

Henry James: “In the Minor Key”*

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In the spring of 1909 Henry James invited his feminist friend Violet Hunt to “think of [him] as henceforth in the pleasing & unaggressive minor key,” having just announced to her: “my pitch of life is lowered—which on the whole, at my advanced age, is an excellent thing” (qtd. in Secor 24-25).¹ What James meant to convey by this musical term “the minor key” (or indeed “the lower pitch”), beyond a humorous sense of chivalry² or else his exhaustion after a series of illnesses following the monumental task of preparing the *New York Edition*, is worth pursuing in the context of James’s

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¹ James was almost 66 years old when he wrote this letter to Hunt, who herself was 46.

² What I mean by this is his “unaggressive” to her generally more aggressive stance in life. The year before, in 1908, the not-so-shrinking Violet had helped to form the Women Writers’ Suffrage League; Hunt’s dalliance with (some would say “dominance” of) various men of James’s acquaintance (Wells, Ford Madox Hueffer) may have been known to him. See Hardwick’s *Life of Violet Hunt* (1990) for further details.

auditory imagination. In its entry for the figurative sense of the musical term “minor” (defined as “the sombre, plaintive, or subdued effect associated with minor chords and keys”) the *Oxford English Dictionary* reaches for James’s *Watch and Ward* (1871; 1878) to furnish its literary example: the climactic scene in which Roger Lawrence proposes to his ward Nora (whose “ear was still closed,” we are told, “to his uttermost meaning”). Here one finds Roger, as quoted by the *OED*, “pleading for very tenderness, in this pitiful minor key.”³ Over the course of his career, James’s notations of (and in) “the minor key” went from sounding the plaintive note in relationships—Roger and his ward, say, or Madame de Mauves and her husband (“it was not a man’s fault if his wife’s love of life had pitched itself once for all in the minor key” [*MMN* 253])—to subduing his own unwieldy materials into a more manageable, or more *minimal*, form. As his Prefaces attest, James would typically “strain the minor key ... almost to breaking” (a result, in part, of his “own appointed and incurable deafness to the major key”) in evocations of heroines such as Julia Bride and Pandora Day (*AN* 264, 273).⁴ In this essay I follow James’s fascination with this suggestive term at both ends of his career, from the tale “Madame de Mauves” (1874; 1878) and the contemporaneous French literary criticism, to the late Prefaces, touristic pieces and letters, demonstrating what I think it means to write, and finally to exist, “in the minor key” for a typically exuberant writer such as James. While he seems, in these earlier pieces, to associate “the minor key” with negative qualities such as “pitiful” and “melancholy,” taking his cue from the emotional range attaching to this musical key, and in the later texts with more positive values such as “pleasing” and “tender,” James often drops the musical sense of “minor key” altogether in favour of another set of associations, involving either “minority” (as small-scale or miniaturising) or else “keys” themselves, in an idiosyncratic process of what could be termed metaphorical drift. It is equally difficult to pin down James’s orientation towards this ambiguous phrase: his early handling of it would suggest that he is initially *dismissive* of characters

³ “Minor, adj. and n.” *OED Online*, Oxford UP, June 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/118931. The *OED* quotes from Ch. 8 of the single-volume first book edition (1878) of *Watch and Ward* (168). Alongside James’s “pitiful,” further dictionary examples under the subheading “minor-key” include the nouns “pathos” and “sentiment” and the adjectives “pitiful” and “sad.”

⁴ From the 1909 Prefaces to vol. 17 and 18 of the *New York Edition of the Novels and Tales of Henry James*, in which James treats “Julia Bride” and “Pandora,” respectively.

who operate "in the minor key"; however, reading his literary criticism of the same period alongside these remarks about his minor characters raises the possibility that the term is in fact *laudatory* (in a poet such as Gautier, for example), expressive of subtlety, complexity, and nuance. By the end of his career, James can be shown to take up "the minor key" as authentic to his own lived experience as someone physically beleaguered and depleted but at the height of his creative powers, and as someone poised at a fulcrum in time: occupying precisely the point where, as a cultural commentator and participant, he could look both forwards to the glaring publicity and supreme confidence of modern modes of communication ("the major key") and backwards to the delicacy and modesty of past forms of expression ("the minor key").

"A word of manifold signification": so begins the entry for "key" in Grove's original edition of *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1879-1883), which now bears his name.⁵ Other popular dictionaries of James's day show that "the minor key" was similarly manifold, as in this entry from Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1865): "that key, or arrangement of tones and semitones, which is chiefly used for solemn and mournful subjects" (841). The modern-day *Merriam-Webster* is even more discriminating on this topic, splitting the head sense of the term "minor-key" into its technical sense ("a musical key or tonality in the minor mode") and its figurative sense ("a mood of melancholy or pathos"). Such definitions take much of their suggestive force from the modifier "minor," which is to say "the lesser" of two things: that which is, comparatively speaking, on "a small or limited scale," or else executed in "a restrained manner."⁶ This may partly explain why melancholy, modesty and restraint have come to be associated with musical works composed in "the minor key." "There is a very common opinion," Grove's *Dictionary* continues in its entry for "key," "that the tone and effect of different keys is *characteristic...*" (52; my emphasis). Despite the reluctance of the author of

⁵ "Key." *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 2, 51. James owned two English language dictionaries, one British and one American: Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1866-70) in 4 vols. and Funk & Wagnall's *Standard Dictionary of the English Language* (1893-95) in 2 vols. Neither has an entry for "the minor key." See Leon Edel and Adeline R. Tintner, "The Library of Henry James, From Inventory, Catalogue, and Library Lists" (1982).

⁶ "Minor key, n." *Merriam-Webster Online*, Merriam-Webster, Inc., June 2019, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/minor%20key.

this entry to commit to such an “opinion” himself, it seems right to suggest that the sound of, and impression produced by, music written in the minor key is distinctive: Bach’s *Cello Suite no. 2 in D Minor* (BWV 1008); Schubert’s *Piano Sonata in A Minor* (D784); Grieg’s *Piano Concerto in A Minor* (Op. 16); Albinoni’s (technically Remo Giazotto’s) *Adagio in G Minor*; the opening strains (in C# minor) of Mahler’s *Fifth Symphony*. Each of these compositions is characteristically plaintive or melancholy, but to group them together in the category of works “in the minor key” would reduce them, since it would not allow for their complexity and variety, their many small departures from the minor key, nor would it allow for their distinctiveness from each other. Were this argument to be transposed to the field of literary composition, would the same objections be raised? This provokes further questions: how would a piece of fiction (or an essay, or a letter) written in “the minor key” strike the inner ear? Would its key signature, as it were, be as immediately communicable?

THE VOCAL INSTRUMENT

The nascent field of “auditory” Henry James Studies has produced at least two critics who consider James’s musical rhetoric: Daniel Hannah, in his account of James’s unembarrassed admission (to composer Georg Henschel) to “a certain lack of musicality” which lends “the rhetoric of music in his works its peculiar charge” (130); and Christopher Voigt, whose work on intonation in James takes some account (via Victorian classicist E.M. Cope’s commentaries on Aristotle) of the rhetorical concept of “tonality” (10). Of course, “tone,” as many others have pointed out, is one of James’s key terms, and with its applications in music and painting it has an important place in James’s conception of writing as continuous with these other artforms.⁷ Unlike “tone”, however, “key” has gone largely unremarked, despite its implications for the question of our sense of Jamesian musicality versus, say, his *un*musicality, his tone-deafness.

One of the first instances of the phrase “the minor key” in James’s writing occurs in his 1873 essay “Théophile Gautier,” revised and collected

⁷ In addition to the work of Daniel Hannah and Christopher Voigt, see the work of Sarah Campbell: in particular, her PhD dissertation “The Turn of the Ear: Reading for Speech in Henry James” (2008) and her essay “The Man Who Talked Like a Book, Wrote Like He Spoke” (2009).

in *French Poets and Novelists* (1878), in which he pays tribute to the minor-key tonalities of the Romantic-turned-Symbolist poet. In this affecting memorial essay James invokes "the clear, undiluted strain of Gautier's minor key," something he sets in contrast to another of his contemporaries, "the vast, grossly commingled volume of utterance of the author of *Men and Women* [i.e. Robert Browning]"—where "volume" as bound book shades into "volume" as loud noise. The imagined disparity is not so much one of key (a minor versus a major, say) as of scale (in the non-musical sense of small- or large-scale) and tone. James registers this difference in the singularity and clarity of Gautier's verse and poetic vision, which he here describes as "undiluted" but which elsewhere in the essay he describes as "localised" and "circumscribed," and the harder-to-characterise variety and "vastness" of Browning's "commingled" monologues ("Gautier" 356).⁸ James uses another musical term to preserve the gap between the tunefulness and tonic purity of Gautier's musical "strain" and the more aggressively modulative or remote-key Browning. This would appear to involve the poet in a delicate balancing act: realising purity and singleness of tone somehow without monotony (literally, "one tone" or "the same tone").⁹ James concludes this essay with a musical analogy for the mind and its creative faculty: "a man's supreme use in the world is to master his intellectual instrument and play it in perfection" ("Gautier" 356). For James, this "perfection" revolves on Gautier's ability to compose on a reduced scale: his miniaturising tendency.¹⁰

⁸ An example of Gautier's "minor-key" works (as quoted by James) is the "perfect little poem" 'L'art' in the collection *Émaux et Camées* (*Enamels and Cameos*, 1852). This might be contrasted with (although James does not) Browning's key-shifting monologue on the subject of art 'One Word More' in the volume *Men and Women* (1855).

⁹ "Strain, n.2." *OED Online*, Oxford UP, June 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/191172. The OED defines the musical senses of "strain" as "a definite section of a piece of music"; or, "a sequence of sounds; a melody, tune"; or, "a passage of song or poetry"; or, in a wider sense, and transferred from its musical sense, "Tone, style, or turn of expression; tone or character of feeling expressed; tenor, drift, or general tendency or character (of a composition or discourse)." Tone is important here because, when describing musical keys, the root note of the key is known as "the tonic": the most resolved note in a key. Anticipating and recognising departures from, and resolutions of, the tonic are often thought to be what makes music pleasing.

¹⁰ At the start of this essay James describes Gautier as "a French poet in his *limitations* even more than his gifts" and declares that "[c]ompleteness *on his own scale* is to our mind the idea he most instantly suggests" (355; my emphasis), both of which observations

A note of confusion is thus sounded in what James intends to convey by “the minor key”: in this instance, given his repeated emphasis on the “geniality” of Gautier rather than any sense of the poet’s melancholy, “the minor key” becomes something like “the small-scale,” and the particular pleasures (concentration, focus, fineness) such a form entails.¹¹ In this way, Gautier’s “minority” (in the sense of his inveterate miniaturising) is as much a feature of his style as any tonal qualities that might be characterised as “minor.”

THE FEMININE REGISTER

James was not alone in tuning in to the lyricism of Gautier: several French Romantic-era composers set his poems to melodies, notably Berlioz and Bizet. The refined mixture of sentiment and simplicity belonging to Gautier “at his purest” meant that for James, in the 1870s at least, Gautier’s “minor-key” works sounded a distinctly feminine note—feminine because of this term’s own connotations of sentimentality, simplicity, and purity, as well as qualities such as modesty and restraint. This does reveal the extent to which James’s characterisation of certain textual styles as feminine was informed by his widely-held beliefs on what constituted femininity in the period.¹² In his 1875 essay on “Madame de Sabran” (1749-1827), the Restoration letter-writer who was still remembered and discussed in James’s day, James elaborates on this theme of what it is to communicate in “the minor key,” an increasingly gendered key for him.¹³ Here, he writes:

suggesting the “distillation” (362) of the poet’s endeavour. Furthermore, James concludes: “our author’s really splendid development is inexorably *circumscribed*” (374; my emphasis).

¹¹ Some adjectives James uses to convey a sense of Gautier’s verse style are “light,” “superficial” and “genial.” The last of these is particularly at odds with a conception of Gautier as a writer in the musical “minor key.”

¹² In his 1877 *Galaxy* essay on “George Sand”, republished in *French Poets and Novelists* (1878), James remarks: “What was feminine in [Sand] was the quality of her genius; the *quantity* of it—its force, and mass, and energy—was masculine, and masculine were her temperament and character” (*Literary Criticism* 2: 716). This chimes with James’s estimation of the slightness or lightness of Gautier’s output, what one might call its *feminine* “quantity”.

¹³ This essay was also lightly revised and collected in *French Poets and Novelists* (1878), the version I use here.

Madame de Sabran's letters have in the direct way but a slender historical value, for they allude to but few of the important events of the time. ... Their compass of feeling is not wide ... If they are passionate, it is passion in the minor key, without any great volume or resonance. Yet for all that they are charming, simply because so far as they go they are perfect. Madame de Sabran had an exquisite talent for the expression of feminine tenderness, and a gift like this has an absolute value. ("Madame de Sabran" 651)

James's association of the "minor key" with softness, mellowness, mutedness, and sweetness, chimes with his description of Gautier serving as a counterpoint to the great "volume" of Browning—"volume" in the sense of both "loudness" and "quantity" or even (in this case) "significance." Aside from their "feminine tenderness", part of the "charm" of de Sabran's letters, no doubt, and part of their "absolute value," lies in their *pastness*: as a document of the decline of the First French Empire. However, as James says, her subject was rarely politics; what seems to have appealed most to him was her sentimental side. If one imagines her kind of "feminine tenderness"—"tenderness" being a key sense of "pathos"—as being conducted on a personal rather than a political level, then "the minor key" in the case of this understated belletrist communicates a pathos, delicacy, and fineness—again, a miniaturising skill—that must have resonated with James's own manner of expression. The negative grammatical construction of his subject's "passion" ("*without* any great volume or resonance") initially suggests a reduction, but it is more likely for James a compliment of the highest order; a "passion in the minor key" could never be "gross"—as with Robert Browning—in any of its senses, but especially: obvious, coarse, rude, dull, physical, corpulent, bloated.

The decline of the Second French Empire is the period in which James's delicately worked tale "Madame de Mauves" (1874; 1875; 1908) is set; it also dwells on (and in) "the minor key," this time in relation to a young American woman of fortune who has married a French nobleman, the Comte de Mauves, in the hope of acquiring something of his old-world chivalry and nobility; the ignoble Comte, on his part, merely hopes to acquire her dollars and carry on his innumerable affairs. We meet her, as the hero Longmore meets her, in her radically disillusioned (though not yet miserable) state. Initially Longmore is unsure of where to place the blame for the failed relationship. As the periodical and first book versions (published a year apart) have it: "there were times when our hero was almost persuaded against his finer judgement that he [the Count de Mauves] was really the most considerate of husbands, and that his wife

liked melancholy for melancholy's sake" (*MMC* 151).¹⁴ When he came to revise the tale for the *New York Edition* of 1908, James altered the wording thus: "there were times when Longmore was almost persuaded against his finer judgement that he was really the most considerate of husbands and that it was not a man's fault if his wife's love of life had pitched itself once for all in the minor key" (*MMN* 253). Judging by this variant, "melancholy for melancholy's sake" is synonymous with, if finally inferior to, "the minor key" in James's thinking, possibly because it sounds too self-indulgent, too whimsical for the "stoical" resignation of Euphemia; however, later in the story, James does preserve the more fitting phrase "self-contained melancholy," in all three versions of the text. Madame de Mauves, who is repeatedly described as a paragon of "purity" and "tenderness" and as having "tones" both "delicate" and "touching," is a perfect example of the feminine minor key, especially given that her "melancholy" suggests not so much "dejection" or "introspection" as a "tender, sentimental, or reflective sadness; sadness as a subject for poetry, or as a source of aesthetic pleasure" (*OED*).¹⁵ In this revision "the minor key" plays a crucial role in making the *NYE* text more colloquial, as the endpoint of the slangy sequence that begins with "not a man's fault" and runs through "love of life," "pitched itself" (another musical metaphor), and "once for all," to resolve on "the minor key." Ultimately, its substitution here suggests that it is a term that retains its sharpness for James across the span of his career: from the 1870s to the 1900s.

THE MINOR MODE

Turning to *Julia Bride*, in the tale of that name written in 1908, James reflects in his Preface of the following year that poor Julia had been "foreshortened ... to within an inch of her life," and he spends a large part of the Preface reliving the artistic problem of "how such a majestic mass could be made to

¹⁴ Edell's edition of the tale reprints the first British book edition of 1875, which does not appreciably differ from the first magazine version of the tale, published the year earlier in two instalments in *The Galaxy* 17 (Feb.-Mar. 1874).

¹⁵ "Melancholy, n." *OED Online*, Oxford UP, June 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/116007. The *OED* quotes from Ch. 5 of the 2nd vol. of the first book edition (1878) of *The Europeans*: "As with her charming undulating step she moved along the clean, grassy margin of the road, ... she was even conscious of a sort of luxurious melancholy."

turn round in a *nouvelle*." Wouldn't such larger-than-life heroines as Julia Bride and Daisy Miller, James asks—with their "note, so to call it, of multitudinous reference"—exceed the confines of short fiction, "strain the minor key ... almost to breaking?" (*AN* 262-63, 264, 263, 264).¹⁶ James imagines these constraints upon himself and his materials in pictorial or plastic terms as well as musical ones, and across the extent of his Prefaces "the minor exhibition" becomes associated with the "minor key": both of which connoted for James small-scale performances. Of "Fordham Castle" (1904) James writes in his 1909 Preface to *Daisy Miller* (among other tales): "I was but to feel myself fumble again in the old limp pocket of the minor exhibition, was but to know myself reduced to finger once more, not a little ruefully, a chord perhaps now at last too warped and rusty for complicated music at short order" (*AN* 276).¹⁷ The disorientating mix of metaphors is classic James, and this slippage from visual—or material, as though the showman is a magician in a coat with oversize pockets—to auditory, and vice versa, becomes a habit throughout the Prefaces (as it does, moreover, in the fiction itself). In this instance, the hesitant fumbling to produce "the minor exhibition" (or display) spills into the rueful "fingering" of the (minor?) "chord," which one is tempted to read here as a *rueful* or doleful chord. This kind of spillage is very much of a piece with late James's indulgence in what might be called a chronic metaphorical drift, and raises the question of whether "minor" meaning "lesser" or "small" may in fact be connected to "minor"-key meaning "rueful" or "doleful"?—in that an enforced contraction or constriction may inspire ruefulness over a life curtailed or foreshortened (although these terms, "minor-key" and "foreshortening" are purely technical, non-value-laden terms in their respective fields).

¹⁶ James associates the *nouvelle* with another musical phrase: "the minor scale" (see the Preface to "The Lesson of the Master," Etc, *AN* 220). Of course, "note" is another of James's musical terms.

¹⁷ From the Preface to vol. 18 of the *NYE*. The exhibitional method is closely tied to "the scenic method" for James and is the cornerstone of his own representational practice, as laid out in the Prefaces. James appears to be drawing on the sense of "exhibition" as "a public display" (of art, or objects of manufacture, etc), so his discussion of a given character's "exhibitional" values could be drawn from the language of pictorial or plastic art, or of drama, or indeed of any kind of "show" (including, even, magic); elsewhere in the Prefaces, James's "exhibition of a case" (as he writes of Stransom in "The Altar of the Dead") seems to draw on the language of philosophical logic and aesthetics.

METAPHORICAL DRIFT

Before asking himself whether Julia Bride (or “Julia Bride”: heroine and *nouvelle*) might not in fact “strain” the minor key, James had asked himself: “What if she were the silver key, tiny in itself, that would unlock a treasure?—the treasure of a whole view of manners and morals, a whole range of American social aspects?” (*AN* 264). The habit of what could be described as zeugma or syllepsis but what I am calling metaphorical drift is ubiquitous in late James, as others have ably shown in their discussions of mixed metaphors in James’s late style.¹⁸ The reason why this drift exceeds the rhetorical device of zeugma is that the “yoking” which occurs in these cases doesn’t merely serve to join two unrelated things (the literal and the metaphorical), but rather indicates that the senses of a single term have become figuratively associated (or even confused) for James. Most often, what begins as a musical metaphor—say, the search for a “compositional key,” as in the 1909 Preface to *The Wings of the Dove*—shakes off its musical sense to become something more mundane (the search for an actual key, for example, the loss of which results in the author being, metaphorically speaking, locked inside himself): “one begins so, in such a business, by looking about for one’s compositional key, unable as one can only be to move till one has found it. To start without it is to pretend to enter the train and, still more, to remain in one’s seat, without a ticket” (Preface to *NYE*, vol. 19, *AN* 294). Here, the apparent search for a key signature turns into, or functions simultaneously as, a literal hunt (“looking about”) for an actual lost key. Another drifting musical metaphor, in this case the “lower key” rather than the “minor key”, can be found in Part III of “Madame de Mauves,” in the first book edition of 1875: “...it seemed to him [Longmore] simply that her whole being [the eponymous heroine’s] was pitched on a lower key than harmonious Nature meant” (*MMC* 144). Over the page, the “lower key” metamorphoses, probably by an associative process, into another key: “She was not striving to balance her sorrow with some strongly flavoured joy; for the present, she was trying to live with it, peaceably, reputably and without scandal,—turning the key on it occasionally, as you would on a companion liable to attacks of

¹⁸ There has been no sustained study of this subject, although there has been much passing commentary on it; memorably, Dorothea Krook in *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James* (1967) points out that the “running together of logical and pictorial imagery ... tends to become a favourite type of ‘mixed metaphor’ in the late novels” (397).

insanity" (*MMC* 145). Once again, there is the transformation of the "lower key" (or musical register) into the (mock-)sinister "key" of the madhouse jailor, the disarming substitution of one metaphor for another here leading the reader into darker imaginings—or at least more sombre tones—than may have been anticipated. The earlier fittingly feminine "minor-key" melancholy of Euphemia's has now become something different: the "lower key" of her destructive "settled ache."¹⁹ All of this points to the already metaphorical nature of the musical "key" itself: a metaphor that becomes shorthand for James in his discussions of character, tone and mood in both literature and visual art.²⁰ The inherently metaphorical nature of the musical "key" is brought out by a recent updating of the term "key" in *Grove Music Online*: "While the French *ton* and the German *Tonart* stress the importance of the tonic, the English term has a broader meaning: as a metaphorical 'key,' the tonic 'unlocks' or clarifies the arrangement of pitch relations that underlies the music."²¹ Further into the entry for "key" there is a helpful turn of the screw: "The idea that a piece or a passage lies 'in' a given key may reflect a cultural inclination to conceptualize key as a musical container." By extension, key as "musical container" may also apply to other aesthetic forms *qua* containers: namely, literary texts. When

¹⁹ The figurative senses of "low-key" and "minor-key" are very similar: As we recall, "minor-key" connotes "sombre, plaintive, subdued" (*OED*, "minor" sense A.6.e) while "low-key" suggests "muted, restrained, modest" (*OED* sense B.2). See the entry for "low key, n. and adj." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/334723.

²⁰ The "compositional key" in the example above could of course be a travelling metaphor: from music to painting. It was not unusual, in the nineteenth century, to talk of a picture's "key." The *OED* gives this definition for "key, n." (*figurative*, 18.c. *Art*): "The prevailing range of tones in a painting; the relative intensity of a particular colour scheme," citing an example from Ruskin. In his earlier-mentioned essay on "Gautier" James remarks that "As an artist, he never knew an hour's weakness or failed to strike the note that should truly render his idea"—merging painterly with musical images and techniques, in a spirit true to the Aestheticism of the era.

²¹ Brian Hyer, "Key (i)." *Grove Music Online*. 2001. Oxford UP. Date of Access 31 Oct. 2020. www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000014942.

There is another sense in which the musical "key" may be said to be metaphorical. Hyer continues: "Keys are often said to possess characteristics associated with various extra-musical emotional states. . . . Though highly specific with respect to different repertoires and listeners, these expressive qualities fall into two basic categories, which conform to the basic difference—often asserted as an opposition—between major and minor: major is heard to be brighter and more cheerful than minor, which in comparison is darker and sadder."

one thinks of the “compositional key”—or indeed the “minor key”—in this way, the key becomes, as in “The Figure in the Carpet,” not so much the thing that miraculously unlocks the meaning of the story, but the thing that unifies, clarifies, and contains it—even though it may be strained “to breaking,” as James says elsewhere.

VARIETIES OF MELANCHOLY

The suggestion of feminine restraint or else effeminacy that one finds attaching to “the minor key” in Henry James is something that William James had theorised—in the terms, or so one fancies, of a James family language—in his Lectures VI and VII on “The Sick Soul” (whose title is a glancing reference to Gertrude’s guilt-ridden speech in *Hamlet*, Act 4, scene 5, lines 17-20), which he collected in *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902). In these lectures, William supplies this footnote to his discussion of the varieties of “melancholy” (religious and otherwise):

f.74. The difference between Greek pessimism and the oriental and modern variety is that the Greeks had not made the discovery that the pathetic mood may be idealized, and figure as a higher form of sensibility. Their spirit was still too essentially masculine for pessimism to be elaborated or lengthily dwelt on in their classic literature. They would have despised a life set wholly in a minor key, and summoned it to keep within the proper bounds of lachrymosity. (*Varieties* 142)

Henry James, as Philip Horne has demonstrated, was rather sensitive to the charge of being unmanly or “undersized” (240).²² Despite such sensitivities, and especially when he is not on the defensive, James appears to be thoroughly reconciled and even “attuned” to what we might call the “feminine note,” what William calls “the pathetic mood” (or pathos?), figured as a “higher form of sensibility.” In Henry’s amusing letter of 16 March 1909 to his friend the writer Violet Hunt, James (we remember) had announced: “my pitch of life is lowered ... Therefore think of me as henceforth in the pleasing & unaggressive minor key” (qtd. in Secor 24-25). As I proposed at the start of this essay, this sounds to me part chivalry, part camaraderie—even though James was “not

²² For an elaboration of this argument, see Philip Horne, “Henry James and the ‘forces of violence,’” 237-47.

eager," as he put it to suffragette Violet a few weeks later, on 6 April, "for the *avènement* of a multitudinous & overwhelming female electorate" (*HJLL* 478)—and part morbidity (what began for James as suspected heart trouble, later became depression and complete nervous collapse).²³ In a letter to Edmund Gosse the following summer, dated 13 June, 1910 James described the way in which "black depression—the blackness of darkness & the cruellest melancholia—are my chronic enemy & curse" (*HJLL* 494). It is at this time that "the minor key" is intimately tied up with the figuration of illness for James—illness as a dramatic or *melodramatic* form often embodied by the figure of the hypochondriac.

A METAPHORICS OF ILLNESS

James was disposed to drop into "the minor key" when his letters took a medical turn, as they increasingly did, in line with the deterioration of his own health and that of his good friends. In a letter to the writer Rhoda Broughton, composed on 25 February 1911, during the last days of winter, James recounts:

I have just had a letter from dear Mary Clarke, not overflowing with any particularly blest tidings, and containing, as an especial note of the minor key, an allusion to your apparently aggravated state of health and rather captive condition. This has caused a very sharp pang in my battered breast—for steadily battered I have myself been, battered all round and altogether, these long months and months past: even if not to the complete extinction of a tender sense for the woes of others. (*LHJ* 2: 178)

James sympathetically catches "the minor key," in this case, from the socialite Mary Clarke's reportedly gloomy letter, and tunes his own woes to her key; the understatement and negative grammatical constructions that

²³ Horne gives an account James's "heart trouble" (and more generally his deteriorating health) in various entries but see especially *HJLL* 485. A reader might wonder if there is any association between James's minor female characters, with their note of "multitudinous reference" and the "multitudinous & overwhelming female electorate." In both cases James could be drawing on the vocal sense of the word: "Of a sound: made by many people" or its commoner senses: "numerous" or "crowded." Either way, the suggestion of volubility and/or numerosity forms part of James's customary lament: that there is hardly space in modern life for such expansive characters who cannot help but exceed their bounds.

tend to dominate the Jamesian minor key are found here: Lady Clarke “*not* overflowing with any particularly blest tidings” is later echoed in James’s litotes in referring to his own state (“even if *not* to the complete extinction of a tender sense”). The result is a muted, reticent quality that is tactfully appropriate to the reporting of another’s illness and is somehow in sympathy with the confinement of Rhoda Broughton’s own “captive condition.” James’s hyperbole (“battered all round and altogether”) is rather fitting, given the threat of his potentially all-consuming hypochondria (“even if not to the *complete* extinction of a tender sense for the woes of others”). While it is true that James had found the cumulative strain on his nerves difficult, particularly after William’s death, his depression had lifted enough for him to joke and tease and indulge in a little tonic self-mockery (“tonic” in both senses: musical *and* medicinal). However, James found his next health complaint, the shingles, utterly debilitating (he was confined to his bed for four months), as he recounts in another letter to Gosse, of the following year, of 10 October 1912:

I am emerging, but it is slow, and I feel much ravaged and bedimmed. Fortunately these days have an intrinsic beauty—of the rarest and charmingest here; and I try to fling myself on the breast of Nature (though I don’t mean by that fling myself and my poor blisters and scars on the dew-sprinkled lawn) and forget, imperfectly, that precious hours and days tumble unrestrained into the large round, the deep dark, the ever open, hole of sacrifice. But there is too much to say, and I am able, in this minor key, to say too little. We must be at it again. (*LHJ* 2: 250)

What is perhaps most striking about these late letters supposedly written “in this minor key”—and distinguished, one could say, by their affliction chords—is how vigorous and humorous they are, how undaunted in the face of serious health conditions. For all that he doesn’t say, for all the presumed (or pretended) minimalism of the minor key as James conceives of it—its “little”-ness as he says here—James manages to say quite a lot. The “minor key” in this case remains something of a false threat, ironic given his playful prolixity, as is the dwindling of this great interlocutor: “We must be at it again.”

This note is often heard in the late travel essays, in the description of rumoured worn-out places that seem nevertheless to offer up unexpected riches. Take, for instance, “Old Suffolk” (originally of 1897 and collected in *English Hours* of 1905), which describes in painstaking detail the impression left on James by unremarkable Dunwich:

I defy any one, at desolate, exquisite Dunwich, to be disappointed in anything. The minor key is struck here with a felicity that leaves no sigh to be breathed, no loss to be suffered; a month of the place is a real education to the patient, the inner vision. . . . Dunwich is not even the ghost of its dead self; almost all you can say of it is that it consists of the mere letters of its old name. The coast, up and down, for miles, has been, for more centuries than I presume to count, gnawed away by the sea. All the grossness of its positive life is now at the bottom of the German Ocean . . . Few things are so melancholy—and so redeemed from mere ugliness by sadness—as this long, artificial straightness that the monster has impartially maintained. (255)

The paradox of “desolate, exquisite” (dismal or deserted, yet somehow beautiful, consummate); the irony of “the minor key,” with its emotional correlation to “sadness,” being struck with “a felicity”; the delicate litotes of “no sigh to be breathed, no loss to be suffered,” returning us to that same mode of understated negation seen earlier; the uncanniness of the thing that has “ceased to be at all” being raised if not to ghostliness (“not even the ghost of its dead self”) then to something like the spectrality of signification (“the mere letters of its old name”); the sloughed-off, sunken “grossness” (recalling Browning) that is the opposite of minor-key *finesse*—all of these effects invite the question, *What other mode is there, if not that of the minor key . . . ?* It is, after all, the key that invites us to sound both the pelagic depths of “the large round, the deep dark, the ever open, hole of sacrifice” and the littoral zone along the stretch of Suffolk coast that has been hungrily consumed. Surely there was nothing ever written in the *major* key that had anything like the “absolute value” shown by this? Indeed, which writer ever confided they’d lapsed into the major key: blatant, brash, showy, triumphalist . . . ?²⁴ Admittedly, there is Ray Lambert in “The Next Time” (1895; 1896), whose supremely literary flop is called *The Major Key*: a book that asserts itself a little too stridently, that has been “hammered at,” that “reeked with culture” and that has been “keyed . . . up too high,” according to the vacuous Mrs. Highmore (197, 215).²⁵ One

²⁴ Tellingly, the *OED* doesn’t list a figurative sense for “the major key”; although Browning, again, comes to the rescue, this time in his dialogue with the English composer Charles Avison in *Parleyings* (1887): “Blare it forth, bold C major!”. Charles Avison’s *Essay on Musical Expression* (1752) was the first piece of music criticism published in English. See “Major, adj. and n.1.” *OED Online*, Oxford UP, June 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/112621.

²⁵ Edel reproduces the first book edition of the tale, from the collection *Embarrassments* (London: Heinemann, 1896).

thing emerges with some clarity from all this: James's oddly upbeat confession of diminution, which we hear repeatedly in his later years in those hints at deterioration and even derogation, is rather an *assertion*: he may be physically ailing and reduced, but his intellectual—his creative and critical powers—are supremely intact.

For James, then, “the minor key” signalled a variety of related phenomena: the subdued female character (“subdued” in the sense of “restrained, toned down” or else “subjugated”); the constrained genre (the lyric poem or the *nouvelle*); and the reduced state of mental or physical being—all of which somehow succeed in disavowing their attenuation. Its collection of associations—from the feminine to the miniaturised to the circumscribed, from melancholy to sorrow to ruefulness—leaves us to posit a possible connection between them. What James understands by this term is something cultural—epochal even—which applies not simply to his sense of key or tonality within gender relations but more widely to the particular time of accelerating historical change in which he lived. James was in many respects eager to embrace modernity, but modernity, to his ear, was so often jarring in its modulation between keys, or else conducted too wholly, too demonstratively, in the major key (too much brass and not enough strings). By contrast, the past—the “palpable imaginable *visitable* past”²⁶ of the Romantic era, the “mysteries” of which, for James, were often still within reach or earshot—was so expressively evoked by “the minor key.” This is because it is the only key that allows the reflective, the understated, the inward, the emotional, the melancholy, the feminine—and all the other things that suffer, in the modern world, certain forms of curtailment—to make their verbal music heard and felt.

²⁶ As James puts it in his 1908 Preface to *The Aspern Papers*, vol. 12 of the *NYE* (*AN* 164).

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