

“Crapy Cornelia”: James’s Self-Vindication?

W. R. MARTIN AND WARREN U. OBER

IN “Crapy Cornelia,” one of his last stories — it appeared in *Harper’s Magazine* for October 1909 — James establishes the image of the dance, and supports it with the image of the “fire,” to present the nature of communication in a highly cultivated and intimate personal relationship. We believe it is natural — and probably intended — that the reader should find in this image a metaphor for the relation between a writer — particularly James — and his reader. Here is the dance image:

As soon as [“crapy” Cornelia Rasch] had begun to talk of Mrs Worthingham — *he* [White-Mason] didn’t begin it! — they had taken their place bravely in the centre of the circle. There they made, the while, their considerable little figure, but all within the ring formed by fifty other allusions, fitful but really intenser irruptions that hovered and wavered and came and went, joining hands at moments and whirling round as in chorus, only then again to dash at the slightly huddled centre with a free twitch or peck or push or other taken liberty, after the fashion of irregular frolic motions in a country dance or a Christmas game.¹

This dance requires first a happy atmosphere, or at least a community of interest and reference, and it proceeds through various stages. A stage that is given emphasis in the image, and fully illustrated in the story itself, is that of hovering, wavering, coming-and-going and whirling, all of which are preliminaries to the dash, the “taken liberty” that brings the consummation in discovery and truth.

We learn in the second paragraph of the story that there has been a failure of communication between the 48-year-old White-Mason and the more youthful Mrs. Worthingham on a delicate, intimate matter of the utmost importance to both: we hear that when he planned to propose marriage to her he found

she had other "irritating and persistent" Sunday afternoon guests who had "so stupidly, so wantonly stuck!" It is of course true that White-Mason and Mrs. Worthingham "hadn't, up to now, quite begun to cultivate the appointment or assignation founded on explicit sacrifices" (p. 336), but White-Mason assumes there is a tacit understanding between them; he is to realize before the end, however, that she "hasn't a glimmer of a suspicion" (p. 367) that he has marriage in mind.

The failure of communication with Mrs. Worthingham points to the centre of the story, which hasn't got very far before we see that it is just as well that White-Mason doesn't marry her. She does not belong to the old New York of White-Mason's past, and her taste, tending to garish rococo and "Louis Quinze" (p. 351) as well as to friendships that dismay him — "What friends she had" (p. 336) — is of a tone altogether different from White-Mason's. No close association or intimacy is possible between them because her style, quite without any hovering, wavering or circling, is baldly direct; even if she had the equipment in intelligence and sensibility, she would not take the time to pick up his vibrations.

Between White-Mason and Cornelia it is quite another matter: she grew up in the old New York and, like White-Mason, she is a creature of its ethos. They share the same experiences and culture, and therefore speak the same language; together they can perform the evolutions of the dance that brings them to intimacy and truth. Cornelia's style is subtler and more effective than Mrs. Worthingham's, and, at least in the initial phases of a conversation, she tends to the indirect, oblique, elaborate, euphemistic, and even aerial, but only in order to bring about "the thud, not to say the felt violent shock, of [the] fall to earth" (p. 344). Paradoxically Cornelia seems to cultivate, in contrast a plain style in her appurtenances: her clothes, as her nickname suggests, are even drab — she has a "frumpy, crapy, curiously exotic hat" (p. 346) — her identity is "perfectly plain" (p. 344), and her "little old Twelfth-Street table . . . piously preserved the plain mahogany circle, with never a curl nor a crook nor a hint of a brazen flourish" (p. 360). It is a matching paradox that Mrs. Worthingham, whose speech is marked, as

we've seen, by plainness of a sort, has "rings and brooches and bangles and other gewgaws, to curl and spasmodically cluster as in emulation of her charming complicated yellow tresses, to surround the most animated of pink-and-white, of ruffled and ribboned, of frilled and festooned Dresden china shepherdeses with exactly the right system of rococo curves and convolutions and other flourishes, a perfect bower of painted and gilded and moulded conceits" (p. 340). Indeed, "frills" and their like become a minor motif in the story; we meet them in the first paragraph, in "the frilled and puckered and ribboned garb of the little girls" (p. 335) in Central Park. The frills become a sign and symbol of the terrible present, which is so different from the past that is lovingly remembered by White-Mason.

In spite of her frills and bangles, Mrs. Worthingham can pick up only the simplest and crudest of signals, and this is what makes the word "explicit" (already quoted from the second paragraph) resound with some persistence in the story. When White-Mason, alone in the twilight, "seemed . . . to catch, to seize . . . by their vaguely-whisked tails" some facts "that hovered and circled, that verily brushed his nose, in spite of their shyness," he realized that, after Cornelia had left Mrs. Worthingham's, "he had practically just sat on with his 'mistress' — heaven save the mark! — as if *not* to come to the point; as if it had absolutely come up that there would be something rather vulgar and awful in doing so" (p. 350); the atmosphere that seems to impose itself in Mrs. Worthingham's ambit appears positively to prevent communication. But with Cornelia,

the point was only that for everything they spoke of after he had fairly begun to lean back and stretch his legs, and after she had let him, above all, light the first of a succession of cigarettes — for everything they spoke of he positively cultivated extravagance and excess, piling up the crackling twigs as on the very altar of memory; and that by the end of half an hour she had lent herself, all gallantly, to their game. It was the game of feeding the beautiful iridescent flame, ruddy and green and gold, blue and pink and amber and silver, with anything they could pick up, anything that would burn and flicker. (p. 356)

The fire provides an image to match that of the dance — it dominates the last paragraph of the story — and it too can be

applied to James's late style and method. Both the dance and the fire images suggest how ideas and feelings pass between White-Mason and Cornelia, and how much more fully and subtly than by "the comparatively clumsy method of sound and statement" (p. 357).

White-Mason has been refused by at least three women before this, but his "self-respect . . . hadn't in the least suffered," presumably because there was a full understanding between him and the women: one gathers this from the good-humoured tone with which they refused him — with "the frank confession that he didn't somehow, charming as he was, cause himself to be superstitiously believed in" (p. 337). Their style adumbrates Cornelia's; she is able to say "just the right thing, the thing she could make so clearly a jest" (p. 345). "Candour" becomes prominent in the story, and we have to distinguish between the controlled and effectual candour of White-Mason and Cornelia (pp. 337, 363, 367) and the candour with which Mrs. Worthingham and her possessions proclaim her bad taste without her being aware of the disclosure (pp. 338, 347).

Though frankness is the only virtue that Mrs. Worthingham's speech would seem at all able to claim, it falls far short of any fullness of meaning because her style of speech is flat, bald, and perfunctorily explicit. Her general style only seems to belie her style of speech, for everything about her — her "rings and brooches and bangles and other gewgaws" — is surface, blindly polished, but without depth. It "had that gloss of new money, that glare of a piece fresh from the mint and ringing for the first time on any counter, which seems to claim for it . . . something more than the 'face' value" (p. 338); similarly, in the next paragraph, White-Mason feels "the general shining immediacy . . . the still unshushed clamour. . . . Every particular expensive object [is] shrieking at him." Mrs. Worthingham's blatancy gives rise to the jocular image, well sustained throughout the story, of the "goggles" (p. 339) White-Mason feels he needs to protect himself against the "glare" that she creates — glare that offers none of the comfort and warmth, and encourages none of the glow and intimacy that goes with the "fire" in Cornelia's room. Without goggles, White-Mason is constantly

constrained to "scowl" in Mrs. Worthingham's company (pp. 339, 360, 364, 367); he prefers "a rich gloom" (p. 339) to these "excesses of light" (p. 340), and it seems that the whiteness in his name needs to be balanced by the "crapy" darkness of Cornelia.

Mrs. Worthingham's allure is in her "gemmed hand . . . flashing . . . in addition to those other things the perfect polish of the prettiest pink finger-nails in the world" (p. 343), while Cornelia's "prettiness" was "always unaccountable" and "used to peep so . . . from behind indefensible features" (p. 346). Constantly one senses intended analogies between such things as appearance and behaviour on the one hand, and on the other such matters as literary style.

White-Mason's second attempt to propose to Mrs. Worthingham ends in another "queer miscarriage" (p. 346) — the term itself perhaps pointing to the unnaturalness of this mismatching. Just as he hesitates in the matter of proposing, so does he on the question of whether or not to attend the departing Cornelia to Mrs. Worthingham's door: he "danced to and fro in the room." The dance image is, as we have seen, central to the story, but this is not the "whirling" dance that he performs with Cornelia: here it is a movement of uncertainty as he is, as it were, caught between the two very different women, and his bewilderment affords Mrs. Worthingham, in the unfeeling "candour" of her egotism, mere amusement and "recreation," because her "pampered confidence" left "not a grain of provision . . . to mere manners" (pp. 347-48).

In contrast to this, in White-Mason's old New York, "the best kindness had mostly been some art of . . . concealing" rather than "insisting" on one's "luxurious differences" (p. 348); this was "for common humanity," and in the same way "rudimentary discretion" prevented people of that society from going "behind" any of the affairs or circumstances of individuals like Mrs. Worthingham. Habits of consideration, born of a civilized sympathy, often require circumspection and the balm of euphemism, and an avoidance of specification and explicitness, rather than the flat unadorned statement of plain or gross facts. Thus we are shown the temper of White-Mason's mind and the

index of his cultivation when we are told that he would never ask "about that obscure agent of his mistress's actual affluence or about the happy headspring itself, and the apparently copious tributaries, of the golden stream" (p. 349); he treats the potentially embarrassing topic in fanciful metaphor and with amusingly oblique allusion and irony, which are the signs of a sort of tact and good manners. These modes belong especially to the phase of the preliminaries in the dance. An expression such as "the sources of the late Mr. Worthingham's wealth" would have been, in comparison, banal, and even gross. It is not always meritorious to call a spade a spade; oblique euphemisms may have a delicacy, and also a moral content of kindness and consideration.

We are not given much of what Mrs. Worthingham says, perhaps because, being flat, it is not memorable. Hence her longest speech — longest by far — is worth some attention; it is in fact a notable manifestation of her style, manner, and nature, and comes after she and White-Mason have had the surprise of finding that they both know Cornelia Rasch: " 'I never dreamed you knew her,' and 'I never dreamed *you* did,' was inevitably what had been exchanged between them," and this may be taken as a sample of the commonplace substance and platitudinous form of their conversation. We are told that this exchange was "supplemented by Mrs. Worthingham's mere scrap of an explanation":

"Oh, yes — to the small extent you see. Two years ago in Switzerland when I was at a high place for an 'aftercure,' during twenty days of incessant rain, she was the only person in an hotel of roaring, gorging, smoking Germans with whom I couldn't have a word of talk. She and I were the only speakers of English, and were thrown together like castaways on a desert island and in a raging storm. She was ill besides, and she had no maid, and mine looked after her, and she was very grateful — writing to me later on and saying she should certainly come to see me if she ever returned to New York. She *has* returned, you see — and there she was, poor little creature!" Such was Mrs Worthingham's tribute — to which even his asking her if Miss Rasch had ever happened to speak of him caused her practically to add nothing. Visibly she had never thought again of anyone Miss Rasch had spoken of or anything Miss Rasch had said. (p. 351)

Passing over the irony that Mrs. Worthingham would have had precious little real talk even if the German guests had had a

fluent command of English, one notices that she meanly and snobbishly disclaims any close or natural friendship with Cornelia, that she patronises her and complacently records her gratitude; but perhaps even more important than this is the perfunctory tone of Mrs. Worthingham's "explanation": it is cliché-ridden, it depends on conventional hyperboles, and the flaccid, invertebrate sentences roll on over "and" after "and." The vulgarity of the sentiment and the banality of the tone are matched by the perfunctory flatness and directness with which the information is presented. We are at a great remove from the delicacy and discrimination that go towards creating the kind of art that, as James said in a letter of 10 July 1915 to H. G. Wells, "makes life, makes interest, makes importance"²; Mrs. Worthingham's speech is the product of the same sensibility that allowed her to be so rude — apparently unconsciously so — to Cornelia when White-Mason arrived.

It is significant that it is through a minor social observance of "the good old New York fashion" (p. 353), which was fit to convey nuances of meaning and shades of distinction by indirect and unobtrusive means — the old custom of leaving visiting cards — that White-Mason manages discreetly to resume his relationship with Cornelia without having to compromise either his old friend or himself by applying to Mrs. Worthingham. Cornelia leaves such a card "on one of the rococo tables of Mrs Worthingham's hall" (p. 353). It is perhaps not altogether coincidental that Cornelia bears the name of the famous mother of the Gracchi, a woman who represented the best in the ancient Roman tradition.

The figure of the whirling dance presents the image of ideal collaborative intimacy and communication, but the story also gives us the parodic form: White-Mason "could see [Mrs. Worthingham], for all her Dresden-china shoes and her flutter of wondrous befrilled contemporary skirts, skip by the side of the coming age as over the floor of a ball-room, keeping step with its monstrous stride and prepared for every figure of the dance" (p. 342). White-Mason sees it as a grotesque, inept solo performance.

Immediately after the description of the contrasting, ideal *pas de deux*, we are given an example of its application — perhaps of the “joining hands at moments” — when Cornelia comes out with, “‘You’re so in love with her and want to marry her!’” The preliminary circling in an elaborate pattern of arcs and tangents has prepared the atmospheric setting and established the confidence necessary for this challenge. What follows this may also be seen as exemplary. “When he had asked how she knew” he wanted to marry Mrs. Worthingham, she replies, “‘Ah, how but from the dear lovely thing herself?’” (p. 358). Her sentence is really a statement, though thinly disguised as a question, and it is moreover somewhat disingenuous in more ways than one, but her ultimate aim is not to mislead: she has, as it were, moved back from a phase of meeting, or joining of hands, to another phase of hovering and wavering, which is preliminary to a dash at the centre. To change the metaphor from the field of love and gallantry to the adjacent field of war, her question is a sort of reconnaissance before another swoop or pounce.

Part V of “Crapy Cornelia” is an extended demonstration of the style and method of conversation practised by White-Mason and Cornelia, and in this we see the figure of the dance and its culmination. It begins with White-Mason’s praise of Cornelia’s “beautiful things,” which provokes her retort: “‘Oh, don’t talk so — after Mrs. Worthingham’s’”; here we have her whirling circumambulation of the topic, a preliminary to a movement in which they together seize on, and agree in, the truth that Mrs. Worthingham’s things are in fact “awful.” After another turn or so, Cornelia arrives at an uncomfortable truth that White-Mason hadn’t “by this time found out” in all his dealings with Mrs. Worthingham: “‘Then no wonder such a creature as that,’ she lightly moralized, ‘won’t suit you!’” This discovery has been quite beyond the reach of the direct, explicit method, and has been arrived at by way of indirection and banter; it leads in turn to the “straight challenge”: “‘You mean you don’t expect to come to an understanding with her?’” (pp. 360-61).

Now White-Mason and Cornelia are speaking with intimacy and true candour, understanding and insight, though we notice

that she is ahead of him, leading him in the dance. Her probing incidentally uncovers the deficiency in Mrs. Worthingham that is crucial in the story: "If you haven't really put it to her [explicitly and crudely] I don't suppose she knows [that White-Mason intends to propose marriage]" (p. 362). By now White-Mason realizes that Mrs. Worthingham belongs to a different world: "She doesn't know anything that *we* know," he says; and the understanding between him and Cornelia is now complete enough for her to ask: "Do you mean you want to marry *me*?" (pp. 362-63). There may be a touch of irony, certainly of surprise, in her question, but there is also a "candour" between them that in White-Mason is described as "ripe," and the urgency of her earnestness appears when she puts the question a second time more straightforwardly. White-Mason can reply as distinctly as the three women who'd refused him, and with their good-humour too — with a "mild, kind, considering head-shake. 'No, Cornelia — not to *marry* you'" (p. 363). Here we see the achievement, without bitterness or rancour, of a truth reached by means of a sudden dash or swoop or pounce "or peck or push or other taken liberty," which followed the "joining hands at moments and whirling," which in turn was made possible by the hovering and wavering that preceded it.

In the image of the dance and in the passages between White-Mason and Cornelia, James has provided us with both the theory and the practical application, the vehicle and the tenor, the image and the fact, and we believe we can see in this a meditated apology for his late style and method, for the process by which he circles, surveys, and keeps at a thoughtful or ironic distance from his topic and his reader, establishing with both a relation through which he can suddenly, and therefore all the more effectually, seize on the truth and display it so that it strikes us with a force sometimes like that of a revelation, either comic or tragic.

We can observe the pattern of the dance that pervades James's late style by taking a drop from the ocean and examining it in "Crapy Cornelia" itself. The following sentence comes from the page-long paragraph that opens Part II and describes

Mrs. Worthingham, her premises, and White-Mason's arrival in them:

The second ground of this immediate impression of scenic extravagance, almost as if the curtain rose for him to the first act of some small and expensively mounted comic opera, was that she hadn't, after all, awaited him in fond singleness, but had again just a trifle inconsiderately exposed him to the drawback of having to reckon, for whatever design he might amiably entertain, with the presence of a third and quite superfluous person, a small black insignificant but none the less oppressive stranger. (p. 340)

It would not be difficult to find longer and more elaborate sentences in which the irony is more rarefied and the hovering and wavering more marked, but this sentence will serve as being typical, and it is, even so, long and elaborate enough, we suspect, for James's critics to argue that some of the flourishes of the first half-dozen lines could be dispensed with: the fairly long and circumstantial simile involving "comic opera," the mock solemnity ("in fond singleness"), the ironically understated qualification ("just a trifle inconsiderately"), the jocularly expansive fancy ("for whatever design he might amiably entertain"), and what one might loosely call tonal transitions (the "almost" before the simile, and "after all"). But this hovering prepares for, and sets off, the effective emphasis — the "thud" or pounce — of the last line: "a small black insignificant but none the less oppressive stranger." This line has its own distinctive movement, reining itself in to a poise, and then releasing its energy in a sudden rush to a beautifully timed climax that fastens our attention on the eponymous heroine on her first appearance in the story. If this is the sort of passage that James's friend H. G. Wells had in mind when he hurtfully wrote of James that "his vast paragraphs sweat and struggle. . . . And all for tales of nothingness. . . . It is leviathan retrieving pebbles,"³ or Leon Edel when, in his Introduction to the volume of the *Complete Tales* in which "Crapy Cornelia" appears, he says that the last tales suffer from "an excess of style and decoration" (p. 11), then all one can say is that they are missing the delicacy of the irony, the fineness of texture, and the important, subtle, functional effects in James's prose. This same para-

graph at the beginning of Part II ends with the statement that Mrs. Worthingham "appeared to be no more moved to mention and account for [Cornelia] than she might have been to 'present' — whether as stretched at her feet or erect upon disciplined haunches — some shaggy old domesticated terrier or poodle" (p. 341). The exposure of Mrs. Worthingham is all the more telling for its elaborate light irony, the sustained amusement of the treatment, which is like the protracted teasing by a cat of a mouse that is held up fastidiously for ridicule at the final pounce. James's sentences need the hoverings in their beginnings, the joining hands and whirling in their middles, in order to achieve the full effect of the final dash towards truth in their endings.

Constantly in the last Part of "Crapy Cornelia," in which we see the culmination of the dance, the narrative suggests how much Cornelia and White-Mason are expressing, how much is passing between them in looks, gestures, movements, pauses and abstentions from movement, and by other means available in the language of the body, and in the language of the dance. Thus White-Mason "resumed his circuit" (p. 362), "turned off afresh" and "had come to her aid after another turn" (p. 363). Part V has a much larger proportion of dialogue than the other Parts of the story, and the dialogue is thus explicitly as well as implicitly presented as an exquisitely controlled dance, the evolutions of which move towards a revelation of truth in a final tableau, and this is achieved when White-Mason joins Cornelia by dropping "into the other chair by her fire" in the last paragraph (p. 367) of the story: "And in spite of the considerable glow there of her little household altar" — in contrast to the "glare" (p. 338) and "blinding light" (p. 339) associated with Mrs. Worthingham — he can, remembering Cornelia's joke about their being "high game" (p. 366), accept without scowling the truth that he is "old." At this moment, when White-Mason's position coincides with Cornelia's at the end of the story, the reader might be aware of a feature of James's narrative strategy that Quentin Anderson has commented on and which bears some resemblance to the features of the dance and to the structure of a Jamesian sentence: "He [James] is always aware of the

arc which separates the reader and himself as both view the situation in the story or novel. He seeks to diminish that arc, so that the end of the story takes place at the moment when your position coincides with his."⁴

Shortly before the end of the story White-Mason and Cornelia "exchange" carte-de-visite photographs of their erstwhile mutual friend Mary Cardew (p. 366); in doing this they enact their mutuality, their ability to share, their intimacy, which is so full and satisfying for White-Mason that he not only does not want to marry Mrs. Worthingham, but — by a final twist of typically Jamesian irony — he now does not need to marry Cornelia either; if he can sit beside her and before her fire he will not need the explicit, publicly-stated and, as it were, material tie. In this James conveys the degree of moral, intellectual and imaginative sympathy that can be established between an author such as himself and a reader who is attuned to the nuances of his voice and sensitive to the allusions that have roots in the ethos they share.

NOTES

- ¹*The Complete Tales of Henry James*, Vol. XII, 1903-1910, ed. Leon Edel (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1964), p. 358. Further page references to this volume will be given in parentheses in the text.
- ²*The Letters of Henry James*, Vol. II, ed. Percy Lubbock (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), p. 490.
- ³*Boon, The Mind of the Race, The Wild Asses of the Devil, and The Last Trump* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1915), p. 108.
- ⁴Introduction, *Henry James: Selected Short Stories*, rev. ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1957), pp. vi-vii.