

## TOWARDS A CANON OF HENRY JAMES'S WRITER-HERO TALES

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Criticism on James's short fiction constantly refers, under one label or another, to a group of stories whose common feature is the presence of an artist generally cast in a very prominent role within the narrated world. Among many similar denominations, these works have been called «stories of writers and artists» (Matthiessen), «shorter fiction [of] writers and artists» (McElderry 120), or «artist tales» (Wirth-Nesher 118); yet, when the artist in question is specifically a man of letters, the narratives in which he appears are more accurately termed «writer-hero [tales]» (Chapman 4) or even «literary' tales,» if we resort to the expression James himself used in his notebooks.<sup>1</sup> Such a wealth of equivalent phrases, however, tends to conceal the unfortunate absence of any reasoned attempt at establishing which of James's stories can be actually considered *writer-hero tales* and which of them do not belong to a category whose limits and composition appear to be apprehended by critics only in intuitive fashion. Anthologies, for instance, seldom have identical contents. Matthiessen's *Stories of Writers and Artists* includes narratives left out by Kermodé's «*The Figure in the Carpet*» and *Other Stories* and viceversa. Even James's own selection of «'literary' tales» for volumes 15 and 16 of the New York edition of his narrative works seems flagrantly incomplete. These discrepancies could be explained by a combination of commercial tact and artistic judgement on the editors' part, but it is difficult to determine the proportion in which these two criteria weighed with Matthiessen, Kermodé and James himself as they made their respective choices. The same problem occurs in critical works such as Sara S. Chapman's otherwise excellent monograph on James's writer-hero tales; to my mind the selection of the narratives is somewhat incoherent, since she includes «The Abasement

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1. *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James* 154; henceforth cited in the text as CN.

of the Northmores» (1900), which could not even count as a border-line case, while omitting «The Private Life» (1892) and «The Velvet Glove» (1900) both of which are undeniably stories of literary life.

Considering this lack of precision, it seems pertinent to ascertain the extent to which this group of narrative works enjoys some kind of differential status within James's production, and then decide on the inclusion or exclusion of individual stories. Of course, we could also put this process in terms of creating a tentative canon of James's writer-hero tales. The method I will follow has nothing original about it and combines inductive and deductive features. First, a general rule will have to be formulated, and then the criteria derived from this rule will be applied to James's short fiction in order to find out which of his works qualify as tales of literary life and which of them are located outside, or on the periphery of, this canon. To set up this rule, I propose to draw on two sources: first, on the authorial statements indicative of James's intentions, second, on the scrutiny of the stories themselves —and particularly of those which have been received as undoubted cases— in order to abstract their distinctive features and see if they recur in the rest of his production. This procedure will enable us to determine whether these writer-hero narratives are a specific subset of James's short fiction and which of them really belong here.

The two main sources of James's opinions about his own works are his notebooks and his prefaces, which respectively carry observations made *before the fact and after the fact* of artistic creation. In the notebook entry for 13th February, 1896, in which he collected material for «John Delavoy» (1898), James recorded the unpleasant experience of having an essay on Alexandre Dumas rejected by an editor because it was not sufficiently «personal» or «chatty.» But the point of this passage is rather the precise categorization of this story, which shows that, at the turn of the century, its author was perfectly conscious of working towards a particular goal:

R. U. Johnson's letter to me the other day, returning my little paper on Dumas as shocking to their prudery, strikes me as yielding the germ of a lovely little ironic, satiric tale —of the series of small things on the life and experiences of men of letters, the group of the little «literary» tales. Isn't there an exquisite little subject in his sentence about their calculation that my article on A.D. would have been unobjectionable through being merely personal? (CN 154)

Even though he is not explicit as to the proper members of this «group of the little 'literary' tales,» he identifies them quite accurately when he states that their subject is «the life and experiences of men of letters,» emphasizing, from a formal point of view, his most cherished condition of brevity, i.e. that they all should be «small things.» This definition is considerably elaborated on in his critical prefaces, especially in his preface to volume 15 where he states that

[t]hese pieces have this in common: that they deal all with literary life, gathering their motive, in each case, from some noted adventure, some felt embarrassment, some extreme predicament, of the artist enamoured of perfection, ridden by his idea or paying for his sincerity.<sup>2</sup>

Here, however, perhaps as a consequence of working after the fact and not before it, James offers information about specific tales. For him, «The Death of the Lion» (1894), «The Coxon Fund» (1894) and «The Next Time» (1895)—i.e. what he refers to as [t]hese pieces» in the above passage—are all writer-hero narratives, the list being so short and restricted because, in the particular preface from which I quote, James is recalling the invitation he received to contribute to a literary magazine entitled *The Yellow Book* and lays special emphasis on those narratives published herein. After dealing at length with the circumstances of his contribution, he also discusses «The Lesson of the Master» (1888) and «The Figure in the Carpet» (1896), calling these five stories «my homogeneous group» (AN 225) in what I hold to be a very clarifying gesture. This is a firm starting-point, anyway, and it receives support from the fact that James collected most of his tales of literary life in volumes 15 and 16 of the New York edition of his selected works, with the exception of «The Real Right Thing» (1899) and «The Story in It» (c. 1900) to be found, respectively, in volumes 17 and 18, and «The Private Life,» «John Delavoy,» and «The Velvet Glove,» which were altogether dropped from this edition. In volume 16, however, apart from unmistakable instances of writer-hero tales, there are several narratives —«The Tree of Knowledge» (1900) and «The Abasement of the Northmores,» among others—that do not seem to qualify as such according to the criteria set up below.

The second source to be tapped is that of the stories themselves and, by focusing on both their thematic and formal aspects, one can refine and amplify James's own comments and make them serve as a discriminating grid to fix a canon. Thematically, we can distinguish two levels of abstraction in analyzing the subject matter of James's tales. One of these levels is tackled by Tzvetan Todorov in his celebrated essay on this topic, where he makes bold to state that *all* of James's tales develop «the quest for an absolute and absent cause» (74), which, in the particular circumstance of his writer-hero tales, is the literary work itself. This absence sets the characters on a search that, characteristically enough, is never fully resolved either for themselves or for the reader, the paradigm of this indetermination being, of course, «The Figure in the Carpet.» Todorov's thematic reduction of the Jamesian tales is reminiscent of the attempts at a universal «narrative grammar» he carried out in the late sixties within the framework of literary structuralism in order to devise his *Grammaire du Décaméron*. The problem

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2. *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James* 220-21; henceforth cited in the text as AN.

with this method is obviously its high level of abstraction which very much hinders my purpose here, i.e. to find out ways of *differentiating* James's writer-hero tales from the rest of his tales, not to see in what respects they are alike or, still less, to propose a thematic cover capable of comprising them all.

There have been several attempts to name the basic thematic components of James's literary production at a more specific level than that of Todorov's description, and, apart from the international theme and the theme of the pilgrim in search of society, it is generally agreed that the theme of the artist in conflict with society features in a large proportion of his works. James's writer-hero tales are characterized precisely by the presence of the literary artist in a prominent position, a fact which immediately invokes metaliterary topics, as well as a potential confusion of realms between the work in hand and the work or works that, almost inevitably, are talked about within the fictional world.<sup>3</sup> But the presence of the literary artist in these tales is not jubilant; rather, it seems beset by difficulties—mainly, though not exclusively, financial and of public appreciation—that lead James to allude to «the troubled artistic consciousness» (AN 221) and to confront the «beautiful talents the exercise of which yet isn't lucrative» with «other talents that leave any fine appreciation mystified and gaping» being, nevertheless, «a source of vast pecuniary profit» (AN 226). The maladjustment of the Jamesian writer to the modes of production of a philistine capitalist society or, in other words, the «power of wealth and the powerlessness of the writer-artist . . . characteristically impotent before successful materialists» is doubtlessly the central subject of these writer-hero tales (Chapman 5). It is not surprising, however, that this central subject, being about writers and their predicaments, should be deeply rooted in a particular stage of James's life.

The autobiographical import of these tales is not universally accepted. There are critics such as Brooke K. Horvath who believes that no aspect of James's life bore any likeness to that of his fictional writers—Ambient, St. George, Saltram, Paraday, Limbert, Vereker, etc.—and, although «James's life and private confessions . . . amply attest to periods of failure, self-doubt, and frustration . . . James is unlike his fictive colleagues, and the presumptions underlying their failure are not his.»<sup>4</sup> No proof, however, is adduced to support this claim, and, in its absence, I would rather turn to a crucial fragment contained in James's preface to volume 15 of the New York edition, in which he discusses the origin of the *données* of the writer-hero tales composed for *The Yellow Book*:

. . . whereas any anecdote about life pure and simple, as it were, proceeds almost as a matter of course from some good jog of fond fancy's elbow, some pencilled

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3. For a discussion of the metaliterary issue in «The Author of *Beltraffio*» (1884), see Lawrence R. Schehr, «'The Author of *Beltraffio*' as Theory.»

4. Horvath 106. Other critics do not share Horvath's assumptions and support the autobiographical weight of James's writer-hero tales; see, for instance, Vaid 62 and Wegelin 639-40.

note on somebody else's case, so the material for any picture of personal states so specifically complicated as those of my hapless friends in the present volume will have been drawn preponderantly *from the depths of the designer's own mind*. (AN 221, my italics)

Two different aspects of the creative process are touched upon here. On the one hand, James throws into relief the role of fancy in the discovery of a suitable «anecdote about life pure and simple»; on the other, he draws attention to the fact that the «complication» of picturing adequately the plight of his fictional writers requires his drawing on «the depths of the designer's own mind,» that is, some support from personal experience that fancy alone seems incapable of providing. This is quite a weighty statement in settling the question of autobiography, but, in addition to this, James is not at all reluctant to tell us in his notebooks which character takes his own part in a specific narrative and what traits of his personality are attributed to this character. When commenting on the initial plan for «The Figure in the Carpet,» he writes:

The young man, the 2d [sic] young man (my friend), does too —and it *is his* torment, *his* worry, *his* study of the pretty books, that I perhaps mainly represent. I have given them up —the game isn't worth the candle. It's all a bad joke and a mystification: *that's* the ground I take . . . Say I take the ground of our hero's madness, or mere persistent pleasantry amounting almost to madness —and that it is he who take[s] the side of the outright beauty and sanity of the work . . . I'm not, I don't care, I cling to my vulgar explanation . . . (CN 137-38)

Passages of this kind do not prove, of course, the existence of autobiography in James's writer-hero tales, since the first person pronoun might well be a mere device used by the author to adopt the character perspective momentarily and check if his development of the story's initial idea is consistent. But, taken in combination with James's statement about the role played by «the depths of the designer's mind» in the conception of the *données* for these tales and with some concrete facts from his life at the end of the nineteenth century, the autobiographical hypothesis gains considerable strength.

According to Leon Edel, in or about 1889 James «was seriously re-examining his professional and financial career» ([363]). In the previous five years he had worked at a frantic pace, but had obtained no proportional success in terms of royalties. James, like other novelists such as James Joyce, turned to the dramatic career as a possibility of leaving behind his inveterate financial difficulties. At the end of the eighties, James enjoyed a remarkable reputation as a novelist, essayist and reviewer among critics and the enlightened reading public, but his income was comparatively low, because he was not at all popular. His first attempt to make a dramatic reputation for himself was the adaptation of his novel *The American* (1877) for the stage. With the resulting play, he

achieved a moderate success in Southport near Liverpool on 3rd January, 1889. But, to his horror, he was soon to realize «how a provincial success is confined to the provinces.»<sup>5</sup>After struggling for four years against a public who did not enjoy his intellectual subtleties, James suffered a great disappointment that brought his dramatic career to an end, when his play *Guy Domville* was booed and hissed by an unappreciative London audience on 5th January, 1895.

It is not difficult to realize that «James's discouragement might have contributed to his broader sympathies with the plight of his writer colleagues» (Chapman 21), and this interpretation seems even more plausible if we consider the publication date of his writer-hero narratives concerned with the depiction of the careful and conscientious artist in conflict with the lowbrow public. His three tales published in *The Yellow Book*—«The Death of the Lion,» «The Coxon Fund,» and «The Next Time»—deal with different modulations of this theme, dating, as we already know, from his theatrical years. Apart from these, one could also point out «Greville Fane» (1892) and «The Middle Years» (1893), as well as the later «John Delavoy» and «Broken Wings» (1900). The theme of the isolation of the literary artist from the general public features in all his tales, but it is particularly noticeable in those just mentioned.

From a formal perspective, there are two criteria that can contribute to setting limits to James's tales of literary life: first, the physical dimensions of the works; second, what Seymour Chatman calls the structure of narrative transmission, i.e. the presence of internal narrators and/or focalizers who, in one way or another, condition the meaning-making process. The first of these criteria obviously disqualifies the novels (e.g. *The Ambassadors* or *The Sacred Fount*) and the novellas (e.g. *The Aspern Papers*) as members of this class. But this is not an otiose distinction, since we very well know the importance James attached to the size of a narrative work in correspondence with the kind of theme it contained. In the preface to «The Author of *Beltraffio*,» he discusses—with reference to the organic growth of the literary work—the problems of artistic compression encountered by writers when editors set stringent word limits under the pressure of production costs. In the course of this discussion, he establishes a dichotomy between the concepts of *anecdotal theme* and *developmental theme* (AN 232-35) and, with their aid, he reviews some of his works, analyzing the correspondence between the kind of theme he adopts and the resulting length. For instance, when dealing with «Greville Fane,» he explains that «the subject . . . is 'developmental' enough, while the form has to make the anecdotal concession» (AN 234). Nevertheless, instead of rueing this inadequacy, he is satisfied with it and finds reasons to boast about the perfect harmony of the finished product.<sup>6</sup> In this case, his source of pride lies in the fact that «Greville

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5. Letter to his brother William, qtd. in Edel 367.

6. In spite of his organicist protestations, James was a mechanist by his method of composition. Instead of abhorring any circumstance that could prevent the full growth of a

Fane» is a relatively short tale, in which he manages to squeeze, by a consistent foreshortening of the subject, the biography of a pleasant popular novelist and her children's unbelievable callousness towards her.

More important than the mere physical dimensions of these works is the subtlety of their narrative structure. The standard writer-hero tale is endowed with a first-person marginal narrator-witness placed on the edge of the represented world and enjoying various degrees of plot significance according to different critical opinions. For Vaid, these narrators «are primarily variations of a narrative method, not fully developed characters in their own right» (61), whereas for Macnaughton they are crucial elements of the fictional world and bear decisively on its representation. Fulfilling the double role of speakers and observers, they contribute to the generation of a Bakhtinian surplus of seeing that relativizes reality by bridging the gap between the inner self and the outer world (Craig 19-20, 30), which causes most of James's writer-hero narratives to exhibit a faltering, insecure tone.<sup>7</sup> In consonance with the «literary» setting of these tales, the role of the marginal narrator is embodied by writers or critics and, although this fact should accord them increased powers of discrimination and perception, they are usually gullible and unreliable.

The foregoing discussion of thematic and formal criteria leads me to formulate a rule whose application will yield a set of tales in the form of a structured canon, i.e. with works placed at its core, on its periphery and, finally, outside the canon, though perhaps closely related to it by formal or thematic aspects. The first criterion to be applied will be the presence in the tale of a literary artist in conflict with society due to the general misunderstanding of his artistry or to the financial difficulties that arise from such misunderstanding. This is obviously a thematic criterion and one which can be derived from authorial statements (signally AN 220-21) or authorial experiences outside the realm of fiction. Technical in nature, the second criterion lies in the presence of what I have called a first-person marginal narrator-witness, i.e. a narrator whose participation in the development of the plot is generally restricted to the role of observer or transitive centre, with the possibility of his mind becoming gradually the object of the narration (for the concept of *transitive centre* see Alvarez Amorós, «James, Lubbock, and Beyond» 50-51). Other minor criteria are, for instance, the role of autobiography in

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developmental theme, he cherishes the imposition of obstacles that may allow him to show off his mastery: «The merit of the thing is in the feat, once more, of the transfusion; the receptacle (of form) being so exiguous, the brevity imposed so great. I undertook the brevity, so often undertaken on a like scale before, and again arrived at it by the innumerable repeated chemical reductions and condensations that tend to make of the very short story, as I risk again noting, one of the costliest, even if, like the hard, shining sonnet, one of the most indestructible, forms of composition in general use» (AN 239-40). For a full discussion of this question, see my essay «Henry James's 'Organic Form' and Classical Rhetoric.»

7. «Greville Fane» is an obvious exception to this rule.

on the formalistic theme of «The Death of the Lion» and «John Delavoy,» according to which what really matters is an author's work and not the purely human side of his personality.

The fourteen tales named and discussed above form, in my view, the canon of Henry James's writer-hero narratives; yet, one could also mention other stories situated outside this canon but clearly related to it. «The Abasement of the Northmores» presents two habitual letter-writers, John Northmore and Warren Hope. But none of them appears as an author of fictional works, and the reference to the fact that Northmore «had made literature» («The Abasement of the Northmores» *Complete Tales* 11:111) just takes on ironic overtones when read in the context of the rest of his achievements: «He had made politics, he had made literature, he had made land, he had made a bad manner and a great many mistakes, he had made a gaunt, foolish wife, two extravagant sons and four awkward daughters —he had made everything . . .» («The Abasement of the Northmores» *Complete Tales* 11:111). Besides, the word «literature» seems to be used here in the traditional sense of «written works» of whatever type, and this is confirmed by Northmore's description —from his wife's perspective— as a genius «in economics, in the higher politics, in philosophic history» («The Abasement of the Northmores» *Complete Tales* 11:116). Further evidence that this is not a writer-hero tale lies in its radical departure from the stipulated conditions, such as the presence of a literary artist in conflict with society and of a first-person narrator-witness: on the one hand, it is difficult to refer to Northmore and Hope as literary artists, let alone to see them in any kind of conflict with society; on the other, the tale is related by an authoritative third-person narrator leaving no room for uncertainty or relativism. «The Story in It,» for its part, is a curious case, since it could be depicted as a tale of literary life, but *not* as a writer-hero tale. Hitherto, both expressions have been considered synonymous, for all stories of literary life turn round the figure of a great writer who plays the more or less clear role of hero or protagonist. But in this tale characters simply pose as amateur critics and discuss French novels in comparison with Anglo-American ones without the least reference to any particular author located in the fictional world. Other Jamesian stories deal with non-literary artists such as sculptors («The Tree of Knowledge») or painters («The Real Thing» [1892] and «The Tone of Time» [1903]). For this reason, they have not been analysed here, but it should be noted that many of them —«The Real Thing» being a case in point— display, and elaborate on, the same themes as those treated by James in the stories presented and examined in this essay.

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