

# *Dantesque Patterns in Henry James's* *"A Round of Visits"*

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“**A**ROUND of Visits” was James’s last tale, but it is, we believe, not merely superstitious regard for final utterances of the famous that has led us to suspect that there are larger meanings shadowed here than have been noticed. What is one to make, for instance, of the parallels to, or echoes of, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, especially the *Inferno*, in the story? Can such a cluster be merely coincidental? And, if it is agreed that the parallels are intended, how are we to interpret the differences given such high relief by the similarities? But first the similarities, which involve title, setting, chronology, language, and characters.

The city of New York itself, with its zoo-like, multi-level hotels and its frozen streets, is, we suggest, James’s version of Dante’s Hell. When we encounter James’s protagonist, Mark Monteith, we find him alone in a New York City smothered by a “great white savage” and “blinding” blizzard. Attacked by the epidemic gripe, Mark suffers more from the reported peculation of his financial agent, his cousin and trusted friend, than he does from his illness. “Within his high cage” in the Hotel Pocahontas, which “made all about him, beside, behind, below, above, in blocks and tiers and superpositions, a sufficient defensive hugeness,” Mark “circled and prowled.” When he looks down on the frozen New York streets “from his tenth story,” it strikes us that Mark is in the topmost of the ten divisions of Dante’s *Inferno* and looking out over a microcosm of it, seeing, through “the rage of the elements,” the bottom Circle of Hell, the vast frozen lake of Cocytus. Wearing by “the ugliness, the bitterness, and . . . the sinister strangeness” of his intolerable sense of betrayal, he compares it to “some horrid alien thing, some violent, scared, unhappy crea-

ture": "a young jibbering ape . . . or an ominous infant panther."<sup>1</sup> Later, "as he thread[s] the labyrinth" to begin his round of visits, he encounters, in the "tropical forest" of the hotel, "vociferous . . . creatures, of every variety of size and hue. . . . The fauna and flora startled him alike, and among them his bruised spirit drew in and folded its wings" (p. 431). Escaping the hotel — at once prison, jungle, and zoo — Mark, "outside in the intensity of the cold," experiences "a jump from the Tropics to the Pole" (p. 437). Before finally arriving at his destination, the apartment of his miraculously transformed old friend, Newton Winch, he is stopped "by a passage . . . of a choked trolley-car that howled, as he paused for it, beneath the weight of its human accretions" (p. 442). By now the hothouse hotels harbouring strange creatures, the icy streets, and the packed humanity in the street car (New York's version of Charon's ferry?) have contributed to a sinister unity of impression: the New York of James's story (with the word *round* in its title) is James's image of Dante's Circles of Hell.

That James's *Inferno* bears a close relationship to Dante's is borne out not only by the tale's locale and title but by its chronology as well. Mark is psychologically and physically at his nadir in his hotel on "that worse Thursday" in March (Maundy Thursday?) when he finds it necessary to send for the hotel doctor. On Sunday he finally braves the wintry streets on his round of visits, presumably spending the late afternoon and early evening of that Sunday in March (Easter Sunday?) in Newton Winch's apartment. Dante, we recall, is lost in the Dark Wood of Sin and Error on Maundy Thursday night, enters Hell in the company of Virgil on Good Friday evening, reaches the bottom Circle of the *Inferno* in the centre of the earth on Holy Saturday evening, and then climbs through the tunnel to the earth's surface at the base of Mount Purgatory on the other side, arriving there at sunrise on Easter Sunday — that is to say, sunset on Easter Sunday in the Northern Hemisphere, where he entered. The period of Dante's descent into Hell, then, coincides with that of Christ's burial, when, according to the Apocryphal account — and Dante — Christ descended into Hell and freed the souls of the Old Testament prophets and patriarchs from Limbo.<sup>2</sup> Hence

the time scheme of Mark Monteith's round of visits forcibly reminds us not only of Dante's descent into Hell but of Christ's as well.

James seems to have simple fun with ironic echoes in the language spoken in his *Inferno* as he sprinkles it with oaths not common elsewhere in his work: "Poor devil," Mark muses about himself after his depressing interviews with his old friends (p. 441). "How the deuce . . . had charm . . . 'squared' the other old elements?" Mark wonders when he meets his old acquaintance, the metamorphosed Newton Winch (p. 445). "Then you take me for a damned fool?" Winch says lightly before we learn of his agony of spirit (p. 447). "How the devil can you *not* feel knocked?" Winch exclaims to Mark over Mark's supposed betrayal at the hands of his agent, Phil Bloodgood (p. 449). "Brutes and hogs never live, I guess, in the sort of hell in which he now must be," Mark says to Winch in pleading Phil's case (p. 450). These oaths, strikingly uncommon in James's fictional world, are "natural" in Hell.

More serious and telling than Mark's and Newton's infernal profanity, however, is the egotism which insulates the characters that Mark meets in his early rounds: their total lack of interest in others' misfortunes. On leaving his room Mark encounters the first of his old acquaintances, Mrs. Folllott. One of the fauna of the Hotel Pocahontas (which, with perverse ingenuity, both exploits in its name the innocence associated with the New World's Indian princess and flaunts in its architecture the "Du Barry" decadence of the Old World), Mrs. Folllott (Folly?) "would herself have tumbled on a cloud, very passably, in a fleshy Boucher manner" (p. 432). Since Mark's second hostess on his round, Mrs. Ash, identifies Mrs. Folllott as "one of a regular 'bevvy'" of Mr. Ash's women (p. 439), we feel that we may properly place Mrs. Folllott among the damned souls in the First Circle of Dante's Circles of Incontinence, that of the Lustful. Mark, before finally visiting Newton Winch, decides to accept the invitation of Mrs. Ash, whose former address in Paris's Rue de Marignan he recalls with wistful nostalgia from his days at the *École des Beaux-Arts*. The Rue de Marignan, which James mentions by name four times in the tale, is a short, block-long street

off the Avenue de Champs-Élysées. In seeking out Mrs. Ash, Mark is trying vainly to recapture those paradisiacal times in the Elysian Fields, moments spent with a once sympathetic Mrs. Ash, who, locked in the prison of self, is now numbered among the damned. We might even say that her selfishness has consumed her to an ash, as one of Dante's damned souls is reduced to ashes by the bite of a serpent (XXIV, 97-105). James, incidentally, has given Mrs. Ash as a first name the very name of Dante's native city, which he memorializes with scathing irony in the *Inferno*:

Florence, rejoice, because thy soaring fame  
 Beats its broad wings across both land and sea,  
 And all the deep of Hell rings with thy name!  
 (XXVI, 1-3)

In contrast to Mark's depressing visits with Mrs. Folllott and Mrs. Ash are his contacts with two vastly different characters, both unnamed: the hotel doctor and the pretty girl. Just as Dante in the Dark Wood encounters Virgil, "the image of Human Wisdom — the best that man can become in his own strength without the especial grace of God,"<sup>3</sup> so Mark during his dark night of the soul ("that worse Thursday") is visited by the hotel doctor, who makes light of his physical ills and shrewdly tells him "that he was, much rather, 'blue' enough, and from causes doubtless known to himself — which didn't come to the same thing; but he 'gave him something,' prescribed him warmth and quiet and broth and courage, and came back the next day [Good Friday?] to readminister this last dose" (p. 428). James describes the doctor as a "good man," cheerful and conscientious, whose "simple philosophy," limited though it may be (p. 429), plucks Mark from his sick bed and puts him on his feet. The doctor, we are tempted to conclude, corresponds to Virgil in Dante's *Inferno*.

Just as the common sense of the doctor jars Mark out of his physical torpor, so the "pretty girl" whom he meets at Mrs. Folllott's otherwise deadly luncheon proves to be the agent of his spiritual regeneration when he finally heeds her persistent urgings to call on Newton Winch. Even before he decides to include Newton on his round, Mark bids her farewell with the impulsive

assurance that he is glad to be back in New York — "since it was to see *you!*" "He liked the pretty girl, with her straight attack and her free awkwardness — also with her difference from the others through something of a sense and a distinction given her by so clearly having Newton on her mind" (p. 436). The pretty girl reminds us of the Beatrice of the *Divine Comedy*, who, as Dorothy Sayers suggests, "represents for every man that person — or, more generally, that experience of the Not-self — which, by arousing his adoring love, has become for him the God-bearing image, the revelation of the presence of God."<sup>4</sup> When we remember that Mark thinks of the pretty girl as "the flower of Mrs. Folliot's crowd" (p. 442), we think perhaps of Beatrice's place in Dante's Rose of Paradise.<sup>5</sup>

Hovering over all in the story to this point is the foggy atmosphere of suspicion of betrayal of friend by friend, of cousin by cousin: Mark Monteith by Phil Bloodgood. On the lookout for similarities by this time, we remember that the bottom Circle of Dante's *Inferno*, the frozen lake of Cocytus, is the eternal abode of such betrayers as Bloodgood is presumed to be — except that the treachery of the traitors in Cocytus always involves murder.<sup>6</sup> Here, being endlessly chewed in one of Satan's three mouths, is Judas Iscariot, whom Virgil points out to Dante as they prepare for the arduous climb from the bottom of Hell up to Mount Purgatory. We may suspect that as Mark makes his tortuous round of visits from his hotel to Fiftieth Street he is moving through Hell to something like this last Circle. But from this point the differences between James's *Inferno* and Dante's become as marked as, and, we believe, more significant than, the similarities.

For, if the apartment on Fiftieth Street represents the depths of Hell, "poor shamed Bloodgood's doom-ridden figure" (p. 433) is nowhere in evidence; it is Newton Winch, not Phil Bloodgood, who occupies the position of Judas. James's Judas is the Judas of the New Testament and of Dante's *Inferno*, but with many striking differences — differences by which James points up the important meanings of his story.

But first let us consider the details that enable us to make the link between Judas and Newton Winch. Winch, who used to be "coarse" and "common," has been involved in speculation or at

least some sort of dubious financial dealing — Judas was the disciples' treasurer (John, 13:29) — and Winch is by his own confession "such another" as Bloodgood, but "worse" (p. 457). We are thus inclined to suppose that Winch has betrayed his friend Bloodgood, who has "sailed" away "for parts unknown and as yet unguessable" (p. 430) — a journey elsewhere described as a "flight" (p. 432); we accept the implication that Bloodgood has achieved something like Christ's ascent to Heaven after the Harrowing of Hell. His names support the association: "Phil" is a Greek root suggesting "love," a term that never appears in the story, just as Christ's name is never spoken in Dante's *Inferno*, and the surname reminds one of the "innocent blood" (Matthew, 27:4) that Judas betrayed. Perhaps Mark's "small show-case that formed part of his usual equipage of travel" (p. 429), with its photograph of Phil, is a sort of icon. In Mark, could James perhaps have had in mind the "young man" who was with Jesus when he was arrested (Mark, 14:51),<sup>7</sup> as well of course as Dante himself, who, like Odysseus, Aeneas, and Conrad's Marlow, returns from the nether world?

The most striking of the differences between James's *Inferno* and Dante's is that James's Judas (whose apartment-studio, with its "high north-light" (p. 445), close to Central Park — another Champs-Élysées? — nevertheless reflects some of the "rich confused complexion of the Pocahontas" and hence must be in Hell) has undergone "some extraordinary process of refinement" (p. 444), presumably as a result of his guilt and suffering for having falsely incriminated Bloodgood.

The scene between Mark and Winch needs to be followed carefully if James's meaning is to become clear: Mark's own feelings toward Bloodgood, his supposed betrayer, having been focused and refined by Winch's seemingly unselfish interest, curiosity, and sympathy, he strives to convey to Winch the precise nature of his concern: ". . . I don't take any interest in *my* case. . . . All I'm conscious of now — I give you my word — is that I'd like to see him" (p. 451). Winch, impressed by Mark's sympathetic desire "to see" Bloodgood, exclaims: "You *would* go to him — in kindness?" (p. 452). He is much comforted by Mark's forgiveness of Bloodgood because it demonstrates that human

sympathy and forgiveness can reach him too. "You save my life," he says with studied casualness (p. 453). Winch then makes his confession, and Mark "inexpressibly understood" (p. 457). Thus when the police ring the doorbell and Winch asks Mark to admit them, Mark can say, "You're wonderful!" and Winch can answer, "We *are* wonderful" (p. 458). Through this cryptic exchange is conveyed the mutual recognition of the symbiotic relationship that has evolved between the two while they have been learning to be simultaneously interested and interesting. Mark, once a student of art in Paris, and Newton, the erstwhile law student now under the "high north-light" of the imagination, have together achieved a clarity of vision that stations them both among the artists; for the imagination, the faculty that distinguishes the artistic consciousness, is the very faculty that enables any human being to escape the prison of the ego through awareness of, and interest in, other human beings. Such acts of the imagination — of the artistic consciousness — in fact give life — or, rather, living — its meaning. James says in a 1910 essay:

Living, or feeling one's exquisite curiosity about the universe fed and fed, rewarded and rewarded — though I of course don't say definitely answered and answered — becomes thus the highest good I can conceive of . . . ; all of which illustrates what I mean by the consecrated "interest" of consciousness. . . .<sup>8</sup>

Newton Winch's and Mark Monteith's sympathetic awareness, curiosity, and interest have resulted for them in the epiphanic clarity of vision that can accompany the act of living, as defined by James.

At this point, however, "A Round of Visits" takes a turn that is shockingly unexpected and appears to be even more un-Jamesian than the other strange features. Indeed, the final catastrophe seems to belong in an Ibsen play rather than a short story by James. For James has produced a situation in which his two central characters, both having been relieved of intolerable burdens of alienation resulting from betrayals of trust — one the betrayer, the other the betrayed — have achieved peace with themselves and with the world. We are conditioned to expect that Newton Winch will expiate his crime, pay his penalty, and rejoin society. Yet this does not happen, for, as Mark answers the door

to admit the police, he hears "the infallible crack of a discharged pistol and, so nearly with it as to make all one violence, the sound of a great fall." They find "Newton . . . stretched on his back before the fire; he had held the weapon horribly to his temple, and his upturned face was disfigured." The last words of the story are Mark's reply to the policeman's gruff query as to whether Mark could have prevented the suicide: "I really think I must practically have caused it" (p. 459).

By this at first puzzling statement Mark conveys, we believe, his sense of the significance of his relationship with Winch: their reciprocal awareness and sensitivity has brought Newton Winch the hope of salvation. Mark *has* in fact saved Winch's life. If a man like Mark can forgive him, so also — *a fortiori* — can God. Mark's imagination and empathy have been the instruments of Winch's release from the prison of his guilt because they have found an answering response in Winch's own artist's imagination.

Before Mark's arrival Winch had been toying with his revolver, trying to steel himself to commit suicide, but his courage had failed him. Now Mark's warmth and understanding — cognate with the artist's "interest" — has confirmed him in his faith, and he finds the courage necessary to kill himself and escape from Hell to appear before a God who will not be less sympathetic than Mark. Mark understands all this, and so his reply to the policeman, "I really think I must practically have caused it," is spoken with more gladness or pride than regret.

Much of the atmosphere of "A Round of Visits" can be traced to James's descriptions of New York in *The American Scene* (1907), in which James suggests that the city cries out for "poor great wonder-working Émile Zola" to render it justice.<sup>9</sup> It can hardly be a coincidence that in *Thérèse Raquin*, where Zola presents his own vision of Hell, his two protagonists, the guilty lovers, after each has discovered the other's plan to commit what would be a mutual murder, escape their "inferno" and meet finally in sympathy and harmony to commit a joint suicide by which they "at last found consolation in death."<sup>10</sup> The lovers, through suicide, thus escape their Hell. Similarly in James's story the final crack of the pistol is not the crack of doom for a lost soul, but the

opening of the doors of salvation. For James damnation was not, it seems, an eternal and irrevocable state: the divine imaginative faculty that evinces itself most clearly in artistic creation can be awakened to redeem even a Judas. This is the difference between the Inferno of Dante, the genius of the Middle Ages, and the Hell of James, the modern romantic.

Quentin Anderson says that "the younger Henry James appears inclined to sympathize with" the view of Swedenborg, quoted in Henry James, Sr.'s *The Secret of Swedenborg*, that "the good appertaining to man makes his heaven, so that every man's heaven is exactly what his good is."<sup>11</sup> This view is apparently echoed in the younger Henry's "Is There a Life After Death?": it is "conceivable that the possibility [of a personal afterlife] may vary from man to man . . . and that the quantity or the quality of our practice of consciousness may have something to say to it."<sup>12</sup> Because the "artistic consciousness," building on a "creative awareness of things," "shines as from immersion in the fountain of being,"<sup>13</sup> and because the artist through his art "makes life, makes interest, makes importance,"<sup>14</sup> it seems consistent that the artist should make his own Heaven too, just as the insensitive and unimaginative should make their own Hell. And Mark, "one of the people on whom nothing is lost,"<sup>15</sup> is ready by the end of his round of visits to become one of the artists. By the same token, it is appropriate that a character like Newton Winch should be able, through profitable suffering, to become refined (as Zola's Laurent does in *Thérèse Raquin*)<sup>16</sup> and thus become eligible, if not for Heaven, at least for an escape from Hell.

"A Round of Visits," we believe, deserves more attention than it has had.<sup>17</sup> Considering how much James has put into it — he drew both from his own intense experience of revisiting his native land (in ripe age and after long interval) and from Western civilization's profoundest traditions — we think it is not too fanciful to regard his last story as embodying a considered final view, fully treated, by an artist still at the height of his powers. We are, in fact, inclined to regard "A Round of Visits" as a sort of last testament.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Henry James, *The Complete Tales*, ed. Leon Edel, XII (Philadelphia and New York: Lippincott, 1964), 427-28. Later references to "A Round of Visits" (pp. 427-59 of this volume) are incorporated in parentheses in the text.
- <sup>2</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri, The Florentine — Cantica I: Hell*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949), Canto IV, lines 52-63; Canto XII, lines 37-45; "Chronology," p. 296. See also E. Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. W. Schneemelcher and trans. ed. R. McL. Wilson, I (London: Lutterworth, 1963), 470-81 ("The Gospel of Nicodemus"). All quotations from Dante's *Inferno* are from Sayers's translation. Canto and line numbers are incorporated in parentheses in the text.
- <sup>3</sup> Sayers, trans., *Comedy: Hell*, p. 67.
- <sup>4</sup> Sayers, trans., *Comedy: Hell*, p. 68.
- <sup>5</sup> Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, ed. C. H. Grandgent; rev. Charles S. Singleton (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972), p. 907 (*Paradiso*, XXXI, 67-68).
- <sup>6</sup> Grandgent, ed., *Divina Commedia*, p. 281.
- <sup>7</sup> See Melancthon W. Jacobus, Edward E. Nourse, and Andrew C. Zenos, eds., *A New Standard Bible Dictionary*, revised and enlarged (New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1926), pp. 547-48.
- <sup>8</sup> Henry James, "Is There a Life After Death?" in W. D. Howells and others, *In After Days. Thoughts on the Future Life* (New York and London: Harper, 1910), pp. 222-23.
- <sup>9</sup> Henry James, *The American Scene* (New York: Scribner's, 1946), pp. 82, 83, 89, 101, 105.
- <sup>10</sup> Émile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*, trans. L. W. Tancock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), pp. 231, 254.
- <sup>11</sup> Quentin Anderson, *The American Henry James* (London: John Calder, 1958), p. 81 n.
- <sup>12</sup> James, "Is There a Life After Death?" p. 201.
- <sup>13</sup> James, "Is There a Life After Death?" p. 228.
- <sup>14</sup> Henry James, *The Letters*, ed. Percy Lubbock (New York: Scribner's, 1920), II, 490. (Letter to H. G. Wells, July 10, 1915).
- <sup>15</sup> Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in *Henry James: Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. Morris Shapira (London: Heinemann, 1963), p. 57.
- <sup>16</sup> Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*, trans. Tancock, p. 193.
- <sup>17</sup> Recent discussions include those of Strother B. Purdy ("Conversation and Awareness in Henry James's 'A Round of Visits,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 6 [1969], 421-32), who, after mentioning briefly Mark Monteith's "passage through the *Inferno*" (p. 421), concentrates on the exchange between Mark and Winch; and Sara S. Chapman ("The 'Obsession of Egotism' in Henry James's 'A Round of Visits,'" *The Arizona Quarterly*, 29 [1973], 130-38), who treats Mark's escape from the "prison of ego" without probing the correspondences that we examine.