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## A SENSE OF ENDING. HENRY JAMES AND ADORNO'S SPÄTSTIL

**Abstract:** While we are perfectly justified in acknowledging the emergence of a new idiom in Henry James's works after 1900 (the date is necessarily tentative), we should see in his so-called late style not only a mere rhetorical or linguistic phenomenon but a result of existential processes transcending questions of style, language and novelistic technique. The main proposition set forth in the article is that it might prove interesting and critically illuminating to situate James's late texts in the context of Theodor W. Adorno's notion of *Spätstil* (late style) as developed by the German philosopher in his essays on Beethoven's last compositions. James's urge to complicate and indeed question his own work, to forward and assist its own exhaustion and dissolution, to point to its existential insufficiency and irrelevance, is a critical impulse conspicuously compatible with the Adornian concept. The ends of such a critique is a heightened awareness of the inadequacy of the medium and an assumption of art as necessarily anti-mimetic and anti-realistic. As is well known, this tendency informed James's last writings, and it gave them a distinct, unmistakable flavor.

**Key words:** modernism, aesthetics, late style, organicism, revision

After 1900 Henry James puzzled most of his readers with a trilogy of long and terrifyingly complex books: *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). Reactions to the new novels were in the main visceral. In a few letters sent in the first decade of the XX century, the novelist's brother William expressed serious reservations about what he called Henry's "third manner." He voiced his conviction that in these novels the author's intentions were muddled by unnecessarily distorted syntax and superfluous rhetorical effects, and that the latter invalidated the realistic substance of his prose: "for gleams and innuendos and felicitous verbal insinuations you are unapproachable [...] the effect of solidity you reach is but perfume and simulacrum."<sup>1</sup> William objected to his brother's ornamental language as well as his evasions and avoidances which resulted in the dispersion and dissolution of the meaning of many sentences. Consequently, William added, the reader was left with the "illusion of a solid object, made [...] wholly out of impalpable materials, air and the prismatic interferences of light, ingeniously focused by mirrors upon empty space."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William's remarks as quoted by Leon Edel in his *The Master: 1901-1916* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1972), 301.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

A few decades later F. O. Matthiessen came up with a full critical recognition of the quality and scope of James's post-1900 style. He proposed to refer to the last years of James's life as the "major phase": "I realized [...] that though James' later evolution had involved the loss of an engaging lightness, he knew what he was about, and that if we want to find the figure in his carpet, we must search for it primarily in the intricate and fascinating designs of his final and major phase."<sup>3</sup> What Matthiessen stressed was not only the exceptional superiority of James's last three novels but the fact that they constituted the culmination of the novelist's artistic and intellectual development, and thus made for the distinct (final) period in the novelist's *oeuvre*. In this deliberate reversal of William James's pejorative account of his brother's "third manner," the critic made it clear that we should see the three novels as possessing a "greater depth and richness" than the works published before 1900.<sup>4</sup> This view was welcomed and has since been generally accepted.

What are the formal coordinates of the Jamesian "third manner"? The customary specification of his late idiom involves such features as linguistic/rhetorical mannerisms, ambiguous meanings informed by repetitions and elongated clauses, the use of the shifting viewpoint technique and interior monologue or the constant utilization of organic metaphors and metonymies. The net effect achieved by means of such devices has often been described as both mesmerizing and dumbfounding, fascinating yet at the same time off-putting. What Edith Wharton wrote in her literary autobiography *A Backward Glance* about James's famous (or notorious) monologues, conveyed during innumerable social feasts, might be easily addressed to the stylistic qualities of his last novels and short stories:

he began, forgetting us, forgetting the place, forgetting everything but the vision of his lost youth [...] the long train of ghosts flung with his enchanter's wand across the wide stage of the summer night [...] wavering and indistinct, they glimmered at us through a series of disconnected ejaculations, epithets, allusions, parenthetical rectifications and restatements, till not only our brains but the clear night itself seemed filled with a palpable fog: and then, suddenly, by some miracle of shifted lights and accumulated strokes, there they stood before us as they lived, drawn with a million filament-like lines.<sup>5</sup>

Sheldon M. Novick, who recalls these words in his excellent biography of the American novelist, helpfully comments on what he terms the "increasing complexity" of James's style: "[James] had trained himself to analyze his own memories into their original, constituent units, breaking down his own remembered perceptions into abstract elements, very much as a painter abstracts from his model a line drawing and

3 F. O. Matthiessen, *Henry James: The Major Phase* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), xv.

4 *Ibidem*, xiii.

5 As quoted by Sheldon M. Novick in his *Henry James: The Mature Master* (New York: Random House, 2007), 271-272.

a selection of pigments, which he then assembles artfully in a manner that will create the illusion of reality.”<sup>6</sup> The biographer makes us aware of the linguistic and rhetorical features of the novelist’s language: “ordinary nouns and verbs would slowly drop from his writing. He preferred proper nouns [...] and concrete images, each of which would quickly give way to a pronoun. A cloud of descriptive nouns, adverbs, and adjectives would surround the pronoun like a skein of metaphors – coalescing in the reader’s eye.”<sup>7</sup> And then: “the elements of his description fuse in the reader’s imagination, as an Impressionist’s brushstrokes fuse in the retina of an observer, with the force of an immediate impression.”<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, the phrase “James’s late style” has come to signify the excessive sophistication of the novelist’s means of expression and articulation, his stubborn determination to extend and prolong minutiae, nuances and subtleties of his stories and to do so almost unendingly, as if he wanted to provide all perspectives at once and at the same time exhaust his narratives, leaving to his readers a (somewhat uneasy) sense of bare life and its never-ending processes. It might be said, incidentally, that despite appearances this obscure and indeed cryptic manner does not leave much room for the reader. To be sure, James’s extended sentences and long-drawn-out clauses are invitingly open-ended and inconclusive. However, the sheer accumulation of all kinds of expressions, tropes and linguistic features makes it almost impossible for the reader to decide on the novelist’s possible intentions or attempt to resolve his narratives. More often than not, the reader stands in genuine awe of their complexities and seems hypnotized by the uninterrupted flow of more and more words and images.

One problem with the standard accounts of James’s late style is that they seem not to give adequate justice to the continuity of his work and writing. There is no doubt that such novels as *The Ambassadors* present us with serious interpretative challenges that are quite new and require a new kind of approach, if not a new kind of sensibility. There is also a blatant sense that if James’s earlier narratives are more or less typical specimens of late Victorian fiction, his post-1900 works transcend the bounds of Victorian idiom and imagination. We have to be careful, though, with describing the development of James’s novelistic technique in terms of strict oppositions between the early, middle and late phases of his career. Presenting the characteristic features of his late manner along rhetorical, linguistic or grammatical lines is an understandable but somewhat delimiting critical gesture. After all, James had resorted to sophisticated, demanding prose idiom before 1900, and we can see in his *oeuvre* an uninterrupted process of refining linguistic means of expression. If his last novels are more syntac-

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6 *Ibidem*, 270-271.

7 *Ibidem*, 271.

8 *Ibidem*.

tically and lexically complicated than the earlier ones, the difference is quantitative rather than qualitative. That is, it has to do with the elaboration of literary and formal devices which had already been present in James. One can only agree with the editors of the 2012 *A Historical Guide to Henry James* when they claim that “stylistic difficulties are not just reserved for the novels of [James’s] major phase; even his earliest writings require careful attention to rhetorical subtlety, multiple meanings, and the discursive twists and turns that reflect aptly the high society whose members enjoy the leisure to entertain subtle interpersonal relations and problems.”<sup>9</sup>

My contention is that while we are perfectly justified in acknowledging the emergence of a new idiom in James’s works after, say, 1900 (the date is necessarily tentative and could be moved backward or forward a bit), we should see in his late style not a mere rhetorical or linguistic phenomenon but a result of existential processes transcending questions of style, language and novelistic technique. It is tempting to identify the existential questions with autobiographical concerns. But in James, and this refers to his late writings as well, biographical matters seem secondary and ultimately subjected to his artistic vision. Even when he touched upon the subject of death, which is after all the conclusive biographical datum, the American writer did so in terms of the artist’s accumulating consciousness which seemingly transcends questions of life and death (this kind of argument informs one of his most astonishing essays entitled “Is There Life After Death?”).<sup>10</sup> James’s awareness of old age in general, and his own old age in particular, is not to be easily dismissed in any discussions of his last writings, but it is by no means a constitutive element of his late style. It is possible that the latter should be located somewhere between life and work, external circumstances and internal necessities, autobiographical pressures and artistic challenges. Reality of one’s life, yes – but only when and as sanctioned by art.

It would be interesting to discuss James’s late style in the context of some ideas proposed by Adorno in his famous essays on Beethoven’s final compositions. To my knowledge, the Adornian context has not been seriously explored in the interpretations of James’s late work. It should be remembered that Adorno’s fragments on Beethoven and the concept of *Spätstil* were published in German in 1993 and only translated into English five years later. Since then, there have been some attempts to apply Adorno’s theoretical concepts to James’s texts. An interesting example is a reading developed by Philip Tsang in a 2014 issue of *The Henry James Review*. While recognizing that “what

9 John Carlos Rowe and Eric Haralson (editors), “Introduction,” in: *A Historical Guide to Henry James* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2.

10 Henry James, “Is There a Life After Death?,” in *Autobiographies: A Small Boy and Others, Notes of a Son and Brother, The Middle Years, Other Writings*, ed. Philip Horne (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016), 716-717.

we identify as James's late style seldom crosses paths with late style as a theoretical concept," the critic offers an interpretation of *The American Scene* as a text which, Adorno-wise, undermines the centrality of authorial consciousness. Thus, what we find in the James of *The American Scene* is an indirect movement towards erasure, avoidance and self-effacement.<sup>11</sup> Another critic (Daniel Moore) suggests that what one can see in James's post-1900 writings is primarily a disjunction of subjectivity and objectivity, and stresses the anti-mimetic quality of the novelist's late works. One of Moore's conclusions is that James's "lateness" (an "atomized concept") looks forward to Adorno and Fredric Jameson.<sup>12</sup> Importantly, however, both scholars view the Adornian context as highly problematic and unwieldy.

Such reluctance to put the American novelist into a narrow theoretical framework is understandable. As one of the critics puts it: "James's late personal writings develop a subtler and less antagonistic sense [...] of the relations between art and the real."<sup>13</sup> It is not difficult to imagine James rejecting Adorno's persuasive arguments to the effect that the great artist has to defy his time and transcend his social environment, genuine art being "esthetically fully autonomous" and radically opposed to the "social tutelage" of the bourgeoisie.<sup>14</sup> The novelist was of course perfectly aware of the grim realities of the culture industry and the book market in the Anglo-American world at the beginning of the XX century (as Michael Anesko has splendidly demonstrated in his important study<sup>15</sup>) yet he never saw himself as seriously subverting the social system he lived in. Similarly, he would never endorse Said's otherwise persuasive idea of the anti-dynastic intellectual who breaks with tradition and rejects received notions in the name of critical independence and integrity.<sup>16</sup>

In general, one might say that as for the writer's conscious motives and articulate intentions, James's novelistic credo did not leave room for any kind of negativity, a central trait of the Adornian *Spätstil*. This can be evidently seen in the prefaces to *The*

11 Philip Tsang, "A Transcription of Impressions: *The American Scene* and the Jamesian Aesthetics of Lateness," *The Henry James Review* 35.3 (2014): 295-296.

12 Daniel Moore, "Lateness in James and Jameson," *The Henry James Review* 36.3 (2015): 290-292.

13 Oliver Herford, *Henry James's Style of Retrospect: Late Personal Writings, 1890-1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 19.

14 Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven. The Philosophy of Music*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, UK, and Malden, USA: Polity Press, 1998), 43.

15 Michael Anesko, "Friction with the Market." *Henry James and the Profession of Authorship* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

16 Introduced in a 1993 conversation with Joseph A. Buttigieg and Paul A. Bové (*Power, Politics and Culture. Interviews with Edward W. Said*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan, London: Bloomsbury Publications, 2004, 186), the concept anticipated Said's influential book *On Late Style. Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London-Oxford-New York-New Delhi-Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2006). See also Said's review "Untimely Meditations. Maynard Solomon's *Late Beethoven*," in *Music at the Limits. Three Decades of Essays and Articles on Music* (London: Bloomsbury Publications, 2008), *passim*.

New York Edition, an impressive declaration of artistic freedom and self-rule. What is stressed in them is the integral character of the work as well as its indebtedness to and interconnectedness with the past. In addition to the figures and concepts connected with the organic concept of the work of art, there are metaphors evoking a sense of fullness, completeness and profusion. In his nuanced comments to the process of composing *Portrait of a Lady*, the novelist refers to architectural notions, with the celebrated image of the “house of fiction” serving as one of the basic figures of his writing. In the same essay, he describes *The Ambassadors* as his best novel, putting emphasis on its “superior roundness.”<sup>17</sup> James’s idea of the modern novel was thus mostly positivist. As a matter of fact, it embraced all the essential features of XIX century positivism: its rationalism, its rooting in natural phenomena, its empiricism and its endorsement of the *a posteriori* knowledge. It would not be a great exaggeration to refer to the American novelist as a follower of the Enlightenment tradition, and this fact puts him poles apart from Adorno’s aesthetic assumptions and preoccupations as expressed in, say, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or *Negative Dialectics*.

But even if the coupling of Adorno’s and James’s views on the aesthetics of the modern literary work is neither obvious nor straightforward, some puzzling parallels between the Adornian examination of Beethoven’s late style and the novelist’s many self-referential comments are noticeable. For one thing, it is worth remembering that for the German philosopher one of the most essential features of late style is the constant clash of biography and work. It might be said that Adorno’s idea of late style arises out of a sense of the irrelevance of the subjective moment in the artistic and creative process, or rather out of the artist’s realization that in order to express himself or herself, s/he needs to go beyond the constraints of the personal point of view as mentioned earlier. It is definitely something that characterizes James’s last writings, too. Secondly, Adorno approaches the idea of negative dialectics (arguably an ironic and deconstructive reversal of the Hegelian dialectics of the Spirit) as a means of artistic expression. Thus, Beethoven’s aesthetic originality and artistic rebelliousness, manifest in his last string quartets and piano sonatas, resulted not only from the composer’s defiance of traditional conventions but also from his fascination with received artistic stereotypes and clichés. Adorno accentuated this double bind, and resolutely turned his discourse on negativity into a defense of the sublime art which abandons the protocols of beauty and celebrates moments of dissociation and disintegration. The critic formulated it in a succinct formula: “In Beethoven’s late style there is altogether something like a tendency towards dissociation, decay, dissolution, but not in the sense of a process of

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17 Henry James, *French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1075 (the “house of fiction” metaphor) and 1080 (*The Ambassadors* as a novel possessing a “superior roundness”).

composition which no longer holds things together: the dissociation and disintegration become artistic means.”<sup>18</sup> Such an imperative can be no doubt felt in James’s last novels, and that is why it is perfectly justifiable to address them in the light of the Adornian characterization of *Spätstil*.

Let us highlight a few critical hypotheses set forth by Adorno in the Beethoven essays. The critic begins by developing a radical critique of the aesthetics and philosophy of art based on the idea of the continuity and homogeneity of the work, and concludes by identifying discontinuity as a feature of the modern work of art (modernity being equivalent to lateness). Here is a characteristic metaphor with which he opens his discussion of *Spätstil*: “The maturity of the late works of important artists is not like the ripeness of fruit. As a rule, these works are not well rounded, but wrinkled, even fissured [...] They lack all the harmony which the classicist aesthetic is accustomed to demand from the work of art.”<sup>19</sup> This line of argument leads to an important thesis that late style finds its full expression in moments of compression and exhaustion.<sup>20</sup> Next, we can find in Adorno the vital idea of the quasi-sublime subjectivity that exceeds and thus negates itself. As the philosopher puts it, late works “are products of a subjectivity [...] ruthlessly proclaiming itself, which breaks through the roundedness of form for the sake of expression, exchanging harmony for the dissonance of its sorrow.”<sup>21</sup> And in a similar fashion: “The force of subjectivity in late works is the irascible gesture with which it leaves them. It bursts them asunder, not in order to express itself but, expressionlessly, to cast off the illusion of art.”<sup>22</sup> Finally, and for many readers this could be a somewhat surprising twist of argumentation, the German philosopher puts stress on the seminal role of artistic conventions which are viewed by him as constitutive in the never-ending process of dismantling received ideas and traditions. One of his significant tenets is that “conventions [are] no longer imbued and mastered by subjectivity, but [are] left standing [...] they finally themselves become expression; expression no longer of the isolated ego but of the mythical nature of the creature and its fall.”<sup>23</sup>

The hypothesis of discontinuity may seem contrary to James’s assumptions concerning the “art of fiction.” As pointed out, most of the images and metaphors by means of which he depicted the construction of the novel had almost always to do with the organicist concept of the work of art. Assuming there is anything like the Jamesian aesthetic of the literary work, one should perhaps define it as based on such notions as the superiority of the inaugural idea of the story (frequently described by the novelist

18 Adorno, *Beethoven*, 189.

19 *Ibidem*, 123.

20 *Ibidem*, 159.

21 *Ibidem*, 123.

22 *Ibidem*, 125.

23 *Ibidem*.

as germ or seed), the controlled and balanced development (growth) of the narrative as well as the sense of the tale being rounded off and completed. In the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* James recalled the origin of the plot of the novel, using his preferred type of organic imagery:

These are the fascinations of the fabulist's art, these lurking forces of expansion, these necessities of upspringing in the seed, these beautiful determinations, on the part of the idea entertained, to grow as tall as possible, to push into the light and the air and thickly flower there; and, quite as much, these fine possibilities of recovering, from some good stand-point on the ground gained, the intimate history of the business – of retracing and reconstructing its steps and stages.<sup>24</sup>

However, when we read the prefaces with an eye to details, we will discover that the novelist's organicist rhetoric is subjected to quite unexpected transformations that seem to break it. Already in the note preceding *The Portrait* James remarks on the "high price of the novel as a literary form" and notices that it "tends to burst, with a latent extravagance, its mould."<sup>25</sup> This is in fact one of the first impressions that we have upon reading his late novels – we feel as if they burst at the seams and disintegrate under the burden of the novelistic convention. A memorable trope of the decomposing form is to be found in the preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, where the standard metaphor of the germ of the story gives way to the metaphor of the virus of language (uncannily anticipating William Burroughs's well-known dictum). After pointing to a casual remark overheard during a party, a "minute and wind-blown seed" of the narrative, and after describing it in terms of its fineness, accuracy and fruitfulness, James suddenly turns to the virus metaphor and further elaborates it into the image of life's "splendid waste."<sup>26</sup> The suggestion of the disordered and uncontrolled form is powerfully developed in the preface to *The Golden Bowl* where the American writer discusses the artist's right to ceaselessly revise his or her works. Although he tries to stick to the organic imagery, suffusing the newly-discovered rhetoric of revision with the metaphors of flowering and blooming, James concludes his text with the following, almost Nietzschean coda: "We are condemned [...] whether we will or no, to abandon and outlive, to forget and disown and hand over to desolation, many vital or social performances – if only because the traces, records, connexions, the very memorials we would fain preserve, are practically impossible to rescue for that purpose from the general mixture."<sup>27</sup>

Importantly, the late James is a self-styled revisionist who perceives art as a "living affair"<sup>28</sup> not in the sense of its aspiring to the full, mature and complete form, but in

<sup>24</sup> James, *French Writers*, 1072.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, 1074-1075.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, 1138-1139.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, 1340.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, 1335 (emphasis in the original).

the sense of its inexhaustibility, its boundlessness, its proneness to organic deviations, mutations and variations. In the remarks closing the preface to *The Golden Bowl* James refers to an “incalculable art” involved in the writing of literary texts.<sup>29</sup> This highly charged phrase, which stands in apparent contradiction to the writer’s organic (or is it simply realistic?) ideals of the unified, harmonious and integral work of fiction, is richly resonant and finds its parallels in James’s writerly practice, in particular in the last works which anticipated the modernist ideal of the literary text as processual, multivocal and consciously self-deconstructive. James’s vision of the novel’s limitless and inestimable potential may be situated in the context of the Adornian stress on the discontinuous form as the main characteristic of the late work of art. Being incalculable, the novel lends itself to moments of self-contradiction and self-negation. It also does away with the utopia of the organic form by letting itself be shattered from within (let us note in passing that in James’s last finished novel the bursting of the form is presented symbolically as the cracking of the golden bowl).

This leads us to Adorno’s contention that one of the characteristics of the late works is that they display the author’s inclination towards compressing and exhausting the inherited artistic conventions. This is yet another issue seemingly contrary to James’s critical assumptions and literary practice (one thinks here not only about his novels and short stories but also about his critical essays). As just pointed out, James’s nuanced prose is ostensibly inexhaustible in generating long and apparently endless clauses; already in the first paragraph of the first preface (to the *Roderick Hudson* volume) he makes us aware of his “tendency to multiply” and to write by “unfolding” and ceaselessly developing his themes.<sup>30</sup> Having attested to the formal and linguistic expansiveness of such novels as *The Ambassadors* or *The Wings of the Dove*, one could consider it problematic, indeed absurd, to discuss James’s novelistic idiom, early or late, in the context of the minimalist aesthetics of the Adornian *Spätstil*. To the contrary, one feels that the categories used to describe the rhetoric of James’s last novels ought to emphasize the ideas of its opulence and profusion, not the ones that would reveal the work’s delimiting features and imperatives.

While not contesting the latter point, we should definitely point out the paradoxical nature of what might be called James’s linguistic and rhetorical exuberance, or even extravagance. One of the most conspicuous features of the novelist’s late style is the serious impairment of its mimetic function, all the more surprising as James aimed at the realistic presentation of his characters’ motives, aspirations and actions. In his penetrating analysis of *The Wings of the Dove*, J. Hillis Miller notices that the ostensibly

29 *Ibidem*, 1339. For a further discussion, see Jacek Gutorow, “Toward the Incalculable: A Note on Henry James and Organic Form,” *The Henry James Review*, 35. 3 (2014): 285-294.

30 James, *French Writers*, 1040.

realistic abundance of details leaves the reader with the impression of the unreality of the presented world. While referring to Roland Barthes's concept of *l'effet du réel*, the critic argues that James's last novels are not so much realistic as they are "realistic" (in quotation marks), subverting their own convention and in a way parodying their own mimetic purposes.<sup>31</sup> Their language is so studied and laborious, so rich and lush in details, that in the end it loses its representational character and becomes its own subject: "each apparently 'realistic' or mimetically represented element stands for something else that is named only indirectly, can be named only indirectly, in catachresis."<sup>32</sup> The resulting dispersion of meanings gives the reader a strong sense of the exhaustion of the narrative which at times seems tautological: it speaks about its own impossibility as it piles up more and more parallel clauses, sentences and paragraphs. James tries to compress the reality into language yet what he achieves is its linguistic and highly rhetorical simulation, spectral and make-believe.

Interestingly, Hillis Miller reminds us that James did not finish the two novels that might have been supposed to crown his novelistic output: *The Ivory Tower* and *The Sense of the Past*. The American writer felt it impossible to go on narrating stories and simply gave up writing; it is by the way important to note that it was his own resolution (and not death) which was the main cause of the discontinuance. The sheer inability to continue and cohere fragments into an organic whole is obviously the kind of effect analyzed by Adorno in his essays on late style. In his own way, Miller interprets James's reluctance to finish his tales in the context of the deconstructive dictum of the spectrality and self-referentiality of all writing, the aporia (or, as Miller calls it, the "quasi-Turn-of-Screw effect"<sup>33</sup>) realized by the novelist in his last years. To this suggestive reading one could add James's own explanations included in his "Working Notes for *The Ivory Tower*," in themselves a dense synopsis of what was to be written and a roundabout confession of artistic impotence of the kind found later in, say, Eliot or Beckett. At one moment the novelist remarks on the impossibility of writing the next sections of his novel: "I seem to see already how my action, however tightly packed down, will strain my ten Books, most blessedly, to cracking. That is exactly what I want, the tight packing *and* the beautifully audible cracking."<sup>34</sup> This is manifestly not the James of "The Art of Fiction." What we hear in the two sentences is a sense of abrupt ending, coming without climax or conclusion, taking the writer by surprise at the sudden exhaustion of both the narrative and (probably) the will to narrate.

31 J. Hillis Miller, *Literature as Conduct. Speech Acts in Henry James* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 154.

32 *Ibidem*, 318.

33 *Ibidem*, 326.

34 Henry James, "Working Notes for *The Ivory Tower*," in *The Ivory Tower. An Uncompleted Novel* (Milton Keynes: Aegypan Press, reprint of the 1914 edition), 152 (emphasis in the original).

In the already quoted preface to *The Golden Bowl* James sets forth the hypothesis of the transcendental self which is capable of surpassing its own limits and conventions. The novelist's radical and transgressive propositions make one think not only of Adorno, but also of poststructuralist and deconstructive projects. With James, the problem of subjectivity seems to have arisen out of his preoccupations with the idea of revision, in itself one of the central notions lying behind the concept of the edition. It is essential to remember that for the American writer the process of textual revision and narrative reinterpretation was not just a technical or rhetorical issue. Significantly, it is described as both an existential ordeal and a mode of perception: "the deviations and differences [...] became, as I say, my very terms of cognition."<sup>35</sup> James's careful revisions of his old novels and short stories were treated by him as "new readings" and "new conductors of sense," and they were supposed by him to provide the "very record and mirror of the general adventure of one's intelligence."<sup>36</sup> At one moment, the novelist sees himself as following in the old footsteps left in snow. The passage deserves to be quoted in full:

It was, all sensibly, as if the clear matter being still there, even as a shining expanse of snow spread over a plain, my exploring tread, for application to it, had quite unlearned the old pace and found itself naturally falling into another, which might sometimes indeed more or less agree with the original tracks, but might most often, or very nearly, break the surface in other places. What was thus predominantly interesting to note, at all events, was the high spontaneity of these deviations and differences, which became thus things not of choice, but of immediate and perfect necessity: necessity to the end of dealing with the quantities in question at all.<sup>37</sup>

Towards the end of the text, James makes a distinction between the non-revisionists (who are "numerous," "protected" and "undisturbed") and the revisionists (who "sound [...] more abysmal waters").<sup>38</sup> It should be noted that the language used in the New York Edition's final preface is highly significant and self-evident. Thus, the effort of textual reexamination and rewriting implies a new way of seeing and is in fact an existential venture; to correct what one wrote is to challenge one's old self and, on a more general level, to question the stability and legitimacy of the self as a source of meanings. James's intentions are flatly encapsulated in passages like this one: "we are condemned [...] to abandon and outlive, to forget and disown and hand over to desolation, many vital or social performances – if only because the traces, records, connections, the very memorials we would fain preserve, are practically impossible to rescue for that purpose from the general mixture."<sup>39</sup> What the American novelist postulates is clearly the dissolution

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<sup>35</sup> James, *French Writers*, 1330.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, 1335.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, 1330.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, 1336.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, 1340.

of the self and the near-annihilation of subjectivity in the name of the “general mixture.” As we know, such was also the intention of his last novels, those strange literary enterprises in which the realistic convention with its postulates of stable meanings and narrative voice/s exceeds and exhausts itself in the seemingly never-ending series of syntactical and semantic shifts and switches.

Situating James’s late writings in the context of Adorno’s dialectical concept of *Spätstil* is by no means an obvious gesture. As can be seen, however, there exist certain analogies which make it possible to speak of James’s late style not as just a culmination of his *oeuvre* but rather an effect of the strong imperative to rewrite, revise and refashion one’s past works – the critical moments considered by Adorno as constitutive of the rhetoric of lateness. The effort of reconstruction is undoubtedly there. Not that the novelist was or wanted to be a radical. After all James, unlike Beethoven, did not seek to proclaim himself in opposition to the social environment or artistic conventions. Nor did he want to negate art in the name of absolute expression. Yet the urge to complicate and indeed question his own work, to forward and assist its own exhaustion and dissolution, to point to its existential insufficiency and irrelevance, is a critical impulse conspicuously compatible with the Adornian description of late style. In this view, the latter is approached not only as an elaboration of the literary idiom but also as a questioning and critique of language and artistic form (convention) in their capability to reflect on the world and one’s self. The ends of such a critique is a heightened awareness of the inadequacy of the medium and an assumption of art as necessarily anti-mimetic and anti-realistic. As is well known, this tendency informed James’s last writings, and it gave them a distinct, unmistakable flavor.

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