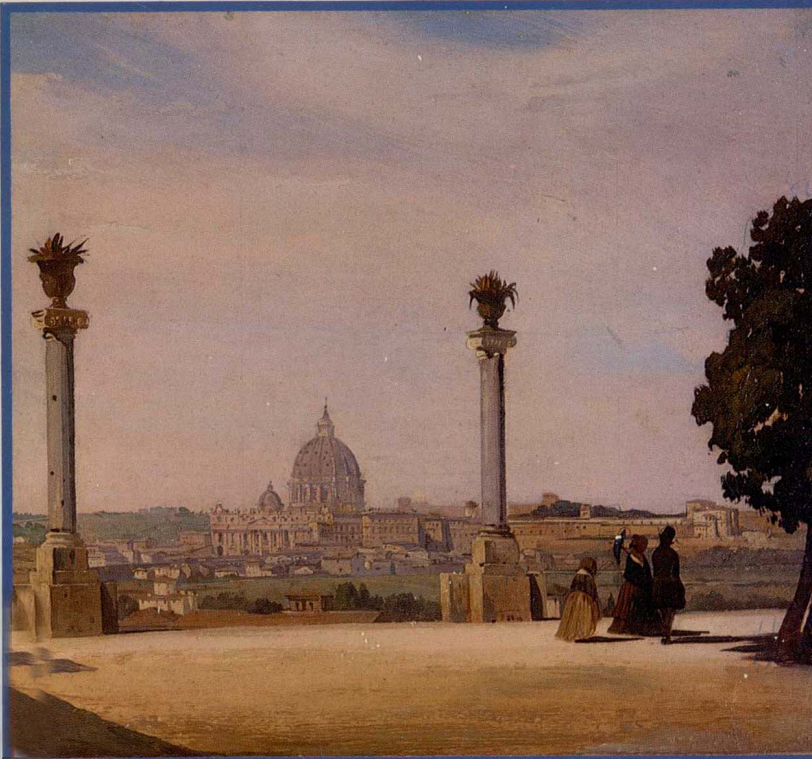


THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

HENRY JAMES  
RODERICK HUDSON



With an introduction by  
Tony Tanner

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*Roderick Hudson*



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TONY TANNER

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## INTRODUCTION

'We are the disinherited of Art!' he cried. 'We are condemned to be superficial! We are excluded from the magic circle. The soil of American perception is a poor little barren, artificial deposit. Yes! We are wedded to imperfection. An American, to excel, has just ten times as much to learn as a European. We lack the deeper sense. We have neither taste, nor tact, nor force. How should we have them? Our crude and garish climate, our silent past, our deafening present, the constant pressure about us of unlovely circumstance, are as void of all that nourishes and prompts and inspires the artist, as my sad heart is void of bitterness in saying so! We poor aspirants must live in perpetual exile.'

Thus the voluble, excitable little American painter, Theobald, in James's story 'The Madonna of the Future' (1873): his outburst summarizes a series of complaints about America which had been variously voiced by earlier writers such as Fenimore Cooper and Hawthorne (who wrote 'no author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case in my dear native land'), and would be constantly reiterated by James himself, in more or less subtle forms and with variant emphases. However they, and others, chose to phrase it, the complaint is at bottom the same - America simply does not contain the needful material to nourish and stimulate the artist, no matter what he might construe that 'material' as consisting of. (Writers like Emerson, Melville, and Whitman, of course disagreed passionately.) Europe, on the other hand, whatever else might be said of it, indisputably contained 'material' - if anything, an excess of it. Thus the figure of the starved American would-be artist venturing into Europe, enjoying or undergoing what James would later call - referring to his own experience - 'the

banquet of initiation', recurs from quite an early date in American fiction. Not that the case 'for' Europe goes unanswered, nor that the results of the initiation are unambiguously happy. Very far from it. To return to James's tale – the first he wrote on this theme – Theobald is answered by the amiable (and wealthy) travelling American who has just made his acquaintance: 'Nothing is so idle as to talk about our want of a nutritive soil, of opportunity, of inspiration, and all the rest of it. The worthy part is to do something fine! There's no law in our glorious Constitution against that. Invent, create, achieve!' That was also a part of James speaking. To do just that Theobald has been saturating himself with classic Italian art in Florence for many years. But he has yet to produce. The narrator half-believes in Theobald's genius, and half-mistrusts his endless high-pitched monologues about art and 'the ideal'. 'If my friend was not a genius, he was certainly a monomaniac.' Moreover he sees that the inordinate abundance of artistic and aesthetic stimuli in a place like Florence may over-stimulate, indeed overwhelm, the eager American aspirant: 'there could be no better token of his American origin than this high aesthetic fever. The very heat of his devotion was a sign of his devotion; those born to European opportunity manage better to reconcile enthusiasm with comfort.' Theobald has been living with a high aesthetic temperature for years, sustaining himself with the illusion (self-deception) that he will one day paint a new masterpiece of the Madonna ('The Madonna of the Future'). It is an important part of the story that the narrator who is a benevolent man, even willing to act as his patron and pay him, is also the figure who punctures Theobald's illusions (about himself, about the 'ideal' beauty of the woman Theobald idolizes, about his refusal to enter into 'the vulgar effort and hazard of production'). He tells him a few home truths, as it were – in an attempt to galvanize him into action; but 'instead of giving wholesome impetus to his talent, I had brutally paralysed it.' The ambiguous results of well-intentioned patronage were to be examined at much greater length in *Roderick Hudson*.

Theobald retreats into silence and hiding and when the concerned narrator finally tracks him down he finds Theobald in a state of almost catatonic inertia in front of a single canvas – on which he was supposedly painting his great Madonna. The narrator approaches the canvas. ‘I can hardly say that I was surprised at what I found – a canvas that was a mere dead blank, cracked and discoloured by Time. This was his immortal work!’ Theobald, drained of his sustaining, intoxicating enthusiasm and self-deception, simply collapses. ‘I’m a dawdler! I’m a failure! I shall do nothing more in this world. You opened my eyes; and, though the truth is bitter, I bear you no grudge.’ He is ‘paralysed’; he sinks into ‘an extraordinary lethargy’ and thence into death. Thus, from the first, James was marking and exploring the hazards and dangers, for an American, of the great European banquet of initiation. Among other things, over-excitement might very well turn into impotence. That blank canvas is a monitory object for all American aspirant artists who seek their material in Europe – including James himself. Roderick Hudson’s decline is curiously similar to that of Theobald; just as the narrator – benevolently helping/fatally interfering – develops into Rowland Mallet. One other aspect of this crucial tale may be mentioned. Near his death Theobald complains: ‘I’m the half of a genius! Where in the wide world is my other half? Lodged perhaps in the vulgar soul, the cunning, ready fingers of some dull copyist or some trivial artisan who turns out by the dozen his easy prodigies of touch!’ There is just such a figure in the tale, an ingenious Italian charlatan who cynically goes in for ‘caricature, burlesque’ and makes vulgar little figures of men and women (usually in ‘some preposterously sentimental conjunction’!) as cats and monkeys. ‘Cats and monkeys, – monkeys and cats, – all human life is here!’ – such is his *aesthetic credo*. The narrator, of course, finds them ‘peculiarly cynical and vulgar. Their imitative felicity was revolting.’ This figure of the slick, cynical, profoundly vulgar European artist – productive and commercially successful in his way – is of course included to contrast with the ineffably non-

productive, hopelessly 'idealistic' American Theobald. The dichotomy is, of course, too much of a simplification. James knew very well that art did not have to be either empty idealism or – let us say – copulating trash. But he was concerned to mark possible extremes. And in *Roderick Hudson* that deft but coarse Italian charlatan would emerge as the infinitely more complicated and subtle figure of Gloriani.

To set James's exploration of the theme of the fate of the American artist in Europe in some perspective, it is helpful to consider briefly the first major American novel really to set up this situation and attempt to explore it, namely Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860). This is not only Hawthorne's most ambiguous book, but one of the most problem-ridden books ever produced by an American. It reveals ambiguous attitudes towards art, nature, law, religion, passion, Europe and America – to go no further. Here let me just summarize some of the ambiguous attitudes towards art contained in the book.

It opens in a sculpture gallery and introduces the four main characters, three of whom are artists. Miriam, of some exotic European descent, is a painter whose pictures lack technical merit but are full of passion and colour. In her own person she is an ungraspable mystery, like those 'images of light' of 'apparent tangibility' which prove to be forever out of reach. Her works are of two kinds: those depicting terrible female passions released – Jael driving the nail through the temples of Sisera, Judith and Holofernes, Herodias receiving the head of John the Baptist; and sketches of 'domestic and common scenes' – an infant's shoe, for instance – in all of which she has included a figure 'apart', an 'observer' excluded from the felicity he or she gazes on. This we know to be in line with Hawthorne's own feelings about the isolating apartness of the artist, and James was to take up the ambiguities of the role of the 'observer' in *Roderick Hudson* and indeed much of his subsequent work. Miriam's studio, almost totally curtained off from daylight, is seen as the 'outward type of a poet's haunted imagination'. She is indeed an artist of the interiority



of the human mind and heart. Hilda, an innocent young American girl, is by contrast an expert copyist. One day she shows Miriam a very felicitous copy of Guido's Beatrice Cenci. She has caught the outward expression perfectly; but Miriam says: 'if I could only get within her consciousness! if I could but clasp Beatrice Cenci's ghost and draw it into myself!' Such an act of dangerous empathy horrifies Hilda, and this helps to explain Hilda's rather strange mid-way position between religion and art.

Hawthorne explains that when Hilda came to Europe she 'lost the impulse of original design' and 'ceased to aim at original achievement'. Hawthorne maintains that this is out of a sense of reverence for the great religious paintings of the past; her copying is thus akin to a religious activity as, in all humility, she attempts to recapture the religious feeling which produced the originals. But we may note that by restricting herself to copying, Hilda safely removes herself from any of the possible dangers involved in the process of artistic creation. And she will never be threatened by the 'blank canvas'. Just as she is somehow both in Rome but not touched by it, just so she wants some contact with art, without any of the contamination which, to her delicate senses, often seems to hover around it. In the geography of the book Rome is often associated with graves, catacombs, cellars, labyrinths, darkness, depths of both time and space, decay, a contagious mistiness, and so on, even while its great beauties are also referred to. (James's Rome was to be an altogether more 'golden' affair, though not without its dangers.) Hilda, by contrast, is all too obviously a creature of the higher air, living at the top of a tower, associated with doves and the pure white light, a believer in 'ideality' who disdains all commerce with problematical human passions. She maintains her 'maiden elevation' and one feels that her resolute virginity, of mind as of body, really cuts her off, or defends her - Hawthorne cannot make up his mind - from any deep appreciation of Rome - or art. She is innocent, cold, pitiless, and to us priggish. For good or bad reasons she effectively abstains from art even while

practising it. This is the significance of her being a copyist.

Kenyon, another American, may seem to be rather different and more open to Rome. He too believes in the ideality of art – for him everything is an emblem, a symbol, or contains a meaning, a moral, and so on (a distinctly Puritan cast of mind). But the main work he is engaged on is a sculpture of Cleopatra (taken, as Hawthorne admits, from a work done at the time by William Wetmore Story – of whom more anon), and this suggests a degree of recognition of the passionate, the carnal, the erotic/exotic in human experience. But Kenyon is more deceptive than Hilda. At a crucial moment Miriam comes to Kenyon's studio. Her solitude and the miserable secret of her past are weighing so heavily on her that she effectively appeals to him to act as her confidant. But he draws back, and she detects this sudden contraction, his unwillingness to become implicated in her life. It is hard to estimate how much irony is intended, but it is fairly devastating. The American artist is there in Rome, working on a large figure of the most voluptuous, passionate, sexually wilful female in history or legend; yet when a real, live, passionate woman comes to him as if in request of some contact and recognition, he closes himself off. For this artist it is one thing to mould dead images of mythical, legendary, emblematical figures; it is, apparently, quite another to open himself to the disturbing complexities and intensities of actual experience. (Roderick Hudson is to prove more genuinely open and susceptible to the female – in every sense.)

Hawthorne is not by any means endorsing this self-protective kind of Puritan artist. He himself refers to 'those dark caverns, into which all men must descend, if they would know anything beneath the surface and illusive pleasures of existence', and he seems to have felt that if an artist was to connect with any reality beyond the surface illusions of life he or she would have to become some kind of 'Descendentalist' (I use the word to contrast with the optimistic philosophy of Transcendentalism which was prevalent in mid-nineteenth century New England). But Kenyon and Hilda will finally

have nothing to do with any such 'Descendentalism'. They remain impermeable to Europe, and to a full sense of the darker depths of human experience, and it is fitting that by the end they plan to return home and marry. On the other hand, when Hawthorne wants to justify the role of the artist he does so in terms of idealities rather than depths. 'Yet we love the artists, in every kind . . . They were not wholly confined within the sordid compass of practical life; they had a pursuit which, if followed faithfully out, would lead them to the beautiful . . . Their actual business . . . necessarily illuminated their conversation with something akin to the ideal.' When Hilda is going through her state of depression, she all but loses faith in art altogether. The key chapter is called 'The Emptiness of Art Galleries': as she wanders through the galleries she is touched by 'the icy demon of weariness'. The great Italian religious paintings now seem to her to be repetitive and dead, 'a lifeless substitution of the artificial for the natural'. She looks at them and sees 'but a crust of paint over an emptiness'. Interestingly, only the Flemish masters of domestic realism survive this disenchanted gaze. Their pictures of simple things, offered in all their secular opacity just as things, seem preferable to the false transparencies of those paintings which invite the viewer to look through them to a higher, ideal, religious world. For Hawthorne this preference for the opaque over the transparent should be a temporary aberration. But so entangled - confused, perhaps - is he among idealities, surfaces and depths, that it is impossible to detect any stable aesthetic maintained by the book. His two American artists retreat - flee - to America, having visited the great banquet of initiation but not, truly, sampled any of the fare. James could see the problems and ambivalences that pervaded Hawthorne's crucial work. But he goes more deeply into the ambiguities of these problems. When his Roderick Hudson comes to the great banquet of initiation he stays to eat - and drink - his fill.

While James was writing *Roderick Hudson* - 1874-5 - he was effectively coming to his own decision to settle in Europe. In 1903 - long after he had domiciled himself in England, he

published a kind of biography entitled *William Wetmore Story and his Friends*. It was the year which saw the publication of *The Ambassadors*, one year after *The Wings of the Dove*, and one year before *The Golden Bowl*. It was written, then, at the peak of James's last major phase as a writer, and it casts a most interesting light on what he always regarded as his first real novel (he effectively banished the extremely interesting *Watch and Ward* (1870) from his own canon). Story was an American who had given up the study of law to come to Rome to be a sculptor (James made his acquaintance in Rome in 1873) and to that crucial extent he offers a real-life prototype for Roderick Hudson – though to be sure the differences in their 'lives' are as marked as the similarities. In re-creating – re-invoking – the Rome of Story, with its colony of American artists, James inevitably casts light on his own account of an American who gave up law to come to Rome to be an artist. So I will quote what I regard as some illuminating passages from this nostalgic evocation by James of a Rome – and an atmosphere – in which his own *Roderick Hudson* was incubated.

As far as James is concerned Europe *now* is very different from Europe *then*. 'Europe, for Americans, has, in a word, been *made easy*; it was anything but easy, however much it was inspiring, during that period of touching experiment, experiment often awkward to drollery too, in which the imagination of the present introduced must thus betray at the outset an inclination to lose itself.' It was a time when Americans, in an almost naïve and childlike way, were beginning to discover Europe as for the first time. 'The dawn of the American consciousness of the complicated world it was so persistently to annex is the more touching the more primitive we make that consciousness . . . the interest is in its becoming perceptive and responsive, and the charming, the amusing, the pathetic, the romantic drama is exactly that process.' Just such a drama and such a process James had himself traced out in *Roderick Hudson*, a figure whose consciousness is indeed 'primitive'. James writes sympathetically about the plight of the would-be American artist at that time – 'I think of the artist-fraternity in

especial, the young Americans aspiring to paint, to build and to carve, and gasping at home for vital air . . .' This is exactly the state in which Rowland Mallet finds Roderick Hudson. William Story is of interest to James, not because of the quality of his art, which is not great, but because of his deliberate renunciation of America in favour of the 'European art-life'. He quotes Story as 'himself recording: 'I found my heart had gone over from the Law to Art, and I determined to go back to Rome.' Roderick's heart was never in law, but once in Rome it capitulates completely. There are of course important differences between the two figures. Story came from a liberal Puritan family with adequate means, while Roderick is a penniless Virginian (the fact of his Southern origin is important when considering his difference from the very New England Rowland Mallet - people from the southern states are, in James, generally more hedonistic, less conscience-ridden, and lazier than his New Englanders). Story was happily married and lived a long steady life, constantly, if often superficially, productive; Roderick's brief life is marked by instability, a fatal fitfulness of production, and most unhappy relationships with women. Yet Story's figures 'strike with predilection the note of passion let loose' and whereas Hudson's figures run a curious gamut - to be considered later - the note of 'passion let loose' begins to creep into his work as it veritably strides into his life. More important, of course, is the whole atmosphere of Rome, in particular as it contrasts with the air of moral fear and foreboding in New England. Referring to 'the suspended *fear* in the old, the abiding Puritan conscience' James alludes to the old image of the 'whip in the sky' and comments: 'The image holds generally, at any rate: the whip in the sky descends on the backs of those who happen not to be 'going' and makes it a necessity that they go. Where and why have ceased to matter; we move, with scarce a question, to the arbitrary lash. From the Italian sky of those days the whip was, in respect to all of its functions, blissfully absent . . .' The problem for Roderick Hudson is that, while the whip is absent from the Italian sky, it is constantly by his

side – albeit half-concealed – in the figure of Rowland Mallet. For Story the choice was relatively unattended by ambiguities and torments. Yet James reveals some of his abiding sense of the ambiguous results of expatriation. It is not exactly clear what or how much he is confessing when he asserts that ‘a man always pays, in one way or another, for expatriation, for detachment from his plain primary heritage’, but after recording the many felicities of Story’s Roman life, he asserts that ‘Story *paid* – paid for having sought his development even among the circumstances that at the time of his choice appeared not only the only propitious, but the only possible.’ Something, somehow, is missing from Story’s work – ‘Story therefore affects us as concurring, curiously, almost perversely, in some fine extravagant waste or leakage.’ It is strange to read the long-committed expatriate James commenting thus on a fellow expatriate. We can only wonder to what extent James is indirectly referring to himself. Conceivably he regarded his choice of England as putting him in a somewhat different category from those who chose Italy where there was, as he says simply, ‘too much’. So it is, he infers in a characteristically strange, rich image, that it was all too easy for Story, so that he never really extended himself. ‘Subjects float by, in Italy, as the fish in the sea may be supposed to float by a merman, who doubtless puts out a hand from time to time to grasp, for curiosity, some particularly iridescent specimen. But he has conceivably not the proper detachment for full appreciation.’ All in all, and gently enough, James rather remarkably concludes that we must ‘figure his career as a sort of beautiful sacrifice to a noble mistake’. Roderick Hudson’s career is also a sacrifice and a mistake – somewhat more dramatically figured than Story’s: just how much beauty and nobility there is in it, each reader of the novel may decide.

One problem seems to be involved in the difficulty of passing beyond initiation into something more mature. The image James uses is particularly appropriate in connexion with *Roderick Hudson*. ‘However, things but simmer and brew, at the best, in the silver cup of initiation, safe to clarify later in

the less brimming, if more precious vessel of acquired wisdom.' Roderick drinks deep of the silver cup of initiation – not to mention several less metaphorical potions; but it seems he cannot make the first step – or perhaps the second step – towards 'the precious vessel of acquired wisdom' (as, say, Strether does in *The Ambassadors*). James, in his introduction to the novel, feels constrained to apologize for the implausible rapidity of Roderick's deterioration: 'at the rate at which he falls to pieces, he seems to place himself beyond our understanding and sympathy.' Aesthetically, the point is debatable. But the picture of an American artist rather quickly 'falling to pieces' after an initial burst of great creative power, is perhaps more appropriate than James could have realized. It was Scott Fitzgerald who said that the lives of American writers contained no second acts, and there is something almost prophetic in James's picture of an American artist moving at such a pace (from the start Roderick does 'everything too fast' and characterizes himself as being driven by a 'demon of unrest') that he could have no energy left after the crowded first act of his life. Or energy enough only for suicide.

But whatever its effects, there is no mistaking the sheer golden magic of Rome – for James as much as for Story and Roderick. It was, as he intimates, less a place than a condition of consciousness. Thus he writes:

So, at any rate, fanciful as my plea may appear, I recover the old sense – brave even the imputation of making a mere Rome of words, talking of a Rome of my own which was no Rome of reality. That comes up as exactly the point – that no Rome of reality was concerned in our experience, that the whole thing was a rare state of the imagination, dosed and drugged, as I have already indicated, by the effectual Borgia cup, for the taste of which the simplest as well as the subtlest had a palate.

James's tone is one of fond recall; but for Roderick Hudson the silver cup of initiation had been all too effectually a Borgia cup.

## II

James first visited Rome – the actual place – in 1869. The effect on him was even stronger than he had anticipated. ‘From midday to dusk I have been roaming the streets. *Que vous en dirai-je?* At last – for the first time – I live! It beats everything: it leaves the Rome of your fancy – your education – nowhere. It makes Venice – Florence – Oxford – London – seem like little cities of pasteboard. I went reeling and moaning thro’ the streets, in a fever of enjoyment’ (Letter to William James – 30 Oct. 1869). Indeed at times he seems almost to have felt overwhelmed, as though it was really just too much. ‘And now as for this Rome, it seems a sadly vain ambition to attempt to give you any idea of its affect upon the mind. It’s so vast, so heavy, so multitudinous that you seem to require all your energy simply to bear up against it. Your foremost feeling is that of your own ignorance’ (Letter to Alice James – 7 Nov. 1869). And at times he revolted against the excessive presence of the Catholic ‘priests and churches’. ‘Their “picturesqueness” ends by making you want to go strongly into political economy or the New England school system’ (Letter to William James – 27 Dec. 1869). But such moods were passing ones. James returned to Cambridge in America in 1870, yet three years later he was back again, reaching Rome in December 1872. There was a fairly extensive American colony there by this time and he was quickly taken up by this society and met a whole range of people – among them Sarah Wister, Mrs Charles Sumner, Elena Lowe (a woman of exceptional appearance and distinguished by a melancholy air – she is conceivably a model for the enigmatic Christina Light in James’s novel), the Bootts (who were to appear, somewhat transformed, in *The Portrait of a Lady*), and of course William Wetmore Story. (‘I have rarely seen such a case of *prosperous* pretension as Story. His cleverness is great, the world’s good nature to him is greater’ so James wrote to Charles Eliot Norton in 1873.) There were other American artists, too, of varying merit and achievement: Luther Terry, an apparently



mediocre painter; Eugene Benson, whose landscapes James considered 'careful, and conscientious, but very uninspired'; Sarah Freeman Clark, whose drawings he declared to be 'mild'; J. Rollin Tilton, a 'queer genius' who suddenly fizzled out. As Leon Edel says, these figures must have influenced James in his depiction of the artists in *Roderick Hudson*, not only Roderick himself, but Singleton and Augusta Blanchard, and perhaps Gloriani (though I cannot agree with Edel when he suggests that Gloriani 'seems to be an Italian version of Story'). In 1874 James was in Florence and it was there that he started to write *Roderick Hudson* – as he fondly recalls in his own introduction. Indeed he is unusually specific about the various places in which he wrote the novel – Florence, the Black Forest, Boston and New York. He also stayed near Como (which he ascended in a thunderstorm) and passed through Switzerland. The importance of this particular itinerary is that in the course of it James was doing two things. He was writing *Roderick Hudson*, and he was coming to the decision to leave America for Europe permanently. The novel started to appear in the *Atlantic Monthly* in January 1875, and before the final instalments were out, James was back in Europe – this time, effectively, for good.

### III

Of his proposed novel, James wrote to William Dean Howells in 1874:

The theme is interesting, and if I do as I intend and hope, I think the tale must please. It shall, at any rate, have all my pains. The opening chapters take place in America and the people are of our glorious race; but they are soon transplanted to Rome, where things are to go on famously. *Ecco*. Particulars, including name (which, however, I'm inclined to have simply that of the hero), on a future occasion. Suffice it that I promise you some tall writing. I only fear that it may turn out taller than broad.

Roderick Hudson's name duly appeared as the title, but the first name – the first words – of the book are 'Rowland