III

HENRY JAMES AND FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY
As John Lyon writes in his introduction to the *Selected Tales*, “James’s writing gathers its energy from increasing uncertainty.” Implicit in James’s work is this sense of the unsayable, a certain irreducible *not*, a void at the center of a text which acts as an agent of dissimulation and dispersal. It impels the characters to speak as if they are piecing together some thought, framing that which remains just at the edge of articulation. Their words remain as if etched in shadow, or written on water. What appears clearly said is in fact overwhelmed by ambiguity. The words are holding back more than they are bringing to light. The characters are attempting, in their dialogue, to illuminate a point that remains hidden. For example, take this dialogue from “The Beast in the Jungle.” Marcher speaks first and May second.

“Then tell me if I shall consciously suffer.”
“Never.”
“Well what’s better than that? Do you call that the worst?”
“You think nothing is better?”
“Why not if one doesn’t know?”
“I see … If I don’t suffer!”
“You see what?”
“You see what you mean — what you’ve always meant.”
“What I mean isn’t what I’ve always meant. It’s different.”

For Marcher knowledge is suffering, vide. Nietzsche. It is Marcher’s lack of knowledge that leads his thinking astray such that he can’t register the truth of May Bartram’s words. This is not merely a misunderstanding. James writes, “Her whole attitude was a virtual statement, but the perception of that seemed called to take its place for him as one of the many things necessarily crowded out of his consciousness.” They are speaking a foreign language. Consciousness is in fact a stumbling block to mutual understanding.

It has been remarked that James’s characters are ill-defined in any conventional or realistic way or, that in his description of them, James creates the illusion of definition without saying anything definitive about them. James writes in “The Pupil” that “Morgan had been as puzzling as a page in an unknown language.” In “The Lesson of the Master,” Henry St. George is described as a “text … a style considerably involved, a language not easy to translate at sight.” The characters reveal as much as they hold back, never enough to characterize them sufficiently in the reader’s mind. They are ciphers. They exhibit what they are not and when they are most like themselves, they offer a portrait subject to illegibility and confusion.

James is not a social novelist or realist of manners. Instead, the nature of unreality or the problems that arise between art and reality are the governing subjects of these works. The work itself is a closed space with James everywhere present. James gives a clue to this highly subjective methodology in “The Lesson of the Master.” Paul Overt is talking to Miss Faucourt. She says, “You talk just like people in your book.” He responds by saying, “Then they must all talk alike.” James, in his works, is in dialogue with himself. The atmosphere in these tales is compressed, almost suffocating, claustrophobic. James does not characterize in the sense of creating stock psychological figures
with reference to a “real world.” Yes, there are rooms, people speaking inside them, events happening, but James only gives us the appearance of reality. This is from “The Real Thing”: “I liked things that appeared. Whether they were or not was a subordinate and almost always a profitless question.” In “The Lesson of the Master,” a character says, “I am not concerned with the relative … only the absolute.” James’s aestheticism gives his work a sense of refinement, almost a kind of rigidity — there is little movement at the center. A reader is conscious only of mouths speaking, disembodied. One waits for the revelation from the dialogue, but it never comes except piecemeal, if at all. The unsayable reigns. This quality indirectly explains James’s style. It has the appearance of fluidity but is in fact governed by self-control, a rigidity that circumscribes a space but fails to define a center, thus hiding more than it reveals. His “prose lines” are carefully checked. One doesn’t get the sense, as in Proust, of a building up of words to great a kind of elaborate architecture. In James, the “buildup” is inward. There is a force which clamps down on language rather than releasing the free expression of a thought. It shackles an unruly beast, the “unconscious.” Take for example James’s use of commas where the pauses are quick, achieving an almost staccato effect:

Marcher’s theory that these elements in contact with which he himself revived, had suffered, on this occasion, it may be granted, a marked, an excessive check.

The use of commas here is like Marcher’s own “excessive check.” They delimit a space, check direct expression. The breath is truncated, fragmented, indecisive. James worked on his tales repeatedly, often making significant changes after the first version was published. His style is intellectual. His prose line is governed by the mind; it is the music of thought delayed. The above example suggests a mind in torment, or uncertain, or hiding something. It is not natural but artificial speech. A “personality” is erased. But the personal is not wholly absent in James’s work. Its function is to create an ambiguity in the text. It is present as
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an absence. In “The Lesson,” Miss Faucourt says, “For one who looks at it from the artistic point of view it contains a bottomless ambiguity.” The work of art is not a direct representation of reality but instead fundamentally ambiguous.

Because of a disdain for the materialism that was prevalent in the late nineteenth century, many artists strove to create the pure art object, unsullied by the material of this world; they wanted to escape from reality. Their art would not be practical or functional, nothing but itself. The self becomes apart from the world, divested from the governing morality of the world, beyond good and evil. James’s fictional world is morally equivocal. Motivations are unclear, often suspect, perhaps negative, or even destructive. This ambiguity extends to the moral universe. There is the betrayal in “The Lesson of the Master.” The relation of the parents to the child in “The Pupil.” Mrs. Hopes wishing for her own death in order to avenge the abasement of the Northmores. Intentions are not clearly delineated so they remain morally ambiguous.

James gives a clue to his treatment of the intellectual and the emotional in “The Figure in the Carpet.” The narrator says, “And a little intelligence might spoil it?” The author, Vereker, responds, “Well, you’ve got a heart in your body. Is that an element of form or an element of feeling? What I contend that nobody has ever mentioned in my work is the organ of life.” So too, life appears in James’s works, but it is not real life, it is an artificial life, a work of Art. This explains the almost static quality at the center of James’s tales. These are not real persons but static objects, as if in a painting, oriented in a closed space, speaking with all the vagueness and enigmatic quality that emanates from a self-portrait. There is no direct movement in James’s characters, only a groping towards something about which, perhaps, they are not fully aware. What sustains interest for the reader is this void, this absence around which James’s characters speak. One doesn’t get in James the adherence to a palpable reality that one, for example, gets in Proust. Comparatively, Proust is a more sensual writer. But Proust is concerned with psychol-
ogy and emotion, that which motivates actions. James keeps us mostly in the dark, especially with regard to emotional states and motives. In “The Death of the Lion,” Lady Augusta says, “I dare say she is—she’s so awfully clever. But what’s the use of being a Princess—” and the narrator finishes her sentence, “If you can’t dissemble your love?” It’s not in the best interest of a Princess to convey her thoughts about love to a potential mate. For May Bartram, in “The Beast in the Jungle,” her love remains unspoken. Only in death does she manage to articulate something real to Marcher. Her absence says more to him than her presence ever did. The surge of meaning overwhelms no less for being sudden. But there was a moment when she attempted to be clear to him about how she felt:

She was right, incontestably, for what he saw in her face was the truth, and strangely, without consequence, while their talk of it was dreadful, she appeared to present it as inordinately soft. This, prompting bewilderment, made him gape the more gratefully for her revelation, so that they continued for some minutes silent, her face shining at him, her contact imponderably pressing, and his stare all kind but all expectant.

This is the climactic moment after which there is no other choice for Mary Bartram but to turn away from him; she is resigned to her fate. But it is at this moment that she is most present to him, in her own mind, even though to him she is not. He, ironically, sees in her face, “the truth,” but it eludes him as an unreadable text. What she presents to him confounds his expectation and so he remains locked in the prison house of his own consciousness and thus cannot read her. This blindness constitutes his betrayal. But it also seals his fate; it leads to his confrontation with the Beast inside himself. The Beast is this lack, this void. James writes, “The escape would have been to love her; then, then he would have lived.” This knowledge of failure, “at least, belated and bitter, had something of the taste of life.” “The Beast in the Jungle” finds James at his most lyrical and orphic. Eurydice is
lost forever as a result of Orpheus’s gaze. The unutterable resists our modes of appropriation in language. Apollo is pure form, the visible, the sayable. The Dionysian is that which is formless, that which precedes speech. In “The Lesson of the Master,” Paul says, “Are there no women who really understand — who can take part in a sacrifice?” The Master replies, “How can they take part? They are the sacrifice. They’re the idol and the altar and the flame.” Marcher sacrifices May out of blindness. “The Beast in the Jungle” can be read as a sequel to “The Lesson of the Master.” In the latter tale, Paul Overt is seen as being governed by an intellectual passion rather than an emotional one. The Dionysian represents the unconscious. Paul’s anxiety and fear at the end is that his sacrifice for the intellect puts into question whether or not the Master is able to write a book. The suggestion is that the Master, writing in a more personal mode, may still be able to complete the book. In Nietzscchean terms, the conflict is made explicit. Here is the Dionysian manifesting as anxiety, an ambiguous emotional state that weakens the stability of Apollonian form.

In “The Beast in the Jungle,” the Dionysian overwhelms the Apollonian. The Beast is the unpredictability and ferocity of nature. It is the emotion that erupts in Marcher, sundering the bars of the Apollonian, so that he succumbs to an irrational emotion: he literally hallucinates the presence of a Beast, it causes him to leap onto the face of the tomb. May arises, from the dead, so to speak, and takes in death what she could not have in life. One thinks of Wagner’s “Tristan und Isolde” of the Liebestod. There is in James’s work the late-Romantic preoccupation with death as a mode of transcendence. Stefan Brand, in Max Ophuls’s film “Letter to an Unknown Woman,” based on a short story by Stefan Zweig, suffers a similar fate as Marcher. Here, when Stefan realizes the author of the mysterious letter is the woman he knew many years ago, who loved him without his even being aware of that love, he confronts the Beast. This knowledge is deadly. He accepts a duel he could not possibly win from the husband of his lover, who remarried many years later and who has discovered his wife’s love for him. Knowledge leads to suf-
ferring and death. The following is a quote from Maurice Blanchot, writing on James’s “The Turn of the Screw”:

The marvelous and terrible moment which the act of writing exercises on truth, torture, violence which finally lead to death where everything appears to be revealed, where everything however falls back into doubt and the void of the shadows.

Henry James is a master of these shadows that obscure speech and cause suffering, the only relief from which comes as an expression of grief. It is a lamentation as old as recorded language.

Works Cited
