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Henry James, in Short

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“Short James” might be approached by way of the memorable Dickensian tag-line, “in short.” The phrase belongs to Mr. Micawber, of course, whose prolix correspondence has long made him a favorite with audiences. His unforgettably effusive epistolary style, noteworthy for elaborate metaphors and convoluted sentences, parodies the letter-writing manuals of an earlier era while at the same time providing a comic foil to the serious literary endeavors of David Copperfield. Beginning with a mastery of stenography, David’s disciplined approach to language presents a stark contrast to Micawber’s inability to control the words at his disposal: “Mr. Micawber had a relish in this formal piling up of words” (749). The long, legalistic letters from his hand are comic masterpieces of the nineteenth-century novel that did not go unappreciated by James. What matters for our purposes here is not only Micawber’s epistolary effusiveness but also his signature maneuver of following up the longest, most elaborate sentences imaginable with the abrupt turn of phrase “in short.” Micawber’s verbosity leaves his listeners at a loss for words until rescue comes in the form of this *epiphonema*, the Latin term for a figure of speech used to provide a pithy summary of the preceding discourse. The humor arises in these scenarios from the rapid accumulation of words while the audience holds its breath in anticipation, but there is nothing short about getting to Micawber’s “in short.”

Mr. Micawber had a way of turning up in James’s own writing. His name appears alongside that of Don Quixote in “The Art of Fiction,” for example, and James even makes the unlikely comparison between himself and Micawber in the preface to “Daisy Miller.” My interests are less with James’s references to Micawber, however, than with the problem represented by Micawber’s exuberance, deliberated over by James in a very different way throughout much of his writing about short fiction. In particular, Mr. Micawber offers a warning against two extremes: prolixity and brevity, or saying too much and saying too little. It is within this framework that I will examine James’s conflicted attitude toward short fiction in a range of writings before concluding with the neglected short tale, “The Abasement of the Northmores,” which, in my reading, enacts a debate over the kinds of superfluous speech found in literature and journalism. After all, this is a story in which Lord Northmore’s collected letters

do little to reveal the private man as originally promised by the editors. Instead, the strange manner in which the portraits accompanying the correspondence evade eye contact with the viewer, so that even a former lover must enter the volume “as if she had been a stranger,” provides a visual emblem for the evasiveness of Northmore’s words in a way that might be compared to James’s short fiction (*CT* 11: 127).

James’s attitude toward short fiction must be pieced together from stray comments made in prefaces, reviews, notebooks, letters, and other writings. The “question of the short story” is a phrase set apart in scare quotes by the notebooks to distinguish between public opinion and his private struggles with the form (*AN* 178). James’s skepticism distances him from self-proclaimed magazinists like Poe, whose commercial opportunism led him to embrace the genre at a time when periodicals in America and Britain were beginning to prefer short fiction over long serialized novels. Formerly loose distinctions among the “sketch,” “tale,” and “story” were treated with greater rigor as a growing number of periodicals required short fiction to entice readers with the promise of undemanding leisure. The demand for short stories by these indiscriminating publications did little to improve their standing as anything more than disposable commodities. In this context, James’s contemporary Brander Matthews felt it necessary to distinguish between the short story and the story that is merely short. The attention given to the short story by James should be understood in the context of Matthews’s 1885 apologia, “The Philosophy of the Short Story,” and of other discussions of the genre since Poe’s review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* in 1842 (569–77), one of the earliest statements about the aesthetics of the short story on either side of the Atlantic. James’s review, “Guy de Maupassant,” associates short masterpieces with American writers such as Poe, Hawthorne, and Hart, as well as with continental writers like Maupassant. By contrast, English audiences still consumed their fiction in bulk by way of the English novel, comparable in its amplitude to “one of those old-fashioned carriages which require a wide court to turn round” (*CM* 242). A wide court indeed: the triple-decker or three-volume novel remained the norm in England until the mid-1890s. Yet, James still thought it necessary to insist that the length of Maupassant’s tales did not prevent them from being masterpieces. Brevity remained a liability rather than a virtue. This condescension put him at odds with many of his American contemporaries promoting the short story as superior to the inherited forms of European fiction.

At a recent James symposium I attended, one speaker humorously remarked of the so-called major phase: “Let’s face it, there is no minor James.” Critical inattentiveness to the short fiction can be partly attributed to the low regard in which James himself held much of it. As he once responded to an invitation to contribute a short tale to *Harper’s*: “The thing is not worth doing at all unless something tolerably big and strong is got out of it” (*CN* 107). James’s contempt for a form at which I have always found him to excel has long perplexed me. The muscular terms “big” and “strong” are hardly Jamesian or even complimentary when used by the author in other contexts. More important, the terms are uncharacteristic of an author whose finest work is set apart by delicacy. The sheer volume of stories written during James’s lifetime goes some way toward explaining this dissatisfaction. Writing well over one-hundred tales ensured that a number of pieces suffered from commercial demands. Readers working their way through the quantity of short fiction would be unlikely to

make such a statement as that of the symposium speaker even in jest. The reputation of the short story for imparting little more than anecdote is painfully deserved by a number of the tales judiciously avoided by James criticism.

An additional factor is the general critical tendency to treat all short stories as minor works. Short tales are usually invoked in connection with a shared theme found in one of an author's longer works rather than treated as *objets d'art* in their own right. I once encountered this attitude firsthand through a rejection of my submission to a journal (not the *HJR*, I hasten to add) for the reason that the essay focused on a single "minor" story. (It was a *nouvelle*, ahem.) There is no disputing the truth of this claim, only whether this is sufficient grounds for disqualification. After all, the minor status of the narrative in question is what inspired the essay's reappraisal of the tale in the first place. A similar ambivalence is evident even in recent collections reappraising the short fiction. Take the defensive manner of the following line from one such reappraisal: "although these earliest stories are not lost gems of James's art, they are often full of delight" (Kaufman 169). The qualification is especially telling in that "gem" is the very word used by James to describe the perfect short story (CN 35).

"Life is really too short for art," says Mark Ambient in "The Author of Beltraccio" (CT 5: 333). All the more surprising that, for James at least, art was seldom too short for life. James's preference for the *nouvelle* over the short story will be familiar to readers of the prefaces to the New York Edition. The preface to "The Lesson of the Master," for instance, recounts James's delight at an invitation from Henry Harland and Aubrey Beardsley to contribute to *The Yellow Book*. Better yet, this contribution would be exempt from the customary—arbitrary—editorial constraints on length. James cites Balzac, Bourget, Maupassant, Turgenev, and even Kipling as exemplars of what the short narrative is capable of when given ample room to breathe. James's comparison of the short story with the *nouvelle* heavily favors the latter in its provision of space for nuanced treatment, organic form, and thematic development not conducive to word limits. It is an intermediate length James referred to elsewhere as "the *Daisy Miller* scale" (CN 107). At the same time, he recognized the extent to which Anglo-Saxon audiences were blithely indifferent toward fine discriminations of this kind: "In that dull view a 'short story' was a 'short story,' and that was the end of it" (AN 220). In contrast to the amplitude held forth by the *nouvelle*, the short story suffered under the principle of "brevity at any cost" (219), or what another preface deems "mutilation" (235). The short story's strict word count is the main reason why James so often dismissed the form as mere anecdote. Short stories are really *nouvelles manquées*, that is, *nouvelles* forced to "masquerade" as anecdotes when in reality they are more complex tales (235). The best short tales would seem to be so in spite of themselves.

The notebooks record James's perpetual struggle to keep within the word limits prescribed by editors. While these pages record the initial *donnée* behind each tale, they likewise capture its inevitable expansion in the author's mind. An instructive example is the entry for "The Patagonia," serialized in the *English Illustrated Magazine* from August to September 1888. The story arose from Fanny Kemble's anecdote about Barry St. Leger's alleged flirtation with a young married woman who later takes her own life by leaping off a ship sailing from India. "Admirable little dismal subject," James comments in the notebooks (43). A subsequent entry records James's intention

of keeping the story within the standard limit of 8,000 words. The first indication that the author is in trouble comes from the sudden apostrophe: "Oh, spirit of Maupassant, come to my aid!" (45). It would take more than invocation of the French master of brevity for this story to remain under the word limit, however. After dividing the tale into three sections, James laments, "I fear that with all the compression in the world I can't do it in so very short a compass as Comyns Carr has demanded" (45). What was determined to be "a triumph of robust and vivid concision" results in nearly 23,000 words (45). This pattern is repeated throughout the notebooks despite James's reassurances about how simple it should be to do otherwise: "A story that couldn't possibly be long would have inevitably to be 'short'" (AN 124). His editors could only watch in dismay as the inevitably short grew to the inevitably long in the pages of their magazines. "The Marriages," "The Aspern Papers," and "Louisa Pallant" likewise all exceed word limits despite James's good intentions to treat each of them with "great brevity" (CN 35). "The Aspern Papers" ballooned into a short novel nearly five times the length of the average short story. Even a novel as expansive as *The Golden Bowl* first struck James as admirably "compact" (CN 115). Oh, spirit of Maupassant!

James's distaste for the short story is all the more unexpected in light of the preference for economy that resonates throughout the prefaces. As he says in the introduction to one cluster of tales: "in art economy is always beauty" (AN 257). The term implies a principle of thrift at first glance most appropriate to the short story. In "The Middle Years," for example, such precision sets Dencombe apart from more commercial authors when we are told how "he preferred single volumes and aimed at a rare compression" (CT 9: 56). "Compression" is the very word used by advocates of the short story (such as Matthews) to differentiate between the novel and the story in terms other than length. Even if the single volume exceeds the word limit of the short story, compression is its distinguishing feature, for Dencombe's single volume would no doubt be another author's triple-decker. This emphasis on concision, the discriminating selection of each word for reasons other than satisfying a count, sets Dencombe apart from more effusive authors such as Henry St. George whom, in "The Lesson of the Master," Paul Overt suspects of having written "too much" after producing the early masterpieces (CT 7: 220). The distinction is one between economy by way of Dencombe's concision, rich in implication with every word, and looseness in the form of St. George's rambling late work, in which much is said without anything being said at all.

Yet, it would be a mistake to treat James's attitude toward economy simply in terms of length. James distinguishes between literature and journalism, or, according to one tale, between "the bard" and "the reporter" (FC 199). Journalism represents a form of writing responsive to commercial demand; it is empty talk designed to fill up as much space as possible in as short amount of time as possible in order to attract as much attention as possible. In "The Death of the Lion," the "Smatter and Chatter" column written by Mr. Morrow for a syndicate of thirty-seven journals is in this sense the antithesis to James's idea of verbal economy (CT 87). The very title of Morrow's column implies the kind of superficial acquaintance and trivial conversation most offensive to James. Similar words associated with popular journalism in James's eyes register the modes of glib writing against which he defines serious literature: chat,

prattle, babble, scribble, gossip, verbiage, twaddle, rubbish, trash. Mr. Morrow is the person least qualified to go beyond superficial observation in the business of writing “chatty” celebrity profiles. These occasional pieces are little more than transcriptions of idle conversation requiring minimal attention from an audience—especially when compared to the rigorous acts of attention demanded by much of James’s own writing. (This was the sort of journalism demanded of James as a correspondent for the *New York Tribune*. When asked by Whitelaw Reid to make the letters more personal, he memorably replied that they “were the worst I could do for the money” [CN 123].) By contrast, “The Jolly Corner” offers an unlikely foil to the journalist in Spencer Brydon’s confidante Alice Staverton, of whom we are told: “she was a woman who answered intimately but who utterly didn’t chatter. She scattered abroad therefore no cloud of words” (CT 12: 201). In fact, James’s attitude toward verbal economy should be understood in opposition to the “cloud of words” emanating from journalists since a “cloud” mystifies rather than clarifies. The goal of the best fiction is, in the words of James’s acquaintance Joseph Conrad, “to make you *see*” (x).

“The Abasement of the Northmores” is illustrative of the distinction between lean and loose writing. The story’s central opposition between two correspondents of varying degrees of volubility, it seems to me, is best understood in relation to James’s concerns about verbal economy and, ultimately, the short story. First published in *The Soft Side* (1900), “The Abasement of the Northmores” is rare among James’s stories in successfully staying under the 8,000 word limit, even if this is described by James in near oxymoronic terms as a “novel[] intensely compressed” (AN 235). The scenario resembles that of many of the literary tales in its representation of two parallel figures with opposite fortunes. In this case, Lord John Northmore is a celebrated public man while his more able friend Warren Hope receives little attention. The deaths of the two men result in a reversal. The posthumously published *The Public and Private Correspondence of the Right Honourable & c., & c.* reveals the successful man’s vacuity, much to the delight of Mrs. Hope, who has been unable to garner sufficient interest to bring forth the letters of her late husband. Her intention to expose the difference in eloquence between the two men by publishing their respective love letters is set aside after she witnesses the abasement of Northmore’s widow in the wake of hostile reviews. The story ends with anticipation that, after Mrs. Hope’s death, Warren Hope’s reputation will be restored by the publication of his own letters.

The deaths of the two men at the beginning of the story assure their reputations will be decided solely on the basis of the residual documents. Whereas Northmore’s prolific correspondence is unlikely to produce a line of consequence, Hope’s mementoes lie “like loose blocks of marble” awaiting appreciation from subsequent generations with the slow passage of time (CT 11: 118). The narrative describes Hope’s abilities in terms of a musical instrument: “natural, witty, various, vivid, playing, with the idlest, lightest hand, up and down the whole scale” (123)—the seemingly effortless effort of the writer best expressed by the Yeats poem “Adam’s Curse” (1904). Hope’s dexterity poses a stark contrast to Northmore’s clumsy hand: “Pompous and ponderous, yet loose and obscure, he managed, by a trick of his own, to be both slipshod and stiff” (128). Mrs. Hope emphasizes the gulf even further by her unique position of having received love letters from both men. Much of the story’s tension arises from her frustration with a world incapable of recognizing superior rhetorical

talents. Repeated use of the word “fat” to characterize Northmore’s bundle of letters expresses her contempt, as do subsequent terms of dimension describing the letters as a “pile,” “heap,” and “mass” (120). For Mrs. Hope, the fatuity of Northmore’s letters should be taken to measure the fatuity of the man himself. In fact, the eulogies for the late Lord Northmore in the newspapers are the only occasion on which Mrs. Hope questions her late husband’s judgment, since unwavering support for his former friend allies her husband with “the chattering crowd” (122). As usual for James, “chattering” is an incriminating word in its registry of an idle, superficial conversation incapable of discrimination.

The actual sequence of events is at times difficult to determine because of the story’s perspectival alignment with Mrs. Hope, whose reliability is questionable due to the partisan endorsement of her late husband. At least one critic has accused her of being a mentally ill “paranoiac” (Gale 102). At any rate, the very name “Hope” suggests a form of wishful thinking driven by individual desire rather than actual circumstance. We do not see the reputed brilliance of either man reported in direct speech; we are told, not shown, their eloquence. We are even left in some uncertainty as to the extent of the press’s critical remarks, which, in her telling, “lay perhaps not quite on the surface, but . . . peeped between the lines” (*CT* 11: 128). It is doubtful whether such muted criticism would even be detected by a less-motivated reader. Much resentment is generated by Mrs. Hope’s inability to locate any letters among her husband’s former contacts, whereas enough of Northmore’s letters surface for at least ten volumes, as if every letter from the great man has been preserved in anticipation of their value to posterity. Conversations with former friends are equally skewed, culminating as they do in a confrontation that fails to take place in what should be the story’s climactic scene. Mrs. Hope’s anticipated revenge in the end is withheld. Mrs. Hope, not Lady Northmore, is the one who leaves the appointment in tears, before destroying the bundle of letters from her former admirer. The alleged abasement, whether imagined or not, is a reversal of Mrs. Hope’s dejection with that of her rival.

The story offers no way of resolving this ambiguity. The relative merits of Hope and Northmore can hardly be the issue, though, since we are given specimens of neither man’s language except through a partial wife’s point of view. Instead, James’s story itself may be taken to model the type of writing that avoids the looseness associated with the Macawberian Northmore. After all, a story about poor writing inevitably risks comparison with the object of its satire. The key phrase in the tale occurs when Mrs. Hope recalls her husband’s “easy power” (*CT* 11: 114). This is the very phrase used by Leon Edel in an introduction to James’s letters to describe the author’s own abilities as a correspondent, one clue that a connection can be made between the gifted but neglected writer featured in the tale and the tale’s author. For Mrs. Hope, the phrase acts as a sort of mantra providing consolation after the secret wound caused by her husband’s neglect. It is notably her phrase, rather than one from either of the two men, that suggests a degree of eloquence operating at the level of the tale itself rather than solely within the letters. The phrase offers the consolation available through language in its most compressed form as opposed to the kinds of distraction dispensed by journalism—“the poetry of the daily press” derided by Mrs. Hope as mere chatter (111). It is in this single phrase, “easy power,” that the story’s own

figures of speech surpass the rival letters from either Northmore or Hope. The story's conclusion is in this sense misleading in that it leaves us waiting for a secret volume of Mr. Hope's letters to be issued after the widow's death. This delayed gratification deflects attention from the degree to which the story itself deserves admiration of the kind denied to Mr. Hope.

"The Abasement of the Northmores" shows the extent to which the critical value we now accord to the short story is the legacy less of James's outspoken complaints against the form than of the exceptional quality of many of his stories. James's complaints nevertheless remind us that this achievement did not come without a struggle. The phrase "in short" is particularly appropriate to James since, away from the page, the author was known to combine both of Micawber's faults of prolixity and brevity, at least according to Edith Wharton, who comically described James's own use of the phrase as "his invariable prelude to a fresh series of explanatory ramifications" (242–43). The struggle on the page is addressed in less comic fashion by the preface to "The Author of Beltraffio," which compares the author's struggles with brevity to the efforts of a psychiatric hospital warden "in making fast a victim's straightjacket" (AN 232). This vivid if unpleasant image remains in my mind as a distinction between the artistic control demanded of the author of short fiction and the "great parade" of words scarcely under the control of Mr. Micawber (749). It resembles the conclusion arrived at by the mature David Copperfield, who recognizes how Micawber's faults are, by extension, those of numerous social institutions that take great satisfaction in grandiloquence. It is a danger faced by all authors confronted with the disciplined economy necessary for a form of literature written in between the parade of important-sounding words and the equally egregious "in short." In Dickens's novel, the last we hear from the long-winded orator is as a newspaper journalist. As usual, the final word belongs to Mr. Micawber.

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