to synthesize the direction and march of the narrative. If expectation is aroused, for example, assume that it will be satisfied through impressions that most clearly represent the action in its most intense dramatic and scenic qualities: dramatically, in that the discourse between Lady Agnes and Grace appears as if the characters were on a stage; scenically, in that the meaning is made perceptible not through narrative telling but through the use of dialogue, movement, and descriptive details that make the scene outwardly visible to the reader.

At the same time those details include an inwardness of certainty and opinion that could never be included in dialogue and movement. The suggestions that "Lady Agnes had ideas... the manner in which she imposed them... the high executive woman," and so on, constitute outward impressionistic aspects of the scene, but they also constitute an inwardness, which might more properly be referred to as the subject of the scene. The barest fragment of a detail becomes a conductor of facts and possibilities that could never be expressed in even the most strained dialogue.

This synthetic compression is what James's novels ultimately achieve. Everything still depends upon the reader's own general vision of things, but it is the sense within the sense that he must look for. Once the light dawns in that inward direction, once the reader learns to look for the multiplicity of perceptions, then the numerous portents and omens can be synthesized into a coherent pattern.

James was therefore perfectly successful in alternating and varying scenes in which he could dramatize his "multiplication of aspects," but he was not successful in providing a center upon which the "aspects" could resolve themselves, in the manner of Tintoretto's Crucifixion. By comparison, The Tragic Muse has a vague and empty center and it is difficult to see how the several actions separately taking place contribute to a unified whole. The mighty pictorial fusion of the three general aspects simply multiplies into great handfuls of variety of vision.

Having no center, finally, upon which all the devices can converge, expand, and relate leads to attenuation. A completely synthesized novel,
however, suggests that all the elements are in place, and mystically con­verted. Without this one element in place, the synthetic novelistic skein unravels, and always there is the tag end, looking for something to hook onto.

The feat then—and to present it this way is hardly to oversimplify—was James's attempt to seek a masterpiece worthy of his talent. He had previously labored, as he says, "under the illusion that the case of the sacrifice for art can ever be, with truth, with taste, with discretion involved, apparently and showily 'big.' . . . whereas the most charming truth about the preference for art is that to parade abroad so thoroughly inward and so naturally embarrassed a matter is to falsify and vulgarise it; that as a preference attended with the honours of publicity it is indeed nowhere; that in fact, under the rule of its sincerity, its only honours are those of contraction, concentration and a seemingly deplorable indifference to everything but itself" (NTHJ, VII, viii). Still, in the centerless world of The Tragic Muse, art seems to be only a cold passion, killing any possibility of a benevolent answer to the eternal questions of men.

Selected Bibliography


