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Henry James's Major Phase: Making Room for the Reader

by Carl Malmgren, University of New Orleans

It is not my fault if I am so put together as often to find more life in situations obscure and subject to interpretation than in the gross rattle of the foreground.

--Henry James

I wish to put before you a general proposition: that a work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion.

--Joseph Conrad

The obliquity of James's "major phase" is not the product of a willful and perverse desire to obscure or obfuscate, but rather is based upon a clearly defined and articulated theory of the strongest "subject" for fiction. Again and again in the prefaces written for the 1909 New York Edition of his works James speaks to this problem, and almost as frequently he falls back upon the notion of "bewilderment" as the necessary element in the generation of compelling narrative: one or more of the "subjects" of the piece must experience a degree of uncertainty if the fiction is to convey the impression of "felt life." The implications that this belief has for James's fictional techniques are admirably summarized by Wayne Booth: "There can be no intensity of illusion if the author is present, constantly reminding us of his unnatural wisdom. Indeed, there can be no illusion of life where there is no bewilderment, and the omniscient narrator is obviously not bewildered."¹ For James bewilderment is an essential aspect of experience at the end of the nineteenth century; the balance of experience rests not in the brute facts of experiential reality but in the way in which the perceiving consciousness construes (and misconstrues) those facts. This credo is reflected at the general level by James's almost programmatic use of a "central intelligence" as the dramatic focus for his later fictions and at the local level by his renewed interest in the ghost story, an interest quickened by a realization that one best renders ghosts not by scrupulously recording the particulars of their deviltry but by reproducing the effect that they create upon their victim.²

As Booth's comment suggests, James's concerns at this point in his career necessarily entail certain consequences in narrative technique, particularly in the matter of the type of narrative situation. Omniscient narration almost by definition precludes the "enactment" ("showing" as opposed to "telling") of states of bewilderment. James is thus forced by his own preoccupations and beliefs to experiment deliberately with alternate narrative situations, an enterprise that after the fact can be seen to take two forms. At one extreme, James at first relies on forms of first-person narration and later perfects what one theorist has called the "figural" novel in order to approximate the pure dramatization of a human consciousness as it wrestles with the various "facts" of experience. At the other extreme, James attempts total effacement of the author through "pure" scenic presentation. The former practice, exemplified in The Turn of the Screw (first-person) and The Ambassadors (figural), has been institutionalized by critics like Lubbock as James's major contribution to narrative technique and

1. The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961; rpt. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 45.

2. See, for example, James's Preface to "The Turn of the Screw," rpt. in the Norton Critical Edition of The Turn of the Screw, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: Norton, 1966), pp. 118-24.

prefigures to some extent the stream-of-consciousness work of the great modernists.³ The latter practice, embodied in lesser-known works like The Awkward Age (which consists in large part of conversation), presages the "pure objectivity" of later writers like Hemingway and Anderson. These two experiments result in narratives of a very different texture, with very different aesthetic effects, but they share an authorial intention to eliminate the author as a source of truth and certitude within the fiction and thus to encode in the text an inherent degree of bewilderment. In other words, these fin de siècle works by James at one and the same time mark and precipitate on a more systematic basis the author's retreat (qua Author) from his narrative domain and the consequent opening of an interpretive space (for the reader) in the fiction.

The nature and consequence of that retreat are embodied most dramatically in that most controversial of all stories, The Turn of the Screw. This "amulette to catch those not easily caught" has quite literally done that from the moment of its publication in 1898--critics have dangled helplessly on the tenterhooks of its systematic ambiguity. The publication in 1976 and 1977 of Christine Brooke-Rose's brilliant series of essays on the text should serve as a landmark of demystification in a mystified critical atmosphere.⁴ Not only does Brooke-Rose accept and demonstrate as explicitly encoded in the text the two major readings (the ghosts are real/the ghosts are products of the governess's imagination); she also convincingly argues that it is "a text structured . . . on the same principle that a neurosis is structured" in that "the structure of a neurosis involves the attempt (often irresistible) to drag the 'other' down into itself, into the neurosis, the other being here the reader." That is, the text induces in its readers the very same tendencies that inform its structure: "the critics reproduce the very tendencies they so often note in the governess: omission; assertion; elaboration; lying even (or, for the critics, let us call it error)."⁵ For example, just like the governess, critics have a marked tendency to slide from supposition to assertion, to assert as fact what they have previously (and without adequate textual evidence) assumed to be true. Part of the strength of Brooke-Rose's first essay lies in the methodological rigor and systematic documentation that she brings to her analysis of critical (mal)practice to date.

What is of particular significance for this essay is the evidence adduced by Brooke-Rose to demonstrate the duplicity of the text--a duplicity that has of late been more and more accepted.⁶ The text admits of at least two sets of interpretations, which at one level are mutually exclusive. This duplicity, encoded in every narrative unit of the text, is made possible by an inherent characteristic of first-person narration, a characteristic that may best be described by more theoretical analysis of the "planes" of a narrative. In any narrative there exist at least two planes, or systems of signification--the discourse of the speaker (the enunciation) and the story of the fictional world (made up of the fictional topography, the actants, the events, etc.). In "authorial" narration, where the enunciation

3. Percy Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction (1921; rpt. New York: Viking, 1957), esp. pp. 156-71.

4. Christine Brooke-Rose, "The Squirm of the True: An Essay in Non-Methodology," PTL: journal for descriptive poetics and theory of literature, 1 (1976), 265-94; "The Squirm of the True: A Structural Analysis of Henry James's The Turn of the Screw," PTL, 1 (1976), 513-46; "Surface Structure in Narrative: The Squirm of the True, Part III," PTL, 3 (1977), 517-62. Brooke-Rose addresses related matters in "Historical Genres/Theoretical Genres: A Discussion of Todorov on the Fantastic," New Literary History, 8 (Autumn 1976), 145-58.

5. Brooke-Rose, "The Squirm of the True, Part I," 268, 291-92. Shoshana Felman makes a similar argument in "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," Yale French Studies, 55/56 (1977), 94-207.

6. The following texts explicitly or implicitly discuss the text as fundamentally duplicitous: Shlomith Rimmon, The Concept of Ambiguity--The Example of James (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977), chapter 5; H. Robert Huntley, "James' The Turn of the Screw: 'Its Fine Machinery,'" American Imago, 34 (Fall 1977), 224-37; Peter Obuchowski, "Technique and Meaning in The Turn of the Screw," CLA Journal, 21 (March 1978), 380-89.

can be attributed to a speaker who enjoys the station, wisdom, and privilege of a fictional deity, the enunciation may be said to exist in a plane different from the plane of the fictional world. The former exists somewhere "above" the latter, at a spatial and temporal remove. From this position of privilege, the speaker has the authority to preside over the space of the fictional world; he or she is privileged to know character thoughts and motives, to move at will through the fictional topography, to articulate a controlling ideology, to manipulate presentation of events, and in general to speak to the fictiveness of the inscribed world. The presence of the authorial speaker particularly manifests itself in the form of perceptual, ideological, and metalingual statements of a discursive nature. That is, the Author pronounces sentences upon characters (perceptual statements), upon the controlling beliefs, habits, or episteme of the fictional world (ideological statements), or upon the nature of the imaginative process (metalingual statements). The Author makes these comments in the form of discrete comments that can only be attributed to Him. These elements of the enunciation act as a sort of filter for the actants and events of the world, to no small degree channeling and directing the reader's response to that world. In first-person narration the ontology of the enunciation changes drastically. In figurative terms, the enunciation is "lowered" into the space of the fictional world and shares the fictiveness of that world. All discursive statements in the enunciation are "motivated"; they belong not to a privileged and disinterested speaker but to an interested character. A "first-person" speaker, whether simple spectator to, or spirited actor in, the unfolding events of the narrative, is necessarily "engaged" in those events, and generally in a double sense: the speaker is affected by the story (otherwise there would be no reason to tell it); at the same time he or she mediates the story--the story is filtered through his or her consciousness or sensibility. The type of mediation might vary; usually the narrator speaks after the fact and, given the advantage of distance and perspective, supplies at least one degree of interpretation (such is the case with the governess in James's tale). But even if the mediation is of the form of "unmediated" perception (as in stream-of-consciousness), the story passes through a "human" and therefore potentially altering sensibility, one that possesses no special privilege in relation to the rest of the fictional world because it exists in the same narrative plane. This fact of purely "fictional" mediation is one of the great attractions of first-person narration. As Richard Gullon puts it, "One of the functions of the narrative 'I' is to produce this verbal space, to give a context for the motion which constitutes the novel; a space that is not a reflection of anything but, rather, an invention of the invention which is the narrator, whose perceptions (transferred to images) engender it."⁷ By way of summary, then, within any first-person narrative there are two equally pronounced systems of signification, the one pertaining to the actants and events of the fictional world, the other to the enunciation itself. In most first-person narrative, the latter dimension has been utilized primarily to make contributions to what Barthes calls the "semic" code. That is, the plane of the enunciation contributes to the characterization of the speaker, who is, after all, a principal agent in the narrative. The enunciation is used to reveal the character's idiosyncracies, idiolect, psychology, or other personal traits. James, however, is one of the first to comprehend all the implications of first-person narration; in particular, that the enunciation is the property of a fictional entity (the "invention of the invention") and therefore twice removed from the "real world." The "content" of the enunciation (in particular, its suppositions and speculations--its interpretations) need not coincide with the "content" of the fictional world. In terms of James's story, there may or may not be "real" ghosts out there. Since, as has been shown by Brooke-Rose and others, "the story won't tell" (from Douglas's Introduction to the story), each of its articulations being susceptible of at least two readings, what recourse has the reader who desires to verify the "truth" of the matter? Readers are placed in a position very similar to that of the governess. Like her, they are left without recourse to a master. Like her, they are dropped into an "unnatural" situation with instructions to "take the whole thing over and let (the master) alone." And like her, readers take the "facts" presented and read into them the meaning that particularly suits their subjectivity. Readers occupy the space of interpretation that the author has evacuated, and the manner of their occupation may well be a matter for his (the master's) amusement.

7. Richard Gullon, "On Space in the Novel," Critical Inquiry, 2 (1975), 12.

If one way to eliminate an authorial speaker with his privileged position and his magisterial prerogatives is to replace his enunciation with that of one of the actants, thus collapsing the plane of the speaker into the plane of the fictional world, another way consists in simply removing the more conspicuous evidence of his presence, thus creating a narrative that aspires to the condition of drama (all "show" and no "tell"). This project James undertakes in The Awkward Age. In his Preface to the text, James himself suggests that "the beauty of the conception" rests in the approximation of the form "to the successive Acts of a Play." James goes on to explain:

The divine distinction of the act of a play--and a greater than any other it easily succeeds in arriving at--was, I reasoned, in its special, its guarded objectivity. This objectivity, in turn, when achieving its ideal came from the imposed absence of that "going behind," to compass explanations and amplifications, to drag out odds and ends from the "mere" story-teller's great property-shop of aids to illusion. . . .⁸

The speaker of The Awkward Age does not have the privilege of "going behind," of revealing the characters' thoughts and motivations or being privy to their secret desires. James thus specifically notes that his speaker will not have access to what might be termed the "perceptual" component of the enunciation. As a matter of fact, the speaker of this novel retreats completely from the level of statement within the enunciation; this speaker is unable (or unwilling) to pronounce upon matters characterological, ideological, or metatextual. Nowhere does the speaker reveal himself at the level of the sentence; everywhere the speaker maintains a "guarded objectivity."

James is too much a "scientist" of consciousness to refrain entirely from forays into the minds of his characters. The problem for him in The Awkward Age consists in allowing his speaker to suggest what lies "behind" without in any way conferring author-ity upon that speaker. James accomplishes this somewhat tricky end by the systematic deployment of "words of estrangement."⁹ That is, the speaker prefaces all incursions beneath the surface with lexical markers that obviate any authority or privilege the statements might confer upon the speaker. The text is heavily marked by verbs of speculation like "it seemed" or "it appeared" or "there might have been" and by words of speculation like "apparently," "perhaps," and (the speaker's especial favorite) "as if." Taken in combination, these words create what Uspensky has termed a synchronic narrative situation. The speaker presents himself as merely an observer present on the scene, one whose scope of knowledge is as limited as that of any "normal" observer. That this is the effect James intends is clear from a remark like, "Mrs. Brook, for some minutes, had played no audible part, but the acute observer we are constantly taking for granted would perhaps have detected in her, as one of the effects of the special complexion, today, of Vanderbank's presence, a certain smothered irritation" (p. 228).

Remarks like this indicate the special problem James confronted in The Awkward Age. He very much wished to have the text approximate the condition of drama, but he did not wish to relinquish entirely the complexities and nuances that the addition of a mediating consciousness makes possible. James was able to accomplish this complex effect by eliminating discursive statements of the enunciation while at the same time leaning heavily on words of estrangement. In two ways The Awkward Age can be seen as a pivotal text. First, it serves as a prototype for fictions in which the method of "scenic presentation"

8. Preface to The Awkward Age (1899; rpt. Middlesex, Engl.: Penguin Books, 1972), p.18. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be incorporated parenthetically in the text. The analysis that follows attempts to describe briefly the shape of The Awkward Age, not to interpret it. An exemplary interpretation can be found in Tzvetan Todorov, "The Verbal Age," Critical Inquiry, 4 (1977), 351-71.

9. I borrow the concept from Boris Uspensky, A Poetics of Composition, trans. V. Zavarin and S. Wittig (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1973).

is carried even further by the more systematic evacuation of the enunciation--for the "objective" fictions of Hemingway and the like. Second, the text prepares James for a different type of drama--the dramatization of consciousness in The Ambassadors.

Writing to Hugh Walpole in 1910 about his turn-of-century work The Ambassadors, James castigates his friend for a failure of reading: "how can you say I do anything so foul and abject as to 'state'? You deserve that I should condemn you to read the book over once again!"¹⁰ It seems then that James's avowed purpose is to "state" nothing, to achieve the "stuff of drama."¹¹ One way to approximate the conditions of drama would have been to present the entire action scenically, in the sense of one dramatic scene after another, as had been done in The Awkward Age. But James confesses in another place a "preference for dealing with my subject-matter, for 'seeing my story' through the opportunity and the sensibility of some more or less detached, some not strictly involved, though thoroughly interested and intelligent, witness or reporter, some person who contributes to the case mainly a certain amount of criticism and interpretation of it."¹² The addition of this one degree of interpretation contributes substantially to the "intensification of interest." One way to accomplish this dramatization of consciousness is to adopt a first-person narrator, but James specifies in his preface that that narrative situation did not serve his purpose for this text. He notes that first-person narration is "foredoomed to looseness" in a long piece (p. 10) and that the "terrible fluidity of self-revelation" does not suit his "exhibitional conditions" (p. 11). Although James's wording is characteristically abstract and indirect, he seems to have a two-pronged objection to first person in this instance: it inherently admits the inclusion of extraneous material because the narrator necessarily wishes to incorporate all the relevant information (in a long piece a complete autobiography presumably); and, consequently, the focus of the drama becomes a total personality rather than the impression created by a circumscribed chain of events. The author, in effect, sacrifices a measure of aesthetic control in first-person narrative. James speaks of the necessity to "encage" Strether so as to prevent him from becoming both subject and object of the narrative. What is to be exhibited is not an entire personality, but a "process of vision" (p. 2) wherein a discriminating intelligence is confronted with an ambiguous situation; it is to be a "drama of discrimination" (p. 7).¹³

In order best to make the narrative approximate the condition of drama, James clearly had to

10. The letter, dated August 14, 1912, is excerpted in the Norton Critical Edition of The Ambassadors, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (New York: Norton, 1964), p. 409. This edition of the text will be used in the analysis that follows.

11. The phrase is taken from the Preface to the novel, Norton Critical Edition, p. 12.

12. Henry James, first paragraph of Preface to The Golden Bowl. James's prefaces and critical writings have been reprinted and excerpted in innumerable texts. A handy collection of his critical texts, noteworthy both for its completeness and for its organizational principle (arranged according to subject matter), is Theory of Fiction: Henry James, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (Lincoln, Neb.: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1972).

13. Many critics have commented on this aspect of the novel. Cf.: "Nothing in the scene has any importance, any value in itself; what Strether sees in it--that is the whole of its meaning" and "Strether's mind is dramatized," Percy Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction, pp. 161, 162; "What Strether sees is the entire content, and James thus perfected a device both for framing and for interpreting experience," F. O. Matthiessen, Henry James: The Major Phase (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1944), p. 22; "It is the seeing that is the subject of the novel, perception at the pitch of awareness," Leon Edel, from an "Introduction," rpt. in the Norton Critical Edition, p. 441. The use of vision as a recurrent motif in the text, one signifying at once the act of perception and the process of interpretation, has often been noticed by critics.

eliminate as much as possible the intrusions of the mediating speaker. As was the case in The Awkward Age, the speaker had to efface himself. Although there has been critical disagreement as to the extent of authorial intrusion in the text, from the vantage point of the overall texture the speaker is conspicuous mainly by (his) absence.¹⁴ A quick perusal of any page reveals the evident care that James took to locate the action in his mediating consciousness:

"he felt even as he spoke . . ."
"he had made up his mind . . ."
"he had a fear . . ."
"this confirmed precisely an interpretation of her manner . . ."
"her voice . . . seemed to make her words . . ."
"he had made up his mind . . ."
"his pleasure was deep now on learning . . ."
"as him finding himself thus able . . ."
"He supposed himself to have supposed . . ."

These locutions can be found in the space of two paragraphs in the text (pp. 174-75 in the Norton Critical Edition), and the same two paragraphs contain no explicit reference to the author and only one phrase that indirectly announces his presence ("The end of it was that half an hour later . . ."). Conspicuously absent from the text are those discursive elements (perceptual, ideological, or metalingual) that signal the speaker's proprietorship over elements of the fictional world. That James from time to time deliberately reveals a speaker's presence is undeniable; the mere existence of the reiterated phrase "our friend" (one critic counts 65 appearances) signals the speaker's presence at the lexical level of the enunciation and to some degree channels the reader's sympathy. But it is to James's aesthetic purpose to reveal the speaker's guiding hand. The speaker wishes to announce his presence so as to increase the distance between the reader and Strether's consciousness, to make the latter the "subject" of the story--i.e., the object of the reader's scrutiny (compare this relationship with the identification frequently fostered by first-person narrative). In this way consciousness itself is to be dramatized. And "dramatized" is the right word because in no explicit way does James's speaker comment on or critique the workings of the consciousness; he encourages the reader to attend to it ("our friend") but he keeps it at arm's length. At one point in the text the speaker refers to himself as "chronicler" (p. 43); that word aptly summarizes his relationship with the fictional world--he is a recorder of (mental) events whose greatest problem seems to be in transcribing those events in their rapidity and complexity (e.g., pp. 43, 91). By putting a consciousness on stage, retaining vestiges of authorship for purposes of aesthetic distance and yet eliminating the descriptive and normative aspects of authorial intrusion, James creates what Stanzel calls a "figural" novel in almost pure form.¹⁵ Given the predominance of this form in the first half of this century, it is an important landmark in modern fiction.

It may be argued, by way of conclusion, that the fictions of James's major phase mark the inception of the "modernist" novel, insofar as they transform the traditional notion of the Author as a source of ideas and repository of value. In these fictions, the Author has been effaced, by the abdication of Authorial prerogatives or responsibilities, or replaced, by the substitution of the voice or consciousness of one of the characters. The novel consequently becomes more an experience and less an exposition. The Author avoids "going behind." This is not to say that narrative components no longer

14. See Percy Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction, p. 40; John E. Tilford, Jr., "James the Old Intruder," Modern Fiction Studies, 4 (Summer 1958), 157-64; William Thomas, "The Author's Voice in The Ambassadors," Journal of Narrative Technique, 1 (1971), 113.

15. Franz Stanzel, Narrative Situations in the Novel, trans. James P. Puskas (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971).

signify, but that their significations remain unarticulated. "Written speech is bound to speak and to signify, in the absence of the father, and without his father's assistance."¹⁶ The abdication of authorial interpretive responsibilities does not signal the end of interpretation--those responsibilities are merely transferred to the reader. In the modernist novel, the fictional experience is still meaningful; the author is, however, unwilling or unable to specify just what that meaning might be. Thus there is generated within the modernist text a significant and substantial hermeneutic space whose management and description falls to the reader. The fiction no longer specifies its relation to "reality"; that relation must be discovered by the reader, who is given no guarantee that the relation is either simple or singular. But because readers come to the novel with expectations of significance (expectations that the author shares and approves of), they willingly or compulsively occupy that hermeneutic space, making the connections and forging the "reading" that the author was unable to. Aesthetically, the readers are invited to step in, to complete the fiction, to make up their own minds, to take chances, perhaps even to make fools of themselves.

16. Jean-Marie Benoist, "The Fictional Subject," Twentieth-Century Studies, 6 (1971), 92.