

The Jamesian Techniques in “Delirious Mutterings at Midnight”

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I

Shui Ching (水晶, 1935-) is the pen name of Yang Yi (揚沂), one of the most promising young writers who have emerged on the literary scene in Taiwan in the sixties. So far he has written only two collections of short stories, *The Green Grasshoppers* (青色的蚱蜢) and *The Bell* (鐘). He has also written a miscellany of essays entitled *Brickbats* (拋磚記) and a volume of criticism, *Art of Eileen Chang's Novels* (張愛玲的小說藝術), which set a milestone in literary criticism in Chinese. His creative work is not distinguished by its quantity, but by its quality. Most of his stories are wrought with meticulous care and evince much originality; for he is a daring writer, willing to experiment with a number of techniques still new to Chinese fiction. Among these, the most memorable is surely “A Man without a Face” (沒有臉的人). It created a sensation upon its publication, and it is still the most successful use of stream of consciousness in Chinese fiction. A moving chronicle of a day in the drab existence of a school teacher, it ably delineates the hopes and frustrations of the ordinary man on the street. Another remarkable piece is “Hi Lili Hi Li . . .” (嘻里里嘻里), which has been translated into English and has appeared in *Twentieth Century Chinese Stories*.¹ A nightmarish fable told in the manner of Kafka, it studies the collapse of civilization in the face of brutal invasion by primitive forces. Not all his stories are equally successful. “The Banished Celestial” (謫仙記) is so burdened with symbols, archetypes and myths that the structure of the story fails to sustain them.²

The novella "Delirious Mutterings at Midnight" (午夜夢囈) is happily one of his best. Set in Taiwan in the sixties, it is the tale of an ambitious young college graduate entering the business world, only to have his aspirations crushed by its corruption and his romantic yearnings frustrated by the sordid facts of life. Poignantly narrated through the young graduate, it is also a story fraught with suspense and intrigue through the deft manipulation of the limited point of view. More than that, it is a moral tale which examines the possibility of decency and virtue in a modern world.

The title of this paper, "Jamesian Techniques in 'Delirious Mutterings at Midnight'" is not intended to imply that Shui Ching, as a writer, is in the same league as Henry James. Though Shui's works in my view represent the best in Taiwan fiction today,³ his limited output alone would preclude that consideration. Neither is the title intended to imply that Shui is an imitator of James. James seems to be his favorite author, and he has discussed the merit of *Ambassadors*, "The Aspern Papers", "The Beast in the Jungle", "The Jolly Corner" and *Wings of the Dove*.⁴ Yet, as previously mentioned, he is also a student of Joyce and Kafka. Furthermore he is an avowed disciple of Eileen Chang, and her influence is also readily discernable.⁵ Moreover his familiarity with classical Chinese poetry enables him to etch many scenes with a richness rare in the modern Chinese fiction. Having assimilated the great works of the past, Shui is consciously forging a style of his own, which is particularly visible in his later stories, "The Bell", "Delirious Mutterings at Midnight" and "Feckless Fellow-travelers" (無情游).

I have nonetheless entitled the paper "Jamesian Techniques in 'Delirious Mutterings at Midnight'" because in this tale Shui employs limited point of view, makes use of the *ficelle* and builds elaborate imagery, techniques which are all strikingly Jamesian. Furthermore, as is well known, James is more interested in the journey of the mind than the happenings of external events. Especially in his later novels the plots are reduced to a minimum; while he concentrates on amplifying the feelings, contemplations and reactions of his protagonists. Likewise Shui Ching's tale is in the main a psychological one; while the physical drama is there, it is the experience of the mind, which is intensely dramatized. Also in James the reader, together with the central intelligence, is in the dark not so much to what will happen as to what *really* happened. Thus Maggie must fathom the secret liaison between the Prince and Charlotte. Strether, dazed by the glitter of European civilization, has to learn the true nature of the attachment

between Chad and Mme. de Vionnet. Isabel finds too late the dark scheme and collusion between Osmond and Mme. Merle. The search for the hidden truth, in James, often maintains the tension in the story. Likewise, the hero in "Delirious Mutterings at Midnight", as we shall see, is kept in the dark and slowly reaches the truth to both his enlightenment and disenchantment. Along the way, Shui, like James, manages to create a nuance rich in suspense and intrigue. Therefore intentional or not, this tale reads like a Jamesian work.

A synopsis will be given below, followed by discussions on the various Jamesian features of this novella.

Synopsis of "Delirious Mutterings at Midnight"

Fang, a recent graduate from college, has secured a clerical position in a public agency in Taipei after eliminating many rivals; but his ambitions are soon crushed when he observes the indolence and corruption around the office. His immediate superior, Old Fan, seems cold and indifferent; but one day Fang notices him secretly shedding tears while reading a newspaper. He learns later that Old Fan's daughter was disfigured by her jilted lover in a scandal which was prominent in the news several years earlier. After the Chinese New Year, Old Fan commits suicide and his position is taken over by Hsieh, who has gained it through his father-in-law's connections.

Manager Kuo, of a trading company, after winning several major government contracts, invites members of a few agencies for an excursion as their "reward". Even a newly clerk like Fang is invited. In his travel group to Taichung there are also his colleague Po, and two assistants from American Foreign Aid agency (AID), Miss Lin and Miss Fu. Fang is enchanted with Miss Lin, a young woman of remarkable beauty and charm; unfortunately she seems rather moody on that day. Upon their arrival at the luxurious inn where they are to lodge for the weekend, Fang chats with Po and discovers his sharp wit and power of observation. When he has trouble falling asleep, he walks into the corridor and finds Miss Lin receiving a late night telephone call. Much to his vexation he cannot discern the contents of the conversation. But something more puzzling happens later, a car suddenly arrives at the inn in the middle of the stormy night.

Early next morning Fang meets a middle-aged man in the lounge, who is

crippled and has a metallic leg. This man wears dark glasses even in the overcast morning and radiates such air of unfriendliness that Fang retreats to the dining room to have his breakfast. With Po he speculates on the events of the previous night. Soon they learn that the man with the metallic leg is Boss Hsü, who arrived late last night and moreover, he is the boss of both Miss Lin and Miss Fu.

The party treks to the dam for an inspection tour. During the visit there appear many signs that Miss Lin is seriously involved with her boss and there must also be some strain in their relationship. As they return to the inn for lunch, Miss Lin in defiance of Boss Hsü's order, drinks excessively and vomits as a consequence. In the evening Miss Lin comes down for dinner, still rather exhausted. Manager Kuo meantime has sent for someone to entertain the party after the debacle at the luncheon. The man proceeds to narrate a ghost story for the assembled: during the Japanese occupation of Taiwan the colonial officers forcibly separated a young couple in the area. After the husband had died in the distant Southeast Asia, the widow committed suicide. Since then there had been reports of encounters with a white-robed female ghost in the inn. She appeared time and again even after the surrender of the Japanese army, to plead for the restoration of the remains of her husband from overseas.

Fang is taking a bath and ruminating over the ghost story when the fierce wind blows open the window and makes a frightful noise. Still unnerved by the story he quickly exits from the bathroom and accidentally finds a white scarf in the corridor. For some inexplicable reason he believes Miss Lin to be in danger, and when he hears the banging of the window inside the women's bathroom he bursts into it, only to discover Miss Lin lying unconscious in the bathtub, with water from the tap flowing down her hair and the odour of chemicals swelling about her body. As Fang carries her out he meets Miss Fu at the bathroom door, who appears to be anxiously looking for Lin. The two of them carry her, past the curious and alarmed on-lookers, back to her room, where Miss Lin's crippled boss retrieves her and shuts Fang out.

A jeep comes in the storm to take Lin back to Taichung hospital. Throughout the night Fang and Po speculate on the cause of her suicide attempt. Early next dawn news comes from Manager Kuo's helper that Miss Lin is out of danger. Furthermore it is on account of the ghost she imagined to have witnessed that she fell into the bathtub; there was never

any suicide attempt. It is apparent to the two young men that everyone from Boss Hsü down to Miss Fu and the helper is trying to cover up the truth.

Life goes on drearily after his return to Taipei. Fang is now living in the dilapidated house he shares with Po. Now and then he cannot help recalling that beautiful episode of his life when he spent two days in the luxurious inn, enjoying the company of a luscious girl. He can only resort to diary to express his feelings, and then, goaded by Po, he starts to write love letters to Miss Lin. As there is no reply, he cannot be sure if the letters have reached Lin (they may be intercepted by her boss); yet he keeps on sending her the daily letters in which he delineates his ambitions and dreams and conveys his tender feelings for her. The one-way correspondence still does not quench his yearning for her, so he goes daily to the AID office to watch her entrance and departure, admiring her from afar. As Miss Lin gets wind of this new development, a "response" comes at last. Fang receives a telephone call one afternoon, asking him to be present in the park after the office hours. He goes there at the appointed hour and after a long wait, Miss Fu turns up instead of Lin, much to his chagrin. She hands him back all the love letters on behalf of Miss Lin.

Then Fang discovers that Po has been visiting the brothels. Instead of dissuading Po from further adventure in the pleasure quarters, Fang lends him the money for his patronage. Though Fang cannot bring himself to frequent such places, he derives a vicarious pleasure from Po's visits, easing the endless frustration of his own pursuit of Miss Lin.

Still he plays the guardian angel for Lin by spying on her daily near her office. On Chinese New Year's eve, he observes Lin in a pair of dark glasses, possibly used to cover her swollen eyes. After the New Year's holidays she disappears altogether. Has she become ill? Has she become full-time mistress to her boss? Or perhaps they have separated? Faced with all these possibilities and uneasy over her welfare, Fang enters the AID office to make a direct inquiry. However, when Miss Fu is sent down to interview him, he beats a retreat.

Several days later, as he is again waiting for Miss Lin's departure in an afternoon downpour, Miss Fu comes to him and invites him to a cafe to have a chat. She says that, on behalf of Po, she is persuading him to abandon his spying on Lin, lest he should come to harm in the process. Tearfully she tells Fang that Lin has already been married to Boss Hsü and he will

no longer see her in the AID office. As he angrily rushes to the door, Fu pulls him back and informs him that Lin has committed suicide again and this time for good. Whimpering, she explains that Lin was forced into it, but on the other hand Lin was too desirous of material benefits to save herself.

Returning to his house Fang and Po plan their revenge for Miss Lin's death. From Miss Fu, who is sympathetic to their case and vows to leave her employment soon, they procure the address of Lin's parents, in the hope that they will come forward to seek legal redress for the death of their daughter. To their surprise, Lin's parents claim that their daughter has died of natural illness. It seems evident that Boss Hsü has bought them with money compensations.

So their planned revenge comes to no avail. As the months pass by, the drab and frustrated life they lead causes Fang and Po to fall into constant quarrels over money matters and recriminations over the events linked with Miss Lin. One day they meet Boss Hsü and Miss Fu sitting together intimately in a restaurant. Astonished by this sight Fang takes his knife to their table and almost strikes the boss but for the timely intervention by Po. After returning home they once more fight a bitter battle. But afterwards in sober reflection Fang realizes that they are both young men of talent, but as victims of their circumstances they are deprived of opportunity for advancement. He finally decides that it is high time for friendly persuasion and judicious plans for the future.

II

F. O. Matthiessen is among the first to note the development of imagery of James, and he finds "that he [James] could bind together his imaginative effects by subtly recurrent images of a thematic kind."⁶ Thus, images of flowing water occur frequently in both *Ambassadors* and *Wings of the Dove*. The iterative imagery of the dove as applied to Milly is an example of the metaphor extended into a symbol to produce an atmosphere of a heightened degree. Elsewhere Austin Warren has studied the various metaphors employed in connection with all the major heroines in Jamesian novels.⁷ James indeed pays close attention to their appearances, including their attires and accessories. Taking the example of the dove-like Milly again, in the climatic final scene she changes from her customary mourning robe

into a white dress for the first time and makes her most radiant appearance.

In his use of the imagery Shui Ching is also meticulous, as evidenced by his employment of the recurrent images. In this regard the motif of white color associated with Miss Lin is the most elaborate of the story. When she enters the train station:

She had removed her cream-colored nylon raincoat, revealing the jade-white gauze shirt and a light purple Chinese-styled skirt. Near her breast and the tight sleeves there were layers and layers of embroidered laces; as the wind blew, they fluttered like flower-petals. Her skin was cream-colored. (p. 69)

Even her suitcase is made of white leather. Later that evening, when she comes downstairs to answer the mysterious phone call, she is again the image of whiteness. "Reflected by the orange glow of the wall lamps her snow-white nightgown was dyed to a light rouge . . . then her white shadow slid by the staircase and was quickly devoured by darkness of the passage." In view of her eventual ruin, being devoured by darkness may well forecast her final doom.

The next evening, as Fang is leaving the bathroom in haste, he comes across a white scarf, which he suspects to belong to Miss Lin. When he rushes to rescue Miss Lin:

I only saw Miss Lin clad in white silk pyjamas lying face up in the bottom of the cherry-red bathtub made of brick.

Her eyebrows were severely arched as her eyes were tightly closed. Her face was a swollen white with tinge of greenish purple, while her lips were slightly parted to reveal her white teeth. At the corner of the mouth there seemed to be bubbles like those of the crabs. . . .

I suddenly felt at a loss. The white silk scarf happened to slip down slightly and covered her face by coincidence. The scalding water droplets splashed and instantly wetted the white silk. (p. 107)

Whiteness in Chinese literature, as in the west, is normally associated with virtue and purity. Its consistent application to Miss Lin can only be interpreted as an irony, for after all Miss Lin is the mistress of her crippled boss and hardly a woman of great virtue. Hence the colors of pink and purple are sometimes blended in to suggest impurity. By resorting to another symbol Shui gives stronger hints to the dual nature of Miss Lin's beautiful exterior and tainted quality within. That symbol is the Japanese doll in the

lobby of the inn.

She [Miss Lin] was standing near the corridor, watching, in a manner almost narcissistic, a large Japanese doll displayed in the glass cabinet. It was a woman dressed in kimono. Under the brilliant light one could see her bun of hair raised aloft. She was leaning over a red silk umbrella with golden threads and clad in a robe of similar material, which tightly wrapped her upper torso layer by layer, yet left a slit near the hem, so that she appeared like a resplendent goddess and the glass cabinet was thus transformed into an altar. But perhaps she was only a geisha. (p. 74)

That doll image is carried further in the luncheon scene where Miss Lin has her drinking fiasco:

Miss Lin had already finished one glass of brandy, even Manager Kuo seemed secretly startled. Her cheeks turned to ashen white and her eyes with their dark pupils were sparkling as though ripples could overflow; still her eyelids were a dry crimson as if they had just been freshly rouged. She suddenly stood up, seemingly intoxicated, and was about to leave for a rest. Her lovely head was rocking back and forth ceaselessly, like a bobo doll made of satin. (p. 97)

To round off the use of the symbol, its final appearance comes at the climax of the inn episode, when Miss Lin, unconscious after her suicide attempt, is carried to the jeep to bring her to the hospital, "the large red Japanese-styled blanket wrapped about her tightly, its patterns of golden pines and cranes with rounded wings were outlined against her snow-white shapely face, and she looked more like a satindoll than ever."

Through the aid of the Japanese doll, which seems half-goddess, half-geisha, the author is able to render his moral judgement on Miss Lin without resorting to any explicit authorial comment.

Compared to Miss Lin, Miss Fu receives less than full-fledged treatment. Throughout her scenes with Miss Lin, she is there mainly to serve as a contrast to the more demure Miss Lin. As her name in Chinese Yen-nü (艷女) implies, she is Fu the Glamorous, so the colors associated with her are dominantly red and black:

Her skin was one of light olive. Her pitch-black hair was branched into many braids, then twisted together into a large bun, hanging behind her head, so that she appeared like an exotic beauty. She was wearing a bright red raincoat, with red shoes, her red and black were matched with distinction. (p. 70)

Her glamor and charm are also accentuated by metaphors. "The one in the red coat [Miss Fu] was evidently much amused and laughed merrily. Her laughter was like the fireworks of a summer night, exploding in series, transforming themselves into full-bloomed flowers."

Even her background could be full of dazzling beauty. "Miss Fu hastily turned back, the crystalline yellow fountain was splashing out behind her back, like a peacock spreading her wings into a fabulous golden glass-flower."

Old Fan, Fang's first boss, has only limited role in the story, but his image is quite striking too:

This Old Fan was truly old. He was wearing glasses and his facial muscles were loosened, stooping downwards. He has long eyebrows and on his lower right cheek there was a mole with stitches of hair about three inches long, which made him look like the "Southern Immortal" or "The Long-browed Old Gentleman" in Chinese paintings. (p. 54)

In the face of his imminent suicide, this description is surely ironic.

Another character who receives much attention with respect to imagery is Boss Hsü, who is the major villain and emanates an air chillness throughout the story. His appearance is remarkably odd:

The minute I sat down, I noticed that his left leg was crippled, above the outlandish yellow boots he wore, there was a white metallic plate. Was it chromium, I wonder. The metallic material was gleaming with a piercingly chill light, attracting my attention.

This man was of a large build. Sitting there in silence, he would nevertheless make one feel his great presence. If he was not a general, he must be at least in the rank of a minister.

After a moment this man extended his hand to tap off his cigar ashes, and turned the page of the newspaper. Then I could observe him more closely. His hair was done in a crew-cut, with a tinge of grey on the sides. His inch-long hair was all stuck up, like a prickly horse hair brush.

More odd yet was the sun glasses on his nose. In the overcast morning who would wear sun glasses! He casually glanced at me with an annoyed air, as though I were the intruder, disturbing his peace. V.I.P.s were all partial to peace and quiet. (p. 85)

Boss Hsü's deformity is the prominent feature of his appearance. His metallic leg always radiates a chillness, just as his face exudes the frigid air. If he is not thus occupied, he would retreat into himself, shielding in a screen

made of cigar smoke and newspapers or sun glasses. Boss Hsü represents the heartless exploitation of others, so it is only appropriate that his image is one of extreme coldness and sometimes of aggressiveness (even his hair is prickly).

Having discussed the imagery connected with the characters, we may now turn to the imagery in connection with the architecture. There are in the main two settings in the story, the humble and shabby living quarters shared by Po and Fang, and the elegant inn of luxury. They provide such a poignant contrast that it is little wonder when Fang recalls the grand setting of the inn, "I would more than ever feel it was only a dream; as if I were the scholar in the ancient fable, who after one night of romance, finds himself in the graveyard next dawn."

Shui Ching has carefully built the two contrasting images, the dilapidation of the house and the magnificence of the inn. In a way, we may take these two settings as two different worlds apart. To Fang only his humble abode is the real world. His encounter in the inn is but a dream, and his remembrance of the events there, is, as the title suggests, like the delirious mutterings in either a dream or a nightmare.

Lastly we should mention the images of the storm, which appears persistently throughout the story. The entire trip to Taichung takes place under the threat of a typhoon. It is on a rainy day that they depart from the train station, but the sky becomes fair as soon as the trip looks promising to Fang. As they arrive at the inn, there comes the news of the typhoon. In the heavy downpour in the middle of the night Boss Hsü intrudes into the scene after the mysterious phone call. The next morning is overcast (the calm before the storm) but in the afternoon it is confirmed that a huge typhoon is heading straight in their direction. And of course Miss Lin's suicide takes place in the climax of the typhoon.

The storm motif is carried one step further. It is again during an afternoon thunderstorm that Fang is met by Miss Fu and informed of the tragic news of Miss Lin's death. Shui has used weather to convey a mood, its each appearance denotes or foretells the tragic events along the way. And like the other motifs or images, it enriches the texture of the story. One would find them, like the theme in a symphonic movement, echoed here and there, enhancing one's reading pleasure. Such device is, of course, not foreign to James. In *Wings of the Dove*, when Lord Mark out of jealousy reveals the secret engagement between Kate and Densher, it is in a Venice of blackened

sky and chilly rain. In contrast, when Sir Luke (the doctor) arrives for a consultation for Milly, the storm is replaced by "autumn sunshine," and the city looks "like a hanging-out of vivid stuffs, a laying-down of fine carpets."

III

A very important feature of a Jamesian work is the voluntary limitation of the point of view by the author. Time and again James shows in his notes that he prefers the more difficult but more rewarding way by dispensing with the omniscient narrator. There are quite a few advantages in this approach, as Percy Lubbock has discussed with great insight. One of these is the creation of suspense. James always jealously guards his own knowledge of the story and is only willing to part with his precious information one piece at a time, thus ensuring our curiosity will be roused till the very end of the story when all the revelations have been made. The other advantage is the possibility of dramatization of the protagonist's mind. As Lubbock puts it, "his [the hero's] consciousness, no longer a matter of heresy, a matter for which we must take his word, is now before us in its original agitation. Here is a spectacle for the reader with no obtrusive interpreter, no transmitter of light, no conductor of meaning. This man's interior life is cast into the world of independent rounded objects; it is given room to show itself, it appears, *it acts*." ⁸ As we shall see, Shui Ching adopts this admittedly roundabout, yet more effective mode of presentation.

The central plot of "Delirious Mutterings at Midnight" is the hero's discovery of the true relationship between Miss Lin and her boss, and his consequent disillusion. By adopting the first-person narrator, Shui automatically places a severe restriction on the information available to the reader. As the hero (the first-person narrator) is barely acquainted with Miss Lin, each item of information concerning her has to be sought assiduously. In that regard he is aided immensely by Po, his confidante (we shall discuss the use of *ficelle* in detail later). Since he is instantly infatuated with Lin after their meeting on the train, it is only logical that he tries to get access of every item about her. It also follows naturally that he observes her attentively, albeit secretly. As the train starts out the station, mystery slowly starts to build, for Fang notices Miss Lin is in somewhat perturbed mood.

Despite the effort of Manager Kuo to entertain, she quickly excuses herself and falls asleep on the train.

The plot truly thickens as the mysterious telephone call for Miss Lin comes in the deep night. In spite of the active maneuver by Fang, he cannot hear the content of the conversation. And even more cryptic event takes place later that night, a jeep arrives in the storm. Who is the new arrival? Is he linked with the midnight phone call? What is the purpose of his urgent visit? By opening only Fang's consciousness to us, we are made to share his mystification.

The answer comes next morning, but only partially. The new arrival turns out to be the reticent boss of both Miss Lin and Miss Fu. Though he carefully erects a screen to keep others at bay, traces of intimacy between him and Miss Lin are nonetheless revealed and arouse in Fang more curiosity. During the inspection tour Miss Lin's attitude alternates between reproach and anger, as the two of them are constantly whispering to each other. Her mood harks back to her ill-humour the day earlier. At the lunch table Miss Lin's mood worsens to one of defiance, when she drinks to excess, causing herself to vomit. Afterwards Fang and Po retire to their room to speculate on the events of the day and the relationship between Miss Lin and Boss Hsü. There are still many unresolved riddles. Is Miss Lin forced into this liaison with Boss Hsü? Is she trying to break free from it? Or is her defiance a form of threat and demand?

When Fang rescues Miss Lin in her suicide attempt, Miss Fu is also having the same foreboding; she comes to the bathroom in search of Miss Lin, and is not the least surprised to find her in Fang's arms, unconscious. After Miss Lin is carried away, however, all members of the party with the exception of Fang and Po claim in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, that Miss Lin merely fainted in the bathroom. This claim only arouses further speculation between Fang and Po as to the true cause of her suicide and the reasons for the cover-up.

After his return to Taipei, the shabby condition and loneliness of Fang's life lead him to constantly recall the wonderful excursion in the expensive inn. So, despite the shift of setting, Miss Lin and her relationship with Boss Hsü still remain active in Fang's consciousness, and thus the focus of the story still. There is little doubt left now that Miss Lin is Boss Hsü's mistress, but on the other hand, their relationship seems far from smooth. Does the boss intend to jettison his mistress? Is Miss Lin tired of her

paramour and wishes to terminate the affair? Or perhaps, does she wish to be the legitimate wife in lieu of being a mistress? Why did she attempt suicide? Fang's mind is obsessed with these questions, which are never fully answered. The only answer comes obliquely from Miss Fu, when she narrates the death of Miss Lin and makes her judgement. "In fact things were not totally hopeless. Lin is too bent on her enjoyment of material things." But in view of Miss Fu's eventual defection to Boss Hsü, one cannot even consider her statement entirely reliable.

In the meantime the reader is locked in Fang's consciousness, as he tries to contact Miss Lin in one vain attempt after another. Although Fang keeps on playing the "guardian angel," he can in fact neither shield her from harm, nor even gain access to information about her. The real development comes on New Year's Eve when Fang notices Lin, contrary to her habit, in a pair of dark glasses. It is then followed by her sudden disappearance. Only in his last interview with Miss Fu, does Fang, and so the reader, receive the news of Lin's death; thus the story is brought to a precipitous denouement. By imparting all the relevant knowledge in such a piece-meal fashion through the control of the limited point of view, Shui ensures the creation of a nuance of mystery. Unlike the detective story writer who can invent murders galore, Shui is working with a quite simple plot. Only by wringing the last drop of juice from each item of information can Shui turn a straight-forward story into an enigmatic and suspenseful one.

Yet Shui has not confined the reader to Fang's consciousness merely to create mystery and suspense. He is also attempting to evince the young college graduate's slow journey towards maturity. In *Ambassadors*, the novel about the middle-aged man who misses the second go in his life, Strether confronts and penetrates the European civilization, only to find himself too old to relive his lost youth. In dealing with his subject, James, Lubbock put it, works in the following way; "his grand adventure is not expressed in its incidents. These, as they are devised by the author, are secondary, they are the extension of the moral event that takes place in the breast of the ambassador, his change of mind; that is the very middle of the subject."⁹ By dramatizing the journey of the mind for Strether to the fullest, James makes the moment of his departure across the Atlantic supremely poignant, for by then we have a full vision of the sad, lonely man holding high the torch of his ideals amidst a sordid world.

Similarly, by narrating from Fang's point of view, Shui opens his mind to reveal its disillusion and maturation. The realization that honesty does not always prevail in the world and the observation of the harrowing presence of evil in the person of Boss Hsü, are painful, yet necessary steps in Fang's reach towards adulthood. More than a mystery story, it is foremost a tale of a young man's journey from innocence to experience. Told through the young man himself, it also demonstrates the survival of decency against all the corrupt elements in his surrounding, a major theme of the work.

IV

In her excellent study of the use of *ficelle* in James, *The Confidante in Henry James*, Sister Sharp makes the following observations about the purposes of such a device. Firstly, with the limitation of a particular point of view, the center of intelligence is not privy to all the facts and information, and needs to elicit them from the *ficelle*. Secondly, the reader, who has only access to the knowledge of the center, is also aided by the presence of the *ficelle* through his delivery of either facts or interpretations. Thirdly, because of James' proclivity for dramatization, he could, through the use of *ficelle*, dispense with the summary pictures, and impart all the pertinent information through the dramatized conversation between the center and the confidante.¹⁰

James favours mature women for this role, more often than not they are sophisticated women of the world, knowledgeable in human affairs and endowed with enough means to travel widely. So they are also women of freedom and leisure. When one thinks of the important *ficelles* in Jamesian cannon, Susan Stirnham of *Wings of the Dove*, Mme. Merle of *Portrait of a Lady*, Maria Gostrey of *Ambassadors* and Fanny Assingham of *The Golden Bowl* immediately come to mind. In fact, the development of the *ficelle* is a long process that begins with Mrs. Tristram in *The American*, who plays only a limited role in that novel. Then, through experimentation in both novels and tales, the *ficelles* become decisive factors in the plot themselves, as typified by the four ladies above.

As Sister Sharp notes, very few successors exist in the use of this technique in English fiction.¹¹ The major disciples of James, Edith Wharton and Joseph Conrad, though they have adopted some other devices of the master, have not made conscientious use of this particular technique.

Interestingly our writer from the east has felicitously applied this method to the novella, "Delirious Mutterings at Midnight".

The *ficelle* here, unlike most of them in Jamesian novels, is a man, the friend of the central intelligence, Po. As his name Ching-ch'ing (鏡清) in Chinese implies, he is the lucid mirror, or a reflector. Like the Jamesian confidantes he is a person of sharp observation and seasoned in the affairs of the world. Even when narrator Fang has not yet rationalized his feelings towards Miss Lin on the train, Po, watching on the side, has come to the right conclusion about Fang's infatuation with Miss Lin. Again when Miss Fu laughs so hard that tears flow, she instantly shields her eye with her hand; Fang believes that a dust particle has fallen into her eye, whereas Po speculates correctly that she wears contact lens.

But Po plays a more important role than cleverly delivering certain information about other characters. Like James, Shui is fond of post-prognostication. Thus, after each major episode has transpired, Fang and Po would discuss the events in depth, just as Strether and Miss Gostrey dissect the events which have taken place. In the inn they have several discussions of that kind, which render immense service to the reader, because the protagonist, Fang, enamored of Miss Lin and reluctant to face the secret liaison between her and her boss, is occasionally less than reliable. With Po as an aid to the reader one gains a wider perspective of the intriguing happenings. We may take as an illustration one scene which takes place after the luncheon:

My words provoked him into laughter. He said, "My good Fang, either you are a sweet simpton, or else, you must be a frightfully sly fox. The reasons for which Miss Lin performed the whining drunk call for detailed investigation."

Po's speech was truly aggravating. Who started to play the sly fox first? Besides, his saucy tone was also irritating.

I could only calm myself and asked, "Then, according to you, what happened?"

"Eh, isn't that obvious? Miss Lin was clearly venting her anger through wine. This incident is naturally connected with her crippled boss. I think . . . may I speak frankly?"

"Why in the world not? Didn't I get acquainted with them the same time you did? What is there to hide?"

"I was afraid you might be offended. Haha, it seems to me the relationship between Miss Lin and her boss is far from simple. Perhaps there is some hanky-panky going on."

Then he told me that Lin had barely worked in her office for half a year and was only a typist. In contrast Fu was a graduate from Taiwan University in economics, and had the rank of an inspector. Besides, she had been working there for more than three years. Was this the outcome of his intelligence-gathering through his long conversation with Miss Fu? "Fang, you see," Po continued, "Miss Lin's stylish wardrobe from Hong Kong, her whining ways around her boss and their secret signals back and forth, these signs are there for all to see."

Po's analysis was of course very logical, but sometimes humans could be no more than irrational animals. Each of his words pierced my ears. (p. 99)

Like the confidantes in later James novels, Po functions more than supply the information, he becomes involved with the plot itself. Because of his secret yearning for Miss Fu, he inveigles Fang into serious pursuit of Miss Lin by, for example, suggesting to him the possibility of love letters. In his own uncertainty over his chance for success, he uses Fang as a sounding board to test the feasibility of his own romance. Later, frustrated by his failure, he starts to frequent the brothel. Not only does he borrow money from Fang for that purpose, but he attempts to induce him into similar venture. By manipulating his confider to gain his own mission, he betrays Fang's confidence and is thus a false confidante. There are similar examples in James too. In *The American*, Mrs. Tristram, to satisfy her own curiosity, goads Christopher Newman along his courtship of the French countess, and only belatedly admits her motive. In "Washington Square" Mrs. Penniman, the incurable romantic, officiously tries to bring about the union between her niece, Catherine, and the fortune-hunter, Morris Townsend; not so much in the interest of Catherine's genuine bliss, as in her own gratification of wishfulfillment. A betrayal of far more sinister kind takes place between Isabel Archer and Mme. Merle. By gaining Isabel's confidence, Mme. Merle arranges the young woman's marriage for her own convenience and ruins Isabel's happiness. James always reserves the sternest indictment for such exploiters of human relationship. Shui Ching, in treating the relationship between the two male protagonists, seems to believe in the potential of mutual improvements, though this potential has yet to be fulfilled by further understanding and confidence of the two. At least the tale ends on an uplifting note, as Fang contemplates the heart-to-heart talk which is long overdue.

V

James often makes conscious use of the character's name, through puns to hint at the personality of the figure in his story. Thus, Christopher Newman is the new American discovering the old civilization of the continent. Mrs. Grose is a good old housekeeper, albeit one of limited intelligence. Marcher is the man who lives a wasted life and never reaches anywhere. Isabel Archer is the young woman who travels afar, daring to affront her destiny. Maria Gostrey is the spinster roaming around the globe. Lambert Strether is a man torn between his loyalty to two women and two cultures. Prince Amerigo is the Italian aristocrat determined to adapt to the American moral code. There are many other examples which justify the claim that James selects the names of his characters with deliberation.

As it happens, Shui Ching is also partial to such a device. We have mentioned in passing that Ching-ch'ing means the lucid mirror, quite appropriate for his character and his function in the story. In fact, his name also has certain element of irony. His surname Po (卜) means divining, and Po Ching-ch'ing, though reflecting the events around him so well, fails to possess the capacity for self-reflection and is thus blind to his own moral deterioration. The name of Miss Lin, Su-cheng (素貞) is also given in irony. In Chinese Su-cheng means plain virtue; though Miss Lin is fond of white dresses, she is not particularly virtuous.

The protagonist of the story, Fang Cheng-kuang (方正光) in Chinese means Mr. Square, the man of decency and rectitude; as the name implies, he is the pillar of morality in the novella almost *fautes de mieux*. Miss Fu (符), homonym with *fu* (副) meaning the secondary, plays the supporting role; and as mentioned earlier, her name Yen-nü hints at her great charm.

Even the minor figures have distinct names. Fang's old boss's name, Old Fan (樊), is homonym with *fan* (煩) meaning worry; as indeed he commits suicide, having grieved over his daughter's misfortune. His new boss, who cunningly seeks the promotion to travel abroad, is named Hsieh (謝), homonym with *hsieh* (斜), the crook. Fang's colleague, who considers visits to bordellos and reading knight-errant novels the major purposes of living, is named Tun (滕), homonym with *tun* (鈍) for being so morally obtuse.

Shui Ching has made detailed comparison between *Portrait of a Lady* with "Ashes of Descending Incense, First Brazier" (沉香屑—第一爐香)

by Eileen Chang.¹² In it he notes the use of anticipation in both. In *Portrait of a Lady* James hints several times early in the story about the eventual downfall of Isabel. Once, for example, her uncle, in leaving her with a large fortune, has the premonition that a man will make her as his prey. In this novella Shui Ching either uses the storm motif or describes the foreboding in Fang's mind to anticipate the events yet to unfold. The ghost tale narrated by Manager Kuo's helper is the story within a story which also alludes to the imminent suicide attempt by Miss Lin in the very same inn.

Two aspects of the work are departures from James. The first is the adaptation of a myth. Though James chooses titles sometimes with Biblical allusions, he does not, so far as I know, directly incorporate a western myth into his story. Shui Ching in this instance has embodied a Chinese myth into the novella. It is *The Legend of the White Serpent* (白蛇傳), and a brief version runs as follows:

Hsü, an impecunious young employee of a herb medicine store in Hangchow, visits the West Lake, where he meets with a beautiful lady with a maid servant and helps them during a storm. She claims to be a widow and proposes marriage. She is in fact a white snake in love with him and her maid servant, Little Green, is a green fish. After the marriage he becomes rich and happy with her aid, but presumably develops a strange look.

A Taoist monk notices this strange look and offers to expose Hsü's "demon wife," but is humiliated by her instead. Later Hsü meets Fa Hai, a holy Buddhist monk and is told that his wife is a demoness. Fa Hai gives him a magic alms-bowl to capture her, and also tells him that on Dragon-boat Festival, wine will make his wife reveal her original shape. He tries the use of wine and indeed witnesses her snake form and dies of shock. Mistress White, his wife, goes to the magic mountain to find the celestial medicine to revive him. They live in happiness again for a period of time, but Fa Hai will not give up his goal of capturing the snake. He comes to their home and succeeds in compelling both the lamia and her maid to reveal their old forms and buries them in a pagoda.¹³

It is not at all difficult to find parallels between this work and the *Legend of the White Serpent*. Miss Lin is the equivalent of Mistress White, not only are they both associated with whiteness, but also their names are identical, both are called Su-cheng. Miss Lin, in her outing, is similarly accompanied by a young woman. The Little Green in the *Legend* has been adapted with alteration of colour to Miss Fu, dressed always in red and black.

Fang is, of course, the equivalent of Hsü, and like Hsü, he meets the two ladies in an excursion during which a storm materializes. The happiness of the lovers in the *Legend* is thwarted by Fa Hai, who in this work is Boss Hsü, causing the ruin of Miss Lin. One remarkable coincidence should be pointed out. Mistress White reveals her true shape after drinking wine on Dragon-boat Festival. In this story Miss Lin drinks the same wine on the same festival and vomits as a consequence.

Naturally not all the details of the two works fit together. "Delirious Mutterings at Midnight" is, after all, an independent work set in the contemporary Taiwan. Yet this borrowing of some of the plot from *The Legend of the White Serpent* certainly enriches the work itself, and the mythical structure, properly modified, renders it more interesting.

Another point of departure is Shui's social concerns. James, while a discerning student of human relationships, is not much concerned with society at large. With the possible exception of *Princess Casamassima* (even there the social turmoil delineated is not particularly convincing), James is, for the most part, indifferent to the sweeping social events of his day. By contrast Shui proves himself a sharp social critic in his rather detailed picture of Taiwan in the sixties. The society depicted there is far from inviting. The air of Taipei is polluted, while the park after the national day is filled with debris and slime. Corruption permeates everywhere. Fang's own boss is currying favour to travel abroad. Manager Kuo, the lobbyist, passes goodies under the table. Miss Lin's Boss Hsü is the very incarnation of a villain. Lowly clerks can only read knight-errant novels to vent their frustration, or else they can turn their snobbery to the poorly customers, as waiters in expensive inns do. Shui, though not writing a social novel, has nevertheless inherited the spirit of Chinese writers in the thirties. No doubt a more polished writer than most of the didactic writers in that era, Shui nevertheless shares with them the moral burden of China, and their "obsessive concern with China as a nation afflicted with a spiritual disease and therefore unable to strengthen itself or change its set ways of inhumanity."¹⁴

In that respect one is happy to note that Shui's work has not encountered any form of censorship. Literature can truly flourish when writers are free from political consequence of their writing, just as society can progress forward when it remains open and tolerant of criticism.

But Shui Ching's concern transcends the social phenomena in Taiwan.

In taking Fang (Mr. Square) as the central protagonist and pitting him against all the corruption surrounding him, Shui is surely reminding us that goodness and decency are still amidst us despite the presence of evil such as Boss Hsü, and that the struggle between the two is a process for which we are all ultimately responsible. It is a moral tale in its consideration of the survival of decency in a modern world obsessed with the material present, a world which has neither a memory of the past, nor a dream for the future. And that survival is, of course, the perennial concern of all writers in the humanist tradition. George Eliot says so well in her *Middlemarch*:

For the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who live faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

Notes

1. Hsia ed. *Twentieth Century Chinese Stories*, pp. 201-217. trans. by C. T. Hsia and Shui Ching.
2. Shui Ching says in the epilogue of *The Green Grasshopper* that he has deliberately chosen a convoluted style to ward off the imitators. But truly, poor imitations, though they may dazzle for the moment, will always lose their glitter in due course; whereas a great work of art will survive, like the gems, the test of time.
3. This view is by no means universally shared. Shui's *The Green Grasshopper* received only one satiric "review". His second collection, *The Bell*, though published in 1973, has only recently received a review by Kao Ch'üan-chih (高全之), which imparts a partial approval of his work. In calling him "one of the most original and accomplished short story writers in Chinese today." C. T. Hsia gives Shui the strongest critical approval yet won by Shui.
4. Shui Ching, *Brickbats*, p. 107 and p. 111.
5. Shui Ching, *The Green Grasshopper*, p. 191.
6. Matthiessen, p. 62.
7. Warren, pp. 142-161.
8. Lubbock, p. 160. Though W. Booth has effectively refuted the claim by Lubbock that Jamesian way of writing a novel is the best for all kinds of fictions, Lubbock's work remains the most illuminating in the discussions of stories written in the Jamesian manner.
9. *Ibid*, p. 160.
10. Sharp, pp. xxi-xxiii.

11. Ibid, pp. xxix-xxx.
12. Shui Ching, *Art of Eileen Chang's Novels*, pp. 61-91.
13. This synopsis is abbreviated from that of N. Y. Ting in his "The Holy Man and the Snake-woman: A Study of Lamia Story in Asian and European Literature" *Fabula* (vol, 8, No. 3), p. 172.
14. C. T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, pp. 533-534.

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