Narrative Middles

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Getting the middle right was hard for Henry James. If, as he suggests in the preface to *The Tragic Muse* (1890), it was his delight in “deep-breathing economy and […] organic form” that kept his novels from reproducing the excesses of what he famously called “large loose baggy monsters,” that sought-after structural tautness seemed most likely to give way in the middle. He writes that

. . . the centre of my structure would insist on placing itself not, so to speak, in the middle. It mattered little that the reader with the idea or the suspicion of a structural centre is the rarest of friends and of critics—a bird, it would seem, as merely fabled as the phoenix: the terminational terror was not the less to break in and my work threaten to masquerade for me as an active figure condemned to the disgrace of legs too short, ever so much too short, for its body. I urge myself to the candid confession that in very few of my productions, to my eye, has the organic centre succeeded in getting into proper position.¹
A novel’s middle is tricky: the structural balance, the produced and proportional difference between a middle or center and everything else is, given James’s interest in “organic form,” simply difficult to achieve; too much or too little here or there results in shapes awkward enough to pose a threat to form, in figures fragmented, stunted, or foreshortened that seem the inevitable consequence of wishing too hard for a perfect body. In the developmental story that James tells again and again in the prefaces, the story of how this little germ grew up into that kind of novel, the “just right” stroke that would at last land the middle in the middle seems maddeningly elusive: the world, running over with relations, has only too much to give, and the impossibility of knowing what would be enough gets right in the way of seeing where one’s middle should go.

The middle is hard to handle even within the context of James’s brief discussion of it in the preface to The Tragic Muse. On the one hand, it names a pervasive attribute of a novel structured around one or another point of view: to look for the middle in these terms would be to look for a “center of consciousness” around and through which the stuff of a novel could be organized. The middle, in this case, would refer to a mostly theoretical point posited in order to allow for the hermeneutic motion between different parts understood as bound together into an internally coherent whole. On the other hand, James seems also to refer to the modest Aristotelian idea of the middle as that which “follows something else and is followed by something else”: “The first half of a fiction insists ever on figuring to me as the stage for the second half . . . ” (6).2 Constructing a fiction is about proportions, and getting the proportions right means having a first half and a second half that make sense in terms of each other and that help each other to make sense. The novel in that case comes to look like a folding screen; its wholeness hangs, as it were, from the hinge of a mundanely material middle. The presence of both senses of the middle—as luminous hermeneutic center and merely material point—produces a situation just as monstrous as any of the prefaces’ other organic forms gone bad. Their simultaneous resemblance and difference threaten to make a lot of nonsense out of James’s discussion of the middle.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has seen in this slip a moment when what seems simply muddled in James’s novel talk instead figures a sensuousness with which the prefaces might otherwise seem to have little to do: “But, confusingly, these spatial metaphors refer to the interrelation among characters’ points of view [. . . ] but also (and quite incommensurably) to the relation between the first half and the latter (or, anthropomorphically, the lower and/or back) half of each novel.”3 The middle is for Sedgwick polymorphous, a place within the novel too excessively there; it thus becomes an idea resistant enough to system-
atization to stand in for a pleasure that would similarly exceed our efforts at simple description. The middle, so hard to do, can only be done (in the vague and suggestive Jamesian sense of that word), and bringing into proximity the first and the second versions of the middle produces a situation in which a novel’s brains cannot be kept safely separate from other, less reputable parts of its body. The middle, hard to hold on to, is delightful precisely because it marks a point at which the terms of James’s nascent novel theory resist abstraction in order to cultivate a writing that is pleasurable because it is particular. There is also another kind of excess at work here. If the middle sometimes seems a place where the body of a novel is—according to an idea about novels that the prefaces both support and lament—too wide, weird, or short, so can it come off as poorly timed, falling somewhere before or after what would seem its proper place. James’s middles can thus seem to resemble his characters insofar as those characters are, according to Kaja Silverman, often “conspicuously either too early or too late,” too early or too late, that is, in relation to one or another primal scene that would take the position of center within a whole narrative of development. Characters in James tend, in other words, to have more than a little trouble knowing what they need to know when they need to know it. In this, they are like a novel form that was itself both early and late: James writes in “The Future of the Novel” that the novel “is a form that has had a fortune so little to have been foretold at its cradle. . . . It arrived, in truth, the novel, late at self-consciousness, but it has done its utmost ever since to make up for lost opportunities.”

It is thus appropriate that James’s discussion of the middle is itself oddly timed, appearing as it does in the preface to The Tragic Muse, a novel for which the middle isn’t that much of a problem. James’s troubled take on the middle applies, he says, to almost all of his novels; if, in that case, the middle is everywhere a problem, why mention it in one preface instead of another? Why mention it here instead of there? James accounts for his discussion with a reference to his “mortal horror of two stories, two pictures, in one,” a horror brought on by the difficulty that came with working to resolve the story of Nick Dormer’s agonized decision to “chuck” politics for art and the story of Peter Sherringham’s efforts to get Miriam Rooth, the tragic muse of the novel’s title, to “chuck” the dramatic art that kindled his desire so that she might respectfully marry him. Though this awkward division of labor does, as James sees, pose problems, they are not exactly the problems about which he writes in the preface to The Tragic Muse. While the presence of several seemingly central characters does indeed complicate the novel’s ability to focus attention, the economic problem posed by the jostling presence of two interwoven tales is not especially about the successful articulation of a middle point coming
appropriately after the beginning and before the end. So, while the middle (as opposed to the center, about which, if we’re talking about Jamesian centers of consciousness, there is already no shortage of writing) is as important to *The Tragic Muse* as it is to any novel, it seems no more important to it than it is to any novel, a fact that would mean little if it weren’t for the fact that the middle is so absolutely important to the novel that James had written just before: *The Princess Casamassima*. As we will soon see, that earlier novel’s most spectacular event is not-so-spectacularly situated at the novel’s most middle point; as a result, where *The Tragic Muse* is just another novel whose prickly middle causes problems, *The Princess Casamassima* is a novel that not only *has* a middle, but also is importantly and centrally *about* the middle.

*The Princess Casamassima* (1886) was very much on James’s mind as he began to write *The Tragic Muse*; he was in 1887 still smarting from the relative silence with which *The Princess* had been greeted and welcomed his new next novel as a chance for change: he writes to Grace Norton in the summer of that year, “I am just beginning a novel about half as long (thank God!) as the *Princess*. . . .” Of course, *The Tragic Muse* was in the end every bit as long as *The Princess*, a fact that gives it the feel of an unexpected and unwelcome repetition. It was meant to be half as long as its precursor, and in expanding to twice its intended length, ends up looking like the latter half of a much larger figure made up of two equally long novels. The recognition that the middle might be a problem thus appears as both belated (in James’s late-blooming reference to it in the prefaces) and precocious (in its unannounced early performance in *The Princess*). Just as the middle tends to encourage excess, so too in this case does the developmental quirk visible in the relation between these novels from James’s “middle years” and their prefaces produce at the level of theory and practice a surplus registered in the fact of so very many words and the oddly timed preface to *The Tragic Muse*. *The Princess Casamassima*, both because it falls where it does in relation to James’s other novels and because of what it does with its own middle, can be taken as a long meditation on middleness: Why is the middle a problem? What does the middle do? Why, when the middle is otherwise elusive in James, is it given such particular pride of place in *The Princess Casamassima*?

*The Princess Casamassima* is about a “little cockney bookbinder” named Hyacinth Robinson. Hyacinth, who is the product of a brief and fatal liaison between a French seamstress and an English aristocrat (she kills him after he jilts her), bears a social order that will not recognize him a grudge. He is raised
in something like squalor by Amanda Pynsent, a kind-hearted seamstress, and suffers an early and defining trauma when “Pinnie,” as he calls her, takes him to visit his disgraced dying mother in the Millbank Prison infirmary. As a result of his hurts, his shame, and his sympathy for “the People,” Hyacinth works for the first half of the novel to insinuate himself into a shadowy anarchist underground dedicated, however vaguely, to society’s overthrow. Towards the middle of the novel—make that at its middle—he succeeds and offers his life to the anarchist Diedrich Hoffendahl: he later tells the Princess, a jaded and beautiful aristocrat who initially takes Hyacinth up because she is interested in “the great cause,” that “I took a vow—a tremendous, terrible vow” (327). He has promised to execute, when called upon, one or another terrorist plot that will almost certainly result in the loss of his life. After making that promise, he sees something of the world (Paris and Venice), experiences a change of heart, finds that he loves a lot of what an otherwise barbarous culture has produced, and commits suicide in order to escape the terms of his vow and what looks like an insoluble and familiarly Jamesian tension between art and life.

Hyacinth’s vow is as much the middle of the novel as his cleverly reflective “vessel of consciousness” is its center: not only does it take place at the novel’s very middle, falling physically between the two volumes of its New York Edition, but it also stands as the culmination of Hyacinth’s political career, the crisis of his life, and the point that bisects that life in terms of its significance. Things happened before he made his promise and things happened after he made his promise; insofar as Hyacinth’s brief life is in the end a whole and narratable thing, his vow is that point against which all other aspects of that life can be read: the promise, we are told, “altered his life altogether—had, indeed, as he might say, changed the terms on which he held it” (326). Beforeness and afterwardsness are, as Deborah Esch points out, built into the very structure of the promise as a speech act defined by the inevitable and unpredictable difference between before and after: “What James calls Hyacinth’s ‘deep dilemma,’ his ‘impossible stand,’ is a function of the intervention of time into the configuration of promise and redemption in the narrative. An interval opens up between the promise and the demand that it be kept. . . .” The constitutive difference between what a promise means today and what it will mean tomorrow is only an especially concentrated form of a structure that reappears locally in Hyacinth’s divided self—“there were times when he said to himself that it might very well be his fate to be divided, to the point of torture” (165)—and more generally in the many ways in which the difference between past and future, present and future, or past and present drive the characters and the plot of The Princess.
If “the noncoincidence of the utterance and its fulfillment” in time constitutes a key dilemma within *The Princess Casamassima*, so is it the very engine of a psychic economy defined by the pressure that the past exerts on the present. Using the language of psychoanalysis, we might think of Hyacinth in terms of his “afterwardsness” (Jean Laplanche’s term for Freudian *Nachträglichkeit* or “deferred action”). *Nachträglichkeit* names the process according to which old memories take on new kinds of significance in relation to new experiences and new stages of psychic development. The phenomenon of *Nachträglichkeit* raises a number of important and importantly novelistic questions: In what ways are past and present related? Are old traumas really responsible for new actions? What, if anything, separates past from present from future? Because these are, as we have begun to see, also *The Princess Casamassima*’s questions, a turn to Freudian *Nachträglichkeit* will be—or, rather, will have been—useful.

Laplanche and Pontalis point out that “Freud uses the term ‘nachträglich’ repeatedly and constantly” to refer to the relation between experiences that seemed the first time around to lack significance and later experiences that make their early, missed significance felt. At first glance, the logic of deferred action would seem to provide fodder for critics who would see psychoanalysis as a determinist reduction of psychic life to a more or less elaborate effect of infantile trauma; some primal scene or primal repression, some early trauma or forgotten seduction will inevitably emerge as the truth of analysis and analysis. Indeed, Laplanche points out that Freud worked, if with difficulty, to solidify exactly this sense of the past’s relation to the present: “Freud . . . never wavered in his conviction that what comes before determines what happens after.” At the level of theory if not practice—in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, “Little Hans,” and the “Wolf Man”—Freud maintains what Laplanche calls the determinist sense of *Nachträglichkeit*’s temporal mechanism—the past really determines what happens in the future. To focus exclusively on that direction of *Nachträglichkeit*, however, would be to miss an important aspect of its operation both in and after Freud: while common sense would reduce its effect to a linear, forward motion (the past *causes* the future), *Nachträglichkeit* also seems to work in reverse. As much as Freud worked to limit his concept to one direction, it seemed nonetheless to resist that limitation; where it was to go forward, it seemed sometimes also to go back. That, for instance, the Wolf Man comes later to “understand” the significance of his parents’ sexual act seems more *retroactive*: “He received the impressions when he was one and a half; his understanding of them was deferred, but became possible at the time of the dream owing to his development, his sexual excitations, and his sexual researches.” In this instance, present knowledge *produces* the past as differently significant—as different—from what it had been. The future,
in this instance, *makes* the past. It is this other direction of *Nachträglichkeit* that Lacan emphasizes: “The past and the future correspond precisely to one another. And not any old how—not in the sense that you might believe that analysis indicates, namely from past to the future. On the contrary, precisely in analysis, because its technique works, it happens in the right order—from the future to the past.” For Lacan, this is the “right order” because the truth of psychoanalysis as talking cure depends upon it: “he simply presupposes all the resubjectivizations of the event that seem necessary to him to explain its effects at each turning point at which he restructures himself—that is, as many restructurings of the event as take place, as he puts it, nachträglich, after the fact.” Or, again to use Laplanche’s terms, “it is the *later* which is perhaps more important, and alone allows us to understand and to interpret what we persist in calling the *prior*."

The point is that Freud’s thinking and writing about psychic causality consistently pose the difference between the forward and backward motion of *Nachträglichkeit* as a problem. At the level of the text, deferred action doesn’t always go only forward or only backward; and neither does it go back and forth both at once. Rather, Freud’s writing regularly forces the reader to decide between one of two available but incommensurate positions: forward or back. It is for this reason that Laplanche takes “afterwardsness” as a translation more appropriate than deferred action or retrospective fantasizing for this phenomenon: “So either one decides to split up and divide the term in translation, or one chooses a term that will allow the readers to stay with Freud’s term and reinterpret it for themselves. That’s why I propose a translation that is not interpretive: I suggest the term *après coup*, and ‘afterwards’ in English. In all cases in Freud it’s possible to use either ‘afterwards’ or ‘afterwardsness.’”

In order to get the double and contradictory movement of afterwardsness across, Laplanche rehearses a moment from *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

> A young man who was a great admirer of feminine beauty was talking once—so the story went—of the good-looking wet nurse who had suckled him when he was a baby: “I’m sorry,” he remarked, “that I didn’t make a better use of my opportunity.” I was in the habit of quoting this anecdote to explain the factor of afterwardsness in the mechanism of the psychoneuroses.

Freud’s use of the story (the protagonist of which sounds appropriately like James’s idea of the novel as a form that “has done its utmost ever since to make up for lost opportunities”) is significant for Laplanche precisely because it isn’t clear from the telling in which direction the erotic charge of the young man’s story moves: either retrogressively from the adult’s mischievous sense of
what he would have done if he knew then what he knows now or progressively from an infant sexuality the force of which continues to be both felt and expressed in the psychic and erotic life of adults.

And if afterwardsness is a problem in Freud, the middle is an important part of its structure; the middle is the point that allows the analyst and the reader to enter into the work of interpretation. What, in other words, makes afterwardsness work, what in both directions makes events legible is a moment that comes in between and that allows the difference between before and after to become meaningful: the analyzable psychic life is made up, says Laplanche, of “two scenes linked by associative chains, but also clearly separated from each other by a temporal barrier which inscribes them in two different spheres of meaning” (Laplanche’s emphasis). The simple fact of relating beginning to end (a relation both dependent on and constitutive of some kind of middle) puts us in a position where if we would read for significance we would need to decide but cannot finally decide between reading forward or backward, from trauma to symptom or from symptom to trauma. This is why Laplanche prefers “afterwardsness”: it holds us suspended between these two available but partial interpretations.

The Princess Casamassima is, I would argue, characterized at every level by its afterwardsness. Afterwardsness is central to the temporality of the vow; the vow is necessarily the sometimes messy structural meeting of a before—when the promise is made—and an after—when the promise is kept. Hyacinth’s relation to his origin is also structured in terms of its afterwardsness: although Hyacinth meets his poor, incarcerated mother early in life (he meets her briefly, as I have said, in one of the novel’s celebrated opening scenes), the life-defining significance of the visit emerges only afterwards: “The strangeness of the matter to himself was that the germ of his curiosity should have developed so slowly; that the haunting wonder, which now, as he looked back, appeared to fill his whole childhood, should only after so long an interval have crept up to the air” (166). The muddled naturalistic logic of the novel remains interesting and, I would argue, Jamesian because it fails ever really to announce its proper order: Hyacinth is a great reader and seems as much a product of novels and plays as of his social context or of any real genetic imperative. Are Hyacinth’s adult feelings, sensitivities, and actions the inevitable result of his genetic inheritance, or is that inheritance rendered significant and legible as a plot only because of the novel-reading that James tells us the adult Hyacinth has done? And, again, as I have already suggested, that the middle is afterwards announced as a problem in the preface to The Tragic Muse but worked out before in the body of The Princess Casamassima seems not only to underscore the significance of this problem, but also to reproduce
it as theory. As was the case with Hyacinth, what we see in James becomes significant only afterwards. *The Princess* thus becomes both a meditation on and an instantiation of problems that seem the inevitable result of James’s particular investment in the middle. Importantly, these different aspects of the same problem with the middle come together—where else—at the middle of *The Princess Casamassima*.

Although *The Princess Casamassima* is divided into six books, the novel’s middle in fact falls between books two and three; in fact, the first volume of the two-volume New York Edition of the novel ends with the end of book two and the second volume begins with the beginning of book three. At the end of book two, Hyacinth is on his way to meet the terrorist mastermind, Diedrich Hoffendahl, in front of whom he will make a solemn promise to commit a violent and probably suicidal terrorist act; book three, as we will see, begins well after Hyacinth has had his midnight meeting with Hoffendahl. What falls in between those two volumes is arguably the novel’s most important event: Hyacinth’s vow. Book two, more specifically, ends in this way: Hyacinth makes a spontaneous speech against the system at the “Sun and Moon,” a pub where erstwhile revolutionists gather; it impresses Paul Muniment, the most serious and impressive of the London radicals (“Hyacinth was sure he had extraordinary things in his head; that he was thinking them out to the logical end, wherever it might land him; and that the night be should produce them, with the door of the club-room guarded and the company bound by a tremendous oath, the others would look at each other and turn pale” [206]). After the speech, Paul invites Hyacinth to meet the great Hoffendahl, who has come to London to recruit participants for one or another plot:

They all walked away from the “Sun and Moon,” and it was not for some five minutes that they encountered the four-wheeled cab which deepened so the solemnity of their expedition. After they were seated in it, Hyacinth learned that Hoffendahl was in London but for three days, was liable to hurry away on the morrow, and was accustomed to receive visits at all kinds of queer hours. It was getting to be midnight; the drive seemed interminable, to Hyacinth’s impatience and curiosity. He sat next to Paul Muniment, who passed his arm around him, as if by way of a tacit expression of indebtedness. /They all ended by sitting silent, as the cab jogged along murky miles, and by the time it stopped Hyacinth had wholly lost, in the drizzling gloom, a sense of their whereabouts. (296)
The passage’s final dissolve only amplifies an ambiguity that has defined the whole of the scene. The errand on which the four men have entered should be among the most motivated of the novel; no one, however, seems to have much of an idea of what it is all about. This is, of course, disturbing in part because it is finally about violence, about hatching a plot to plant a bomb, to shoot a man, to do damage for reasons that will remain, like details of the scene, unclear. The tone of the thing—the hour, the weather, the mode of transportation—seems to take over, putting the atmospheric cart before the narrative horse. And if the weather is murky, so is the affective field in which these characters move; expressions are tacit, significant, excessive, maybe meaningless, maybe not. We lose, like Hyacinth, all sense of our whereabouts as chapter, book, and volume fade to black.

The beginning of the next book, book three, exacerbates or at least sustains this confusion:

Hyacinth got up early—an operation attended with very little effort, as he had scarcely closed his eyes all night. What he saw from his window made him dress as rapidly as a young man could do who desired more than ever that his appearance should not give strange ideas about him. . . . (299)

It is not for another page or so that we realize that three months have passed since the previous scene and that Hyacinth now finds himself waking up in a spare room at Medley, a country house rented by the Princess Casamas-sima. Until that’s clear—and the text seems to delight in withholding that information—we can have no idea where Hyacinth is in fact waking up; that he exhibits an anxious concern about fitting in with his surroundings tells us nothing—it is, after all, the truth of Hyacinth’s character that, as nice as he always looks, he never fits in. That book two ends in the late evening and book three begins early in the morning produces a narrative ellipsis that goes unnoticed long enough to suture the scenes together; learning, as we will, that much time has passed between night and day will require us to tug at those stitches, giving the middle an affective significance that it didn’t necessarily need to have. As if to add to this effect, the ellipsis is made into even more of a fetish by the fact that it falls in between chapters; indeed, in between the two discrete physical volumes of the New York Edition of the novel. The three lost months and the all-important promise that stand between his evening with Paul and his morning with the Princess are left somehow to hang in the air, dislocated and lost.25

What falls between the pages is arguably the novel’s most important scene, the moment when Hyacinth makes his promise. The scene is, because of its
absence, the novel’s middle in a way that something coming at the end of
the first part or the beginning of the second never could be. In this way, the
excluded middle of *The Princess Casamassima* seems like a performed solution
to problems that will be afterwards announced in the preface to *The Tragic
Muse*: carving out a precise absence at the novel’s midpoint is, it seems clear,
an ingenious way to keep still a middle that might otherwise swell all out of
proportion or simply float away. If, however, digging a hole where the middle
should go works to pin down what will in the preface to *The Tragic Muse*
seem all too elusive, we might wonder why this scene of all scenes, a scene the
presence of which would have pinned down the notoriously vague politics of
*The Princess Casamassima*, should be sacrificed to structural convenience. As
happy, in that case, as this move might make the formalist worried only about
securing the tenuous relation between beginning, middle, and end, the absent-
ing of the meeting with Hoffendahl offers only anxiety to the reader worried
more about politics and political violence. Why, with so much at stake, would
James withhold Hyacinth’s promise and thus the promise of the political real
from *The Princess Casamassima*?

Thought of in these terms, *The Princess*’s absent middle might be taken as
the index of a more general political ambivalence that has given critics much
about which to write. Is the novel, considering the quality of its treatment of
terrorism in the 1880s, a heavy-handed joke, or is it rather a canny kind of
political analysis? There are, on the one hand, those who would see James’s
novel as pure political fantasy: Rebecca West famously called *The Princess* “a
mad dream,” and James’s anarchists have been said to belong “decidedly in the
realm of comic opera.” 26 John Lucas writes that “at the very point where we
need precision we meet a baffling vagueness. The ignorance of the characters
too often suggests the ignorance of their creator.” 27 There are, on the other
hand, those who have tried to salvage a properly political James. Lionel Trill-
ing, for instance, writes: “For the truth is that there is not a political event of
*The Princess Casamassima*, not a detail of oath or mystery or danger, which is
not confirmed by multitudinous records.” 28

James, in fact, plays in his preface with the idea that he might not have
known enough about his subject: “There was always of course the chance that
the propriety might be challenged—challenged by readers of a knowledge
greater than mine” (48). Knowing little, however, does little to undermine
James’s carefully guarded position. On the one hand, James converts his “not
knowing” into a virtue: “Shouldn’t I find it in the happy contention that the
value I wished most to render and the effect I wished most to produce were
precisely those of our not knowing, but only guessing and suspecting and
trying to ignore, what ‘goes on’ irreconcileably, subversively, beneath the vast
smug surface?” (48). On the other hand, James was, as Trilling notes, “nourished like any other on conversation and the daily newspaper,” and shared in a general anxiety that characterized the period in which the novel was written. If he didn’t know a lot, that meant simply that he knew as much as the next guy. In January 1885 James writes to Grace Norton: “There is very little ‘going on’—the country is gloomy, anxious, and London reflects its gloom. Westminster Hall and the Tower were blown up two days ago by Irish Dynamiters.” James is, in this regard, a man very much of his time, a man of a time Mike Davis describes as that “half-century during which the bourgeois imaginary was haunted by the infamous figure of the bomb-throwing nihilist or anarchist.” It was exactly the “haunting” quality of that threat that James wanted to capture; rather than write an article about terrorism, he wrote a long novel and in so doing sought, as he writes in his preface, to represent “the sketchiness and vagueness and dimness” of a violence that seemed omnipresent to what elsewhere he called his “imagination of disaster.”

In answer to the first question—why does Hyacinth make his vow—we might say that, according to the logic of James’s novel, he can’t do much else. The Princess Casamassima is, among other things, James’s odd and oddly strained effort to produce a naturalist novel, one written self-consciously under the influence of Zola. Read in this way, the novel is a working-out of the consequences of Hyacinth’s genetic inheritance, the consequences of a self divided between the English blood of his father, the dissipated duke, Frederick Purvis, and the French blood of his mother, the “wild” seamstress, Florentine Vivier. This problematic provenance could be taken as that which drives all else along; it puts Hyacinth in a place where he might most poignantly feel and diagnose the injustices of a corrupt social order, it gives him an inborn revolutionary credibility that James makes much of (his is, at different moments in the novel, the gloriously spilt blood of 1789, 1848, and 1871), and it sets the stage for the
crisis of conscience that leads to Hyacinth’s suicide. It is also what convinces Paul Muniment, who introduces Hyacinth to Hoffendahl, that he is the right man for the job. Not only is Hyacinth sure that his friend Poupin “had taken upon himself to disseminate the anecdote of his origin, of his mother’s disaster” (282), but that origin also seems to be the cause of Hyacinth’s spontaneous speech to the men of the Sun and Moon, a speech which stands as the clear precursor to his awful vow. After one disgruntled radical, a certain Delancey, taunts the others, calling them “afraid, afraid, afraid,” Hyacinth responds:

The next moment Hyacinth found that he had sprung up on a chair, opposite to [Delancey], and that at the sight of so rare a phenomenon the commotion had suddenly checked itself. It was the first time he had asked the ear of the company, and it was given on the spot. He was sure he looked very white, and it was even possible they could see him tremble. He could only hope that this didn’t make him ridiculous when he said, “I don’t think it’s right of him to say that. There are others, besides him. At all events, I want to speak for myself: it may do some good; I can’t help it. I’m not afraid; I’m very sure I’m not. I’m ready to do anything that will do any good; anything, anything—I don’t care a rap. In such a cause I should like the idea of danger. I don’t consider my bones precious in the least, compared with some other things. If one is sure one isn’t afraid, and one is accused, why shouldn’t one say so?” (294)

The terms and the spontaneity of his speech suggest something like pure reflex: Delancey’s attack feels “like a quick blow in the face”; Hyacinth finds himself on the stump without knowing how he ended up there; he speaks, he says, because he “can’t help it.” The speech is accompanied by familiar physical symptoms: he trembles, he blanches, he stammers (the rapid and close repetition of “I”—“I don’t,” “I want,” “I can’t,” “I’m not,” etc.—in his short speech produces the effect of a stammer that is at other moments named directly: “he seemed to himself to stammer and emit common sounds” [198], he “blushed and stammered” [286]). We might, of course, read Hyacinth’s performance as a simple and appropriate response to the severity of the commitment he feels himself making; joining up with the anarchists is, as he awkwardly suggests, maybe to choose death. There is, however, something excessive in the style of Hyacinth’s speech that we should consider. The act seems all the more reflexive because it is almost purely phatic: Hyacinth says little else in his speech than “I am now speaking politically.” His tortured syntax, the abstraction of his speech, his tendency to shift course mid-sentence: these are signs that the speaker, though he can speak, has nothing much to say. What’s more, the play between Hyacinth’s speech and James’s narration, a play indexed by the sudden
odd shift from the jerkily repeated “I” to the stiff impersonality of the “one” in his last line, suggests that stammering might go all the way down in *The Princess Casamassima*. Why, in other words, does the strained person-ness of the passage, frenetically secured at some expense to the speaker (I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I), give way at last to this curious anonymity? Why after so many “I”s (ten in only eight lines) does he ask “why shouldn’t one say so”? In an essay called “He Stuttered,” Gilles Deleuze writes that there are moments in novels when an otherwise absolute difference between a character’s speech and a narrator’s language collapses: “It is no longer the character who stutters in speech; it is the writer who becomes a stutterer in language.” That, according at least to one familiar reading of the novel, James knew no more about politics than Hyacinth makes moments like these vibrate between the related registers of a character’s speech and a narrator’s language. Where, in other words, we might want to see Hyacinth’s inability to say anything as an effect of what he doesn’t know, we might in this case see it as equally an effect of what narration (rather than James) doesn’t know. Not knowing, an absolute condition positively rendered here as a kind of stammering, cuts sharply across the distance between narration and character in a way that both reverses and exceeds the force of free indirect style. *Exactly the same* absence of knowledge drives style for both Hyacinth and narration, making identical the quality of their respective stammers. In all these ways, Hyacinth’s sudden stump speech comes across as a brilliantly nervous and nearly automatic formal performance that is more about a relation to politics than about politics as such.

That an imperative more formal than genetic drives Hyacinth’s speech makes sense here: if the literary naturalism with which James explicitly associates *The Princess* is “often characterized, implicitly or explicitly, as instancing the hard facts of racial determination and the contest between individual will and genetic fate,” in Hyacinth it is, as the novel again and again tells us, neither Englishness nor Frenchness that drives him; it is, rather, the relation between the two that gives his character its meaning and force. “He didn’t really know whether he were French or English, or which of the two he should prefer to be” (127). His paradoxical inheritance is that which stands in the middle of those two competing terms: a relation, the formal quality of which reappears in the form of his curiously abstract but still fluid speech (one Channel, it seems, is as fluid as another). James’s naturalism thus seems an expression of Walter Benn Michaels’s “logic of naturalism,” which he identifies as a “a set of interests and activities that might be said to have as their common denominator a concern with the double identities that seem [. . .] to be required if there are to be any identities at all.” What drives Hyacinth to speak at this moment is neither any particular fact about his past nor some kind of cleanly constitutive
absence; rather, James exploits the conventions of literary naturalism in order to posit as the center of Hyacinth’s character something messier than pure presence or absence, something more like a fold or what Michaels would call a “working-out” of conflicts that would result from the fact of those conflicts being forced into such close, overlapping, awkward proximity.  

With this, we simply name Hyacinth’s kinship with other Jamesian folk who act without the felt pressure of what Leo Bersani calls “vertical” motives. That we find a fold between one thing and another where we might have expected a birthmark or juicy secret come lately to light makes The Princess Casamassima another “narrative surface . . . never richly menaced by meanings it can’t wholly contain.” To continue with Bersani: “Complexity consists not in mutually subversive motives but rather in the expanding surface itself which, when most successful, finds a place in its intricate design for all the motives imaginable.” The expressive middle of Hyacinth Robinson, because it is a fold instead of a fixed point, spreads out to do whatever the novel needs it to; if there is, in other words, a force to neither-Frenchness-nor-Englishness, it is a force that might be recruited for any kind of work. That is, in itself and after Bersani, not much to notice; that it is mobilized as such within the frame of the naturalist novel—or, at least, James’s version of the naturalist novel—is something else. We should take this first as a bit of Jamesian ingenuity; how, the novel seems to ask, might one retain the possibly saleable form of the naturalist novel without reducing one’s characters to automatons driven along by a single biological imperative? If James’s characters are not deep, neither are they stupid; indeed, if Hyacinth is any example, they are more at risk, as James says in his preface, of coming off as “too divinely, too priggishly clever” (37). Second, and more importantly, this arrangement creates a contradiction within The Princess, one the novel spends most of its energies trying to resolve. If Hyacinth is, like The Princess Casamassima, structured around, driven on by a sort of fold, he is also at last forced to choose between the two terms that come awkwardly together to produce that fold: Englishness and Frenchness, culture and anarchy, aesthetics and politics, nonviolence and violence, etc. In other words, Hyacinth seems organized according to two incompatible models: one defined by its demand that one choose and another defined by its structural resistance to the very idea of choice. Hyacinth is a choice asked to choose: “It made him even rather faint to think that he must choose” (165).

Hyacinth Robinson makes a promise at the middle of The Princess Casamas-sima:
The only thing settled was that it was to be done instantly and absolutely, without a question, a hesitation or a scruple, in the manner that should be prescribed, at the moment, from headquarters. Very likely it would be to kill some one—some humbug in a high place; but whether the individual should deserve it or should not deserve it was not Hyacinth’s affair. (333)

This promise, as I have already suggested, structures the whole of *The Princess Casamassima*; it divides the novel into two, stands as a figure for an afterwards-ness that characterizes the novel at several levels, and is the most concentrated source of narrative desire in the novel (will it happen? when will it happen? who will it be?). It is both what retroactively makes sense of Hyacinth’s life (he becomes that boy who grew up to be a terrorist) and leads with an almost plodding inevitability to the novel’s bloody conclusion. The promise, in as many ways as we can describe, makes the middle of *The Princess Casamassima*. It is in that case all the more odd that Hyacinth at last fails to keep his promise. Towards the end of the novel the long-awaited order arrives in the form of an enigmatic letter, the contents of which are never directly revealed to the reader: “The letter,” as Peter Brooks puts it, “is a blank.” Although Hyacinth receives the letter, seems at first to accept that he will assassinate one or another duke, and takes the pistol with which this assassination will be carried out, he does not finally act; Hyacinth Robinson breaks his promise and shoots himself. In breaking the terms of his vow, the figure that seemed, both thematically and structurally to hold the novel together, Hyacinth threatens to break up *The Princess*, to pull from under it a rug that had been counted on to tie James’s cluttered room together. We must, in that case, ask: what keeps Hyacinth Robinson from keeping the promise that makes the middle of *The Princess Casamassima*? The novel raises, only to dismiss, a number of possibilities.

Is it because Hyacinth renounces the political use of violence? Although, as we have seen, James had an active “imagination of disaster” and thought society corrupt, he was no radical. In *A Little Tour of France* (1885) James offers this in response to terrorist activity in Lyons:

> Of course there had been arrests and incarcerations, and the *Intransigeant* and the *Rappel* [left-wing newspapers] were filled with the echoes of the explosion. The tone of these organs is rarely edifying, and it had never seemed less so than on this occasion. I wondered, as I looked through them, whether I was losing all my radicalism; and then I wondered whether, after all, I had any to lose. Even in so long a wait as that tiresome day at Lyons I failed to settle the question, any more than I made up my mind as to the possible future of
Although James’s reluctance to endorse the political use of violence seems more a matter of mild good taste than real moral outrage, we can nevertheless see that he has little time for a certain kind of radical. In his review of Turgenev’s *Virgin Soil*, a novel on which he drew heavily for the plot of *The Princess*, James describes that novel’s protagonist, Nezdanov, as “the ‘aesthetic’ young man [who], venturing to play with revolution, finds it a coarse, ugly, vulgar and moreover very cruel thing; the reality makes him deadly sick . . .” (29). Insofar as parallels between these novels have been thoroughly worked out elsewhere, we might simply take Hyacinth’s reaction as a repetition of Nezdanov’s visceral reaction to the violence of revolution. Hyacinth, however, never really repudiates the political use of violence. In fact, the novel tends even at its most serious moments to take a peculiarly light tone when it comes to the possibility of political assassination. About Hyacinth’s mission, we are told that “Very likely it would be to kill some one—some humbug in a high place; but whether the individual should deserve it or not deserve it was not Hyacinth’s affair” (333). Hyacinth’s response is not only surprisingly low-key, but also sort of comic; the metrical lilt of “humbug in a high place” gives the phrase a familiar if inappropriate shave-and-a-haircut feel. So, if Henry James would have found the shooting of a duke “coarse, ugly, and vulgar,” the same, it seems, can’t be said of Hyacinth Robinson.

We might, instead, think of Hyacinth’s final refusal to act in terms of the opposition that has most often been taken to structure *The Princess*: the opposition between aesthetics and politics. In a long letter to the Princess, written towards the end of his modest tour of Italy and France, Hyacinth both owns and makes clear his rejection of Hoffendahl’s general position: “The monuments and treasures of art, the great palaces and properties, the conquests of learning and taste, the general fabric of civilization as we know it, based, if you will, upon all the despotisms, the cruelties, the exclusions, the monopolies and the rapacities of the past, but thanks to which, all the same, the world is less impracticable and life more tolerable” (396). Hyacinth finds himself, as he looks over the triumphs of a long and continuous European culture, favoring its Arnoldian “sweetness and light” over the possibility of revolution: “What was supreme in his mind today was not the idea of how the society that surrounded him should be destroyed; it was, much more, the sense of the wonderful, precious things it had produced, of the brilliant, impressive fabric it had raised” (382–83). *The Princess Casamassima* is dotted with references to Arnold, and Hyacinth’s late discovered allegiance to culture follows a familiar
Arnoldian pattern; insofar as Hyacinth’s good taste puts him at odds with his socioeconomic context, he ends up looking distinctly “alien” in Arnold’s sense of the term. If it has been Hyacinth’s problem that he feels all too divided, the structure of Arnoldian disinterestedness gives him an out; adopting and emulating culture allows Hyacinth to sublate the two terms of what had hitherto stood as a painful contradiction in his character. Trilling saw long ago that Hyacinth was after something between the terms of the proliferating pairs that fill *The Princess Casamassima*: “He is a hero of civilization because he dares do more than civilization does: embodying two ideals at once, he takes upon himself, in full consciousness, the guilt of each.” In order to negotiate the negation of the negation of his divided self, Hyacinth opts to trade terrorist cell for culturalist clerisy.

If, though, the novel repeatedly opens itself up to a reading based on Hyacinth’s eventual choice of culture over its destruction, that choice is not for Hyacinth equivalent to the choice of shooting or not shooting a duke. Hyacinth writes in the same letter that, though his sympathies have shifted, “You can’t call me a traitor, for you know the obligation that I recognize” (396). He remains committed to the terms of his vow well after he understands that he is all for sweetness and light; not only does choosing the aesthetic not mean *not* choosing violence, but it also seems even to support his respect for the vow as vow, for the vow as an end unto itself. If the practical man of politics (a Paul Muniment) could turn his back on a vow or comrade, Hyacinth, increasingly sensitive to an ideal ethical disinterestedness, finds himself at this late point in the novel unwilling to break his promise.

Indeed, as the letter continues, Hyacinth turns his attention to what appears to be the anarchist’s simple bad taste:

You know how extraordinary I think our Hoffendahl (to speak only of him); but if there is one thing that is more clear about him than another it is that he wouldn’t have the least feeling for this incomparable, abominable old Venice. He would cut up the ceilings of the Veronese into strips, so that every one might have a little piece. I don’t want every one to have a little piece of anything, and I have a great horror of that kind of invidious jealousy which is at the bottom of the idea of a redistribution. (397)

The problem with Hoffendahl is that he doesn’t know enough or can’t feel enough to like Venice. It is not clear from Hyacinth’s letter which comes first: ideology or vulgarity. What is clear is that Hyacinth finds himself in a position at this later point in the novel to *name* Hoffendahl. Where earlier descriptions treat him as something like a god (quietly omniscient and omnipresent in his
effects), Hoffendahl is here reduced to the diminutive “our Hoffendahl,” and Hyacinth writes (in conspicuously smooth Jamesian prose) as if he is in possession of ideas that would supersede the terms of Hoffendahl’s “jealous” little mind. In this, Hyacinth strikes a distinctly Nietzschean pose, spotting in his anarchist friend a bad case of ressentiment: “To the psychologists first of all, presuming they would like to study ressentiment close up for once, I would say: this plant blooms best today among anarchists. . . .”\(^\text{44}\) Where sweetness and light have allowed Hyacinth to cultivate a sovereign forgetfulness, the ragtag revolutionists of *The Princess Casamassima*, men of ressentiment, remain trapped in and motivated by a pathological internalization, fixed in a state that feels like a physical hurt: “Everywhere, everywhere, [Hyacinth] saw the ulcer of envy—the passion of a party which hung together for the purpose of despoiling another to its advantage” (405). As a result, the world—at both its worst and its best—becomes an insult: “Beauty and goodness are, for [the figure of ressentiment], necessarily as outrageous as any pain or misfortune that he experiences.”\(^\text{45}\) Such is the nature of the “invidious jealousy” that Hyacinth finally sees in Hoffendahl; giving everyone a “little piece” is not to satisfy every possible want “a little,” but to reduce life to a state in which there would be no way to want anything more. To Hyacinth’s expanded sense of things, “redistribution” names a violent, unwanted, and general impoverishment: “I don’t want every one to have a little piece of anything.” He wants, we take it, everyone to have rather a little more: “‘I think there can’t be too many pictures and statues and works of art,’ Hyacinth broke out. ‘The more the better . . . ’” (413).

While we will want to listen to this proto-Nietzschean strain in *The Princess*, it, too, cannot account for Hyacinth’s final, suicidal refusal to act; Hyacinth continues to respect the terms of his vow long after he comes to this conclusion. Because Hyacinth’s commitment to his vow has seemed oddly impervious to evidence and to ideas that might make him rethink the sacredness of his vow to Hoffendahl, his decision at last not to act seems all the more arbitrary:

This loathing of the idea of a repetition had not been sharp, strangely enough, till his summons came; in all his previous meditations the growth of his reluctance to act for the “party of action” had not been the fear of a personal stain, but the simple extension of his observation. Yet now the idea of the personal stain made him horribly sick; it seemed by itself to make service impossible. (582)

Although the thought of his mother as a bad example clearly disturbs Hyacinth, it is not her crime that the passage emphasizes; the crime is indeed
mentioned only in passing. It is rather repetition as such that seems to bother Hyacinth, that produces in him a revulsion strong enough to get between him and his vow. This compulsion not to repeat has been seen to lead not only to the breaking of his promise but also in different ways to his suicide. On the one hand, Sheila Teahan writes: “Thematically or conceptually, his failure to carry out the assassination is a betrayal of the revolutionary cause. But in textual or performative terms, Hyacinth’s bid for a radical break with patterns of repetition (by avoiding a repetition of his mother’s crime, by dissociating himself from a political movement perceived as duping the mystifications of the ruling class) renders his suicide revolutionary.”

And, on the other hand, critics have pointed out that, insofar as Hyacinth is the bastard son of a duke, he is himself a kind of duke. His suicide is, in that case, a more successful assassination than it at first looks and ends the novel with the purest and most final form of repetition, a last return to the quiescence of death. Thought of in these terms, because Hyacinth’s suicide is a way absolutely to own both his father’s aristocratic title and his mother’s crime (like Hyacinth, she killed a duke), it is the most perfect and most capacious of repetitions and is thus one well suited to usher in the necessary silence of a novel’s end. Still, whether we view Hyacinth’s suicide as a move that paradoxically masters the drive towards death or as a paradigmatic case of an organism living only so that it might at last “die in its own fashion,” we are no closer to understanding the relation between his ostensible refusal to repeat and his turn away from a particular political act.

All of which returns us to the afterwardsness of *The Princess Casamassima*. Afterwardsness, we remember, is Laplanche’s term for Freudian Nachträglichkeit; where other terms place emphasis on either the progressive or the regressive aspects of Freud’s concept, “afterwardsness” allows the ambiguity of his thinking on the matter to stand. *The Princess Casamassima* is a novel of afterwardsness because it interrogates the concept through its formal preoccupation with the middle and its thematic interest in the temporality of the vow; the novel also appears as an instantiation of afterwardsness in the related forms of the promise, the prefaces, and Hyacinth’s variously divided self. I want to go on now to suggest that afterwardsness provides us not only with an interpretive scheme with which to unpack the novel but also a way to understand the value and varieties of political action and inaction in it. Afterwardsness is, among other things, that aspect of psychic life that makes the interpretive work of psychoanalysis possible. To say that psychic events are meaningful is to say that they are meaningful as past traumas and present symptoms that are, in turn, meaningful in terms of each other. What makes this double movement between the past and present possible isn’t any necessary causal relation, but
rather the fact that past and present are understood as parts of a greater analyzable whole: in analysis experiences are, says Lacan, “placed within a parenthesis of time, within a form of time.” What, in turn, makes that “form of time” a form (in a sense related to James’s sense of “organic form”) is the articulation of one or another point around which it might be organized. Although that point is often thought of in terms of an end, in terms “of a final settling of accounts [. . .] when every event will receive retroactively its definitive meaning, its final place in the total narration,” in The Princess Casamassima that structuring work falls, as we have seen, to the middle, to the site of Hyacinth’s vow, to that “temporal barrier which inscribes [before and after] in two different spheres of meaning.” It is, in other words, the middle that makes sense of things; it is the middle that makes meaningful the temporal and structural difference between a before and an after. How, with so much at stake, would one go about locating or producing the point that would do all this work?

Hyacinth, as I have already said, turns his back on the party of action not because he renounces the use of violence, and not because he chooses art over politics, and not because he resists the resentment that he comes to associate with Hoffendahl. Although he is affected by these ideas, Hyacinth maintains that he will nevertheless respect the terms of his vow. He chooses, as I have already said, not to act because of his “loathing of the idea of a repetition.” We might read this loathing as Hyacinth’s wish as the protagonist of a naturalist novel to transcend the terms of his genetic inheritance and to do what his mother could not: to become something else. Hyacinth, however, is in this passage disturbed not by a particular repetition (the repetition of his mother’s criminal act) but by the idea of a repetition, an idea that is bound up with a temporal logic that he has begun to associate with Hoffendahl’s politics. The novel is filled with an abstract and self-consciously hackneyed rhetoric that accentuates the “eventness” of revolutionary activity: when it comes, it will be a sudden “scare,” a “general rectification,” or “a new era.” Each of these terms offers the revolutionary act and, implicitly, revolution itself as the willed production of “a temporal barrier [between] two different spheres of meaning,” into, in other words, a before the revolution comes and an after the revolution comes. If narration seems from the start to feel that these terms lack seriousness, it is the index of Hyacinth’s development within the terms of The Princess that he comes more and more to resemble narration. We need not, however, see this turn towards narration as an absolute turn away from revolution; indeed, what Hyacinth performs might be taken less as a rejection
of revolution as such than as the recognition of a theoretical difference within thinking about revolution. Hyacinth is, to take things a little too literally for a moment, less a follower of Bakunin than of Kropotkin. Where Bakunin was all for “a spontaneous, formidable, passionate, energetic, anarchic, destructive, and savage uprising of the popular masses,” Kropotkin warns enthusiastic revolutionists that “‘The Year I of Liberty,’ has never lasted more than a day, for after proclaiming it men put themselves the very next morning under the yoke of law and authority.” The difficulty here is not that men want liberty or that they use violence to get it; it is rather the logic of “the Year I” that seems to Kropotkin to lead to bad political repetition: “How many fiery innovators are mere copyists of bygone revolutions?” What Kropotkin warns against is the idea that one could simply make a middle, that one could simply put in place a point that would once and for all divide human time into night and day; formal faith in that kind of a break seems to Kropotkin to lead to exactly the kind of repetition that at last produces loathing in Hyacinth. Hoffendahl’s revolution, a revolution by committee, begins to look more and more to Hyacinth like a return of that which it would replace.

If, however, Hyacinth outgrows his early sense of what a revolutionary action might mean—“Isn’t it a new era?” (130)—he never does turn fully away from an idea of revolution as a possible and, indeed, historically inevitable good; well after he writes his letter to the Princess, the letter that announces both his allegiance to culture and his disdain for the anarchist as man of resentment, he has this thought about the days to come:

Why so watery a revolution? Revolution, it seems, is an “oceanic feeling” for Hyacinth; it is a “flood,” a “floating,” a “pulsation” quite at odds with the feel of Hoffendahl’s more arid anarchist program; Hoffendahl is compared to “a great musician,” under whose knowing fingers all the different parts of the revolution will come to life. His, however, is a dry sound: “The day would come when Hyacinth, far down in the treble, would feel himself touched by the little finger of the composer, would become audible (with a small, sharp crack) for a second” (334). The short, sharp shock of Hoffendahl’s style resembles the sound of chopping blocks and gunfire; it is also altogether different from the liquid feel of Hyacinth’s thinking about revolution and the flowing Jamesian
prose in which that thought is rendered (this is another moment at which it is hard to tell two voices pulsing and stammering together apart). Where Hoffendahl hears in revolution the staccato sound of so many hard “cracks,” Hyacinth responds more to the pedal point of a revolutionary “pulsation,” a notion running against the Bakuninist violence with which Hyacinth and the novel had flirted. We might, in fact, hear in Hyacinth’s music something at once radical and conservative. In a different but related context, Neil Hertz has seen “pulsation” as a figure that straddles the difference between dumb repetition and radical change, between habit and desire in George Eliot: “As we have seen, this region is gestured towards by Eliot’s repeated allusions to rudiments, her fondness, as we have seen, for words like *pulse* and *pulsation*, which figure at once an elementary sameness, the repetition of a beat, and an equally elementary difference, the opening up of a temporal gap.”

If “pulse” carries with it these overlapping senses of return and renewal, what are we to make of Hyacinth’s revolutionary pulsation? On the one hand, we might read his as a fantasy of return to what Freud, writing about another case of “oceanic feeling,” “dismisses [ . . . ] as a delusionary cure for human suffering traceable to the ‘limitless narcissism’ of infancy.” Just as the child, flush with precarious infant omnipotence, knows not what it is to want, so will the subject of revolution somehow be above or beyond it all: “ . . . there was joy, exultation, in the thought of surrendering one’s self to the wave of revolt, of floating in the tremendous tide, of feeling one’s self lifted and tossed, carried higher on the sun-touched crests of billows than one could be by a dry, lonely effort of one’s own” (478). The happiness of this revolution is the happiness of a life of total, floating “surrender”; it is a life that lacks nothing. The trouble, as Jonathan Lear points out in a different context, is that a life that lacks nothing is a life that lacks lack:

. . . to characterize such a condition as a life lacking in nothing hints at the idea that the truly happy life is somehow beyond lacks—that is, beyond desire. The hint is of a life which is beyond the exigencies and pressures of life itself. The fantasy of a happy life becomes tinged with the suggestion of a life beyond life—a certain kind of living death.

The twin fantasies of an achieved return to a state beyond want that would reduce the pang of desire to the need always already met and a total revolution that would make desire historically residual meet for Hyacinth at a point of “happy” annihilation. Here we might take Hyacinth’s fantasy as a subtle performance of the anxiety (James’s anxiety) that accompanies all utopian revolutions: when the revolution comes, we will be bored to death.
We might, however, see this moment as a more particular and less annihilating return: a return to his early and formative visit to his mother in the Millbank Prison infirmary. The visit has all the characteristics of a “seduction” in Laplanche’s sense of the term; because it is affectively charged and because Pinnie does not tell Hyacinth that the woman, wild and “starved” for his infant kiss, is his mother, this meeting is like many significant encounters between adults and children: “These are experienced as messages but they are necessarily enigmatic. Precisely because these messages escape our understanding, they captivate us. . . .” The mother’s enigmatic message takes a number of forms: she shouts in French; she reaches out to him from her prison bed; she, still a stranger to Hyacinth, demands a mother’s embrace. These are supplemented with another form of message: her speaking, weakening pulse: “. . . she had but the thinnest pulse of energy left . . .” (85). The presence of the mother’s pulse at so early and important a moment forces us to reconsider not only the terms of Hyacinth’s oceanic feeling but also the character of this particular return. The pulsation and “magnificent energy” of revolution reads, that is, like an amplification of the mother’s barely remembered pulse, a figural return less about the violence with which Florentine Vivier was so spectacularly associated and more about an effort to repeat with a difference profound enough to be something more than a repetition. Thought of as the result of a kind of feedback (a pulse fed back to itself until it becomes a roar), Hyacinth’s oceanic revolution would function neither as repetition nor as break, but as a figural amplification that would own without fixing in place what had been, rendering it in the process so much more itself as to become something new. That is, after all, what Hyacinth wanted: the only revolution that would be good enough would be the revolution at the end of which everyone would have more than “a little piece of anything” (397). The good-enough revolution would have more than enough to give.

Where it might have seemed that—in absenting the middle of his novel, in placing a hole where Hyacinth’s vow should have gone—James had carved out of his novel the most perfect of middles, *The Princess* at last turns its back on that model: Hyacinth, acting only in the name of a loathing for the logic of repetition, breaks his vow, undermining not only its content but also its pride of structural place in *The Princess Casamassima*. Instead of acting for the party of action, Hyacinth turns his pistol on himself. As was the case with his vow, the suicide is not directly represented in the novel. Instead, we see with the Princess, who has arrived only too late to save Hyacinth, what has happened.
She and Schinkel show up to find that Hyacinth has locked himself in his room and isn’t responding to knocks; Schinkel puts his shoulder to the door:

The door collapsed: they were in the light; they were in a small room, which looked full of things. The light was that of a single candle on the mantle; it was so poor that for a moment she made out nothing definite. Before that moment was over, however, her eyes had attached themselves to the small bed. There was something on it—something black, something ambiguous, something outstretched. Schinkel held her back, but only for an instant; she saw everything, and with the very act she flung herself beside the bed, upon her knees. Hyacinth lay there as if he were asleep, but there was a horrible thing, a mess of blood, on the bed, in his side, in his heart. (590)

It is a beautiful death. The single candle that illuminates the room seems out of necessity to have taken the place of the “cleverly reflective” consciousness that has only just been snuffed out. It, as a dim and yet central source of light, lends the scene palpable atmospheric effects: that the room is filled with “things” off of which the light plays offers, without any need of further description, a vivid sense that the room is all at once confused, crowded, delicate, and arranged. Hyacinth, of course, is finally just another thing in the room, and the fact that the candle offers him nothing more than it offers his stuff gives us an initial sense that the novel is without him oddly belated, just another roomful of junk lacking anything to hold it all together. There is, however, order here. Though James suggests that there is a “mess of blood” in the room, it is a mess most carefully arranged within this final frame, with the wound itself—it is “in the heart”—functioning as a center around which the rest of the composition is concentrically arranged: if James’s description goes from out to in (from room to bed to shirt to heart), the scene encourages us to go from in to out: from heart to shirt to bed to room to house and so on. And though we can see that this is “what he would have wanted,” we must nevertheless wonder at the significance of this last beautiful thing in a novel filled with them. Why at this last moment risk the bad taste of a beautiful death? What is gained arranging a room around Hyacinth’s broken heart?

The problem with both the form and the ideal result of Hyacinth’s vow is that they support the notion that a single event—a violent act, the assertion of authority, the just-right middle of a novel—might make violent totalizing sense of what comes both before and after. Hyacinth’s suicide, driven by the rejection not of any particular position but of a way of thinking about the significance of events in time, replaces the end of the novel with a much different middle.60 Just as Hyacinth reproduces at the level of fantasy his mother’s
weakening pulse as the torrent of revolution, so does his suicide rewrite the middle: “Hyacinth lay there as if he were asleep, but there was a horrible thing, a mess of blood, on the bed, in his side, in his heart.” At the novel’s end we see the emergence of a shape, a set of rings emanating concentrically out from a wound in Hyacinth’s heart; where the vow was a middle that ordered because it divided, Hyacinth’s heart, broken and spilling over from heart to side to bed to room, makes visible a different kind of order, a fluid order the surface of which is agitated but not broken by the light splash of his suicide. The novel uses Hyacinth’s body, puts its material, hemorrhaging shape in competition with a middle in which it seems to have lost faith and to lay claim to the problem of the middle as one that should rightly remain a problem. The middle, a figure that both occupied and exceeded the prefaces, is in that case at its best when it is left to overflow its bounds; it is when it is fixed too firmly in place that it becomes a matter for the “imagination of disaster.” If it has become all too clear in recent years that the worst kinds of violence might be authorized by the belief that everything changed on this or that day, Hyacinth, in wrenching the novel’s middle away from its place in between the beginning and the end, casts doubt on the notion that an end invented as the necessary effect of a merely asserted middle can justify any and all means.

Notes

6. James returns self-consciously and, it seems, belatedly to this discussion in the preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, which, he says, “happens to offer perhaps the most striking example I may cite (though with public penance for it already performed) of my regular failure to keep the appointed halves of my whole equal.” Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), xlv.
7. About the center, James asks, “What has become in that imperfect order, accordingly, of the famous centre of one’s subject?” (8). For more on what is exceptional about the structure of *The Tragic Muse*, a structure organized around a central character who is not a clear “center of consciousness,” but who is rather oddly “dense or opaque,” see Joseph Litvak, *Caught in*
the Act (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 242–47. Because Miriam Rooth is not a center in the sense we tend to associate with James (we never, as James says, “go behind” Miriam), she is a center “that wanders from its assigned post, pervading and disfiguring the text that tries to master it” (245). I will, in what follows, be interested in a much different kind of middle.


10. James’s discussion of Hyacinth in the preface leads to one of his more thorough discussions of this aspect of his narrative technique: “I should even like to give myself the pleasure of retracing from one of my own productions to another the play of a like instinctive disposition, of catching in the fact, at one point after another, from Roderick Hudson to The Golden Bowl, that provision for interest which consists in placing advantageously, placing right in the middle of the light, the most polished of possible mirrors of the subject” (42).


12. Esch, 323.


14. Much of what Freud says about deferred action takes place in the context of his rejection of Jung’s idea of a retrospective fantasy that simply “gives priority to the present over the past.” Laplanche, “Notes on Afterwardsness,” in Essays on Otherness (London: Routledge, 1998), 262; and John Fletcher’s “Introduction” to that same volume, 15.


17. Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” in Écrits, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 48. For the Lacan of the Rome Report, the logic of Nachträglichkeit works because in analysis temporality is itself the effect of a “full speech”: “Let’s be categorical: in psychoanalytic anamnesis, what is at stake is not reality, but truth, because the effect of full speech is to reorder past contingencies by conferring on them the sense of necessities to come, such as they are constituted by the scant freedom through which the subject makes them present” (48).


22. Properly speaking, the trauma resides somewhere in the middle: “On this model, neither of the two experiences is traumatic in and of itself. The earlier experience need not have been traumatic when it occurred, because it was registered but not understood. The later experience, for its part, can be innocent in itself—as, for instance, the experience of mild sexual arousal in a situation that triggers a reminiscence of the earlier occasion. What becomes explosive is the cocktail of both those experiences.” Jonathan Lear, Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 45.

23. Afterwardness looks like a contradiction because psychoanalysis—in and after Freud—is pulled artificially in two directions: it works both as a determinist system that looks for real past traumas that would account for present psychic life and as a hermeneutic system that sees the past as a construction creatively produced to make sense of the present. Laplanche suggests that this split (seen locally in Freud and more generally in the constitution of the psychoanalytic community as a whole) is the result of psychoanalysis’s early abandonment of the seduction theory, which Laplanche returns to and updates: for Laplanche the individual is in part constituted by the “implantation of enigmatic signifiers from the other.” In other words, the child is first formed as a self in relation to an external world—which, of course, both includes and is exemplified by the mother—from which it receives real messages that it can perceive but not understand, in part because it lacks the developmental know-how to interpret them, and in part because they are also obscure products of the other’s unconscious. These necessarily enigmatic messages, which constitute what we might call an “ordinary seduction,” not only continue to exert a pressure on the individual after they have been internalized but also contribute to the very consolidation of the psychic apparatus insofar as these “processes mark the boundaries between inside and outside as sites of exchange and targets of parental care,” a fact that constitutes an important part of Laplanche’s contribution to Freud’s “unfinished Copernican revolution” (31). That these messages are both historically real and essentially enigmatic means that their significance must be understood both in terms of the determining effect of the past on the present and in terms of their availability to a necessary hermeneutic restructuring. We will return to the presence of the enigmatic message in The Princess Casamassima shortly. See John Fletcher’s “Introduction,” “Interpretation between Determinism and Hermeneutics,” and “Time and the Other” in Laplanche, Essays on Otherness, 1–52, 138–65, 234–59.

24. The Princess Casamassima took a number of different physical forms before finding its way into the New York Edition: it was first published serially in The Atlantic Monthly from September 1885 to October 1886. Though it was meant to appear in twelve issues, it appeared finally in fourteen. It was then published in three volumes in 1886 and as a single volume later that year. The two-volume edition of The Princess appeared in 1908 as volumes five and six of the New York Edition of the novels and tales of Henry James. The publication history of The Princess thus comes to perform the search for the middle that James describes in the prefaces and enacts, as we will see, in The Princess Casamassima.

25. John Carlos Rowe sees this ellipsis as a means of exposing social contradiction in James’s novel: “The formal structure of the novel is the representation of such contradiction; the melodramatic and suspenseful discontinuity in the narrative, which we have sketched above, is merely a synecdoche for a pervasive feature of James’s structural organization.” John Carlos Rowe, The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 186. Here, I draw on and develop an argument I began in Bad Form: Social Mistakes and the Nineteenth-Century Novel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

29. Trilling, The Liberal Imagination, 68.
30. Mike Davis, in Jon Weiner, “Mike Davis Talks about the ‘Heroes of Hell,’” Radical History Review 85 (2003): 227–37; 227. Davis locates the beginning of that “half-century” in 1878. To associate that fear with the bourgeois imaginary is not, however, to say that there was no reason to be afraid. The first half of the 1880s was marked by a steady and often successful stream of assassinations and bombings in London and beyond; between 1883 and 1885 successful and unsuccessful attacks were made on the Local Government Board Offices in London, the offices of The Times, two underground railways, Victoria Station, Scotland Yard, St. James’s Square, Nelson’s Column, London Bridge, the House of Commons, Westminster Hall, and the Tower of London (most of these attacks were connected to Irish nationalists). These local attacks were vaguely associated with attacks and assassinations occurring at the same time in Russia, France, Italy, Germany, and Spain. See De Vine, Trilling, and Derek Brewer’s introduction to The Princess Casamassima for more on James’s familiarity with terrorism in the 1880s. See also Paul Avrich, Anarchist Portraits (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) and Weiner, “Mike Davis Talks about the ‘Heroes of Hell.’”
31. From an 1896 letter to A. C. Benson, quoted in Trilling, The Liberal Imagination, 60.
32. James visited Millbank Prison in order to “collect notes” for what would become one of The Princess’s opening scenes in December of 1884. He writes of the visit to Thomas Sergeant Perry: “I have been all the morning at Millbank Prison (horrible place) collecting notes for a fiction scene. You see I am quite the Naturalist.” Quoted in Edel, Selected Letters of Henry James, 148.
33. For more on The Princess’s complicated relation to race, nation, and the generic terms of literary naturalism, see Sara Blair, Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 90–122.
34. Gilles Deleuze, “He Stuttered,” in Essays Critical and Clinical (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 107. Deleuze goes on to associate the “stuttering of language” to a “growing from the middle” of a word, sentence, paragraph, and so on: “Creative stuttering is what makes language grow from the middle, like grass; it is what makes language a rhizome instead of a tree, what puts language in perpetual disequilibrium” (111). Though Deleuze doesn’t mention James in relation to creative stuttering, it would be hard to come up with a better phrase to account for the Jamesian style, a fact apparent both in the rhizomatic expansion that characterizes James’s efforts at revision and in the rhetoric of excess that returns again and again in the prefaces; novels, after all, do tend to grow from the middle. It is also an effect that appears with a particular force in relation to political language in The Princess Casamassima (and, indeed, in The Bostonians).
35. Blair, Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation, 90.
36. Much attention is paid in the novel to the fluid quality of Hyacinth’s speech; he passes with odd—and mostly unregistered ease—from English to French, and speaks at once the language of the drawing room—“he had had from his earliest years a natural command of [the h]”—and the language of the people.


42. See the first few pages of Cargill, “*The Princess Casamassima: A Critical Reappraisal*.”

43. Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 86.


46. In this, Hyacinth and James are drawing on a familiar critique not necessarily of revolution itself but of a contradiction within the idea of revolution: “What Robespierre calls Danton’s vice is the excessive pleasure in beauty and happiness that he and his friends do not want to relinquish and that the people do not desire any less. Danton thus succumbs not merely to the revolution, but also to the revolutionary victory that he has already gained. He is a traitor not because he joined forces with the king and foreign countries (as the people suspect), but because in the frenzy of destruction he has remained true to the happiness that he would not begrudge to anyone, although he enjoys it before the others do.” Szondi’s reading of Büchner’s *Danton’s Death* is instructive here: How might one divide things up without reducing them? Is there a way to reorganize life without erasing the remainder that Szondi calls “happiness”? How, in other words, might a whole thing—painting, person, or state—he torn into strips that would in the end remain equal to or greater than the object from which they came? This, against Hoffendahl, is the revolution Hyacinth wants. Peter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 97.


48. Hyacinth’s situation might, in that case, be read as a formal and thematic meditation on what Peter Brooks has identified as “Freud’s Masterplot”: “We are here somewhere near the heart of Freud’s masterplot for organic life, and it generates a certain analytic force in its superimposition on fictional plots. What operates in the text through repetition is the death instinct, the drive toward the end. Beyond and under the domination of the pleasure principle is this baseline of plot, its basic ‘pulsation,’ sensible or audible through the repetitions that take us back in the text. Yet repetition also retards the pleasure principle’s search for the gratification of discharge, which is another forward-moving drive of the text.” We might see Hyacinth’s ethical worry about repetition as a formal contribution to novel theory after Brooks; what does one do with the fact that it often seems as if there are only varieties of repetition? As we shall see, Hyacinth’s choices will amount, however problematically, to an argument—to a hope—that one can in novels and in life get outside the masterplot. Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), 102–3.


51. Although we don’t need to tie James materially to either figure in order to register important ideological similarities and differences (these ideas were, as James perceived, “in the air”), it is clear that James would have at least known of both figures in terms of their ideas
as well as of their personalities. “[James] may have met Prince Kropotkin, the theorist of anarchism, at Turgenev’s bedside in 1880; he was to know him later—after he had written The Princess—in London” (Edel, Selected Letters of Henry James, 186). And James would have heard of Bakunin both from Turgenev (the two had lived together in Berlin) and from reports of Bakunin’s visit to Boston and New York in 1861, a visit that brought him very close to the James circle (for instance, Bakunin had dinner on November 27 with William James’s teacher, Louis Agassiz, whom Bakunin referred to as “an old friend”) (Avrich, Anarchist Portraits, 21). It is, of course, beyond the scope of both this essay and my expertise to detail exhaustively either the similarities or the differences between Bakunin and Kropotkin. Two ideas, however, are pertinent here: first, while both Bakunin and Kropotkin supported the use of political violence, they had very different ideas about the nature of that violence. While Bakunin saw violence as an essentially creative force (“the urge to destroy is a creative urge”), Kropotkin “wished [revolution] to be as humane [...] as possible, with the ‘smallest number of victims, and a minimum of mutual embitterment.’” Furthermore, it was to be a social revolution, carried out by the masses themselves rather than by any political party or group. Political revolutions, he warned, merely exchange one set of rulers for another without altering the essence of tyranny” (Avrich, Anarchist Portraits, 66–67). Second, the two had very different ideas about the institutions of anarchism that have some bearing on The Princess. Where Kropotkin dreamed of truly autonomous, popular revolution, Bakunin, under the influence of his protégé Nachaev, “was determined to create his own secret society of conspirators, subject to ‘a strict hierarchy and to unconditional obedience’” (Avrich, 12). Organized along the model of “revolutionary fives” (an organization made up of cells of five members, only one of whom has contact with other cells), this structure seems to be the model upon which James draws in The Princess: Hyacinth offers a pledge of his “unconditional obedience” (“He had taken a vow of blind obedience, as the Jesuit fathers did to the head of their order”) before the other four members of his secret cell: Muniment, Schinkel, Poupin, and Hoffendahl. In this, Hoffendahl and company are at least bureaucratic fellow travelers of Bakunin’s World Revolutionary Alliance, Ishutin’s Hell, Nachaev’s The People’s Justice, Blanqui’s Society of the Seasons, the Black Hand, and, more recently, Peru’s Shining Path.

52. Peter Kropotkin, “Law and Authority,” in Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 197. Alenka Zupačič finds something very much like this difference at work as an opposition internal to Nietzsche’s thought: “...Nietzsche himself oscillates between two logics delineating the beginning of the new. He alternates between the notion of the Beginning as what will come (only) after a cataclysmic Event inaugurating a new era, and the Beginning as what starts at midday, in the ‘midst of life.’ Although both logics are indeed present in Nietzsche’s work, the second one is clearly the more prevalent of the two. As a matter of fact, the first logic only really acquires an explicit shape with the onset of Nietzsche’s ‘madness.’” In December 1888, he writes to Brandes: ‘We have just entered the great politics, even very great. ... I am preparing an event that will probably break the history in two parts, so that a new calendar will be needed, where the year 1888 will be the year I.’” Hyacinth and The Princess are, in that case, like Nietzsche: they are all motivated by the tension between the desire for the year I and the desire for something ambiguously more than that. Alenka Zupačič, The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Two (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 25–26.


54. James’s novel sketches out three different ways of thinking about anarchism, terrorism, and their effects. The first, to which Hyacinth clings in the early parts of the novel, is an anarchism underwritten by a messianic temporality; the terrorist attack is important because
it will be or at least analogically model a change to end all changes. The second, which occupies Hyacinth after his aesthetic conversion and resulting depression, is a nihilist anarchism interested in the aleatory act of violence for its own sake; in this version, change is already omnipresent and meaningless, and violence stands more as a recognition of this dumb fact than as any kind of progressive act. The third model is James’s contribution to thinking about violence, and what follows will work to account for it.


56. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 172. Freud, of course, begins *Civilization and Its Discontents* with a discussion of an “oceanic feeling” that “a friend” had brought to his attention in response to his earlier *Future of an Illusion*.


59. While in Paris, Hyacinth visits a number of sites related to the Revolution: “The great legend of the French Revolution, sanguinary and heroic, was more real to him here than anywhere else; and, strangely, what was most present was not its turpitude and horror, but its magnificent energy, the spirit of life that had been in it, not the spirit of death. That shadow was effaced by the modern fairness of fountain and statue . . .” (393). Two things about this passage: first, the Revolution, by now predictably, “works” for Hyacinth because it seems, like Paris itself, less an event than an atmosphere. Second, when he looks at the old sites of the Revolution he sees that they have been neither repeated nor replaced, but rather supplemented with—what else—fountains.

60. With this, we might see James as offering a text that would ask “us to imagine what it would feel like to receive something from time if this did not take the usual form of a disruption of illusion and infliction of the violence of temporal difference, but were also not reducible to the merely temporizing deferral of that violence, to a ‘buying of time’ and only momentary preservation of experiential blankness.” Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 46.

61. We might, in other words, see the end of *The Princess* as a moment where the prefaces’ confusion about center and middle returns, but with a new and urgent motivation. Where the overlap between center and middle looked there like a mess, here the collapse of center, middle, and end stands as an especially poignant argument against counting too absolutely on what middles we have made.