

The Dangers of Interpretation

*Art and Artists in Henry James
and Thomas Mann*

Ilona Treitel



THE DANGERS
OF INTERPRETATION

ORIGINS OF MODERNISM

VOLUME 8

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ILONA TREITEL

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SERIES PREFACE

The Modernist Movement, characterized by the works of T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, and writers of similar stature, dominated Anglo-American literature for some fifty years following World War I. By the time the United States emerged from its military involvement in Indo-China in the 1970s, the Modernist Movement had disintegrated into Post-Modernism. High Modernism's most proud claim was that it would "make it new," that it represented a radical and sudden break with previous cultural traditions. We now see this claim to be false. Nowhere is Modernism more derivative than in its claim to radical novelty. The Modernist "revolution" of the twentieth century is best seen as the culmination of ideology developing in the late nineteenth century. This series of books is devoted to the study of the origins of Modernism in the half-century between the Franco-Prussian War and the First World War, from the death of Dickens to the roaring twenties and the Lost Generation.

As drama is the center of the literature of the Elizabethan Age, so criticism is the focus of the Modernist Age. Modernist writers worked in an environment of university and school curricula more introspective, self-conscious, and cannibalistic than ever before. How did the philosophical and pedagogical system supporting Modernism develop? What part does feminism play in the struggle for literary domination? How do changing systems of patronage and the economy of literature influence Modernism as a vastly expanded reading public is eventually augmented by cinema, radio, and television as consumers of literature? Do the roots of cultural pluralism within English literature recede back to the Victorian era? When English is used as the vehicle for expression of American, Canadian, Australian, or Indian culture; or for Afro-American, Hispano-American, Asian-American, or Amero-Indian culture, where do the origins of this eclectic pluralism lie?

We believe that there are two important groups of writers essential to the development of Modernism: (1) Gerard Manley Hopkins and the circle of his correspondents (Robert Bridges, Coventry Patmore, Canon Richard Watson Dixon, and

related figures) and (2) the circle of writers surrounding Joseph Conrad (Ford Madox Ford, Henry James, Stephen Crane, and others). We especially encourage the further study of these two groups as foundation stones for the Modernist Movement, but there are many other sources important to its development.

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ABBREVIATIONS

James

"AP"	"The Aspern Papers"
<i>BiJ</i>	<i>The Beast in the Jungle</i>
<i>GB</i>	<i>The Golden Bowl</i>
<i>RH</i>	<i>Roderick Hudson</i>
<i>SF</i>	<i>The Sacred Fount</i>
<i>TM</i>	<i>The Tragic Muse</i>
<i>WD</i>	<i>The Wings of the Dove</i>

Mann

<i>DiV</i>	<i>Death in Venice</i>
<i>KH</i>	<i>Royal Highness</i>
"LHF"	"Little Herr Friedemann"
"LL"	"Little Lizzy"
<i>TK</i>	<i>Tonio Kröger</i>

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THE DANGERS
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Introduction

Henry James and Thomas Mann achieved a similar status not only in their separate canons but in their common Western literary tradition. While sharing a cultural heritage, both also contributed to its transformation in fictions representing the transition from nineteenth-century art to modernism.

Nevertheless, as far as I have been able to determine, there has, as yet, been virtually no extended critical examination of affinities between James and Mann. This is, perhaps, partially explained by a nearly total lack of reference to each other in the biographical material relating to the two authors. Although Henry James read German well, and, moreover, some of Mann's early works were known in England during James's lifetime,¹ I have found no references to Mann either in biographical works about James or in James's own autobiographical and critical writings; nor do his Notebooks or published letters contain such references. In Thomas Mann's case the situation is slightly different. Before World War I, James was not well known in Germany: comparatively few of his works were translated,² and Mann does not seem to have read any of these translations. It is also highly unlikely that the young Mann read James in English; in an essay of 1925, he mentions his difficulties in reading that language, and his consequent lack of familiarity with English literature.³ However, after his emigration to America, Thomas Mann began reading James in English. In fact, from 1942 on, we find diary entries in which he mentions specific works by the American author, whom he appears to admire. He is particularly satisfied at being mentioned together with James as one of the greatest modern novelists.⁴ Nevertheless, he does not reveal real familiarity with James's work.

While similarities between Henry James and Thomas Mann, then, have not been investigated, there are a number of separate studies of James and Mann which address the issue of each writer's explicit preoccupation with the canonical authors who preceded him. This related concern, in addition to the shared cultural heritage and

the comparable status the two writers occupied in their literary traditions, as well as similarities in the thematization of the problem of interpretation, suggest the usefulness of a comparative study. Moreover, the fact that both authors have been discussed in the context of Nietzsche's thought points to pertinent links in their views of creative and interpretative activities.

It is, in fact, on Henry James's and Thomas Mann's investigation of creativity that my study focuses, as I examine works in which the two novelists thematize the creative process as an interpretive one. Indeed, the similarities between James and Mann are particularly conspicuous in the fictions that self-reflexively treat the author's and the reader's interpretive quest for meaning. The semblances are also prominent in the narrative techniques used by both writers, technical devices, which make the reader conscious that he, the reader, is actually creating his own meaning.

In this study I adopt Harold Bloom's theory that a literary text constitutes a creative misreading of an earlier author's text.⁵ I shall consider the literary text a field upon which author and reader meet, the reader playing an active part interpreting what the author has recorded. Since, in Bloom's terms, the reader's interpretive activity is not intrinsically different from the author's, it too can be thought of as constituting a creative misreading.⁶ Consequently, the reader's interpretation of a work of literature results in a new work, "antithetical" to a previous text, which he necessarily misinterprets as he makes it his own.⁷ The reader's creativity therefore threatens the author, just as the author challenged his precursor and appropriated his text when "revising" it.⁸ But the reader is as vulnerable as the author whose authority he jeopardizes for, as "interpretation" is implicitly hierarchical and cannot proceed without a usurpation of authority,⁹ his re-created text is necessarily revised again and, consequently, appropriated by the next reader in the "hierarchy," or by his own next reading. "There is only interpretation," Bloom says, "and...every interpretation answers an earlier interpretation, and then must yield to another one."¹⁰

If he does not "create" his own texts but only "interprets them into existence,"¹¹ the author (and, it follows, the reader as well) may very well suffer from an "anxiety of influence," fearing that his

precursors have left him nothing to do.¹² Bloom allows for some exceptions, most notably Shakespeare, Milton and Goethe, who, he argues, "absorbed" their precursors.¹³ Among them Goethe, in particular, acknowledged influence but "denied the anxiety."¹⁴ Of special interest to my study is Bloom's claim--which I shall discuss more fully in the relevant chapters--that "Thomas Mann, a great sufferer from the anxiety of influence, and one of the great theorists of that anxiety, suffered more acutely for Goethe's not having suffered at all."¹⁵ However, the absence of anxiety in these authors does not necessarily imply the absence of a struggle with their precursors. On the contrary, Bloom's repeated claim that Shakespeare, Milton and Goethe *absorbed* their poetic forerunners indicates a confrontation in which the "stronger" author emerged victorious, both because of the weakness of his precursors,¹⁶ and as a consequence of what Goethe called the *force* of his will.¹⁷ A text is thus "a psychic battlefield upon which authentic forces struggle for the only victory worth winning, the divinating triumph over oblivion," and most often neither author nor reader can be certain of being "strong" enough to win that victory.¹⁸

More than the "anxiety of influence" threatens interpreting author and reader, according to Bloom. Both risk danger when they attempt "to decide meaning or perhaps to see whether meaning *can* be decided,"¹⁹ and, even worse, when they mistakenly believe that they have found the one privileged meaning that, Bloom argues, interpretation cannot reveal. Within the hierarchical interpretive chain, no text has an "ascertainable meaning," for texts are made up of words which, in turn, refer only to other words. Since he assumes that language *revises* previous language, he implies that interpretation is a "creative misreading," which cannot create an autonomous meaning that escapes the hierarchical chain.²⁰ Nevertheless, Bloom's use of the term *mis-interpretation* suggests that he does not deny the existence of true meaning; rather, he claims that human beings cannot attain it through language. According to Bloom, true meaning resides in God, and, consequently, it is inaccessible to fallen man. Relying on the 18th century Italian philosopher Vico, Bloom claims that, "the world of the indefinite, the world of ambivalent and uncertain images, which is the world of poetry, becomes identical with our fallen

state... [We] suffer a condition in which we are ignorant of causation and origins, yet still we are very much in quest of origins."²¹ However, while Bloom argues that language, the only medium by which we can pursue meaning, must fail us, he opposes the deconstructionist claim that "'language'... [does] our writing for us," because it denies even the will to pursue meaning.²² Acknowledging the impossibility--after Nietzsche's claim that "rational thought is only interpretation," and after Freud's theories of the unconscious--to "return wholly to a mode of interpretation that seeks to *restore* meaning to texts," he would, nonetheless, "favour a kind of interpretation that *seeks* to restore and redress meaning, rather than primarily to deconstruct meaning." After all, despite Nietzsche's "perspectivism" and Freud's "reductiveness," we are reminded, Bloom claims, by poems and dreams of what "consciously we have never known." It is this forgotten consciousness that Bloom claims the great poets of the 19th century, interpreted.²³

The desire to pursue "causation" and "origins" has called forth, according to Bloom, the need for a myth about the first poets--whom all subsequent poets fear to imitate, yet strive to re-create.²⁴ In Bloom's myth--a "mis-reading" of Auerbach's interpretation of Vico--these original poets were primitive solitary nomads, who tried to impose imaginative order on the chaos of nature with their imagination in order to survive. Their "wisdom" was ceremonial rather than rational, and the ceremonies they invented were equivalent to poetry. These original "poets" believed they could foretell--"divine"--the future, and thus survive chaos by interpreting the past they perceived in magic signs.²⁵ The first poems, then, were the "divinations" of these magicians. However, in addition to "foretell," "divine" also means "to become a god by foretelling."²⁶ Consequently, the first poets, as Bloom conceives of them, sought to usurp God's power in their attempts to create a future that would make them immortal. Bloom's myth thus enables him to claim that "meaning gets started by catastrophe that is also a ruining and breaking creation," or, in other words, by "usurpation" and "violence."²⁷

Such usurpation and violence have been explored by Freud as endemic in the family group and have led Bloom to speculate that

"meaning gets started...by catastrophes at our origins [and] by family passion and strife."²⁸ In fact, the theories outlined above, especially that of the anxiety of influence with its emphasis on the poet's simultaneous admiration and fear of his precursor, are, to a great extent, based on Bloom's "mis-reading" of Freud's "family romance."²⁹ Just as Freud speaks of a child's early identification with the father,³⁰ which progressively changes into antagonism,³¹ Bloom claims that a poet's "initial love for the precursor's poetry is transformed rapidly enough into revisionary strife."³² Although the poet (in Bloom's extended sense of author-reader) strives to emulate his precursor-father, he must also impute "error" to the father-figure in order to usurp his role as creator and thus perceive himself as "self-begotten."³³ In Freud's "family romance," the little boy's hostility turns into "a wish to get rid of his father in order to take his place with his mother."³⁴ In Bloom's reading of Freud, the mother-figure becomes the poet's creative impulse, his "Muse," and the struggle with the father-precursor originates in his need to have been inspired first, that is, to have impregnated the mother-muse, and thus to have become the father of himself. Since this need cannot be fulfilled, Bloom says that the poet comes to feel betrayed by the mother-muse and rejects her as a harlot who "has whored with many before him."³⁵

In his paper on narcissism, Freud speaks of a "primary narcissism" which manifests itself in all infants as a simultaneous love for the nurturing mother (or her substitute) and for the self. The narcissist will later choose his sexual objects according to one of these primary models. He will attach himself either to a mother figure who cares for him, or he will choose his own self as his love object, not only loving himself, or his ideal of himself, but overestimating the power of his wishes, believing in the magic force of his words and refusing to accept his own mortality.³⁶ One cause for the development of this love for the self is the boy's surrender of the "sexual overvaluation of the mother" (or the girl's of the father), which are "incompatible with reality" and with the child's own sexual development.³⁷ That surrender is experienced by the boy as the mother's rejection of him, and is thus extremely painful.³⁸ In fact, Freud claims, his "loss" of the mother's love leaves a permanent "narcissistic scar."³⁹ In Bloom's "mis-reading" of Freud, the scar

causes the anxiety in which the poet's creative drive originates; the poet strives to master the anxiety with his narcissistic "pride of an originator" and his equally narcissistic belief in the "omnipotence of thought," that is, in the power of the mind over life and death.⁴⁰

Deliberately misinterpreting Freud, Bloom repeatedly links narcissism and artistic creativity. For instance, reading narcissism as the illness Freud is referring to, he argues that the lines from Heine that Freud interprets as claiming that we love in order not to be ill, actually "state a psychogenesis of creativity rather than of love":

Krankheit ist wohl der letzte Grund
Des ganzen Schöpferdrangs gewesen;
Erschaffend konnte ich genesen
Erschaffend wurde ich gesund.

(Illness was no doubt the final cause of the whole
urge to create. By creating, I could recover; by
creating, I became healthy.)⁴¹

Such linkage, which depends on Nietzsche even more than on Freud, has provided much of the basis for recent Thomas Mann criticism, following a study of *Felix Krull* by Hans Wysling, who like Bloom relies on Freud and Nietzsche. Indeed, Nietzsche's influence on Thomas Mann has not only been extensively demonstrated by critics, but frequently commented on by Mann himself. As for Henry James, it has been argued that he, too, was familiar with and, perhaps, also affected by the German philosopher. Nietzsche's association between disease and creativity is, however, problematic, since his statements on the relationship between illness and art are contradictory. Disease must be cured, and it is the creative process, he maintains, that provides the cure. Yet he also stipulates disease as a precondition for the creative act: the creative artist must be ill in order to *be* creative. Nonetheless, Nietzsche considers illness the artist's bane, and condemns as a decadent weakling the artist who--in his judgement--has yielded to it. Such an artist degenerates into a clown, who either manufactures empty and thus decadent form, or, in contrast, surrenders to formlessness--the very antithesis to art.⁴²

Nevertheless, in his study, Wysling maintains that the narcissist's cure occurs if he succeeds in transforming his idealization of the self into a work of art. Thus the diseased artist, in particular the narcissist, is "saved by language," if he can transfer his desire for beauty and power from his body image to his written text.⁴³ In contrast, Manfred Dierks and Rolf Günter Renner claim that it is only through Lacan's reinterpretation, in "Le Stade du Miroir," of Freud's *On Narcissism*, that narcissism can be theoretically linked to language. The child's recognition, in the mirror reflection, of its own *whole* body, which he previously experienced as disconnected fragments, introduces the preverbal imaginary state, in which the reflection becomes both the self and "the other," and which leads to the child's entrance into the "symbolic," that is, language.⁴⁴ Lacan's account of the mirror stage suggests the possibility that the three stages of development occur synchronically, as well as diachronically.⁴⁵ This tension between synchronic and diachronic development enables Dierks to establish clearly the link between the narcissistic mirror-I, imagined wholeness, and language and claim that at the mirror stage the child experiences the symbolic, which it will later re-experience as the structure of language.⁴⁶ Lacan calls "the *mirror stage*...a drama...which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a *fragmented* body image to a form of its totality."⁴⁷ The memory of this fragmentation, which, according to Renner, the narcissist cannot overcome,⁴⁸ is, in a sense, analogous to Freud's "narcissistic scar," and like Freud's "scar," it can motivate creativity: in the narcissist who has failed to re-construct a realistic "self-image," the desire for the wholeness he perceived at the mirror stage becomes transformed into a creative force. A narcissistic writer imposes "totality" on his work by structuring a mythical "self" in language, and masters reality by creating it in language.⁴⁹

Though it is not my intention to base my study extensively on Lacan's theories, I propose to follow his arguments as far as they are relevant to my interpretation of Bloom. Lacan argues both that language exists before the "I" "enters" it in the "mirror stage," and that it has a life of its own, unrelated to the world of objects, so that, while structuring the unconscious, it does not convey meaning.⁵⁰ His

claim that "no signification can be sustained other than by reference to another signification"⁵¹ is, indeed, almost synonymous to Bloom's argument that "every interpretation answers only an earlier interpretation"--both drawing on Nietzsche's belief that language continually creates its own changing truth.⁵² Following Nietzsche, Lacan as well as Bloom can thus be read as considering language an inadequate medium for the transmission of the true meaning that the individual, nevertheless, seeks. If the interpretive task of the author and/or the reader is to find the absolute, privileged meaning of a verbal message *through* a verbal message, it is bound to fail. However, given the interpreter's narcissistically motivated creative drive, the task he assumes is, rather, to impose on a verbal text *his* meaning, *as the* privileged meaning. In Bloom's chain of mis-readings, that meaning must be antithetical to the one imposed by the predecessor in the interpretive hierarchy. It must also, inevitably, be subversively re-created by the successor in the hierarchy.

However, the meaning that the interpreter imposes on a text need not be seen only as a consequence of the interpretive power struggle. In its apparent condemnation of interpretive force, the perception of Mikhail Bakhtin, for instance, seems diametrically opposed to Bloom's. Bakhtin claims that "a unitary language is not something given [*dan*], but is always in essence posited [*zadan*]--and at every moment of its linguistic life it is opposed to the *realities* of heteroglossia."⁵³ "Heteroglossia"--the "stratification" of language into endlessly varying and constantly developing different discourses"--allows for an ongoing dialogue between meanings, each of which is "true," while, the dialogic activity itself is also "true." This dialogic activity stems, Bakhtin claims, from the fact that "no living word relates to its object in a *singular* way," because the same object always has been and always will be interpreted in different words.⁵⁴ Bakhtin's notion that "every speech act spring[s] from previous utterances and [is] structured in expectation of a future response,"⁵⁵ is reminiscent of Bloom's and Lacan's theories concerning interpretation and signification, especially as Bakhtin, too, insisting on a plurality of interacting meanings, denies the possibility of one privileged meaning. Nevertheless, Bakhtin grants that "unitary language" imposes limitations on "heteroglossia," thus "guaranteeing a certain

maximum of mutual understanding."⁵⁶ In Bakhtin's theory there is, therefore, an unresolved tension between the unrestricted proliferation of meanings implicit in "heteroglossia" and the "unitary" force that limits such proliferation. Whether that force is intrinsic to language or is imposed by the "writer...who knows how to work language while remaining outside it," is not quite clear.⁵⁷ However, from his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, it is possible to infer that, in Bakhtin's view, the author does have interpretive power, which is not usurped by the characters he has created; the author, he says, "in no way assumes a passivity"; rather he creates a text that reflects the "special interrelationship between [his] and the other's truth."⁵⁸ While Bakhtin's theory, in a sense, seems more attractive than Bloom's because it does not focus on a struggle for interpretive mastery, it does, nevertheless require a "creative mind" who not only creates the multivalent text in which the dialogic interrelationship is acted out, but who actively, like Bloom's author, both controls its meanings and transmits them through a medium that is incapable of conveying the one privileged meaning the reader pursues.

Whereas for Lacan, there is a gap between the word and the object, Bakhtin sees the word *surrounded* by "heteroglot voices," one of which is that of the author.⁵⁹ In my discussion of works by Henry James and Thomas Mann, Lacan's theories will be applicable primarily to texts which suggest an absence of meaning, a gap that the artist character, as well as the reader, attempts to fill. Other texts, seem to offer a multiplicity of meanings, and for my reading of them Bakhtin is relevant. However, it is principally Bloom's theories, as outlined above, that allow me to explore and discuss the "dangers" of interpretation that I find in works by James and Mann.

While most of the artists in the works by Henry James and Thomas Mann that I examine can be perceived as latecomers, it is, chiefly, the early works of both authors that focus on the particular "dangers" facing the latecomer artist. Aspiring to create a tradition of his own, he rejects the influences of the existing one. He is, nevertheless, constrained and thus threatened by those very influences, which he has difficulties in interpreting, partly because of the shifting meanings of language. In later works, these shifting meanings also cause the "crisis of representativeness" that afflicts

those artists who perceive the gap between reality and representation (reflecting the gap between meaning and language) as constituting an absence. In their attempts to become creators by filling that absence, some of them practice deception, so that not only the status of the work of art, but also the moral stature of the artist, is set in doubt. The same kind of doubt surrounds the artist who transforms the "absence" into an image with constantly changing significances. Other fictions by James and Mann probe the metaphoric association between disease and creativity, in which illness is seen as the prerequisite for the creative act, and thus for the imposition of form implicit in the creation of art. Disease is, however, also represented as the drive to surrender the will to interpret and, rather, succumb to aestheticism. The moral stigma that appears to be attached to art is interpreted as stemming from the destructiveness inherent in the two conflicting drives, the drive to create form and the drive to surrender to formlessness, both motivated by disease. The artist's moral position is further jeopardized if he completely relinquishes his interpretive mastery and thus yields either to a nothingness that also threatens life or invites interpretive anarchy. Such anarchy makes possible the application of a ruthless force that not only destroys moral perception, but threatens to wipe out life and the creativity that stems from life.

It is, then, with these dangers, which are inherent in the creative process itself, and which threaten the artist and the reader as creators and as moral beings, that this comparative study of works by Henry James and Thomas Mann is concerned.

Chapter 1

The Making of an Artist by Himself and Others *Roderick Hudson*, "Little Herr Friedemann," "The Dilettante," "Little Lizzy," *Tonio Kröger*

In his chapter "James's *Hawthorne* and the American Anxiety of Influence" in *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James*, John Carlos Rowe applies Harold Bloom's theory of "the anxiety of influence" to his reading of Henry James's book on Hawthorne.¹ Rowe claims that the treatise reflects its author's "aggressive denial of the local and provincial," as well as his pressing need to create an American tradition. Hawthorne is, Rowe argues, a precursor, whom James, the beginning American novelist, must try to imitate while "giving that imitation the illusion of originality."² Rowe interprets the book by applying Bloom's ratios for the "anxiety of influence," in order to demonstrate how James misreads his predecessor as he strives to take control of the tradition of American literature and establish his own position in it. By reading his precursor as "the last American innocent, alienated by the provinciality of young America," he is able to "establish for himself a local and native American tradition." Thus, on the one hand, his "portraiture" of "his master, Hawthorne," suggests "something of James's own bid for artistic mastery over the American history so personally present to him on that imaginary shelf where he keeps his father's and Hawthorne's collected works." On the other, it is a "defense against his fear that he, too, would be subsumed into a historical tradition" and thus overpowered by his literary father figure.³ Nonetheless, James cannot shake off his precursor; he must acknowledge him even if that acknowledgement takes the form of a struggle for preeminence, as it does, for instance, in what Rowe calls James's "translation" of *The Scarlet Letter* into *The Portrait of a Lady*.⁴

Similarly, Henry James's *Roderick Hudson* has been read as a re-interpretation of Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*. For instance,

Leon Edel claims in his Introduction to the novel that James is building on Hawthorne's work.⁵ More recently, Sheila Teahan has noted not only that in *Roderick Hudson* James "appropriates and develops" the plot of *The Marble Faun*, but that both novels examine "the questions of transmission, originality and belatedness" that preoccupy American artists.⁶ However, whereas Teahan claims that "Roderick becomes a figure for Hawthorne himself, the doomed precursor who plays out the *via negativa* of James's own controlled, mediated, and transumptive relation to tradition,"⁷ I suggest that the novel as a whole can be read as thematizing the "anxiety of influence" experienced by the young Henry James, as it is also reflected in *Hawthorne*, published four years after the novel. I further propose that a similar "anxiety" can be seen as thematized in Thomas Mann's early works, particularly in the short stories that treat artist-figures and in the more elaborately worked out novella *Tonio Kröger*.⁸

Discussing these early works by Mann, Hans Rudolf Vaaget, while using language that is less "aggressive" than Harold Bloom's, nevertheless outlines a phenomenon singularly like "the anxiety of influence." Whereas Bloom speaks of an author's active misreading of earlier texts as being the consequence of his savage will to struggle with his precursor,⁹ Vaaget employs the term "Kontrafaktor" (from the Latin *contrafacere*) and defines it as the "critical-productive reaction to another text, a will to 'make something against,' that is, an impulse to write against." The "Kontrafaktor" is often a contradiction; yet at the same time it can be compared to the "fading of an original picture caused by another differently illuminated one." Although this kind of creative misreading is sometimes the consequence of "productive admiration," and thus does not necessarily reflect opposition or hostility, it expresses the young latecomer's wish to assert himself as an originator in an overpowering tradition.¹⁰

In the struggle to become such originators of tradition, Henry James and Thomas Mann each had to establish the insufficiency of the existing one. But whereas James could deplore the thinness of the prevalent American tradition with comparative impunity,¹¹ an attempt by Mann to disclaim the greatness of his German predecessors--or even his contemporaries--was inconceivable. Nonetheless, his strategy was similar to James's: both authors placed their protagonists in

environments inimical to art--Salem, Northampton, Mass., or Lübeck--and both distorted the aesthetic and emotional impulses that did reach these characters as they took up their creative tasks. In addition, both creatively misread their precursors. In fact, the works discussed in this chapter reflect their authors' struggles with similar, at times even identical, precursors, for while Mann must also contend with the non-German European canon, James had to confront the European tradition as well as the American.

Roderick Hudson reflects an ambivalent attitude towards European art. On the one hand, deeming American tradition deficient, the American artist seeks models among his European predecessors. But, on the other, these predecessors are even more threatening than the American ones, partly because they cannot be dismissed as inferior. Indeed, their superiority may be perceived as inhibiting the creative impulse of the American artist. Rowe's juxtaposition of Hawthorne and Henry James Sr. implies that the young James perceives his American precursor as a father-figure whose position he must usurp. Analogously, in *Roderick Hudson*, European tradition can be seen as representing the mother-figure and the artist the child to whom she has given life, but whom, subsequently, she either restrains, injures, or rejects. James's novel contains several such mother-figures. So do the stories by Mann, but his women, though playing roles similar to James's, reflect more markedly the corruption of the creative impulse.

Rejected by the mother or rejecting her, and striving to take the father's place, the artist in the early works of James and Mann perceives himself as the creator of a new tradition. Following Harold Bloom's re-interpretation of Freud, I read this artist as attempting to compensate for the "narcissistic scar," with the--narcissistic--"pride of an originator." That "scar"--so Freud maintains--marks the infant after its first failure in the love-relationship with its parents. And it motivates the child's and, according to Bloom, the artist's "wounded narcissistic self-esteem" to defend itself by the "aggression" of a creativity that denies the existence of prior creations.¹² Perceiving them as dramatizations of the "family conflict," and, to a great extent, also as re-interpretations of the Narcissus-myth, I read the oscillations between omnipotence and powerlessness, integration and

disintegration in the works I discuss as thematizing the polarities of the artist's narcissism.

However, my reading of these early works questions Hans Wysling's claims--also based on Freud's theories about narcissism--that as far as the narcissist is able to integrate his self through language, by creating a literary text for instance, he is not only "saved by language," but succeeds in building a "bridge" between himself and others.¹³ It relies, rather, on Manfred Dierks's argument that the only link between narcissism and language that can be established stems from Lacan's re-interpretation of Freud and his claim that the narcissistic "I" comes into existence when the infant "enters the symbolic," that is, the structure of language.¹⁴ Lacan's assertion that "meaning 'insists' but none of [the] elements [in the chain of the signifier] 'consists' in the signification of which it is at the moment capable,"¹⁵ obviates the possibility that verbal communication can constitute Wysling's verbal "bridge." Thus any attempt of the narcissistic artist figures in these works to integrate their selves through language, is bound to fail, due to the indeterminacy of language that Lacan postulates.¹⁶ Consequently, in the struggle for power enacted in the texts between the artist and his precursor, as well as between the artist and the reader, interpretive control cannot be attained. The dangers of interpretation that link Henry James's and Thomas Mann's early artist fictions as they confront their "internal" and "external" readers are, then, inherent in the linguistic medium itself.

I

In *Roderick Hudson*, Rowland Mallet can be read as a would-be American artist who has a "need of expression," yet spends his days "groping for the latch of a closed door" through which to escape from the American spiritual and aesthetic void.¹⁷ Mallet considers himself the descendant of "a chip of the primal Puritan block" (*RH* 9) that yields to the pioneer's hammer rather than to a sculptor's mallet and is aesthetically and emotionally barren: "beauty," he has been taught, is to be found in "abstinence" (*RH* 12). There appear to be only two ways for him to fill the void and satisfy his need for expression: "Extremely fond of all the arts and [with] an almost

passionate enjoyment of pictures," he can combine the virtues of "a good citizen" with aesthetic "egotism" and (like Adam Verver in *The Golden Bowl*) present "to an American city, not unknown to aesthetic fame," "valuable specimens of the Dutch and Italian schools," which, "in imagination" he has often seen himself bargain for (*RH* 7-8). However, such a solution is not altogether satisfactory, for, as Rowe points out, "collectors...can never own the 'art' they purchase," and therefore the bought works will not be intrinsic parts of the American heritage.¹⁸ The second alternative, which Mallet adopts by taking Roderick to Rome in order to turn him into a sculptor, is to *produce an artist* and give him the task to initiate a new tradition. In *Roderick Hudson*, James thus creates two American artists: he makes the one, Rowland Mallet, carry out his creative task through the second, Roderick Hudson, just as he himself, in a sense, creates Roderick through Mallet.

Referring in his Preface to the New England town as an "antithesis to the state of civilization providing for art," James seems to reaffirm the artistic inadequacy of the Puritan heritage suggested in the novel. In fact, re-reading his novel he claims that the negative influence of that American heritage counteracted the "august example" provided by "the great shadow of Balzac." The older American novelist seems to be saying that the young American writer lacked the "experience" to "emulate" the French predecessor. He had been wrong in attempting to represent "the particular local case" of "Northampton, Mass." in the manner in which Balzac "'did' Saumur, did Limoges, did Guérande," and that is why his "evocation" of "the small New England town...fails." But Balzac would also have failed, for he would "have found little enough in Northampton, Mass. to tackle."¹⁹ Like James's representation of the "thinness of New England life," this interpretation of the ineffectiveness of the influence of Balzac can be considered the kind of "misreading" that, according to Rowe, is partly aimed at emphasizing the American artist's "isolation within American provinciality," and thus at justifying James's ambition to create a tradition of his own.²⁰ In the novel itself, it is just such misreadings that Rowland Mallet's creative adventure dramatizes.

A product of New England, Mallet is, nevertheless, also an heir to European aestheticism through his mother's Dutch descent.

However, the impact of this European heritage--tenuously guarded by the vaguely remembered grandmother--is limited. For years his mother sinks into "spiritual torpor" and surrenders her son to her husband's rigid Puritan influence. It is only shortly before she dies--and thus finally abandons him--that she removes her "mask" of compliance with her husband, a mask that of late has concealed her "ingenuity" in cultivating "a little plot of independent feeling" (*RH* 13-14). The "key" to that "plot" of aesthetic liberty, which she figuratively hands Rowland on her deathbed, becomes the "key" to his struggle for independence and his eventual rejection of the father--reflected in his "passionate need" to contest the unfair will (*RH* 16). The conflict between the influences of the American father's morality and the European aestheticism only just transmitted by the mother results in "fits of melancholy," "an awkward mixture of moral and aesthetic curiosity," and the realization that "he would have made an ineffective reformer and indifferent artist" (*RH* 16). If Rowland Mallet is read as interpreting the father he eventually rejects as "America" and the mother who has abandoned him to the father's tyranny as "Europe," he can be perceived as denying that any valuable precursors--American or European--can be found in the American environment. Such a denial amounts to the kind of "wilful revisionism" that inspires in him the ambition to create a new tradition.²¹

However, "a man of genius half-finished," with a strong "need for expression," Mallet lacks "the faculty of expression" needed to fulfill his creative ambition (*RH* 8). It is such talent for expression he believes he finds in Roderick Hudson, whose first sculpture, "The Waterdrinker," has, he is convinced, "taken form under the breath of genius" (*RH* 19). Mallet is the kind of narcissist, discussed by Manfred Dierks, whose self was fragmented in childhood, and who strives to become re-integrated through the creation of a work of art.²² Freud's claim that the narcissist loves "what he himself would love to be," also applies to him.²³ Indeed, by creating an idealized narcissistic mirror image of himself in Roderick Hudson, Mallet can be seen as attempting a re-integration of his self. Significantly, Mallet interprets "The Waterdrinker" as "Narcissus"--as well as other "beautiful youths of ancient fable" (*RH* 17). To a certain extent, the

fact that the statuette was produced in the spiritual void of "a New England village, without aid or encouragement, without models or examples" (*RH* 19) indicates to him that Roderick is independent of any "parental" influences: American or European. Thus the sculpture appears to prove the existence of an exceptional original talent. Yet Mallet's doubts concerning the validity of Roderick's ideas about "'original, aboriginal'" American art are among the motives behind his offer to take Roderick to Rome to study European models and examples (*RH* 33). Mallet's aim is to create American art that is nurtured by European tradition, without the interference of the suffocating "paternal" environment. However, attempting to make Roderick an artist with "an almost creative ardour" (*RH* 48), he himself becomes a kind of father who seeks creatively to supplant the suffocating tradition of the American "fathers." It is his influence that Roderick soon enough struggles to shake off.

Actually, the "father-son" duality develops out of the narcissistic double image, in which Mallet and Roderick reflect each other.²⁴ Like Mallet, Roderick--as a created work, and as a creator himself--expresses in his art the quest for an integrated self and the drive to creative originality. In fact, Roderick's creativity also stems from a "narcissistic scar": his weak, indulgent mother's failure to control him amounts to negligence, and his father's drinking himself to death after squandering the family fortune spells desertion. The moral severity of the surrogate father Mr. Barnaby Striker resembles the elder Mr. Mallet's and finally arouses the "son's" rebellion. Roderick "begin[s]" his "work" as an artist by destroying the image of this father figure: "... I can't make a better beginning that this!" he exclaims as he approaches the bust he has made, "seize[s] a hammer...and...deal[s] a merciless blow on Mr Striker's skull" (*RH* 38). Indeed, his first two sculptures after the destruction of the image of the father, the "Adam" and the "Eve," signify his rejection of parental influence and his ambition to *make* his own parents. More than that, however, they represent his aspiration--more vehement than Mallet's--to take the place of the Divine Creator. So do his next projects: "I mean to do the Morning; I mean to do the Night! I mean to do the Ocean and the Mountains, the Moon and the West Wind" (*RH* 118). After *Genesis*, Roderick intends to proceed through the