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The Genealogy of Duplicity in Henry James

Perhaps no author in the modern Anglo-Saxon tradition has yet had a better sense than Henry James of what Nietzsche, in *On the Genealogy of Morals* and elsewhere, famously described as the "torture-chamber" of the soul in its making. Where else in American or British literature have such quintessentially Nietzschian themes as the subjugation of desire, the travails of sublimation and spiritualisation, of renunciation and sacrifice, found such rigorously formal and even dramatic representation as in James? Indeed the very thrust of the Jamesian formal enterprise seems to derive from a Nietzschian sentiment of "bad conscience," that contradictory product of the pressure exerted upon the "human animal" by its introduction into society:

> I regard the bad conscience as the serious illness that man was bound to contract under the stress of the most fundamental change that he ever experienced – that change that occurred when he found himself finally enclosed within the walls of society and peace. The situation that faced sea animals when they were compelled to become land animals or perish was the same as that which faced these semi-animals, well adapted to the wilderness, to war, to prowling, to adventure: suddenly all their instincts were devalued and "suspended." From now on they had to walk on their feet and "bear themselves" whereas hitherto they had been borne by water: a dreadful heaviness lay upon them. They felt unable to cope with the simplest undertakings; in this new world they no longer possessed their former guides, their regulating, unconscious and infallible drives: they were reduced to thinking, inferring, reckoning, co-ordinating cause and effect, these unfortunate creatures; they were reduced to their "consciousness," their weakest and most fallible organ! (2.16)

After going on to describe this "suspension" of the instincts and the dawning of consciousness as the greatest source of distress the earth had ever witnessed, Nietzsche relates

how for such a deprived creature, racked with homesickness for the wild (for the "unconscious" use of his instincts), there must have appeared the alternative of reversing the situation and turning *himself* into an "adventure, a torture-chamber, an uncertain and dangerous wilderness," how, in short, this yearning and desperate semi-animal became the inventor of the "bad conscience":

> This secret self-ravishment, this artist's cruelty, this delight in imposing a form upon oneself as a hard, recalcitrant, suffering material and in burning a will, a critique, a contradiction, a contempt, a renunciation into it, this uncanny, dreadfully joyous work of a soul voluntarily at odds with itself that makes itself suffer out of joy in making suffer – this *active* "bad conscience" – you will have guessed it – as the womb of all ideal and imaginary phenomena, eventually brought to light an abundance of strange new beauty and affirmation, and perhaps beauty itself. (2.18)

The duplicity at the origin of the aesthetic impulse in Occidental culture derives, according to Nietzsche, from the turning of the animal "soul" against itself, taking sides against itself, imposing upon itself, as the most intractable of "materials", a form. Like James, Nietzsche refuses to distinguish the moral from the aesthetic in the never-ending quest of the soul to surmount its disaccord with itself. The "artist's cruelty" with which the self subjects itself to the constraint of form is itself a moral attribute, the most primitive or fundamental of them all, and this despite the pleasure that such voluptuous constraint evidently affords. One could cite numerous examples of artists in James's fiction for whom aesthetic pleasure is not only concomitant with but derives from the moral impulse of self-determination and overcoming that Nietzsche describes. An example is the writer Mark Ambient, in "The Author of Beltraffio," who speaks as lucidly as Nietzsche does in the passage just quoted of the voluptuous cruelty of his art and whose radical aestheticism is indeed less a product of the doctrine of "art for art" (57), as the narrator thinks, than the consequence of an "extreme dread of scandal" (78), directly linking the artist's obsession with form ("the spirit in him that felt all life as plastic material" [89]) to what Nietzsche calls an "*active* bad conscience." Such an active bad conscience is precisely what the artist's wife, Beatrice, "the very angel of the pink of propriety" (92), dimly discerns in the aestheticism of her spouse, from whose influence she futilely hopes to protect the couple's son, the beautiful Dolcino. The story owes its success to the fact that aesthetic sublimation as refined as that which Ambient achieves ("oh how it worries me, the shaping of the vase, the hammering of the metal! I have to

hammer it so fine, so smooth […]. And all the while I have to be so careful not to let a drop of the liquor escape!" [87], etc.) is so persuasive that the only effects produced in its beholders are a manic form of suspicion, on one hand, and a sort of benighted blindness on the other. The scandal of beauty as the product of a bad conscience almost manages to remain a well-kept secret in this text, despite the wife's hyperbolical reaction to it and the narrator-critic's near-perfect delusion. James's abiding resistance however to the doctrine of "art for art", as he articulates it in his essay on Baudelaire for example, derives from a distinct awareness he shared with Nietzsche of the moral genealogy of the artistic vocation. Beauty, as Nietzsche put it, is the product of a bad conscience. The aesthetic instinct is never innocent in James.

The point of Nietzsche's criticism however is to get at the origin of bad conscience, not merely to qualify its effects and the transformations it will have undergone in the course of Western history, ending up producing precisely the kind of ultra-refined aesthetic consciousness that one finds in James. Bad conscience is itself the result of a fatal turn in the affairs of man, the reversal by means of which a stress or pressure originally exerted from without becomes a pressure exerting itself from within, producing that "secret self-ravishment," that "uncanny, dreadfully joyous work of a soul voluntarily at odds with itself," in other words that simultaneously persecuted and persecuting interiority that anyone who has read James's "The Turn of the Screw" is familiar with. Nietzsche, as we've seen, goes back to the dawn of civilisation to identify the "original" pressure undergone by the human-animal with its introduction into society and the denaturalisation of its instincts, in short with that terrifying expropriation from nature, giving birth to a 'half-animal" suddenly unfit for its surroundings, weaker than before and overwhelmed by the weight of existence. A similar genealogical intention, less explicitly anthropological in character of course, can be found in James. Evidence of this resides in the very existence of the prologue James added to the principal narrative of "The Turn of the Screw." For what other purpose does Douglas's prologue serve but that of situating the origin of the governess's duplicity, the origin of the epistemological pressure she exerts upon herself and her young victims – one of whom she might be said to have squeezed to death in the end –, in her voluntary acceptance, prior to the events she narrates, of the pressure exerted upon her by the proprietor of Bly? Like much of the European discourse whose idealistic intentions Nietzsche sets out to deconstruct, nothing in the narrative of the governess, a preacher's daughter one remembers, is able to account for the bad conscience whose hyperactivity derives precisely from a violent will to conceal its origin from itself. The prologue reveals that the origin of the pressure the governess exerts upon herself and the children, the origin of that active and voluptuous duplicity of her soul, so

productive indeed of ideal and imaginary phenomena, lies in her acceptance of the law or of the constraint of the beloved proprietor, to "take the whole thing over," as Douglas reports, "and let him alone." "That she should never trouble him – but never, never; neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything, only […] take the whole thing over and let him alone." (6) The voluptuous duplicity and the secret self-ravishment of the governess, the veritable torture-chamber she turns herself into depends upon a sacrifice of the instincts, as Nietzsche would put it, ("when […] he held her hand, thanking her for the sacrifice, she already felt rewarded" [6]), that is to say upon the renunciation of the immediate gratification of desire and the ineluctable turning of desire against itself in the production of *imaginary* phenomena, an *ideal* object. Not even the reversal of the ideal image of the beautiful proprietor into the spectral image of Peter Quint – the precise equivalent in James of Nietzsche's inversion of Platonism –, not even the repetitions of this fall from the beautiful to the grotesque, from the ideal to the ghostly, are able to shake the heroic bad conscience of the governess who prefers to believe in the "reality" of the ghosts rather than conduct a well-needed genealogical critique of their production.

If bad conscience consists of a sort of half-deliberate blindness intended to avoid knowledge of the origin of consciousness and to maintain an idealistic belief in its ends, thereby transforming the sublimation of desire into an end in itself, and self-denial, as Nietzsche would put it, into a full-fledged project of spiritual redemption, then one must see James's work as simultaneously partaking of this model and intent on its genealogical critique. Indeed James nurtures a certain duplicity with respect to the productive duplicity, or disaccord with oneself, that Nietzsche sees at the basis of the bad conscience. On one hand James, like the governess herself, milks the duplicity at the origin of the aesthetic impulse for all it is worth, sublimating a latent or repressed desire into an aesthetic form of idealism ("It isn't to my possible glories I cling; it's simply to my idea […] I like it better than anything else," says the artist-comedian, Miriam Rooth, in *The Tragic Muse* [436]); on the other, and no doubt secretly at first, working backward, genealogically, against the flow of his own creative instinct, that is to say against his own "decadence," in the Nietzschian sense. This conflict comes to a head in the late 1880's, when James was writing what he then thought would be his "last long novel" (*A Life in Letters*, 224), *The Tragic Muse*. This novel bears all the signs of a bad conscience making matters worse for itself by deliberately building upon an aesthetic idealism it no longer believes in, while in a series of short fictions written in the years just prior to *The Tragic Muse* James is already busy at work undermining that same ideology. The genealogical intent at work in such short, apparently modest works like "The

Modern Warning" and "A London Life," both published in 1888 before James had started work on *The Tragic Muse*, "The Chaperon" (1891), and the brief, intensely focused study, "The Visits" (1892), would culminate in 1898 with "The Turn of the Screw." In order to get a glimpse of the genealogical critique of the duplicity at the source of James's own aesthetic consciousness it is worth taking a closer look at a scene from one of these stories.

The scene we'll come to in a moment is from "A London Life." The principal character is a young American girl, Laura Wing, who is visiting her sister and her brother-in-law in England for the first time. It is not without pertinence, of course, that James has furnished each of the tales I've just mentioned, as well as other writings from the same period, with a young female reflector – something about the consciousness of a girl, or of a young woman, at the more or less awkward age of her entry into society being what he appears to deem the ideal device for his genealogical explorations. The dramatic situation in which the young heroines of these stories find themselves tends to spring precisely from that "expropriation" from nature which Nietzsche identified, with equal pleasure but with perhaps less pity than James, as concomitant with the introduction of the "human-animal" into society. Such expropriation – the word appears in the second paragraph of "A London Life," where it becomes evident that Laura Wing is haunted by a strange sensation of duplicity – is frequently dramatized in James by the sentiment of impropriety or shame, which the young heroines of course are always quite zealous to rectify. Since the expropriation in question can never be felt otherwise than in a mediated way, the scandal at the source of the heroine's bad conscience is often to be found in the misbehaviour of a close relative, a sister or a mother, for example, rather than in any impropriety of her own.[1] In the texts just mentioned and others James plays on the proximity of the words "property" and propriety", an obsession with property ("Within the lodge-gates or without them it all seemed alike a park – so intensely and immutably 'property'", thinks Laura Wing in the opening scene of "A London Life" [88]) always reinforcing in the end an even more intimate, and genealogically anterior, sense of expropriation, in other words an *impropriety* that the heroine attempts to overcome in the course of her adventure. Such an attempt usually ends in failure. In "The Modern Warning," Lady Chasemore's hyperbolical attempt to overcome the shame she feels in the eyes of her American brother – her British husband has written what she fears to be a scandalous book

[1] As the narrator of "The Chaperon" says of Rose Tramore's feelings with respect to her mother's scandalous life-style: "If one thing were more present to her than another it was the very desolation of their propriety." (97). In like manner Fleda Vetch's love for Owen Gareth, in *The Spoils of Poynton*, is rendered exquisitely spiritual, the joyous work of a soul voluntarily at odds with itself, as Nietzsche would put it, not by the sentiment of her own dispossession, but by that of her would-be mother-in-law, Mrs Gareth, who through her son's marriage would find herself dispossessed of her property, Poynton.

about her homeland – ultimately leads to the young woman's suicide; and in the most poignant text of all, "The Visits," where the expropriation from nature and the inscription of the "human-animal" in the symbolic order of society is dramatised by a girl's involuntary verbal outburst to a young man in a moment of uncontrollable desire ("I broke out to him, I told him, […] it was as if I were borne along in the air by the wonder of what I had said – it rolled over me that I was lost" [161]), the impropriety proves insurmountable and Louisa Chantry dies, unconscious, several days afterward.

As a careful analysis of this group of texts could show, the expropriation from nature that Nietzsche describes as the condition of consciousness corresponds in James with the subject's assumption of the faculty of language. Over and over in James, and beginning in these genealogical studies of the late 1880's and 1890's, the duplicity or internal contradiction characteristic of consciousness is revealed to derive from the attempt to compensate, always in a more or less hyperbolical manner, for what one might call the linguistic expropriation of the subject. In *The Tragic Muse* this linguistic expropriation is dramatised by Nick Dormer's "ejaculation" (28) at the instant of Gabriel Nash's appearance, at the beginning of the novel, and is compensated for by this appearance itself, in a scene of specular recognition constituting the subject on the basis of its dispossession. In "The Visits" and "A London Life," however, a similar desire for recognition by the other fails tragically, leading to the pure expropriation of the subject. Laura Wing, unlike Louisa Chantry, survives nonetheless the experience, with only a few sick days in bed following the impropriety she commits.

The scene in "A London Life" that I want to focus on is precisely one of the specular recognition, or lack of such, that always occurs in James immediately after the linguistic expropriation of the subject. The scene occurs at the opera, just after what Laura Wing afterwards calls her "monstrous overture " (116), in other words just after having committed the impropriety of expressing to Wendover her desire that he ask her to marry him. Her motivation for this is complicated, for the scandal of what the young woman sees as the "expropriation" of her sister's mother-in-law from Mellows, from which the story begins, is itself a metonymy for a more intimate impropriety, that of her sister Selina's licentious sexual behaviour. In short, Laura Wing feels her own respectability to be so sullied by the impropriety of her sister that when it is revealed to her, at the opera, that Selina has just fled across the Channel with her most recent lover, leaving her to take the brunt of the ostracism her sister deserves, she determines that the best chance of overcoming her public exposure lies in the demand that Wendover, her opera companion ("he gave her a feeling of high respectability" [67]), ask her to marry her on the spot, in advance of the news he'll receive on

the morrow of her sister's adultery. If she has some slight reason to entertain such a hope, this hope takes on hyperbolical proportions to the precise extent that she feels her position to be a vulnerable one:

> Laura's spirit was all suspense – suspense of which she returned the pressure, trying to twist it into faith. There was a chance in life that sat there beside her, but it would go forever if it didn't move nearer that night; whereby she listened, she watched for it to move. I need scare mention that this chance presented itself in the person of Mr. Wendover, who more than any one concerned with her had it in his hand to redeem her detestable position. To-morrow he would know, and would think sufficiently little of a young person of *that* breed: therefore it could only be a question of speaking on the spot. That was what she had come back to the box for – to give him his opportunity. (113)

Everything depends here upon the "twisting" of the "pressure" she undergoes into a "faith," the faith that her sense of impropriety will be redeemed in advance of its exposure by Wendover's recognition of her desire. As the word "twist" suggests, the pressure is tropological, implying here the substitutive exchange of a specular recognition by the other for the loss of self-identity that will reach its climax in the girl's verbal outburst. Time passes, however, and Wendover remains silent, increasing the pressure, obliging the girl at last to utter her "monstrous overture":

> If he had nothing to say, why *had* he said, why had he *done*, what did he mean ——? But the girl's inward challenge to him lost itself in a mist of faintness; she was screwing herself up to a purpose of her own, and it hurt almost to anguish, while the whole place about became a blur and a swim through which she heard the tuning of fiddles. Before she knew it she had said to him: "Why have you come so often?" (114)

This scene will be repeated with perhaps greater effect in "The Turn of the Screw," where the same tropological pressure ("she was screwing herself up") gets the better of the governess in her own "monstrous utterance of names" (51).[2] In both cases a more or less secret desire for recognition is involuntarily expressed, leading to a scandalous outburst and the expropriation

[2] Compare, in particular, with the scene where the governess shuts herself up in the schoolroom and tries, as she says, to "come to the point": "the strange dizzy lift or swim (I try for terms!) into a stillness, a pause of all life, that had nothing to do with the more or less noise we at the moment might be engaged in making and that I could hear through any intensified mirth or quickened recitation or louder strum of the piano. Then it was that the others, the outsiders, were there." (51)

of the subject.[3] Unfortunately for Laura, Wendover is caught totally off guard by her words. What happens then is that instead of substituting his recognition of the girl for the girl's loss of self-possession, in a specular moment of exchange where the other constitutes the self, Wendover appears to the girl (much as the ghosts appear in the gaze of the governess) as a reflection of the tropological tension that had itself led to the "monstrous overture." This is clear in the following paragraph, where the tropological pressure ("twisting", "screwing") released in the verbal outburst returns in a strange and violent manner upon Laura, just as Wendover is slowly catching on to her wish and preparing to declare his love for her:

> For an instant she thought he was coming nearer, but he didn't: he stood there twirling his gloves. Then an unspeakable shame, a great horror, horror of herself, of him, of everything, came over her, and she sank into a chair at the back of the box, with averted eyes, trying to get further into her corner. "Leave me, leave me, go away!" she said in the lowest tone he could hear. The whole house seemed to be listening to her, pressing into the box. […] "You don't love me – and you torture me by staying!" Laura went on in a convulsed voice. "For God's sake go away and don't speak to me, don't let me see you or hear of you again!" (115-16)

He catches on too late; she becomes hysterical. Instead of canalising and temporalising the tropological tension that has led to the girl's outburst, Wendover's mere reflection of it has the effect of *returning* the pressure. For what does the "twirling" of his gloves reflect, precisely, if not the "twisting" and the "screwing up" of the girl's tension into a highly speculative faith in him? Indeed the very name Wendover – Laura Wing, we've been alerted, is highly sensitive to names – suggests the same thing, for *Wendung*, in German, means *turn*. What Laura Wing finds herself confronted with then is a specular image of the hyperbolic tropological activity of her own mind. Instead of a moment of recognition which sooner or later always reveals itself to be illusory – but which is nonetheless absolutely necessary to the constitution of the self –, what the specular image reveals here is the tropological structure, founded in language, that underlies all cognition in James. Prefiguring the ghosts whose turning on the staircase at Bly will have the same horrifying effect on the governess, Wendover "coloured" we read a few lines further on, "looked […] unmistakeably discomposed." (115) A ghost is always but the visual trace of the linguistic moment

[3] In "The Turn of the Screw": "I always broke down in the monstrous utterance of names. As they died away on my lips I said to myself that I should indeed help them to represent something infamous if by pronouncing them I should violate as rare a little case of instinctive delicacy as any schoolroom had probably ever known. When I said to myself: '*They* have the manners to be silent, and you, trusted as you are, the baseness to speak!' I felt myself crimson and covered my face with my hands." (51)

constitutive of consciousness. In precise contrast to Gabriel Nash, the saving angel whose equally specular apparition helped Dormer overcome his "crisis" (27) in *The Tragic Muse*, ghosts and other more or less decomposed figures in James have the opposite, demonic effect of reflecting the tropological condition of consciousness and undercutting its idealistic aspirations.

What such scenes in James reveal is that man is a tropological animal. They reveal a genealogical intention or deconstructive force in James at least as fruitful, if more discrete, than that which one finds in Nietzsche. Nietzsche's image of an aquatic animal suddenly become terrestrial, forced all at once to "bear itself" where previously it had been borne by water, is an apt metaphor for the transition in James from nature to culture, from pre-linguistic being to the symbolic order of society. Man's promise, according to Nietzsche, depends on his expropriation from nature, on a weakness, a terrible vulnerability. James's narrator, at the end of "A London Life," somewhat ironically describes Laura Wing's vulnerability this way:

> It is apt to be the disadvantage of women, on occasions of measuring their strength with men, that they may feel in the man a larger experience, and feel their own precious substance, their general 'side,' as part of that resource. It is doubtless as a provision against such emergencies that nature has opened to them operations of the mind quite independent of experience. (139-40)

What these "operations of the mind quite independent of experience" refer to is the tropological (or mimetic) faculty serving to compensate for what James's text designates as an anterior impropriety, in other words for an original lack (or loss) of nature that can never be identified in non-metaphorical terms. Duplicity in James, in particular that active duplicity of the bad conscience informing the aesthetic impulse itself, originates precisely in such a lack of nature.

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