

IT IS ART THAT MAKES LIFE: EXPERIENCING VISUAL ART IN HENRY JAMES'S
NOVELS

by

JENNIFER L. EIMERS

(Under the Direction of Kristin Boudreau)

ABSTRACT

This work examines the transformative experience of art in James's fiction. In a 1915 letter to H.G. Wells, James declares that "It is art that *makes* life," a claim whose rich implications are traced here. The first chapter examines the effect of aesthetic experience on the characters of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), which was written at the height of the British Aesthetic movement. A few years later, in *The Bostonians* (1885), James suggests the transitional nature of American intellectual and artistic culture as the country begins to cast off the influence of Europe and to trust its own creative voice, a process that is mirrored in the novel's characters. In short, art in this novel affects and reveals both the national and the individual consciousness. *The Tragic Muse* (1890) revisits James's complicated relationship with the late nineteenth-century controversy over Aestheticism. This chapter presents a reading of the title character that strongly resists the dominant perception that Miriam lacks depth. The final chapter of this study contends that in James's late phase novel, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), the responses of individual consciousness to a Bronzino and a Veronese painting are central to the novel's conclusion. This novel contains strong Paterian and Ruskinian echoes, and in it James works out his lingering ambivalences toward the ideas of these two well-known art critics. Situated within nineteenth-century aesthetic theories and cultural moments, this project as a whole suggests that in James's novels, art *does* make life.

INDEX WORDS: Henry James, Aestheticism, Art, Architecture, Walter Pater, John Ruskin, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Bostonians*, *The Tragic Muse*, *The Wings of the Dove*

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DEDICATION

For my patient and supportive family

For Jeremiah, who taught me about baseball and about the South

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Introduction

The Question of Art in James's Experience

“That’s the delightful thing about art, that there’s always more to learn and more to do; it grows bigger the more one uses it and meets more questions the more they come up.”

The Tragic Muse

In a private letter to Henry James composed in 1915, H. G. Wells declared that “[t]here is of course a real and very fundamental difference in our innate and developed attitudes towards life and literature. To you literature like painting is an end, to me literature like architecture is a means, it has a use” (James, *Life in Letters* 553). In his reply two days later, James took issue with this distinction:

[I] hold your distinction between a form that is (like) painting and a form that is (like) architecture for wholly null and void. There is no sense in which architecture is aesthetically “for use” that doesn’t leave any other art whatever exactly as much so; and so far from that of literature being irrelevant to the literary report upon life [. . .] I regard it as relevant in a degree that leaves everything else behind. It is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process. (*Life in Letters* 555)

Wells claimed that he did not understand the last sentence: “I can only read sense into it by assuming that you are using ‘art’ for every conscious human activity. I use the word for a research and attainment that is technical and special . . .” (*Life in Letters* n. 555). While Wells

appreciates art for its functional rather than aesthetic qualities, James believes the aesthetic value is no less dispensable than the pragmatic purposes of art.

Behind this exchange of aesthetic philosophies lie assumptions about the way readers and viewers experience literary and visual art. My thesis in the following pages is that these assumptions are central to James's fiction; characters' experiences in the presence of specific works of art "make life" by changing their consciousness and their perspectives of the world. The idea that art practically and aesthetically "makes life" is also evident in "The Art of Fiction" (1884) where James writes that "the province of art is all life, all feeling, all observation, all vision. [. . .] it is all experience" (388). His definition of the term "experience" does not only indicate, as Collin Meissner suggests, "something that one lives through or suffers" (2). James writes in the Preface to *The Princess Casamassima* (1909) that experience is "our apprehension and our measure of what happens to us as social creatures" (37). For James, the term indicates the conclusions that the mind draws from the stimuli to which it reacts.

James's understanding was no doubt influenced by the psychological theories of his older brother William, with whom he frequently exchanged ideas. William, a psychology professor at Harvard, published the highly influential *Principles of Psychology* in 1890. In the revised and abridged 1892 edition, *Psychology: The Briefer Course*, William defines the term experience in this way: "what is called our 'experience' is almost entirely determined by our habits of attention" (39). In other words, our response to the surrounding stimuli depends on the things we have trained our minds to notice. We cannot measure what happens to us if we do not notice it. William further divides experience into "discrimination" and "association," discrimination being when we notice any part of an object, and association being the connections that form our stream of thought (111, 120).

In this context, experience for Henry means that when the mind encounters an object or an event, the things a character has been trained to notice or to ignore contribute to how that object or event affects her consciousness. What happens in that encounter can be explained through William's definition of perception, or "the consciousness of particular material things present to sense" (179). He writes that "the moment we get beyond the first crude sensation all our consciousness is of what is *suggested*, and the various suggestions shade gradually into each other, being one and all products of the same psychological machinery of association" (179). The same process occurs in his brother's novels when a character encounters an object, receives a sensation, and the consciousness then begins a string of associations. For example, in "The Beast in the Jungle" the expression of anguish in the face of a mourning man prompts John Marcher to finally understand the "beast" that has been lurking within him for years. His initial sensation on seeing the man is to wonder "[w]hat had the man *had* to make him, by the loss of it, so bleed and yet live?" (338). From this question he eventually arrives at his answer, one that changes his consciousness by shedding a new light on both the past and the future. His shattering realization that he had ignored May's love for so many years changes his habits of attention, and things he had ignored in the past suddenly become part of his consciousness. May's death would seem to make new experiences with her impossible, but as Marcher reevaluates all of their moments together, he illustrates James's belief that, like consciousness, "experience is never limited, and it is never complete" ("Art of Fiction" 382), even when the door to a particular experience seems closed.

While any object may potentially stimulate these associations, art is a privileged site for exploring consciousness in James's fiction. In the same way that the man's face prompts Marcher's associations and permanent change of perspective, other Jamesian characters make

“associations” that stem from paintings, sculptures, and architecture. The experiences art offers its viewers or readers can, in James’s view, open up new perceptions, thus altering habits of attention and in turn, consciousness. In addition to his passionate personal interest in art, one likely reason for James’s preference for using art in this way is that it attempts to convey an idea. The indirect play between the mind of the artist and the viewer through such an object offers opportunity for more intense experience than that offered by the mind’s encounter with, say, a train or a landscape. These things have no creative mind behind them, and there is more subjective space between the mind of the artist and the viewer through an art object than there is between the mind and non-art objects. In even a painted landscape, compared to a real one, the painter makes choices regarding the best manner of representation, and a viewer’s imagination reflects on those choices. James strives to “sound the depths” of his characters’ consciousnesses, and interactions with art offer him a wider variety of associations and a more complex path to do so.

As we shall see, James’s lifelong passion for all forms of art is well documented, and the visual art prominent in his writing has received ample critical attention. However, within the scholarship devoted to visual art in James’s fiction, there is no extended study of the guiding role visual art often plays in the experiences of his characters. The experiences characters have when they make associations that change consciousness, and the subsequent trajectories on which these changes place them, are often prompted by visual art. Highlighting and analyzing James’s representations of consciousness in the presence of recognizable works of art (painting, sculpture, and architecture), I expand and explore Wells’ suggestion that James uses “art for every conscious human activity.”

To demonstrate the process by which art makes life in James's fiction, I examine moments of perception, prompted by encounters with specific works of art, that create new content in characters' consciousnesses and thus offer new associations by which they understand themselves and their lives. Walter Pater's idea that art can prompt a "quickened, multiplied consciousness" underlies my discussion (*Renaissance* 153). I focus on this process in four novels in particular: *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *The Bostonians* (1885), *The Tragic Muse* (1890), and *The Wings of the Dove* (1902). I have chosen these particular novels because their publication dates span his mature career and because the various means by which they employ art apply to similar moments in many other works by James. My approach to these moments with art is historical, as in my chapter on *The Bostonians*, where I set the characters' responses to Memorial Hall, Central Park, and The Boston Music Hall within the context of American concerns for establishing a distinct cultural authority that is independent of Europe's. Furthermore, by tracing James's attitude toward British Aestheticism, and toward John Ruskin and Walter Pater in particular, through these four novels, we can see how his use of art and its influence on consciousness changed as his ideas about Aestheticism changed.¹

Scholarly Context

James's interest in art, consciousness, and experience has long interested scholars of his fiction. Adeline Tintner, who takes an art historical approach, is the most notable and prolific scholar in this vein of Jamesian criticism. In *The Museum World of Henry James* (1986), *Henry James and the Lust of the Eyes: Thirteen Artists in His Work* (1993), and in countless articles,

¹ Recent critical interest in Aestheticism suggests that some of James's nineteenth-century concerns, such as how to put aesthetic theories into practice, are resurfacing. See Nicholas Shrimpton, "The Old Aestheticism and the New" (*Literature Compass* 2 [2005]: 1-16), which traces current developments in Aestheticism and their origin in the late-nineteenth century. He notes that the "New Aestheticism" would not be possible without historical investigations of late-nineteenth-century Aestheticism (1).

she thoroughly catalogues the identifiable works of art in his fiction and suggests the ways in which these works complement James's characters and scenes. Her research provides basic information about the artwork that I discuss in my exploration of the interactions between art and consciousness.

Another approach explores James's narrative adaptation of artistic devices and techniques, such as pictorialism and impressionism. In relation to my project, this narrative relationship between art and literature in his fiction has been studied most usefully by Viola Hopkins Winner in *Henry James and the Visual Arts* (1970) and by Marianna Torgovnick in *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism, and the Novel* (1985).² Winner's important, ground-breaking book offers a background for James's adult attitudes toward visual art, discusses James's fictional artists, and delves into the implications of artistic devices in the novels. Torgovnick looks forward from James by examining the ways that his incorporation of the visual arts prefigures Modern novelists Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence. She creates a helpful continuum that allows us to categorize the manner in which these authors write about art. The spectrum ranges from decorative uses, or passages that "suggest a particular movement or an actual work" (14), to perceptual uses, or "the ways in which *characters* experience art objects or pictorial objects and scenes in a way that provokes their conscious or unconscious minds" (22). Her definition of perceptual uses suggests a discussion similar to my own thesis that art, experience, and consciousness are intricately related for James; in practice she focuses on the perceptual process whereby readers and characters mentally frame scenes or episodes as pictures rather than focusing on the specific moments when characters face a work of art in James's fiction. Reading

² This relationship is also explored by scholars H. Peter Stowell in *Literary Impressionism: James and Chekhov* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1980), and by James J. Kirschke in *Henry James and Impressionism* (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1981).

James's fiction as a point of comparison for Woolf's and Lawrence's more radical work, Torgovnick believes that James's unwillingness to engage with abstract, Modern art severely limited his potential for radically revising the literary uses of visual art (46). If, however, we consider James's perspective that art should be firmly grounded in recognizable human experiences, as his aversion to abstract art indicates, it becomes clear that in the interactions between character and art object, James advanced an appreciation of visual art as a catalyst for creating a more perceptive consciousness.

While my project is indebted to various studies, my approach is not art historical nor do I study the adaptation of visual art to narrative style. Instead, I analyze the psychological responses and narrative representations of consciousness that occur during and after encounters with art. The scholarship that is perhaps most relevant to my own is Jonathan Freedman's *Professions of Taste* (1990). Asserting that British Aestheticism was first given expression in America through the selling of aesthetic domestic goods and was fully integrated into America's culture of consumption decades before American intellectuals gave it literary and artistic respect (xxiii), Freedman then turns to James and argues that he "reshaped the essential agendas of the British 'aesthetic movement' into ones more easily assimilated into the particular needs of his own cultural moment" (xxv). The result of James's professionalization ultimately normalized British aestheticism, which in turn shaped the discourse of high Anglo-American Modernism (xxv). Acknowledging the accuracy and cogency of Freedman's claims, I build on his research regarding James's relationship with aestheticism, exploring in detail the psychological portraits that James creates in the interactions between his characters and visual art. These moments, as I have noted, can alter the character's developing perception and aesthetic imagination. Through these interactions, James introduced his American middle-class readers to aesthetic attitudes

toward visual art that were intended to improve the quality of one's inner life, rather than being grounded in consumer culture or domestic decoration, as they had been thus far. Presenting art in this way, James trained an "enlarging and increasingly enthusiastic audience for 'high culture' in patterns of expectation and response that a subsequent generation of writers and artists—the 'modernists'—were able to call upon and take for granted" (Freedman xxiv). Furthermore, my project fills in a small gap in Freedman's work by investigating the effect of visual art on consciousness, an idea that he briefly discusses only as it pertains to the affinities between Walter Pater's dying aesthete in *The Renaissance* (1873) and Milly Theale's consciousness of her impending death in *The Wings of the Dove*.

Discussions of Jamesian consciousness among other scholars cover a wide range of approaches. The most significant book-length works in this field include Dorothea Krook's *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James* (1962), Paul Armstrong's *The Phenomenology of Henry James* (1983), Sharon Cameron's *Thinking in Henry James* (1989), and Millicent Bell's *Meaning in Henry James* (1991). Krook focuses on the theme of "being and seeing," which captures for her James's exploration and definition of consciousness (ix). These two words refer to characters who are "actively and deeply involved in the objective world" and who are at the same time "intensely and minutely conscious of all that this involvement in the objective world implies" (22). Though Krook does not apply this discussion to art, I build on her summary of James's definition of consciousness with my thesis that visual art offers characters a lens through which to "see" the subjective implications of their involvement in the world. Like Krook, Paul Armstrong is concerned with the life of the mind, centering his attention on the relationship between Jamesian consciousness and moral vision (vii). To this end, he identifies "five major aspects of experience that, together, map James's understanding of human being" (vii). The first

aspect of experience, the “impression” as a way of knowing, is most relevant to my project. “Impression” has many meanings for James, as Armstrong notes (37). Giving the example in “The Art of Fiction” of the English novelist whose glimpse of French Protestant youth led her to produce a reality, Armstrong demonstrates that “in James’s view, the impression has almost miraculous revelatory power” (39). For James art is the process by which life, interest, and importance are made, so this power, as my project discusses, becomes even more compelling as a way of knowing when the impression originates in visual art. Armstrong’s concern with moral vision takes him in a reader-oriented direction, with which I am less concerned, but I link James’s characters and their process of applying meaning to visual art with his notion that “[r]epresentational art provides us with images of who we are and who we might be” (68).³

How characters apply meaning to their experiences—the things that happen to them—is Sharon Cameron’s concern. Consciousness and knowledge are often conflated, but Cameron pointedly discriminates between them: “Because consciousness and knowledge (traditionally associated with awareness and with interpretation that is socially codified) are neither identical nor completely separable, the space between the two is the ground of confusion” (65). Cameron writes that “at one level, consciousness cannot be pure in that there is always a dialectic between the specific thought and what occasions it. This is another way to say that consciousness cannot be pure in that there is always a *content* governing its workings” (3). And the content of one’s consciousness determines rather than reflects meaning (4). Following this line of thought, we will see in the subsequent pages how often art is a major factor in the shaping of a character’s consciousness. As a privileged site for exploring this aspect of James’s fiction, a work of art

³ In a similar phenomenological vein, Merle Williams, in *Henry James and the Philosophical Novel* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1993), examines James’s late fiction, particularly in light of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

becomes the content of consciousness, and characters determine a meaning for it that in turn reshapes the consciousness for its next experience.

Like Cameron's belief that consciousness determines rather than reflects meaning, Millicent Bell believes that James "participated in that general cultural shift which promotes the idea that meaning is not to be imposed upon experience but, problematically, discovered in it" (6). Bell's discussion focuses on a succession of meanings in James's fiction rather than relying on one final interpretation, and she examines the reader's response to James as a major aspect of her research. This focus is in a different vein than my own, but she opens the way for my exploration of the ways that the different, though equally valid, meanings that characters apply to the same work of art, such as Harvard's Memorial Hall, reveal their past experiences as well as indicate future associations.

James's Formative Years

James's early responses to art indicate his adult attitudes toward the movements that flourished during the decades of his literary career. Growing up in a wealthy and respected family, James was encouraged to develop personal attitudes towards all forms of art by a wide exposure to painting, sculpture, and architecture in Europe and America. He spent his formative years in New York City (1847-1855), where the James children were allowed to fully experience the widely varied cultural education that the city offered. In these years, the family often enjoyed the theater and the spectacle of Barnum's American Museum (introducing Henry to his life-long love of drama), but these were overshadowed by the numerous painted canvases that the family viewed: "We were shown without doubt, under our genial law here too, everything there was" (James, *Autobiography* 151). Like his mature view of art, his upbringing included "all

observation, all vision. [. . .] all experience” (“Art of Fiction” 388). Unsatisfied by the “collection of worm-eaten diptychs and triptychs, of angular saints and seraphs” at Bryan’s Gallery of Christian Art, which represented the “primitive” and made him “begin badly with Christian art” (152), James found more to admire at the Dusseldorf Gallery. After it opened in 1849, he visited it “repeatedly and earnestly” (New Britain Museum, *Autobiography* 151). The Dusseldorf promoted primarily European, and especially German, artists, and sixty years later James remembered “the huge canvas of the Martyrdom of John Huss [. . .] as a revelation of representational brightness and charm” (*Autobiography* 151). He goes on to say that “No impression here, however, was half so momentous as that of the epoch-making masterpiece of Mr. Leutze, which showed us Washington crossing the Delaware in a wondrous flare of projected gaslight and with the effect of a revelation to my young sight of the capacity of accessories to ‘stand out’” (151). This large painting, on display from October 1851-1852 at Goupil’s Art Gallery (Metropolitan Museum), impressed the young Henry with the sharpness of its detail, though when he returned to it as an adult he found it “lividly dead” (*Autobiography* 152). His revised evaluation suggests that his childhood preference for historical narrative and bright color in painting faded as he saw a wider variety of genres and as he refined his taste. In addition to visiting Dusseldorf and Goupil’s, James likely saw the collections of mostly American paintings at the New York Gallery of Fine Arts, the American Art Union, and the National Academy of Design, which provided him with a wide exposure to contemporary American art.

This broad introduction to living artists likely influenced his heavy involvement in the modern world of visual art. While he eventually acquired a solid knowledge of “the old masters,” and especially admired High Renaissance Italians such as Tintoretto and Titian, he kept abreast

of contemporary painters. He was, however, slow to accept innovations in visual art. Reviewing the French Impressionists who exhibited at the 1876 Salon, he wrote that they “are partisans of unadorned reality and absolute foes to arrangement, embellishment, selection, to the artist’s allowing himself, as he has hitherto, since art began, found his best account in doing, to be preoccupied with the idea of the beautiful” (*Essays on Art* 164). This criticism reflects his own concern with form and with discriminating among details. He continues that “the ‘Impressionist’ doctrines strike me as incompatible, in an artist’s mind, with the existence of first-rate talent. To embrace them you must be provided with a plentiful absence of imagination” (165). For this reason, James similarly disliked James McNeill Whistler’s work, which he felt resembled the Impressionists (*Essays on Art* 278). He held Edward Burne-Jones’ opinion that Whistler’s paintings were “fatally deficient in finish” (292). Imagination and some degree of verisimilitude in representation remained critical components of James’s judgments. Without these two qualities, consciousness resisted the influence of art because the mind was preoccupied with the work’s flaws.

James’s contemporary involvement with artists began during his young life at home: “There were ‘artists’ in the prospect—didn’t Mr. Tom Hicks and Mr. Paul Duggan and Mr. C. P. Cranch and Mr. Felix Darley [. . .] more or less haunt our friendly fireside, and give us also the sense of others, landscapist Cropseys and Coles and Kensetts, and bust-producing Iveses and Powerses and Moziars, hovering in an outer circle?” (*Autobiography* 36). His early acquaintance with artists put James at ease with them, and as an adult he cultivated many important friendships with well-known artists, such as John La Farge and John Singer Sargent. Also at the Jameses’ fireside was a large 1837 painting, *View of Florence from San Miniato*, by the Hudson River artist Thomas Cole, in which “I could always lose myself as soon as look” (*Autobiography*

153). James's absorption in this painting provided him with early first-hand evidence of the transforming effect art could have on consciousness. The Cole painting accompanied a Tuscan landscape painted in "frank rich colours" by Lefèvre. When a visitor questioned these bold colors, claiming that in Tuscany the colors are much softer, the young James was offered a lesson on representational realism. Settling the dispute between the visitor and his father, Henry pointed to Cole's work and noted that Florence was in Tuscany, making his father realize that "if the Florence was 'like it' then the Lefèvre couldn't be, and if the Lefèvre was like it then the Florence couldn't: a lapse from old convenience—as from the moment we couldn't name the Lefèvre [as Tuscany] where were we? All of which it might have been open to me to feel I had uncannily promoted" (*Autobiography* 154). Again, the young James's attention to color is uppermost in his artistic criticism, but the underlying, and more important, lesson that James gains by the "lapse from old convenience" seems to be that aesthetic value can be independent of verisimilitude—the mark of good art is not necessarily to "be like" the original, since by that measure one painting fails. Though recognizing that one painting represents the color of Tuscany less realistically, James still admires both paintings, even if uneasily. In James's future fiction, the intensity of a character's response to a painting will not depend on verisimilitude. Rather, it will depend on the artist's ability to convey human experience and on the amount of imagination the viewer possesses.

During the family's extended stays in Europe, James also saw many works of art. In London, the James family visited the Pantheon, the Marlborough House, and the Royal Academy. The Pantheon of Oxford Street was "above all a monument to the genius of that wonderful painter B. R. Haydon" (*Autobiography* 177). Again favoring larger-than-life narrative canvases, James found "remarkable interest and beauty" in works such as *The Banishment of*

Aristides and embarrassingly surmised “that the grand manner, the heroic and the classic, in Haydon, came home to us more warmly and humanly than in the masters commended as ‘old,’ who, at the National Gallery, seemed to meet us so little half-way, to hold out the hand of fellowship or suggest something that *we* could do” (177). He goes on to say that “the genius of the Pantheon was fresh, whereas, strange to say, Rubens and Titian were not” (177). His interest in the effect of art foreshadows his later explorations of the responses visual art could elicit from his fictive characters, such as Milly Theale’s reaction to a Bronzino portrait. Even more enticing to James than the Pantheon was Robert Vernon’s collection of 157 paintings, mostly by nineteenth-century British artists, donated to the nation and arrayed at Marlborough House (Winner 8). Despite the paintings by reputed artists such as Turner and Constable (Winner 8), James was drawn to the human interest in the paintings of Daniel Maclise, William Mulready, Edwin Henry Landseer, David Wilkie, and Charles Leslie, which were “directly inspiring” and “endlessly delightful” (*Autobiography* 178). His specific recollection of Maclise’s play scene in *Hamlet* and of Leslie’s *Sancho Panza* reinforce Winner’s observation that “Henry’s initial response to European art in Europe and his preferences among works in New York indicate that the dramatic, anecdotal, and psychological interest of painting attracted him rather than more formal qualities” (6). Though he would come to appreciate the more formal qualities of painting, this initial inclination stayed with him. It is reflected in the psychological bent of his fiction and in his representation of art that inspires.

In Paris James’s artistic and aesthetic preferences began to mature. He continued to admire paintings of historical episodes, such as Delaroche’s *Les Enfants d’Edouard*, which “thrilled me to a different tune” and reconstituted a “far-off history of the subtlest and most ‘last word’ modern or psychologic kind. I had never heard of psychology in art or anywhere else—

scarcely anyone then had; but I truly felt the nameless force at play” (*Autobiography* 194). As a writer of fiction, James’s use of narrative impressions that convey a story, like Isabel’s mental image of Serena Merle and Gilbert Osmond, seems to owe something to his early preference for the anecdotal. At the Louvre, however, where James and his older brother William made regular trips, he slowly absorbed an aesthetic new to him, one based on traditional art, not modern or experimental works. In the Louvre he happily crossed “that bridge over to Style constituted by the wondrous Galerie d’Apollon, drawn out for me as a long but assured initiation” (196). The Louvre represented a place where “the house of life and the palace of art became so mixed and interchangeable [. . .] that an excursion to look at pictures would have but half expressed my afternoon” (198-99). When the seventy-year-old James recalls the origin of his aesthetic sensibility, he recalls that his experiences at the Louvre prompted his first significant feeling of the interdependence of art and life.

As his regular trips with Henry to the Louvre indicate, William was also interested in visual art. When he began taking art lessons in 1858 from William Morris Hunt, a Boston painter who had studied under Thomas Couture, Henry flirted with the idea of becoming a painter as well. Though enchanted with being “at the threshold of a world” in Hunt’s studio, he soon realized his artistic talents lay elsewhere: “the arts were after all essentially one and [. . .] even with canvas and brush whisked out of my grasp I still needn’t feel disinherited” (*Autobiography* 285, 294). After accepting that his path to artistic fame pointed to the literary arts, James concentrated his efforts on becoming an author. In February 1869, anxious to gather ideas and impressions “to be introduced into realistic novels yet unwritten” (*Life in Letters* 28), he embarked on a fifteen-month tour of Europe. Through his friend Charles Eliot Norton, editor of the *North American Review* (*NAR*), James met several members of the English art world,

particularly the Pre-Raphaelites William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, and their promoter John Ruskin.

John Ruskin and Walter Pater

James's relationship with Ruskin and with his work is a major factor in the formation of James's early understanding of visual art. That Ruskin certainly influenced James's aesthetic convictions is a commonplace of James studies. In the mid-nineteenth century, Ruskin exerted enormous influence on the perspective with which people viewed and judged art and architecture, and an impressionable, young Henry James did not escape this influence.⁴ Freedman notes that "Ruskin's conservative, hierarchical social vision and sense of the social importance of art mirrored the ideology of the group that historians refer to as the American gentry—the largely northeastern, indeed largely Bostonian elite who considered themselves the embattled proponents of culture and civilization in an increasingly materialistic and secular age" (87). As part of this Bostonian, American gentry, James, who was widely exposed to art in his youth, was familiar with Ruskin's name and works from a fairly young age. In his twenties, his friendship with Charles Eliot Norton led to the brief meeting with Ruskin in 1869. The previous year James had praised the art critic in a book review for *NAR*. Indicating his close familiarity with Ruskin's art criticism, James designated him the "single eminent representative" of the art critic in England (*Painter's Eye* 33). James clearly believed that Ruskin was an artistic prophet of sorts, an opinion he reiterated after meeting him. The aspiring author wrote to his mother that

⁴ For excellent discussions of Ruskin's place in the formation of a Victorian aesthetic and the treatment of fine art in literature, see Roger Stein's *John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 1840-1900* (1967); Richard Stein's *The Ritual of Interpretation: The Fine Arts as Literature in Ruskin, Rossetti, and Pater* (1975); and Linda Dowling's *The Vulgarization of Art: the Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1996).

despite Ruskin's mental illness, "the fitful flashes of his beautiful genius" were still evident (*Complete Letters* 1.1: 256).

Ruskin's early influence on James's developing artistic sensibility is most easily seen in the artists whom both writers preferred. Like Ruskin, James admired the Pre-Raphaelites (*Autobiography* 178) as well as "the genius of this mightiest of all painters of landscape," J. M. W. Turner (*Essays on Art* 272).⁵ When James visited Venice for the first time in 1869, Ruskin's ideas accompanied him. Writing to William in September, James spent several pages noting Ruskin's opinions of Venetian and Italian artists and comparing his own impressions. Like Ruskin, James extolled the virtues of three Italian painters: Paolo Veronese, Jacopo Bellini, and most especially Tintoretto, whom he admitted "to be the biggest genius (as far as I yet know) who ever wielded a brush" (*Complete Letters* 1.2: 114). James recommended Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53), the third volume in particular, for "a number of magnificent descriptive pages touching [Tintoretto's] principal pictures" (1.2: 116). At this stage in his career, James clearly admired and agreed with the future first Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford, who in return so admired James's writing that he at one point wished James to succeed him as Slade Professor (Sweeney 1).

Ruskin and James believed that the feeling a work of art conveyed to the viewer was important and that the degree to which art expressed imagination should be a criterion by which to judge it. For both men, imagination is an intellectual power that is concerned with "seeing." Ruskin insists in *Modern Painters II* (1846) that the penetrative imagination is "the highest intellectual power of man" (*Works* 4: 251). Furthermore, "the virtue of the Imagination is its reaching, by intuition and intensity of gaze (not by reasoning, but by its authoritative opening

⁵ Susan Casteras, in "'The Prime Hours of First—and Subsequent—Initiations': Henry James on Pre-Raphaelite Art and Artists" (*HJR* 23.3 [2002]: 304-17), notes that James lost his early enthusiasm for Pre-Raphaelites Holman Hunt and Millais.

and revealing power), a more essential truth than is seen at the surface of things” (4: 284). “A more essential truth” alludes to the theocentric nature of Ruskin’s aesthetic theory, especially in his early criticism like *Modern Painters*. James was always skeptical of Ruskin’s theocentrism, but James’s art criticism and fiction frequently echo the value of perception and imagination. Imagination is the common denominator in the most perceptive of his heroes and heroines, from Isabel’s “ridiculously active” imagination to Strether’s “imagination galore,” and it also serves as a touchstone for his art criticism.

Though Ruskin played a formative role in creating James’s aesthetic, both directly and indirectly through his permeating place in art criticism, the younger man ultimately arrived at different conclusions from his predecessor. As James began to publish his own short stories, novels, and art criticism, he established his own methods of evaluation. In a review titled “Ruskin’s Collection of Drawings by Turner” (April 1878), he writes that Ruskin “has spent his life, his large capacity for emotion, and his fortune in a passionate—a too passionate—endeavour to avert, in many different lines, what he believed to be the wrong and to establish his rigid conception of the right” (*Essays on Art* 273). James, on the other hand, believed “questions of art are questions (in the widest sense) of execution; questions of morality are quite another affair” (“Art of Fiction” 392). An artist must not be confined to “moral” topics. Doing so circumscribed the experience art provided, whereas for James “experience is never limited, and it is never complete” (382). Kevin Swafford pinpoints this fundamental difference in Ruskin’s and James’s attitudes: “in Ruskin’s aesthetic, there are finite experiences—which are the endpoints of knowing truth (singular and universal). For James, in contrast, aesthetic experience is potentially infinite” (1-2). Arguing that James’s writing on Florence, particularly “The Autumn in Florence”

(1873) and “Recent Florence” (1878), were intended to correct Ruskinian aesthetics, Swafford continues,

According to James, there is an enormous amount of unpredictability in the (inter)subjective response to art, given the vastness and multiplicity of human consciousness and experience. James suggests art’s meaning is configured in the expansiveness and variability of its experience. Ultimately, for James, the work of a valid artist must, if it counts for anything, constitute, first and foremost, an experience, as opposed to an ‘idea,’ which is always secondary to the experiential.

(2)

Swafford’s definition of “experience” seems to mean what happens psychologically during one’s encounter with art. The emotions and thoughts the work conveys were more important for James than its didactic message. By informing readers “what is and is not valuable and what [they] can and cannot rightfully experience and think in relation to certain works of art” (Swafford 1), Ruskin, in James’s opinion, misses the purpose of art: the pleasure it provides (*Italian Hours* 117).

Indeed, James openly criticized Ruskin for his inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to simply enjoy art. A month after reviewing Ruskin’s Turner collection, James wrote in a travel article for *Atlantic Monthly* that “This idea of the value of a work of art being the amount of entertainment it yields is conspicuous by its absence. [. . .] Instead of a garden of delight, [Ruskin] finds a sort of assize court, in perpetual session” (“Recent Florence” 591). By the time of the Whistler-Ruskin trial later that year, James had decided that “Mr. Ruskin’s language quite transgresses the decencies of criticism, and he has been laying about him for some years past with such promiscuous violence that it gratifies one’s sense of justice to see him brought up as a

disorderly character” (*Essays on Art* 293). James does not, of course, side with Whistler in this case either, calling his paintings “very eccentric and imperfect” (293), but by calling Ruskin a “scold,” James asserts his growing independence from this one-time sovereign of European art criticism.⁶

While James acknowledged Ruskin as an early influence and later publicly disagreed with him, he was mysteriously quiet about the influence of another famous later nineteenth-century art critic, Walter Pater. Freedman and Richard Ellmann offer convincing evidence that James read *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* shortly after it appeared in 1873 (Freedman 133-4, Ellmann 25-28). The resistance that James exhibited toward the doctrine of “art for art’s sake” seems similar to Ruskin’s—for different reasons they both thought it was implicitly selfish—yet James’s travel essays and fiction offer ample evidence that he often engaged Pater’s ideas, both to criticize and to support them.⁷ For example, James’s concern for art as a “garden of delight” in his 1878 criticism of Ruskin repeats, whether intentionally or not, the questions that Pater believes an aesthetic critic should ask himself—does this song or picture give me pleasure (*Renaissance* xxix)? Despite disavowing his interest in Pater’s ideas, James was decidedly attracted to the art critic’s ideas, particularly those expressed in the Conclusion to *The Renaissance* concerning the ability of art to inspire a “quickened, multiplied consciousness.” Pater’s complicated influence on James became central to his ideas for *The Tragic Muse* and *The Wings of the Dove*.

⁶ Adam Parkes discusses in more detail James’s complicated attitudes toward Whistler and Ruskin at the time of the trial, including James’s “note of impatience” with Ruskin in “A Sense of Justice: Whistler, Ruskin, James, Impressionism” (2000).

⁷ On the affinities between Pater and James, see Richard Ellmann’s “James Among the Aesthetes,” Jonathan Freedman’s *Professions of Taste* (133-66), and Richard Salmon’s “Aestheticism in Translation: Henry James, Walter Pater, and Theodor Adorno” (*Translating Life: Studies in Transpositional Aesthetics*. Eds. Richard Salmon et. al. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1999. 277-96).

The Art in James's Fiction

Like Ruskin and Pater, James published his own artistic manifesto in “The Art of Fiction” (1884), where he articulates his mature attitudes toward the function and value of art. Though the essay primarily reflects James's beliefs that an “air of reality” is the “supreme virtue” of a novel—both painters and writers should strive to produce “the illusion of life” (383)—“The Art of Fiction” also suggests the viewer's role. As we can see in the characters he creates in his novels, James valued “those on whom nothing is lost,” e.g. those who are attuned to the smallest glimpses of life and who bring prior experience to their reading of art. Like James himself, spectators do not require formal art training in order to gain what James believes is the function of art—to provide experience as well as pleasure. People's selection of the art they like or dislike is motivated by experience, or by William James's ideas of “discrimination” and “association.” Thus, “as people feel life, so they will feel the art that is most closely related to it” (“Art of Fiction” 388). In James's aesthetic, “art makes life” in that art both reveals and creates our habits of attention, thereby affecting our stream of consciousness.

The encounter between consciousness and art was a core tenet of Aestheticism. Freedman notes that “[f]rom Rossetti's *The Portrait* or *The Blessed Damoziel* through Pater's *Renaissance* and even Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, the encounter between an alert, interrogating consciousness and a work of visual art has been a sustaining, even a defining, staple of the aesthetic movement” (211). Among his late-nineteenth-century contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic, James was the most conscientious about developing this connection between art and consciousness in fiction. Most of James's fiction includes either an artist as a central character, or a work of art that shapes another character's consciousness. Freedman points to the idea that James was not alone in his interest in the connection between art and consciousness (211). James's unique

contribution to this “staple” of Aestheticism was bringing it to middle-class readers without formal art training and demonstrating that even these readers could have significant interactions with art. His preoccupation with consciousness, experience, and perspective broadened the approach that both writers and readers took to art and literature, and authors in the following generation took his experiments into new territory. Freedman delves into the influence of Jamesian aesthetics and consumer culture on the Modernists, and aside from acknowledging the relevance of this point, I do not aim to reexamine such carefully researched and well-covered ground. Rather, I wish to examine James’s approach to art. After James had had a lifetime to formulate his aesthetic theories, his epistolary exchange with H. G. Wells near the end of his life encapsulated his late philosophies. Looking back through his literary productions, we can trace the formulation of these ideas, which culminated in Wells’s assumption that James was “using ‘art’ for every conscious human activity,” a central tenet of my study. Through exploring how James privileges art in his fictional studies of consciousness, I suggest that for James, art was so closely intertwined with consciousness that consciousness itself became a work of art.

Chapter 1

Aesthetic Experience in *The Portrait of a Lady*

James delves into casting consciousness as a work of art in *The Portrait of a Lady*. As its title suggests, this novel contains many frames: the physical frames of paintings, the imaginary frames around Isabel Archer, and the novel's frame of the two scenes in the Touchetts' painting gallery, to name a few.⁸ These frames imply objectivity; the framed objects are observed and judged by others but are granted no subjectivity of their own. Even Isabel, as the title frames her, does not escape this aestheticization. Her male observers, especially Ralph Touchett, Lord Warburton, and Gilbert Osmond, view her as a work of art that they either observe from a distance or actively attempt to shape. Beginning with an early scene in the novel, though, James offers resisting readers a more subjective view of her. In contrast to the passive, static perspective, in which Isabel *is* art but is not affected by aesthetic stimuli, the strategic placement of the opening and closing scenes in the Touchetts' painting gallery at Gardencourt suggests the central role art plays as a source of experience within the novel and for Isabel in particular.

Believing that visual art offers knowledge, Isabel eagerly and intently examines the Touchetts' paintings by candlelight during her first visit and concludes, "Well, now I know more than I did when I began" (*Portrait* 50). But she does not yet know enough to see the ghost of Gardencourt; her previous experience has not prepared her to discern the ghost. Ralph tells her that to do so requires that she suffer: "[The ghost] has never been seen by a young, happy, innocent person like you. You must [. . .] have suffered greatly, have gained some miserable

⁸ Adam Parkes provides an account of these and other frames through which Isabel is judged in "A Sense of Justice: Whistler, Ruskin, James, Impressionism" (614-17).

knowledge. In that way your eyes are opened to it” (52). Though Isabel protests that she is “very fond of knowledge,” Ralph pinpoints her obstacle when he notes that she is only fond of happy, pleasant knowledge: “But you haven’t suffered, and you’re not made to suffer” (52). Her initial response to the gallery offers a standard for further examining the development of her consciousness. By the end of the novel Isabel does, of course, suffer greatly, and achieves her most heightened moment of consciousness, seeing Ralph’s ghost. To arrive at that moment, her approach to aesthetic experience undergoes a significant reorientation.

The Portrait of a Lady is widely discussed as “a historically specific response to aestheticism” (Freedman 146), in which Isabel is the central art object, framed and confined by the various men in her life.⁹ Isabel’s personal experiences with architecture and visual art in the novel are also significant to James’s philosophies, though. By examining her interaction (and non-interaction) with art, we will see indications that she learns to distinguish among the variety of her aesthetic impressions, and thus arrives at a higher level of consciousness. That is, in addition to recognizing Isabel as an object of aesthetic appreciation, the novel asks us to consider her as a central subject of aesthetic experience.

The understanding of aesthetic experience that James illustrates in *The Portrait of a Lady* was garnered largely from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walter Pater. In general, “aesthetic experience” refers to the effect that art has on the judgments and emotions of its beholders. Though scholars frequently cite Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790) as the summation of eighteenth-century discussions about the concept and as the starting point for its nineteenth-

⁹ Dorothea Krook argues that Isabel is tainted with a fatal aestheticism similar to Osmond’s (58-9), while Freedman argues for “the universality of aestheticism in the novel” in that each of the characters possesses a unique aesthetic vision (157).

century development, no existing written evidence indicates that James read Kant.¹⁰ James's ideas come more directly from Emerson and Pater, whose work he had read and who had each written their most influential texts by the time James began writing *The Portrait of a Lady*.¹¹ Emerson's aesthetic ideas are recorded in "Art," which closes *Essays: First Series* (1841). In the Transcendentalist's view, the historical office of art was to educate our perception of beauty:

We are immersed in beauty, but our eyes have no clear vision. It [beauty] needs, by the exhibition of single traits, to assist and lead the dormant taste. [. . .] The virtue of art lies in detachment, in sequestering one object from the embarrassing variety. Until one thing comes out from the connection of things, there can be enjoyment, contemplation, but no thought. Our happiness and unhappiness are unproductive. (291)

Emerson suggests that we can truly enjoy art only by making distinctions among it, which implies that we must understand the individual qualities that cause our emotional reaction. Walter Pater expresses a similar sentiment in his definition of the aesthetic critic. Invoking Matthew Arnold as an authority and source for his definition, Pater writes that the aesthetic critic must discriminate among the impressions and feelings that art objects inspire in him: "Our education becomes complete in proportion as our susceptibility to these impressions increases in depth and variety" (*Renaissance* xxx). Isabel similarly moves from a state of inhaling large quantities of aesthetic stimuli without noticing the cause of her impressions to distinguishing among the emotions she experiences. This continuum corresponds with William James's definition of experience and its subdivision into "discrimination" and "association." As Isabel

¹⁰ See Dabney Townsend's "From Shaftesbury to Kant: The Development of the Concept of Aesthetic Experience" for a discussion of eighteenth-century definitions of aesthetic experience (*Journal of the History of Ideas* 48.2 [1987]: 287-305).

¹¹ Isabel's Emersonian characteristics have been acknowledged most notably by Richard Poirier in "Portrait d'une Dame" (*L'Arc* 89 [1983]: 38-46).

learns more and more to detach art from its surroundings and to distinguish the distinct and various suggestions that each work offers her, this aesthetic experience teaches her consciousness to gradually recognize displeasure as well as pleasure.

My reading works to revise arguments that present Isabel's decision to marry and then to return to Osmond as evidence that she does not learn from experience. Collin Meissner, for example, subtitles his chapter on *The Portrait of a Lady* "Isabel Archer's Failed Experience." Her experience fails, according to him, because at the end of the novel her mindset "has been such that the rest of the world is effectively closed to her" (Meissner 127). Meissner also refers to "the completion of Isabel's experience" (128), a phrase which contradicts what we know of James's attitude toward experience: "Experience is never limited, and it is never complete" ("Art of Fiction" 382). I suggest, on the other hand, that the aesthetic experience and knowledge of suffering that Isabel gains through her choices, and her developing ability to discriminate among her impressions, lead to heightened powers of consciousness. She returns to Osmond not because she does not see an alternative, but because her vision of Ralph's ghost restores her hope that "there's something deeper" than pain and that her "generous mistake" will not hurt her for more than a little while (*Portrait* 478, 479). Rather than being framed by her suffering, she sees past it; it is a temporary state. The optimism and delight in freedom that make Isabel an embodiment of Emersonian ideals are not lost with her return to Rome.

The sense of Isabel's potential and opportunity loom large in the narrator's initial descriptions of her. This optimism is partially conveyed through her unfamiliarity with suffering. Because she has not personally experienced such pain, these emotions do not color her perception, and she sees the world as full of happy potential rather than seeing possibilities for failure. Her youthful understanding of sorrow and suffering is impersonal and abstract; she tells

her aunt, Mrs. Touchett, that her affection for her grandmother's house is based on the idea that it is "full of experience—of people's feelings and sorrows" (36). These sorrows are not her own, she hastens to inform Mrs. Touchett, but those of the many people who have died there. While other people's experiences, represented to her in this case through architecture, inspire her affection, her appreciation is abstract and limited because she has little experience of her own and because her strong imagination hesitates to empathize: she is "afraid of suffering" (52). The young Isabel's experience has been limited to what she has read: "[i]t appeared to Isabel that the unpleasant had been even too absent from her knowledge, for she had gathered from her acquaintance with literature that it was often a source of interest and even of instruction" (39). Though Isabel desires this type of knowledge, she naively assumes she can see life through other people's unpleasant experiences without personal risk: "I don't wish to touch the cup of experience. It's a poisoned drink! I only want to see for myself" (134). When Ralph gently accuses her of wanting to see but not to feel, she replies, "I don't think that if one's a sentient being one can make the distinction" (134). She implies that to see is to feel, yet in practice she attempts to see without the effect of pain. Her fear of suffering predisposes her to detached observation, but her "immense curiosity about life" propels her into the world, where pain is a distinct possibility (41). This dilemma is reinforced by her belief that foreign travel (i.e. cultural knowledge)—wherein she hopes to gain experience by observation alone—will improve her mind (*Portrait* 77). Isabel is situated on a continuum between involvement and detachment and between discrimination and association. As she makes choices that are guided by her encounters with art, her opportunities become more limited, but her perspective broadens.

Isabel's early, detached encounters with art are not really "experienced" in the specific sense that the term took for James and his contemporaries, and her tendency to rely on inert

mental images to control what she sees and how she sees it reinforces that contemporary idea. Ample textual evidence demonstrates that Isabel thinks pictorially: for example, after Mrs. Touchett's proposal to take her to Europe, she reflects on "a host of images of the things she was leaving behind her. The years and hours of her life came back to her" (39). She also "occupied herself in examining the image" of Lord Warburton as a "personage" (94), and "[s]he had been haunted at moments by the image, by the danger, of [Caspar Goodwood's] disapproval" (105). Isabel takes away an image of Osmond from his Florentine hilltop (237), and she spends a midnight vigil turning over the image of Madame Merle and Osmond "musing, face to face, with the freedom of old friends" (343). Her ability to compose and analyze abstract ideas in this way prepares her to appreciate artistic images, such as painting and sculpture. Even images of abstractions, because they are images, are representational, and as representations they resemble art. While her mental images are clearly not art, they do imply that her mind is capable of interpreting similar representations.

Isabel relies on these images as a means to perfect her moral character: "She was always planning out her development, desiring her perfection, observing her progress" (56). This perfection includes forming a completed consciousness: "hitherto her visions of a completed consciousness had concerned themselves largely with moral images—things as to which the question would be whether they pleased her sublime soul" (94-5). In James's view, consciousness continually strives for heightened perception—a completed consciousness is beyond human attainment ("Is There a Life After Death?" 219-20). But as a determined idealist and optimist—she possesses these characteristics to a fault—Isabel strives for perfection, and her wish for others to admire her for superior moral qualities is uppermost. Her "deepest enjoyment was to feel the continuity between the movements of her own soul and the agitations of the

world” (41), and she gives frequent thought to how she should relieve the world’s misery (56). Though she concludes that she has more pressing aspirations in her youth, and that the world’s relief must wait, her “completed consciousness” comprised of “moral images” is the design by which she lives life—it is her personal system. She refuses Warburton’s and Goodwood’s marriage proposals because she fears being drawn into *their* philosophies of life: “A certain instinct [. . .] murmured to her that virtually she had a system and an orbit of her own” (95). That Isabel thinks of her system in soul-pleasing images contributes to the emerging picture of a young woman for whom representations offer an approach to knowledge and experience.

Isabel transfers her interpretation of images into a single-minded pursuit of a “completed” consciousness, which she seeks through cultural knowledge. She does so by exposing herself to as much visual art as possible. Unfortunately, her aesthetic education does not advance very far in England. She is impatient to see the Touchetts’ painting collection, and on her first excursion to London, “Isabel was full of premises, conclusions, emotions” in response to the British Museum, the National Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum, Westminster Abbey, and to pictures in both public and private collections (125). However, Isabel does not seem to distinguish among these premises, conclusions, and emotions. Like her static mental images, the paintings she views appear to wash over her in a pleasant stream; she does not yet make any discriminations or associations among them.

Italian Initiations

Not until Isabel arrives in Italy does her aesthetic education begin progressing. To Isabel, Italy offers concentrated quantities of aesthetic opportunity; it “stretched before her as a land of promise, a land in which a love of the beautiful might be comforted by endless knowledge”

(193). In other words, she anticipates that her experiences there will develop her aesthetic appreciation and increase her understanding of life. As she hovers on the edge of this larger adventure, she continually pictures her career “by the light of her hopes, her fears, her fancies, her ambitions, her predilections” (193). Italy was widely considered the seat of culture in the nineteenth century, hence James’s decision to locate her developing aesthetic appreciation there. The country also had a long history of non-Italian authors writing about its art, such as Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812-18), John Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice*, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun* (1860), William Dean Howells’ *Venetian Life* (1866), and Walter Pater’s *The Renaissance*. And, of course, James opens the New York Edition Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* (1908) by remembering that he wrote the novel in Florence and Venice, settings that inspired him without question. Against the long history of Italian art and culture, his heroine had ample opportunity to develop her aesthetic sensibility.

When Isabel arrives in Florence, specific aesthetic knowledge challenges her earlier assumptions. Her previous excursion to London and its art museums with Ralph and Henrietta gave her a glimpse of a life of aesthetic appreciation. In Florence this glimpse turns into hours spent in the company of art. Fully immersing herself in visual art, “she was in no want indeed of aesthetic illumination” (211):

She went to the galleries and palaces; she looked at the pictures and statues that had hitherto been great names to her, and exchanged for a knowledge which was sometimes a limitation a presentiment which proved usually to have been blank. She performed all those acts of mental prostration in which, on a first visit to Italy, youth and enthusiasm so freely indulge; she felt her heart beat in the

presence of immortal genius and knew the sweetness of rising tears in eyes to which faded fresco and darkened marble grew dim. (212)

Isabel clearly experiences something more than detached observation in Florence, but the aesthetic stimulus that causes her tears is unclear. Not yet making distinctions, she does feel the subtle tug of this experience on her knowledge. She approaches famous artists, whose reputations likely came to her through books, with a presentiment that something is about to occur, only to discover that her premonition has no content. Consciousness, like art, has no particular or necessary content, but it is hard to imagine either one without a subject. Isabel does not have preconceived ideas about the content or form of art, but in her enthusiasm for knowledge, perhaps she expects the experience of great art immediately to change her, to reveal some deeper mystery. Instead, she encounters “knowledge which was sometimes a limitation” in contrast to the “endless knowledge” she expected. While in the abstract art can contain all experience, Isabel mistakenly predicts that once it has taken form, once its content has been discriminated and shaped into art, that it will still contain all experience. She fails to consider that when art takes a particular form, the artist must discard some possibilities. Accepting this idea requires accepting that knowledge limits imagination, a lesson she has avoided since childhood when she shunned the window of a bolted door in her grandmother’s house: “she had no wish to look out, for this would have interfered with her theory that there was a strange, unseen place on the other side—a place which became to the child’s imagination, according to its different moods, a region of delight or of terror” (33). As an adult (who has still never looked out of that window), she continues to avoid facts that challenge her imagination: “With all her love of knowledge she had a natural shrinking from raising curtains and looking into unlighted

corners. The love of knowledge coexisted in her mind with the finest capacity for ignorance” (173).

Isabel’s love of knowledge and capacity for ignorance are also revealed through her judgment of Gilbert Osmond. Since Isabel seeks knowledge through the experience of art, Madame Merle’s description of him naturally intrigues her. During their first meeting in Florence, Isabel responds to Osmond in the same way she responds to art: “it [was] more important she should get an impression of him than that she should produce one herself” (212). The description of their second meeting offers a framed image of Isabel’s impression:

She had carried away an image from her visit to his hill-top which her subsequent knowledge of him did nothing to efface and which put on for her a particular harmony with other supposed and divined things, histories within histories: the image of a quiet, clever, sensitive, distinguished man, strolling on a moss-grown terrace above the sweet Val d’Arno and holding by the hand a little girl whose bell-like clearness gave a new grace to childhood. The picture had no flourishes, but she liked its lowness of tone and the atmosphere of summer twilight that pervaded it. It spoke of the kind of personal issue that touched her most nearly; of the choice between objects, subjects, contacts—what might she call them?—of a thin and those of a rich association. (237)

Isabel’s tendency to think in images is not new, as she relies on it to help her judge “quickly and freely” (95). In this case, Osmond appears to be “a very creditable imitation” of her ideal, and “her imagination supplied the human element which she was sure had not been wanting” (228). Once she has developed this frozen image of Osmond, she ignores the other signs of this “sterile dilettante’s” manipulative, narrow-minded personality. His displeasure with St. Peter’s, the

control he exerts to keep his daughter child-like, and warnings from Ralph, Mrs. Touchett, and Henrietta cannot dissuade her from believing that his extensive knowledge and exquisite taste will improve her mind. Her creation of and reliance on this frozen portrait to judge Osmond can be read as evidence of her immature aestheticism, which relies on detached judgment to prevent suffering.

In Rome Isabel encounters ample aesthetic stimuli and a wider range of aesthetic experience, though her faculty for discriminating among these impressions is still indistinct: “By her own measure she was very happy; she would even have been willing to take these hours for the happiest she was ever to know. [. . .] Her consciousness was so mixed that she scarcely knew where the different parts of it would lead her, and she went about in a repressed ecstasy of contemplation, seeing often in the things she looked at a great deal more than was there” (245). Her mixed consciousness indicates that she feels many responses, but she cannot define them. Distinctions arise when the narrator, for the first time in the narrative, finally specifies the works of art to which Isabel is responding. Seated “near the foundations of the Capitol” and other architectural relics of Rome’s past, she reflects on her future:

Keen as was her interest in the rugged relics of the Roman past that lay scattered about her and in which the corrosion of centuries had still left so much of individual life, her thoughts, after resting a while on these things, had wandered, by a concatenation of stages it might require some subtlety to trace, to regions and objects charged with a more active appeal. From the Roman past to Isabel Archer’s future was a long stride, but her imagination had taken it in a single flight and now hovered in slow circles over the nearer and richer field. (246)

Her future is the richer field, in comparison with the heavy weight of the Roman past, because she takes a personal interest in her own future, which she imagines contains only pleasant, happy experiences. If her thoughts had pursued the historical relics, she inevitably would have encountered individual suffering in the destruction of past civilizations. Though the relics are the starting point of her stream of consciousness, and they lead to thoughts of her future, she does not directly associate the one with the other, leaving her impressions mixed and unclear. When her own past appears in this moment in the form of Lord Warburton, the literal shadow that he throws across her line of vision reflects the metaphorical shadow he throws across her thoughts. Simultaneously bringing her back to the present and the nearer past, he reinforces her mixture of emotions. She is happy to see him, but senses she is in danger of being drawn into his emotions, telling him “You may be unhappy, but you shall not make *me* so. That I can’t allow” (249). Isolating this emotion, Isabel still works to keep bolted that door of unhappy knowledge from her childhood.

Antique Marbles

Lord Warburton’s unhappiness is reinforced by overt comparisons between him and the statue of the Dying Gladiator in Rome’s Capitoline Museum. The statue, which depicts a wounded and dying man in the act of sinking to the ground while leaning on one arm, also marks a subtle shift in Isabel’s ability to feel the suffering that is often the subject of art. With Osmond wandering in the background, Warburton’s unspoken admission as he announces his departure to Isabel in the presence of the statue appears to be that her newest suitor has defeated him. Tintner argues in *The Museum World of Henry James* that,

The relation between the work of art and the defeated British nobleman is underlined through the perception of Gilbert Osmond. [. . .] Osmond is experiencing a sophisticated kind of aestheticism in watching the gem of his collection, Isabel, reject a man better born and more richly endowed than himself. [. . .] this drama, which gives him the advantage, is played before one of the greatest museum prizes, one far beyond the hopes of private acquisition. (60)

When Osmond suggests to Isabel that she is cruel to the nobleman, she carefully reflects on the “vanquished Gladiator” in front of her. She considers her actions while studying the museum piece, and decides that she is “scrupulously kind” (*Portrait* 258). Though she still resists feeling others’ unhappiness, she does appear to associate the suffering depicted in the Dying Gladiator with her rejected suitor’s pain, thus making a connection similar to the one she made between her New York house and its former inhabitants. This time, the connection between art and another person’s emotion seeps a little deeper into her consciousness because she causes the suffering.

The Dying Gladiator has a long history of nineteenth-century literary appearances, including those in Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun*. So the statue undoubtedly brought to mind literary associations for the well-read Isabel and for James’s readers, who would likely have recalled Byron’s stanzas in the fourth Cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. James greatly admired Byron’s work, and like Warburton, Childe Harold travels through Europe and Asia seeking to escape the past. Yet Childe Harold is also comparable to Isabel in that they both personify the inanimate statue: “his eyes / Were with his heart, and that was far away; / He reck’d not of the life he lost nor prize, / But where his rude hut by the Danube lay” (Byron, Cantos IV 1261-64). James’s focus on this statue also recalls *The*

Marble Faun, whose opening chapters center around the Dying Gladiator. Kenyon criticizes it for failing to reach its finale: “I find myself getting weary and annoyed that the man should be such a length of time leaning on his arm in the very act of death. [. . .] in any sculptural subject, there should be a moral standstill, since there must of necessity be a physical one” (Hawthorne 14). Isabel seems to feel the same way about Lord Warburton; he is “such a length of time” in the act of killing his romantic interest in her. They will not arrive at a moral standstill until one of them is married, since they each refuse to accept the other’s wishes.

Isabel is more affected by the “antique marbles” that surround the Dying Gladiator. Seating herself in the center “of these presences,” she listens to “their eternal silence”:

It is impossible, in Rome at least, to look long at a great company of Greek sculptures without feeling the effect of their noble quietude; which, as with a high door closed for the ceremony, slowly drops on the spirit the large white mantle of peace. [. . . A] clear, warm shadow rested on the figures and made them more mildly human. Isabel sat there a long time, under the charm of their motionless grace, wondering to what, of their experience, their absent eyes were open, and how, to our ears, their alien lips would sound. The dark red walls of the room threw them into relief: the polished marble floor reflected their beauty. (257-58)

Aestheticism and consciousness merge for her in these statues as she humanizes them with thought and experience. They suggest that the answer to her search for “a completed consciousness” is a quiet life of aesthetic appreciation. The mixture of emotions that she experienced on first encountering Rome has settled, and though she has not yet experienced suffering or a full range of aesthetic experience, she does distinguish the specific emotion of peacefulness that these statues trigger. In this beautiful space she is entirely safe from Lord

Warburton, from Caspar Goodwood, from suffering, and from questions of her future. Isabel's experience reflects James's own experience in this room. He wrote to his sister that "the dying Gladiator, the Lycian Apollo, the Amazon &c—all of them unspeakably simple & noble & eloquent of the breadth of human genius. There is little to say or do about them, save to sit & enjoy them & let them act upon your nerves & confirm your esteem for completeness, purity & perfection" (*Complete Letters* 1.2: 178). These statues individually and collectively offer a glimpse of art in its most perfect (and unattainable) form.

Behind Isabel's response to the statues lies Walter Pater's belief in ideal art. Pater most closely associates this ideal form with music: "this artistic ideal, this perfect identification of form and matter, this strange chemistry, uniting, in the integrity of pure light, contrasted elements. In its ideal, consummate moments, the end is not distinct from the means, the form from the matter, the subject from the expression" ("School of Giorgione" 530). James similarly suggests that these statues offer a glimpse of perfect form and matter, which have a peaceful effect on one's consciousness. Pater writes that in such glimpses, whether inspired by music, painting, or sculpture, "the stress of our servile, every-day attentiveness being relaxed, the happier powers in things without us are permitted free passage, and have their way with us" ("School of Giorgione" 537). Isabel is in this particular state of emotional openness to happiness, which inspires a calming effect on a young woman who is usually in a constant state of mental and physical movement. The desire to maintain the effect of the completeness, purity, and perfection she perceives in the statues acts on Isabel by casting a special light on Osmond when he interrupts her contemplations. Isabel moves away from detached observation/appreciation by investing Osmond with the values she discerns in the statues. She cannot help associating his superior aesthetic taste with the peaceful feeling that these artworks inspire in her because the

illusion of perfect taste and ease that he cultivates suggests to her the cessation of desire. In Osmond, the struggle to interpret life and art seems to be at rest, so in this setting there seems no better or more moral life than to cultivate the perfect taste that he has mastered. Ralph later concludes that Isabel mistakenly “attributed a superior morality” to a man who possesses only superior aesthetic taste (331). This “mistake” occurs because her imagination gives the statues consciousness, and “the completeness, purity, and perfection” of their form sparks (what is for her) a logical mental leap that associates aesthetics and morality.¹² The moral and aesthetic are here further connected in the idea of perfection—perfect satisfaction in Gilbert Osmond, and the perfect expression of content and form in the statues, which “transcend the legitimate bounds of beauty” (*Complete Letters* 1.2: 191).

St. Peter’s Cathedral

The vast sublimity of St. Peter’s offers her a new moral image that widens the associations she makes between art and her completed consciousness. The cathedral inspires an unbounded conception of greatness:

She had not been one of the superior tourists who are “disappointed” in Saint Peter’s and find it smaller than its fame; the first time she passed beneath the huge leathern curtain that strains and bangs at the entrance, the first time she found herself beneath the far-arching dome and saw the light drizzle down through the air thickened with incense and with the reflections of marble and gilt, of mosaic and bronze, her conception of greatness rose and dizzily rose. After this it never

¹² James repeatedly associates aesthetic and religious experiences, particularly during Isabel’s early experiences in Italy. Meissner notes that “By lending Isabel’s Roman experience a religious connotation James conflates the spiritual and the aesthetic and, in doing so, allows the latter to absorb the higher insight normally attributed to the former” (104).

lacked space to soar. She gazed and wondered like a child or a peasant, she paid her silent tribute to the seated sublime. (251)

The experience feeds Isabel's sense of the greatness of human potential and exemplifies James's own response. In "A Roman Holiday," he declares that "the image of the great temple [. . .] rises[s] above even the highest tide of vulgarity and make[s] you still believe in the heroic will and the heroic act" (*Italian Hours* 136). In other words, the moral is exemplified in the material. Similarly, Isabel is looking to exert her own heroic will and make her own heroic act with the power her fortune has forced on her. Her imagination "kindled at the mention of great deeds" (245), but the freedom and possibility that her fortune gives to "her new consciousness was at first oppressive" (182). Before inheriting the money, she often worried, "What should one do with the misery of the world in a scheme of the agreeable for one's self?" (56), and the money exacerbates this bothersome question. She tells Ralph: "I try to care more about the world than about myself—but I always come back to myself. It's because I'm afraid. [. . . freedom is] such a fine thing, and one should make such a good use of it. If one shouldn't one would be ashamed. And one must keep thinking; it's a constant effort. I'm not sure it's not a greater happiness to be powerless" (193). She cannot avoid, though, taking "perpetually for granted a thousand good intentions"; she imagines herself making a great contribution, and loses "herself in a maze of visions; the fine things to be done by a rich, independent, generous girl who took a large human view of occasions and obligations were sublime in the mass. Her fortune therefore became to her mind a part of her better self; it gave her importance, gave her even, to her own imagination, a certain ideal beauty" (193). She imagines that through the right application of her fortune, she will fulfill her potential to improve humanity, and this moral privilege gives her "a certain ideal beauty." The pressure of making the perfect decision intimidates her, though—her ideal lies so

much higher than any reality she could create—so postponing immediate action, she falls back on her theory that a clever young woman like herself “should begin by getting a general impression of life. This impression was necessary to prevent mistakes” and afterwards she might help others (56). The aesthetic experience that Isabel has in St. Peter’s corresponds with her constant reflection on “beauty and bravery and magnanimity” (54), reminds her of her own potential to do something significant with her life, and seems to point to Osmond as a partner in that greatness.

The aesthetic and heroic elements embodied for Isabel in St. Peter’s merge into concrete possibility when Osmond appears. In a place that represents religious or spiritual worship, Isabel encounters the man who worships the effects of art, though, of course, she thinks he appreciates art more broadly. A life with Osmond “seemed to assure her a future at a high level of consciousness of the beautiful. The desire for unlimited expansion had been succeeded in her soul by the sense that life was vacant without some private duty that might gather one’s energies to a point” (297). His appearance in Rome seems to suggest that he is offering himself as another image of greatness; as Torgovnick notes, “Isabel’s seduction by Osmond is simultaneously a seduction by art” (162). Unknowingly greeting her with the same words Lord Warburton used on the day he proposed to her, Osmond suggests to Isabel, who notes the identical greeting, that she might offer him the power to make the world more beautiful through his refined aesthetic sensibility: “Unless she should have given it [her fortune] to a hospital there would have been nothing better she could do with it; and there was no charitable institution in which she had been as much interested as in Gilbert Osmond. He would use her fortune in a way that would make her think better of it and rub off a certain grossness” (358). Choosing Osmond as the beneficiary of her money transfers the moral pressure of power that she inherited with the money: “What

would lighten her own conscience more effectually than to make it over to the man with the best taste in the world?" (358). Thus, Isabel's aesthetic experience in St. Peter's, situated significantly at the end of the first volume, becomes a turning point of the novel. Entertaining Osmond's courtship offers her one path to a larger freedom, but by ruling out certain possibilities, her imagination can no longer sustain multiple ideals. She surrenders both her ideal self and her freedom in one decision.

In their responses to St. Peter's, Isabel and Osmond demonstrate their contrasting understandings of aesthetic experience. The description of Isabel's experience at St. Peter's both stands in contrast to and points to John Ruskin's thoughts about the church. Ruskin held a low opinion of its architecture, writing from Rome to his tutor Rev. Thomas Dale in 1840 that "St. Peter's I expected to be *disappointed* in. I was *disgusted*. [. . .] As a whole, St. Peter's is fit for nothing but a ballroom, and it is a little too gaudy even for that" (*Works* 1: 380). Thirty-five years later, he publicly declared in *Mornings in Florence* that "Disappointed as you may be, or at least ought to be, at first, by St. Peter's, in the end you will feel its size—and its brightness. These are all you *can* feel in it" (23: 366).¹³ Though he emphasized that the building "is meager outside and offensive within," he also admitted the impressiveness of "the exquisite feeling and glorious art brought out in every *part* and *detail*" (1: 380). Ruskin seems to find the manner of decoration tacky, but he grudgingly acknowledges that the sheer volume of art and the size of the structure are impossible to disregard. His overall negative aesthetic response to the cathedral, though, contrasts with Isabel's overwhelmingly positive one. While she agrees that "[i]t's very large and very bright," the narrator notes that this response is all "she contented herself with replying," suggesting that she feels more and that she does not negatively view the architectural design (*Portrait* 252). Her response also contrasts Ruskin's narrow viewpoint about its "gaudy"

¹³ James devoted a section of "Italy Revisited" (1878) to criticizing *Mornings in Florence* (114-17).

decoration. Despite Ruskin's personal aversion to St. Peter's, Isabel's response does illustrate his general belief that architectural design should expand one's concept of greatness. This response is one that Isabel clearly experiences.

Osmond's idea of aesthetic experience, in contrast with Isabel's, focuses on controlling the effect art has on people's thoughts. Agreeing with Ruskin in his opinion that the cathedral is too large, Osmond's dislike is based on the feeling of smallness the space inflicts on him. This conception of great art, which is limited by his need to feel that he controls the perception that others have of him, is reflected in other aspects of his life. His narrow ideas extend to "a sovereign contempt for every one but some three or four very exalted people whom he envied, and for everything in the world but half a dozen ideas of his own" (360). The quality in Osmond that prevents him from appreciating the sublimeness of St. Peter's also largely causes Isabel's suffering. Like the church that is "too large" and "makes one feel like an atom" (252), Osmond comes to fear her large ideas: "He said to her one day that she had too many ideas and that she must get rid of them" (359). His desire for control precludes aesthetic experience that heightens perceptions because that particular kind of aesthetic experience allows for new ideas that may contradict his own. As Isabel later discovers, he "expected his wife to feel with him and for him, to enter into his opinions, his ambitions, his preferences" (362). Osmond's aesthetic taste is admitted by all to be exquisite, but, as Isabel and readers discover, it is narrow, selfish, and unforgiving. For Osmond, art should cause the world to acknowledge his importance. Like the minor effects that his "genius for upholstery" produces on admirers, Osmond practices the same calculations with his manner of life: his effects "were produced by no vulgar means, but the motive was as vulgar as the art was great. To surround his interior with a sort of invidious sanctity, to tantalize society with a sense of exclusion [. . .] to impart to the face that he presented

to the world a cold originality—this was the ingenious effort of the personage to whom Isabel had attributed a superior morality” (331). Osmond seems to relish inflicting pain on others, which perverts Walter Pater’s notion of aesthetic experience by replacing aesthetic pleasure with the cruel pleasure of curtailing Isabel’s freedoms and causing her pain. His response to St. Peter’s foreshadows the narrowness of his aesthetic ideas.

Images

After her marriage, Isabel’s range of aesthetic experience widens as her unhappiness increases. Interestingly, we are given glimpses of her unhappiness through the perspectives of other characters, but not until her midnight vigil, which James calls “obviously the best thing in the book” (15), is Isabel’s perspective narrated.¹⁴ Her reflection on the image of Madame Merle and Osmond—“musing, face to face, with the freedom of old friends who sometimes exchange ideas without uttering them” (343)—indicates that her habit of seeing ideas in the form of images has not left her. Yet Osmond’s and Madame Merle’s motionless figures, as Mark Desiderio correctly notes, remain merely suggestive at the close of her vigil (Desiderio 274). In this moment the image holds little meaning for Isabel. It prompts her reflections on her unhappy marriage and it closes her vigil, but between the beginning and end of her reflections no mention is made of Serena Merle. Like a *tableau vivant*, it remains a frozen portrait that she cannot read. Through it, however, she tries to pinpoint the source of her unhappiness. Alden Turner believes that “Isabel’s suffering is created by her perception of the disjunction between her imagination and the reality of the world which she enters” (236). She certainly admits that before her marriage “she had imagined a world of things that had no substance” (*Portrait* 357). At bottom,

¹⁴ Cameron examines this passage from the Preface to discuss moments of “consciousness construed as a framed phenomenon” (54).

though, her suffering comes from her inability to understand the image that made such an impression. The picture articulates nothing because Isabel does not see the deception it reveals. Her aesthetic education has not taught her to see that art personally offers her anything but happy knowledge, so she struggles to view suffering through this image. Though she intuits something unhappy in the image, her understanding remains empty until Countess Gemini explains it to her.

Once the *tableau vivant* of Osmond and Serena becomes clear to her, Isabel learns to see and feel suffering in art. Before her marriage her aesthetic experience with art was limited by her determination not to suffer through art or through any other means. This detachment changes after her marriage has taught her what it is to suffer. Torgovnick argues that “Isabel’s enthusiasm for the visual arts diminishes as she comes to know Osmond better” (158). As the following passage demonstrates, however, she instead takes comfort in art:

[S]he had grown to think of [Rome] chiefly as the place where people had suffered. This was what came to her in the starved churches, where the marble columns, transferred from pagan ruins, seemed to offer her a companionship in endurance and the musty incense to be a compound of long-unanswered prayers. There was no gentler nor less consistent heretic than Isabel; the firmest of worshippers, gazing at dark alter-pictures or clustered candles, could not have felt more intimately the suggestiveness of these objects nor have been more liable at such moments to a spiritual visitation. (430-31)

This spiritual visitation is not, of course, religious, but aesthetic. Her present personal understanding of suffering teaches her heightened sensitivity to aesthetic experience because the range of her emotions expands. She relieves her suffering by sharing it with those who have been there before her. The visits to pastoral churches, when contrasted with her experience in St.

Peter's, offer readers a measure of Isabel's developing perspective. While in St. Peter's, Isabel admires the "conception of greatness" and thinks of her heroic potential. Now, as she "stood in a mouldy church to which no one came, she could almost smile at it [her sadness] and think of its smallness. Small it was, in the large Roman record" (430). Where she once would have read only impersonal ancient history, she now associates the architectural ruins with both her personal pain and the pain of others. Having experienced suffering, she is not as afraid to acknowledge and share the suffering of others. By opening herself to painful aesthetic experience, Isabel heightens her perception and increases her ability to make associations, that crucial aspect of experience for James and his contemporaries. This personal reading of architecture differs from her earlier one at the Forum in that she embraces the past and its pain rather than turning to the future, which now does not appear to hold the same promise.

Return to Gardencourt

During Isabel's confrontation with Madame Merle at Pansy's convent, her discriminations concerning art and her husband's friend reveal her heightened consciousness. Now aware that Serena "made a convenience" of Isabel, the young woman finally fully comprehends—"in the crude light of that revelation which had already become a part of experience"—Madame Merle's duplicity and the extent to which she arranged Isabel's marriage (475, 459). The images that haunt her now present rather than prevent pain. For days Madame Merle's image is in her mind, so real that when she unexpectedly meets the accomplished woman at Pansy's convent, the abrupt collision of the mental picture with the reality jars her:

Madame Merle was already so present to her vision that her appearance in the flesh was like suddenly, and rather awfully, seeing a painted picture move. Isabel

had been thinking all day of her falsity, her audacity, her ability, her probable suffering; and these dark things seemed to flash with a sudden light as she entered the room. Her being there at all had the character of ugly evidence, of handwritings, of profaned relics, of grim things produced in court. (456)

Like the initial image of Osmond that Isabel carries away from the hilltop, Isabel freezes Madame Merle's dark image in her mind. As Susan Cameron notes, "the life in the mind and the life outside of it suddenly come together as Isabel sees animated what the Countess Gemini has made her think" (56). In this clash, James underscores the notion that Isabel finally perceives distinctions among her aesthetic responses through echoing a phrase Pater uses in "School of Giorgione": Giorgione "is the inventor of *genre*, of those easily moveable pictures which serve for uses neither of devotion nor of allegorical or historical teaching; little groups of real men and women amid congruous furniture or landscape; morsels of actual life, conversation or music or play, refined upon and idealized till they come to seem like glimpses of life from afar" (531). This passage emphasizes the idea of art so well executed that the viewer's imagination brings it to life. Static images begin to move, which Isabel finally applies to her glimpse of Madame Merle and Osmond's moment of "musing face to face." Living in Osmond's house in the presence of so many beautiful but sterile things and in such unhappy circumstances had challenged Isabel's active sympathy with art: "When she saw [Osmond's] rigid system close about her, draped though it was in pictured tapestries, that sense of darkness and suffocation [. . .] took possession of her; she seemed shut up with an odour of mould and decay" (361). In stifling her sympathy for art, Osmond stunted her ability to read his *tableau vivant*. Now, however, the clash of that image with Madame Merle's appearance at the convent sparks Isabel's acceptance of her suffering and a new perspective of art.

In her confrontation with Madame Merle, her understanding of art takes a new form, as a second reference to “moveable pictures” suggests. The image of Pansy’s heart standing “almost as still as it would have done had she seen two of the saints in the great picture in the convent-chapel turn their painted heads and shake them at each other” is also narrated from Isabel’s consciousness (461). Isabel’s static mental images begin to move, and in allowing them to do so, she becomes “far afloat on a sea of wonder and pain” (457). Earlier, she rests her sadness on the ruins of the Roman countryside, but here at the convent, she allows the full extent of suffering to batter her: “She saw, in the crude light of that revelation which had already become a part of experience [. . .] the dry staring fact that she had been an applied handled hung-up tool, as senseless and convenient as mere shaped wood and iron. All the bitterness of this knowledge surged into her soul again” (459). Her first instinct is to react as her husband would in the presence of pain by refusing to alleviate Madame Merle’s bewilderment. “[T]he hideous vision dropped,” however, and with it she drops her Osmond-like response. She has the opportunity to make Serena suffer, to say “something that would hiss like a lash,” but she indicates the difference between her aesthetic vision and her husband’s by refusing to take it up (459).¹⁵

During her journey to Gardencourt, Isabel feels the fullest extent of her suffering: “the truth of things, their mutual relations, their meaning, and for the most part their horror, rose before her with a kind of architectural vastness” (465). In comparison to her experience of “greatness” at St. Peter’s, where an architectural form gave her an unlimited conception of one idea—moral greatness—now she reorders experience by adopting an architectural metaphor for the numerous associations she is making. In doing so, she indicates the completeness of her

¹⁵ Parkes argues that Isabel “extracts maximum psychological punishment” through her refusal to allow Serena to defend herself, and thus “Isabel makes a victim of Madame Merle” (618). While the text makes clear that Isabel takes satisfaction in Madame Merle’s uncomfortableness, James’s heroine does not seem to dominate their encounter sufficiently to be read as the victor. Because Serena “triumphantly” orchestrates a painful parting with Isabel when she reveals Ralph’s indirect role in her marriage, it seems that Isabel is once again a victim.

altered perception of art. Where she once saw it from a finite, limited perspective of enjoyment, she now uses it to understand her torment as well as her pleasure. The metaphorical comparison between St. Peter's and this mental architectural form includes horror, not just greatness, adding nuance to her earlier understanding of moral values and degrees. Her visions on the train "started to life with the spontaneity of a shiver" (465). As she pieces together the forces that have brought her to this point, she reflects: "To live only to suffer—only to feel the injury of life repeated and enlarged—it seemed to her she was too valuable, too capable, for that. Then she wondered if it were vain and stupid to think so well of herself. When had it ever been a guarantee to be valuable? Wasn't all history full of the destruction of precious things? Wasn't it much more probable that if one were fine one would suffer?" (466). During her heightened awareness of suffering, Isabel associates not merely her pain, but her self, with fine art. She has been the object of others' aestheticization, particularly Osmond's and Ralph's, and her own association suggests that she sees from their perspective and understands that being seen and manipulated as a work of art has caused her suffering. Though such a conclusion has the potential to once again distance her from art, a result Torgovnick suggests is true, her thoughts and actions at Gardencourt indicate a different outcome (Torgovnick 164).

The setting of Gardencourt, when considered in the light of the opening chapters, provides the true measure of the change Isabel has undergone. The narrator leads us to think about this change by narrating Isabel's reflection on her life before her marriage. She returns to the same aesthetic objects, or the same experience in a conventional sense, with wider aesthetic experience and the ability to make discriminations and associations. As she strolls along the gallery of pictures where she had once asked Ralph to see the ghost of the house, "[s]he envied the security of valuable 'pieces' which change by no hair's breadth, only grow in value, while

their owners lose inch by inch youth, happiness, beauty; [. . .] She might have had another life and she might have been a woman more blest. She stopped in the gallery in front of a small picture—a charming and precious Bonington—upon which her eyes rested a long time” (471-72). The painting leads her to wonder if Mrs. Touchett had not found her in Albany that day, would she have married Caspar Goodwood? This response to the gallery is vastly different than her initial eagerness to closely examine the subjects of the paintings. Torgovnick finds evidence in this scene for Isabel’s refusal to engage with art: Isabel realizes “that works of art derive value from their static quality—their inability to feel and change—a quality immensely different from the central facts of human experience. Appreciation of the arts—carried so far as Osmond carries it—confuses categories aesthetic and vital. In revulsion from Osmond, Isabel also withdraws from the visual arts” (164). Though she envies the static nature of the paintings and their immunity from suffering, I would assert that she has learned that the value of art lies in its non-static effect on the viewer’s consciousness. As Isabel learns to feel pained absorption in art, she depends less on mental images. She has gone from someone who refused to experience suffering to someone who alleviates her suffering by sharing it through art.

Isabel’s ability to make this connection is evident when she sees Ralph’s ghost: “It seemed to her for an instant that he was standing there—a vague, hovering figure in the vagueness of the room. She stared a moment; she saw his white face—his kind eyes; then she saw there was nothing” (479). James has deliberately framed the story with Gardencourt and the idea of the ghost, it seems to me, as a measure of Isabel’s heightened consciousness. Compared to her first arrival at Gardencourt, her expanded state of awareness allows her to see Ralph’s ghost. As with the Roman statues’ thoughts and her recent painful image of Madame Merle, this ghost is entirely a figment of her imagination, yet if we trust Ralph that “the privilege isn’t given

to every one,” her vision indicates that she has arrived at a new level of consciousness, one in which she understands that suffering is necessary to truly appreciate the art of life.

This ghost represents to her the truth of her final words to Ralph. She comes to terms with her pain as Ralph is dying, telling him that it is not “the deepest thing; there’s something deeper” (478). Though her impulse is “[t]o cease utterly, to give it all up and not know anything more,” even deeper is the “the sense that life would be her business for a long time to come. And at moments there was something inspiring, almost enlivening, in the conviction. It was a proof of strength—it was a proof she should some day be happy again. It couldn’t be she was to live only to suffer; she was still young, after all, and a great many things might happen to her yet” (465, 466).¹⁶ Like Rome, where the ruins of former happiness lie amidst “the flower-freckled turf” and become the foundation for future growth, Isabel, when she arrives at her deepest understanding of suffering, also sees that this disillusionment with life’s possibilities is not an end, but a gate to a higher consciousness and appreciation of the beautiful and the good (431). This transformation demonstrates, too, her ability to elude the many frames that others try to impose on her. She refuses to run away with Goodwood not because she has a “morbid desire for suffering” and a “paralysing aestheticism,” as Juliet McMaster asserts (66), but because she sees beyond her suffering and regains the Emersonian optimism that makes her so attractive a character. Like Pater’s story of the dying man who found a quickened sense of life through art, Isabel returns to her unhappiness in Rome knowing she will bear it through her broadened ability to see possibility.

¹⁶ In an August 1883 letter, James offers similarly sympathetic yet stoic advice to Grace Norton on surviving suffering: “consciousness is an illimitable power, and though at times it may seem to be all consciousness of misery, yet in the way it propagates itself from wave to wave, so that we never cease to feel, though at moments we appear to, try to, pray to, there is something that holds one in one’s place, makes it a standpoint in the universe which it is probably good not to forsake.” He optimistically concludes that “[s]orrow comes in great waves,” but “[e]verything will pass, and serenity and *accepted* mysteries and disillusionments, and the tenderness of a few good people, and new opportunities and ever so much of life, in a word, will remain” (*Henry James Letters* II, 424-25).

Chapter 2

The Influence of Architecture in *The Bostonians*

“[R]ecent generations, gathered in from beneath emptier skies, [. . .] must have found in the big building as it stands an admonition and an ideal.”

The American Scene

The Emersonian optimism that Isabel Archer embodies continued to appear in James’s fiction, though in *The Bostonians* (1885) it is expressed not through any one person, but rather through ideas about America’s cultural potential. In 1837 Emerson issued his challenge for a true American poet in “The American Scholar.” His call reflected a growing national concern that Americans “have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe” (62). The ready adoption of European artistic and cultural tastes concerned intellectuals in all creative arenas—literary, artistic, and architectural. Roger Stein notes that by 1840 the problem of cultural self-justification “had divided Americans who were concerned with art roughly into two camps: those who felt that art in America should be stimulated only by our native resources, and those who felt and feared that to cut ourselves off from the European traditions of art was a form of cultural suicide” (14). Emerson firmly entrenched himself in the first camp when he lamented in “Self-Reliance” (1841) that American culture imitates rather than invents: “Our houses are built with foreign taste; our shelves are garnished with foreign ornaments; our opinions, our tastes, our faculties, lean, and follow the Past and the Distant” (149). Holding that the American atmosphere offered artists a plethora of unique opportunities for original art and thought, he asked, “why need we copy the Doric or the Gothic model? Beauty, convenience, grandeur of thought and

quaint expression are as near to us as to any” (149). But Emerson’s belief in the American potential for greatness through isolation was contested by his good friend Henry James, Sr., who spent much time abroad and “attached [importance] to Europe for the development of America, where the mould of the Old World inheritance could provide a base for New World improvement” (Taylor, *Father* 190). The elder James voiced the concern of many Americans (and Europeans) in his opinion that establishing a respected artistic community would be an arduous task without the model of European precedents.

As a child and young adult, Henry James Jr. was surrounded by this cultural dispute, which he witnessed firsthand in his father’s friendship with Emerson. When the younger James entered the debate by deciding on a literary career, his eclectic education and experiences in Europe and America offered him a wide range of cultural knowledge. Emerson took a keen interest in this author’s career, especially after reading the young James’s 1869 letters, sent to his parents from Europe, which recorded his impressions of that continent’s art and culture. Emerson so admired the letters that, according to William James, “[h]e pleaded hard to keep them for study, but F[ather] refused. Meeting Edward [Emerson] in the Athenaeum the next day, the latter said his father was doing nothing but talk of your letters” (Skrupskelis 58). The elder philosopher’s interest indicates that he recognized that the fledgling author could be effective in creating a tradition of original American art.

James’s own position in the European/American cultural debate was complex. While he personally felt that Europe better suited his artistic imagination, he was still invested in America’s cultural development. Indeed, questions of American originality would become central to his work. After his first few short stories were published in American magazines, James indirectly echoed Emerson’s call when he expressed his hope for a new era in American

letters to his literary-minded friends, including William Dean Howells and Thomas Sergeant Perry.¹⁷ In September 1867 he wrote to Perry that the vast field of literature written in English remained largely unexplored, especially compared to “what the French [literature] is to the French”: “Deep in the timorous recesses of my being is a vague desire to do for our dear old English letters and writers *something* of what Ste. Beuve & the best French critics have done for theirs” (*Life in Letters* 16). After dismissing this desire as an arrogant hope, he continues:

When I say that I should like to do as Ste. Beuve has done, I don't mean that I should like to imitate him, or reproduce him in English: but only that I should like to acquire something of his intelligence & his patience and vigour. One feels—I feel at least, that he is a man of the past, of a dead generation; and that we young Americans are (without cant) men of the future. [. . .] I think that to be an American is an excellent preparation for culture. We have exquisite qualities as a race, and it seems to me that we are ahead of the European races in the fact that more than either of them we can deal freely with forms of civilization not our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically &c) claim our property wherever we find it. To have no national stamp has hitherto been a defect & a drawback; but I think it not unlikely that American writers may yet indicate that a vast intellectual fusion and synthesis of the various National tendencies of the world is the condition of more important achievements than any we have seen. We must of course have something of our own—something distinctive & homogeneous—& I take it that we shall find it in our “moral consciousness,” our unprecedented spiritual lightness and vigour. In this sense at

¹⁷ In a December 1866 letter to E.C. Stedman, Howells refers to a talk with James “two or three hours long, in which we settled the true principles of literary art” (William Dean Howells, *Selected Letters*. Eds. George Arms et. al. Boston: Twayne, 1979-83. I: 271).

least we shall have a national *cachet*.—I expect nothing great during your lifetime or mine perhaps: but my instincts quite agree with yours in looking to see something original and beautiful disengage itself from our ceaseless fermentation and turmoil. (*Life in Letters* 16-17)

James's thoughts in this passage reveal that while he feels that America lacks culture, he hopes and believes that in the future a "distinctive," "original and beautiful" body of art will arise from this "defect." He foresees that, in time, Europeans will respect the culture that Americans, through the national characteristics of intelligence and vigour, will produce by building on the work of "civilizations not our own." As Leon Edel puts it, this letter "was the view of a cultivated American, translated into cosmopolitan terms. Henry was determined from the first to be an American artist, and equally determined to discover what his native land could offer his art" (*Untried Years* 265).

James began publicly searching for native artistic inspiration in his 1879 critical biography of Hawthorne, which he wrote after moving to London. He was especially concerned with the European perception that American writers were provincial. *Hawthorne* pleased British readers, who enjoyed the picture of quiet New England life that James painted, but he was surprised by the bitter complaints it drew from American reviewers, who objected to what they perceived as James's condescending categorization of the New England author as provincial.¹⁸ To European readers, American literary naturalism seemed provincial, a weak imitation of the French naturalists, so James was wary of nationalistic exhortations like Emerson's. Yet, to American readers, cosmopolitanism could fall into slavish imitation of European culture. Hence, James had difficulty pleasing two diverse audiences and received mixed reviews of *Hawthorne*.

¹⁸ He wrote to Lizzie Boott that he thought the American press "would protest a good deal at my calling New England life unfurnished, but I didn't expect they would lose their heads and their manners at such a rate. We are surely the most-thin-skinned idiots in the world, & I blush for my compatriots" (*Life in Letters* 117).

Howells, for example, in his *Atlantic* review, complimented James for his picture of Hawthorne as a man, but wrote that “the provinciality strikes us as somewhat over-insisted upon, and [. . .] speaking from the point of not being at all provincial ourselves, we think the epithet is sometimes mistaken” (Anesko 143). Though James later admitted to using the word “provincial” too often (Anesko 146), he seems to use it not as a condemnation of Hawthorne, but from the standpoint of a self-conscious fellow American writer trying to mitigate European criticism of America’s cultural dearth, and as a rising critic attempting to establish a reputation as a serious author.¹⁹ James emphasizes the provincialism of mid-nineteenth-century New England as a way of assuring readers that he, though an American, does not suffer himself from this handicap.

James reveals his fears of the ideological limitations that provincialism could impose after a November 1872 visit to the Louvre with Emerson. The young author wrote to Norton that Emerson’s “perception of art is not, I think, naturally keen; & Concord can’t have done much to quicken it” (*Life in Letters* 51). Fifteen years later, James mentally revisited their trip to the Louvre in *Partial Portraits*, writing that Emerson’s “perception of the objects contained in these collections was of the most general order. I was struck with the anomaly of a man so refined and intelligent being so little spoke to by works of art” (30). James’s reading of Emerson indicates his confidence in his own aesthetic perception, but his criticism of Concord suggests again James’s concern for avoiding the pitfalls of provincialism. His judgment of Emerson perhaps reveals more about James than it does about the Concord philosopher. Ann Hostetler holds James “responsible for the early twentieth-century view that Emerson had little to contribute on

¹⁹ Hawthorne’s closing words in “The Custom House” accurately describe James’s situation: “I am a citizen of somewhere else. My good townspeople will not much regret me; for—though it has been as dear an object as any, in my literary efforts, to be of some importance in their eyes, and to win myself a pleasant memory in this abode and burial-place of so many of my forefathers—there has never been, for me, the genial atmosphere which a literary man requires in order to ripen the best harvest of his mind” (*The Scarlet Letter*. 1850. Ed. Ross C. Murfin. Boston: St. Martin’s P, 1991.52-3).

the subject of art,” a view that she contests (121). And a week after their visit to the Louvre Ellen Tucker Emerson wrote in a letter that “Harry James [. . .] once took Father to the Louvre, and Father came home enchanted” (21). Whether Emerson was enchanted by the art or by James is unclear, and enchantment with art does not indicate that it “spoke” to him, but the conflicting reports of his experience suggest James’s preoccupation with distinguishing himself from literary nationalists and with the effects of provincialism on aesthetic perception. It also indicates that “experience” as an objective phenomenon can be discerned by others (both men visited the Louvre), but as a subjective experience others cannot precisely detect the influence on their consciousnesses.

In *The Bostonians*, James combines these concerns about provincialism and cultural imitation with his hope for new American artistic achievements. He abandons his most common theme—the experiences of Americans in Europe—in favor of examining the status of American culture. While his early novels with European settings have received significant scholarly attention from critics interested in his engagement with art, the novels with American settings (*The Europeans*, *Washington Square*, and *The Bostonians*) have been virtually ignored.²⁰ Despite the absence of paintings in *The Bostonians*, the novel does represent famous pieces of American art. More crucially for our purposes, it also takes up the question of European influence, doing so through the narrative representations of carefully designed architectural achievements: Harvard’s Memorial Hall, New York’s Central Park, and the Boston Music Hall.

²⁰ This neglect is probably due to the lack of “museum pieces” incorporated into the novels. Viola Hopkins Winner mentions *The Bostonians* only twice in her seminal book on James and the visual arts. Similarly, throughout her large body of art criticism, Adeline Tintner mentions the novel only once, noting its reference to Raphael’s *The Sistine Madonna*. She adds that this novel “displays James’s increasing tendency to use the specified museum work of art only once even in a very big novel” (*Museum World* 77). Jonathan Freedman, too, ignores the novel in his discussion of Aestheticism.

Though the status of American art was still under debate in the nineteenth century, these buildings and Central Park have long been recognized as art and therefore worthy of study. Perhaps because of the overriding social concerns of the novel, very little critical attention has been given to the architectural spaces James weaves into this narrative. Their significance has been successfully established by Janet Wolf Bowen, who writes that “[a]rchitecture mediates between the opposing forces of self and society in *The Bostonians*” by creating, or at least attempting to create, “a space in the nation in which the visible and the invisible, the public and the private, the exterior and interior selves can be united” (6). Bowen situates this space domestically: “For this warring pair [Olive and Basil], home—a home centered on Verena Tarrant—is the only ground for unification of the self” (7). This claim limits her discussion to an examination of representative domestic architecture, specifically in terms of what Olive’s parlor, Miss Birdseye’s hallway, and Ransom’s shabby rooms reveal about the homelessness of the central triangle of characters. For these characters, Bowen concludes, “there is no resting place” in a novel that notably ends with Basil and Verena in the street (7). While crucial scenes do occur in the private domestic spaces that Bowen describes, the architecture of public spaces, as we shall see, reveals complications and apparent contradictions in the characters.

James uses specific, famous, and identifiable non-domestic architecture to reveal the characters’ central concerns in the novel, but more significantly, this architecture prompts transformative experiences within the characters, as we have seen already in *The Portrait of a Lady*. In *The Bostonians* architectural structures and spaces, which are inspired by European traditions but represented to the reader through an American’s perspective, make a statement about American artistic originality. The descriptions of the two halls and the park are filtered through the minds of the transplanted Mississippian Basil Ransom, the Boston bohemian Verena

Tarrant, and the anonymous but identifiably American narrator. By presenting these American spaces through various regionally-specific eyes, James demonstrates the emotional, aesthetic, and cultural power of European-influenced architecture (or any fine art) adapted in uniquely American ways. Architecture provides a transformative lens on two levels of consciousness—the national and the personal.

Memorial Hall

Memorial Hall held a notable position in the national consciousness, a position that underlies *The Bostonians*. Though the project certainly escaped the notice of much of the country, as Ransom's ignorance of it demonstrates, the Northeastern arbiters of taste and culture envisioned it as a symbol of collective American history as well as a reflection of the contemporary concern for American art and culture. The building history of Memorial Hall, in particular, reflects American intellectuals' belief in the superiority of European models. Constructed between 1870 and 1878 to "commemorate the patriotism" of the university students who served "the United States during the war for the preservation of the union," Memorial Hall is a noted example of the Victorian Gothic style that was popular in Europe at the time, largely due to the influence of John Ruskin's works and teaching. As one of the hall's architects, Henry Van Brunt, later put it: "It was a style which at the time we were persuaded was the only one having life and progressive power." He goes on to explain that "the Gothic revival of that time was a universal cult among all English-speaking people, and had reached the dignity of an intellectual if not a moral movement" (qtd in Shaffer 231).

Seeing the Harvard project as an "opportunity for elevating the tone of architecture in this country," Van Brunt and his partner William R. Ware struck the very chord that concerned

Charles Eliot Norton, scholar of medieval art and culture and Art History Professor at Harvard from 1875-1898 (qtd in Shaffer 221). Norton was one of the five members of the building committee who oversaw the choice of architect and design for the hall. His vision for American architecture can be seen in an 1859 book review. After describing the Oxford Museum, a pet project of his close friend John Ruskin, Norton criticizes Harvard's new Museum of Comparative Zoology:

What provision has been made that in its outward aspect it shall correspond with the worth and grandeur of the collections it is to hold and the studies that are to be carried on within it? [. . .] The building for the Museum is one which can never excite high admiration, never touch any chord of poetic sentiment, never arouse in the student within its walls any feeling save that of mere convenience and utility. Its bare, shadowless walls, unadorned by carven columns or memorial statues, will stand incapable of affording support for those associations which endear every human work of worth. (770)

As this passage makes evident, Norton brought at least two central ideas to the Building Committee: a building's exterior should reflect its interior purposes, and attention should be given to the feeling the edifice evoked from those who entered it. James had already presented this Ruskinian ideal in *The Portrait of a Lady* through Isabel's experience in St. Peter's, where the architectural design expands her conception of "greatness." Norton also brought to Harvard the belief that the Oxford Museum "has proved the perfect pliancy of Gothic architecture to modern needs" (768). Eight years later, when plans for Memorial Hall were in motion, Norton delivered a lecture in Boston on "American Culture." In it he expressed pessimism about the state of architecture in America: "There is not one building in America in which a characteristic

and original sentiment is so embodied in a form of imaginative beauty, as to make it the expression of the noble mood of a great people, or of the genius of an artist inspired by popular emotion” (qtd in Shaffer 225-26). This pessimism, in part, prompted his efforts to sway the design for Memorial Hall. It is difficult to determine exactly how much influence Norton brought to bear on the final choice of a Gothic design for the memorial, and certainly it was far less Ruskinian than Norton intended, but the final product was a massive building that stood apart physically as well as in design, grandeur, and purpose on the Harvard campus.

Norton had been close friends with James since 1864, and two years later, when Ware and Van Brunt won the building competition, the James family was settling in Cambridge. So it seems likely that Norton discussed the project with the aspiring author, whom he had encouraged to read Ruskin. Though James spent long intervals in Europe in the 1870s, he may also have seen some construction of the hall, and he received brief updates in letters from his friends and family before seeing the completed building when he returned to Boston in 1882.²¹ This firsthand knowledge of the building and its implications for American art are evident in James’s *American tale*. For example, it is true that many of Harvard’s buildings echoed English models at Oxford and Cambridge. The library, the narrator tells us, was “a diminished copy of the chapel of King’s College, at the greater Cambridge” (244), and the dining hall resembled those of Oxford, which are “hung about with portraits and lighted by stained windows” (245-6). Moreover, Christopher Wren’s Sheldonian Theatre at Oxford is commonly believed to be the prototype for Harvard’s Sanders Theatre. And, of course, Ruskin’s ideas influenced the Gothic design of Memorial Hall, which Ransom describes as “significant” and “majestic” (245). Given all of this British

²¹ See Boott, Elizabeth. Letter to Henry James. 13 June 1874; James, Henry Sr. Letter to Henry James. 21 June 1874. James Family Papers. Houghton Library. Harvard University. Cambridge, Mass. [Dear Henry James.org](http://DearHenryJames.org). Ed. Pierre A. Walker *et al.* 2005 Salem State College. 12 April 2006.

influence, one might well ask what statement Memorial Hall makes for America's cultural independence in *The Bostonians*.

The answer to this question lies in the function of the edifice. Speaking at the services when the cornerstone was laid in October 1870, Judge Ebenezer R. Hoar hoped that the building would “create a new bond of sympathy connecting the College with every State and city and neighborhood—almost with every village and hamlet from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts” (“Harvard” 2). He went on to say that, “No memorial more truly national and representative will probably be erected” (2). Commemorating and representing a sense of the national through a local site, Memorial Hall inspires a similarly emotional but non-partisan response in Ransom, a response that “explicitly conveys the replacement of a contested ideological commitment with the memory of an allegiance to fighting and sacrifice” (Brigham 11). James's narrator recognizes the bond of sympathy that Judge Hoar hopes the memorial will evoke, telling us that

The effect of the place is singularly noble and solemn, and it is impossible to feel it without a lifting of the heart. It stands there for duty and honour, it speaks of sacrifice and example, seems a kind of temple to youth, manhood, generosity. Most of them were young, all were in their prime, and all of them had fallen; this simple idea hovers before the visitor and makes him read with tenderness each name and place. (246)

The narrator makes no reference to the justice of either army's cause. He instead focuses on the emotions that connect the Harvard soldiers with other Union veterans and with Confederate Army soldiers. While Ware and Van Brunt's Gothic design was not uniquely American, they made the design their own by honoring a watershed event in American history in a manner that forged, or at least was intended to forge, a new union between North and South. Similarly, in

their experiences with Memorial Hall, Verena and Basil will create a different kind of union between North and South, one that represents national concerns.

We can see in Verena's agreement to keep Ransom's visit a secret that the couple does forge a shaky alliance before they leave the Harvard campus. Verena's familiarity with the campus indicates she has given this tour before, but this excursion is not a simple encounter like the tours given to other gentlemen who visit and who are presumed to share her allegiance to the Union cause. Verena and Ransom have quite different experiences there, yet arrive at an alliance that offers a largely unexplored statement about nineteenth-century American art and culture. Ann Brigham addresses one aspect of this statement when she discusses the unifying function of Memorial Hall as a tourist destination in *The Bostonians*. She notes that the monument is "the site for the development of two intersecting stories of 'union making.' The first of these, as suggested by the linking of the national and the local, is the Union; the second is the heterosexual union that is created during this pivotal scene" (8). As we will see, a third union between European and American artistic models is also suggested in the monument.

Ransom's experience at Memorial Hall is easier to perceive since James makes him the center of consciousness for most of the narrative description of this scene, though the narrator also contributes to our impressions of the experience. As Verena and Ransom approach the monument, the Southerner reflects that "the ornate, overtopping structure, which was the finest piece of architecture he had ever seen, had moreover solicited his enlarged curiosity for the last half-hour. He thought there was rather too much brick about it, but it was buttressed, cloistered, turreted, dedicated, superscribed, as he had never seen anything" (245). This reflection also describes his opinion of Verena, who is the most beautiful woman he has met, who engages his curiosity, and who is buttressed, cloistered, and dedicated by Olive and the women's movement.

He admires the form of both works of art, though as a declared outsider to the North and to Boston feminism, Ransom has every reason to approach the content of both the memorial and Verena with hostility. Enticed by their exteriors, Ransom willingly braves their possibly unpleasant interiors, confident that “he saw things in their absolute reality.” His belief in this single, objective truth makes him unafraid that either the monument or the enchanting feminist will change his own political convictions (314).

Entering the building, Ransom and Verena wander throughout the theatre and dining hall, but linger longest in the solemn memorial chamber. This transept, which is situated between the other two sections of the hall, contains a 2600 square-foot marble floor, two large stained-glass windows at either end, a sixty-foot high wooden Gothic vault ceiling, and twenty-eight marble slabs bearing the names of 136 Harvard student soldiers who died in the Civil War. These things, for Ransom,

were not a challenge nor a taunt; they touched him with respect, with the sentiment of beauty. He was capable of being a generous foeman, and he forgot, now, the whole question of sides and parties; the simple emotion of the old fighting-time came back to him, and the monument around him seemed an embodiment of that memory; it arched over friends as well as enemies, the victims of defeat as well as the sons of triumph. (246)

Though one could reasonably expect, as Verena does, Ransom’s reaction to be violently partisan, the Gothic arches and cold marble tablets do not revive his Southern sympathies. They inspire the emotion of the war years only insofar as they help him to recognize that the emotions of Northerners during those years must have been similar. For James “[t]he touchstone of greatness for a work of art lay in its power to evoke a sense of human relationships, especially of the past

to the present” (Winner 25). In this context, Memorial Hall is a great work of art in that it does precisely that; it evokes a past emotion in Ransom, which he then uses to redefine the present. His redefinition involves recasting himself as Verena’s protector, just as he had tried to protect the South. In the following scene, Ransom, who is attending Verena’s lecture at Mrs. Burrage’s home, thinks the girl “was a touching, ingenuous victim, unconscious of the pernicious forces which were hurrying her to her ruin,” a ruin from which he wishes to “rescue” her (251). His experience at Memorial Hall indicates he no longer feels the bitterness of the South’s loss, but it rekindles other emotions from those years, emotions that he transfers to Verena as he takes up a new fight.

Verena unknowingly suggests this transference of emotion when she startles Ransom out of his reveries of the past back into the present. With the battles at which he had been present uppermost in his mind, Verena suddenly greets him with the question of her allegiance to Olive. Knowing that Olive has the power to place Verena beyond his reach, Ransom tries to convince the girl, while they stand in the memorial transept, not to reveal their meeting to his cousin:

They were discussing their affairs, which had nothing to do with the heroic symbols that surrounded them; but their affairs had suddenly grown so serious that there was no want of decency in their lingering there for the purpose. The implication that his visit might remain as a secret between them made them both feel it differently. [. . .] if she were to prefer to do so such a preference would only make him consider the more that his expedition had been a success. (247-48)

The memorial has stirred up Ransom’s war-time feelings, and his response to Verena’s question comes out of these emotions. They “feel it differently,” and for Ransom this difference suggests a transfer of his war emotions to include Verena. The terms of war become prominent here (and

continue to be so whenever Olive and Ransom cross paths). Though he pretends not to care if Verena “betrays” his visit, he is “slightly conscious of a man’s brutality”—of his own brutality—in pushing her not to tell (248). In his first conversation with Verena in Olive’s parlor, he argues that women “are at the bottom of all the wars” (111). Verena is the catalyst and victor’s prize for the war that Ransom has mentally entered with his cousin. He revises his self-image in this scene from a defeated veteran of the South to a man who has entered a new fight, one in which the prize is both Verena’s love and the satisfaction of wounding the women’s rights movement.

The way in which Verena “feel[s] it differently” is less explicit in this scene, and in fact it is Ransom who assumes she feels it as he does. While Ransom experiences Memorial Hall historically and sublimely, there is much evidence to suggest Verena’s very different experience. Because the narrator does not enter Verena’s thoughts while she tours Memorial Hall, unresisting readers come away with the sense that her imagination is unable to “properly” experience this monument, which the narrator claims “is impossible to feel [. . .] without a lifting of the heart” (246). Verena’s heart does not appear to be lifted, yet she does appreciate the architectural assets that surround her. She acknowledges that the building is “beautiful,” “majestic,” and “peaceful,” but that beauty does not, to her mind, justify glorifying “a lot of bloodshed” (246). Implicit in this statement is her perspective on history, which she has been studying with Olive and which seems to them “in every way horrible.” They see war, and thus this memorial, as a male response to conflict, whereas women, if they were in power, would “usher in the reign of peace” (246). Verena provides a model for this peace by putting aside the past and looking to the future, where she can prevent war between Olive and Ransom. Her attempt to reconcile the estranged cousins stems both from her feminine/feminist resistance to war and from her desire to avoid the necessity of choosing to whose side she will be loyal. When it becomes clear that neither side

will negotiate for a peaceful compromise, she hopes to spare Olive's feelings and to avert war by keeping her excursion with Ransom a secret.

As this response suggests, Verena experiences Harvard personally: it becomes a secret she keeps from Olive. The difference between her encounter and Ransom's is indicated in part when Verena abruptly breaks their silent reflections with a question about her allegiance to Olive. The question "had no reference to the solemnity of the spot" (247), but signifies her concern that she is betraying the other woman. Until now, her allegiance has been completely to her female companion, but at Memorial Hall Ransom manages to elicit Verena's consent to hide their meeting from Olive, in spite of his violent opposition to the women's ideologies and in spite of fact that the two women have no secrets between them. Later in the novel, Ransom notes that, "There you are—you women—all over; always meaning, yourselves, something personal, and always thinking it is meant by others" (327). But even Verena's ostensibly personal reading of Memorial Hall is historical, as we can see in her feminist resistance to all wars, national and personal. If, moreover, the excursion at Harvard begins her change of heart toward her guest, that change has political as well as personal implications. She has good reasons for resisting Ransom, a male war veteran who represents access to institutions that do not welcome her, and who actively opposes her right to a Harvard education. Yet she does not dislike him, despite her opposition to his ideas; this contradiction and her need to choose between her personal affection for Ransom and her political aversion to what he represents and believes propel the rest of the narrative.

Towards the end of the novel, Olive and Verena both see the moment of Verena's promise as a turning point. Verena retrospectively recognizes her "hideous mistake" (372), while Olive muses that the excursion at Harvard "was the key of all that had happened since, that he

had then obtained an irremediable hold upon [Verena]” (372). Though Ransom’s will is never strong enough to abolish Verena’s aversion to his politics, Olive sees the Harvard outing as crucial, not only because the impulse to keep their excursion secret indicates the danger—to Olive and to the women’s movement—of Verena’s personal feelings for Ransom, but also because, “[i]f Verena had spoken at the time, she would never have let her go to New York” (372). There, Verena’s excursion to Central Park with Ransom puts the young woman in further sympathy with the conservative Southerner.

In spite of their very different responses to Memorial Hall, Ransom’s and Verena’s individual experiences do merge. Ransom turns his attention from national history to Verena’s personal hesitation to keep secrets from Olive, but he does so by infusing her reflections with the partisan terms of war. He is jarred out of thoughts and emotions about past war experiences to thoughts about his present relations, which he begins to figure as a battle. Verena, too, turns her thoughts to the present and future, a future in which winning the cultural battle for women’s rights will allow her entry into institutions like Harvard. Verena proposes their tour of the campus with the apologetic qualification that “[t]he inner life, of course, is the greatest interest, but there is some fine architecture, if you are not familiar with Europe” (238). Her qualified praise of Memorial Hall (“if you are not familiar with Europe”) can be read satirically, but her tone seems sincere in the context in which she utters it. She has just returned from Europe, and her tone more clearly indicates an uncertainty about the independent status of American cultural productions and a wish not to appear provincial. And her notice of the “inner life” of the buildings, on the surface, refers to the learning that takes place within its walls, an inner life from which she, as a woman, is excluded, though as a native of Cambridge she is highly qualified to guide Ransom through the architectural features of the campus. Ransom, as a poor man, is also

excluded. In this way, American institutions imitate exclusive and unjust European institutions. James's construction of this scene, however, subverts such cultural authority, replacing it with a more egalitarian notion of possible experience. When we remember that for James art was meant to be experienced, and that experience transformed the self, Verena's comment also unintentionally suggests the potential of architecture to work on the inner consciousness. Thus, even if they cannot enroll in classes, James suggests that the woman and her nearly destitute male companion can indeed enjoy a noteworthy and life-altering experience at Harvard.

Central Park

The subsequent afternoon that Verena and Ransom spend in Central Park builds on their Cambridge experience but in markedly different ways for each of them. For Verena in particular, her time in the park marks the turning point in her attitudes, desires, and emotional development. At the time that Ransom and Verena wander through the space that Calvert Vaux called the "big art work of the Republic," the park had been a fixture in New York for twenty years (qtd in Rosenzweig 136). The experience of Central Park, Sara Blair writes, was "a 'thoroughly American' revision of European aesthetic models'" (158). Its designers, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, conceived that the green space, every foot of which was designed, created, and planted, "would be a democratic institution by virtue of the mixing of classes within its boundaries" (Rosenzweig 136). They hoped the experience of the park would "empower each individual with the confidence of personal aesthetic judgment" and "improve its citizens and give them a higher sense of moral and civic purpose" (Rosenzweig 137, 138). According to Olmsted, "The main object and justification is simply to produce a certain influence in the minds of people and through this to make life in the city healthier and happier. The character of this

influence is a poetic one and it is to be produced by means of scenes” (356). Olmsted’s reliance on “the natural as an antidote to the urban is of a distinctly Emersonian strain,” notes Andrew Taylor (“Utopianism” 106):

Encountering the ‘poetic . . . scenes’ of Olmsted’s natural creation, the parkgoer, it was hoped, would become like Emerson’s famous transparent eyeball, echoing the New England transcendentalists’ celebration of the agency of nature in purifying Americans of dubious European habits and influences. The mind is ‘lifted out of moods and habits’—conformity and regularity, both Emersonian taboos [. . .]. (106)

Even if, as seems likely, James was unaware of Olmsted’s interest in Emerson and transcendentalism, the similarity of thought between the author and the architect is striking. Both men demonstrate a belief in the ability of art to change the viewer’s perspective and attitude, a belief illustrated during Verena’s and Ransom’s visit to the famous park.

Building on her experience at Memorial Hall, Verena’s experience in the Park points toward Olmsted’s and James’s comment on the cultural purpose of the space. The narrator enters Verena’s thoughts much less frequently throughout the novel than he does the thoughts of Olive and Basil, but in this scene the young woman’s consciousness dominates the narrative. At Memorial Hall she displays the first signs of emotional development by making a decision she knows Olive would not condone. Similarly, in Central Park she delights in an experience that Olive would not find to her “taste.” Though Verena had been through the park in Henry Burrage’s carriage, she prefers her outing with Ransom because to wander in Central Park “with a companion, slowly stopping, lounging, looking at the animals as she had seen the people do the day before; to sit down in some out-of-the-way part where there were distant views, which she

had noticed from her high perch beside Henry Burrage—she had to look down so, it made her feel unduly fine: that was much more to her taste, much more her idea of true enjoyment” (316). Verena responds warmly to the democratic space of Central Park, whereas Olive cannot stand the visible and social evidence of democracy, though she tolerates it for political purposes. Olive takes the street-cars because “Boston was full of poor girls who had to walk about at night and to squeeze into horse-cars in which every sense was displeased; and why should she hold herself superior to these?” (52). In her heart, however, “she loathed it.” Her loathing of this democratic conveyance and “her most poignant suffering” come “from the injury of her taste”: “She had tried to kill that nerve, to persuade herself that taste was only frivolity in the disguise of knowledge; but her susceptibility was constantly blooming afresh and making her wonder whether an absence of nice arrangements were a necessary part of the enthusiasm of humanity” (57). Olive turns away from her private taste because she is less able to feel confidence in her personal aesthetic judgment. Verena, on the other hand, prefers to “rub elbows” with the other, less wealthy, people in the park. In this scene she freely satisfies her taste without appealing to her principles for permission to do so, as Olive does. She goes to the park in Henry Burrage’s private carriage because it is an outing Olive approves of, but she goes to the park in the practical and convenient street-car with Ransom knowing that Olive would disapprove. Building on the decision to keep her meeting with Ransom a secret from Olive, Verena again shows emotional growth in trusting her own personal judgment.

Her experience in the park—wandering through the Maze, admiring the statues, observing the swans, mingling with the crowds, viewing the picturesque scene from their secluded bench—puts Verena in a democratic, tolerant mood. As she and Ransom wander, she listens to her companion’s arguments and retorts in kind, but “[s]he ceased after a while to care

to argue with him” (321). The park’s position as a place where disparate social classes can mix seems to induce in her a “desire not to part from him with a mere accentuation of their differences” (322). So she quietly listens to Ransom’s “monstrous opinions,” opinions that “interfered so with her life” (322, 323). Though her democratic tolerance allows her to sympathize with her companion, Verena independently concludes that her sympathy must be temporary: “one must lead one’s own life; it was impossible to lead the life of another, especially when that other was so different, so arbitrary and unscrupulous” (323). She pictures Olive’s painful and nervous worry at her absence, but her judgment of Ransom does not appear to be influenced by her friend’s opinions.

Ransom’s park experience diverges from Verena’s from the first. Though he suggests the park as their destination, his true wish is to take Verena to a more private, quiet French restaurant. Perhaps because this expectation is unrealized, Ransom’s response to the park does not neatly align with the goals of its creators; he shows a want of imagination. Central Park, through the various activities it offered, “simultaneously symbolized and provided a new kind of space for the formation of a more genuinely democratic ‘general culture,’ a public sphere of open exchange” (Blair 158). Ransom resists this open exchange, and rails against a democracy that educates everyone: “he thought the spread of education a gigantic farce [. . .]. You had a right to an education only if you had an intelligence,” which is the attribute of only “one person in a hundred” (321, 322). He also appears ignorant of the irony that relaxed social norms concerning women’s public activities, such as excursions to Central Park with male suitors, make possible his public declaration that “[m]y plan is to keep you at home and have a better time with you there than ever” (328). Rather than broadening his perspective, he assimilates experience in a manner that reinforces his previous beliefs. His refusal to be influenced by this natural space

stands in stark contrast to Verena's ability to appreciate Memorial Hall, a space that does not invite her in as it does Ransom. In James's fiction, the characters we most sympathize with are those who are open to new experiences and changing perspectives. In this light, Verena is not merely a beautiful form waiting to be filled, but someone who is deliberately trying to create a more inclusive American culture.

When Verena senses the threat that Ransom poses to her cultural project, she abruptly takes her leave of him, not yet fully trusting her ability to resist the male, Southern, conservative, and implicitly foreign domination he represents. The setting for their parting, on the border of the park and the city, is a democratically picturesque scene. The transition between the two man-made but very different aesthetic settings is prominent:

The bowers and boskages stretched behind them, the artificial lakes and cockneyfied landscapes, making all the region bright with the sense of air and space, and raw natural tints, and vegetation too diminutive to overshadow. The chocolate-coloured houses, in tall, new rows, surveyed the expanse; the street-cars rattled in the foreground, changing horses while the horses steamed, and absorbing and emitting passengers; and the beer-saloons, with exposed shoulders and sides, which in New York do a good deal towards representing the picturesque, the "bit" appreciated by painters, announced themselves in signs of large lettering to the sky. Groups of the unemployed, the children of disappointment from beyond the seas, propped themselves against the low, sunny wall of the Park; and on the other side the commercial vista of the Sixth Avenue stretched away with a remarkable absence of aerial perspective. (332)

The narrator draws attention to Central Park as an English imitation, but contrasts it with a new, distinctly American, urban picturesque, “appreciated by painters.” Standing in between these two landscapes, Verena resists Ransom’s reading of her as an imitation of Olive, as “an inflated little figure [. . .] whom you have invented and set on its feet, pulling strings, behind it, to make it move and speak, while you try to conceal and efface yourself there”: “That description of herself as something different from what she was trying to be, the charge of want of reality, made her heart beat with pain” (330, 331). Her anger at this accusation indicates that she has personal aspirations and is not simply a pretty form waiting to be filled with content, which is a description of her that Olive, too, offers earlier in the novel: “I should like to be able to say that you [Verena] are my form—my envelope. But you are too beautiful for that!” (168). Olive’s qualification does not prevent her from using Verena as an envelope. She, like Ransom, admires Verena for her form. And Verena, like the fledgling nation’s artists, is learning to trust her own private aesthetic by resisting this evaluation of her character.

Boston Music Hall

Unfortunately, the conclusion of the novel does not bear out her aspirations. The climax occurs at the Boston Music Hall, where Verena is scheduled to give a speech that will introduce her to the world as the new leader and voice of the women’s movement. The Music Hall attracted a fair amount of attention when it opened in 1852, largely because its architect, George Snell, paid careful attention to the building’s acoustics. Its beauty, too, was admired. *Gleason’s Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion* declared it was “probably unsurpassed for architectural excellence and beauty in this country” (“New Music” 385). Though Ruskin’s preference for Gothic architecture over more classical models was beginning to take hold in America when the

Music Hall was designed, its architect instead relied on Greek Revival decorations, which the country's founders, including Jefferson, had advocated in the early 1800's as a way of associating the new American democracy with the older one (Roger Stein 35). The Music Hall contained two upper galleries extending the length of the hall as well as floor seating. Above the upper gallery the walls were decorated in Corinthian order, and a statue of Apollo, patron god of musicians and poets, looked down from the rear of the hall. A bronze statue of Beethoven that stood on the stage subtly reminded hall-goers that America had not yet produced its own musical genius. Still, an 1872 guidebook declared that "in no other single hall in the country have so many and so choice programmes of music been performed, and [. . .] no other hall has furnished a platform for so many distinguished orators during the past twenty years" (*Boston Illustrated* 62). In the 1870s the Music Hall represented the cultural heart of Boston.

Aside from its being the largest venue in Boston, James probably had another reason for choosing the Music Hall as the scene for the novel's climax. It was here that James vividly remembered attending the January 1, 1863 celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation. In particular, he recalled the "momentousness of the occasion, the vast excited multitude, the crowded platform and the tall, spare figure of Emerson, in the midst, reading out the stanzas" of the "Boston Hymn" (*Partial Portraits* 27-28). At the time, James was attending law school at Harvard, the very institution that excludes Verena and Ransom, and James's younger brother Wilky was fighting for the Union cause. Twenty-five years later, the Boston Music Hall still rang in James's memory with the notes of Emerson's "Hymn." Moreover, Ransom's first impression of the hall would certainly have reminded readers of the assassination of Lincoln: "its lofty vaults and rows of overhanging balconies made it to his imagination immense and impressive. There were two or three moments during which he felt as he could imagine a young man to feel

who, waiting in a public place, has made up his mind, for reasons of his own, to discharge a pistol at the king or the president” (414). These associations could hardly have escaped James when he chose the Music Hall for the final scene of a battle between a Northern and a Southern cousin for Verena’s loyalty. Ransom’s position is much like John Wilkes Booth’s in that they both resent the social changes that are imminent.

When Ransom arrives at the Music Hall, he associates its architecture with his personal mission: “Everything that surrounded him referred itself to [. . .] the question whether he might not still intervene as against the girl’s jump into the abyss” (413). At this point he has “no definite plan”; rather he hopes to “make up his mind” once he has gained “a view of the field” (414). Upon his entrance into the hall, the architecture of the place works on him in a manner that determines his course of action. The narrator tells us Ransom “had never been in the Music Hall before” and “[t]he place struck him with a kind of Roman vastness; the doors which opened out of the upper balconies, high aloft, and which were constantly swinging to and fro with the passage of spectators and ushers, reminded him of the *vomitoria* that he had read about in descriptions of the Colosseum” (414). Ransom’s comparison of the refined and modern Music Hall with an ancient arena known for the violence that took place within its walls is not so unusual when we consider the Greek and Roman aspect of the building’s architecture, such as the bust of Apollo and the Corinthian decorations. In his imagination the relatively new hall takes on a historical significance as great as one of western culture’s oldest monuments.

Ransom’s mental connection to the *vomitoria* indicates the heroism he believes himself to possess while facing the difficulty of “wresting her from the mighty multitude” (413), a phrase which brings to mind gladiators fighting in front of a blood-thirsty crowd. This image is further emphasized by the atmosphere of the hall, which invites Ransom’s belief that the audience is

violent: “suffused with the evenly distributed gaslight, which fell from a great elevation, and the thick atmosphere that hangs for ever in such places, [the audience] appeared to pile itself high and to look dimly expectant and formidable. He had [. . .] a glimpse of the ferocity that lurks in a disappointed mob” (416). The effect of the architectural influence climaxes as the great organ rolls out its first notes: “[i]f he had had no definite plan [Ransom] now had at least an irresistible impulse” (416). The impulse is, of course, to find Verena and to convince her to come away with him. This scene indicates that even the classical architectural tradition, widely interpreted as representing reason and oratory, can be reinterpreted as a symbol of mad, democratic mobs. Rather than celebrating democratic enlightenment, the hall reminds Ransom of his hostility to the masses. Despite his certainty hours earlier that he had lost the fight, Ransom’s interaction with the Music Hall restores his confidence, and he forces Verena, Olive, and everyone in his path to submit to his will.

Ransom’s personal experience of Snell’s architectural space attains national significance as he deals a major blow to the women’s rights movement in the American scene of James’s novel. Though Ransom persuades Verena to give up the lecture podium, her intent to deliver her inspiring call-to-arms speech in a space designed to inspire American artistic and cultural genius—a space fastened forever in James’s memory as the site of a pivotal moment in democratic progress—demonstrates James’s adaptation of a European design to American purposes. When we return to James’s 1867 letter to Perry, we can see the parallel between this adaptation and his idea that Americans “can deal freely with forms of civilization not our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically &c) claim our property wherever we find it” (*Life in Letters* 17). *The Bostonians* addresses cultural questions that James had

considered for twenty years, questions he would continue to explore into the late phases of his career, particularly in works like *The Ambassadors* and *The American Scene*.

The unsatisfying conclusion of the novel has kept the debate over its meaning warm for over a century. Though his comment on the social situation of women and his sole portrait of a Southerner are valuable elements of the novel, and have justifiably constituted a focal point of critical attention, scholars have pursued these topics to the neglect of other cultural matters. I have focused on how the novel dramatizes the development of original American art, the importance of these various forms on the minds of those who experience them, and the complex cultural context in which this process took place. From a broader perspective of the larger cultural debate concerning European influence, James's depictions of Memorial Hall, Central Park, and the Boston Music Hall through the consciousness of Basil Ransom and Verena Tarrant suggest the transitional nature of American intellectual and artistic culture as the country begins to cast off the influence of Europe and to trust its own creative voice. James offers no easy answers to the debate over European cultural influence; in *The Bostonians*, he suggests that Americans must not let slavish imitation to European cosmopolitanism override native inspiration, and thus reestablishes Emerson's challenge for a true American artist. Yet James's decision to silence Verena as a voice for change makes irrefutable conclusions impossible. Twenty-seven years later, James decided against including this novel in the literary legacy he was shaping, the New York Edition (1907-09), further curtailing what we can know about his intentions. He did personally hope for a new era in American letters, but he also believed that Americans could not reach this era without the model of European art, as evidenced by his decision to live there. What we *can* take away from this American novel is a better understanding of James's decision to leave America. By standing outside the intense cultural

debate, he felt he could better help American letters. Within it, he feared his perspective would become too narrow, and for James, a limited perspective would not encourage the kinds of experiences that lead to higher levels of consciousness.

Chapter 3

The Literal and the Imaginative Miriam in *The Tragic Muse*

Basil Ransom sways Verena Tarrant away from the stage before the Boston debut that would have altered her life forever; in *The Tragic Muse* (1890) Peter Sherringham fails to have the same effect on Miriam Rooth, who scorns his proposal that she quit acting in order to marry him. Though opposites in this respect, both women are talented artist figures who occupy central positions in their respective novels. Despite the prominent position of these women in the narratives, their thoughts are not directly revealed. Instead, readers must approach Miriam and Verena as art objects through other consciousnesses that *are* represented. In the 1908 Preface to *The Tragic Muse*, James explains that “I never ‘go behind’ Miriam; only poor Sherringham goes, a great deal, and Nick Dormer goes a little, and the author, while they so waste wonderment, goes behind *them*” (9). This narrative technique forces readers to view Miriam, like Verena, from the consciousnesses of the “reflectors,” or other characters, who surround her.²²

The absence of revealed consciousness does not mean, however, that Miriam is inaccessible or that her consciousness is unworthy of transparency, as most scholarship suggests. S. Gorley Putt, for example, calls Miriam a “comparatively slight character” (209), and Alan Bellringer, perhaps her harshest critic, writes that “Obviously her mind is too undeveloped and second-hand to serve as one of James’s fine ‘registers or “reflectors”’ of experience. She is not, unlike Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*, sufficiently interested ‘in the things that are not herself’ to serve as a central consciousness. Briefly, Miriam is not discriminating enough to be worth doing from the inside” (83). This critical view, combined with the indirect narrative

²² For James’s discussion of reflectors, see, for example, the 1909 Preface to *The Wings of the Dove* (11, 12).

approach, leads unresisting readers to view this focal character as Peter and his cousin Nick Dormer do, as merely a work of art, a surface without content, subject to their creation and interpretation. But as we have seen in our consideration of James's earlier novels, the interaction between James's characters and art both shapes and reveals consciousness. Though *The Tragic Muse* is often categorized as a novel about artists rather than as one that incorporates art in any meaningful way, three portraits and an architecturally-famous cathedral within the novel suggest a revision of popular thought is necessary. Miriam is a work of art—both as a portrait subject and as an actress—from which the two men take inspiration and have consciousness-expanding moments. Additionally, Miriam, like Isabel Archer, is subject to aesthetic experience. Through the aesthetic suggestion of Notre Dame, Nick's two portraits of Miriam, and the painting *La Tragédie* (1859), Nick, Peter, and Miriam each experience moments that inspire ideals of artistic perfection.

Notre Dame

Nick Dormer, who struggles between his desire to paint and familial pressure to embrace political office, begins seriously to consider a painter's life in the evening shadow of Notre Dame de Paris. As he walks towards Notre Dame with Gabriel Nash, Nick is bewildered by Gabriel's aesthetic beliefs because they so blatantly disregard the opinions of others. His single-minded pursuit of the beautiful is an unfamiliar concept to Nick, who worries about pleasing others more than about what pleases him. Sounding Gabriel on the "truth" that art represents, Nick's eye falls on Notre Dame. As the full effect of the cathedral's beauty washes over him, it brings clarity: "Notre Dame *is* truth; Notre Dame *is* charm; on Notre Dame the distracted mind can rest" (118). Though these words do not articulate the "truth," they do express a belief, particularly when

uttered to the Wildean aesthete Gabriel, that art offers its beholders an understanding of the world at which they otherwise might not arrive, a certain clarity of perspective that reveals appreciating art is the best way to enjoy life.²³ One connotation of “distracted mind” is a mind torn between conflicting interests, which is clearly an issue for Nick. Visually absorbing the “serene and sublime” Gothic monument, Nick begins to see his own struggle more clearly, and his lurking artistic self is brought to the surface by a monument that “threw a distinction even over the Parisian smartnesses” (119).

The artistic power of the cathedral also is emphasized by Nick’s and Gabriel’s apparent obliviousness to the other nearby historical landmarks of Paris: “Our young men [. . .] crossed the wide short bridge which made them face towards the monuments of old Paris—the Palais de Justice, the Conciergerie, the holy chapel of Saint Louis” (118). All three old Paris monuments have political ties. The Palais de Justice housed the various French legal courts and was attached to the Conciergerie, where Marie Antoinette was imprisoned before her execution during the French Revolution. Sainte-Chapelle reminded passers-by of the king who built it, Louis IX, who ruled France during the height of its European political power and whose canonization sealed his reputation as the quintessential Christian king. Before the chapel’s major destruction during the French Revolution, it housed religious relics. Baedeker describes Saint-Chapelle as “a perfect gem of Gothic architecture” (*Tragic Muse* n. 502); despite representing the same school of architecture as Notre Dame, this gem and the other political monuments receive no attention from Nick and Gabriel. Nick prefers to admire a Gothic structure that is universally and secularly admired primarily for its architecture: Baedeker calls the façade of Notre Dame “the finest part

²³ Jonathan Freedman (182-92), Richard Salmon (“Aestheticism in Translation: Henry James, Walter Pater, and Theodor Adorno.” *Translating Life: Studies in Transpositional Aesthetics*. Eds. Richard Salmon et. al. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1999. 277-96), and Richard Ellmann (36-7) most successfully discuss Gabriel Nash as a Paterian/Wildean aesthete.

of the cathedral” (*Tragic Muse* n. 501). And though its mere presence through centuries of French history implies political ties, they are not overt: the great cathedral is “disengaged to-day from her old contacts and adhesions” (118). Nick sees Notre Dame only for its architectural triumphs, and his slighting of the Parisian political monuments underlines his struggle to choose between politics and art.

Descriptions of Notre Dame’s architectural effect strategically preface Nick’s confession of artistic ambition, and the narrative tone paints the cathedral as a friendly and welcoming environment:

[The vast cathedral-face] greeted Nick Dormer and Gabriel Nash with a kindness the long centuries had done nothing to dim. The lamplight of the old city washed its foundations, but the towers and buttresses, the arches, the galleries, the statues, the vast rose-window, the large full composition, seemed to grow clearer while they climbed higher, as if they had a conscious benevolent answer for the upward gaze of men. (118)

Like Isabel’s response to St. Peter’s, this structure supports heroic impulses. Though Notre Dame was not an intentional destination, Nick is seeking answers, and the kind and benevolent face of the building’s façade encourages his exploration of the dilemma facing him. Notre Dame, which represents the confluence of art and religion, becomes the “temple of a faith so dear to [Nick] that there was peace and security in its precinct” (119). This particular temple is a pivotal setting in other novels by James, most notably *The American* and *The Ambassadors*, but in those works he focuses on the interior effect of the building. Here, the cathedral’s influence emanates from its exterior: “the great cathedral [. . .] rises high and fair, with her front of beauty and her majestic mass, darkened at that hour, or at least simplified, under the stars, but only more serene and

sublime for her happy union far aloft with the cool distance and the night” (118). Nick’s spontaneous reaction to it is the desire to act: “How it straightens things out and blows away one’s vapours—anything that’s *done!* [. . .]. The great point’s to do something, instead of muddling and questioning; and, by Jove, it makes me want to!” (118). The aesthetic glow of Notre Dame’s sublime architectural triumph inspires his impulsive confession to Gabriel Nash, a self-described “apostle of beauty,” that if he were not running for the House of Commons, he would devote himself to artistic pursuits (119): “What I really hanker for is to be a painter; and of portraits, on the whole, I think. That’s the abject crude ridiculous fact. In this out-of-the-way corner, at the dead of night, in lowered tones, I venture to disclose it to you. Isn’t that the aesthetic life?” (121). Having made this confession, which he had previously hardly even admitted to himself, Nick takes a first step towards a more aesthetic perspective on life.

The vast distance that Nick must traverse to reach Gabriel’s thoroughly Aesthetic point of view, though, is immediately evident as Nick explains that the absurdity of his situation lies in his lack of technical knowledge about painting. Gabriel tells Nick that he “cling[s] to the old false measure of success”; all that matters is “[t]o be on the right side—on the side of the ‘fine’” (121). In other words, knowing how to accurately represent life on a canvas is a conventional standard for judging artistic merit. Gabriel, presented as an Aesthetic authority, suggests that living an Aesthetic life requires a fundamental change in one’s consciousness and approach to the world. Such a change, of course, is difficult to complete in a moment’s time, but Nick has enough artistic perception to recognize that his current perspective may yield to Gabriel’s. Quoting a line from *Phedre* by Racine, Nick correlates Notre Dame’s truth, and Gabriel’s ideas, with poison in his veins: “*C’est Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée* [It’s Venus fully seizing her prey]—putting Venus for art” (122). He does not believe Aestheticism is evil—he merely

associates its effect with the destruction of his political career. At the end of his encounter with Notre Dame, Nick is still determined to run for office, but he understands that his desire to become a painter poses a threat to this goal. He is not yet ready to adopt a new measure of success and clings to his long-held plans for the future. Though Notre Dame has reawakened Nick's interest in art, he is determined to resist an aesthetic life. Instead of helping him to forget about art, however, this determination has the opposite effect in that he leaves Paris and returns to London with the thought of portrait painting uppermost in his consciousness.

Miriam as the Tragic Muse

The catalyst for Nick's acceptance of the aesthetic life and official abandonment of political aspirations is the portrait he paints of Miriam as the Tragic Muse. Having just been elected to the House of Commons, and consequently "formally renounc[ing] all manner of 'art'" (261), Nick is surprised when Miriam commissions a portrait from him, a commission that Gabriel convinces him to accept. Initially, Nick focuses on a problem that he had discussed with Gabriel—the technical challenge of painting: "She was in her way so fine that he could only think how to 'do' her: that hard calculation soon flattened out the consciousness, lively in him at first, that she was a beautiful woman who had sought him out in his retirement" (262). Though flattered that Miriam chose him, he primarily regards her as an object he must render. As he humors her wish for conversation, though, Miriam's observation that one's artistic consciousness should be privileged above all and the "vivid light" in which he sees her move him: "the idea of what one might make of such material—touched him with an irresistible wand. On the spot, to his inner vision, Miriam became a rich result" (262). When Nick commences to capture Miriam's spirit in paint, she inspires in him an artistic ideal. At the outset, he is merely drawn to

her exterior beauty, as he was drawn to the façade of Notre Dame, and he wishes to reproduce it as a technical attempt.²⁴ Gradually his thought for the painting goes beyond the technical to embody a lofty idea. Without Miriam this inspiration would not be possible, but he worries that his technical talent is not great enough and that he has “let [his inspired idea] fall and smashed it” (267).

In his exploration of Nick’s artistic dilemma, James seems to be working out a problem that also faced him. In the Preface to this novel James addresses the difficult task of creating one’s ideal artistic vision while working with real material, a task that daunted him as he undertook *The Tragic Muse*. He refers to the compromise that occurs in the act of creation: “Of course the affair would be simple enough if composition could be kept out of the question; yet by what art or process, what bars and bolts, what unmuzzled dogs and pointed guns, perform that feat?” (4). If an artist could execute an idea without the intermediate step of putting pen to paper, or body on stage, all art would be “simple enough” to create. His inspiration for tackling this dilemma is Tintoretto, who, James believed, mastered this vexing problem. In 1873 the author wrote that,

Before [Tintoretto’s] greatest works you are conscious of a sudden evaporation of old doubts and dilemmas, and the eternal problem of the conflict between idealism and realism dies the most natural of deaths. In his genius the problem is practically solved; the alternatives are so harmoniously interfused that I defy the keenest critic to say where one begins and the other ends. The homeliest prose

²⁴ Paul Beidler briefly contends that “[t]he similarities between Miriam Rooth and Notre Dame are many and significant. Miriam [. . .] seems also to look down on mortal man from on high as Notre Dame does.” She also “animates her landscape in the same way that the cathedral pervades the city with ‘everlasting freshness’” (29).

melts into the most ethereal poetry—the literal and the imaginative fairly confound their identity. (*Italian Hours* 56)

In Tintoretto’s work, the real subject is portrayed so expertly that it also captures the painter’s ideal. Nick, too, struggles to interfuse “the literal and the imaginative” in his portrait of Miriam. Though not explicitly revealed until later in the novel, in his first portrait Nick portrays Miriam as the Tragic Muse, which is both an ideal Miriam aspires to as an actress and an ideal that Peter and Gabriel impose on her. She is repeatedly associated with the Tragic Muse, who was also known as Rachel. Though James does not place Nick in a position to view or hear about Gérôme’s portrait of Rachel, *La Tragédie*, hanging in the Théâtre Français, the narrative implies that Nick’s portrait will be compared to Gérôme’s. James draws on the latter painting to suggest that Nick will strive to achieve Tintoretto’s artistic synthesis. Nick must not merely produce the effect of *La Tragédie*, but must do so while capturing Miriam’s specific and unique characteristics of beauty and of personality.

Portraits reveal more than just their models, of course. They also reveal their painters, as James records in his portrayal of Nick. A mere six months before he began developing his idea for *The Tragic Muse* (*Complete Notebooks* 46), James offered high praise for John Singer Sargent’s talent as a portrait painter:

There is no greater work of art than a great portrait. [. . .] The gift that [Sargent] possesses he possesses completely—the immediate perception of the end and of the means. Putting aside the question of the subject (and to a great portrait a common sitter will doubtless not always conduce), the highest result is achieved when to this element of quick perception a certain faculty of lingering reflection is added. [. . .] I mean the quality in the light of which the artist sees deep into his

subject, undergoes it, absorbs it, discovers in it new things that were not on the surface, becomes patient with it, and almost reverent, and, in short, elevates and humanizes the technical problem. (“John S. Sargent” 691)

In this passage James makes it clear that a great portrait is the combined result of an exceptional model and a painter who is gifted both technically and psychologically. In other words, a painter must see into the mind of his sitter. James’s praise for Sargent reflects his appreciation of the difficulties that present themselves to Nick as he undertakes his first formal commission. Nick aspires to create the ideal portrait of Miriam, but he has to capture a real person along with this ideal in order to achieve his goal. As he gathers impressions of her during her current theater production, Nick listens to Gabriel’s rhapsody on portraitists. This oration reinforces the pressure of meeting an ideal, and as scholars have noted, echoes James’s essay on Sargent:

Nash [. . .] talked [. . .] about the possible greatness of the art of the portraitist—its reach, its range, its fascination, the magnificent examples it had left us in the past: windows open into history, into psychology, things that were among the most precious possessions of the human race. He insisted above all on the interest, the importance of this great peculiarity of it, that unlike most other forms it was a revelation of two realities, the man whom it was the artist’s conscious effort to reveal and the man—the interpreter—expressed in the very quality and temper of that effort. It offered a double vision, the strongest dose of life that art could give, the strongest dose of art that life could give. (268)

Gabriel precisely articulates the interaction that should occur between Miriam and Nick in their joint endeavor to create a portrait that embodies two arts, that of the portraitist and that of the actress. If Nick can capture the qualities that give Miriam so much life, he will have succeeded in

capturing the strongest dose of her art as well. In his representation of Miriam, Nick hopes to offer future generations not only a window into history that will revive her in the minds of her viewers, but also an illustration of the quality of his own mind. This is the idea that she inspires in him, indicating that he is primarily invested in representing her because of the positive reflection on himself. His interest in art is not as disinterested as Gabriel's thoroughly Aesthetic, *l'art pour l'art*, attitude. In presenting the concept of two realities—a double vision—Gabriel draws attention to the collaborative nature of Miriam's portrait, a collaboration to which Nick gives lip service without taking it seriously.

Though Nick slights Miriam's role in creating the portrait, his encounter with her as an art object does recalibrate his consciousness, a process begun in the shadows of Notre Dame, and he irreversibly abandons politics for painting. Though it will mean ending his engagement to Peter's sister, Julia Dallow, who wants to be a politician's wife, and being written out of Mr. Carteret's will, thus forfeiting money that his mother and sisters need, Nick's experience while painting Miriam calms his internal struggle between art and the world. As Nick works to create the ideal portrait of Miriam, he sees more and more clearly that by serving art he "represents" people more effectively and honestly than as their political representative.

For Peter, too, Miriam inspires an ideal, an ideal into which he tries to mold her. His passion for the theater is so deep that he tells Nick, "I'm fond of representation—the representation of life: I like it better, I think, than the real thing" (62). In Peter's mind, the theater holds possibilities for the ideal that real life can never meet. Through his interest in the theater he meets Miriam, whom he cannot neatly categorize, much like Basil Ransom's inability to decipher Verena Tarrant. Rather than seeing her as a woman with her own ideas, he concludes that "her existence was a series of parts assumed for the moment" (126). Moreover, "she

positively had no countenance of her own” because “[t]he expression that came nearest belonging to her, as it were, was the one that came nearest being a blank” (126). That Peter views her as an artistic object is driven home when he compares her to a “finished statue lifted from the ground to its pedestal” (214). In much the opposite experience from Isabel Archer’s with the statues at the Capitoline Museum, Peter disregards the consciousness of a vibrant woman and sees her as an antique marble. Yet this blank statue and her perfect “histrionic nature” (126) inspire in him an ideal for the theater. As he watches her face, “something delicate dawned in it, a dim promise of variety and a touching plea for patience, as if it were conscious of being able to show in time more shades than the simple and striking gloom which had as yet mainly graced it” (93). He grasps at the potential he sees and, as he spends more time with Miriam, he comes to see her as the embodiment of his ideas for the future of the theater: “What he flattered himself he was trying to do for her—and through her for the stage of his time, since she was the instrument, and incontestably a fine one, that had come to his hand—was precisely to lift it up, make it rare, keep it in the region of distinction and breadth” (147). He imagines her as the means to an end, a means that he believes belongs to him, despite the fact that Miriam owes him no particular allegiance.

When Peter sees his cousin’s painting of Miriam as the Tragic Muse, he perceives Nick’s potential to be the kind of portrait painter that James praises in Sargent. The portrait’s effect on Peter is pronounced. Looking at the unfinished canvas in Nick’s absence, he is struck not only with his cousin’s artistic potential, but also with Miriam’s beauty:

Unfinished, simplified and in some portions merely suggested, it was strong, vivid and assured, it had already the look of life and the promise of power. Peter felt all this and was startled, was strangely affected—he had no idea Nick moved with

that stride. Miriam, seated, was represented in three quarters, almost to her feet. She leaned forward with one of her legs crossed over the other, her arms extended and foreshortened, her hands locked together round her knee. Her beautiful head was bent a little, broodingly, and her splendid face seemed to look down at life. She had a grand appearance of being raised aloft, with a wide regard, a survey from a height of intelligence, for the great field of the artist, all the figures and passions he may represent. Peter asked himself where his kinsman had learned to paint like that. He almost gasped at the composition of the thing [. . .]. (303)

This is the sole description of any of Nick's paintings, and the strength of his ability may be measured in Peter's reaction. Though Miriam is the object of study and her beauty affects him, Peter's thoughts consistently turn to what the painting reveals about Nick's artistic talent. Peter sees Nick's potential to fulfill Gabriel's theory that a great portrait reveals two realities, Miriam's and her interpreter's. In addition to bringing together the many elements of Miriam's personality, Nick's mind is suggested in the larger ideal that she embodies. William Storm argues against this idea, stating that "the fact that [James] leaves Nick's 'tragic muse' not only unfinished but not described in detail seems unnecessary and even counterproductive. Indeed, by providing scant clarification with respect to the look of Nick's canvases, James loses the opportunity to be more incisive in the portrayal of Nick himself" (84). Though Storm's complaint is understandable, he fails to consider that James's intention is not to ekphrastically represent Miriam, but to show her *effect* as a work of art on Nick and on Peter. The style and specific rendering of Miriam are not as important as the fact that she inspires Nick to abandon politics and to join the world of art. The portrait affects Peter by reinforcing Miriam's external beauty, and it reinforces his dream of becoming the manager of "a great academic artistic

theatre” where he would “[pour] forth a continuity of tradition” (306, 307). Realizing that “Nick’s bribe was ‘art’—the strange temptress with whom he himself had been wrestling and over whom he had finally ventured to believe that wisdom and training had won a victory,” Peter revives his dream (301). The “strange temptress” he sees in Nick’s painting, Miriam, serves a double purpose in that she is the central figure around whom he builds his idea of an academic theatre, and she is the subject of the portrait that inspires him to pursue such an ideal. Peter’s description and response suggest that in the finished portrait Nick may capture the idea that Miriam gave him. She has the illusion of looking down at life from a height, life being both where artists get their inspiration and what their inspirations represent. In other words, Nick represents Miriam as the consummate artist, able to offer the “double vision.”

Miriam as the Comic Muse

Miriam as an aesthetic object also becomes Nick’s inspiration to soldier through an artistic crisis that tests his dedication. Despite the praise others give his portrait of Miriam, Nick becomes disillusioned with his representation of the Tragic Muse, believing that he has not accurately represented who she is or what he can do:

It had not been definite to Nick that he wanted another sitting at all for the slight work, as he held it to be, that Miriam had already helped him to achieve. He regarded this work as a mere light windfall of the shaken tree: he had made what he could of it and would have been embarrassed to make more. If it was not finished this was because it was not finishable; at any rate he had said all he had to say in that particular phrase. (391)

What seems to be at issue here is not the portrait's lack of gravity, which Peter's description confirms it does possess, but Nick's failure to portray Miriam's inner life. "He had made what he could of it" implies his own artistic shortcomings and his limited, objective view of Miriam. He has had glimpses of her depth, which unconsciously feed the ideal she inspires, but until he fully accepts her genius he cannot finish the portrait. The subjective view of her seems just out of his reach, as a visit to the National Gallery demonstrates. His responses to art there cause him to be "discouraged beyond measure by the sight of the grand things that had been done—things so much grander than any that would ever bear his signature" (392). Because his imagination had "become conscious of a check" (391), the glow of his decision to drop politics in favor of an artistic life is fading, and his reaction to this artistic crisis becomes crucial.

As he ponders what course of action to take, he thinks of Miriam: "Ambition, in her, was always on the rush, and she was not a person to conceive that others might in bad moments listen for the trumpet in vain" (392). He quiets all questions of her personal gravity by acknowledging her serious dedication to her art. And as with the idea she inspires for her portrait, Miriam again provides the motivation for his decision: "Miriam suddenly supplied the bridge correcting the gap in his continuity. If he had made his sketch it was a proof he had done her, and that he had done her flashed upon him as a sign that she would be still more feasible. Art was *doing*—it came back to that" (393). Action is the only antidote for his doubt.

Nick subsequently undertakes a second portrait of Miriam not as "the sibyl, the muse, the tremendous creature" but as "the charming woman, the person one knows, differently arranged as she appears *en ville*, as she calls it" (398). Miriam is discriminating enough to understand this fresh perspective as well, telling him, "Don't make me vague and arranged and fine in this new view. [. . .] make me characteristic and real; make life, with all its horrid facts and truths, stick

out of me” (420). She aids him in this new challenge by assuming the role of “*comédienne*” as she sits for Nick: “Miriam’s account of her mother’s view was a scene of comedy, and there was instinctive art in the way she added touch to touch and made point upon point” (421). This “real” Miriam and her productive force offer a sharp contrast to Nick’s own slow toiling with little promise of fame—in the time frame of the novel neither portrait of Miriam is finished. Because we have ample reason for believing in Nick’s artistic talent, this failure may be attributed to his assumption of her plasticity. Even at the end of the novel, after she has demonstrated her artistic vision and has, to a certain extent, tried to attract a more personal interest from him, “she remained to him primarily and essentially a pictorial object, with the nature of whose vicissitudes he was concerned” (462). Though Paul Beidler argues that Nick’s two “paintings show James’s sublime heroine developing in the novel from an actress, a mere art object, to a woman and a work of modernist realism” (19), Nick’s objective perspective of her does not change. Her notable effect on him is only as an art object.

Both paintings play key roles in the reader’s interpretation of the characters and the novel, and whether in the act of painting or viewing them, they inspire men. Yet Beidler gives little authority to the first portrait, calling it poetic but not realistic (37). His reading of these two portraits seems to come down to a preference for one style over another, which in the context of the novel is insignificant. At stake instead is how Miriam inspires the portraits, which in turn inspire others. Miriam, like the actress Rachel, has a double effect on the consciousnesses of others through the various visual means by which she is presented.

La Tragédie

As we have seen, Miriam is primarily presented as an aesthetic object in various forms: herself, an actress, and a portrait. She is also, in the first two Books of the novel, repeatedly associated with Elisa Félix, the French actress who became better known as Rachel, and with the Tragic Muse, an appellation by which Rachel was also known. In the green foyer of the Théâtre Français hangs a portrait of this portrait by Jean-Léon Gérôme, called *La Tragédie* (1859), and it holds a central place in James's story. Many of his nineteenth-century readers would also have been familiar with Sir Joshua Reynolds' painting *Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse* (1784), though James makes no explicit comparison or reference to it. In fact, scholars widely agree that the novel's title derives from this painting, rather than from Gérôme's.²⁵ Storm argues that "a part of James's strategy is to relate Miriam directly, as both an actress and a model, to famous works of theatrical portraiture," Reynolds' and Gérôme's in particular (76). Linking Miriam to Mrs. Siddons is defensible, but it should not overshadow the specific portrait James incorporates. Mrs. Siddons' portrait is never mentioned in the story, and a literal translation of the phrase *La Tragédie*, which is referred to as "Portrait of Rachel" in English, would undoubtedly also incline James to the title *The Tragic Muse*. James chose explicitly to compare Miriam to Rachel and *La Tragédie*, and this specific work of art affects the characters' consciousnesses in ways that the Reynolds' painting does not.

La Tragédie has a commanding presence in the foyer of the Théâtre Français. Its influence paradoxically prompts Peter to propose marriage and Miriam to refuse the offer. Despite Peter's privilege as a center of consciousness, little of his thought is narrated in this scene. He does not openly praise the portrait or its subject, but because he admires Miriam and mentally compares her to the painting, his admiration for Rachel is implied: "Peter, from his

²⁵ See Winner (124), Tintner's *The Lust of the Eyes* (66-68), and Beidler (n. 97).

bench, watched his friend a little, turning his eyes from her to the vivid image of the dead actress and thinking how little she suffered by the juxtaposition” (229). As he continues to turn his eyes between Miriam and Rachel, and to reflect on Rachel’s career, Peter sees that if Miriam should become as famous as the dead actress, a romantic relationship with Miriam would not be feasible. As a political ambassador, he cannot reputedly marry an actress, or, as Miriam later phrases it, “a grasshopper can’t set up a house with a fish” (419). So far he has only acknowledged to himself that he has a deep interest in Miriam; the thought of losing her forces his spoken confession that he loves her. While “the cold portrait of Rachel looked down” upon them, Peter pleads,

“Give it up and I’ll marry you to-morrow.”

“This is a happy time to ask it!” she said with superior amusement. “And this is a good place!”

“Very good indeed, and that’s why I speak: it’s a place to make one choose—it puts it all before one.” (233)

For Peter, the portrait of Rachel represents how Miriam will be taken from him. He tells her that “I want you for myself—not for others, and now, in time, before anything’s done” (235). Like Basil’s wish to keep Verena’s talent for his private amusement, Peter wishes the same devotion from Miriam. Peter’s reaction to the portrait reflects two things: his refusal to make a sacrifice for art and his misunderstanding of Miriam. Miriam earlier inspired his thoughts of a classical academic theater, and he pictured her as the center of it. Now that he believes he loves her, he wants her for himself rather than sharing her with an adoring public. And by going so far as to ask her to give up the theater, it is clear that he does not intuit Miriam’s extreme dedication to her art, for which she *is* willing to make sacrifices. Peter’s interaction with the portrait clarifies

his feelings for Miriam, and he returns to his post in Paris with a new appreciation for her beauty and talent.

For Miriam, on the other hand, “Gérôme’s fine portrait of the pale Rachel invested with the antique attributes of tragedy” solidifies her commitment to the theatrical arts, and prompts her to recall Nick’s proposal to paint her (229). Her gaze at the portrait while she discusses Nick strongly implies that she is mentally projecting her own portrait next to Rachel’s; she asks Peter if Nick was thinking of this portrait when he offered her his artistic talents. At this moment, which occurs before Peter’s marriage proposal, Miriam’s response to the painting becomes intertwined with and emphasized by her meeting with the current star of the Théâtre Français, Mademoiselle Voisin. As a complement to the objective surface of the painting, the vibrant actress represents a living work of art, who, Peter observes, is “triumph, she’s full accomplishment” (228). Miriam, too, would like to shape herself into a famous actress of full accomplishment, and she takes inspiration from this French woman. Miriam’s veneration for the actress, which is uncharacteristically narrated from her perspective, is thorough:

Miriam admired the note of discreet interrogation in her voice—the slight suggestion of surprise at their ‘old house’ being liked. This performer was an astonishment from her seeming still more perfect on a nearer view—which was not, the girl had an idea, what performers usually did. This was very encouraging to her—it widened the programme of a young lady about to embrace the scenic career. To have so much to show before the footlights and yet to have so much left when you came off—that was really wonderful. Mademoiselle Voisin’s eyes, as one looked into them, were still more agreeable than the distant spectator would have supposed; and there was in her appearance an extreme finish which

instantly suggested to Miriam that she herself, in comparison, was big and rough and coarse. (230-31)

In the French woman, Miriam sees that one key to success is the ability to exude artistic finish both on and off the stage—it indicates one’s dedication to the dramatic arts. The most notable aspect of this passage, however, is that it refutes James’s absolute claim that he never “goes behind” his heroine. This moment, the only one in the novel where the narrative reveals her thoughts, offers critical insight into understanding Miriam’s deep artistic perception.

James’s decision to portray Miriam objectively in the rest of the novel might seem to support the idea that she lacks depth. Thus, it may appear unjustified to suggest that Miriam has any meaningful interaction with painting. Bellringer argues this point by contending that James’s unflattering portrayal of Miriam’s shallow mind reveals his personal belief that acting did not require intelligence (77). To support this thesis, he cites a June 19, 1884 notebook entry in which James writes that the story might be “a confirmation of Mrs. Kemble’s theory that the dramatic gift is a thing by itself—implying of necessity no *general* superiority of mind. The strong nature, the personal quality, vanity, etc., of the girl: her artistic being, so vivid, yet so purely instinctive. Ignorant, illiterate. Rachel” (*Complete Notebooks* 28). While James’s notebooks often give us valuable insight into his writing process and intentions, we should remember that they are also *notes*, from which his final idea evolved and changed. Also, it is more likely that by the adjectives “Ignorant, illiterate” James intended to convey that acting did not require academic knowledge, but rather imagination, passion, and dedication. While the novel clearly indicates that Miriam has little interest in books or academic knowledge of the theater, for James imagination was a far more important marker of intelligence than formal education was; he often

uses the terms interchangeably. And as her undeniable talent for acting illustrates, Miriam has imagination in abundance.

James further refutes Miriam's apparent lack of depth in the Preface, explaining that his decision to present the title character's consciousness "only through a more or less bewildered interpretation of it by others" (*Tragic Muse* 8) was grounded in the logic that "No character in a play [. . .] has, for the right expression of the thing, a *usurping* consciousness; the consciousness of others is exhibited exactly in the same way as that of the 'hero'" (8). In other words, theater audiences cannot see inside the minds of characters, but can only evaluate them based on their dialogue and actions. In similar theatrical fashion, James denies readers Miriam's thoughts, preferring that "the emphasis is all on an absolutely objective Miriam," who "is thoroughly symbolic, as functional, for illustration of the idea" of "the art-appetite raised to intensity" (*Tragic Muse* 8, 9). The unusual technique (unusual for James, that is) of centering a story around a character whose consciousness remains unavailable to the reader is especially disconcerting in that she is, according to James, the center of the novel (8). Given that he offers such large doses of both Nick's and Peter's consciousnesses, James acknowledges that in *The Tragic Muse* readers will wonder in whom the center resides, but concludes: "Miriam *is* central to analysis, then, in spite of being objective; central in virtue of the fact that the whole thing has visibly, from the first, to get itself done in dramatic, or at least in scenic conditions" (8). Because she is an actress, the most appropriate method of presenting her is through the perspective of those for whom she acts. From this point of view, Miriam acquires meaning only in her encounter with sentient others, which is similar to Isabel Archer's response to the antique marbles that she humanizes. But through the "multiplication of *aspects*" and the brief glimpse of

her thoughts, we still arrive at an understanding of her consciousness, which is just as central to the story as Nick's or Peter's (*Tragic Muse* 8).

James's narration of Miriam's thoughts during her time with Mlle. Voisin reveals her ability to discriminate among her impressions, which, like Isabel Archer, makes her a Paterian aesthetic critic. Miriam studies the source of the accomplished actress's polish and the conditions under which she creates her impressions in order to recreate the same effect. In addition to noting in detail the changes in Mlle. Voisin's on- and off-stage personalities, "her mind was flooded with an impression of style, of refinement, of the long continuity of a tradition" in Mlle. Voisin's dressing room (232). Like Pater, Miriam recognizes that creating the effect of beauty is the chief end of her art. Her success as an actress depends on being able to make the audience feel, whether that feeling be pleasurable or painful. Through the details that Miriam notices at the Théâtre Français, the narrator makes it clear that she is, in fact, discriminating. Her mind is developed enough to take a large view of her art in that she defines success not as being well-known, but rather as "playing five hundred things and never being heard of at all" (466).

As Miriam leaves Mlle. Voisin and immediately returns to the portrait of Rachel, the inner view of her consciousness fades. Miriam's words, however, indicate that she considers Mlle. Voisin and the portrait as objective yet suggestive surfaces that together and separately offer her a vision of her future. Her praise of the living actress focuses on the same reason for which she admires the painted Rachel: "She showed us nothing—nothing of her real self. [. . .] She has a hard polish, an inimitable surface, like some wonderful porcelain that costs more than you'd think" (234). Her observation implies that both Rachel and Mlle. Voisin are art objects, Rachel as represented in paint and Mlle. Voisin as a porcelain. The porcelain metaphor reinforces our perception of Mlle. Voisin as created art, like the painting of Rachel. For

contemporary readers, the purchase of porcelain was associated with the interior decoration craze of the House Beautiful movement, a form of British Aestheticism that advocated the home as a work of art (Freedman 106). In this context, the porcelain suggests the artifice and perfection that Miriam aspires to, though her words reveal her recognition that there is a real, imperfect self beneath Mlle. Voisin's art. Like Miriam herself, Mlle. Voisin is viewed both objectively and subjectively.

As the scene shifts from the portrait of Rachel to the actress back to the portrait, readers are led to connect Miriam's thoughts to these two works of art. Eyeing the portrait repeatedly as she talks of Mlle. Voisin, Miriam ultimately refuses Peter's marriage proposal, seeing she has more opportunity to influence the world as an artist than as a wife. Adeline Tintner writes, "Miriam seems to be consulting the portrait, at which she looks four times, to help her make her decision" (*Lust of the Eyes* 64). Tintner's reading of this scene describes Miriam's communion with the portrait and provides an account of the portrait's history, but does not delve into a deeper examination of the portrait's significance in this scene and in the larger context of the novel. Miriam's study of the portrait reveals to her that she wants to live in the world of art: "I want to be what *she* is—I want it more than ever" (233). Though she stands under the portrait, "*she*" is not Rachel but is instead Mlle. Voisin. Thus, Miriam and readers connect the three women. Both the portrait of the dead actress and the influence of the live one reinforce Miriam's decision to make herself into a work of art. All three women—Miriam, Rachel, and Mlle. Voisin—cultivate aesthetic surfaces; their depth can be accessed only by those who are imaginative enough to see it.

James clearly wants us to know from the scene in the Théâtre Français that Miriam has a deep artistic perception. Bellringer's unfavorable evaluation of Miriam cites the common

criticisms of her, though many scholars read her, in passing, in a positive light.²⁶ No one has challenged the idea that Miriam is too shallow to be an interesting center of consciousness. This oversight may be due to the fact that *The Tragic Muse* has received far less critical attention than James's other major novels. With the exception of Storm, who explores James's technique in portraying Miriam through various non-literary artistic means, recent attention to the novel generally focuses on Gabriel Nash's Aestheticism, James's relationship with the theater, or race and gender issues.²⁷ Miriam is usually taken into consideration in these discussions, but read as Peter, Nick, and the narrator present her—at face value. In the rest of the novel she is overwhelmingly presented as holding value only as a portrait subject or as a living work of art (i.e. an actress). By revealing her ability for perception shortly before Nick begins to paint her portrait and as she hovers on the edge of fame, James adds a layer of dramatic irony to the verbal exchanges in Nick's studio, which Nick considers idle chatter. Her decision to sit for a portrait is motivated by a desire to “be like Rachel,” that is, to have future generations remember her as the greatest actress of her time. Thus, she does not exchange meaningless pleasantries, but gracefully guides Nick to a composition that will live through history. His objective perspective of her is undermined when we resist his reading and see behind her exterior finish. While she will fashion herself as a work of art from which Nick and Peter take inspiration and have consciousness-expanding moments, Miriam's own interactions with art demonstrate that she is a perceptive artist herself, and they reveal the depth of her consciousness.

²⁶ See, for example, Dorothea Krook, *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James* (87-95), Edward Wagenknecht, *Eve and Henry James: Portraits of Women and Girls in His Fiction* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1978. 73-90), and Judith Funston, “‘All Art is One’: Narrative Techniques in Henry James's *The Tragic Muse*” (*Studies in the Novel* 15 [1983]: 345).

²⁷ In an earlier article, “Henry James's Conscious Muse: Design for a Theatrical Case in *The Tragic Muse*,” Storm contends that James fashions in Miriam a theatrical muse for his 1890-95 foray into writing for the theater (*The Henry James Review* 21.2 [2000]: 133-50). In “Henry James, Jack the Ripper, and the Cosmopolitan Jew: Staging Authorship in *The Tragic Muse*,” Sara Blair discusses race in the novel within the context of the heightened anxiety that the sensational 1888 London murders caused. Jack was popularly thought to be Jewish (*ELH* 63.2 [1996]: 489-512).

Miriam on Stage

Peter's consciousness finally recognizes Miriam's genius as a woman, not just as an actress, when he observes her brilliant portrayal of Juliet in her finest performance to date. After learning that another marriage proposal would be futile because she has already married, he watches her act and comes to a new understanding of Miriam as a work of art and, consequently and paradoxically, as a woman:

[He] read clear, at the last, in the intense light of genius with which this fragment [of the performance] was charged, that even so after all he had been rewarded for his formidable journey. The great trouble of his infatuation subsided, leaving behind it something appreciably deep and pure. This pacification was far from taking place at once, but it was helped on, unexpectedly to him—it began to work at least—the very next night he saw the play, through the whole of which he then sat. He felt somehow recalled to the real by the very felicity of the experience, the supreme exhibition itself. He began to come back as from a far-off province of his history where miserable madness had reigned. He had been baffled, he had got his answer; it must last him—that was plain. (490)

His "experience" here is both the objective display of Miriam's acting and his subjective response to it. Like the audience at large who does not know her personally, Peter can see how well she portrays Juliet. But he also finally sees beneath the artifice to the real woman. His answer, which he slowly accepts over the next few weeks, is that Miriam's genius is for the stage, and that in taking her from it, he would be doing the world of art a great disservice. He finally sees what Miriam saw when she first studied the portrait of Rachel, that she has more to offer the world as an artist than as a wife.

Once Peter gives up his illusions and pursuit of the ideal theater, the narrator rapidly brings the novel to its close, as if to suggest that in this release of tension the center of the story has dissipated. In an uncharacteristic move, James superficially ties up loose ends, strongly suggesting that all the characters succeed in their profession and become happily married. In between the lines, however, James characteristically leaves open the possibilities for less happy endings. The success of Miriam and Nick still lies in the future and is not definite, though they remain in pursuit of the ideal and their potential for achievement is widely recognized. And the marriage between Julia and Nick is by no means certain. What is certain is that Miriam should not be written off as superficial and indiscriminating, as the narrator's last word about her indicates: "every one is agreed that both in public and in private she has a great deal more to show" (492). While James chooses an uncharacteristic method with which to portray her, her position as an object of study offers liberal opportunity to discern that her perception is astute and her imagination ample. Accepting this claim, which is intricately connected to the narrative structure of the novel, means reconsidering the mediocre reputation of this novel's composition. While it is certainly not flawless—James himself notes in the Preface that "[Nick] is not quite so interesting as he was fondly intended to be" (13)—in James's attempt to tackle a problem in literary composition he paves the way, as he so often does, to a fresh artistic perspective.

Chapter 4

Paterian Aestheticism and Ruskinian Morality in *The Wings of the Dove*

When Henry James invoked Walter Pater in the character of Gabriel Nash, Pater was still living and publishing. *Appreciations*, in which “Wordsworth” reappeared in November 1889, kept him on the public’s mind at the same time as *The Tragic Muse* was being published in the *Atlantic Monthly* (1889-90). The plot of *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) has similarly been associated with Pater by scholars such as Jonathan Freedman. As Freedman notes, in addition to the obvious connection James’s title makes with the epigraph to *The Renaissance*, “Yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove,” James also presents the novel’s central idea in his New York Edition Preface in language reminiscent of Pater’s (217):

The idea, reduced to its essence, is that of a young person conscious of a great capacity for life, but early stricken and doomed, condemned to die under short respite, while also enamoured of the world; aware moreover of the condemnation and passionately desiring to “put in” before extinction as many of the finer vibrations as possible, and so achieve, however briefly and brokenly, the sense of having lived. (*Wings of the Dove* 3)

These sentences describing Milly Theale recall the situation of Pater’s dying aesthete, whose one chance to live depends upon “getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time” (*Renaissance* 153). Though Pater acknowledges that great passions such as love can give us this heightened sense of life, he maintains that art offers the best way to experience these pulsations, since it “comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments

as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake" (153). When James began writing Milly's story in late 1899, Pater had been dead for five years, and, though James could not have known so, literature was moving away from Aestheticism and Decadence toward the Modernism movement. Indeed, *The Wings of the Dove* marks the beginning of his late-phase novels, noted for their Modern characteristics. Though it may seem unusual that James chose to develop a Paterian plot at this particular moment in literary history, he had entered his first developed notebook sketches for *The Wings of the Dove* in early November 1894, a mere three months after Pater's death. John Ruskin's death in January 1900 may have turned James's thoughts toward the lasting impact each famous art critic had on late nineteenth-century art and aestheticism. This turn strongly influenced his 1902 novel, in which James works out his lingering mixed attitudes about their ideas.

James's ambivalence toward "faint, pale, embarrassed, exquisite Pater" (*Life in Letters* 292) and his work has become a staple of James scholarship. While some scholars argue that James consistently criticizes Paterian aestheticism, others contend that James and Pater share similar sympathies. Richard Ellmann takes the former position, writing that beginning with *Roderick Hudson*, whose central theme "is a counter-statement to Pater," and ending with *The Golden Bowl*, in which "James might well have felt that in this novel he was remixing the ingredients of aestheticism to show how they might be more gainfully employed than they had been in the past," James waged "an elaborate Napoleonic manoeuvre" against the aesthete (28, 43, 30). Freedman takes the latter position when he links the power of consciousness in the work of both authors: "Milly's course of action through the novel can be understood as an extension of James's own highly Paterian exploration of the powers attained by a consciousness facing its own impending demise—the central conceit of the Conclusion to *The Renaissance*" (206).

Arguments for James's position somewhere between consistent criticism of and wholehearted agreement with Pater have also yielded many new insights into his aesthetic philosophy. In this middle ground, James and Pater share an objective, yet they approach it with opposing assumptions. I would like to focus attention on this objective—their attempt to rewrite Ruskin's moral aesthetic of art. Scholars have addressed separately Pater's and James's efforts to revise Ruskin's impact on art criticism, but James conveys his own attempt, written in light of Pater's work, in *The Wings of the Dove*.²⁸

Ruskin's aesthetic, particularly of his career up to 1860, briefly summarized, is that “[t]here is an absolute right and wrong in all art” (Ruskin 12: 69) and that art should “prepare the feelings for the reading of the mysteries of God” (3: 301). He advocated a Wordsworthian fidelity to Nature, and though he acknowledged that perfect imitation is impossible, believed art should be judged on its ability to faithfully represent the natural world. Based on this standard, he strongly preferred Gothic architecture (which is evident in his influence on the architectural style of Harvard's Memorial Hall) because the beauty of its form is derived from Nature, as a leaf, for example, is pointed (12: 24-25). Ruskin also admired the heaven-pointing spires of Gothic architecture because they express religious aspiration (12: 36). His moral attitude toward art is particularly evident in a review of William Holman Hunt's 1853 painting *The Awakening Conscience*. In the review, Ruskin implies that art can influence people to commit evil acts, an influence they should resist: “while pictures will be met with by the thousand which literally tempt to evil, by the thousand which are directed to the meanest trivialities of incident or emotion [. . .] there will not be found one powerful as this to meet full in the front the moral evil

²⁸ For discussions of Pater's and James's individual reassessments of Ruskin, see, for example, W. R. Martin, “The Eye of Mr. Ruskin: James's Views on Venetian Artists” (*The Henry James Review* 5.2 [1984]: 107-16); Tessa Hadley and Tom Nichols, “James, Ruskin, and Tintoretto” (*The Henry James Review* 23.3 [2002]: 294-303); Richard Stein, *The Ritual of Interpretation* (1975); and Kevin Swafford, “Italian Counterpoint: Henry James and John Ruskin in Florence” (2004).

of the age in which it is painted” (12: 335). Ruskin wrote for a growing middle class who wished to learn about and to purchase art, and his moral aesthetic was extensively influential in creating the standards by which they judged and bought it.

The artists and art critics who inherited Ruskin’s moralistic critical legacy faced a steep road in their attempts to alter it. Richard Stein establishes Pater’s efforts to revise this aesthetic, writing that “Pater’s fiction attempts to mediate between aesthetics and morality, to create, while defining a position distinct from Ruskin’s, a new ‘moral aesthetic’” (261). In *The Renaissance* Pater boldly revised Ruskin by eliminating all suggestion that artistic worth could be determined on a moral basis. His focus on the Italian Renaissance as a high point of western art pointedly violates Ruskin’s belief that Northern Gothic held this distinction and that the Renaissance was the aesthetic version of the fall. The young aesthete’s sympathy, however, with the Victorian moral criticism that his work received led to his later attempt to incorporate an ethical element in his fiction. Despite this attempt, Stein contends, “the mode of his vision invariably dominates its content”; thus, “Pater’s new moral aesthetic, far more than Ruskin’s, is an aesthetic before it is a morality” (262). In other words, Pater was so deeply averse to hinging judgments of art on moral considerations that he could not write a “moral” novel even when he tried.

Like Pater, James also attempts in his fiction to mediate between aesthetics and morality, and given that he was less averse to exploring moral considerations than Pater, he does so more successfully. Indeed, one question that James poses in *The Wings of the Dove* is what is the place of morality in art in the early-twentieth century? His aesthetic ideology may not have coincided with Pater’s amoral one, but it also did not subscribe to Ruskin’s religiously moral ideology. James’s personal and professional relationship with Ruskin was complicated, and it evolved throughout his life. Early in his career, James expressed a high opinion of Ruskin, partially

prompted by Charles Eliot Norton's praise of the Englishman, who heavily influenced the ideas that Norton brought to the building committee for Harvard's Memorial Hall. James wrote to his family in glowing terms about *The Stones of Venice* in September 1869, and in an essay on Charles Baudelaire originally published in 1876, he adopted a Ruskinian tone in his claim that "[t]he more a work of art feels [morality] at its source, the richer it is; the less it feels it, the poorer it is" (*French Poets* 82). But as he advanced in his career, James pulled away from such whole-hearted admiration for Ruskin, and in fact criticized certain aspects of his theories. The primary focus of James's disapproval was Ruskin's "narrow theological spirit, the moralism *à tout propos*, the queer provincialities and pruderies" (James, *Italian Hours* 8). A moral conflict always exists at the heart of James's fiction, but he sought to free art from the dogmatism that Ruskin advocated.

James's struggle to find an aesthetic philosophy that satisfied his discontent with major aspects of Pater's and Ruskin's principles is given concrete form in *The Wings of the Dove*. The moral conflict in this novel is, of course, Kate Croy and Merton Densher's plan to deceive Milly, taking advantage of her wealth and her illness. The plot hinges on the young American's hovering mortality, which she discerns while gazing at a Bronzino painting.²⁹ Her journey to this life-altering encounter begins when James introduces her capacity for aesthetic sensibility at Mrs. Lowder's dinner party. She concentrates on discriminating among the multitude of impressions; despite her "alertness of vision," there were "more indications than she could reduce to order" (*Wings of the Dove* 99). She is particularly taken with Kate, wondering "why she [Milly] was so different from the handsome girl—which she didn't know, being merely able to feel it" (101). She looks to Lord Mark to help her discriminate, but "he spoke as if he had

²⁹ Her visit to the doctor, Sir Luke Strett, makes the fact of her illness and impending death more explicit, but recent critics generally agree that the moment when she recognizes her mortality takes place in front of the painting. See, for example, Cameron (128), Jöttkandt (63-64), and Kuchar (181).

given them [discriminations] up from too much knowledge. He was thus at the opposite extreme from herself, but, as a consequence of it, also wandering and lost” (100). At this point she lacks the key perception required of a Paterian aesthetic critic, the capacity “to know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly” (*Renaissance* xxix). Without this capacity, Milly may not have meaningful interactions with art. Her *effort* to discriminate, however, implies that she has the potential to become an aesthetic critic. In her present “wandering and lost” state, though, Kate takes advantage of Milly’s “shamelessly human” eagerness for life and her romantic interest in Merton Densher (115). The handsome girl begins to see that in this young woman may be the solution to her own romantic dilemma with Densher.

The Bronzino Portrait

While Milly’s love for Densher eventually sparks and then extinguishes her desire for life, her greatest moments in the novel, in the sense of experiencing Paterian pulsations, involve paintings. When Milly encounters the Bronzino painting at Lord Mark’s estate, she encounters a new “sister,” one whose eyes hold her even during a conversation with Kate, a living sister. The beautiful painting that is “so like” her prompts her to take “full in the face the whole assault of life” (88). Milly’s interaction with the Bronzino portrait is, as critics like Sigi Jöttkandt (63-64) and Sharon Cameron (128) have noted, a moment in which she confronts her own death:

[S]he found herself, for the first moment, looking at the mysterious portrait through tears. [. . .] [T]he face of a young woman, all splendidly drawn, down to the hands, and splendidly dressed; a face almost livid in hue, yet handsome in sadness and crowned with a mass of hair, rolled back and high, that must, before fading with time, have had a family resemblance to her own. The lady in question,

at all events, with her slightly Michael-angelesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage—only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead. Milly recognised her exactly in words that had nothing to do with her. “I shall never be better than this.” (*Wings of the Dove* 137)³⁰

Pater’s adjective “quick,” which he uses in the phrase “quickened sense of life,” and Milly’s repeated use of the word “dead” to describe the woman in the Bronzino painting suggest Emerson’s distinction in *The American Scholar* between “dead fact” and “quick thought.” Emerson writes, “The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again. [. . .] It was dead fact; now, it is quick thought.” He concludes that “[books] are for nothing but to inspire.” If we apply this framework to painting, and use the dual lenses of Pater’s “Conclusion” and Emerson’s distinction between the dead fact and the quick thought, we can study painting in the novel as artifact (dead fact) and as prompter of subjective response (quick thought). Put simply, we can see art as object or art as inspiration, a distinction we have seen before in Isabel, Verena, and Miriam, and in the reactions they evoke from other characters. While there is no evidence that James had Emerson specifically in mind, this dichotomy between object and inspiration is clearly represented by the Bronzino. Just as Miriam uses a vague referent—“I want to be like her”—in front of Gérôme’s painting, Lord Mark misunderstands Milly’s unspecified referent—“I shall never be better than this”—thinking she refers to the painting as an object. Milly is more concerned with the moment, however, which she describes as “a sort of magnificent maximum,

³⁰ This passage is reminiscent of Pater’s comments on Leonardo Da Vinci’s *La Gioconda* (*Mona Lisa*). Pater notes the portrait’s suggestiveness, lack of crude symbolism, and subdued and graceful mystery, all of which the Bronzino painting also radiates (*Renaissance* 79). Further, *Mona Lisa*’s “unfathomable smile, always with a touch of something sinister in it” resembles what Milly sees in Lucrezia Panciatichi’s gaze (79).

the pink dawn of an apotheosis coming so curiously soon” (137). The painting inspires her to face the thought of her own death. Jöttkandt notes that “an apotheosis is [. . .] the elevation to divine status whose concomitant implication is that one is already dead” (63-64). Thus, in the Bronzino painting Milly discovers “that the meaning of life is death” (Jöttkandt 64).

Milly’s recognition of her death sets off a chain of thought leading to the fuller development of her consciousness. As James Gargano writes, “James’s heroine is present at her own creation as a complex psychological being” (18). Cameron, who argues that “in James’s work [. . .] thinking is often represented as if its inception occurred outside the mind, which only subsequently takes it in” (124), reads the Bronzino scene as an objective correlative to the thought of death:

What is being recognized—in the specific sense of realized—is Milly’s thought of “her” death. Milly is made to see her thought—to picture the thought of death—and then she is given words for it: “I shall never be better than this.” Thus, while Lord Mark and the others see Milly’s likeness to the Bronzino, she sees that she is only the image of the dead girl, sees precisely the fact that she does not *yet* look like her. They see a physical likeness. She intuits the difference between herself and the figure in the painting, which inspires, or could itself be identified as, the thought of death. (128-29)

In other words, this particular art object awakens the thought in Milly that she soon will be the exact image of the dead woman. Confronting her mortality in the Bronzino has the advantage of shaping her perception into that of an aesthetic critic. Twice just before she sees the painting “things melted together”—as at Mrs. Lowder’s, discriminations escape her—but as she gazes at the face of the young woman, she clearly understands her own impression: “everything this

afternoon has been too beautiful, and [. . .] perhaps everything together will never be so right again” (137). Suspicions of her illness have haunted her, and in this moment, with a work of art stimulating her consciousness, she finally recognizes and accepts her predicament and does so in Pater’s brief “interval,” an interval that it is her challenge to expand by “getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time” (*Renaissance* 153).

Readings of the Bronzino scene typically end with Kate’s entrance, but the effects of its revelation come into further focus after Milly and Kate are alone. In “the presence of the pale personage on the wall, whose eyes all the while seemed engaged with her own,” Milly plunges into the “something that was perversely *there* [. . .] with every renewal of their meeting. ‘Is it the way she looks to *him?*’” (140). For the first time she can discriminate and acknowledge her jealousy that Densher is in love with Kate. Speaking “with her eyes again on her painted sister’s—almost as if under their suggestion” (141), Milly confesses that she has an appointment with the well-known doctor, Sir Luke Strett. Despite her show of confidence, she does not entirely trust Kate, and in her attempt to keep her friend close, Milly keeps her enemy closer. She begins to be deceptive, which has not been an evident aspect of her character thus far.

This distrust is compounded by undertones of the sinful and sinless throughout the Bronzino scene, which is the first suggestion of Ruskin’s moral evaluation of art. Lord Mark initiates the comparison when he comments that Milly is “better” than the woman in the painting “because, splendid as she is, one doubts if she was good” (137), and Kate unknowingly takes it up by playfully accusing Milly of being “impossibly without sin” (140). In response, “Milly’s eyes, on this, remained a little with their companion’s” (140) as if to wonder if the woman in the painting really were “good” and if Milly herself is any better. She may also wonder what Kate’s sins are—is she hiding a relationship with Densher? Milly hints that deception is not beyond her

ability, having employed “the wisdom of the serpent” to find the best doctor. These moral contemplations directly correspond with Ruskin’s belief that “pictures will be met with by the thousands which literally tempt to evil” (12: 335). Milly is not necessarily tempted to evil, but the presence of her painted sister does push her to deceitfulness.

Milly’s manipulation of Kate is the unconscious result of suddenly having to decide how to conduct the life that remains to her, a remainder that is finite and precious, as she discovers in her encounter with the painting. Gary Kuchar argues in Paterian fashion that “she comes to possess her own awareness of death as an enabling existential limit rather than a vague, spectral idea of termination” (181). Her awareness of death is enabling in that she is faced with decisions that cannot be put off until later. She suddenly has a reason to extract as much pleasure as possible from life. Milly sees the Bronzino painting (identified by Miriam Allott as sixteenth-century Lucrezia Panciatichi) with connotations of possibility hovering in the air. One possibility is to cultivate her other similarities to the dead woman. When Milly sees her death in the portrait, she also sees her likeness to Lucrezia Panciatichi’s upper-class social status and function as an aesthetic object. She relates to the woman in the painting as “a very great personage,” which is the kind of success Milly has had in London, though it is not the kind that she initially seeks. Lord Mark notes her success with Maud Lowder and Kate when he gives her the highest place among Mrs. Lowder’s properties (104). This note—of a certain kind of achievement—is again sounded at the beginning of the Matcham section of the novel: “It was to be the end of the short parenthesis which had begun but the other day at Lancaster Gate with Lord Mark’s informing her that she was a ‘success’—the key thus again struck” (131). This “key” is even more valuable when she faces, in the portrait, the opposite of success, death.

Face to face with the real possibility that she may not live long enough to satisfy her love of life, Milly optimistically turns to Kate as the most immediate means for quickening her remaining time. The Bronzino suggests to her that just as the woman in the portrait inspired an emotionally intense moment, a quickened sense of life, so she would like to have such an effect on others, such as Kate and Densher. In so far as this effect would result from fashioning herself as an aesthetic icon, Freedman argues that she formulates a specific plan in this scene to intentionally “[transform] herself into the very image of the Bronzino portrait,” a plan that she immediately proceeds to enact (214). But at Matcham Milly does not fully see her future or the end she desires; she is still searching for a way to live and a law that will guide her, as we see when she seeks advice from the doctor. Ultimately, she becomes more than another Bronzino in the consciousnesses of her friends, and in the mean time, deceiving Kate allows her more possibilities than the narrow path of truth would.

This scene at Matcham loudly echoes Pater, indicated by Milly’s moment of heightened consciousness in the presence of the painting. James emphasizes her response by contrasting it with the responses of other characters. Lord Mark is unable to see past a physical comparison of the painting with Milly, while Lady Aldershaw looks “at Milly quite as if Milly had been the Bronzino and the Bronzino only Milly” (139). The tight rhetorical structure of this chiasmus has a deadening effect, and also recalls the structure of Milly’s statement that “[s]ince I’ve lived all these years as if I were dead, I shall die, no doubt, as if I were alive” (127). In these sentences, the living person becomes like a work of art and the dead becomes like the living. This exchange of object and subject prefigures the aesthetic effect Milly’s memory will have on Densher after her death, an effect that she does not inspire in him while she is alive. Where others seem to see only the physical comparison between the portrait and Milly, her heightened consciousness with

the Bronzino reveals something deeper: the Paterian end of her experience. For Pater, the pulsation she has in response to the painting is the highest point of life. The painting offers her an end to this emotion and a means to sustaining it by suggesting a way to shape her death and immortalize her life.

In suggesting that the Bronzino offers Milly both an end and a means, James moved beyond Pater to something more Jamesian. While H. G. Wells expressed one standard view that art should have a practical purpose, should be a means to an end, and Pater saw only that art was an end in itself, James held that the means and the ends of art are inseparable. In his view, art raises one's consciousness to a higher level, a level at which art is also created. In *The Wings of the Dove*, James's perspective manifests itself in the connection Milly's consciousness makes between the painted woman and her own impending death. It is a Paterian moment of heightened awareness of the idea that the meaning of life is death, but this end cannot be separated from the painting that shaped the thought.

The immediate result of Milly's emotionally intense experience is her search for a way to hold on to life. The doctor, Sir Luke Strett, offers her one law for living, suggesting that she should "accept any form in which happiness may come" (149). Leaving Milly with the Paterian advice that she should take the trouble "to live," he confirms her suspicion that if she has thus far lived as if she were dead, she must now accept that "her doom was to live fast. It was queerly a question of the short run and the consciousness proportionately crowded" (105). Digesting this information, Milly continues the re-evaluation of her life that began in front of the Bronzino. Sir Luke has suggested that she can live if she will, but Milly, as yet, does not see her way to doing so.

The Image of the Dove

Kate soon after unknowingly offers her friend the law of action that facing her mortality in the Bronzino necessitated. Kate calls her a dove because she is beautifully generous and gentle, and Milly “found herself accepting [the image] as the right one, while she caught her breath with relief [. . .]. She met it on the instant as she would have met revealed truth; it lighted up the strange dusk in which she lately had walked. *That* was what was the matter with her. She was a dove. Oh *wasn't* she?—it echoed within her” (171). Just as Isabel Archer’s tendency to see life in images reflects her ability to interpret representations that are similar to art, so Milly initially interprets the image of the dove as a guide for her actions. Freedman believes that “Milly sets out to remodel herself in the term of that image” (216) in the same way she remodels herself after the Bronzino, as an aesthetic icon. It seems more likely, though, that Milly takes the less radical step of “*acting as if*” she were a dove rather than sincerely attempting to adopt the qualities that the image of the dove represents (Holland 297). Having deceived—or attempted to deceive—Kate about the seriousness of her illness, she sees the benefits of deception that “acting as if” offers.

She also takes her cue for duplicity from Kate and Aunt Maud. Though the dove suggests innocence and vulnerability, “Milly internalizes aspects of Kate and Aunt Maud’s ‘dovelike’ behavior that are antithetical” to this idea (Freedman 216). For example, Mrs. Lowder acts dovelike while trying to manipulate Milly into asking Kate if Densher has returned to London: “It was in the tone of the fondest indulgence—almost, really, that of dove cooing to dove—that Mrs. Lowder expressed to Milly the hope that it had all gone beautifully” (172). Acting like a dove allows her to deceive Mrs. Lowder in return. Milly “felt in a rush all the reasons that would make [her answer] the most dovelike; and she gave it, while she was about it, as earnest, as

candid. ‘I don’t *think*, dear lady, he’s here’” (172). Though the older woman fixes her with a look of “deep criticism,” her reply is simply “Oh you exquisite thing!”—a phrase whose “luscious innuendo” appeals to Milly (172). Freedman reads Milly’s adoption of “the elegant and euphemizing hypocrisies of Lancaster Gate speech” in a slightly more ominous manner than Lawrence Holland, who asserts that she lies as a way of protecting her friends’ interests and feelings (Freedman 216, Holland 297). The balance between protecting her friends and achieving her own goals provides much of the novel’s momentum. In adopting a dove-like image, Milly finds a way to get what she desires: a quickened sense of life and a law of action.

The National Gallery

Having arrived at a law by which to live, Milly visits the National Gallery in search of Paterian “possible great moments she should, save for to-day, have all but missed. She might still, she had felt, overtake one or two of them among the Titians and the Turners” (174). The aesthetic experience she leaves with, however, comes from an unexpected source. She finds that “what held her was the mere refuge, that something within her was after all too weak for the Turners and Titians. They joined hands about her in a circle too vast, though a circle that a year before she would only have desired to trace. They were truly for the larger, not for the smaller life, the life of which the actual pitch, for example, was an interest, the interest of compassion, in misguided efforts” (174-75). Lacking the emotional strength to experience the finer vibrations and pulsations that art can stimulate, she instead mediates her experience of the paintings through watching the lady copyists and her fellow American tourists, hoping for the same heightened emotions that she might otherwise have sought in the original art.

While in a room of small Dutch pictures, she abruptly receives an unlooked-for personal connection when she recognizes Densher. Her awareness of his presence is filtered through her compatriots, whom she overhears comment on “some object on the other side of the room.” As Elissa Greenwald explains, Milly first sees Densher as though she were looking at a painting:

In visiting the National Gallery, she first encounters the person she has ostensibly come to London to see, Merton Densher, as a representation. When a visitor refers to something “in the English style,” Milly “took the reference as to a picture.” She sees Merton through the frame of representation, as a picture; only after an interlude does she recognize him as her friend. At the time, she is in a room of “small Dutch pictures” (which provided a common analogy for literary realism for Eliot, James, and others); in turning away from them, Milly turns away from the realism of art to a view of reality as a work of art. (183)

Greenwald rightly concludes that Milly “refuses to see, in the conjunction of Merton and Kate, the double portrait of their intimacy,” a refusal which ultimately leads to her “turn[ing] her face to the wall” (183, *Wings of the Dove* 331). In this moment, though, Milly’s view of Densher becomes a question of object versus inspiration. She first sees him as an art object: “she concurred in their tribute, even qualified; and indeed ‘the English style’ of the gentleman—perhaps by instant contrast to the American—was what had had the arresting power” (177). Her perception changes when “in the very act of judging the bared head with detachment she felt herself shaken by a knowledge of it” (177). But even as she recognizes Densher, she hesitates to re-establish her personal connection with him, preferring the emotional safety of her aesthetic gaze.

As she considers her options, “a perception intervened that surpassed the first in violence. She was unable to think afterwards how long she had looked at him before knowing herself as otherwise looked at” (177). This moment is the key to all that later occurs in Venice. Milly “knew herself handled” (177) and yet her concern is to “ease” Densher off, a decision that also benefits her: “She would really, tired and nervous, have been much disconcerted if the opportunity in question hadn’t saved her” (178). She could easily have accused Kate of deceit, but her affection for Densher prevents causing him to feel any unpleasantness. This dove-like act, which she accomplishes by playing the “American girl,” sets the tone for her subsequent kindness to Densher. It also reveals her feelings for him and offers Kate the opportunity to deceive the American by hiding her own romantic relationship with him. Moreover, Milly’s act adds to her emerging idea that the way to “save” herself is through Densher. Like the circle of Dutch art that surrounds them, which she can either view with an eye to the personal note or view with detachment through the copyists, Densher can either be the connection that gives her will to live and the consciousness that keeps her alive after her physical death, or he can be a mere acquaintance.

Aesthetic Venice

While the human element that Milly faces in the National Gallery is a critical encounter, the space itself suggests a course of action that will allow her to stay alive through Paterian inspiration and also help her to create an image that will remain after her death. Milly discovers in the art museum that this atmosphere “was the air she wanted and the world she would now exclusively choose; the quiet chambers, nobly overwhelming, rich but slightly veiled, opened out

round her and made her presently say ‘If I could lose myself *here!*’” (174). At the museum she uses her ability to discriminate among her own impressions to conclude that,

There were people, people in plenty, but, admirably, no personal question. It was immense, outside, the personal question; but she had blissfully left it outside, and the nearest it came, for a quarter of an hour, to glimmering again into view was when she watched for a little one of the more earnest of the lady-copyists. Two or three in particular [. . .] seemed to show her for the time the right way to live. She should have been a lady-copyist—it so met the case. The case was the case of escape, of living under water, of being at once impersonal and firm. There it was before one—one had only to stick and stick. (174)

After her experience there, she chooses to spend the rest of her life in a Venetian palazzo whose atmosphere offers the same feeling of safety. With its “high florid rooms” and “painted ‘subjects’ in the splendid ceilings,” Palazzo Leporelli becomes “the ark of her deluge” (258, 264). Greenwald asserts that “in Venice, Milly expresses the reality of her spirit, if not her physical existence, by reshaping her life as a work of art” (185). The narrator’s description of the building suggests instead that Milly will worship art as a means to immortality: “Hung about with pictures and relics, the rich Venetian past, the ineffaceable character, was here the presence revered and served,” and “Milly moved slowly to and fro as the priestess of the worship” (260). Milly’s palazzo is a beautiful living tomb that allows the development of her heightened consciousness to continue so she may cling indefinitely to her physical life.

Contrasting with her Paterian approach to the palazzo, Milly’s decision to live in Venice conjured a world of Ruskinian associations in the minds of James’s readers. These associations again complicate the earlier prominent Paterian overtones. In *The Stones of Venice*, a work that is

echoed in *The Wings of the Dove*, Ruskin popularized ideas of death, decay, and evil where formerly had existed good, beauty, and godliness. Tony Tanner notes that “the word/name ‘Venice’ was a site of semantic excess, over-filled with desires, anticipations, dreams, expectations, experiential appropriations. At the same time it was a site of semantic evacuation, disillusion, loss, deprivation, decline and declinations, experiential expropriations” (6). This duality is evident, too, in Milly’s experience. Venice embodies both her desire for life and her ultimate disillusionment and death. For Ruskin, though, these two extremes do not intersect as they do for Milly: Venice had been a vision of artistic greatness before it fell into its present extreme moral decay. Ruskin does not delineate ambiguous space between these two points.

James adopts this overtone of moral decay. As Freedman writes, James not only “turns to Ruskin to give resonance to the moral voice in which the novelist wishes to speak,” he also “align[s] his moral, aesthetic, and social vision with Ruskin’s; indeed [does] nothing less than strike the Ruskinian stance of the secular prophet” (95, 98). The most notable Ruskinian passages in the novel appear after Densher is turned away from Milly’s door:

It was a Venice all of evil that had broken out for [Densher and Eugenio] alike, so that they were together in their anxiety, if they really could have met on it; a Venice of cold lashing rain from a low black sky, of wicked wind raging through narrow passes, of general arrest and interruption, with the people engaged in all the water-life huddled, stranded and wageless, bored and cynical, under archways and bridges. (325).

Until this moment when Milly’s servant turns him from the palazzo, Densher has preferred thinking that “his conduct was marked by straightness” (296). But on this cold, rainy day he discovers that something has changed, and he finds its cause in the image of Lord Mark through

the plate glass window at Florian's: "it explained—and that was much, for with explanations he might somehow deal. The vice in the air, otherwise, was too much like the breath of fate. The weather had changed, the rain was ugly, the wind wicked, the sea impossible, *because* of Lord Mark. It was because of him, *a fortiori*, that the palace was closed" (328). After realizing that Lord Mark's presence signifies that Milly now knows his true relationship with Kate, Densher must face his own complicity and ugliness in deceiving her. While James's initial depiction of Venice emphasizes the Paterian effect of Milly's palace, the final view reveals Ruskin's "fallen" Venice. In the space between these extremes Milly must make the choices that will be her legacy.

The Veronese Canvas

Ruskin's perspective of Venice provides an appropriately immoral setting for Kate to "name" her ethically questionable plan. Against the background of a Veronese painting, this revelation has added implications. In Venice, the narrator rarely enters Milly's consciousness, and the reader is left to interpret her actions through the perception of others, Densher in particular. After Mrs. Stringham suggests a Veronese painting, commonly agreed to be *Marriage Feast at Cana* (Tintner, *Lust of the Eyes* 101; Meyers 19, 26), as a metaphor for the dinner party that Milly hosts in honor of the doctor's visit, Densher cannot avoid seeing it through Veronese-colored glasses, so to speak. The musicians, "the golden grace of the high rooms, chambers of art in themselves," and Milly with her red hair and white dress, resembling the bride of the painting, suggest to him "the Veronese picture of which he had talked with Mrs. Stringham" (301). Viewing the gathering through this particular lens reinforces Milly's brilliance for Densher and causes Kate to pale in comparison: "he noted that Kate was somehow—for Kate—wanting in

lustre. As a striking young presence she was practically superseded; [. . .] she might fairly have been dressed tonight in the little black frock, superficially indistinguishable, that Milly had laid aside” (303). Moreover, he feels up to his neck in the “beatific mildness” that Milly exudes. Until now, Densher has expressed only friendly interest in Milly, but with the atmosphere of the painting hanging over all, he begins to compare her to Kate. As he is negotiating the terms of his cooperation with Kate’s plan, he is also thinking about Milly’s vitality: “Milly was indeed a dove; this was the figure, though it most applied to her spirit” (304). He senses the ability she has to protect him, to protect all of them. Thus, when Kate finally names her plan to acquire Milly’s wealth, a plan that will allow them to marry, she is placed at a moral and aesthetic disadvantage. Viewing Milly within the frame of the biblical painting adds a moral perspective for Densher. The outcome Kate hopes for becomes threatened by the aesthetic background that both morally and aesthetically favors Milly.

While Milly’s experience with the Bronzino evokes Pater, Veronese evokes Ruskin. Referring to *Marriage Feast at Cana*, Ruskin wrote, “the chief purpose of it is, I believe, to express the pomp and pleasure of the world, pursued without thought of the presence of Christ” (7: 335-36). James disagreed with this moral analysis, asserting that “Mr. Ruskin, whose eloquence in dealing with the great Venetians sometimes outruns his discretion, is fond of speaking even of Veronese as a painter of deep spiritual intentions. This, it seems to me, is pushing matters too far” (*Italian Hours* 55-6). Whether or not James intended the Christian overtones of the painting to make a moral statement in his novel is the subject of some debate.³¹ Milly seems an innocent victim in Kate’s scheme, her dove-like wings reaching out to protect

³¹ Millicent Bell writes that “the religious tradition is being invoked, but there is no need to see allegory in the novel. Milly is not Christ, but James wanted to introduce the powerful vocabulary of the tradition which insists on the immeasurable value of the spirit and the ethic of generous love in the place of the modernism exemplified by Kate and Densher” (294).

friends who betray her, but Jöttkandt argues that Milly intentionally “stages her party as an imitation of a Veronese painting, and puts herself into Christ’s place as the sacrificial object” (77). Though it is difficult to prove to what degree Milly intentionally evokes Veronese or Christ, given James’s statement against Ruskin and against Veronese’s religious intentions, it seems more likely that James was only trying to incorporate the moral suggestion of the painting, not the specific Christian connotations. Thus, Densher judges Kate and Milly, as parts of the painting’s composition, morally. The lens of Veronese heightens the moral ugliness of Kate’s plan and beatifies Milly for him. In this context, Milly becomes both object and inspiration. She is an object to Kate, who desires her wealth and her pearls, and an inspiration to Densher, who admires her dove-like spirit and aesthetic effect.

Milly’s Wings

After Lord Mark reveals Densher and Kate’s attachment, Milly’s consciousness is at its fullest because she finally sees the whole picture. Ironically, at this point the reader has long been barred from Milly’s consciousness, a technique that allows readers to assess whether or not her attempt to immortalize her dove-like image is successful. Though she turns her face to the wall in Venice, she likely sees that her last option for living lies in inspiring Densher to an ethical act that will redeem him. In this way, she has reason to hope that he will keep her image as a dove, with all its positive connotations, in his memory.

The extent of Milly’s success is most clearly measured in Densher’s response to her death and to his subsequent inheritance. James wrote in a personal letter that “the lines of composition [. . .] account for what is & what isn’t there; what isn’t, e.g., like the ‘last interview’ [. . .] of Densher & Milly. I had to make up my mind as to what was my subject & what wasn’t, & then

to illustrate & embody the same logically. The subject was Densher's history with Kate Croy—hers with him, & Milly's history was but a thing involved & embroiled in that" (*Life in Letters* 371). In this sense, the effect that Milly has on Densher becomes the most important aspect of the novel. The "essence" of his final meeting with her in Venice "was that something had happened to him too beautiful and too sacred to describe. He had been, to his recovered sense, forgiven, dedicated, blessed; but this he couldn't coherently express" (370). In this moment, which is the last time Densher permits himself to think of Milly as alive, Milly achieves her apotheosis. She "puts the guilty man in touch with the best instincts of his consciousness" (Gargano 26). His "great dread, verily, was of being ashamed" (*Wings of the Dove* 203), and the way her dove-like wings cover him, allowing him to avoid this shame, inspires him to renounce the money she leaves him. He returns to London, and takes little interest in the wait for official news of her death. For him, she is immortalized. James's original idea, carried out here, was that "her devotion, her beauty of soul [. . .] produces a tremendous effect on him" (*Complete Notebooks* 106), while slowly Kate begins to lose her appeal: "Something in the other woman's whole attitude in the matter—in the 'game' he consented in a manner to become the instrument of: something in all this revolts him and puts him off. In the light of how exquisite the dead girl was he sees how little exquisite is the living" (106). Milly's death marks her failure to inspire Densher's passion, which might keep her alive, but in dying she lives forever as the inspiration for his ethical act. This outcome indicates that by adding an ethical aspect to the effect that she produces, Milly becomes more than the Bronzino painting that originally inspired her. She has an aesthetically and spiritually beautiful death, but she ultimately rises above, as Freedman suggests, another Bronzino. The Bronzino does not inspire ethical actions, whereas Milly does. In this way, James suggests that she combines the lessons of Pater and Ruskin.

Thus, the image of the dove that Milly adopts is finally moral and aesthetic. Kate offers this reading in her final dialogue with Densher, implying that she had underestimated Milly. She finally sees that Densher's "change came—as it might well—the day you last saw her; she died for you then that you might understand her. From that hour you *did* [love Milly]. [. . .] And I do now. She did it *for* us. [. . .] I used to call her, in my stupidity—for want of anything better—a dove. Well she stretched out her wings, and it was to *that* they reached. They cover us" (402-03). Kate intuits that Milly, to all appearances, finally chooses death so she can give the money, and her forgiveness, to Densher and Kate. Though the money would enable him to marry Kate, Milly understands Densher, and knows that this act will seal his devotion to her—she uses her wealth "as a counter-move to fate" (263). In his notebook plot outline, James writes that "I seem to get hold of the tail of a pretty idea in making that happiness, that life, that snatched experience the girl longs for, BE, *in fact*, some rapturous act of that sort—some act of generosity, of passionate beneficence, of pure sacrifice, to the man she loves" (105). This plot outline is perhaps too simple in that Milly does hope to gain from her sacrifice, which eliminates the possibility of *pure* sacrifice. Indeed, one could argue that Milly makes no sacrifice at all given how confident she seems that the outcome will be in her favor. Yet she loses so much—both Densher and her life—that it is difficult to accuse her of any selfishness. Like the adopted image of the dove, which is aesthetically pleasing yet morally duplicitous (in that Milly lies to Mrs. Lowder), Milly's final act has aesthetic and ethical conclusions for the triangle of characters.

When we return to James's question in this novel concerning the place of morality in art in the early twentieth-century, several possible answers arise. The previous century went from the extreme of Ruskin's Victorian conservatism to Wildean Decadence inspired, in part, by Pater. In *The Wings of the Dove*, characters with imagination value the experiences that art

inspires as an end, but they also use those experiences as a means to making ethical choices. Milly's heightened consciousness with the Bronzino was the Paterian end of her experience and also a means to her apotheosis in Densher's mind, which was further shaped by the Veronese painting in the second half of the novel. James's characters view art with a Paterian, sensory sensibility, valuing art for its ability to produce an experience. On the other hand, Milly's and Densher's experiences with paintings ultimately alter their conduct and choices, as Ruskin suggests art has the power to do. And in attempts to revise Ruskin, Pater's approach differs significantly from James's in that while Pater's philosophy is amoral, claiming that "experience itself is the end" of the aesthetic sensibility, James's fiction retains a moral element by extending rather than abolishing the boundaries of Ruskin's "rigid conception of the right" (James, *Essays on Art* 273). In the space between these two approaches, James suggests in *The Wings of the Dove* that rather than instilling morality, art brings to the surface elements that already lie within our consciousness. He seems to predict, though obviously could not have known, that twentieth-century art will continue to depend on Paterian aesthetic critics to appreciate its value, but will move toward Modernism by having its general frame of reference within itself. This characteristic is prefigured in *The Wings of the Dove* through Kate. Many readers initially judge Kate's actions as morally questionable, but James allows that she had little other choice. There is a way to read Kate in the context of the novel so that she is no more in the wrong than Milly is. Kate, after all, risks—and loses—far more than any other character.

In the closing year of his life, the epistolary debate James had with H.G. Wells reiterated a position James had been developing for decades. He believed that Wells's narrow view of art as "technical and special" limited one's experience of the world. In the same way, James felt Ruskin's dogmatic moral aesthetic limited one's experience of visual art. Yet, while James may

have philosophically preferred Pater's amoral approach, he did personally feel that art could direct the choices of its viewers by offering them knowledge outside the realm of their previous experiences. Thus, despite the obvious Paterian affinities and the more subtle Ruskinian elements, James rightly saw in *The Wings of the Dove* that the most interesting and useful approach to these opposite poles lay in the rich ground between them.

Conclusion

“I glory in the piling up of complications of every sort”

Henry James Letters 4: xxxi

Henry James’s delight in complication raises more questions than it answers. Through art, James developed his own system for being in the world. The fact of this system is evident in the epistolary exchange between James and H.G. Wells with which these chapters began. In the same letter in which James declares that, “It is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application,” he also writes, “for myself I live, live intensely and am fed by life, and my value, whatever it be, is in my own kind of expression of that” (*Life in Letters* 554-55). Life is inescapably intertwined with art for James. The seriousness with which James approached this philosophy sparked the disagreement (the result of a public exchange of criticism) that curtailed his friendship with Wells.

Wells’ reply that “I can only read sense into it by assuming that you are using ‘art’ for every conscious human activity. I use the word for a research and attainment that is technical and special . . .” was intended to provoke James; it is also extremely perceptive (*Life in Letters* 555). For James, consciousness itself was an art. While plot lines and historical contexts and cultural criticism are all vital aspects of James’s legacy, the connecting thread among all his work is the study of consciousness as an art. His portraits of Isabel, Verena, Basil, Nick, Peter, Miriam, Densher, and Milly demonstrate that their responses to art fascinated him because they revealed that consciousness dictated one’s quality of life. James’s intense preoccupation with consciousness and art was related, in part, to metaphysical concerns. They were no less than a

matter of life and death for him. In “Is There a Life After Death?” he writes, “How can there be a personal and a differentiated life ‘after,’ [. . .] for those for whom there has been so little of one before?—unless indeed it be pronounced conceivable that the possibility may vary from man to man, from human case to human case, and that the quantity or the quality of our practice of consciousness may have something to say to it” (201). He suggests that the more one worked throughout life to develop and heighten one’s consciousness, the more likely one would experience some form of existence after death.

As we have seen, the characters in his fiction often develop this heightened consciousness in their experiences with art, and James’s copious art criticism, both public and private, indicates that he was personally invested in this process as well. Though in his exploration of life after death he does not specifically discuss the relationship between art and consciousness that underlies his fiction, he does conclude that artistic consciousness is immersed in the “fountain of being”: “Into that fountain, to depths immeasurable, our spirit dips—to the effect of feeling itself, *quâ* imagination and aspiration, all scented with universal sources. What is that but an adventure of our personality, and how can we after it hold complete disconnection likely?” (“Is There a Life After Death” 228). The artistic consciousness, James contends, rests in the soul, and this immeasurable quality may tie us to the world after death.

To draw neat conclusions about Henry James’s use of visual art would be to contradict his central belief about art—that aesthetic experience is potentially infinite and does not provide tidy didactic truths. James’s shifting attitude toward British Aestheticism, apparent in the four novels I have discussed, is one significant example of his refusal to offer readers a determinate position. Perhaps one reason for James’s ambivalence or inability to heartily endorse Aestheticism is that he does not, indeed cannot, detach aesthetics from ethical issues, and to do

so is a central tenet of the movement. I do not mean to invoke the words “ethical” and “moral” in the narrow sense that Ruskin does, but rather to imply that in James’s work each character creates a system, a code of ethics, within the novel by which her choices are guided. His heroes and heroines, who are best able to experience and appreciate works of art, often create a system in response to an experience with art. For example, in *The Spoils of Poynton* Mrs. Gereth and Fleda Vetch both appreciate the aesthetic value of Poynton’s interior, yet it is clearly Fleda who more strongly feels their ability to improve her life, and whose interest in its art is complicated by questions of acting in the interest of the good. In the end she loses the art and Mrs. Gereth’s son, Owen, but James leaves readers with the sense, if not an absolute pronouncement, that her moral choices were the right ones in the context of her system. In each of James’s works, readers must similarly find their way in his “full imaginative possession and imaginative re-creation of all experience” (*Life in Letters* 566).

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