Gwen Matheson

PORTRAITS OF THE ARTIST AND THE LADY IN THE SHORTER FICTION OF HENRY JAMES

There have been few writers more conscious of their craft as such or of themselves as artists than was Henry James. His interest in the writer as a character or type is revealed in much of his work, but especially in several outstanding short stories. That there have also been few male authors who could so well portray the female psyche is also a fact that is abundantly revealed throughout his fiction. These two aspects of the great American writer—his interest in the Artist and his interest in Woman—can be seen in a highly significant relation to each other. The main source used in the following treatment of this topic is a collection entitled *Stories of Artists and Writers* by Henry James, edited with an introduction by F. O. Matthiessen.[1] These pieces of shorter fiction were written during the period between 1873 and 1900, approximately a quarter of a century, and cover the middle part of the author's life. With the exception of "The Madonna of the Future" (1873)[2], which stands apart in some respects, they deal with the problems of English writers and their public. But the feeling which James developed early in America that the public was hostile to creativity seems not to have decreased in the new setting.

The reading of several of these stories about the artist as writer discloses the main outline of James's ideal of the breed: he must strive to be an essentially independent being, capable of detachment from everything except his all-absorbing work; he must be able to detach himself from the claims of conventional morality and practical family life, as well as from the demands of publicity—all of which are depicted by James, often with great irony and wit, as being in some way involved with femininity. The artist-hero of James's fiction, however, is less often seen as a victor than as a victim of the world and society, chiefly in the form of Woman. Reading through these tales, one is often reminded of the theory of George Bernard Shaw, who was also

obsessed with the relationship between the creating genius and the procreating female, both of whom he saw as equally powerful promoters of the great "Life Force". In his dedicatory epistle to *Man and Superman,* written in 1903, Shaw describes the genius as "a sublime altruist in his disregard of himself, an atrocious egotist in his disregard of others". And the chief conflict in a number of James's tales is implied in his statement "Here Woman meets a purpose as impersonal, as irresistible as her own: and the clash is sometimes tragic."[3]

In James's stories it is Woman in her function as Mother who poses one of the greatest threats to the freedom and complete dedication of the Artist—particularly when she happens to be married to him. James is also preoccupied a good deal with a type of triangle in which an older man and a young man, the younger being an admirer and friend of the older, are usually in opposition to some variety of threatening female character or conspiracy. There is also, of course, the complication to be considered when Artist and Woman are one and the same person, but James did not regard such a singular phenomenon (for his period, at least) very seriously; and often he treats it with outright satire. Woman in her more positive aspects is presented as the ideal and inspiration of the Artist, and as the finest type of artist herself in that highest of all arts, the art of living.

The two most significant stories from the point of view of Shaw's comments are "The Author of Beltraffio" (1884) and "The Lesson of the Master" (1888). As F. O. Matthiessen observes, both of these tales deal mainly with "the split between life and art" (p. 1—introduction), and "life" is represented by Woman. The most important issue at stake here between the Artist as writer and his wife as Woman is the welfare of their children, and this is involved with the quality of the artist's work.

"The Author of Beltraffio" is a tale of a conflict beween Mark Ambient and his wife Beatrice over the possible influence of the author's work on their child; it is told by the narrator, a young admirer of the great novelist, who is visiting them during the climax of the struggle, and who, like the third party in "The Madonna of the Future", indirectly brings about the final tragedy. Mark Ambient is seen almost as a disciple of Walter Pater in his devotion to art for art's sake and to beauty for the sake of beauty; Mrs. Ambient, on the other hand, believes that art must have a "purpose", and she regards her husband's works as immoral. Little Dolcino, the product of this mismating, is being constantly torn between his father and his mother. As a result he sickens, and during his illness his mother takes the advice of the narrator and reads her husband's latest manuscript. Shocked by the book, she determines

that her son will never be corrupted by it, with the consequence that she deliberately keeps the doctor from the child, and he dies. This is possibly the one story of the collection that can be most truly described as a "tale"—with the later exception of "The Figure in the Carpet" (1896)—for it is quite obvious that the plot is not supposed to be an imitation of events in actual life. Mark Ambient plays to the full the role of Artist or Shaw's "man of genius", manifesting the Life Force in its enlightening process; his wife in her role as Woman embodies the moral attitude in opposition to her husband's more aesthetic outlook. But it is Mrs. Ambient's actions as Mother than intensify the conflict and bring on the catastrophe, for her tragi-comic effort to "save her son from his father's books" is a distortion of the maternal instinct to preserve and protect the race.

In "The Lesson of the Master" (1888), further variations on the above theme are put forth. St. George, the successful writer who looks like a "wealthy stock broker", makes it clear to Paul Overt, his young disciple, that his recent decline in writing ability is the result of worshipping false gods. The aggressive and practical Mrs. St. George performs very admirably as a priestess of these gods of "the world" by regulating her illustrious spouse's life in order to make him yield a maximum of production, and in general ensuring herself and family of a place among the eminent and successful. She even keeps her husband locked up in a large high study without windows and with a skylight at the top for part of the day so that he may the better pursue his role as literary bread-winner; the irony of this "ivory tower" lies in its domestic setting and the fact that the "dragon" guarding *St. George* is his wife. Just as in the preceding story, the artist is opposed by his wife's maternal function; Mrs. St. George, nevertheless, is not so concerned with Morality as with that perhaps even greater monster, Respectability, and she exploits her husband's genius in its service. (The exploitation of art appears often in these stories, and is something that James particularly deplores.) When she finally dies, leaving her famous husband in a freed but at the same time definitely saddened condition, he begins to have a dream of connubial bliss with the beautiful and sympathetic Miss Fancourt, who is in love with Paul; he also dreams of seeing the devoted artistic life that he missed realized in his young friend. Skilfully "that smooth English gentleman" (Matthiessen's phrase) makes both these dreams come true by persuading Paul to leave England for two years to write a great book, during which time he captures the forsaken lady. The rather fortunate St. George is almost the only artist that James creates who cannot be described as a definite victim. Marian Fancourt, incidentally, al-

though she has tried unsuccessfully to write a novel herself, is portrayed by James as a master (or mistress) of a higher art than the literary, the art of living.

In 1893, James wrote "Greville Fane", in which both the Artist and the Lady are combined in the prolific person of a lady author. The conception of the Artist as Lady was also commented on by Shaw who felt that such a phenomenon greatly complicated "the tragic clash": "George Sand becomes a mother to gain experience for the novelist and to develop her, and gobbles up men of genius, Chopins, Mussets and the like, as mere hors d'oeuvres."[3] Greville Fane, however, "was not a woman of genius", and her career of producing volume after volume of light literature is presented with a mixture of pathos and humour. Also, unlike Shaw's concept of the female artist who "becomes a mother to gain experience for the novelist", this ageing lady is a novelist to gain money for her children; and rather than being able to "gobble up" men of genius she would undoubtedly bore them to death. James's Greville Fane is evidently his attack on the superficial success of the best-selling author. The old conflict between the artistic and the maternal did not even take place in her, for the maternal was always in complete control. Her loutish son Leolin and his snobbish sister between them finally work "the oracle" to death, but she is too blind in her maternal devotion to be aware of what is going on. A tragi-comic twist is given to the Shaw-James formula of the Woman as Mother exploiting the Artist: in this case it is the Mother herself who is being used; but she in turn uses her artistic propensities (such as they are) in the service of her maternal instinct.

"The Next Time" (1895) reverses the theme of "Greville Fane", and depicts in an even more bitterly ironic and yet almost burlesque manner one of James's chief concerns—the predicament of the author who is too good to be popular. Obviously reflecting James's own personal attitudes as a novelist, it is the product as well of his experience in the journalistic field. Ralph Limbert, the "unsuccessful" hero of the story, has the added misfortune to have wooed and won "pretty pink Maud" from the critic-narrator, and so to have fallen prey to the material enslavement of domesticity, made worse by a growing family and a demanding mother-in-law. Until his exhausted death at the conclusion, he continues vainly hoping for "the next time" when he will succeed in prostituting his fine talent in a novel suited to the low taste of the public, and so be able to satisfy the pressure from "Upstairs"—that is, the female part of the household.

As a comic contrast, James portrays another novelist—a lady, of course,

and a spiritual sister to Greville Fane--who yearns to make her "next time" productive of just "one exquisite failure"; but in spite of all her efforts, Mrs. Highmore, like Limbert, cannot escape her fate, which in her case is the doom of popularity and money. Unlike her unfortunate predecessor, however, she has a career unencumbered by the demands of biological maternity, for she presents her efficient business-manager husband (a male counterpart of Mrs. St. George) only with brain children in sets of "triplets"—novels that are about as third-rate as were Greville Fane's flesh-and-blood children.[4] But Ralph Limbert's constant efforts to produce a "male heir" in the form of a common best-seller only result in another "shameless, merciless masterpiece"—or, as James describes it with a highly ironical and paradoxical phrase, "but another female child".

"The Middle Years" (1893) depicts Woman as most openly and crudely in opposition to the sensitive and victimized Artist, and the union between the older writer and his youthful disciple reaches an almost erotic intensity. The plot concerns an ailing novelist, "poor Dencombe" (the adjective is significant), who meets an enthusiastic young reader of his novels, Dr. Hugh, whose devoted ministrations give the writer hopes that he will recover sufficiently for one more chance to surpass the novel which is the last and highest product of his "middle years". But at this point rivals temporarily take up the doctor's much-needed attention in the person of his wealthy patroness, an invalid Countess, and her "humble dependent", Miss Vernham, who apparently has matrimonial designs on the young man. Dencombe's inevitably approaching death deprives him of "another go" for which he had so hoped. And Dr. Hugh, as a result of the consequences of his admitted "infatuation", has cheerfully accepted the fact of being cut off without a penny from the jealous Countess.

In the next story about a novelist, Woman continues to play a destructive role in her relationship with the Artist, once again contributing to her victim's death. The conflict in "The Death of the Lion" (1894) is involved in the relationship between the writer and his public—a theme worked out in a somewhat different manner in an earlier work by James that does not appear in this particular group, "The Aspern Papers", published in 1888.[5] Bringing together several of James's main preoccupations in his treatment of the artistic and feminine principles, the story of "the lion" illustrates the author's feeling that the foolish public, incapable of an impersonal appreciation of the Artist through his books, becomes clamorous for a vulgar acquaintance with his person. The narrator, who has been sent to interview and thus

publicize Neil Paraday, later describes his experience with the brilliant author as a conversion from a profane purpose to a state of holiness. It can be seen, then, that James associates exploitation (through publicity, for example) with the "personal" and the profane—in short, with the herd—and these are all exemplified in Mrs. Weeks Wimbush, that Queen of the lion-hunters who was "constructed of steel and leather". On the other hand, the impersonal, the holy, and fastidiously aloof—in other words, the masculine attitude (according to James)—are embodied in Paraday who is the "lion", the hunted, and eventually the victim.

Finally the "world" descends on Paraday in the form of a more aggressive reporter, and he realizes with horror that he is going to be famous in his own time. When Mrs. Wimbush, a much more formidable representative of the "world", whisks off the unfortunate Paraday to her country house, where she has another rare bird on display in the form of a rather stupid Princess, the narrator-protector follows faithfully, doing his best to assist his over-taxed and by now terrified hero. The "lion" who has been a disappointment to his huntress-hostess eventually becomes ill as a result of his strenuous and unaccustomed social life and dies in her magnificent mansion; and the precious manuscript of what was to become his next book is lost through carelessness. However, one brighter note occurs at the end of this tale when the narrator who has converted one of Paraday's admirers to his impersonal philosophy becomes united to this charming young lady both by the bonds of matrimony and by their joint search for the missing manuscript.

The idea of some literary pursuit or knowledge forming a bond between a man and a woman comes out very strongly in the last three stories dealing with artists and writers. "The Figure in the Carpet" (1896) not only illustrates this theme but also echoes the notion expressed in "The Aspern Papers" that there is something esoteric connected with literature. In a confiding moment, Hugh Vereker, the writer, reveals to his reviewer, a journalist, that there is a "little point", a subtle pattern, running throughout his works like "a complex figure in a Persian carpet". The narrator looks for it in vain, but he has a friend, George Corvick, who together with his fiancée Gwendolen makes a more thorough search. Finally discovering the great secret by himself, Corvick is approved by Vereker, marries Gwendolen, and is killed by a fall on his head during the honeymoon. Three weeks after this comes Vereker's death and before the year is out, the death of his wife. Gwendolen is then left in sole possession of the coveted knowledge. The narrator meanwhile is tortured by his curiosity: "Was the figure in the carpet traceable or

describable only for husbands and wives—for lovers supremely united?" (p. 306). Gwendolen finally marries Drayton Deane, another reviewer and a rival of the narrator; and then she herself departs this life in the act of childbirth. (One cannot help admiring the convenient and casual way in which James gets rid of his characters in this fanciful little tale.) When the narrator encounters the bereaved husband and tries to extract the mystery that he supposedly possesses, they both learn that Deane's wife had not thought him worth enlightening, and so the pair of them (along with the reader) are left in a tragi-comic state of permanently unappeased curiosity. The strange preoccupation of James with the union of literature and matrimony and their association with esoteric insight would no doubt be productive of some interesting psychological interpretation. At any rate James seemed to believe, especially during these later stories, that the artistic and the feminine principles are at times united instead of ending in a tragic conflict.

"Broken Wings" (1900), the last of James's stories having as their subject the artist's life, as in many ways a suitable conclusion to this series.[6] The central situation is an artistic alliance between a man and a woman based on a dichotomy between the gross world or the public and the private and esoteric realm of the truly dedicated. Mrs. Harvey, a writer, and Stuart Straith, a painter, are united in what to James are the exclusive and distinguished bonds of popular "failure": "We're simply the case . . . of having been had enough of" (p. 329). Since each had for a lonely period of ten years feared to intrude in the other's apparently self-sufficient life, it is only now that they can overcome the false barriers of earlier "success", and face together an indifferent public whose opinions, they realize, have no real validity. "Broken Wings" is possibly the only one of James's stories in which he presents Woman as Artist with no hint of levity or condescension. Mrs. Harvey is even granted the high distinction of being a "failure", and Artist and Woman come together as successfully in her person as they do in the separate persons of herself and Stuart Straith; there is also the additional "family reunion" of novelist and painter—for, as Straith observes, "Truly the arts were sisters" (p. 328). The Shavian dilemma appears to be resolved, but perhaps only because Woman here is herself an artist—and, even more important, Mrs. Harvey, who in some ways hardly seems female, shows no threatening signs of a desire for maternity. After the long final embrace of the two lovers (a rare phenomenon in James's fiction) the exclamation of both is memorable: "And now to work!" (p. 330).

But even in this latter story there is no complete resolution of the prob-

lems in lack of communication that obsessed the author throughout this period. Although the Artist as creator might be happily united with his feminine counterpart, there is no indication of his coming to terms with the family, or beyond it with that greater menace, society in the mass. "Lucky in love, unlucky at cards" might in the Jamesian universe be altered to "Lucky in love, unlucky at art"—an adage that applies equally to "The Lesson of the Master" and to "Broken Wings". With the much-discussed changing roles of men and women in the twentieth century, James's whole problem of the arts and sex might seem to us to be rather dated. In the same way, advances in science and resultant social changes will perhaps make Shaw's conflict meaningless to future generations when creation and procreation will probably not be considered quite so much the special prerogative of either sex. Could it not be said that the basic conflict is, after all, between those who sacrifice some personal aspect of life to improve its general quality (either through art or by some other means), and those who insist on the more immediately pleasurable procedure of "just living", even in some instances sacrificing ideals for personal concerns? In either case the matter of sex is irrelevant. When the problem is restated in this manner, it is plain that its elaboration in James's fiction will always have some significance, especially when he deals with so many aspects of the artist's life. Finally, the union described by James in "Broken Wings" possibly symbolizes in a sense what Virginia Woolf further expressed more than a quarter of a century later:

> If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine.[7]

NOTES

1. Henry James, *Stories of Artists and Writers,* ed. by F. O. Matthiessen (New York, New Directions, 1962. The date which appears after the title of each story (with the exception of "The Aspern Papers") indicates when the story was written, rather than the time of publication in book form, which was usually from one to several years later. The page numbers of all subsequent quotations taken from this anthology are indicated in parentheses in the text.
2. In this story, the first in the anthology, an expatriate American painter living in Florence is an idealistic dreamer who has such a lofty conception of the

Madonna he wishes to paint that for twenty years he has avoided "the vulgar effort and hazard of production". The "sublime Serafina" plays almost to the point of absurdity the role of Woman as Inspiration, for it is she whom Theobald has idolized for such a lenghty period as the future model for his great portrait. She could represent the Eternal Feminine, combining in herself both its benign and sinister aspect—a dualism that will constantly reappear in James's treatment of most of the ladies in the remaining stories.

3. G. B. Shaw, *Man and Superman* (Penguin, 1951), p. xxi ("Epistle Dedicatory").
4. James seemed to feel that the products of an artist's creation and procreation will be equal in quality; Mark Ambient's son, Dolcino, for instance, appeared to be as fine as his father's other masterpiece, *Beltraffio.*
5. "The Aspern Papers" was probably not published in this collection because of its relatively greater length. The plot is centred around a critic's ruthless attempt to secure some precious papers of the deceased American poet, Jeffrey Aspern, from the ancient Juliana, the woman he once loved. He states that the papers are more desirable to him than the solution to the riddle of the universe. In the tragic clash in this story, we see that neither side is successful. According to Shaw, the artist will risk the stake, the cross, and starvation, for his great purpose; and it appears from this tale that even the artist's critic will cheerfully kill old ladies (indirectly, of course) and trifle with helpless spinsters, all in the service of art.
6. "Broken Wings" is the *second* last story in Matthiessen's edition of these tales. But the last one, "The Story in It", has to my mind only a very remote relation to the writer's life.
7. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own,* (Penguin, 1963), p. 96.