

The Constant Listener

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1

“The Tragic Muse”

October 1907

If it be ever of interest and profit to put one's finger on the productive germ of a work of art, and if in fact a lucid account of any such work involves that prime identification, I can but look on the present fiction as a poor fatherless and motherless [sic], a sort of unregistered and unacknowledged birth.

—Henry James
Preface to “The Tragic Muse”
The New York Edition, volume 7

It seemed to take hours, but at last the train to Rye slowed and pulled around the final curve, and the tiny station came into view. I leaned over to look at it, almost a doll house of a station, lemon yellow with white trim, bright colours that would never survive in London. There, on that bright October morning, those colours looked just right.

I stood up eagerly, but I still had to wait with the other Rye passengers for the train to stop. I carried my bags and bundles down the steps after the guard had opened my compartment. I looked around and saw at once the large figure of Mr. Henry James coming

towards me, his arms stretched high in the air, and I waved back, a small wave with my one free hand. As we met, he took my hand and shook it warmly.

"I'm so glad to see you made the train, so very glad, really, Miss Bosanquet, most glad." His warm words made me feel conspicuously welcome as I stood awkwardly among the strangers at the station.

"Now, your things! Oh, yes, I hope you will not mind walking up the hill. It's but a few steps. I always make my guests walk, to take in the feel of our wonderful Rye. Really, it's so old, you know, quite ancient, nothing like it for venerable," Mr. James went on as we passed out through the doors of the station. Once we reached the curb, I was startled to see an old man in soiled clothes coming directly towards us, noisily shoving his muddy wheelbarrow into our path, but Mr. James greeted him.

"Oh, good, George, here's our Miss Bosanquet, and I expect her trunk is up waiting on the platform. Is that right, do you have a trunk?" He turned to me, and I was alarmed that my expression of confusion and repulsion was there for him to see. He went on quickly. "Oh, I am sorry, Miss Bosanquet, I forget that down here in the country we might look a bit rough to you city folk. I assure you that George is the gentlest of men, and he nearly always remembers to clean out the inside of our garden wheelbarrow before he brings it down to fetch my visitors' things. Would you like to have your bundles carted up along with the trunk?" Mr. James took my bundles and lunch basket and gave them to the gardener, with instructions to take them to my room.

"I hope you don't mind, Miss Bosanquet, but I've arranged for you to have your own tea waiting for you with your landlady, and so we'll go straight to Marigold Cottage. I'm afraid that my domestic arrangements at Lamb House are not all that could be desired this afternoon. I have a very simple household with a housekeeper, who cooks for me, but she's quite unreliable, and today appears to be a bad day. Then, there's George to take care of the garden, and then of course there is little Burgess, my manservant—he came to me when he was a boy, and he's not much bigger now—but you'll meet them all soon enough. Now, then . . ." He led me across the wide street that ran beside the town's high wall with its round, embedded stones.

“Is this not just the thing?” Mr. James patted the stones as we walked past. “They say that villagers began building the town wall on this side of Rye in 1194. Hard to think of those poor fellows over seven hundred years ago laying stone on stone right on this spot. And I think my work goes slowly, step by step! Not a patch on these fellows, I’m sure.”

At last, I was to hear something of the work to be done. I remember leaning eagerly towards Mr. James, listening to his smooth and endless flow of words as we climbed up the steep, cobbled street between the houses leaning side by side in the dusky October light.

The next day, that first morning, I found my way up to Lamb House. I realised, in spite of all my preparations, that I knew nothing of what was waiting for me beyond the heavy, copper-green door. I was afraid to knock. I had been too nervous to sleep well or eat a proper breakfast, worrying over that first day. Though I was confident of my skill with the typewriting machine, I was concerned how my bad ear, left over from a childhood illness, might affect my ability to typewrite correctly in an unfamiliar situation. I had always been the one at Miss Petherbridge’s secretarial bureau to set up the arrangements of table, chair, and machine in relation to the person giving dictation. I had hoped to arrive at Mr. James’ house early, but at least I was there at the appointed hour, ten-fifteen, in spite of the weather. My walk up the hill had been very short but very wet, with the steady rain obscuring all the house fronts and making the cobbled street quite treacherous. Now, I lifted the heavy brass knocker and thumped it twice.

I’d had to wait two months after the interview and Mr. James’ kind offer in his first letter before he could make the arrangements for me to come to him. I had answered yes and then waited until, at last, his second letter arrived. I felt ruffled at my flat in London that morning when the early post brought Mr. James’ reply, the heavy cream envelope with its Rye postmark and the smell of the leather writing desk and the sea. I opened it along the edge and slipped out a single, folded page.

His remarkable script seemed strong but shaky, the elegant black ink flowing smoothly over paper stippled cream in the light. The reassuring kindness was set out so that each word was

distinguished, but the ending blurred and slid off into the ache of his fingers:

October 9th, 1907

Dear Miss Bosanquet,

I rejoice to hear of your arrival tomorrow & shall give myself the pleasure of meeting you at 1.28 at the Station. You shall have every facility of [sic] for trying my machine. I have just got a new & apparently admirable one.

*Yours very truly,
Henry James*

After what seemed like a long, silent wait, Mr. James' copper-green door swung inward, and I was startled to see Mr. James himself. He was dressed less formally than for our first meeting, this time in a blue-belted jacket and bright, striped shirt with a cheerfully red spotted tie, his clean-shaved face shining pink out at me as I stood hesitating on the doorstep, while the rain poured down. He stepped back, inviting me in, and I stammered something in return to his warm welcome. Then, as I came in with my dripping coat and umbrella, I was so alarmed I could scarcely speak. Was I really meant to hand over my dripping umbrella to Mr. James? Was he really going to help me out of my very wet macintosh? As I hesitated, I was aware that I was dripping all over the black-and-white tiles of shining marble in the entrance hall.

It all seemed so unlike Miss Petherbridge's secretarial bureau. Never before had a client greeted me. Instead, there had always been time to settle myself, to put away my street things and take on the appearance of calm assurance and competence that Miss Petherbridge had taught us girls. But as Mr. James hung my coat and umbrella on the hall stand, I wondered: Whatever was I to do about my wet galoshes? Pull them off right there, in that beautiful entrance hall? Mr. James noticed my discomfort and led me to the kitchen and to the chair where apparently he himself removed his muddy

foot-wear; there was a paper spread, and so I was able to pull off my galoshes and collect myself, for the moment, while he spoke to his housekeeper. He introduced me to Mrs. Paddington and then went on to give her instructions for his lunch—to be ready at one-thirty, a moment that seemed endlessly in the future.

Mr. James then led the way back to the hall and up the front stairs to the large corner room where we would be working. I wondered again how it would be to work with Mr. James in such close quarters. Lamb House did not seem to be very large, and it looked as though Mr. James' own bedroom was right across the hall from the room where we were to work. Quite convenient for him, I thought, when he had an idea for something in the middle of the night, but it did seem somewhat improper.

"We call this the Green Room," Mr. James announced as he preceded me into the room, "from the colour of the paint on the wainscotting." He went to one of the windows and pulled back the heavy curtains, making the room much brighter, much more welcoming. Hesitantly, anxiously, I waited, hardly able to take it all in as he waved towards a large cloth-covered, lumpish mound on a dark metal stand set up conveniently at the end of a large desk.

He went on, "I am not quite ready for you, so please make yourself comfortable. Arrange things for your convenience, have a look around at my books, whatever you like," and then he turned away and began sorting through a large pile of papers.

I avoided approaching the dread machine and instead turned and looked around at the graceful room with tall, curtained windows on two sides and the sounds of the rain streaming down outside. I liked the small fire already glowing in the tile-rimmed fireplace. There was an easy chair placed nearby and two large writing desks, one set before the window, one against the wall. Every other bit of wall was filled with waist-high bookcases. I went closer to where the light fell on the titles. There were books by Edith Wharton, George Bernard Shaw, Joseph Conrad, Turgenev, other Russians, the French—everyone.

I could not resist—I took down one delicious novel, then another, only to be amazed to discover that each one had been signed by its famous author, dedicated, and autographed with effusive notes

for Mr. James; his collection was immense and personal at the same time. I was delighted to come upon a book by Paul Bourget, someone I had always wanted to read. As I turned the curious pages, with their texture like felt and the ruffled edges where they had been torn with a paper knife, their thick weight and pale ink pressed deep, and the soft words, it all seemed so different from our crisp, English-made books. I tried my French on the first paragraph and was glad to see I could read it—Oh, thank you, Mlle. Brun.

I was startled by the sound of a metal clang against the grate; Mr. James was leaning over the fire and giving it a poke, which only made the sullen flames disappear. He looked up as if appealing for help and found me guiltily trying to stuff Bourget's book with its bright yellow wrapper back onto the shelf, afraid it might not seem proper for me to be looking at such writings. Mr. James, in an expansive gesture with the poker, waved me on as if he wanted me to keep the book.

"Oh, good. Good old Paul Bourget, I see. Perhaps you can use my books here to help you through the pauses in dictation. Sometimes I can't go straight through a piece of writing but, instead, must think for a bit. The man who first took my dictation would read the newspaper during the intervals. My dear Miss Weld would knit while she waited for me. You don't knit, do you, Miss Bosanquet?"

"No, I never could—I didn't have the patience."

"Well, then, please help yourself to any of my books at any time, and you can read through the intervals. Now, tell me, what do you think of my machine?" He left the poker and walked to the mysterious, cloth-covered mound. As he swept off the cover with a flourish, I was startled to see how shining and new, how large and complicated this Remington looked. It was not at all like the old model I had practised on back at Miss Petherbridge's. I went over to it and said in my best business voice, "It's fine, sir, such a new one." I tried touching a key, and it flew up alarmingly.

Mr. James brought a plain wooden chair over for me. "Well, we might as well begin and see how it goes." He pointed to a large stack of fresh, white paper on the writing desk. "Here is the paper. I don't pretend to have the slightest idea how this glorious machinery works. Please take your time getting ready for me to begin. I've

written out for myself what we will be doing today, so let me know when you're ready."

I moved the chair to what seemed the best angle for hearing him, sat down, and began by tucking two pieces of his beautiful, heavy paper between the rollers. Everything was different, but I knew that with my good understanding of machines, I could do this. I looked for the tab key and the space bar—at least they were in the right place. The rollers moved silently, and the return lever was not the same as on the machine I knew. But, yes, I could do this.

"Yes, I'm ready."

"At the top, please put Capital V, *Volume*, Capital I. New Line—the widest space between the lines, if you please, Double Double Space."

There was a pause while I struggled to find the lever that adjusted the lines. Finally, I had to stand up and walk around the machine to look and feel blindly, desperately, until I located the lever on the far side. Mr. James was still waiting patiently for me, a sheaf of paper in hand. He cleared his throat and in his warm, clear voice slowly began to dictate:

"All Capitals, *PREFACE*, Double Space, Capital I *I profess a certain vagueness of remembrance in respect to the origin and growth of Quotation*, Capital T "*The Capital T Tragic Capital M Muse Comma, End Quotation*," which appeared in the Quotation, Capital A "*Atlantic Capital M Monthly End Quotation*" again Comma, beginning Capital J *January 1-8-8-9 and . . .*"

Here, there was a pause in the tapping of my keys while I hunted for the numbers 8 and 9. I had not practised numbers, and they did not come easily to my hand. There!—But he had gone on.

"I'm sorry, sir." I interrupted the flow. "Could you please go back?—I lost some of the words . . ."

"Go back? Where? What?"

"I stopped at the date, at 1889."

"Oh, yes, I see. Well, I will slow down, I must not rush you along so—this is your first day. I hope it will come easier when you are more accustomed to the machine." And he went back again: "*January 1-8-8-9 and running on Comma, in-or-din-ate-ly Comma, several months beyond its proper twelve—*"

Mr. James stopped his pacing to look at me. I glanced up, waiting for a full stop or more words. Was that to be the end of his long first sentence?

He went on. "Full Stop. Capital I *If it be ever of interest and profit . . .*"

Oh! This was a new sentence—Or was he talking to me?

. . . to put one's finger" (I began typing furiously to catch up) "*on the productive germ of a work of art Comma, . . .*"

The work went on in fits and starts to the bottom of the page—my page, for his page seemed to be bottomless.

As he passed behind my chair, he continued, "*. . . and I remember well the particular chill Comma, at last Comma, of the sense of my having launched it in a great grey void from which no echo or message whatever would come back Full Stop.*"

He paused, as he seemed to notice that it was time for a new sheet of paper.

"Let's halt here," he said, "and see how it's going. By the way, at least for some months, you and I will be working on prefaces for a New York edition of my collected works in more than twenty volumes. Since the publisher is in the United States, we'll use American double inverted commas—what the Americans call 'quotation marks'—as a small concession, but wouldn't you agree that we should honour accepted British spelling and use a space before semicolons and colons?"

I was very glad to have that breather with his directions and his nod to our British style, for I was feeling terribly out of sorts, perspiring, even shaking from the strain of working his new machine and from the hugeness of Mr. James' presence. I hurriedly rolled out the sheet, glad to be done with that page at least. But in looking over the typed sheet, I was horrified to find so many misspelt words, over-struck letters, uneven and faint letters, and smudges.

Mr. James took the sheet from my hand and made an unconscious grimace at the messy page. I looked away and bent to the machine, struggling to put a fresh sheet in place.

"It feels good," he said, "to be dictating again this way after so long. I lost my last amanuensis, Miss Weld—perhaps you know her—when she decided to marry. And then I went travelling for

many months without being settled enough to dictate. It is a great relief to me now to hear the *tap-tap* of the typewriting machine, Miss Bosanquet. I have become accustomed to this method. In the old days when I would be writing a serial like 'The Tragic Muse,' I would write out my text in longhand with my favourite dip-pen and inkwell and send out a section of it as it was written, off on the first boat to the New York publishers, and they would have it typeset and send the galleys back by return boat.

"And so, it might be a month or more before I would see my work again. Of course, I could correct only the most glaring errors that way, and of course by then I was hard at work on the next instalment. Think of it, weeks between—really, it is most remarkable that these old pieces fit together at all. Now, it is all so pleasant—I write out my notes, dictate from them in the morning, and then I have the typewritten pages even with a copy so that I can correct and amplify the pages that night, almost before the ink has dried. Well, of course, the typewritten word doesn't have quite that glorious damp and fresh-ink smell of my old pages, but really it is a most remarkable system."

He had been pacing back and forth across the room while he was talking and apparently keeping a close eye on my progress with reloading the machine, for as soon as I was done, he said, "Ready then, Miss Bosanquet? Onward:

"Capital I *It seemed clear that I needed big cases* Dash—*small ones would practically give my central idea away* Semicolon ; *and I make out now my still labouring under the il-lu-sion that the case of the sacrifice for art* Underline *can . . .*"

I was stumped again. How was I to underline? Oh, yes, the upper-case dash—but now, where—Oh! Had he stopped when the machine stopped? I hoped so.

". . . *can* ever be Comma, *with truth* Comma, *with taste* Comma, *with discretion involved* Comma, *apparently and show-i-ly* Quotation "big Full Stop, End Quotation."

It all went smoothly for several more pages, even past Mr. James' spelling out in a low aside, "'The Newcomes'—one word," as if I had never heard of Thackeray or the other characters and titles Mr. James used so often as examples. It made me wonder what

impossible sorts of secretaries he had been accustomed to. And yet I was glad that I had done my homework, had spent the month waiting for that job by reading over his novels, especially “The Tragic Muse,” so that the names of his characters, of the reluctant artist, Nick Dormer, and the aspiring actress, Miriam Rooth, and their strange friend, Gabriel Nash, would land safely from my fingers, even if Mr. James had not carefully spelt out their names.

I was surprised, after the first panic had subsided, that I was able to do this, to take his dictated words and, yes, too slowly, and, yes, with too many errors, place them on the typewritten page. I was surprised, too, that I could understand him, could follow his argument as he dictated, and see what he was trying to communicate. Oh, not at first, when I could not even find the right keys, but soon enough I could listen and think and typewrite simultaneously. I was thrilled to be there, to hear his words and thoughts before anyone else, to be their engraver, their recorder, even sometimes their midwife.

It is true that at times Mr. James would stop dictating suddenly and, instead, pace the room, struggling to improve a word or phrase. That first day, I was extremely uncomfortable with his long, weighty pauses, since I had no way to tell if this was one of the times when he would prefer me to be engaged otherwise, rather than panting like an eager retriever at the hunt, waiting for Mr. James to throw his words out again. I had brought the Bourget to the table, so I leafed through the pages and tried not to look up at the tense figure across the room. Happily, these pauses were brief because he had prepared most of his text for that first day.

Later that week, when I was retyping those first smudged and much corrected pages, I remembered how at times his words or phrases surprised me. Sometimes, my disquiet was caused by his phrases, such as calling “The Tragic Muse,” the unpopular book before us, his “*maimed or slighted, the disfigured or defeated, the unlucky or unlikely child.*” Suddenly my mind flew away to home and my poor little brother, Louis.

Or when he proclaimed that the book’s best points to him were things I had barely noticed in my reading—its “*preserved tone.*” Mr. James was most happy not with the novel’s pacing, its balanced

treatment of the interesting artists and the Paris theatre scene but, rather, that he had succeeded in hiding what he saw as a flaw in the book's composition. He thought he had gone on too long in the first parts, where he set the stage, the scene, and supporting characters so that the last act—the real story—could be enacted. He went on at great length to explain that what he had really cared about was his theme. After all, nothing should be more important to Miriam or Nick or any aspiring artist than to be free to create art.

I was surprised at the vehemence of his language when describing his characters' sacrifice for art: "Capital T *There need never Comma, at the worst Comma, be any difficulty about the things advantageously chuckable for art Semicolon ;*"

He went on, and then he startled me: "*Nothing can well figure as less Quotation "big Comma, End Quotation," in an honest thesis Comma, than a marked instance of somebody's willingness to pass mainly for an ass Full Stop.*"

I believe that moment was the first time I had ever typed any language remotely like "ass." I must have looked up, and he did seem a little embarrassed, but he did not stop. Clearly, this book and its theme of what a man must sacrifice for his art had meant something important and, to him, perhaps even disturbing.

I wondered at his assurance. It was easy for him to talk about artists suffering for their art while he was there in his lovely house filled with antiques and oriental rugs, snug in quiet Rye, easily visited by all his famous, wealthy friends. For me, it was different: I wanted my writing, my art, to be out there, to make a noise, so that I could become famous myself. What, then, was I doing with my own life, there with Mr. James?

But in the midst of his words I had no moment to pursue that thought.

As our appointed three hours drew to a close, Mr. James seemed to be enjoying himself more and more, perhaps not wanting to stop. He went out for a few minutes to ask Mrs. Paddington how long before his lunch would be ready, and I looked over what we had done so far.

I wondered for the first time how hard had it been for him to become a writer. Was his family like mine, not wanting him to

be miserable, poor, and struggling? Even now, Father still hoped I might yet give up my career and marry, for my own good. I think my telling Father that I was training with Miss Petherbridge and was going to live with my friends in a London flat or even my telling him I was going to Rye to take the job with Mr. James had been easier for him to accept than my telling him that I hoped to be a writer.

Mr. James came heavily back up the stairs and, with some chagrin, announced that we would have to stop. The housekeeper was adamant: her lunch would not wait.

I stacked our finished pages and pulled the cover over the machine. As I stood, Mr. James urged me to take the Bourget book, and I did.

Soon, bundled and cautioned against the continuing bad weather, I was back outside in the gloomy day. The rain had lessened, but it was still wet and cold. Where was I to find my lunch? What was I to do with myself now? The arrangements with my landlady were for one hot meal in the evening, but I was on my own until then, and so I made my way down to the shops and found a dark loaf of that morning's bread, a small yellow cheese, and a good bottle of ale. I took the purchases back to my room, tore off chunks of the cheese and slabs of the bread, arranged them on a piece of clean paper, and drank from my tooth cup (for of course my room came with no amenities of dishes or cutlery). I threw away the paper, rinsed out the cup, and looked around at my small, nearly windowless room, at the low brow of the eaves that blocked the light, the narrow bed, the dusty old spread, and the rusty corner sink. I washed out my shirtwaist, soot-stained from the train journey the day before, and spread it out to dry on the chair back.

I thought again about Mr. James and how his conversation had gone from a nervous, stilted defensiveness to, perhaps, real enjoyment. Even the way we ended had a hopefulness. Oh, he had not liked how poorly I typed, but he could see my work was improving with each new page, and I liked it when he added references to "us," a collective we of readers and writers. I had noticed that usage when he dictated, ". . . and we look in vain for the artist Comma, the divine explanatory genius Comma, who will come to our aid and tell us Full

Stop.” Mr. James had smiled, seeming almost hopeful, and I had smiled in agreement. Only time would reveal to me more about what I could do for him, with him.

The second day seemed easier than the first, since now I began to understand what he was doing. The New York Edition of his collected works was his artist’s canvas enlarged. He was a consummate and totally conscious, even self-conscious artist. The work we were doing on the prefaces was meant to frame and display, to varnish and polish his conscious art. I was in awe of these explanations of his process, and I wanted to learn everything I could from them.

From the moment I had heard his words being dictated to a typist down the hall all those months before, I had dreamed of sitting there beside Mr. James, helping him to achieve his dream and learning from the experience how to become a successful writer. Perhaps I might someday show him some of my work, but for now I was happy watching him exclaim proudly about every difficulty he had overcome, about how he had met all the challenges he had set for himself, handling such a large canvas combining art and politics in the same novel, steering his complex story through to its conclusion.

He had paused and then gone on. “Capital I *I fairly cherish the record as some adventurer in another line may bug the sense of his inveterate habit of just saving in time the neck he ever [sic] undiscourageably risks . . .*” There Mr. James was, the adventurer, pacing our small room or even sitting or standing at his desk—I could imagine him in the role, and my ambition increased with each new revelation, each new discovery.

It was inspiring to hear him talk of his two main characters—Nick Dormer, painter and politician, and the beautiful actress, Miriam—who, against all odds, fell in love. Mr. James seemed almost to be channelling his actress’s quandary, with his—or was it her?—impassioned speeches:

“Capital S *She is in the uplifted state to which sacrifices and submissions loom large Comma, but loom so just because they must write sympathy Comma, write passion Comma, large Full Stop.*”

I felt that, without being aware of it, Mr. James this time was speaking directly to me and my aspirations: art, passion, sympathy—What

wasn't I capable of?! Those words made me wonder what sacrifices I might have to make for the life of writing.

He paused, his hand in mid-air, as if he were an orchestra conductor stopping in mid-beat. "Miss Bosanquet, it seems you're so attentive that you hear my voice drop for each parenthetical phrase, and you catch the silent beats in a compound sentence. I think I don't need to dictate each and every comma but only the other punctuation and unusual commas. And a full stop surely alerts you to a capital for the next word." With that, he went on:

"Her measure of what she would be capable of for him Dash—capable, that is, of Underline not asking of him Dash—will depend on what he shall ask of Underline her, but she has no fear of not being able to satisfy him Comma, . . ."

He paused, and I thought to myself: Ah! If only life could be like that.

But there was no time to think, for he continued:

". . . even to the point of Quotation "chucking End Quotation" for him, if need be, that artistic identity of her own which she has begun to build up Full Stop."

I felt a little shiver of apprehension and typed to the end of the page.