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The Art of a Verse Novelist: Approaching Robinson’s Late Narratives Through James’s The Art of the Novel

by THELMA J. SHINN

To recognize the influence of Henry James on the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson has become a critical commonplace. As early as 1936 Walter Fuller Taylor referred to Robinson’s late verse narratives as “psychological tales” and remarked that they “are to poetry what the novelettes of Henry James are to prose.”1 When he compares the similar life styles of James and Robinson, Louis Coxe also points out that “Robinson’s poetry always kept a prose in view, as James’s prose had always sought the figurative, echoic and rhetorical resourcefulness of poetry.”2

These similarities become increasingly apparent when we examine Robinson’s late verse novels in light of the principles set forth by James in The Art of the Novel. In subject matter, characterization, and style, Robinson’s verse novels achieve the intentions of the novelist as James describes them quite as clearly as the novels upon which these prefaces were based.

Both Robinson and James are directly concerned with life, but not to depict, as James put it in his preface to The Spoils of Poynton, “clumsy Life again at her stupid work.”3 Art for both depends rather on selectivity; James identifies with the approach of Ivan Turgenieff: “It began for him almost always with the vision of some person or persons, who hovered before him soliciting him, as the active or passive figure, interesting him and appealing to him just as they were and by what they were” (pp. 42-3). Like Turgenieff as well is James’s concentration on human relationships: “to show my people, to exhibit their relations to each other; for that is all my measure” (p. 431). James reveals these relationships psychologically in “the effort to show their adventures and their history—the author’s subject matter all—as determined by their feelings and the nature of their minds. Their emotions, their stirred intelligence, their moral consciousness, become this, by sufficiently charmed perusal, our own very adventure” (p. 70). Finally, this psychological analysis of human relationships, he tells us in the preface to

The American, encompasses both the real and the romantic elements of life:

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 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. (pp. 31-2)

In summary, James takes for his subject matter the real and the romantic as they apply to individuals, to the experiences and perceptions of his chosen characters.

So too Robinson usually explores the psychological realities of an individual, whether that reality is tangible or intangible. In Avon’s Harvest, The Man Who Died Twice, Cavender’s House, and Amaranth, the real is subordinated to the romantic as James has defined them. The psychological exploration of the central characters is achieved through visions, dreams, and projections rather than through human relationships which are experientially real. Yet the relative reality of Avon’s experiences with his boyhood friend, of Nash’s vision, of Cavender’s encounter with his dead wife, and of Fargo’s dreams is of little importance: all four characters confront themselves and “the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire.” From the romantically unreal encounter with an aspect of himself, each gains a psychologically real insight.

In Roman Bartholow, The Glory of the Nightingales, Matthias at the Door, and Talifer, increasing awareness of the self is gained through experience. Roman Bartholow has gained awareness before the poem begins; but, through the confrontation with Gabrielle’s suicide and Penn-Raven’s betrayal, he realizes his isolation and his responsibilities to himself and to humanity. A similar revelation comes to Malory through his aborted attempt to murder the Nightingale of his hate and his confrontation with the Nightingale of his fate. Matthias learns from the successive loss through death’s door of the three people with whom he had had his only human relationships, and he finds the same door blocked for himself because he has become aware of his still unpaid commitment to life. Only in Talifer is the cost of awareness lowered so that isolation can be avoided by a change in the human relationships. Finally, in King Jasper, the real and the romantic combine to produce the symbolic. Both human relationships and dreams are used to explore consciousness, but the characters are more allegorical types than individuals.

James, too, sought to present “typical” characters, but neither he nor Robinson usually sought an allegorical type. Rather, James sought to
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portray, as he tells us in his preface to *Roderick Hudson*, a hero that "is special, that his great gift makes and keeps him highly exceptional; but that is not for a moment supposed to preclude his appearing typical (of the general type) as well; for the fictive hero successfully appeals to us only as an eminent instance, as eminent as we like, of our own conscious kind" (p. 12). Similarly, he tells us in the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* that Isabel Archer "hovers, inextinguishable, as a charming creature, and the job will be to translate her into the highest terms of that formula, and as nearly as possible moreover into all of them" (p. 51).

In this sense of typical, Robinson agrees with James. Most of his main characters (King Jasper excepted), as Hermann Hagedorn has noted, are "all variants of 'Richard Cory'," all "Tilbury Town heroes."4 Crowder more specifically identifies them as successful businessmen capable of masculine action.5 The only exceptions would be Nash and Fargo, but as artists they would be equally acceptable to James, for whom the artist is always a suitable subject. These eminent men are either "men of iron" (Talifer, Cavender, Avon, Nightingale, and Matthias) who must gain awareness of their own limitations before they can even begin to see beyond themselves, or others (Roman Bartholow and Malory) who must accept their own isolation before they can leave it to contribute to humanity.

For both James and Robinson, then, the subject matter of the novel is the psychological study of a typical main character, a study involving both the real and the romantic, but a study focussed on the experiences and the perceptions of that character as discoverable through human relationships. This central character, James tells us in his preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, must be acutely conscious of himself and others:

...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 connexion with it (p. 62).... I never see the leading interest of any human hazard but in a consciousness (on the part of the moved and moving creature) subject to fine intensification and wide enlargement. It is as mirrored in that consciousness that the gross fools, the headlong fools, the fatal fools play their part for us—they have much less to show us in themselves. (p. 67)

This central consciousness would either be the character with which the novel was most concerned, as with Hyacinth Robinson in *The Princess Casamassima*, about whom James tells us that "it seemed to me I had only to imagine such a spirit intent enough and troubled enough, and to place it in presence of the comings and goings, the great gregarious company, of the more fortunate than himself—all on the scale on which

London could show them—to get possession of an interesting theme” (p. 60). Or it would be a “mirror” character, as with Rowland Mallet in *Roderick Hudson*. In that preface James locates the center of the novel “in Rowland Mallet’s consciousness, and the drama is the very drama of that consciousness” (p. 16). James describes this technique as “placing advantageously, placing right in the middle of the light, the most polished of possible mirrors of the subject” (p. 70).

At the same time, this central consciousness necessarily has its limitations. James cautions that “it had, naturally, Rowland’s consciousness, not to be too acute—which would have disconnected it and made it superhuman” (p. 16). He also comments in reference to Hyacinth that “they may be shown as knowing too much and feeling too much—not certainly for their remaining remarkable, but for their remaining ‘natural’ and typical, for their having the needful communities with our own precious liability to fall in traps and be bewildered” (p. 63). In fact, what James is trying to preserve by this caution is that bewilderment: “if we were never bewildered there would never be a story to tell about us; we should partake of the superior nature of the all-knowing immortals whose annals are dreadfully dull so long as flurried humans are not . . . mixed up with them” (pp. 63-4).

Both of these conditions are found in Robinson’s central characters. Their consciousness was noted by Conrad Aiken, who pointed out that Robinson’s narrative “is, like the narrative of Henry James, an affair pre-eminently of relations: a narrative, it would be more exact to say, of relations and contacts (between character and character) always extraordinarily conscious . . . living almost wholly in this awareness showed in the alteration or corruption of character by character.” The almost cosmic bewilderment they display reminds us of the bewilderment James attributes to the characters in Thackeray: “the condition of a humble heart, a bowed head, a patient wonder, a suspended judgement, before the ‘awful will’ and the mysterious decrees of Providence” (p. 66). In *Avon’s Harvest*, Avon expresses his bewilderment with the cost and purpose of life when he tells the narrator:

> When are we mortals to be sensible,  
> Paying no more for life than life is worth?  
> Better for us, no doubt, we do not know  
> How much we pay or what it is we buy.7

Fernando Nash in *The Man Who Died Twice* is the most completely humbled and accepting of the “awful will” as he asserts that

> God was good  
> To give my soul to me before I died

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7. Edwin Arlington Robinson, *Collected Poems* (New York, 1937), p. 558. All further references to Robinson’s poems are to this edition, and are identified by the letter R.
Entirely, and He was no more than just
In taking all the rest away from me.  (R, p. 955)

Each central character in Robinson’s verse novels is humbled by experience and the perception of his own limitations and isolation; each also suspends judgement before “the mysterious decrees of Providence.” Roman Bartholow, Malory, and Matthias commit themselves to whatever service of mankind the future may hold for them; Cavender, Talifer, and Fargo accept their rightful positions in human society; and none discount entirely the possibility of what the narrator of The Man Who Died Twice calls “a music / Whereof the world was not impossibly / Not the last note” (R, p. 965).

If these conscious but bewildered central characters serve as focus to the novels of James and of Robinson, another group of characters common to both serve a structural purpose. James has called these “ficelles,” characters who belong “intimately to the treatment,” relating to the form rather than the subject of the novel. James includes Henrietta Stackpole of The Portrait of a Lady and Maria Gostrey of The Ambassadors in this class: both characters are there expressly to serve the reader rather than to elucidate the situation by their own involvement. In his preface to The Portrait, James explains that “Henrietta must have been at that time a part of my wonderful notion of the lively” (p. 57); thus, she serves mainly as comic relief. Maria Gostrey has a bigger job, he tells us in the preface to The Ambassadors: “She is the reader’s friend much rather—in consequence of dispositions that make him so eminently require one; and she acts in that capacity, and really in that capacity alone, with exemplary devotion, from beginning to end of the book. She is an enrolled, a direct, aid to lucidity; she is in fine, to tear off her mask, the most unmitigated and abandoned of ficelles” (p. 322).

With these two examples to show us the meaning of the term, we can easily recognize ficelles in the verse novels of Robinson. These minor characters inform the reader and often amuse him with dry New England humor as well. If such an integral character as Maria Gostrey can be called a ficelle by James, then Robinson’s list can include Umfraville in Roman Bartholow, Doctor Quick in Talifer, Evensong and Amaranth himself in Amaranth, and Garth in Matthias at the Door.8 Umfraville, with his many-colored coat, his fishing gear, and his philosophical reflections, adds a light touch, even though he seems somewhat ominous to Gabrielle. He serves effectively as a structural device. Roman’s growth is reflected in terms of his former impression on Umfraville, and

8. The use of Gawaine in Tristram is also both humorous and structural, where the flirtatious, shallow, charming young man both delivers Tristram to Joyous Gard and delivers the news of his death to Isolt of Brittany. However, I have not included the Arthurian verse novels in this study, and Gawaine’s character has been thoroughly investigated in Jacob Adler, “Robinson’s Gawaine,” English Studies, XXXIX (February 1958), pp. 1-20.
his plans after Gabrielle's suicide are presented dramatically through conversations with the fisherman. Umfraville early asserts his right to speak out and thus to interpret to the reader when he tells us that

Being myself
A nondescript, I take upon myself
A more ingenious right of utterance
Than tongues of others ordinarily
Might sanction or employ. (p. 740)

Doctor Quick in Talifer serves a similar function, even though he has been given a larger role than that of Umfraville. The suggestion of his "romantic involvement" with Karen and Althea is reminiscent of the relationship between Maria Gostrey and Strether. He is a source of humor, but like Umfraville he is also a source of perception, enhancing the reader's understanding of the story.

If Amaranth and Evensong can be called ficelles, it is because they serve to organize Fargo's successive dream-visions, Amaranth leading Fargo and offering perceptive insights into each vision, and Evensong more directly relating to and dramatically commenting on the alternative course which Fargo's life could have taken had he not come to terms with himself. Garth, in Matthias at the Door, serves a function similar to that of Umfraville as he introduces Matthias to the door, and later as he appears in a vision to echo the awareness that Matthias has gained. I hesitate to classify these three characters strictly as ficelles because they do seem to have more importance in the poems; but they are not central to the story line in either poem, and they admirably serve the structural purpose, if not always the humourous purpose, of a ficelle.

These ficelles also enable Robinson to present dramatically what he would otherwise be forced to present in narrative. Again, this relates him to James, who repeatedly directs writers to "Dramatise, dramatise!" (pp. 236, 251, 265, et passim). Both Robinson and James had ventured, temporarily and unsuccessfully, into drama itself, and their interest in this approach never lagged. A dramatic presentation would seem to emerge naturally out of their interest in interactions between characters. How this could be applied to the novel is explained by James in the prefaces to The Tragic Muse, The Awkward Age, and The Ambassadors.

In his preface to The Tragic Muse (a novel particularly concerned with theatre), James sees the novel in terms of "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" (pp. 89-90). He applies this to The Awkward Age, a novel which alternates between dialogue and settings, so that "each of these scenes in itself, and each as related to each and to all of its com-
panions, abides without a moment's deflection by the principle of the stage play" (p. 115). His aim is, through the scenic limitations of setting and dialogue, "to make the presented occasion tell all its story itself, remain shut up in its own presence and yet on that patch of staked-out ground become thoroughly interesting and remain thoroughly clear" (p. 111). But *The Awkward Age* was confusing to many readers; setting the scene and then allowing the dialogue alone to carry all the weight of his intricate psychological analysis was inadequate. Consequently, James qualified the form somewhat with the use of *ficelles* and of "picture" in *The Ambassadors*. As he explains in the preface to that novel, "Everything in it that is not scene . . . is discriminated preparation, is the fusion and synthesis of picture" (pp. 322-23).

In summary, the dramatic form of a novel as James finally defines it in the preface to *The Ambassadors* still utilized scenes composed of setting and dialogue, but these were united by preparation or "picture," and additional information and transitions were provided dramatically through the use of *ficelles*, allowing James to present his material dramatically but also giving the reader the assistance of additional background in the "picture" and in current evaluations from the *ficelles*. The same structure can be seen in many of Robinson's verse novels. In *Roman Bartholow*, for instance, the first scene is set by the "picture" of Roman rejoicing in the new morning of his life, and is realized through his dialogue with Umfraville. Scene two finds him inside to confront Gabrielle, and both join Penn-Raven for more dialogue; after Roman leaves, an exchange between Penn-Raven and Gabrielle ends the scene. The entire verse novel can be divided into eight scenes, each dependent upon dialogue with only minor preparation, so that "the presented occasion," as James recommends, "must tell all its story itself." The seventh and eighth scenes, like the first, are given dramatic form through the use of the *ficelle* Umfraville and inform the reader of Roman’s immediate reactions to the suicide and his ultimate plans for the future.

The other verse novels can be similarly broken down into a dramatic structure similar to that of James.

Robinson's use of dreams and visions is more an adaptation than a departure from this theory. The dreams themselves could be called mini-dramas, reflecting perhaps an analogous movement in modern drama into expressionism and symbolism in order to represent more comprehensively the multi-level consciousness of man. Each dream is structured dramatically and must be understood both in terms of "the presented occasion," and in terms of its relationship to other scenes, and to the total structure of the poem. This can be seen best in *Cavender's House*, where the dream or vision *is* the poem, or is at least the central dramatic scene of the poem. Cavender confronts a projection of his own divided self in his dialogue with Laramie. Helen Mac-Afee, recognizing the essential nature of the poem in her review, called
it a dramatic tragedy which could have been presented as well on the
stage "but for the incidence of time."  

Thus far we have seen that Robinson's verse novels share thematic
concerns, psychological approach, exploration of the real and the ro-
mantic, characterization, and dramatic structure with the principles set
forth by James in The Art of the Novel. Recognizing these similarities
may help us to understand some of the subtleties of Robinson's style by
relating it to his purposes. The concentration on dramatic form, for
instance, precludes extensive descriptive development of character and
setting. Character, James tells us, is to be merely sketched in, then
developed dramatically: "A character is interesting as it comes out, and
by the process and duration of that emergence; just as a procession is
effective by the way it unrolls, turning to a mere mob if all of it passes
at once" (p. 128). Details and setting are presented succinctly; James
prefers "the 'neat' evocation—the image, of any sort, with fewest at-
tendant vaguenesses and cheapnesses, fewest loose ends dangling and
fewest features missing, the image kept in fine the most susceptible of
intensity" (p. 256). Description often allows symbolic emphasis to be
given to details, as to the "splendid Things" in The Spoils of Poynton,
which he tells us in the preface are "placed in the middle light, figured
and constituted, with each identity made vivid, each character discrim-
inated, and their common consciousness of their great dramatic part
established" (p. 126). The image defines character, as The Wings of
the Dove relates to the dove-like Milly Theale, to her beautiful, brief
flight into the world, and to her enveloping presence, both alive and
dead, above the lives of Kate Croy and Merton Densher. On a slighter
scale, the images in What Maisie Knew convey the personality, in
Maisie's view, of her mother, whose "hugh painted eyes . . . were like
Japanese lanterns swung under festal arches."  

A similar brevity of description in Robinson's poems has led Jessica
North to accuse him of being the "one poet alone" who has "resisted
the warm appeal of the senses to spend his life putting down the elusive
intricacies of the mind."  Approaching his descriptions through the
dramatic theory expressed by James, however, reveals a concentration
rather than a lack of sensuous surface—a condensed, symbolic evoca-
tion both of the surface scene and of its relation to the theme and char-
acters, what Charles Cestre calls a "refraction of reality through the
prism of the imagination, that interpenetration of the visible and the
invisible, that radiation of the life of the soul through an atmosphere of
mystery."  

Consequently, characters in Robinson's poetry are often defined by
giving prominence to certain identifying physical characteristics or man-

nerisms, while certain objects become symbolic and the scenery, even Nature itself, often provides analogues to states of mind. This type of characterization can be seen in Roman Bartholow, where Penn-Raven is identified with his thick, soft lips, and in Amaranth, where the title character is little more than a pair of fiery, irresistible eyes. The character may also be identified by an image; as Richard Crowder has pointed out, Talifer’s very name brands him as a “man of iron.” Likewise, Matthias’s inner deterioration is imaged in an “unripe mellowness”:

An early-fallen fruit
With a worm hidden in it might have had it;
Or a determination to be kind,
After long injuries and indecisions,
Might have been like it. Call it this, or that,
Or welcome it, it was not like Matthias.
It was too smooth and soft on the outside
To be Matthias. (R, p. 1118)

Similarly, Robinson evokes symbolic depths in his descriptions of the setting. Cavender’s house is the “dark house in which Cavender himself is locked.” The dark moonlight in the same poem reflects its sombre tone and Cavender’s darkened vision, while the sunny “Sungay” morning which ends Talifer is a fitting tribute to Robinson’s one unequivocally happy ending in the verse novels.

Each aspect of the description, therefore, becomes part of the “picture” in both James and Robinson, to prepare the reader for the dramatic action. The picture is presented as succinctly as possible to emphasize the drama—the psychological exploration of characters—and images are used to produce the multi-level references. The design also reflects James’s insistence on proportion, which he claims in the preface of Roderick Hudson to be the “most interesting question the artist has to consider”: “To give the image and the sense of certain things while still keeping them subordinate to his plan, keeping them in relation to matters more immediate and apparent, to give all the sense, in a word, without all the substance or all the surface, and so to summarise and foreshorten, so to make values both rich and sharp...” (p. 14). The images in Robinson’s poetry not only convey their own reality but also direct the reader’s attention to the central “plan” or theme. In this way, Penn-Raven’s view of the deadly waters into which Gabrielle would go and over which Roman must cross contrasts them with the protective ancestral trees:

Early one silent evening in July,
Faintly aware of roses and syringas,

Similarly, Matthias first rejects "A brook somewhere unseen" that "made a cold song of an eternity / That would always be cold, and always dark, / And far from his desire" (R, p. 1078). But he finally accepts it as "a tinkling in the night like a small music / That had been always and would always be, / And was a brook" (R, p. 1154). In accepting the brook he accepts both life and the cosmic bewilderment that admits to knowing none of the answers to the final questions of life. Robinson refracts the reality to evoke at the same time a deeper reality.

In conclusion, not only can we see the similarities in narrative techniques between these two writers when we examine Robinson's verse novels in relation to the principles set forth in James's *The Art of the Novel*, but we can also understand the purposes which govern Robinson's departure from the sensuous luxuriance often common to poetry. For both novelists, the dramatic purpose dominates and all other aspects of style are subordinated to this purpose. In their attempts to reveal the psychological realities of life through their characters, James and Robinson have tried "to make the presented occasion tell all its story itself." The consistently conscious craftsmanship and the successful achievement of their intentions through the conscientious utilization of their chosen symbolic and dramatic approach enables them to achieve a psychological penetration of their characters seldom reached in literature.

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