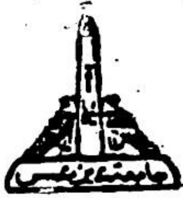

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The Detached Involvement:
A Reading of <u>The Awkward Age</u>

<u>A Summary</u>:

This paper attempts to explore Henry James's conflict between subjective involvement in his literary text and objective detachment from its elements that developed after his failing attempts to write for the theatre. Though admitting his own failure, James recognizes a certain asset in the experience that he calls "a secret mystery of structure." Such an asset has induced him to aspire towards an attitude of objective detachment from the experience he portrays. Yet his subjective epistemology pulls him in the other direction for it propagates the importance of human consciousness in receiving and reproducing experience in art. Under its influence James becomes full of self-importance and develops a need for self-assertion which conflicts with his objective literary principle. His short story "The Altar of the Dead" embodies this conflict. His novel <u>The Awkward Age</u> produces its resolution. It reconciles the two opposing sides in James. It is significant that this novel has been generally misread by critics which makes this paper not only a contribution to James's artistic development but also to <u>The Awkward Age</u> itself.

The Detached Involvement: A Reading of The Awkward Age

By Dr. Ebtisam Sadiq

Because of its crucially transitional position in James's career, The Awkward Age is particularly interesting in the light of James's artistic development. Critics have generally concentrated on analyzing the characters, polarizing their roles or evaluating the moral implications of their moves. [1] They have also argued over the meaning and the purpose of the novel and ignored its more significant and larger revelations about James's conflicts during that period in his career that succeeds his failing "theatre years" and immediately precedes his "major phase." Such revelations are implicit in the novel's technique of total absence of authorial commentary, of complete elimination of any central consciousness and of absolute reliance on dialogue form. This objective technique is even more significant because it has, in its extremity, no precedence in James's novels and short stories, nor does it repeat itself, in this ostensible form, in his later writings. It is both a growth of earlier moods and a beginning of later attitudes.

The transitional position of the technique has been overlooked even by critics specifically concerned with problems of technique who usually dismiss James's objective practice as insignificant or apologize for the author's dependence on it. Joseph Wiesenfarth, for instance, "accuses James of having overburdened the reader and wastefully expended both time and space to achieve an objectivity not worth what it costs" (qtd in Wagenknecht 165). Louis Auchincloss defends James's objective withdrawal from the text by claiming that "for the

most part we do not really need to go into the minds of the speakers. The 'bad' characters . . . are a shallow lot" that deserve no revelation while the "good" characters are either "too simple" or "too transparent" " to need to be penetrated" (113). Even when Sergio Perosa intelligently links the novel's theme with its technique by claiming that "Nanda is exposed to the danger represented by the free dialogue: consequently her story is developed purely and consistently in terms of dialogue" (72), his reading ignores the novel's ties with earlier and later works. And when Margaret Walter describes the effect of James's "theatrical technique" by suggesting that James uses it "to involve us not with the characters but with the game of interpretation" (199), she attempts no speculation on James's reasons for wishing to manipulate the reader's involvement in this direction.

James seems to have experienced a conflict over the role of the artist after his failure with the theatre that led him to reconsider the nature of the relationship between author and text. His short stories that immediately succeed the "theatre years" are persistingly preoccupied with speculations on the role of the artist, the function of art and the proper response of the reader to both. Those stories include "The Author of Beltraffio," "The Figure in the Carpet" and "In the Cage." Particularly interesting for the purpose of grasping the nature of his contention for both art and artist is "The Altar of the Dead." This short story is actually one of the finest statements of James's conflicts during this period particularly the one related to the proper way for the artist to handle his material and whether he ought to be subjectively involved in his work or objectively detached from it. James brings this

issue in the story to a suicidal crisis and resolves it unsatisfactorily towards its end. It is later on in The Awkward Age that he seems capable of envisioning a satisfactory form of resolution. Significantly, it is the objective technique of this novel that enables him to do so.

The objective side of James's conflict, his desire to remain outside the experience of his characters, is a lesson he learned from writing for the theatre. Though admitting his own failure, James recognizes the benefit he gained from that experience:

> When I ask myself what there may have been to show for my long tribulation, my wasted years of patience and pangs, of theatrical experiment, the answer . . . will perhaps have been exactly some such mastery of fundamental statement-- of the art and secret of it, of expression, of the sacred mystery of structure. (qtd in Auchincloss 102)

The "sacred mystery of structure" must inevitably involve a lesson of detachment and the method of objective presentation for these are elements that play-writing basically depends on.

Though coming in reaction to his failure with the theatre, the subjective side of James's conflict, his desire to be present in his work as a means of self-assertion, is largely fed by his subjective epistemology that dictates a state of active response of human consciousness to the phenomenal world in the process of receiving its forms. Because it contends that human consciousness normally brings its store of past experience and private impressions on coming into contact with the world, James's subjective epistemology generates a feeling

of self-importance and a need for self assertion. With the phenomenal world endlessly submitting to the individual's inner being in the process of receiving experience, it becomes inevitable that this inner being will continue to assert its presence in the process of creating experience. The result is a subjective form of literary creation that would inevitably conflict with James's objective principles.

James's contention for the active response of human consciousness to the phenomenal world is evident throughout his letters, prefaces and fictions. In his preface to The Princess Casamassina, for instance, he writes of how this novel has originated in his frequent walks throughout London streets for the purpose of receiving "impressions." However, the process of gathering impressions is not a passive act of James's consciousness, for he describes it as an "attentive exploration of London, the assault directly made by the great city upon an imagination quick to react" (The Art of the Novel 59).

This active response of human consciousness to the phenomenal world also materializes in James's story "The Altar of the Dead." Stransom, James's protagonist in the story, wishes to pay tribute to his dead lover and dead friends after their departure from the world. The tribute takes the form of setting up candles for them on an altar in a nearby church. He begins by building up in his mind an "unapproachable shrine." Significantly, this mentally-conceived image of the "shrine had begun in vague likeness to church pomps, but the echo had ended by growing more distinct than the sound" (105). In other words, Stransom's imagination has actively glorified the vaguely-perceived image of outer shrines.

To this kind of response a feeling of self-importance and a

need for self-assertion become indispensable. On renewing his contact with the real temples of the world, Stransom discovers that they make "a brightness in which the mere chapels of his thoughts grew dim" (105). However, rather than losing himself into passive involvement in their dazzling presence, Stransom actively responds to them and becomes highly conscious of his inner needs, for James asserts that Stransom will only find now "his real comfort in some material act, some outward worship" (105). Implicit in this outward movement is a need for action as a means of self-expression and self-assertion.

Stransom's present relationship with his past experience further discloses his self-assertive attitude. James's protagonist revives his past history in order to re-live it in the present. Significantly, this revival occurs as a result of the protagonist's consciousness of his inner being with its past unfulfilled needs. With death interfering in his life and carrying away the woman he loves, Stransom's need to live, to love and to commune remains unsatisfied. Seeking satisfaction in the present but finding the "world" "indifferent" (105), Stransom turns to the past. He restores its dead people from their state of annihilation by setting up candles for them on the altar of his church. With each candle becoming a representative of one of his dead, Stransom has his whole past transformed into a living presence in his present life. The process of arranging the existing candles on the Altar and of making space for every new addition also satisfies Stransom's need for self-assertion. It gives him a sense of control over the revived state of his dead and a sense of power over their fate. It fulfills his need for self-assertion.

This active and self-assertive role of human consciousness

James extends from the reception of experience to its creation in art. The process of artistic creation becomes with him an active exercise of mental faculties and a self-assertive presence of the artist in his work. In illuminating his readers, for example, on the secret of Balzac's creative powers, James writes of "the happy fate" of partaking of life "actively, assertively, not passively, narrowly in mere sensibility and sufferance" (Miller 74). This active employment of mental faculties has, according to James, enabled Balzac to "quarry his material" and has proven to be "the sole solution to an otherwise baffling problem" of passively receiving and artlessly reproducing the endless flux of forms and images originating in the phenomenal world.

Under the influence of this subjective and self-assertive conception of the process of artistic creation, James's presence in his work becomes inevitable. It has many signs in his story "The Altar of the Dead" and becomes obvious in his choice of its subject-matter. The story is a statement of the career of an artist. This subject must have deeply touched James, the artist, to make it a matter of basic concern in his story. Furthermore, his exploration of the process of artistic creation, evident in his detailed description of Stransom's handling of his candles, must have granted James a fitting release of his own energetic belief in his importance as an artist.

However, this subjective involvement in "The Altar of the Dead" does not operate at complete freedom. James's commitment to the principle of objective detachment, which he learned from and maintained after his theatre experience, holds it in check. Such commitment actually induces James to abstain from

mentioning directly that Stransom is an artist. He merely presents his protagonist as a person deprived from the will but not the wish to live, with the result of his having to substitute his unlived social life with a compensatory fantasy of communing with the dead through representative candles. No explicit mentioning of artistic involvement appears in the story. It is the weirdness of the fantasy, the unusual intensity of Stransom's emotional experience and the richly connotative language of the story that suggest an alternate level of meaning and hint at its self-assertive implications. James seems to be objectively reacting to his need for self-assertion by disowning interest in artists and artistic careers. Therefore, in so far as this subtle covering up goes, James has virtually detached himself from a deep, personal and subjective concern though fully asserting his importance through Stransom's experience.

A second sign of James's desire to balance his subjective involvement in the story with an attitude of objective detachment comes in his use of the omniscient narrator to represent him in relating the story. This narrator opens up a possibility for the desired balance through his all-knowing, all-seeing and infinite presence that places him, and his author behind him, in an elevated position above the characters, the situation and the action. While granting the author a sense of power and control over his material, and thus satisfying his need for self-assertion, the narrator's elevation also creates a distance between the author's personal desires and the experience of the characters inside the story. Hence, he manipulates the characters' experience without necessarily forcing the author to identify with it. James

expects his omniscient narrator to present Stransom's experience as if it were the protagonist's not James's.

However, James's omniscient narrator fails this obligation. His voice merges with that of the protagonist. Both Stransom and the narrator, for instance, hold the same dissatisfied attitude towards social reality. They both seem to view people and objects from the same perspective, expressing their feelings in identical images. Mrs. Creston, for example, seems to Stransom's eyes to have a vulgar and mercenary smile just as the jewelry store has appeared to the narrator to look at people with a "mercenary grin" (99). This merging indicates that the narrator unconsciously identifies himself with the protagonist. And, because James's choice of this narrator has initially indicated, beside self-assertion, a desire to disengage himself from his protagonist's experience, his inability to keep his narrator and protagonist separate impairs his capacity for detachment; beside other people's minds, he discloses his own mind as well. James's subjective involvement in the story throws the principle of objective detachment off balance.

James's struggle to achieve objective detachment from the elements of his story in the midst of powerful subjective involvement affects the role he ascribes to his protagonist. Stransom experiences his author's conflicts. James's self-assertive impulse repeats itself in Stransom's refusal to grant his dead friend Hague a candle on the altar: "Mine are only the Dead who died possessed of me. They're mine in death because they were mine in life" (120). Hague has been alienated in life and cannot, therefore, be reconciled in death. Stransom has to sacrifice his need for self-assertion

if he were to forgive Hague his insult and grant him a candle in his design. James's subjective conception of art prevents Stransom from doing so. The protagonist refuses to sacrifice his self-importance.

Stransom's refusal does not mean that James relaxes his hold on the principle of objective detachment. When Stransom's self-assertive impulse presses him to place his own candle on the altar instead of Hague's, James shows his reservation about granting him this privilege. The author's commitment to the principle of objective detachment decrees that Stransom must die if his candle were ever to be added to the collection without upsetting its essential design. In his protagonist's death James will preserve the basic philosophy of the work as a representative of, and a tribute to, dead people. To this objective commitment Stransom acquiesces. He sets out on a suicidal trip to the altar. In dying by the altar side, he will become entitled to have his own candle added to the design. "It will be the tallest candle of all," he demands (114). Yet since death is nothing but a form of self-effacement, a let go of Stransom's hold on the human state of consciousness, it, therefore, colors the protagonist's self-assertion with negation. Stransom cannot indulge in a perfect form of self-assertion in the midst of his commitment to an objective principle outside the sphere of self. His submission to form proves to be self-destructive. The two sides of subjective involvement and objective detachment seem, during this stage of James's artistic career, irreconcilable.

Towards their reconciliation James takes a decisive step in _The Awkward Age_. If the omniscient narrator has failed him at objectivity and has allowed, in consequence, James's

self-assertive impulse to surface uncontrolled, the author decides now to limit that narrator's role and to place more control on his activities. Like a dramatist, James writes The Awkward Age. His narrator's interference between the lines of the story comes as a mere substitute for stage direction. It portrays the scene and moves the characters on the pages but makes no attempt to penetrate into their private lives and activities off-stage. It also helps the reader, now a mere spectator in a Jemsian theatre, to read surface impressions on the characters' faces without volunteering any revelation of their inner being. Their feelings, psychological reactions to experience and motivations remain hidden behind the narrator's reserved commentaries and restricted moves. The narrator's opinion of their activities equally remains undeclared. This control of the narrator's activities removes him from the characters' consciousness without permitting him to become a central consciousness in the novel. James's narrator loses in The Awkward Age not only his omniscience but his identity as well. Only through such double loss can James prevent his own intense subjectivity from surfacing.

Although they have recognized James's objective inclination in The Awkward Age, critics overlook his underlying self-assertive attitude.[2] Curiously enough, the two sides of subjective involvement and objective detachment become simultaneously possible when language ceases in this novel, through James's excessive objectivity, to be associable with the workings of any central consciousness, be it that of the characters or the narrator. This dissociation grants language an abstract quality and transforms it into a powerful presence that engages the reader neither with the characters nor with

the narrator but rather in its own activity.[8] And since this activity often becomes concerned with the artist and the process of artistic creation, it allows James's self-assertion full play. However, under its dissociation from central consciousness, such play remains implicit and indirect. The reader's participation in the text of The Awkward Age becomes an involvement in the workings of an impersonal artistic consciousness.

The subtle workings of James's self-assertive impulse through the abstract language of The Awkward Age materialize in the light of earlier, more explicit statements and attitudes that revolve around the artist and the process of artistic creation. Statements such as "[e]xplanation, after all, spoil things" (155), "the past is the one thing beyond all spoiling" (105), "we pay for it, people who don't like us say, in our self-consciousness" (232), echo earlier attitudes and concerns in "The Altar of the Dead." This echoing allows their implications about James's consciousness of his importance as an artist to surface. For example, when Stransom explains to the woman worshipping in his shrine his reason for not allowing Hague a candle in his design, "the spell" between them is "broken" (121). The woman ceases to make her regular appearance at his shrine. In recognition of that drawback James now subtly insinuates that interpretation spoils art. Similarly, James has emphasized the importance of the past in Stransom's creative process, and now he carries his earlier attitude on when he idealizes the past as a presence beyond all spoiling. And if James's attitude in "The Altar of the Dead" has been of intense self-consciousness, the author now expresses his indifference to people's critical attitude from

it. However, since the previous statements stand dissociated from the characters' subjective reality and from the narrator's consciousness, they hover over the text abstractedly and independently. The artistic consciousness they express remains impersonal. James manages in The Awkward Age to assert his importance as an artist in an impersonal and indirect manner. Though subjectively involved in the novel, the author is simultaneously detached from it.

This complex state of detached involvement gains enforcement from James's changing attitude from his old artist of "The Altar of the Dead" and his embracing of a new conception of the figure of the artist in The Awkward Age. He dissociates his old artist from the process and the prospect of artistic creativity, and replaces him with another figure gifted with the capacity to be simultaneously active and passive, involved and detached. James's attitude from Longdon and his portrayal of Nanda reflect his newly-realized ideal of detached involvement.

In his portrayal of Longdon James repeats Stransom's image. Like Stransom, Longdon is fixated on the unconsummated love of the past. Like the earlier artist, Longdon is also dissatisfied with social reality, for he calls himself "a hater," criticizes his social circle and manifests a strong dislike for its sustaining power, Mrs. Brook. Moreover, Stransom's fixation on the past and his disappointment in social interaction have determined his social isolation, and "Longdon appeared to accept his prospect of isolation with a certain gravity" (106). Furthermore, Stransom is an artist involved in a priest's activity and, similarly, Longdon "might almost have been a priest" (28). And finally, if Stransom has

had the capacity to recreate the past in imagination, Longdon's "wonderful memory and . . . admirable vision" put the similarity between Nanda and her grandmother "into all the detail" (120). If Stransom is James's portrait of the artist, Longdon certainly is.

However, though another Stransom in <u>The Awkward Age</u>, Longdon lacks the earlier artist's gift for creativity. He is presented as an artist in observation of social life not in the act of creating a work of art. For while Stransom is seen either fantasizing, arranging or rearranging his work of art, Longdon is discovered at "the most exquisite form of it. Observation" (106). Stransom's wonderings in the street also result in further disappointments and, consequently, further acts of the imagination, while Longdon's observations result in verbal criticism. He even needs the corrupt circle, more than his imagination, to keep him in touch with the old memories, and talks of his dead to its members. And while Stransom recreates the past in imagination, Longdon encounters his past recreated in Nanda and tries to adopt her. Even his own house with all its manifestations of artistic taste from colored china, precious mahogany to the beautiful portraits of the deceased is a creation which "Mr. Longdon had not made . . . he had simply lived it" (253). In short, if Stransom has been the most eminent presence in "The Altar of the Dead," Longdon has "indeed no presence, but somehow an effect" (28). This dissociation of the old artist from the process and the prospect of artistic creation denotes a change in James's attitude towards him. The author is no longer capable of accepting the conflicting state of the old artist, nor is he willing to embrace his extreme subjectivity.

Therefore, James replaces his old artist with a more balanced figure who has enough passivity in her nature to guarantee a remarkable sense of control over her active side. Stransom's tension disappears in Nanda's case significantly without restricting her active response to experience. Through this balanced nature James realizes, once more in The Awkward Age, his ideal of detached involvement.

Nanda's passivity materializes in her lack of imposing curiosity in relation to life and people. Her quest of knowledge is spontaneous, unmotivated by personal demands and unimpeded by deliberate moves. Van, for example, tells her "You're too clever. You make no demands. You let things go. You don't allow, in particular, for the human weakness that enjoys an occasional glimpse of the weakness of others" (284). This form of passivity and lack of curiosity are beyond Stransom's capacity. The earlier figure of the artist burdens his companion in the shrine with questionings about her past relationship with Hague and about the kind of injury that man had inflicted on her: "Good God, how he must have used you!" (119) and "What was it he did to you?" (120). Although he never discloses the nature of Hague's insult to him, Stransom cannot prevent himself from being inquisitive about her private affairs. His curiosity tortures Stransom and unbalances his character. Through her lack of curiosity Nanda succeeds where Stransom has failed.

Her success and capacity for detachment do not restrict Nanda's active response to experience, for James's heroine proves capable of intellectualizing her responses. Like Stransom who has been dazzled by the beautiful temples of the world without losing consciousness of his inner needs, Nanda is

dazzled by Van's beauty and remains active on the inside; she maintains her ability to understand and analyze the nature of her passion for him. This ability surfaces when she reveals her sentimental attachment to Van by requesting his cigarette case for a keepsake. Significantly, Nanda herself recognizes her capacity for active responses when she says "I don't only know what people tell me" (244), but rather brings in her own contribution to knowledge. In short, Nanda's ability to respond to people without the imposing force of curiosity is no hindrance to her active responses to life, people and experience. Despite her ostensible passivity, she continues in this respect to be another Stransom in <u>The Awkward Age</u>.

However, because of the combination of an active and a passive side in Nanda's nature, she is a much more successful version of Stransom. With the disappearance of the tension of extreme subjectivity, under the modifying power of passivity, Nanda becomes capable of translating her inner activity into balanced action. Unlike Stransom, who on recognizing his personal need for human interaction merely fantasizes, Nanda takes an initiative towards the satisfaction of her need for Van. Frequently, she insinuates to her passion in his presence and tries to win him over. When he fails to respond as she wishes him to, Nanda quietly and gracefully withdraws with Longdon into the country side. And if Stransom walks the streets yet remains emotionally isolated, Nanda in her upper and isolated chamber "had enjoyed a due measure both of solitude and society" (346). Her active and passive sides enable her to enjoy an ideal state of detached involvement in life. Critics have recognized James's aspiration towards this kind of ideal. Nicola Bradbury, for example, writes of how the

"poise between curiosity and restraint becomes [in James] an increasingly clearly recognized ideal, not only for the attitude of a protagonist to his experience, nor simply for the relationship between characters, but for that of character, author and reader" (5).

This ideal of detached involvement that James realizes on more than one level in The Awkward Age continues to govern his handling of subsequent works. Although an exploration of such continuity lies beyond the scope of this paper, a hint at it is necessary to restore to The Awkward Age its association with James's following works. The author's description of Lambert Strether in The Ambassadors, for example, comes as a sign of such continuity.[4] Describing Strether, James asserts that there "was detachment in his zeal and curiosity in his indifference" (6). In its reminiscence of Nanda this description suggests a continuation of James's ideal of detached involvement from the earlier into this later work.

Though it may suggest an anti-climactic reaction to the ideal of detached involvement, the cessation of James's exploitation of theatrical techniques after The Awkward Age is not a negation of his just realized ideal. Fogel describes the technique of The Ambassadors as "lavishly impressionistic. In it picture and scene are filtered generally . . . through the subtle meditative consciousness of Lambert Strether" (14). Although he uses this statement to emphasize the shift in technique in The Ambassadors from The Awkward Age, Fogel discloses, unawares, the continuity of James's practice from the earlier into the later work. To speak of scene depiction and picture presentation is actually to describe the stage directing activity of the narrator of The Awkward Age. The

major difference between the two works lies in the consciousness that transmutes the picture and portrays the scene. James replaces his reserved and impersonal narrator with the central consciousness of Lambert Strether. However, since this figure is an embodiment of James's ideal of detached involvement, the return of the central consciousness into this later work is not a going back to the conflicting stage of "The Altar of the Dead." Rather, James seems to combine the two different levels on which he has realized his ideal of detached involvement in _The Awkward Age_ into one. Lambert Strether's scene depiction and picture portrayal seem more like an act of maturity on Nanda's part. It is as if the ideal artist of _The Awkward Age_ has finally grown into playing the role of the reserved narrator of that novel on reaching _The Ambassadors_. James's ideal of detached involvement is no longer divided between a narrator and a character as it used to be in _The Awkward Age_. In this sense the later novel's technique is an extension and a growth of James's practice in the earlier one not a negation of its philosophy of detached involvement.

End Notes

[1] The critical disagreement over Mrs. Brook and Nanda in Edward Wagenknecht, Daniel Fogel and Daniel Schneider is a good example and the contrast between Van and Mitchy in Margaret Walters is another good example.

[2] Joseph Wiesenfath, for example, "accuses James of having overburned the reader and wastefully expended both time and space to achieve an objectivity not worth what it costs" (qtd. in Wagenknecht 165).

[3] Nicola Bradbury recognized this abstract quality in James's novels for he writes of "how the novels themselves tend increasingly towards a level of abstraction where our attention is directed towards the process and the effect" (5).

[4] I have chosen <u>The Ambassadors</u> because it is the first work in James's major phase after the conflicting period culminating in the resolution offered by <u>The Awkward Age</u>.

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