



**"The Triumph of intentions never entertained":  
Gestational Ambiguities and Attempts at Correction in  
Henry James's Tales**

Arnold Leitner

► **To cite this version:**

Arnold Leitner. "The Triumph of intentions never entertained": Gestational Ambiguities and Attempts at Correction in Henry James's Tales. *Alizés: Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 2003, Henry James and Other Essays, 23, pp.101-110. hal-02344240

**HAL Id: hal-02344240**

**<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02344240>**

Submitted on 4 Nov 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

“The triumph of intentions never entertained”:  
Gestational Ambiguities and Attempts at Correction  
in Henry James's Tales<sup>1</sup>

---

Henry James's literary productions—as voluminous as they may already seem—are not confined to his plays, his twenty novels and more than a hundred tales. We also have to add his letters, his travel writings, half a dozen biographies and—equally important—James's notebooks. Almost during his entire creative period, James used to take notes of everyday occurrences, hoping to find in the trite and trivial the “suggestive germ” for what would then become a new novel or one more tale.

If we compare the ideas and first drafts Henry James jotted down in his notebooks with the tales that finally evolved from these notes, it becomes quite evident that a number of James's tales took a course that the entry in the notebook did not foresee. The gestation of James's tale “A London Life,” for example, illustrates exemplarily how the unfolding tale little by little emancipated itself from the original notebook idea. In the case of “A London Life,” James put down in one of his notebooks that the French author Paul Bourget had witnessed the suicide of a young woman. According to Bourget's report the young woman jumped out of her hotel window in Milan, because she was driven to despair by the promiscuous behaviour of her mother. A few days later, however, Bourget had to admit to James that he had made up most of the story:

I should add that a day or two after telling me his story, Bourget let me know that his interpretation of the *motive* of the suicide had probably been utterly fanciful. Nothing in the real history was clear but the fact that she had killed herself, and the mother's immorality [...] relegated [itself] to the vague.” (*Notebooks* 36 ff.)

---

<sup>1</sup> This contribution is a slightly revised version of a paper given at the Henry James Today Conference at the American University in Paris, France (5-9 July 2002).

James nevertheless was interested in the story as it was told by Bourget, but modified it essentially along the act of composition. James, who thought that no American magazine would publish a story about a promiscuous mother compromising herself in front of her daughter, rejected the possibility that the mother was an adulteress and changed the mother-daughter constellation into a relationship between two sisters: "I think the American magazines can be made to swallow the sister, at least" (*Notebooks* 38), commented James. Another concession James made to the American readers was that he superimposed the international theme on the original story: the elder, promiscuous sister is described as typical of the London set, while her younger, naive sister, having just arrived from the United States, is utterly shocked by the frivolous life in the British capital. Finally, James did not recoil from changing the only actual occurrence of the original story—the young woman's suicide. The reason why James omitted the suicide from his tale is as simple as it is surprising: "I don't want the suicide. It's too rare, and I used it the other day in 'Two Countries'" (*Notebooks* 38).

By briefly tracing the development of this particular tale from notebook idea to actual tale we could see that James as a working artist was influenced by a number of factors that determined the *histoire* of his tales, a process which James himself called the "triumph of intentions never entertained" (*Art of the Novel* 127). In the case of "A London Life" the "intentions never entertained" triumphed to such a degree that the original germ and starting point of the story didn't agree with the therefrom resulting story anymore and had to be removed.

Apart from the just mentioned specific case it can be observed that the alterations of the *histoire* are in most cases a direct consequence of the more important role the narrator or reflector assumes in the finished tale as compared to the draft in the notebooks: narrators and/or reflectors, which are only rarely mentioned in the notebooks at all, quite often become the "center of interest" (*Art of the Novel* 84) of the finished tales. An example in point is the tale "The Author of Beltraffio." Originally the tale was conceived as the story of a mother who lets her child die rather than let it fall under the influence of the father, who is a novelist allegedly dealing with outspoken themes. James had planned in his notebooks to have the gruesome story told by a young American, who happens to visit the family in question. In the finished tale, however, the supposedly peripheral narrator becomes far more involved in the lives of his host family than originally planned and he can even be held responsible for the child's death: it is the narrator who presses Mrs. Ambient to read her husband's new book by

virtually forcing the manuscript on her. This manuscript gives Mrs. Ambient such a horror of her husband's morally corruptive books that she determines to let her son die. The narrator's responsibility for the child's death is not a mere detail in the tale, but has a direct impact on his motivation to tell the story. Believing himself to be guilty, his narration becomes a confession and, at the same time, an apology. In the tale the narrator distances himself from his "ingenious mind" when he was only 25 years old, dwells on his limited understanding of the English people and explicitly gives voice to his anxiety that the reader could misunderstand the situation:

In looking back upon these first moments of my visit to him, I find it important to avoid the error of appearing to have understood his situation from the first, and to have seen in him the signs of things which I learnt only afterwards. (*Beltraffio* 316)

Thus the narrator, who in the notebook was still placed at the periphery of the story, assumes an important dramatic role in the finished tale. Owing to his involvement, the narration obtains an existential tone that gives a totally new direction to the tale. Rather than focussing—as planned in the notebooks—on the dispute between art and morals and the therefrom-resulting tragedy, the story hinges on the narrator's possible share of guilt and the analysis of his line of conduct. "The Author of *Beltraffio*" thus serves by way of example for James's marked tendency to upgrade the narrator's role in the act of composition, even if this implied profound modifications on the level of the *histoire*.

In a few of James's tales, however, the upgrade of the narrator's role led to gestational ambiguities, *i.e.* inconsistencies in the *histoire* that were caused by the new course the tale had taken in spite of the entry in the notebook. The less well-known tale "The Solution," provides us with most interesting examples of such gestational ambiguities: the older notebook idea and the newer version of "The Solution" overlap and result in the co-existence of two different genetic layers of the same story.

In 1889 James sketched out a possible story in which two young men make their friend believe that he has compromised the reputation of a young woman and is therefore obliged to marry her. The notebook entry shows that James had planned to have his tale focus on the resulting unhappy marriage and—equally important—to have the story told by one of the young men who carried out the joke: "The story should be told by one of the actors [...] who carried out the joke. He relates it late in life [...] He has had great remorse since"

(*Notebooks* 50). The narrative thus was planned to be one of reminiscence, where remorse and conscience of guilt play an important role. The narrator was supposed to be tormented by remorse at what he had done, and conscience of guilt was to be at the bottom of his story. These feelings of remorse go hand in hand with the originally planned unfolding of the tale, which is the unhappy marriage of two miserable young people.

If we compare this first draft of the tale with the actual story, it becomes conspicuous that, contrary to the notebook idea, the narrator has become the central figure of the tale. What makes the case of "The Solution" especially interesting is that traces of James's change of mind with regard to the narrator are still visible in the tale. In other words, a few inconsistencies in the story indicate that James began writing the tale according to his scheme in the *Notebooks*, but then, already in the act of composition, gave a new direction to it.

The setting of the tale is Rome, Italy, where the importunate Mrs. Goldie and her three daughters contribute to the exhilaration of the diplomatic corps in more than one way: "The jokes made about them were almost as numerous as the cups of tea received from the hands of the young ladies" (*Solution* 354). When the young American diplomat Wilmerding comes back late from a walk with the eldest of the three daughters, the narrator of the tale makes him believe that he has compromised the reputation of the girl and that, according to European standards, he is expected to propose to her. Wilmerding actually believes him, proposes with a heavy heart and is accepted by the girl. When the narrator becomes aware of what he has done, he turns to his own ladylove and asks her to find a way out of the difficult situation. His girlfriend actually helps—but not in the way the narrator had hoped: Wilmerding can buy himself out of his obligation with Miss Goldie and marries the narrator's girlfriend, who was as impressed with Wilmerding's honourable conduct as she was disappointed at the narrator's frivolity. The practical joke actually backfires on the narrator: instead of wedding Wilmerding to Miss Goldie, he has driven him into the arms of his own beloved. And the Goldies? In the tale it says that they fully enjoyed their unexpected financial wealth...

If we recollect that James had planned in his *Notebooks* to have the narrator be tormented by remorse and conscience of guilt for the harm he had caused to his friends, it becomes clear that these emotions do not agree anymore with the new turn the tale has taken. The new importance that the narrator assumes in "The Solution" not only puts him at the center of interest of the tale, it also changes his dramatic role from instigator and trouble-maker to that of a



victim—a victim to his own wantonness, but still to be pitied. In the first two chapters of the tale, however, the narrator pronounces himself on the incident as if he had made himself guilty of a great wrong. He characterizes his story as a "belated confession" and a "story of his shame" (*Solution* 357) and describes his behaviour "as that of a very demon" (*Solution* 369). This negative judgement of himself and the confession of guilt, however, only make sense with the story as it was originally planned in the notebooks, where the narrator's deeds actually did harm other persons.

Interestingly enough, after the first two chapters, the narrator's emotions suddenly change from a feeling of guilt to anger and agony. The narrator complains about the "finished feminine hypocrisy" of his beloved, he confesses that the whole affair had made him "wince" (*Solution* 394) and claims to be entitled to "consolation" (*Solution* 407). These feelings finally agree with the actual course of the tale. "Shame" or "feelings of guilt" belong, at this stage of the tale, to times long past.

In "The Solution" James's tendency to make the narrator of his tales also the "center of interest" thus led to ambiguities with regard to content. We were able to show that the narrator's emotions expressed in the first half of the tale do not agree with the actual plot of the tale, but only with the draft in the notebooks. James must have first pursued his notebook idea and then—already in the act of composition—deviated from it, which resulted in the incompatible co-existence of two different genetic layers of the same story.

As "The Solution" did not find its way into the monumental New York Edition, where James re-edited and revised most of his novels and about half of his tales, the inconsistencies of the tale remained without correction. In a few other of James's tales, however, not only is it possible to point out gestational ambiguities, but also James's attempts to correct these discrepancies in the revised versions of the tales in the New York Edition (*cf.* Stanzel 284).

One of these tales is "The Lesson of the Master," a narrative which belongs to James's stories about writers and artists. In "The Lesson of the Master" the elder author Henry St. George has to aim, in his literary productions, for quick financial success rather than artistic quality, because he has a family to sustain. When he gets to know his young and promising colleague Paul Overt, he warns him against the perils of family life. Overt, although feeling a strong attraction to Miss Marian Fancourt, takes St. George's advice and leaves England in order to concentrate his attentions and efforts exclusively on his new book.

On returning to England, Overt learns that St. George's wife has died and that St. George has married Marian.

By offering two different and differing versions of the tale, Shlomith Rimmon has laid her finger on the central ambiguity of "The Lesson of the Master": is Henry St George sincere when he cautions his colleague and fellow author Paul Overt against the incompatibility of marriage and the dedication to art? Or does he encourage him to leave the country only to have his rival in wooing the beautiful Marian Fancourt out of the way? (cf. Rimmon 79 ff.)

When James (in June 1888) jotted down the first notes for "The Lesson of the Master," the planned tale had nothing that would suggest future ambiguity: James ponders on the effect of marriage on the artist and suggests in his notebooks that the concepts of "Life" and "Art" are difficult if not even impossible to reconcile. Setting out from these considerations James traces out a plot in which an elder author, on whom family life has taken its toll, tries to save a talented younger colleague from committing the same mistake:

It occurred to me that a very interesting situation would be that of an elder artist or writer, who has been ruined [...] by his marriage and its forcing him to produce promiscuously and cheaply—his position in regard to a younger *confrère* whom he sees on the brink of the same disaster and whom he endeavours to save, to rescue, by some act of bold interference—breaking off the marriage, annihilating the wife, making trouble between the parties. (*Notebooks* 44)

The notebook idea is thus unequivocal and cleanses Henry St. George a priori from any suspicion of plotting and intriguing in order to get hold of Miss Fancourt. However, the aforementioned tendency of Henry James to turn his attention during the act of composition on the narrator and—as in this case—the reflector alters the course of the story and replaces "unambiguousness" by pluridimensionality. By focussing exclusively on the perceptions, feelings and doubts of the reflector Paul Overt, the story, which was supposed to be a parable about the incompatibility of "Art" and "Life," becomes a story of literary rivalry along with the subtle battle for a young woman's love.

In order to show to what extent James was captured by the new turn the tale was taking, we can consider the main female figure, Miss Marian Fancourt. According to the notebook idea Marian Fancourt and Paul Overt live in a steady relationship or are even married to each other (*Notebooks* 43). In the actual tale, however, it is true that Paul Overt is desperately in love with Marian, but she doesn't return his affection. Quite contrary to the notebook idea, Marian is described as leading a completely independent and Bohemian life:

Marian was on the footing of an independent personage—a motherless girl who [...] was not held down to the limitations of a little miss. She came and went without the clumsiness of a chaperon; she received people alone and [...] the question of protection or patronage had no relevancy in regard to her. (*Lesson* 252)

Described like this, Marian suggests sisterhood with Daisy Miller and Pandora Day. Only Marian's total freedom and her un(con)strained association with both men make St. George's actions suspicious and Overt's doubts possible.

Twenty years after the first publication of "The Lesson of the Master," Henry James reflected, in the prefaces to the New York Edition, on this particular tale. What is most surprising is that James confined himself in his deliberations to Henry St. George, ignoring the actual center of interest and the remarkable ambiguous ending of the tale completely. In other words, it seems as if James returned, in his retrospective analysis of the tale, to his original notebook idea. Equally surprising is that James expresses in the aforementioned preface his "active sympathy" and even pity for St. George. Considering that St. George's moral integrity and honesty are at least questionable, feelings of sympathy come as a surprise; considering that he is a jubilant bridegroom at the end of the tale, feelings of pity become especially difficult to understand.

What then could be the reasons for these peculiar discrepancies between the evidence of the text and the interpretation made by the author himself? We can of course suppose a lapse of memory and that James had simply "forgotten" that his tale had swerved from the original notebook idea.

A more plausible explanation for James's relapse to the notebook draft is suggested by a thorough comparison of the first published version of the tale with the revised version of the New York Edition. As it is impossible to enumerate in detail all the alterations James made for the New York Edition, I will point out three main areas where changes occurred. In revising his tale, James was intent on outlining the contours of the main characters more sharply and thus creating a more limpid and transparent situation. Paul Overt, for one, is depicted as the ideal artist. His aspirations for creating a perfect work of art is described as totally sincere, even if this implies asceticism and renunciations. The New York Edition suggests far more than the first version of the tale that Overt's vocation is Art and that he must be saved from Life's temptations:



## First edition (1888)

"Important! Ah! the grand creature," Paul murmured, hilarious. (251)

"Ah, perfection!" Overt sighed. (261)

"To save me?" Paul repeated. (262)

"[...] No, no; success is to have made people tremble after another fashion. Do try it!"

"Try it?"

"Try to do some really good work" (265)

## New York Edition (1908)

"Important! Ah the grand creature!"—and the author of the work in question **groaned for joy**. (52)

"Ah decency, ah perfection—!" the young man **sincerely** sighed. (66)

"To save me?" he **quavered**.

"[...] No, no; success is to have made people wriggle to another tune. Do try it!"

**Paul continued all gravely to glow**. "Try what?"

"Try to do some really good work."

Other corrections concern Marian Fancourt. By means of authorial interpolations which are added in the New York Edition, Marian's affection for St. George is revalued. This is of consequence for the end of the tale, because it means that St. George doesn't have to fall back on cunning in order to gain Marian's love:

Paul Overt looked at her [Marian Fancourt] a moment; there was a species of morning-light in her eyes. (227)

Paul Overt met her eyes, which had a cool morning-light **that would have half-broken his heart if he hadn't been so young**. (21)

The most important alterations James made in the New York Edition, however, concern Henry St. George. Again by adding authorial commentary James tries to vindicate St. George from the reproach of dishonesty. St. George's warnings against the obligations of family life are described as authentic, as well as his enthusiasm for Overt's artistic talent and his acrimony against himself:

"Ah, perfection!" Overt sighed, "I talked of that the other Sunday with Miss Fancourt."

"Oh yes, they'll talk of it as much as you like! But they do mighty little to help one to it." (261)

"Ah decency, ah perfection—!" the young man sincerely sighed. "I talked of them the other Sunday with Miss Fancourt."

**It produced on the Master's part a laugh of odd acrimony**. "Yes, they'll talk of them as much as you like! But they'll do little to help one to them." (66)

"You are an incentive, I maintain," the young man went on. "You don't affect me in the way you apparently would like to. Your great success is what I see—the pomp of Ennismore Gardens!"

"You are an incentive, I maintain," the young man went on. "You don't affect me in the way you'd apparently like to. Your great success is what I see—the pomp of Ennismore Gardens!"

"Success?—do you call it success to be spoken of as you would speak of me if you were sitting here with another artist—a man intelligent and sincere like yourself?" (265)

"Success?"—**St George's eyes had a cold fine light.** "Do you call it success to be spoken of as you'd speak of me if you were sitting here with another artist—a man intelligent and sincere like yourself?" (71)

To sum up our argument we can point out one specific change which is symptomatic of all the corrections James made in revising the tale for the New York Edition: at the end of the story, Paul Overt calls to account St. George and accuses him of perfidy and of having plotted against him. In the first version of the tale St. George defends himself by saying: "Honestly, at my age, I never dreamed [...] It has turned out differently from any possible **calculation**" (*Lesson* 281). In the New York Edition James eliminated the negatively connoted word "calculation" and substituted it with a more neutral "it has turned out differently from anything one could have dreamed" (93).

The obliteration of the expression "calculation" embraces all of James's attempts to minimize potential nests of ambiguity and to clear away the suspicion that St. George might have schemed against his fellow-author Paul Overt. It is especially worthy of note that James even put up with a re-authorialization of the tale—which of course is quite contrary to his normal tendency to undermine the authority of the narrator and to give emphasis to multiperspectiveness and plurality of perception. When plurality of meaning, however, resulted from the incomplete removal of the first rough-draft of the tale or the superimposing of one gestational stratum on top of the other, it turns out that James was intent on emending these ambiguities—whereas ambiguities which are conditioned by the narrative form (as for example focussing exclusively on mental processes of a reflector) remained untouched. James's attempts to correct gestational ambiguities give evidence of his consistent development in the art of narration. In the end, it is not "the intentions never entertained" which triumph, but Henry James's always growing artistic consciousness which directly points the way to the complex narrative techniques of the beginning XX<sup>th</sup> century.

Arnold LEITNER  
*University of Coimbra, Portugal*



## WORKS CITED

- James, Henry. "The Author of Beltraffio." *The Complete Tales of Henry James* V, 303-355.
- . *The Art of the Novel. Critical Prefaces*. Ed. Richard Blackmur. New York, 1950.
- . *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*. Ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers. New York and Oxford, 1987.
- . *The Complete Tales of Henry James*. Ed. Leon Edel, 12 vols. London, 1963.
- . "A London Life". *The Complete Tales of Henry James* VII, 87-212.
- . "The Lesson of the Master." *The Complete Tales of Henry James* VII, 213-284.
- . *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*. 26 vols. New York, 1907-1909.
- . "The Solution." *The Complete Tales of Henry James* VII, 351-407.
- Rimmon, Shlomith, *The Concept of Ambiguity: The Example of Henry James*. Chicago and London, 1977.