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Framing the Romantic Artist: Goethe's *Torquato Tasso* and James's *Roderick Hudson*

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Abstract: Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Torquato Tasso* (1790) and Henry James's *Roderick Hudson* (1875) share not only a number of structural parallels but also an interest in the fate of the romantic artist in a regulated society. The article suggests Goethe's play as a possible influence on James's novel. After a brief outline of James's relationship to Goethe and of the structural parallels between the texts, the article discusses the similarities of their stance on the romantic artist. Both texts contrast the protagonist's classicist-idealist art with his broadly romantic personality, both remain ambivalent about the romantic conception of the poet-genius, and both take an analytical attitude toward their artist figures. On this poetological level, the article concludes, their portraits of a proto-Romantic and a late Romantic respectively form a revealing historical frame of the phenomenon of the Romantic artist.

Henry James's first Italian journey culminated in his visit to Rome in October 1869. "At last—for the first time—I live!" he wrote to his brother William. "I went reeling and moaning thro' the streets, in a fever of enjoyment" (James 1974–1980: 160). James was not the first writer, of course, to find inspiration in Italy, but few have responded so enthusiastically. Among these few was one of the literary greats of the nineteenth century, a writer James admired from his youth and whose Italian experience changed the course of a nation's literary history: Johann Wolfgang Goethe. Originally planned as a respite from his administrative duties in Weimar, Goethe's *Italian Journey* (1786–1788) became the formative event in his life and resulted in a major aesthetic reorientation: the unfettered enthusiasm of the *Sturm und Drang* years gave way to classicist repose. One immediate consequence was his revision of *Torquato Tasso*, a long-unfinished play about the Italian poet who was considered the equal of Homer and Virgil at the time (Atkins 1973: 7). While nothing is known about the original version, it seems clear that the

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play's focus was decisively altered by Goethe's classicist turn – and by his discovery of a new Tasso biography that emphasized the poet's conflict with the Ferrara court society, in particular with the statesman Antonio Montecatino.¹ Published in 1790, the final version of the play sets a youthful, stormy artist against the venerable rules and conventions of Italian society. Goethe had conceived Tasso as a *Sturm und Drang* artist, a romantic in the wider sense of the term and in some ways a proto-Romantic in literary history, but after his classicist turn the play became a study rather than an expression of artistic romanticism. The romantic artist is now framed both by the narrow framework of his society and, in the diegetic process, by the classicist leanings that his author had developed by that time.²

From this perspective, *Torquato Tasso* has much in common with *Roderick Hudson*, the novel that grew out of James's Italian journeys of the late 1860s and early 1870s. Both Tasso and Roderick are introduced in a rural, somewhat idyllic setting; like their authors at the time of writing, both are set to go to Rome where they hope to promote their artistic pursuits. Leon Edel describes the Rome of *Roderick Hudson* as “the Rome of Goethe, of Shelley, of Keats” (qtd. in Fogel 1981: 157), and indeed, James's novel becomes the site of a complex exploration of the romantic artist that oscillates between compelling sketches of the artist as an irresistible genius in the Shelley-Keats tradition and a distanced analysis of this artist-genius along the lines of Goethe's *Tasso*. In the following I will explore the interconnections between these texts from two angles. First I will outline the conspicuous resemblances between the novel and the play: the character of the artist-hero, his conflicts with a regulated social environment, the female counterpart who rejects the hero's love because of these regulations, and the male counterpart who is both mentor and rival. In a second step I will discuss the aesthetic implications of this constellation in both texts: the contrast between the hero's classicist-idealist art and his romantic personality, the authors' ambivalence about the notion of the romantic poet-genius, and the analytical attitude both authors take toward their artist figures. Given that Goethe's *Torquato Tasso*, as numerous critics have asserted, “precedes the Romantic concern with the artist figure, and anticipates that of the later nineteenth century”, I suggest that *Roderick Hudson*

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1 Grawe (1981: 69–81); Haile (1973: 187–188); Serassi (1785). Goethe might also have known Wilhelm Heinse's 1774 biography that portrays Tasso as a Dionysian genius (Hopmann 1995: 33–51).

2 I follow the convention of using capitalization to distinguish the polysemic word ‘romanticism’ from the historically specific period and movement of Romanticism in the arts. As we will see, *Torquato Tasso* and *Roderick Hudson* frame both the romantic and the Romantic artist on several levels.

can be read as a reflection on the concerns and manifestations of Romanticism in the arts (Dieckmann 1974: 102). Read together, Goethe and James form a revealing historical frame of the phenomenon of the Romantic artist.

We know from one of James's reviews that by the time he wrote *Roderick Hudson* he was familiar with Goethe's *Tasso*, the first English translation of which dated from 1827 (James 1957: 117).³ His correspondence indicates that he read Goethe regularly around 1870, and convincing arguments have been made for parallels between *Roderick Hudson* and Goethe's famous novels *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) and *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–1796).⁴ James also read the historical Tasso and visited his place of death in 1873, the year before he began work, again in Italy, on *Roderick Hudson*. The connection in his imagination between Tasso and Italy also surfaces in *Portrait of a Lady*, where Henrietta Stackpole mentions a “young boatman who chanted Tasso” in her “conscientious account” of Venice (1881/1985: 481).⁵ The historical Tasso had become a legendary figure soon after his death, in both senses of the term. The ‘biography’ published by his friend and admirer Giambattista Manso drew a compelling picture of the poet as the passionate victim of society, a melancholy genius destroyed by unrequited love. Its success laid the ground for Tasso's lasting fame throughout Europe, and its anecdotal character – literary sources have been identified for about nine tenths of its content – left many gaps that later biographers and readers could fill according to their own ideas.⁶ The next major biography, published by Pierantonio Serassi in 1785, emphasized Tasso's conflict with court society and reinterpreted his malady as a sign of intellectual distinction and creative power.⁷ While the first of these aspects was an important

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3 James's admirations for Goethe shines through his letters and reviews in the 1860s and 1870s; James (1865: 281–285); (1957: 115–117, 121–122); (1974–1980: 49, 58). See also Hovanec (1979: 36–37, *et passim*); Edel (1953: 121).

4 Gauss (1991); Kelley (1965: 41–44); Martin (1986: 387–395). James reviewed *Wilhelm Meister* for *North American Review* (1865: 281–285). Traces of Goethe's third novel, *Elective Affinities* (1809), have been found in *The Golden Bowl* (Ryan 1982; Winnett 1993). On other possible sources for *Roderick Hudson* see Cargill (1971: 20–24); Tintner (1981b: 172–173); Wagenknecht (1983: 35–36). James might also have read Goethe's *Italian Journey* (Kelley 1965: 145–146).

5 *Roderick Hudson* and Rowland Mallet go to Venice, too, and let a “brown-breasted gondolier” row them to Torcello; there is no mention of singing however (1878/1969: 79). On reading Tasso see James (1872–1876/2008: 257); Edel (1962: 109); on visiting his place of death see James (1909/1992: 182–183). The character of Theobald in “The Madonna of the Future” might have been inspired by the Tasso legend as well.

6 Brand (1965: 207–209); Filippis (1936); Manso (1621/1995); Pivont (1986: 104).

7 Pivont (1986: 105–106); Serassi (1785). Against Serassi's argumentation, Goethe retained the aspect of Tasso's love for the Princess, which was central to his plot; cf. Grawe (1981: 79).

influence on Goethe's play, it was the second that made a considerable impact in European literature and arguably started the Tasso vogue of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Tasso was now celebrated as the prototypical Romantic poet, an unruly genius whose exceptional gifts alienated him from society and resulted in his exclusion and punishment. The story of his unhappy love for the Princess, though discarded by Serassi, was affirmed in numerous learned studies of his work and regarded as proof of his extraordinary sensitivity and passion.⁸

Goethe's play shows Tasso as part of the Ferrara court society, which is represented by the Duke Alfonso, his sister the Princess Leonora, and the countess Leonora Sanvitale. At court Tasso is regarded as sensitive, melancholy, and somewhat paranoid, but the women are fascinated by his poetic genius and personal charm. He makes his first appearance when he presents the *Gerusalemme liberata* to his patron the Duke and is crowned with Virgil's wreath in recognition of his genius. In the course of the play, however, Tasso's moodiness and paranoia increase and he comes into conflict with everyone around him. He hotheadedly draws his dagger on Antonio, the Duke's advisor, because Antonio rebuts his offer of friendship; he alienates Alfonso by requesting permission to leave court and take his manuscript with him; he rejects Leonora Sanvitale's advice; and in a climactic scene near the end he confesses his love for the Princess and throws himself into her arms in a flagrant breach of courtly decorum. In the end Tasso is a broken man who clings to his rival Antonio for a remnant of social status and mental health.

As this brief summary indicates, there are no consistent parallels between *Torquato Tasso* and *Roderick Hudson*. Presumably James read the play years before he started writing the novel. What we tend to keep in mind of plays after we have forgotten the details is the dramatic constellation and the character of the hero, and it is in these aspects that the play and the novel correspond. *Torquato Tasso* may have provided what James liked to call a 'germ' for *Roderick Hudson*: a promising plotline, a memorable protagonist, small ideas that James could take up and reimagine as he was conceiving his first serious novel.⁹ As Emil Staiger points out in his monumental study of Goethe, *Torquato Tasso* was the first serious drama in European literature to center on a poet (1957: 391–392). This elevation of the poet's social stature was not only an important influence on the emerging Romanticist movement; several decades later, it might have encouraged

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⁸ Brand (1965: 205, 215–219); Pivont (1986: 106–108). Some biographers remained skeptical of the Romantic narrative, cf. Brand (1965: 213–214).

⁹ Elements of *Roderick Hudson* have been traced to various sources. See Cargill (1971: 19–24); Wagenknecht (1983: 35–36).

the young James to make an artist the protagonist of his first serious novel. There are conspicuous resemblances, in any case, between the characters of Goethe's *Tasso* and James's *Roderick Hudson*. Unlike most other versions of the Tasso story, including Byron's "Lament of Tasso", both Goethe and James introduce their artist at a young age and contrast his immaturity with the set expectations of his social environment (Japp 2007: 107).¹⁰ This works in the artist's favor in some respects – he can be spontaneous and refreshing, he stirs his friends' imagination – but tends to turn against him as the plot progresses, partly because both texts chart the artist-hero's development against the background of a stable, regulated upper-class society.

Christina Light is the only other character beside Roderick who can be traced to Goethe's play. Her first appearance in the novel triggers a somewhat gratuitous comment of Roderick's that might be read as an oblique hint at James's source of inspiration: her poodle reminds Roderick of the poodle scene in Goethe's *Faust* (1878/1969: 82). That poodle turns out to be the disguise of Mephistopheles, and while Roderick's first encounter with Christina is momentous, her combed and ribboned poodle can hardly be suspected of Mephistophelian designs. The much stronger parallel is between Christina and Princess Leonora from *Torquato Tasso*. Christina becomes a princess in the course of the novel, but she is *described* as one from the beginning. She received "the education of a princess", her mother asserts, and has been told over and over that she can marry "a reigning prince" – and her family pressures her into accepting the first princely offer they can obtain (1878/1969: 123–124). Leonora and Christina have a very similar function in the artist-hero plot. In his doomed love for the princess, whom he regards as the ideal woman, the artist-hero confronts and reveals the extremes of his own personality. A final structural parallel can be found in the strong mentor figures that surround the artist-hero in both texts. In *Torquato Tasso* this function is centered in Antonio, whereas James parcels it out to several characters: Striker, Gloriani, and most importantly Rowland. In both cases the main characters are subjected to an extraordinary range of critical judgments, which contributes to the analytical distance both texts establish toward the artist-hero.

In James's case this distance might have been suggested by the Goethe criticism he would have encountered as early as 1860, when he was sent to school in Bonn, Germany, and spent his days reading German verse (and a few novels, including Goethe's *Elective Affinities*) (Hovanec 1979: 8–9). German Goethe criti-

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¹⁰ Goethe's *Tasso* seems younger even than the historical Tasso when he visited the Duke at Belriguardo in 1577, at age 33. Byron repeatedly stresses the "[l]ong years" Tasso has spent in prison (1986: ll. 1, 3–4, 166).

cism at the time was dominated by bourgeois moralists, and James's descriptions of his Bonn schoolmaster suggest that he had met with a fairly typical specimen (Edel 1953: 154–155). The favorite exercise of such critics consisted in subjecting classical literature to a strict, if superficial, examination of its morals. Their interpretations of *Torquato Tasso*, which was standard reading in German high schools at the time, are unusual in that they cast Antonio rather than Tasso as an authorial spokesman. Tasso is regarded as immature, weak, and dependent on the principled Antonio for moral guidance. These critics diverged strongly from both their predecessors, the Romantics, and their successors in the late nineteenth century, for whom Tasso became an instance of Dionysian boundlessness and creative power.¹¹ Studying Goethe in that day and place must have reinforced James's understanding of *Torquato Tasso* as a critique of the Romantic artist and helps explain the striking deviations from the Romantic image of the artist-genius in *Roderick Hudson*. Goethe's Tasso and James's Roderick Hudson are highly ambivalent artist-figures: their work situates them in a classical-idealist tradition, but their personality is what we would broadly call romantic. Both Goethe and James seem to be interested in observing this contradiction rather than resolving it. Their comments in and on their books suggest that they see the contradiction as typical for a certain kind of artist, and they establish a distanced, somewhat critical view of their artist-hero in order to analyze its effects.

In Goethe's play, the contradiction is introduced in the very first scene. According to the stage directions, the scene is set in "A Garden adorned with busts of the Epic Poets. To the right, a bust of Virgil; to the left, one of Ariosto". Virgil, author of the national epic of ancient Rome, is the arch-classicist; Ariosto is a more ambiguous reference but seems to represent the chivalric-romantic tradition and the lighter art of the Rococo (Staiger 1957: 397).¹² They are not just epic poets, they are *the* epic poets. The frame of reference is almost universal: Tasso, we realize, will have to situate himself between two ideals of epic poetry. He does not talk much about his poetics – nor does he need to, given the historical Tasso's popularity among Goethe's contemporaries – but the little he says suggests classical leanings. "With modest daring I aspir'd to near / The mighty masters of the olden time [*der Vorwelt*]", he tells Antonio, and the reference is clearly to the ancients rather than to his near-contemporary Ariosto (1851: ll. 2634–2635). The Golden Age he imagines in his conversation with the Princess is a *locus amoenus* familiar from ancient poets like Hesiod and Ovid (Heizmann

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¹¹ Gaede (1931: 48–54); Wagner (1995: 90–98).

¹² The reference is additionally complicated by Antonio's speech in I.4, in which he aligns with Ariosto and claims him in rather classicist terms as a venerable authority; cf. Hinderer (1980: 173, 176).

1988: 20).¹³ His friends at court regard him as a classicist-idealist poet too. “His eye scarce lingers on this earthly scene, / To nature’s harmony his ear is tuned”, says Leonora, and Alfonso crowns him with Virgil’s wreath, not Ariosto’s, in the opening scenes (1851: ll. 159–160). Platonism seems to be another strong influence on intellectual life at Ferrara. Leonora calls the Princess “Plato’s pupil” (1851: l. 222), and Tasso grounds the enduring quality of his epic creations in Platonic idealism: “These are not shadows by illusion bred; / I know they are eternal, for they are” (1851: ll. 1103–1104).

Roderick Hudson’s first major work of art bears a Greek name: Δίψα (*Thirst*). “The figure might have been some beautiful youth of ancient fable – Hylas or Narcissus, Paris or Endymion”, Rowland thinks, and when he asks Roderick what the figure stands for the artist replies, “he’s youth, you know; he’s innocence, he’s health, he’s strength, he’s curiosity” (1878/1969: 33, 39). Roderick’s classicist idealism becomes most apparent in his discussion with Gloriani, the dark Romantic, at Rowland’s dinner party. “I mean never to make anything ugly”, Roderick says. “The Greeks never made anything ugly, and I am a Hellenist; I am not a Hebraist!” And later: “I care only for perfect beauty. [...] It is against the taste of the day, I know; we have really lost the faculty to understand beauty in the large ideal way” (1878/1969: 94). His models, he declares, are “Phidias and Praxiteles”, and he will do nature in the grand idealist way, in capital letters: “I mean to do the Morning; I mean to do the Night! I mean to do the Ocean and the Mountains; the Moon and the West Wind” (1878/1969: 95). Like Tasso he conceives of his art in Platonic, idealist terms. His creative process begins with an ‘idea’, an inspiration for a new work that is at the same time a vision of that work in the state of perfection. “Roderick lost his temper time and again with his models, who offered but a gross degenerate image of his splendid ideal”, the narrator comments approvingly (1878/1969: 87).¹⁴ Rowland shares this classicist-idealist aesthetic. He cannot see Roderick becoming a great artist in the American wilderness; rather, he tells Striker, the young artist must learn by “looking at models and imitating them” (1878/1969: 59). When Striker asks what kind of models he has in mind, Rowland replies, “the antique in the first place” (1878/1969: 59). Even much later,

¹³ Korff suggests that Tasso and Antonio embody idealism and realism respectively (1974: 178).

¹⁴ In the New York edition James underscores this idealism by revising the dinner party conversation, where Roderick originally announced that he was planning to sculpt Jesus in a “more realistic” way. In the later edition James changed this to “more idealistic.” In both versions Roderick continues: “The perfection of form, you know, to symbolize the perfection of spirit” (1878/1969: 94). The New York edition fails to eliminate the inconsistency between Roderick’s general idealism and the Leavenworth scenes, where the patron becomes the idealist and Roderick ridicules him for it.

when Roderick's failure to live up to these expectations is becoming apparent, Rowland still insists on framing his behavior in classical terms: in a letter to Cecilia he downplays Roderick's mental problems by calling him "a nervous nineteenth-century Apollo" (1878/1969: 204).¹⁵

The contradictory nature of Roderick's artistry, however, already surfaces in these very avowals of classicism. As the quotations in the previous paragraph indicate, James weaves a layer of allusions to the Romantic poets into his descriptions of Roderick and his art. The young artist's first major sculpture is likened to Endymion, the eponymous hero of the first major poem Keats presented to the public. When Roderick declares that he wants to sculpt the West Wind he inevitably evokes Shelley's famous poem. At other points in the novel he is linked with Byron and Rousseau (Graham 1975: 31). A more complex allusion, and one that reinforces the Tasso intertext, is Roderick's interest in Ariosto. By James's time Ariosto had been praised and claimed by many of the English Romantics; he was now a romantic poet both in the original sense of the chivalric romance and in the new, wider sense associated with the movement engendered by Wordsworth and Coleridge (Marshall 1934: 382–384). "This seems to mean", Adeline Tintner comments, "that Roderick's tastes are romantic and gallant [...]. It seems as if James identified Roderick with Ariosto, the person himself, for Ariosto, like Roderick, was forced against his will to study law and finally found a patron in the duke of Ferrara, though like Roderick he wanted to be free from a patron's supervision" (1987: 79–80).¹⁶

At first glance this is a very different set of associations than in Goethe's play, where Ariosto serves as a foil rather than a model for the artist-hero. It is important to note, however, that both texts distinguish the artist-hero's personality from his art. What Tintner says about Roderick also applies to Tasso: it is "the person himself" who has affinities with the romantic Ariosto, whereas their art is described in very different terms.¹⁷ It is telling, for instance, that the Ariosto

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¹⁵ Milliman (1994: 232–236). Viola Hopkins argues that Rowland in his neoclassicism "expresses James's own view of art" (1963: 68). On the "neoclassicist" tendency in James's early criticism and theory see Ward (1967: 4–5, 9–13). Graham reads Roderick as "idealist" but also "essentially Romantic" (1975: 34).

¹⁶ Tintner's suggestion that James based Roderick Hudson on the description of Ariosto in William Roscoe's *Life of Leo the Tenth* is rather unconvincing since it requires a one-sidedly benevolent reading of Roderick. Also, her claim that Roderick "himself says a penchant for Ariosto is unbecoming to a sculptor" (Tintner 1987: 79) is questionable – it is Rowland who says that, and Roderick does not comment on it directly.

¹⁷ Antonio's claim, at the end of Act I, that Ariosto was a poet of measured beauty has all the appearances of a blatant misreading; cf. Heizmann (1988: 15) on the underlying poetics; Bennett (2010: 23) on his general unreliability in this passage. If the misreading is intentional, he too is

allusions only begin to appear halfway through *Roderick Hudson*. There is no talk of Romantic poets in the beginning, when the emphasis is still on Roderick's classicist idealism; indeed the narrator mentions at one point that Roderick "never read books" (1878/1969: 107). This has changed after the ball where Christina meets her future husband; it is in the following chapter that the Ariosto references occur. They are one of the means by which James changes our perspective on Roderick, who is now increasingly put in a romantic light. All the references are to Roderick's personality, not his work. Roderick even seems to use Ariosto as a convenient excuse to lay aside his work when he argues that unlike this romantic poet he cannot just go out into nature and find subjects for his (classicist) sculptures. "It may be noted", the narrator interposes as if to caution against the romanticist promise, "that Rowland had heard him a dozen times affirm the flat reverse of all this" (1878/1969: 162–163). The uses to which James puts the Ariosto intertext is paradigmatic for his general portrayal of his artist-hero: Roderick is a classicist artist increasingly hampered by a romantic personality.¹⁸

The notion of a romantic personality did not exist at the time Goethe wrote his play – Friedrich Schlegel's redefinition of romanticism was still a few years off – but Tasso already exhibits several of the character traits that would later be associated with the Romantic artist.¹⁹ He is highly sensitive, reacts emotionally and impulsively, and tends to dramatize his situation. He shifts quickly from confidence to melancholy, from exultation to dejection and despair. He is a superior artist, a genius who creates intuitively, on the spur of the moment, but is never satisfied with what he creates. Nevertheless he demands respect and freedom for his artistic pursuits. "In poesy and thought I will be free", he says. "In act the world doth limit us enough" (1851: ll. 2305–2306). All of these aspects recur in later, Romantic adaptations of the Tasso figure, the most influential of which was Byron's "The Lament of Tasso" (1817).²⁰

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using Ariosto to comment (unfavorably) on Tasso's personality: after all, Ariosto did succeed as both poet and courtier.

18 Along similar lines, the allusion in Rowland's name to Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* seems to work on a psychological level: the contrast with Ariosto's hero, who loses his mind over his love for Angelica, highlights Rowland's inability to follow through on his emotions. (Note the idealizing religious touch of the names of Angelica and Mary).

19 On Goethe's later attitude to the German Romantic movement see Hoffmeister (1984: 21–47). On the German Romantics' responses to *Torquato Tasso* see Schwan (1995: 102–122). The most stringent reading of *Torquato Tasso* as a critique of the (Romantic) poet-genius is Korff (1974: 168–183).

20 Byron certainly knew that Goethe, whom he admired, had written a play about Tasso, but since the play had not yet been translated into English it is doubtful whether he was familiar with

Byron's widely-read poem marked a peak of the Tasso vogue of the early nineteenth century. It framed Tasso as what was becoming known as a 'Byronic hero' and thus as the prototypical Romantic poet, "loving passionately but hopelessly and beyond his station, the victim of political oppression, maintaining his dignity and essential nobility of heart through intense and prolonged suffering".²¹ This image became so popular that it was widely believed to be true, and it still pervades Milman's 1850 *Life of Tasso*, the most likely biography for James to come across (Brand 1965: 218). James must also have heard of "The Lament of Tasso". He appreciated Byron's poetry, and several of the tales he wrote around the time of *Roderick Hudson* feature Byronic characters.²² Roderick Hudson is in many respects a Romantic, and in some respects even a Byronic figure. We meet him in the American backwoods, where he makes great art untouched by the corruptions of established taste. Childlike, impulsive, and spontaneous, he embodies the Romantic ideal of the 'original genius' and displays the natural, effortless superiority of the Byronic hero. His defiance of cultural norms and restrictions continues in Italy and gradually extends to his family and friends. To the very end, the only dictates he will accept are those of his own feelings. When his selfishness has alienated him from his environment he shifts between self-exaltation and despair; like Byron's Tasso he feels dead in this world and, it seems, expects amelioration from the next.²³

What distinguishes James from Byron is the distance he keeps from his hero. Like the Byronic characters in James's tales, Roderick is an object of analysis rather than an authorial spokesman (Tintner 1981a: 58). Most critics have followed this lead and read Roderick as an ambivalent or even a negative figure; the novel as a whole has been called "an attack on the popular romantic stereotype of

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it. Other important adaptations in a Romantic spirit include the fictional diary *Les Veillées du Tasse* (1800; English translation 1828), Baudelaire's sonnet "Le Tasse en prison" (1844), and – by a writer James admired – Victor Cherbuliez' *Le prince vitale* (1864).

21 Brand (1965: 205); Hewitt (1987: 431–446); Thorslev (1962).

22 Maves (1973: 12); Tintner (1981a: 52–53). Even in James's late novels there are traces of his continual engagement with the Romantic heritage (see Fogel 1981).

23 On Roderick as a Romantic hero see Dupee (1951: 87–88); Graham (1975: 28–41); Putt (1967: 98); Tintner (1987: 69, 82). Beside the Byronic hero, another Romantic prototype to which both *Torquato Tasso* and *Roderick Hudson* can be related is Goethe's own *The Sorrows of Young Werther*; cf. Atkins (1973: 5–7); Martin (1986). Many other critics refer to him as a small-capitals 'romantic' but not specifically as a representative of the historical movement. A very different kind of argument comes from Charles Schug, who claims that James's aesthetics was built on Romantic values like organicism, creativity, and experience, and thus prefigured the "Romantic form" he sees as characteristic of the "modern novel" (1979: 3).

the artist” (Milliman 1994: 232).²⁴ In this respect it is certainly much closer to Goethe than to Byron. Goethe’s Tasso is a proto-Romantic, Roderick Hudson a belated Romantic, but neither Goethe nor James are Romantic enough to identify with their heroes. They share two main reservations toward the Romantic genius: his lack of moral responsibility and his pathological inclinations.

The question of the artist’s moral responsibility to society was of limited interest to most Romantics. Where it was raised it was rejected outright and served as little more than a foil to the ideal of artistic freedom. In *Torquato Tasso* and *Roderick Hudson*, by contrast, the artist’s responsibility to his environment is a central aspect and an authoritative category for the evaluation of the hero’s stature. Both heroes are accused of selfishness by their friends (Tasso by the Princess, Roderick by Rowland); indeed, their selfishness seems to be an integral part of their artistic achievement. Roderick can craft his impressive sculptures because he is able to focus on his ideal and exclude all other considerations until the work is done. He is, James Tuttleton suggests, “a type of pure artistic egotism, a latter-day New England Shelley” (1993: 102). Goethe’s Tasso has accomplished more, and over a longer time, than Roderick, but as Staiger argues he might have needed a very similar kind of egotism in order to sustain his self-confidence. “Only a naively egotistic, headstrong mind, who widely overestimates his own role on the world’s stage, is able to assert himself against the whole beyond his first youth”, Staiger says, but the consequences are very similar to what Roderick experiences: “he pays for the bliss of hubris with tremendous doubts as to the value of his existence as soon as his genius leaves him, [...] the harmony dies down and the Other—‘Reality’—suddenly closes in on the sobered spirit” (1957: 399; my trans.). It is at this point that the exaggerated self deflates and leaves the artist with nothing to fall back on – neither a sustainable self nor meaningful social ties. Tasso escapes into pastoral daydreams of tending the Princess’ garden or visiting his estranged sister; Roderick is driven from one place to the next, from one person to the next, but fails to regain any sort of viable self.

James links the romantic artist’s lack of moral responsibility with his pathological inclinations. In this he follows Goethe’s controversial pronouncement in his *Conversations with Eckermann*, “I [...] should define the classic by the word *healthy*, the romantic by the word *sickly*” (Eckermann 1852: 285). The *Conversations* were one of Goethe’s best-known books in nineteenth-century England and America, not least because of Margaret Fuller’s acclaimed 1838 translation,

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²⁴ See also Beebe (1964: 217–219); Cargill (1971: 26–32); Poirier (1960: 11, 25). On the reception of Goethe’s *Tasso* beside and against the Romantic version see Brand (1965: 210); Schwan (1995: 112–116).

which James is likely to have known (Schultz 1942: 174–175). Goethe's statement expresses his later estrangement from the Romantic movement, but the fundamental differences between his conception of the artist and the Romantics' are already tangible in *Torquato Tasso*. Rather than a misunderstood genius, Tasso is described by the other characters as a medically sick man. "Better it were to remedy his pain, / With the physician's aid attempt a cure", Alfonso says about his paranoia, and as his condition is declining Tasso refers to himself as "sick" (*krank*) on several occasions (1851: ll. 328–329; ll. 2384, 2753). The most influential explanation for Tasso's decline came from Goethe himself: the play and its protagonist, he told Caroline Herder, dramatized the "disproportion of talent with life" (Gräf 1968: 309; my trans.). This enigmatic statement, much debated in criticism, indicates Goethe's ambivalent stance on his protagonist. In a favorable, romantic reading it describes the clash of a superior genius with the necessities of social life (Schmidt 1985: 336–337). If, however, "life" is taken to express the natural morality (*Sittlichkeit*) of an ideal society – a persistent idea in Goethe's thought – the artist stands as a quasi-pathological outsider incapable of living up to the ideal (Korff 1974: 173).

The ideal values that frame this conflict in *Torquato Tasso* have vanished eighty years later, when James is staging Roderick Hudson's clash with life. Neither is Roderick's social environment an ideal society in any way, nor does his talent seem to be all that disproportionate, quite apart from the fact that his downfall is caused by pursuits other than artistic. Roderick, too, is described in pathological terms toward the end, and like Goethe's Tasso he is riddled with self-pity and melancholy. While Tasso's melancholy had all the symptoms of a serious medical condition, however, Roderick's comes across variously as laziness, posture, and lack of willpower.²⁵ With this reversal James emphasizes the construct-ness of many of the values that anchor Goethe's drama – and the Romantics' self-conception – in a stable epistemology. It is only in an epistemology grounded in a shared idea of "the necessary course of the Whole" that tragedy can arise from the disproportion of talent with life, as Goethe himself pointed out in his early speech "On Shakespeare Day" (1771/1992: 11; my trans.). In *Torquato Tasso* stability is guaranteed by the supreme authority of the patriarch, Duke Alfonso, whose absence in *Roderick Hudson* leaves a void none of the many self-declared authorities can fill.

It is not surprising, then, that many readers have seen in Roderick a "melodramatic" rather than a tragic figure (Poirier 1960: 12). The difference becomes clearest in the death-vision that both heroes experience toward the end. Tasso's

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²⁵ Valk (2002: 118–132); Dunbar (1952: 113).

vision is bound up with a moment of tragic recognition. “Alas! I am self-banish’d”, he exclaims in the last scene. “Now let mine anguish’d heart recall how fair / What, as in sport, I’ve madly flung aside. [...] Perchance I might recover! Never more!” (1851: ll. 3383–3400). Roderick’s vision, by contrast, begins with a call for pity, remains unaffected by self-recognition, and strikes the reader as a Byronic posture as much as a genuine moment of despair. “Pity me my friend”, are Roderick’s first words after their retreat to the Swiss Alps. “Look at this lovely world and think what it must be to be dead in it!” (1878/1969: 310). While Rowland is still trying to comfort him, Roderick turns the moment into yet another occasion for self-celebration. “Say that he trembled in every nerve with a sense of the beauty and sweetness of life; that he rebelled and protested and struggled”, he implores posterity, already adopting the third person for biographical effectiveness. The pathological aspect of his frenzy becomes apparent in Rowland’s brief, disillusioned reaction: he simply asks, “are you insane?” (1878/1969: 311). Roderick’s only moment of genuine recognition comes days later, when he hears of Rowland’s love for Mary: he realizes his behavior “must have appeared simply hideous” (1878/1969: 340) and walks off into his death. Where Tasso clings to his rival and mentor in the end, Roderick breaks all ties with those around him and, incapable of placing himself in (their) society, escapes into what Rowland ambivalently calls his “transcendent egotis[m]” (1878/1969: 337). James does not seem to set much store in vague Romantic explanations like melancholy. He scrutinizes the artist’s psyche and looks for explanations in objective factors such as the artist’s interaction with his social environment. Melancholy, like creative frenzy, begins to appear as a Romantic construct rather than a medical condition.

This analytical attitude toward the artist-hero, which Goethe shares with James, arguably marks a major innovation in their respective genres and merits a closer look in conclusion of our comparative discussion. On the technical side, both texts work with markers of unreliability to establish a distance between the hero and the (implied) author. Tasso’s paranoia is the most obvious case as it is increasingly undermined by contrasting evidence from previous scenes. The authorial position is taken over by other characters, including his rival Antonio, who in the last act asks with full authority, “What’s his suspicion but a troubled dream?” (1851: l. 2921). Both texts use the other characters as ‘reflectors’ to establish a more objective perspective on the hero. Unlike Hamlet or Schiller’s Don Carlos, for example, Tasso is introduced through lengthy conversations of others *about* him before he gets to speak for himself. He recedes into the background again toward the middle of the play, where for long passages he is only perceived through the eyes of others. It is perhaps no accident that Goethe decided, against dramatic convention, to include two characters with identical names from his historical sources: the etymology of “Leonora” – “the other one” –

hints at the reflective function these characters fulfill in his dramatization of the artist-in-society. Roderick, too, is described by various acquaintances (and shaped in Rowland's central consciousness) before he makes his first appearance in the novel. In another distancing twist, many of the protagonists' statements, though not entirely unfounded, are undermined by their tendency to dramatize and exaggerate (Dieckmann 1974: 105). Moreover, the ideal reader Goethe once envisioned for *Torquato Tasso* – “a young man of good family, with sufficient intellect and sensibility and an adequate education such as is acquired among accomplished men of the higher and highest classes” (Grawe 1981: 93; my trans.) – sounds very much like James and his ideal readers in his ability to identify with the hero's situation and at the same time to examine it objectively. One critic even suggests that young James's resolve to “study man” internally and externally was directly inspired by his reading Goethe.²⁶

The differences between *Torquato Tasso* and *Roderick Hudson* are obvious. One is a play, the other a novel; one lets the protagonist speak for himself in long monologues, the other gives us the protagonist as perceived by his friend (and rival) as told by an auctorial narrator. Everything we learn about Roderick has come through these two filters; we are never shown his inner life except in a few enigmatic statements and exclamations. Nevertheless, looking at Goethe's play with James's novel in mind alerts us to the fact that the play also has its reflective elements. For its first production in 1807, Goethe deleted or shortened many of Tasso's monologues and shifted the focus from the interior to the exterior. His contemporary and one-time guest Jean-Jacques Ampère wrote home to his father, the famous scientist, that Goethe held Tasso “always at a distance” and thus gave the play a “novelistic” quality (1875: 447; my trans.).²⁷ It is in these aspects that the play seems to foreshadow James's reserved attitude toward his artist-hero. Another lesson it might have taught James, though he did not put it to its full use yet in *Roderick Hudson*, is the valorization of detailed, nuanced character development over dramatic plot – a shift noted by several of the earliest readers of *Torquato Tasso* in Goethe's circle (Hinderer 1980: 169). One manifestation of the distance both writers kept from their protagonists is the ambivalent ending, which they brought to mastery in their respective genre – one thinks of *Iphigenia in Tauris* and *Faust*, *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove*. Refusing to synthesize or reconcile either the protagonists among each other or the artist and the world, both Goethe and James sparked vivid critical discussions and ensured

²⁶ Kelley (1965: 54); cf. Staiger (1957: 425).

²⁷ “[...] toujours à distance, toujours romanesque”. On Goethe's revisions and their effects see Atkins (1973: 10); Blumenthal (1951: 59–85); Grawe (1981: 81–84).

that the characters and their dramatic conflicts lived on in the minds of their readers.²⁸

Finally, there is historical significance in the observation that both Tasso and Roderick are partial and ultimately discarded versions of their authors. Goethe himself acknowledged autobiographical traits in the Tasso figure and hinted at his personal investment in the plot, though often in ambivalent terms (1993: 182).²⁹ As mentioned above, both Tasso and Antonio have been read as authorial representatives, either in opposition to the other or, most often, as a ‘duality’: a successful writer *and* statesman, Goethe embodies himself in both characters and studies their interaction but also their shortcomings.³⁰ And indeed, both the text itself and Goethe’s comments on it suggest that he was already exploring the strategy of the literary work as self-objectification that the modernists, James among the first, would later bring to fruition (Müller 2010: 14–16, 127–133). Tasso serves not as a spokesman for his author but as a potential self deployed for critical analysis through the fictional text. As Staiger points out, however, the objective tendency in *Torquato Tasso* is still entwined with the subjective. “Everywhere he is wholly immersed”, Staiger says of Goethe, “and everywhere he is still watching attentively” (1957: 418; my trans.).³¹ In *Roderick Hudson* these two aspects are embodied in the two main characters: Roderick is wholly immersed, Rowland is watching attentively. The very setup of the novel shows that for James the hero-as-spokesman was not even an option anymore. The mediating narrator figure was only the first of many strategies he explored to establish analytical distance between the reader and the characters, particularly between himself and the artist figures to whom he would devote many of his stories and some of his novels. Both Goethe and James use such distancing devices to frame the Romantic artist in terms of their complex, wide-ranging reflections on aesthetics and artistry. And in the wider perspective of nineteenth-century literary history, they frame the career of Romanticism from its troubled conception to its supersession by the epistemology and aesthetics of modernism.

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²⁸ On the ambivalent ending of *Torquato Tasso* see among others Atkins (1973: 20); Hinderer (1980: 182); Japp (2007: 109–110); Staiger (1957: 424); for a comprehensive summary of interpretations of the ending see Grawe (1981: 236–247).

²⁹ For influential readings of Tasso as an autobiographical figure see Fischer (1890: 15–16); Grawe (1981: 125–130); Rasch (1954: 12–15).

³⁰ Gille (2003: 39); Wagner (1995: 92–96).

³¹ See also Viëtor (1949: 91).

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