4 Henry James: Refusing the Limit

As Henry James, in his work on the New York Edition, once again looked over the manuscript of Roderick Hudson after an interval of many years, he began vividly to recall the emotions that had attended its composition. Though he was now the acknowledged master of both novel and short story, James could not but acknowledge the mixture of trepidation and daring with which he had originally embarked on this his first considerable enterprise and, retrospectively, the first that he was prepared to recognise as his own. This tale of a young American artist was a reckless and presumptuous, if necessary, venture in which the lineaments of the brash and opinionated hero offered a definite clue to the many and various moods of his creator also. Though far less daunting to the reader, Roderick Hudson was James’s Mardi, an exploratory journey into unchartered waters, an essay in artistic self-definition:

Roderick Hudson was my first attempt at a novel, a long fiction with a ‘complicated’ subject, and I recall again the quite uplifted sense with which my idea, such as it was, permitted me at last to put quite out to sea. I had but hugged the shore on sundry previous small occasions; bumping about, to acquire skill, in the shallow waters and sandy coves of the ‘short story’ and master as yet of no other vessel constructed to carry a sail. The subject of Roderick figured to me vividly this employment of canvas, and I have not forgotten, even after long years, how the blue southern sea seemed to spread immediately before me and the breath of the spice-islands to be already in the breeze.

(The Art of the Novel, p. 4)

Though the mature artist still feels affection and even respect for the fledgling work he is nevertheless conscious of a certain hubris
mingled with incapacity, reflected in his use of such words as 'reckless' and 'rash'.

If there is one fault that James particularly fastens on, it is the lack of sufficient development either in the plot or in the character of the hero – everything 'moves too fast' (p. 12). In fact James retrospectively discerned in his first novel the problem that he was to encounter in his more substantial works: the fact that, for all their length, they seemed to possess a beginning and an end, without having anything very substantial in the way of a middle. James felt that Roderick's rapid disintegration in Europe, after venturing there with such high hopes – and, indeed, after following up with such signal achievements – was such as to place him 'Beyond our understanding and our sympathy' (ibid.). Roderick seems contradictory since his collapse seems to render nugatory the high talent attributed to him in the first place. In presenting his hero as a man oscillating wildly between extremes, James seems to have created a hero so paradoxical as to be beyond even his own powers of explanation. James remarks,

We conceive going to pieces – nothing is easier, since we see people do it, one way or another, all round us; but this young man must either have had less of the principle of development to have had so much of the principle of collapse, or less of the principle of collapse to have so much of the principle of development. (p. 13)

So Roderick's character seems not merely excessive but inexplicable as well.

In his latter-day Preface, James concedes that certain aspects of his theme may nevertheless have escaped him with the passage of time, despite all his endeavours to restore it to its pristine freshness:

I have felt myself then, on looking over past productions, the painter making use again and again of the tentative wet sponge. The sunk surface has here and there, beyond doubt, refused to respond: the buried secrets, the intentions are buried too deep to rise again, and were indeed, it would appear, not much worth the burying. (p. 11)

But in so saying it seems to me that James is being too severe on his earlier creation and perhaps insufficiently ready to acknowledge