We begin our study with Henry James because James is the first figure whom we can isolate as a major source of the way we have read and taught fiction in England and America for the past fifty years. We can trace back to Henry James the dilemma of Anglo-American novel criticism: how to focus on technique without sacrificing subject matter. Much of the novel criticism of this century has been trying to resolve these two factors into an aesthetic. Given that novels seem to create imagined worlds with distinct time, space, and causality that mime that of the real world, it seems as if subject matter ought not be ignored. But given that novels are, like other literary forms, works of art composed of words, we cannot ignore technique. As we shall see in the ensuing pages, most ‘formal’ critics of the novel do not neglect content in determining meaning; nevertheless, focus on one always seems to be at the expense of the other.

When in his recent book, *Fiction and Repetition*, J. Hillis Miller speaks of repetition, he is speaking of the same dilemma. What he calls ‘Platonic’ repetition underlies the concept of true-to-life; as he puts it, ‘The validity of the mimetic copy is established by its truth of correspondence to what it copies.’ Hillis Miller’s ‘other, Nietzschean mode’ is one in which ‘Each thing . . . is unique, intrinsically different from every other thing’ and exists ‘on the same plane’. This tradition enjoys art for its own sake, ‘without reference to some paradigm or archetype’, and feels that discussion of differences and similarities in technique is interesting in itself.¹

In the following pages, without making any claims to completion, I
shall briefly sketch the major ideas of James. The stature of James’s novel criticism surely depends upon James’s stature as a novelist. As Sarah B. Daugherty notes, ‘James’s Prefaces, though they have been rigidly interpreted by Percy Lubbock and others, constitute his presentation of his own case, not a set of formulae to be applied to the works of other novelists.’

We should remember that his discussion of method and theory is shaped by his own experience of writing novels and, in the case of the Prefaces, in response to his memory of his own novels. Still, his writing about the aesthetic of the novel provided an example for discussing the art of the novel, particularly point of view, and for the humanistic perspective that has dominated Anglo-American formal criticism of the novel. While James looks forward to concern with form and technique, he provided continuity with the high seriousness of Arnold who argued for the central place of criticism and defined it as a disinterested act of mind. As Daugherty has shown, James accepts Arnold’s definition of criticism – ‘to know the best that is known and thought in the world’: ‘For him, the literary critic was not the narrow formalist, but rather the cultural, social, and moral critic;’ James wished, like Arnold, ‘to remain aloof from the vulgar herd, to observe the world from an intellectual height, to see life steadily and see it whole.’

According to Wimsatt and Brooks, James and Flaubert ‘display, in reaction against romantic inspiritionalism, a concern for craftsmanship, and a stress upon form as opposed to the exploitation of privileged “poetic” materials’. But James’s focus on art was in part a reaction to naturalism which focused on heredity and environment in shaping human character and on the drab life of the lower-middle and lower classes. That art controls life and that form discovers the moral significance of theme are part of the New Critical credo for which James has been regarded as a source. Wimsatt and Brooks iterate an orthodoxy of New Criticism when they remark: ‘[T]he general principle governing the relation of individual word to the total work is not changed simply because these are poems and not novels.’ For them James is a spokesman in defence of this position when he writes: ‘A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts’ (‘The Art of Fiction’, M, p. 36). By stressing the relationship between form and content in his criticism and by creating works that required the most attentive and intense kind of reading, James provides a precedent for the view articulated by Mark Schorer that technique discovers the