

Vulnerability of an American Artist in *Roderick Hudson*

—A Study on Henry James—

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1

Henry James, as a novelist, is not likely to escape strong opposed opinions as to the character of what he wrote. Here is summary of the prevalent criticism on his works as follows: rootlessness of his works, pathetically limited theme, narrowness of his emotional range, priority of form to content, unreadability of his writing owing to esoteric style, etc.

It is true that the Japanese readers, learning English as a second language, will generally admit the last case pointed out above as reasonable, and consequently the number of Jamesian readers is to be limited, but they are chosen and passionate readers. Then, what makes them peruse so in spite of the difficulty of his reading and appreciation? The above five characteristics regarded as the main faults of James by many critics are not wholly allowed by his followers. They think his limited theme can not be helped because of his education and surroundings, but that the international theme cannot be brought about without his rootlessness. They also insist that his sensibility can well be expressed within his emotional range, and that what he intends to express, namely, subtlety, delicacy, clearness, or complexity cannot be done without his original form and style.

When we read some of his works, a question, a little different from the controversies so far, will arise as to the fate of characters in his favorite situations. In many cases, candid and innocent heroes or heroines (mostly Americans) are to succumb and be surrendered to the corrupted and conventional world, so the result of his story is reduced into either defeat or renunciation or capitulation of the innocent, and not optimistic happy ending. What does he mean to say by his merciless handling of the innocent Americans to a tragic conclusion? In this essay, I would like to take up *Roderick Hudson* and examine why an American artist should be defeated in the Old World with all his fine quality and assistance from his good friend and the "ambassadors" from the New World. This novel chiefly contains two of his favorite themes: the international situation and the meaning of an artist, and describes a kind of portrait of the artist as a young man through the eye of his patron. Roderick is a young amateur

sculptor in Northampton, Massachusetts and is found by Mallet Rowland, who discovers weak points of the sculptor's work, a young Waterdrinker, but thinks its charm is of finest essence. He is determined to be his patron and takes Roderick to Rome for his artistic education. Though he makes a splendid start, he gradually proceeds to indulge his passions for a seductive girl and so degenerates and dies, to his friend Rowland's disappointment and despair.

There are other American artists such as Sam Singleton and Miss Blanchard, who are Roderick's friends but do not degenerate or die in Europe. Singleton is modest, laborious, and satisfied, though fame and fortune have not yet come his way. Miss Blanchard has made her way to Rome alone and unaided, but anyway enjoys her life there. Roderick, on the contrary, is too hasty and ambitious for his job and thinks he is a great man equal to his job. Yet, he is somewhat weak and yields to the temptation of gambling and fatally of a beautiful girl, Christina Light, and the good intention of his betrothed, Mary Garland, and his mother to save him from bad influence is refused by him as a nuisance and eventually he destroys himself as an artist. Therefore, it can be said that his human nature, great as it is, has some vulnerability on his artistic quality. Not the outside elements such as betrayal of his betrothed or his friend, or inevitable adversity, but his vulnerability within him leads to the catastrophe of the story. What is his vulnerable quality as a young artist will be explored in the following.

2

Here is an interesting introduction to *The Torchbook Edition of Roderick Hudson* by Leon Edel. He says that comparing with the case of Stephen Dedalus by James Joyce, in the case of Roderick Hudson, a product of the Calvinist tradition, the conflict is between art and passion and that Roderick allows his terrible passion to destroy his art. It is doubtful whether he is a legitimate product of New England (he is "the very copy of his poor father," a drunken Virginian), but apart from this, we can all agree to his view that his passion overwhelms his art to destruction. Are love and art compatible each other in a strict sense? When devoted to a woman, can we be a good artist? We know quite well the answer is in the negative and the two elements do not agree for ever. The question in this case is why Roderick chooses to cultivate his passion for Christina Light in spite of his definite awareness that his aim is to be a great sculptor. We can say in this choice is his vulnerability.

"Weakness" or "frailty" is not preferred to use here, because the word weakness has somewhat broad meaning and is often connected with the weakness of Christian belief,

while the word frailty, as used in *Hamlet*, is sometimes taken as the attribute of a whole group. Instead the word vulnerability, which means Achilles' heel, can well denote a weak point in a strong body. The tragedy is that his beneficent patron, Rowland, is immune from this quality of his and takes it as a feature of his genius:

Suddenly he felt a rush of pity for his companion, whose beautiful faculty of production was thus a double-edged instrument, susceptible of being dealt in back-handed blows at its possessor. Genius was priceless, beneficent, devine, but it was also at its hours capricious, sinister, cruel; and natures ridden by it, accordingly, were alternately very enviable and very helpless.⁽¹⁾

In order to avoid misunderstanding of this word, it should be added that vulnerability (that quality of being easily wounded, susceptible of receiving wounds) has no connection with sensibility of artistic feeling. When he fails to get what he wants, Roderick shows his vulnerability and the perfect separateness of his sensibility. It is true both may have some contacts in many cases, but not always. We know meanwhile sensibility is often accompanied with invulnerability.

It is natural that everybody should have some vulnerability as a human being, but in case of Roderick Hudson, the source of his creative energy has not so much been exhausted leading to escape with a girl as first of all he gives up being an artist on account of being charmed with her. An essential spring of art has dried up within him, and this is only a result from his divergence with a girl. Art is the expression of any ideal which the artist can realize in plastic form. An artist should, therefore, have this intention, a demoniac desire to express what he thinks beautiful as an object of his study, keeping up ardent passion for it.

When we compare Roderick and Rowland in this artistic qualification, we are surprised to know the novelist's cynical creation of the two types, for Rowland is much more qualified as an artist in this respect than the other, though he can only buy pictures and not paint them. D.W. Jefferson explains Rowland's type as follows in his *Henry James* :

Rowland accepted the prospect of bachelorhood when Cecilia married his cousin, but that when Cecilia became a widow he no longer wished to marry her. There is no one, in fact, that he wishes to marry—until he is fully committed to go to Europe with Roderick; and then he develops a strong feeling for Mary Garland, whose inaccessibility becomes complete when Roderick announces his engagement to her. Mary's inconsolable grief after Roderick's death leaves her still inaccessible. It would seem that he belongs to the category of men for whom the inaccessibility of a woman is a favourable condition for the development of tender sentiments.⁽²⁾

Roderick is just the opposite type, for he wants to possess Christina instead of ex-

pressing her beauty. Possession in hand and expression at arm's length can not go together. By the way, is Roderick well convinced what his pursuit of passion brings forth? Probably he is not willing to know the result, nor does he know the dangerous character of Christina, of which his friend Rowland warns him more than once. His fellow sculptor, Gloriani, who admits he is the very deuce for observation, tells him that Miss Light resembles Salome, daughter of Herodias, but he is not afraid of her. His shallow conception of her characteristics makes him blind to her danger, and moreover he does not like to admit the limitation of human nature. This we can call his innocence. It can be said innocence produces vulnerability.

3

The word innocence here does not mean something characteristic of God or Christ, in other words, sinless or holy, but it means something "having or showing the simplicity, ignorance, artlessness, or unsuspecting nature of a child or one ignorant of the world (N. E. D)." That he is ignorant of his vulnerability is his vulnerability. This fact reminds us of a passage from the Bible: "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians, 12, 10)." This means, apart from the Biblical interpretation, that when we are well conscious of our own weakness and fault, we are at least immune from wishing too much in vain only to fail exhausted. So is the case with Sam Singleton, who keeps up his own pace, however slow it may be, and survives his friend Roderick.

Roderick's innocence means ignorance of his vulnerability, which inevitably helps to form the view of his own situation in Rome. Innocent idea in him like that of a child leads to his frivolous, impetuous, egocentric perception. He is not satisfied unless he is the central figure in his surroundings. So far as the world circles round him and people respect him as a promising sculptor, he is amiable, optimistic, and everything seems to be well with him. His flight in the Roman society is described as follows:

He took to evening parties as a duck to water, and before the winter was half over was the most freely and frequently discussed young man in the heterogeneous foreign colony.⁽³⁾

But once in the adversity, in which he cannot make his lover obey him as he wishes or cannot make progress in his work on account of [some artistic barrier, he easily reveals his vulnerability out of innocence and is driven to despair. The novelist makes him say, "I would have sacrificed everything to her (Christina)—you, Mary, Mallet,

my work, my fortune, my future, my honour."⁽⁴⁾ This type of man will easily resign himself to defeat, renunciation, or capitulation, which James thinks are the most effective means of expressing his "realistic romanticism."

Furthermore, what is Roderick's attitude toward art as an artist? Here again his innocence shows its vulnerability in understanding art. His view seems to be too romantic and simple, while Gloriani is cynical and almost too knowing about the limitation of artistic inspiration. He says, "...passion burns out, inspiration runs to seed. Some fine day every artist finds himself sitting face to face with his lump of clay, with his empty canvas, with his sheet of blank paper, waiting in vain for the revelation to be made, for the Muse to descend. He must learn to do without the Muse!..."⁽⁵⁾

Herbert Read in his *The Meaning of Art* says, "...art is not necessarily beauty: that cannot be said too often or too blatantly," and "...the purpose of art, which is the communication of feeling, is inextricably confused with the quality of beauty, which is the feeling communicated by particular forms"⁽⁶⁾ In a small group of artists in Rome, with regard to the above aesthetic conception, Roderick declares as follows opposing to Miss Blanchard's suggestion of making a Judas:

"Never! I mean never to make anything ugly. The Greeks never made anything ugly, and I'm a Hellenist; I'm not a Hebraist! I have been thinking lately of making a Cain, but I should never dream of making him ugly. He should be a very handsome fellow indeed, and he should lift up the murderous club with the beautiful movement of the fighters in the Greek friezes who are chopping at their enemies."⁽⁷⁾

Roderick's view seems to be derived from his simple human nature, which cares only for beauty of Type, and he means to do things that will be simple and sublime, while Gloriani's is dually complex and he seems well aware that the object of beauty is one thing and its expression is quite another. It is true that "even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of the lilies of the field," but it is a human being who extracts and expresses not only the beauty of the lilies but that of Judas, whom people have thought rather ugly and contaminated. It is doubtful if Roderick is aware of the connection between beauty and expression and of the existence of various beauties which man's genius can only create.

4

So far the failure of Roderick has been investigated from the viewpoint of his vulnerability, innocence, and egoticism. There are, of course, some other factors that influence the process of his failure besides his personal faults. Except Mallet Rowland, who is the narrator of this story and is so neutral and fair to all the characters,

and sees the beauty of both the Worlds, Mary Garland and Christina Light are the most interesting figures who have grave influence on him. This is because the former represents the beauty of New England and the latter, though she is the same American, is a product of the old contaminated tradition of Europe, and this contrast between the New World and the Old attracts us as an effective way of understanding the merits and demerits of each other's world. It is strange, however, that Mary should appear to us rather plain as the moon of her modest light fades away in the brightness of the sunshine from Christina, and her impression to us is not so lively for all the novelist's intention of stressing all her virtues such as faithfulness, fortitude, etc. This is partly because the narrator's attitude to her is rather too sympathetic and he even confesses to us his increasing affection for her, and moreover it is not known to us what attracts Rowland so much, who is fastidious about the faults of both American and European girls.

Mary, when she comes to Rome with Roderick's mother with the mission of protecting her fiancé, tries instead of resistance to recognize the beauty of the Old World doing her best, who says, "To enjoy so much beauty and wonder is to break with the past—I mean with one's poor old own. And breaking's a pain."⁽⁸⁾ Her image, however, does not loom so attractively to our disappointment, and Roderick is too much absorbed in another girl. To be frank, we cannot be touched with the feeling of conversation between Roderick and Mary, which seems too artificial and shows little human emotion.

On the other hand, Christina surprises us with dexterity with men in the conventional society, and with her ambition to get a high social position with a great deal of property, which is hidden under radiance of her beauty. She appeals to us, so to speak, as the embodiment of the corrupted world, as Rowland says, "It has taken twenty years of Europe to make her what she is,"⁽⁹⁾ yet we are much more surprised to find her very charming and to find ourselves turning out rather sympathetic with her, because she also falls a sacrifice to the desire of her mother, and is forced to get married with a prince she despises. Why does she look much more charming to us than Mary Garland? Her upbringing has made her much acquainted with a conventional world, so she is inoculated with "European virus" and has somehow immunity, ingenuity, and complexity of repercussion that Roderick and Mary do not have:

It was Christina's constant practice to remind you of the complexity of her character, of the subtlety of her mind, of her troublous faculty of seeing everything in a dozen different lights.⁽¹⁰⁾

Contaminated as she is, she is well aware of her quality and in her own way of thinking, she does her best to get out of her miserable fate. In her desperate

effort and confession, though her motive may be wrong, we can feel a kind of fascination:

"I should like to be a grandee—the Prince is, among many wonderful things hereditary *Grand d'Espagne*—and I think I should be a very good one; I would play my part well. I'm fond of luxury, I'm fond of a great society, I'm fond of being looked at, I thrill with the idea of high consideration. Mamma, you see, has never had *any*. There I am in all my native horror. I'm corrupt, corrupting, corruption!" (1)

It is no wonder that Roderick's mind is disturbed with her virulent power and loses equilibrium to the ruin of his sensibility to art. His vulnerability in combination with the attraction of her corrupted beauty accelerates his failure.

In other words, we can say that this encounter is a confrontation [or a showdown] between the New World and the Old represented by Mary and Christina for the acquisition of Roderick's soul, and this is ended with a decisive victory of the Old World over the American. The unpliant, ingenuous girl from New England has no power or charm to save Roderick. When he dies, however, he once more returns to his native innocence and has Sam Singleton say, "He was the most beautiful of men!" It is symbolic of his nature that he does not die in the midst of the conventional society, but in the midst of the Alps, which may remind him of Mount Holyoke, the river and the meadow in America. We can assume that despair is the novelist's feeling with his country and countrymen, though it is accompanied with his deep love and compassion.

5

When we regard this novel only as dealing with the international situation, the hero's situation much resembles that of Christopher Newman in *The American*, where James is free from artistic problem. Whether the hero is an artist or a retired businessman, the common theme is the American defeat in the old traditional world, and this comes from vulnerability out of innocence. Apart from the international theme, then, can we not find the same situation in his other novels? In *Henry James* F.W. Dupee says as follows:

In Roderick's gigantic sculptures, his exploits in the Colosseum, his spectacular death in the Alps, James was being romantic about romanticism. This he was never to attempt again; instead he was to concern himself subtly with the subtler forms of self-indulgence. (2)

When we apply his opinion to another work of his, is it strange to say conclusively

that the situation of the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* should coincide with that of Roderick Hudson except the difference that the former is the subtler form of self-indulgence?

The two characters are of course, quite different: the governess's mind is not so much innocent as prejudiced against her predecessor and pupils. We should say prejudice is just the reverse of innocence. It is "to give a bias or bent to, influence the mind or judgement of beforehand (often, unfairly) (N. E. D.)." Yet, the novelist's favorite situation of contrast between the New World and the Old is here transformed into the situation of a young daughter of a poor country parson requested as guardian of two children of a rich family devoid of their parents. The grand impression she gets at the old house on the first night of her arrival gradually changes into an obscure, weary obsession. We can say, therefore, that James is versed in the skill of showing us vulnerability of a human being who is either innocent or having inferiority complex, by means of the change of situation. Without the change, neither Roderick nor the governess would throw himself or herself into tragical ending respectively.

But when we compare the two works, we can find that there is a distinct difference of James's method of describing the two persons. In *The Turn of the Screw*, all the happenings and her mental movement are expressed through the eye of the governess herself. Therefore, we are not sure to our dissatisfaction whether the ghosts really appear before the two children, and accordingly we can enjoy only the mystic feeling which ambiguity of her limited observation produces. On the other hand, how Roderick feels is related through the consciousness of the narrator. It is true in this case that Rowland is fair to all the characters in the novel, being an excellent and experienced observer, yet it cannot be denied that there is inevitably the same limitation of his observation. We are informed of the relation and feeling between Roderick and Mary or Christina only when the narrator is present to them, and it is impossible for us to see the hero's agony—the process of his inner struggle—directly through the novelist's explanation. The narrator is, as a matter of fact, not ubiquitous in the sense that there remain some of Roderick's anguished looks that he cannot fully express, and he is not omnipotent in the sense that he is a little too partial to Mary Garland and too moralistic with Roderick.

Cornelia Kelley in her *The Early Development of Henry James* points out that his device is to make his story seem true and that it gives the story a unity of point of view, and thus makes it stronger, more compact, to have one person see and tell all. We can well understand what she means to say, but at the same time we will see the fact that having one person see and tell *all* is technically impossible and leads to a narrowness and limitation of point of view as well as its unity, for the narrator will gradually

grow out of the novelist's hands and begin to form an independent character and view, a little different from his original intention. Therefore, we will think it wise to interpret the narrator's interpretation of the characters in the novel, taking into consideration his personal way of observation, feeling, and thinking. Our innocent hero's vulnerability, accordingly, should be transferred into our own interpretation out of the narrator's immune hands and be judged fairly.

References

- (1) *Roderick Hudson*, The New York Edition Vol. 1, p. 222.
- (2) D. W. Jefferson, *Henry James (Writers and Critics)*, Edinburgh and London, 1960, p. 25.
- (3) *Roderick Hudson*, p. 100.
- (4) *Ibid.*, p. 428.
- (5) *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- (6) Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art (Pelican Books)*, 1949, pp. 17—20.
- (7) *Roderick Hudson*, p. 115.
- (8) *Ibid.*, p. 333.
- (9) *Ibid.*, p. 188.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p. 449.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 407.
- (12) F. W. Dupee, *Henry James (The American Men of Letters Series)*, London, 1951, pp. 87—88.