Tintoretto and James: Exposing the Shattered Subject

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In 1869, in a letter to his brother, Henry James describes his initial response to the painters of Venice, singling out Tintoretto for his highest praise: “If Shakespeare is the greatest of poets, Tintoretto is assuredly the greatest of painters. . . He seems to me to have seen into painting to a distance unsuspected by any of his fellows. I don’t mean into its sentimental virtues or didactic properties but into its simple pictorial capacity” (Letters from the Palazzo Barbaro 60). Not only did James admire Tintoretto’s originality and stylistic inventiveness, but he quickly imagined the possibility of translating something of the artist’s vision onto the page. In the same letter to William, he muses: “I’d give a great deal to fling down a dozen of his pictures into prose of corresponding prose and color” (Letters 63). However, with the exception of Viola Hopkins Winner’s Henry James and the Visual Arts (1970) and, more recently, Tessa Hadley and Tom Nichols’s discussion of Tintoretto and James’s “common integration of the visionary and the real” (301), little has been made of the connections between Tintoretto and James. And even though it is a young James who speaks extensively about Tintoretto in his letters and travel writing, the Venetian artist’s “brooding presence” may be discerned, on architectural, stylistic, and thematic levels, throughout his work.  

Separated by three centuries, these two artists both stage a forceful assault on the conventions of their medium and engender in the viewer or reader (as well as internal “perceivers”) a kind of vertigo—a visual and psychological dislocation that is the basis of a new
kind of insight. In Tintoretto, this dislocation ushers in mannerist and pre-baroque ambiguity—a sense of alienation that is “an indispensable stage on the mind’s journey to itself” (Hauser 96); in James, fluid, inconclusive images of others, reflected through the inner drama of a perceiving consciousness, set the stage for a post-modern interrogation of the subject. Tintoretto’s spiritual encounters, reformulated in James as struggles of competing desires, are what the French philosopher, Alain Badiou, calls “events”: they disrupt our conventional understanding of being and force a new way of seeing.3 Though “influence” may be too strong a word, the compositional affinities between James and Tintoretto are pervasive and worthy of comparative analysis, especially because both artists capture the moment when wonder gives way to the lonely and final uncertainty of our knowledge—of self, of others, of secular or spiritual truth.

Tintoretto’s “radical spatial reorientation” (Nichols 47), and his breach of the image’s surface with a witness who enters the “frame,” are reconfigured in James’s moments of dramatic insight, framed and penetrated by a central intelligence. The artist’s “violently recessional architecture” (Nichols, Tintoretto 31) may be found in James’s seductive recessions into deep architectural space as characters are baffled by the frustration of their desire.4 The Venetian’s “heightened dynamism,” “spatial aggressiveness,” and “theatrical fluidity” (Rosand 153) are reconfigured in James’s tableau vivants where an arrested image is, quite purposefully, “the stuff of drama.”5 Through parallel visual strategies each foregrounds the individual’s struggle to hold onto a coherence that seems to be slipping away.

Entering the Frame

A youthful James attempts to define the essential drama of Tintoretto in the 1550 Temptation of Adam: “the composition is so simple that it hardly exists, and yet the painting is
so rich and expressive that it seems as if the natural, the ‘real’ could go no further. . .” (Letters 65). Through Adam, who “take[s] up a position equivalent to our own” (Nichols, Tintoretto 93), we move into a layered narrative, rather than across the surface of the picture. Beyond the voluptuous body of Eve, we glimpse two clearly lit figures in the middle distance, Adam and Eve being chased from paradise by an avenging angel. Tintoretto thus renders the pictorial space episodic while simultaneously freezing the drama in the foreground. Despite Adam’s hesitation, his backward leaning torso and the withdrawal of his right hand from the offending apple, the scene suggests a poignant struggle between the quest for knowledge and its danger, as the longing for the always impossible object of desire, what Jacques Lacan calls the *objet petit a*, reveals the tragic inevitability of human destiny.

This frustrating and inevitably frustrated quest is reenacted in James as a confrontation with an “object” of desire that entraps the gaze, “showing us that as subjects we are literally called into the picture” only to only to grasp our own nothingness (Lacan, *Concepts* 92). Peter Brooks observes that the “abyss” in *The Wings of the Dove* “may be taken to stand for all the evacuated centers of meaning in his fiction that nonetheless animate lives” (173). Such an abyss
presents itself in the governess’s first sighting of the mysterious stranger on the battlements in

_The Turn of the Screw_:

“...The place...in the strangest way in the world, had, on the instant...become a solitude...The rooks stopped cawing in the golden sky, and the friendly hour lost, for the minute, all its voice. But there was no other change in nature, unless indeed it were a change that I saw with a stranger sharpness. The gold was still in the sky, the clearness in the air, and the man who looked at me over the battlements was as definite as a picture in a frame.” (311)

Through the precise use of a visual frame, James arrests time (“the rooks stopped cawing”; the “friendly hour lost...its voice”) in order to foreground the “solitude” the governess sees “with a stranger sharpness.” The implied gaze of the figure who has entered the frame transforms her pastoral world, rendering it alien and other. But he is, precisely, the elusive, unnamable object of her desire, something the governess not only “sees” but narcissistically composes. James’s obsession with in this unreachable object echoes Tintoretto’s fascination with the mystery and ambiguity at the heart of spiritual desire. Insofar as there is a consistent visible reference to a signifier that is out of reach, James and Tintoretto both point to our failure to understand the Other, spiritual or secular, or to define, to hold onto, to make permanent, our “true” selves.

However unintentionally, Tintoretto complicates and subtly undermines the coherence of the spiritual encounter through his “dramatic chiaroscuro” and “love of antithesis” (Nichols, _Tintoretto_ 186, 202), his “diagonals veering into the distance” and “high handed vanishing points” (Hahn, “Witness” 205), and his consistent defiance of the “spatial logic of conventional perspective construction” (Rosand 161). In an early work that signals his radical departure from the vision of his contemporaries, _Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple_, a painting which
James notes “utterly kill[s] Titian’s version of the same subject (Letters 60), the viewer is led to
“lay down his gaze” (Lacan Concepts 109), to submit to the artist’s powerful and controlling
vision.

“In contrast to the static, self-contained horizontality” of Titian’s Presentation of the Virgin,
“Tintoretto constructs an image of vertiginous verticality. . . which violently pulls the viewer into
the picture space. . . [and] shoots the protagonist into the background” (Nichols, Tintoretto 47).
The virgin child has already ascended the stairs and faces the priest in the upper right, her
presence softly illuminated, but also displaced, by the powerfully sculpted women and children
in the foreground. The two self-contained halves of the organ doors, the original site of the
composition, create a “bold spatial division” (Nichols, Tintoretto 202) that draws in and,
simultaneously, decenters the viewer. Tintoretto seems to recognize, as will James, not only that
“perception always involves a circulation of positions” (Holly 83) but that that the subject always
becomes part of the picture (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 96). We enter the scene from somewhere below the mother in the foreground who ascends the stairs, but, immediately, we notice the contrasting mood of the figure on the lower left, whose body, in a contorted gesture, turns away from the scene towards the viewer, while his gaze remains fearfully fixated on the virgin. Our own gaze alternates between these two sets of witnesses and their opposed attitudes, exposing an ontological gap that undermines the peaceful certainty of the virgin’s ascent.

James, too, composes images of “vertiginous verticality” and uses the dislocation of a witness to render more complex an emotional response to a scene. Early in *The Wings of the Dove*, Milly Theale is secretly observed by her confident, Susan Stringham who follows her to her perch on a fragment of rock in the Alps where “the great side of the mountain. . . appeared to fall away altogether” (*WD* 83). A “looming depth” (Hahn, “Witness” 201) characteristic of Tintoretto is enhanced by a “compositional inversion” (Nichols, *Tintoretto* 31) as Milly is pushed to the upper corner of the picture, like the child in *The Presentation of the Virgin*. The “viewer” is drawn into the frame, identifying with Susan Stringham who gazes up at Milly from below and “stifles a cry” (*WD* 84). Susan alternates between her own darkness and light, struggling to give this scene a positive interpretation. She decides, finally, that Milly is not “meditating a jump” but is “looking down on the kingdoms of the earth”. . . in a state of uplifted and unlimited possession”(*WD* 84). Visually, however, James continues to undermine the perceiver’s certainty (that of both Mrs Stringham and the reader): Milly’s “passage” will be “complicated” and Susan, feeling the full measure of her responsibility, “stands near the mouth” of a “mine” “not yet quite cleared” (*WD* 85).
The Line of the Eye

David Rosand observes that Tintoretto completely “reconceives the structuring function of light and dark” (160), and Eric Newton explains that “light as a free element that could be directed to any given spot, could flood any given area or be withheld at will...was something entirely new” (21). In essence, Tintoretto succeeds in manipulating the viewer’s perception in radically new ways, reminding us, as Lacan suggests, that our belief in our own visual mastery is an illusion: “That which is light looks at me, and by means of that light in the depths of my eye, something is painted...something...which is in no way mastered by me. It is rather it that grasps me, solicits me at every moment” (Concepts 96). In the San Giorgio Maggiore Last Supper, the table cuts across at a diagonal so that the eye moves into the depths rather than from side to side, and our gaze is “solicited” by separate spatial planes that catch different angles of light, illuminating different spheres of activity. James comments on the painting’s multiple points of interest, its “dusky spaciousness, its scattered lamp-light and halo-light, its startled, gesticulating figures” (Letters 42). As Winner explains, “shadows and bursting light ignore the individual forms in favor of...an overall flickering movement and emotional highlighting” (42). Angels descend with arms outstretched to embrace Christ, but the busy activities of the servants in the foreground, and the disciples in the lower left, divert our attention from the primary subject. Christ is gently illuminated but by no means the “center” of this picture because, Tintoretto’s viewer, like the Jamesian reader, identifies, sequentially, with different centers of “intelligence” (activity and light), and a new post-Renaissance subjectivism subtly asserts itself.
In The Ambassadors, James, too, plays with “lighting” to undermine the stability of a scene and to suggest ambiguity in the consciousness of the perceiver. Lambert Strether’s Paris is a “vast bright Babylon,” a “huge iridescent object, a jewel brilliant and hard. It twinkled and trembled and melted together, and what seemed all surface one moment seemed all depth the next” (AMB 118). The city itself foreshadows the effect of its central representative, Madame de Vionnet, who is, for Strether, “an obscure person, a muffled person one day and a showy person, an uncovered person, the next,” someone who stirs up “ambiguities” and takes “all his categories by surprise” (AMB 257). Chad Newsome’s “palpable presence and his massive young manhood” is revealed as he “raises his face to the lamp. . .with an air of designedly showing himself” (AMB169). And Strether is “held” by the “penetrating radiance” of the sculptor, Gloriani’s eyes, the “special flare” of the artist’s “esthetic torch lighting that wondrous world forever” (AMB 200). The elusive ideal of a more complete self that Strether imagines he
sees in Chad, in Gloriani, in Madame de Vionnet is alternately illuminated and called into question in the chiaroscuro of his vision.

Similarly, Strether’s delicately composed image of Madame de Vionnet is shattered in the pivotal scene in the French countryside where he discovers the real nature of her relationship with Chad. Poignantly, we are reminded of Strether’s willful shaping of the picture, as he imagines an “oblong gilt frame” which “dispose[s] its enclosing lines; and as the poplars and willows, the reeds and river. . .f[all] into a composition” (AMB 458). With its “diffused coolness. . .all copper green. . .and glazed pearly sky” (AMB 459), this scene, as critics have noted, suggests impressionism, but in Strether’s moment of crisis, it casts off its impressionistic surface; there is a Tintoretto-like “collision between painter and viewer” (Nichols, Tintoretto 22), and the distorted ambiguity of mannerism asserts itself. As a boat with two figures advances round the bend of the river, Strether recognizes Madame de Vionnet and, simultaneously, her deliberate attempt to cut him: the knowledge “darken[s] his vision” (AMB 463). The perfection and fulfillment he has been experiencing all day, “the spell of the picture” whose “frame” he has “not once overstepped” (457) is lost, and the “solid figure” is replaced by “changing appearance” (Wofflin, Principles 87). Strether recognizes not only the “quantity of make-believe” imposed on him by his antagonists but also his own purposeful illusion-making, prompted by his desire—and his lack.

Decentered Subjects

Arnold Hauser comments on the mannerists’ early recognition of the fictive nature of all representation: “even the most objective picture of reality was a product of the mind, and was therefore partly fiction and illusion” (29). If we consider Lacan’s critique of the humanist model
of viewing, we can understand the significance of Tintoretto’s and James’s challenge to the ideal of visual transparency: “when I am presented with a representation,” Lacan reflects “I assure myself . . . that that there is, beyond, the thing itself” (Concepts 106). However, Lacan continues, the perceiver mis-recognizes, the permanence and coherence of the object, just as he does that of the self (Concepts 81-83). The gaze thus articulates the division, rather than the wholeness, of the subject, for there is no real reciprocity: “You never look at me from the place at which I see you” (Lacan, Concepts 103). This disconnection may be traced in Tintoretto who is consistently “willing to foreground uncertainty and to draw the audience into his process” (“Witness” 196).

One of the ways this uncertainty is delineated in Tintoretto is through the “disintegration of continuous space” (Nichols, Tintoretto 204). Robert Hahn describes the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes as “a composition in flight from a nominal center” (“Witness” 193).7 A similar compositional decentering occurs in The Baptism of Christ. Light descends from the sky highlighting the ghostly figures in the depth of the painting, briefly illuminating the head and shoulders of Christ (whose face is in shadow) and, finally, focusing our gaze on woman in the foreground who turns away from the central action to nurse her child. Valconover observes that “the main moment of the event” is “given no particular importance”; “the two protagonists are banished to the left” as Christ’s face, as well as that of John the Baptist, are “immersed in the shadows” (63). There is something subversive, according to Hahn, about the way Tintoretto’s “expansiveness” flirts with “incoherence” (“Witness” 193); in the Baptism, as in many other paintings, “minor characters, architecture, landscape, weather and light, overstep the boundaries of subordinate, supporting roles” so that “ambiguity becomes an animating principle” (Hahn, “Witness” 194, 195).
James takes this decentering to the next level, using it to interrogate the coherence of the subject. In “The Jolly Corner,” Spencer Brydon, like James himself, returns home after many years absence seeking his “alter ego” in “a compartment of his mind never yet penetrated” (“JC” 699). His quest is literally enacted as Brydon spends each evening in his empty ancestral home to await this other self and bring him “at last to bay” (“JC” 729). But, enclosed in the top rooms of his “house,” Brydon finds himself trapped by his own vision, now terrified of the “erect confronting presence” (“JC” 701). Rapidly descending the stairs in an attempt to escape, he passes “rooms which gape like caverns,” entering “a watery underworld” which he likens to “the bottom of the sea” (“JC” 723), a womblike space where his own differentiation is threatened. Finally confronted with his alter ego, he denies the “awful beast” (who is symbolically castrated
two fingers on one hand have been reduced to stumps and he is blind): “He’s none of me, even as I might have been” (JC 730). However, “Brydon and his wraith,” as Donald Burleson suggests, “present us with aporia, with irresolvable oscillation and slippage and elusiveness” (15). Like Oedipus, he struggles to hold onto the original identity he has lost, but his own sight has been “ruined”: he can no longer successfully avert his gaze from the fading of the self. Standing in for the alienation that James himself traces upon his own return to New York, Brydon is forced to acknowledge the split in his identity that cannot be healed.

Trauma: Exposing the Shattered Subject

Winner observes that James’s “often tortuous, involuted, later style and Tintoretto’s twisted lines and tormented, restless forms reflect an unresolved tension in their efforts to reconcile physical and psychical existence” (91). Despite Tintoretto’s “theater of piety” (Rosand 139), his visual strategies call into question the central meaning of the story and implicitly the coherence of the subject. The “distortion of form” and “disruption of boundaries”; the “interplay of form and chaos, surface and depth, transparency and obscurity” (Jay 48); the “shifting perceptual world,” and “lack of absolutes” (Holly 109), visible in both James and Tintoretto, evoke the “great void in the middle” characteristic of baroque as well as postmodern vision wherein “the possibility of closure is always negated” (Holly 109).

Examining The Removal of the Body of St Mark, Hahn offers an incisive reading of the way Tintoretto embeds ambiguity into every facet of the scene. “A central meaning takes shape only to be questioned” (“Witness” 208). St Mark’s body occupies the right foreground of the canvas, but the “discolored sky,” the “eerie light,” the “wind-swirled moment before the storm,” and the “off balance attendants” set up an irresolvable tension between the main action—the
removal of the body—and the world in which it takes place. Hahn even compares the “pale figures vanishing off stage left” to “figments who may or may not be there like ghosts rising across the pond in *The Turn of the Screw*” (“Witness” 208).

A similar instability may be found in many scenes in James’ work, as individuals struggle to hold onto the worlds they have composed. The surreal deconstructive energy that competes with and challenges the sacred text in Tintoretto anticipates the tension in James’s late compositions as the intense will of Maggie, Milly, and Strether, their common desire to believe in the world they have created, is undermined. Towards the end of *The Golden Bowl*, Maggie silently studies “her father’s wife’s lover facing his mistress” (*GB* 486) during a game of bridge and imagines exposing Charlotte and Amerigo: “They might have been figures rehearsing some play of which she herself was the author. . . .Spacious and splendid, like a stage again awaiting a drama, it was a scene she might people, by the press of her spring, either with serenities and
dignities and decencies, or with terrors and shames and ruins” (GB 488). A “vibrating tension between surface and depth” (Nichols, Tintoretto 31) informs Maggie’s struggle as she reflects on her power to maintain or destroy this portrait of domestic harmony. If she chooses to remain silent, it is not without acknowledging the shattered truth of their lives. In both James and Tintoretto, such “vertiginous moments” (GB 486) are confrontations with the abyss of meaning that subtly asserts itself as we acknowledge that our compositions are always our fantasies.

In the two paintings that complete the cycle of events depicted in the Ground Hall of the Scuola di San Rocco, Saint Mary Magdalen and Saint Mary of Egypt in Meditation, Tintoretto distills his understanding of the individual’s intimate, personal relationship to the divine. Saint Mary of Egypt sits quietly with her book in a subdued monochromatic landscape that extends almost to infinity. Mary seems at peace, yet profoundly alone, separated from the houses in the distance that seem about to be absorbed into a luminous twilight. Fortini Brown notes that “the pulsating and kinetic effect of light” creates a “magical environment” that “is not quite of this world” (115). But, as Nichols observes, Tintoretto “goes so far as to put the status of the naturalistic landscape as a source of knowledge in doubt” and “the objective relation of figure and landscape is undone” (226). The isolation embodied in Mary’s solitude reminds us of Pascal’s wager, a choice founded on nothing but individual will, the only guarantee of permanence that created by the subjective consciousness of the participant—or viewer.
In his first masterpiece, *The Portrait of a Lady*, completed just a decade after his first exposure to Tintoretto, James articulates the dramatic power of this kind of isolation and longing. When Isabel Archer discovers the true nature of the choices she has made, she travels alone to the outskirts of Rome and envelops herself in a scene which is at once “sad” and “splendid”:

The carriage, passing out of the walls of Rome, rolled through narrow lanes, where the wild honeysuckle had begun to tangle itself in the hedges, or waited for her in quiet places where the fields lay near, while she strolled further and further over the flower-freckled turf, or sat on a stone that had once had a use, and gazed through the veil of her personal sadness at the splendid sadness of the scene—at the dense, warm light, the far gradations and soft confusions of color, the motionless shepherds in lonely attitudes, the hills where “the cloud-shadows had the lightness of a blush” [italics mine]. (557)
In its contemplative mood and its evocation of a perceiver who gazes into the “dense, warm light,” James’s composition is almost a duplicate of Tintoretto’s *Saint Mary of Egypt*. If the Roman hills offer Isabel solace, it is that of “companionship in endurance,” a place where she feels “the touch of a vanished world” (*PL* 557), that of her own lost dreams. The final inability, not only to control another, but to cohere, is a dominant theme in James’s late tales and may be read as his furthest attempt to confront individual human lack. At the end of “The Jolly Corner,” “The Beast in the Jungle” and “The Altar of the Dead,” James’s hero comes face to face with the beast he has sought: he discovers, in the words of Spencer Brydon, “the bared identity” that is “his” (“JC” 725). This moment in which the shattered self is exposed may constitute James’s final debt to Tintoretto. When we gaze at the paintings in the Scuola di San Rocco, James observes, “it is not immortality we breathe, but “conscious, reluctant mortality” (*IH* 22).

Did James see in Tintoretto, imbedded within the revelation of the miracle and its implicit comfort, a competing emphasis on the fading of the subject? One must ask because, borrowing from Ruskin’s analysis of Tintoretto, we see how James “penetrates” the “imagination” of *his* characters, exposing their final awareness that the miracle of the unified subject is a myth. (*IH* 22). Thus, James, too, gives us “the true nature of the thing represented,” but perversely, if you will, for in the late novels and tales, the promise of a realistic and coherent resolution, is shattered by what Lacan calls Das Ding, the Thing that is unknowable, impossible to imagine—the Thing that points to our fundamental lack—conscious, reluctant mortality. (*IH* 22).

As James implicitly calls into question the false comfort of traditional humanism, the belief in a definable, knowable self, echoing Tintoretto’s challenge to Renaissance harmony and stability, he explores the relationship between our visual representations, our fantasies—and the real basis of our desire—our longing for wholeness and completion. This longing, and its
impossibility, anticipated in Tintoretto and realized in James, underscores the intimate relationship between desire and mortality—the anamorphic blot that subtly inserts itself into every composition.\(^{11}\) In confronting the classical “real” and pushing that “real” to a place where it shatters its own boundaries, James, updating Tintoretto’s tumultuous vision, a vision that is both sincere and questioning, anticipates the postmodern “Real”—the place where language fails and characters, viewers, and readers, are forced to confront the void.\(^{12}\)

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1 Henceforth *Letters*.

2 James comments that Tintoretto becomes “an immense perpetual moral presence, brooding over the scene and worrying the mind into some species of response and acknowledgement” (*Letters* 59).

3 An “event” for Badiou is something that “compels the subject to invent a new way of being” (*Manifesto* 42).

4 Consider the architectural stages of Strether’s movement into Madame de Vionnet’s home in as he passes into “the court . . . large and open, full of revelations,” and constructs a meaning that will fulfill his own need and his lack: that of “the ancient Paris he was always looking for—sometimes intensely felt, sometimes more acutely missed” (AMB 235).


6 Henceforth *Concepts*.

7 Newton refers to this technique as “the system of the whirlpool, in which all the main elements seem to be held in tension round the circumference of an implied circle, as though thrust outwards by centrifugal force” (84).

8 I have deliberately used the 1880 version of *The Portrait*; however, the only change in this passage James made in the New York Edition was “leaving the walls of Rome behind” instead of “passing out of the walls of Rome.”

9 Ruskin attributes to Tintoretto the power of “Imagination Penetrative”: “The power of every picture depends on the penetration of the imagination into the true nature of the thing represented. . .” (*Modern Painters* 4:28; qtd in Nichols and Hadley 295).
Lacan explains that “das Ding” “is attached to whatever is open, lacking, or gaping at the center of our desire” and he claims that “all art is characterized by a certain mode of organization around this emptiness” (The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 84, 130).

For an analysis of the function of the anamorphic blot in art, see Lacan’s discussion of Holbein’s Ambassadors (Concepts 92).

The “Real” for Lacan is that which is beyond the image, beyond the symbolic: it is that which is outside language and inassimilable to symbolization (Freud’s Papers 66); it is, therefore, “the “stain, the spot,” the place where we witness our disappearance (Concepts 97).

Works Cited


