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Henry James, Bataille, and the Dialectical Image

In the Preface to "The Tragic Muse," Henry James simultaneously theorizes and enacts a model of how a writer successful navigates the contradictory relationship between a writer's medium (language) and the literary imagination. While discussing his "usual difficulties" (85)[1] writing a novel, James tacitly demonstrates that the images the imagination produces exceed the "limits" (87) of a text creating an impossible predicament for the writer. How does the writer depict the multiplicity of an image in his mind while containing that image in a novel, much less a sentence? James navigates this impasse when he suggests that the writer must saturate an image just enough as to "successfully *foreshorten*[ ]" (87) it.

This dilemma correlates to Bataille's theories of general and restricted economy. If a text is a restricted economy (limited), then the writer's task is to fill it with the general economy of his imagination. However, because of the impossibility of this task, the text produces waste and an excess of images and meanings (everything that the text cannot contain). This excess is the defining element of Walter Benjamin's dialectical image. The relation between the restricted economy and the general economy of the writer's imagination produces a surplus of images that engenders a "constellation saturated with tensions" (475)[2] or the dialectical image.

After sorting through the relationship between James, the dialectical image, and Bataillian economies, my paper returns to James and concludes that his arduous late style is an attempt to put on display the very dilemma he describes. James's prose is unique because its convoluted syntax and reliance on numerous figures overtly directs the reader to the images within the text and the images outside, the excess; that is, James's style consciously engenders dialectical images.

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[1] Henry James. "Preface to *The Tragic Muse*." The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1934. 79-97. Print.

[2] Walter Benjamin. The Arcades Project. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Ed Rolf Tiedemann. Cambridge: Belknapp Press, 1999. Print.