THE DRAMA OF DIVIDED ATTENTION IN HENRY JAMES, D.H. LAWRENCE, AND VIRGINIA WOOLF

by

ROSEMARY K. LUTTRELL

(Under the Direction of Adam Parkes)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation traces in the representation of divided attention inscribed in the work of these authors—in James’s The Portrait of a Lady, The Princess Casamassima and The Bostonians, in Lawrence’s The Rainbow and Women in Love, and in Woolf’s To the Lighthouse—an intensely Romantic response to the disjunction of modernity. If these writers all were elucidated by the fragmentation of attention in modernity that preoccupies thinkers like Walter Benjamin and Jonathan Crary, they all imagined impassioned efforts to resist that fragmentation, seeking to evoke at least transient moments when vision is unified, taking in multiple lines of vision, distance, and perspective all at once. These writers resist or reject the idea that attention, in any given moment, constitutes a limited quantity of capital. This dissertation shows in some detail how the fiction of James, Lawrence, and Woolf actively opposes to the fragmentation of modernity a capacity for an integrative vision achieved through the collapse of two or more perspectives into one.

INDEX WORDS: divided attention, vision, Henry James, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Ralph Waldo Emerson
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by

ROSEMARY K. LUTTRELL

BA, Tulane University, 2001

MA, The University of Georgia, 2008

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2018
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ROSEMARY K. LUTTRELL

Major Professor:    Adam Parkes
Committee:         Richard Menke
                    Michael Moran

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2018
DEDICATION

For my daughters, Mary Alden and Emily Luttrell
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply indebted to my major professor, Dr. Adam Parkes, for his insight, support, and patience, and for his close attention to the development of my argument and the quality of my writing. I am also grateful for my committee members, Dr. Richard Menke and Dr. Mike Moran. I took multiple classes with each of them during my first two years as an MA student at The University of Georgia, and their profound lectures and leadership of provocative discussions inspired me to continue my studies in the PhD program. I am grateful to the Journal of Modern Literature (jml), in which Chapter Four of this dissertation first appeared in somewhat different form.

I may have given up on this project if it had not been for the love, encouragement, and support of my parents, Rachel and Dan Kahn-Fogel, who never gave up on me. Mary Alice Mallett taught me that acceptance is the key to overcoming my challenges. And Corey Luttrell always believed I could do this, even when I did not believe it myself.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

You can't give a great symbol a “meaning,” any more than you can give a cat a “meaning.” Symbols are organic units of consciousness with a life of their own, and you can never explain them away, because their value is dynamic, emotional, belonging to the sense-consciousness of the body and soul, and not simply mental. An allegorical image has a meaning. Mr. Facing-both-ways has a meaning. But I defy you to lay your finger on the full meaning of Janus, who is a symbol.

-- D. H. Lawrence (Introduction, “The Dragon of the Apocalypse, by Fredrick Carter,” in Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation 48)

In denigrating allegory, with what he construed as its purely mental, mechanical meaning, in favor of the organic dynamism of the symbol, D. H. Lawrence returned in his essay on Frederick Carter (first published in the London Mercury four months after Lawrence’s death) to a favorite trope, the symbol of Janus, the ancient figure who defies the normal constraints of vision by looking two ways at once. The infinitely suggestive figure of Janus—which will, Lawrence asserts, defy efforts to find in it a fixed meaning—embodies the problem of divided attention that I contend in this dissertation is a central concern of Henry James, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf. That problem, symptomatic of emergent modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,
is a preoccupation that unites these highly distinctive pioneers of Modernism, even though in the main I treat each of them as more fully autonomous agents, rather than primarily as reflections or creatures of the wider culture.

Representations of divided attention inscribed in such novels as James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880-1881), *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), and *The Bostonians* (1886), in Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1920), and in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1921), engender an intensely Romantic response to the disjunction of modernity. In these texts, James, Lawrence, and Woolf pose challenges to recent discussions of the relationship of Modernism to Romanticism by such critics as Maud Ellmann, James Longenbach, and Max Saunders. For one thing—and despite Lawrence’s declaration to Edward Garnett of his interest in the “non-human, in humanity” (*Letters II*, 183)—there is in these novels a highly personal inscription of the selves of their authors into the fictions they produce, in contrast to the “impersonality” of Modernism on which Ellmann focuses, even in tracing impersonality back into such Romantic manifestations as Keats’s poet who has “‘no identity’” (*The Poetics of Impersonality* 3). But as James emphasizes in a famous extended trope in the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, it is the very “consciousness of the artist” that marks most deeply the form and vision of a work of fiction, with each “posted presence” at the countless windows of the “house of fiction” functioning as “a unique instrument, insuring . . . an impression distinct from every other” (7). Saunders focuses in his discussion of “autobiografiction” on what he is able to read as highly ironized fictionalized critiques of traditional autobiography, basing his discussion of Woolf on such apt texts as *Jacob’s
Room, Orlando, and Flush, and only mentioning on the fly, as it were, To the Lighthouse and Mrs. Dalloway, both of which are far more deeply personal and far less ironized.

James, Woolf, and Lawrence are in my view Janus-like figures in looking both ways, toward a highly Romantic view of genius and the autonomous self and simultaneously toward a Modernist and even post-Modernist view of the self as decentered, destabilized, and continuously produced by external forces. Perhaps my position is closest to Longenbach’s, particularly in that he sees Modernist writers as engaged with mysticism and yet (quoting Wallace Stevens) as ambitious “to press away from mysticism toward that ultimate good sense which we term civilization” (22). But I would take exception with Longenbach’s emphasis on such anti-mystical “good sense” in arguing that James, Lawrence, and Woolf all press toward the mystical in a peculiarly Romantic tenor precisely at those moments when the multivalent vision of divided attention momentarily collapses into epiphanic visions of reconciliation and wholeness. There is a transcendental thrust to such moments that clearly resonates with Emerson in his role as a main conduit of Romantic transcendentalism into modern Anglo-American letters, his being connected, as Lawrence would put the matter, only “on the Ideal phone” (Lawrence, Review of Sherman, Americans, Introductions and Reviews 224).

In short, if James, Lawrence, and Woolf all were affected by the fragmentation of attention in modernity that preoccupies thinkers like Walter Benjamin and Jonathan Crary, they all imagined impassioned efforts to resist that fragmentation, seeking to evoke at least transient moments when vision is unified, taking in multiple lines of vision, distance, and perspective all at once. These writers reject or at least push back against the idea that attention, in any given moment, constitutes a limited quantity of capital. The
project of this dissertation is to show in some detail how the fiction of James, Lawrence, and Woolf actively opposes to the fragmentation of modernity a Romantic capacity for an integrative vision achieved through the collapse of two or more perspectives, however briefly, into one.

Poets, psychologists, philosophers, and theorists and historians of art, literature, and culture have of course long taken fragmentation and rupture to be hallmarks of modernity. Again and again, we hear the poet’s *cri de coeur* against the exhaustion and depletion of fragmentation, in, for instance, Matthew Arnold’s plaintive description in “The Scholar Gypsy” (1853) of “this strange disease of modern life / With its sick hurry, its divided aims” no less than in T. S. Eliot’s line, “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” in *The Waste Land* (1922). Cultural fragmentation as the condition of modernity is a given of much of the work of the Frankfurt School. Graeme Gilloch observes in discussing Walter Benjamin, “In a cultural environment characterized by disintegration and disorientation . . . Benjamin pioneered modes of critical reading and textual representation that were in keeping with the fragmentation, eclecticism, and dynamism of modernity” (5-6). And Benjamin foreshadows in his preoccupation with the forms of representation inherent in commodity capitalism the work of the contemporary critics Jonathan Crary and Tim Armstrong.

Crary epitomizes the theoretical move of the last three decades that transposes fragmentation and disruption in more general senses to the specific domain of vision and attention. In an important essay of 1994, “Unbinding Vision”—a clarion précis, in effect, of the phase of Crary’s work that would culminate in *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (1999)—Crary charts “the relatively sudden
emergence of models of subjective vision” in the first half of the nineteenth century and
the development of “visual modernism” in the latter half of the century (21). In the late
nineteenth-century, Crary argues, “the problem of attention became a fundamental issue”
the centrality of which “was directly related to the emergence of a social, urban, psychic,
industrial field increasingly saturated with sensory input” (22). Crary sees this
development as an effect of “the dynamic logic of capitalism,” which responded to the
undermining of “any stable and enduring structure of perception” by developing
“external techniques of manipulation” and by imposing or attempting “to impose a
disciplinary regime of attentiveness”: “Part of the cultural logic of capitalism demands
that we accept as natural switching our attention rapidly from one thing to another” (23).

In the extended analysis of Edouard Manet’s In the Conservatory upon which the
closing and longest section of Crary’s article turns, Crary emphasizes multivalence and
instability, noting that “Manet perhaps knew intuitively that the eye is not a fixed organ,
that it is marked by polyvalence, by shifting intensities, by an indeterminate organization,
and that sustained attentiveness to anything will relieve vision of its fixed character” (40).
Crary reads In the Conservatory above all as figuring

... an essential conflict within the perceptual logic of modernity in which two
powerful tendencies are at work. One is a binding together of vision, an obsessive
holding together of perception to maintain the viability of a functional real world,
while the other, barely contained or sealed over, is a logic of psychic and
economic exchange, of equivalence and substitution, of flux and dissolution that
threatens to overwhelm the apparently stable positions and terms that Manet
seems to have effortlessly arranged. (30)
The doubleness of the treatment of attention that Crary sees as inscribed in Manet’s painting—the doubleness of holding together juxtaposed with flux and dissolution—exemplifies the polyvalent nature of modern attention. Tim Armstrong, exploring the “shock” and “trauma” of modernity, anatomizes the efforts of psychologists and cultural theorists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to grasp the consequences for attention of the violent, swift, and multifarious stimuli of modern life. Armstrong notes, for instance, that Freud “makes time a function of the organic basis of mental activity, the on-off flickering of attention in relation to any object of attention” (65). Armstrong writes:

The flux of modern life described by [American physician George M.] Beard and [Walter] Benjamin is linked in both of these writers to another set of terms, attention and distraction, terms which are central both to turn-of-the-century psychology and to cultural analysis. Social critics depicted the modern world, with its flood of images, publications, its speeded up transport, in terms of a crisis of attentiveness and a collapse of culture into mere distraction; while psychophysical researchers followed [Wilhelm Maximilian] Wundt in analysing reaction-times, attention-spans, divided attention, and the limits of attention.

(66-67)

And Armstrong also notes the centrality of the problem of attention to William James’s thought: “For William James intellectual life is the struggle to attend, to fix the flux of time and the stream of thought which moves through it: ‘the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will,’” he writes in the Principles (p. 424)” (67). Concluding an extended
discussion of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender is the Night* (1934), Armstrong argues that “if the novel represents the dialogue of trauma and distraction in modernity, it ultimately centres its analysis of the modern self on the latter term” (71).

In contrast to Armstrong, however, I do not take the struggle with divided attention in James, Lawrence, and Woolf the way Armstrong sees it in Fitzgerald as a source of “fatigue and stress and the sense of depletion which accompany them” (71). I understand that struggle, rather, as a catalytic experience for the achievement of transcendent moments of integration. Nor am I, in this dissertation, centrally concerned with the manipulation and disciplining of attention that Crary sees as part of the ineluctable dynamic of capitalism, a project he extends in his most recent book, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013). There is nevertheless a clear parallel between some of Crary’s terms and mine. What he sees as the rapid “switching” of attention compelled by the “logic of capitalism,” I read as oscillations of attention that originate in the peculiar sensibilities and situations of James’s, Lawrence’s, and Woolf’s focalizers and in the logic of the texts in which their characters are narrative functions, though I would argue also that the oscillating attention of these novelists’ characters—and those giddy privileged moments when they seem to see in all directions at once—are often clearly responses to the contradictions and fragmentation of the very medium in which they have their fictive being, their authors’ representations of the flux and instability of emergent modernity. And whereas Crary is concerned with the instability of attention in historically specific fields of *vision*, my investigation includes but goes beyond the oscillation of attention among objects in the visual field to such conceptual or
abstract “perspectives” as surface and depth, near and far, beauty and morality, and
tradition and revolution.

James, Lawrence, and Woolf were all heavily invested, albeit in very different
ways, in narratives that create—and in characters who actively seek and achieve—
fleeting moments of visionary integration. They were particularly concerned with the
effort to arrive at such moments even in the teeth of the distinctively modern knowledge
that such moments are unsustainable—of their shared apprehension that a fall into
multiplicity and fragmentation will inevitably follow the exhilarating collapse of
competing perspectives into brief moments of integrated vision and being. As strongly as
James fashions a distinctive proto-modernism, as emphatically as Lawrence and Woolf
illustrate different facets of modernity, their shared yearning for and valorization of
moments in which division and fragmentation are transcendentally superseded by the
reconciliation of oppositions marks them as heirs of British and American Romanticism
just as much as that often frustrated nostalgia makes them exemplars of modernity.

In a “Study of Thomas Hardy” (1914), D.H. Lawrence writes: “like Janus, face
forward, in the quivering, glimmering fringe of the unresolved, facing the unknown, and
looking backward over the vast rolling tract of life which follows and repeats the initial
movement, man is given up to his dual business.” In the OED, the first definition of the
term two-faced is associated with the god Janus Bifrons and with transitions between
seemingly contradictory visions, while the second definition associates this dual vision
with deceit and hypocrisy. Yet in the years leading up to and following the turn of the
twentieth century, we see attempts to rewrite two-facedness as a representation of a
liberating and artistic temperament, one that is more authentic and more faithful to the
nature of human consciousness than the normative representation of a single face gazing in only one direction.

James, Lawrence, and Woolf approach attention as a subject of particular interest to those who, seeing themselves as others or outsiders, are highly concerned with issues of morality. I argue that the bivalent vision represented by Janus offers a helpful way of understanding not only the modes of seeing and discovery explored in the fiction of these authors, but also the nature of modern attention. My project traces the development of the Janus-faced figure in the modern novel, with special emphasis on how James, Lawrence, and Woolf develop characters who attempt to make order out of disordered systems of judgment and to make sense of the modern world where there are no absolute truths and no hard-and-fast realities.

In *The Crack Up* (1945), F. Scott Fitzgerald proclaims, “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” (69). Yet Fitzgerald’s test seems to defy the logic of Kenneth Burke, who claims that “every way of seeing is a way of not seeing” (“Permanence and Change” 70). As Richard Lanham explains, Burke’s apothegm “meant that paying attention in one way means you cannot pay attention in another” (Lanham 164). Here attention means choosing, at least for a moment, a way to see and, thus, choosing, for that moment, another way to *not* see. Though we move back and forth, when we face one end of the spectrum, unless we are gods like Janus Bifrons, we necessarily turn our backs on the other. Nonetheless, James, Lawrence, and Woolf resist this very logical analysis of attention, creating spaces that encourage a two-faced perspective. Instead of moving along Lanham’s spectrum facing either one end or the
other, these authors create characters who look both ways at once or, in an alternative formulation, imaginatively collapse two or more divergent points of attention onto one another. In Rupert Birkin’s theoretical formulations in *Women in Love*, Lawrence, in particular, goes beyond the bi-directional vision of Janus to imagine a multivalence that takes in simultaneously as many perspectives as there are points on the circumference of a circle, as though Janus were continually turning at the center.

In my first chapter I discuss three of James’s novels from the 1880s: *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Bostonians*, and *The Princess Casamassima*. All these novels include characters who are compelled to pay attention to such seeming oppositions as freedom and responsibility, tradition and revolution, and substance and style. They worry that their attention to one term or the other in such oppositions will undermine their moral soundness. James’s tendency is to dramatize moments of emotional liberation for those of his characters who allow for extreme overlap between seeming polarities, as Hyacinth Robinson is able briefly to do, or, contrastingly, to show how an inability to allow for that overlap can lead to a character’s ruin, as we see happening to Verena Tarrant and Olive Chancellor. The happiness of these characters’ seems to depend on their ability either to oscillate smoothly between what seem to be two opposing ends of a continuum, or as Hyacinth does in Venice and Paris, to draw the two ends of the continuum together in at least momentary combination. This chapter, which leads to a reading of the end of each of these novels that is significantly informed by the tension each novel creates around the problem of divided attention, will argue that James was interested in attention’s role in our construction of beauty and morality well before the height of aestheticism in England and America.
In the next chapter I show how Lawrence approaches the role of the challenges of divided and multivalent attention. Although Lawrence is not interested in the morality of attention in the same way as James, he also gives us Janus-like figures who attempt to be both concrete and abstract, both intimately connected with others and completely independent. These characters, like James’s, struggle with what conflicted and divided attention means about their identity and ability to have meaningful relationships. In both *Women in Love* and *The Rainbow*, in generation after generation, the Brangwens come together with, and fall apart from, the men and women they love because of their attempts to take in at once multivalent perspectives. My discussion of these novels will climax with a close reading of several scenes from *Women in Love* that demonstrate how Ursula Brangwen copes with Rupert Birkin’s divided attention, how she overcomes the instability of loving a man who Hermione, among others, feels “is not a man…because he was not consistent” (92). Examining Ursula through the lens of Birkin’s preoccupation with the morality of attention will provide a rereading of Lawrence’s portrayal of women, one that offers Ursula as the strongest character in the novel in her ability to withstand the anxiety of divided attention and even to maintain a level of conflict with Birkin that encourages his contradictory perspectives. In *The Rainbow* Lawrence takes us back to Ursula’s roots and reveals how her family history and her own childhood contribute to her strength in *Women in Love*. Ultimately, the most successful relationships in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* are those that can survive the necessary conflict and anxiety of oscillating attention.

Finally, I explore Woolf’s distinctive embodiment of modern attention economies in *To the Lighthouse* by highlighting parallels and differences between Woolf’s
philosophy of sight and that of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The argument thus diverges from recent Woolf scholarship that focuses primarily on her move from Impressionism to Post-Impressionism. Emerson’s metaphors of vision rest on the claim that in the natural world we are afforded glimpses of universal laws. *To the Lighthouse* similarly implies that manipulating distance and vision in observing the external world will provide “illuminations” of something, but Woolf teases us with the ambiguity of what that something is (161). Through this framework, I develop a reading of Mrs. Ramsay that moves beyond the traditional take on her character as a domestic artist or mystic; she provides, additionally, a paradigm of visionary illumination resonant with Lily Briscoe’s project of negotiating space to create art. And, as we shall see, the manipulation of distance and perspective is yet another form of the effort to see in more than one way at once, whether conceived as the oscillations of Janus gazing simultaneously in opposite directions or as the dynamic and perhaps unattainable (or at least unsustainable) multivalent perspectives toward which Lawrence’s Birkin and Woolf’s Lily Briscoe aspire.

In short, my project is to trace through the works of James, Lawrence, and Woolf a new kind of morality involving the possibility of a liberating, attentional multivalence. This inquiry should subsequently help us to question our own culture’s discomfort with dualism, multivalence, and divided attention and its tendency to privilege rigid consistency over dynamism, intellectual flexibility, and adaptability, a tendency we see playing out in our increasingly polarized and unaccommodating political culture. We may even come to understand the authoritarian tendency of our current climate as a reaction against the kind of multivalent attention valorized in the work of these visionary pioneers.
of the modern. The transcendental one-ness of Romantic desire has, of course, its own totalizing and therefore authoritarian potentials, but the saving grace for each of the authors examined in this dissertation is the very unsustainability of that exhilarating moment in which all differences collapse into each other, the transience of such transcendence returning us always to the joys, challenges, and anxieties of multiplicity and freedom.
CHAPTER 2
DIVIDED ATTENTION IN HENRY JAMES’S NOVELS OF THE 1880s

I. The Marriage of Style and Meaning in Henry James

Throughout his late novel *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), Henry James calls to our attention that we are reading a text and that the characters, who develop with so much seeming realism, are products of words, made up of typed characters. We hear, for example, that Aunt Maud’s insistence that Milly “must stay” is “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’” (James, *Wings* 133). Even more striking and relevant to my study is the description of Susan Stringham’s sense “that their relation,” hers and Milly’s, “might have been afloat, like some island of the south, in a great warm sea that represented, for every conceivable chance, a margin, an outer sphere, of general emotion; and the effect of the occurrence of anything in particular was to make the sea submerge the island, the margin flood the text” (128). James shows his pen-strokes where none are needed, calling attention to the makeup up of the margins and the typography of the text. The frame not only encloses the “sea” of “general emotion,” but also can spill into and drown the substance. James generates the image of the margin, or the frame, as a vessel of emotional effusion.

Not only does James emphasize text as text, but the entities that his text creates seem to recognize themselves as aesthetic products. Most prominently in *The Wings of the Dove*, Milly seems to recognize herself as an artistic creation, a recognition reflected
not only in her emotional reaction to her resemblance to the Bronzino portrait at Matcham, but also in the narrative comment that while visiting Sir Luke Strett’s office she felt “she should be one of the circle of eminent contemporaries, photographed, engraved, signatured, and in particular framed and glazed, who made up the rest of the decoration” (148). The peculiar focus here, for Milly, is no more on the substance of the artwork she imagines herself becoming than it is on the surface touches: the framing, glazing, and artist’s marking of his or her name. Not only does James’s writing demonstrate the complex relationship between form and content, but he also explicitly draws the reader’s attention to his focus on style by, among other things, using words like parenthesis, margins, and text.

Style is not merely an important aspect of the text, but rather the style melts into the meaning, making itself indistinguishable from the substance. Style, moreover, is a container of heightened emotions and is, according to James, necessary for communicating the substance “honorabley” (4). Style is not just meant to adorn the meaning. Instead, as James’s use of the word “honorabley” suggests, appropriate style carries with it its own morality of correct or successful expression. James thus insists on our looking in at least two ways at once—or, alternatively, on our looking in one direction to see two opposed elements at once in the interfusion of style and substance—taking in simultaneously surface and depth, style and invention. This is precisely what Lanham says we cannot do because in his “attention economy” (8) the gaze is always directed in one direction at the expense of other perspectives. Yet it is toward such multivalent vision that the fictions of James, Lawrence, and Woolf and the characters central to their fictions continually strive.
Discussions of Henry James’s work that focus on polar oppositions and on the dialectical process of James’s imagination have been legion. Readings that focus on the oppositions embedded in James’s texts include, among many others, Sallie Sears’s *The Negative Imagination* (1968), which revolves around the failure of James’s protagonists to reconcile such binaries as Woollett vs. Europe, taste vs. morality, sensuous pleasure vs. austere rectitude, and American democratic leveling vs. European social hierarchy; Richard A. Hocks’s *Henry James and Pragmatistic Thought* (1990), which reads James (and his brother William) as Coleridgean thinkers for whom authentic polarities create and affirm life; Daniel Mark Fogel’s *Henry James and the Structure of the Romantic Imagination* (1981), which argues that the figure in James’s carpet is a Hegelian dialectic of spiral return that mirrors William Blake’s dialectical progression from innocence through experience to organized innocence; John Carlos Rowe’s *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James* (1984), which interprets James through the lenses of various critical theories, but always with a deconstructive relish for contradiction and opposition; and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *The Epistemology of the Closet* (2008), which famously reads “The Beast in the Jungle” as charged by the “double scenario” (212) of homosexual and heterosexual compulsion.

These and countless other studies of James, as divergent from each other as they may be, have in common interpretive approaches that make much of polar oppositions, doubling, dialectics, and binaries in Henry James’s art and thought. No studies of James so far as I am aware, however, take as their subject the dialectical design of James’s work, thematically and structurally, as embodying the author’s preoccupation with divided attention as a hallmark of the modern consciousness.
The height of Henry James’s explicit engagement with the dislocations, disorientations, and fragmentation of modernity lies in his account in *The American Scene* (1907) of his return to the United States in 1904-1905 after an absence of thirty years. There the attention of the “restless analyst” is continually solicited in conflicting directions, as when in his native New York he casts his eye backward to scenes of his youth and young adulthood and forward to the scarcely imaginable future adumbrated in the spectacle of the city present before him in 1905, booming with commerce and construction. Not only through vision, but through all of his senses James is engaged in recording the multiplicity of the spectacle, his ear, for instance, registering the din and rush of the city and, even more intensely (and troublingly), the Babel-like cacophony of the many tongues now spoken on its streets. It is often said that James became a Modernist at some point in the latter half of the 1890s, perhaps midstream in the composition of *What Maisie Knew* (1897), though there is much to be said for the equally widespread view that the first sharp and extended foretaste of modern fiction in James went back the better part of two decades, to the account of Isabel Archer’s “motionlessly seeing” in Chapter 42 of *The Portrait of a Lady*.¹ For James studies and for studies of Modernism, a leading implication of the following discussion of the great novels James published between 1881 and 1886 is that it was not only Isabel’s famous fireside meditation that marked his pioneering Modernism in the 1880s, but also his unflinching exploration in those novels of the emergent, modern challenge of divided attention.

¹ See, for example, Michelle Phillips on the emergence of the Modernist novel in *What Maisie Knew* (see, especially, 103-108) and Michael Gorra on the inception of James’s Modernism in the 1881 text of *The Portrait of a Lady* (see, for instance, 236 and 311-312).
II. Beauty and Morality in *The Portrait of a Lady*

James’s tropes of textuality in *The Golden Bowl* and *The Wings of the Dove* show James’s interest in issues of attention divided between morality and art in the period of his career that followed the height of aestheticism in England and America. But James was actively and indeed urgently exploring the problematics of modern attention at a far earlier stage in his career and at a much earlier point in the trajectory of aestheticism.

When James returns to *The Portrait of a Lady* in 1906 to write the Preface for the New York Edition, he is interested in how the attention he spent on the beauty of the “historic and romantic sites” affected his ability to produce his story during the spring of 1879, when he began writing *The Portrait* in Florence, and as he continued it the following year in Venice. He writes that he was “constantly driven” to his window by the “the waterside life, the wondrous lagoon spread before me, and the ceaseless human chatter of Venice” (James *Portrait* 3). It was as if he had been looking to see whether, out in the blue channel, the ship of some right suggestion, of some better phrase, of the next happy twist on my subject, the next true touch for my canvas, mightn’t come into sight. But I recall vividly enough that the response most elicited, in general, to these restless appeals was the rather grim admonition that romantic and historic sites, such as the land Italy abounds in, offer the artist a questionable aid to concentration when they themselves are not to be the subject of it. They are too rich in their own life and too charged with their meanings merely to help him with a lame phrase; they draw him away from his small question to their own greater ones. (3)

James looks to the beautiful sights and sounds of Venice, its style, to help him create his...
story, but recognizes that they are too “charged with their meanings” and draw his attention away from his work (3). James continues, “strangely fertilizing, in the long run, does a wasted effort of attention often prove. It all depends on how the attention has been cheated, has been squandered. There are high-handed insolent frauds, and there are insidious sneaking ones” (4). The attention “wasted” on the Venetian beauty, then, has the potential to become “fertilizing,” feeding the substance (4). James is aware that he produces characters who exemplify the modern division of attention, and Ralph Touchett recognizes Gilbert Osmond’s implication in the problematics of attention when he realizes the paradox of Osmond’s monstrous egotism is that Osmond is also the world’s “humble servant” since “the degree of its attention was his only measure of success” (James, Portrait 346). While Lanham discusses what he calls the “attention economy” (8) in the digital age and addresses the ease with which attention moves back and forth along the continuum between the substance of an object and its surface, writers from the late nineteenth century were uncomfortable making such quick transitions between ethics and aesthetics.

These anxieties are reflected in The Bostonians when Olive Chancellor, believing that her attention to beauty compromises her political work, worries that she and Verena Tarrant are both demoralized after enjoying the music in Henry Burrage’s apartment. Olive fears that attention diverted to beauty will reduce the capital of attention she has left to spend on politics. Similarly, in The Princess Casamassima, Hyacinth Robinson writes to the princess that he fears that when he returns from Paris and Venice, where he has indulged his passion for art and beauty, he will find his work “a terrible grind…that will mean, no doubt, that [he is] deeply demoralized” (James, Princess 353). Although he
fears his attention to beauty demoralizes him, Hyacinth, as I show in more detail below, actually discovers a deeper sense of moral clarity when he collapses the continuum to focus at the same time on ethics and aesthetics.

While James does not openly embrace aestheticism in a Wildean fashion, his disavowals of a clear division between beauty and morality often engage him in the aesthetic discussion. His tendency is to dramatize moments of emotional liberation for those of his characters who allow for extreme overlap between substance and surface, as Hyacinth Robinson is able to do, or, contrastingly, to show how an inability to allow for that overlap can lead to a character’s ruin, as we see happening to Verena Tarrant and Olive Chancellor. Each character’s happiness seems to depend on his or her ability, or lack thereof, either to oscillate smoothly between the opposite ends of Lanham’s style and substance continuum or, as Hyacinth does in Venice and Paris, to draw the two ends of the continuum together so that aesthetics combines with and leads to morality. While *The Portrait’s* Gilbert Osmond is a prime example of James’s “satirical portrayal of the aesthete” (Freedman xvii), Isabel Archer’s struggles with attention more fully illustrate James’s attitude towards aestheticism in the early 1880s. Further, we may trace the evolution of James’s aesthetic and of his philosophy of attention through a close reading of the treatment of substance and style in *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Bostonians*, and *The Princess Casamassima*, and also, of course, in the treatment of Miriam Rooth, Nick Dormer, and the Wildean Gabriel Nash in *The Tragic Muse* (1889)—a progression that suggests how James’s preoccupation with the matter of attention spanned the entire decade of the 1880s.
In his preface to *The Portrait*, as James is “trying to recover, for recognition, the germ of [his] idea,” he muses that it came “in the sense of a single character, the character and aspect of a particular engaging young woman, to which all the usual elements of a ‘subject,’ certainly of a setting, were to need to be superadded” (James, *The Portrait* 4). He remembers Ivan Turgenieff saying that his “fictive picture” almost always began

   with the vision of some person or persons, who hovered before him, soliciting him…. he saw them, in that fashion, as *disposables*, saw them subject to the chances, the complications of existence, and saw them vividly, but then had to find for them the right relations, those that would most bring them out; to imagine, to invent and select and piece together the situations most useful and favourable to the sense of the creatures themselves, the complications they would be most likely to produce and feel. (5)

If we use James’s invocation of Turgenieff’s method as a way of reading Gilbert Osmond, Osmond becomes one of the main “complications of existence” that Isabel must face as she sorts out her emotional connection to her tastes and her desire to be deep and just. Isabel’s plight, then, represents one of the dilemmas of aestheticism: that is, to reconcile the conflict between invention and style that troubled so many of James’s contemporaries (vii). And it would be a mistake to read Osmond’s role as an amoral aesthete as fully representative of James’s view of aestheticism. When read in this mistaken way, the novel seems to participate in aestheticism’s plight, for the movement itself is too often completely confused with its most flamboyant proponents.
Isabel strives to satisfy both her attraction to beauty and style and her desire to be deep and just. When Isabel arrives at Gardencourt, we hear that its “rich perfection…at once revealed a world and gratified a need” (57). Gardencourt’s “brown ceilings and dusky corners, the deep embrasures and curious casements, the quiet light on dark, polished panels” appeal to “the taste of our young lady, whose taste played a considerable part in her emotions” (57). The image of Isabel holding a book which she is not reading is repeated throughout the novel, and when she is “guided in the selection” of one book “chiefly by the frontispiece” we are given further proof of her attention to style (33). Yet Isabel also is “stoutly determined not to be hollow,” and she has a highly developed sense of justice (55). In fact, she sacrifices her sense of taste to her loyalty and sense of friendship when she allows Madame Merle to go with her to visit Pansy. For though “she had prefigured her small pilgrimage as made in solitude…she was nevertheless prepared to sacrifice this mystic sentiment to her great consideration to her friend” (266). It is perhaps this sense of loyalty Isabel further reveals in the same conversation (when she says “I think a great deal of my promises”) that leads Madame Merle to embrace the idea of Isabel as Pansy’s stepmother (267). It is, after all, after this remark that Madame Merle’s tone changes from mockery to thoughtful sincerity when she says, “I really think you wish to be kind to the child” (267). Madame Merle believes that while Isabel’s attraction to style will help Osmond trap Isabel and her fortune, Isabel’s sense of loyalty and justice will make her stay.

The other characters in the novel recognize Isabel’s struggles to reconcile beauty and justice. Edward Rosier remembers “perfectly the walk at Neufchatel” that he once took with Isabel, “when she would persist in going so near the edge,” and he makes this a
metaphor for Isabel’s behavior when he imagines “this same tendency” in her “subversive” manner while questioning him (186). We have the image, then, of Isabel hovering near an edge, possibly preparing to jump into something deep, just as she perches with unopened books preparing to jump into the texts. Yet we are also reminded of Madame Merle’s lesson to Isabel during the first days of their intimacy, that a woman “has no natural place anywhere; wherever she finds herself she has to remain on the surface and, more or less, to crawl” (171). Isabel’s position is precarious; as she attempts to satisfy both her attraction to style and her commitment to substance and justice, she is confronted with the reality that she may have to pick one. Furthermore, if she takes Madame Merle’s word for truth, she can do little more than hover near the “edge,” unable to jump into the deep even if that is what she chooses (186).

Isabel, however, clearly is deep, and her depth is often revealed through her artistic sensibility and attention to style. In these cases, invention and style become confused because James brings the two polarities together. We get a sense of their merger when Isabel explores Rome, where there was “history in the stones of the street and the atoms of the sunshine” (245). Her experience is Paterian, as the narrator does “not attempt to report in its fulness our young woman’s response to the deep appeal of Rome, to analyse her feelings as she trod the pavement of the Forum or to number her pulsations as she crossed the threshold of St. Peter’s” (245). But we do hear that as she explores Rome the sense of the terrible human past was heavy to her, but that of something altogether contemporary would suddenly give it wings that it could wave in the blue. 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, and yet not seeing many of the items enumerated in her Murray. (245)

It is to the beauty of Rome that she is attracted as much as can be expected of “a person of her freshness and eagerness,” but her attention to the beauty leads her into moral contemplation of “the terrible human past” (245). “Her consciousness was so mixed” because she pays attention both to her present happiness amidst so much beauty and to the “terrible past,” which allows her to give the history “wings that it could wave in the blue” (245). This passage is an example of James’s ability to collapse seemingly opposed poles. Isabel does not oscillate back and forth between Rome’s surface and its substance; rather, she pays attention to both at once, causing her to feel both incredibly “mixed” and ecstatic (245). Isabel’s efforts to develop both her attention to style and her sense of her own depth, however, are thwarted by her attraction to Gilbert Osmond and his manipulation of her attraction to style.

Osmond seduces Isabel through her attraction to style and uses her as a tool to “publish” his own style to the world (260). James often describes Isabel as being like Pansy Osmond, as so much stuff that Osmond can pattern, mold, and fashion. She is “ivory to the palm,” a very “superior material,” and, of course, a composition, painted and framed by “the hand of the master” (259, 331, 330). Osmond, in a manner clearly reminiscent of Robert Browning’s Duke, “thought Miss Archer sometimes of too precipitate a readiness. It was a pity she had that fault, because if she had not had it she really would have had none; she would have been as smooth to his general need of her as handled ivory to the palm” (259). Earlier, Osmond complains to Madame Merle that
Isabel “had only one fault,” which is that she has “too many ideas,” and he goes on to acknowledge that her ideas “must be sacrificed” (244). Thus, his problem is with her substance, while he feels that he will benefit by her surface, as well as, of course, by her money. Osmond is acutely aware that he uses Isabel’s attraction to style to capture her; James writes,

if an anonymous drawing on a museum wall had been conscious and watchful, it might have known this peculiar pleasure of being at last identified—as from the hand of a great master—by the so high and so unnoticed fact of style. His ‘style’ was what the girl discovered with a little help; and by now, beside herself enjoying it, she should publish it to the world without his having any of the trouble. (260)

Isabel becomes a vehicle for Osmond to present his ideas in a beautiful light. He imagines Isabel’s “fanciful mind” will reflect his “thought on a polished elegant surface” (296). Although Osmond tells Madame Merle that Isabel’s ideas must be sacrificed, he also treasures her intelligence insofar as it is able to repeat and reflect him beautifully. For “Osmond hated to see his thought reproduced literally—that made it look stale and stupid; he preferred it to be freshened in the reproduction even as ‘words’ by music” (296). He imagines her intelligence will be a “silver plate, not an earthen one—a plate that he might heap up with ripe fruits, to which he would give a decorative value, so that talk might become for him a sort of served desert” (296). Osmond represents Isabel’s intelligence, then, as a lovely but flat surface, and the “ripe fruit” which he will heap on her are his own, shallow ideas. He carries out his intentions for Isabel by skillfully manipulating her attraction to his style and by beautifully framing himself and his life.
Immediately after alluding to her family’s disapproval of her engagement, Osmond demonstrates his use of style in his seduction of Isabel, and, by the same stroke, exploits Isabel’s disposition narcissistically to see herself as the heroine of a novel. After defending himself against his suspicion that Ralph and Mrs. Touchett think he is in love with Isabel’s money, he prepares her to view their life together as an artistic production by comparing his life to a book. Osmond tells Isabel, “I have been putting my eyes over the book of life and finding nothing to reward me for my pains; but now that I can read it properly I see it’s a delightful story” (297). Yet, as he proceeds, he tells her nothing of what the story of her life will be, none of the plot or the substance. Instead, he only describes what it will look like; it is “all soft and mellow—it has the Italian colouring” (297). He describes their story as a “long summer afternoon that awaits” them, and continues, “it’s the latter half of an Italian day—with a golden haze, and the shadows just lengthening, and that divine delicacy in the light, the air, the landscape, which I have loved all my life and which you love today” (297). Osmond seems not to be describing the contents of a book, as he implied he would, but a painting, or perhaps the frontispiece of the book.

Osmond’s self-presentation as an epitome of taste and style is calculated to cast a spell over the innocent Isabel, who can’t yet see through the bank of flowers to the serpent underneath. Although she denies to Ralph that she is attracted to Osmond’s beautiful possessions and collections of art, Ralph believes that “she loved him not for what he really possessed, but for his very poverties dressed out as honours” (294). Thus, though she may not be attracted to Osmond for his art, she is attracted to the effect of his style, to how he dresses his poverties. Yet Ralph acknowledges, though only to himself,
that “she was wrong…she was deluded” because her “fine theory about Gilbert Osmond” was designed by Osmond himself and by his own manipulation of her artistic imagination (294). When Isabel finally realizes that, as Ralph imagines, Osmond does not have a “superior morality,” but that she, like Pansy, is merely the “superior material” with which he has decided to work, it is too late; she has already made her promises to them both (331).

In the end, because she thinks she must choose between paying attention to style or to substance, Isabel sacrifices her sense of taste to her commitment to morality. When she thinks of the “magnitude of his deception,” she loses “herself in infinite dismay” (359). She remembers that Osmond “said to her one day that she had too many ideas and that she must get rid of them…he had really meant it—he would have liked her to have nothing of her own but her pretty appearance” (359). Isabel seems to feel that she has deceived herself and Osmond with her attention to style when she remembers that Osmond “told her he loved the conventional; but there was a sense in which this seemed a noble declaration. In that sense, that of the love of harmony and order and decency and all of the stately offices of life, she went with him freely, and his warning had contained nothing ominous” (359). Her attraction to beauty, her “love of harmony and order,” had prevented her from heeding what she now sees as a “warning” (359). Yet she also implicates Osmond in her deception, for he “had led her into the mansion of his own habitation,” and it is only after he leads her farther in that “she had seen where she really was” (360). What she discovers inside is “something appalling”: Osmond’s egotism (360). And his house becomes “the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation” (360). The “four walls that are to surround her for the rest of her life,”
because of their content, become completely distasteful and oppressive to Isabel (360). The substance of Osmond’s house destroys Isabel’s attraction to its beauty. But in the process of this destruction there is a necessary crossover and intermingling of the two. Isabel cannot pay attention to the beauty of her surroundings without also paying attention to the moral decay.

In the closing chapters of the novel, we are left with the impression that Isabel must sacrifice her youth and her desire to see the world for herself in order to uphold her own moral code. Though Ralph makes it clear that he wants Isabel to stay at Gardencourt, that away from Osmond she will “grow young again,” she remains aware that “certain obligations were involved in the very fact of marriage and were quite independent of the quantity of enjoyment extracted from it” (479, 481). Isabel returns to Rome even though she thinks of it “with a kind of spiritual shudder” (481). Because of her commitment to her moral sense and her loyalty to Pansy, she goes back to a life that has become appalling to her. Isabel is practically absent from the end of the novel, and we only hear from Henrietta Stackpole, who tells Caspar Goodwood, that “she started for Rome” (490). But here I am reminded of the “immediate horror” Isabel feels much earlier in the novel when she considers that without Madame Merle’s influence she would not have fallen into Osmond’s trap and of her supplication afterwards that “whatever happens to me let me not be unjust…let me bear my burdens myself and not shift them upon others” (340). Although Isabel is both attracted to style and determined to be just throughout the novel, in the end James’s focus is not on her love of beauty or her ability to assimilate that love into her moral sense.
Isabel’s character, far more than Osmond’s, reflects James’s ambivalent and changing attitude toward style and its role in British aestheticism, particularly at this stage in his career, as Jonathan Freedman argues in *Professions of Taste*. Her struggles represent James’s interest in a mind that yearns to pay attention simultaneously to surface beauty and to a deep morality of care. James’s representation of her struggle demonstrates that even at this relatively early date James was not only weighing aestheticism in his critical balance (and weighting his own aesthetic with moral ballast) but also, in the process, incorporating into his text a pioneering instantiation of the modern struggle with divided attention.

III. Justice and Beauty in *The Bostonians*

Published half a dozen years after *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Bostonians* embodies Olive Chancellor’s struggle to efface her sense of style in the interest of an undiluted commitment to social justice, and then, dramatically, at the conclusion of the novel, to recuperate and accommodate style within that commitment. In essence, she evolves to a point at which she can simultaneously pay attention to style and to prosecution of the radical feminist agenda that Verena Tarrant forsakes when she tearfully leaves Olive for Basil Ransom.

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2 Freedman argues that James in the 1880s was attuned to the “‘intensely contradictory vision and hesitant privileging of art as a locus of value’” of late nineteenth-century aestheticism, regularly posing the aesthetic against the moral in the major fictions of his middle period, and that only in *The Golden Bowl* did James move to a seemingly unequivocal (and very Modernist) privileging of the aesthetic in Maggie Verver’s triumphant design.
From the time of its first publication, *The Bostonians*, has been criticized as being anti-feminist.\(^3\) I wish to offer an argument that though different from Leslie Petty’s, also reframes James’s stance toward feminism, focusing on the author’s preoccupation with justice and beauty, a thematic that richly complicates our understanding of a text that is all too susceptible, otherwise, to simplification as a satire of the New England reform spirit embodied in the women’s movement. James engages himself in the dialogue of British and American aestheticism when he creates Olive Chancellor, who is both attracted to beauty and style and terrified by the moral implications of her attraction. Olive’s anxious attitude towards justice and beauty represents a classic Victorian dilemma: that is, the anxiety one feels when attracted to two apparently opposed values. Pulling the aesthetic dialogue into the field of an American social movement, James generates fresh insights into the intricately involved and dependent relationship between art and morality and turns the aesthetic discussion into an American problem that must be resolved.

It is easy enough to read Verena Tarrant as the clichéd female battlefield over which opposing forces wage war. From Matthias Pardon, the young journalist who whispers “there’s money for some one” in Verena, to her own mother, who wants Verena to “remodel [their] visiting-list which bulged and contracted in the wrong places,” James

\(^3\) Leslie Petty cites Lucia T. Ames, who wrote a review of the novel published “on March 13, 1886, in the *Woman’s Journal*, the official organ of the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA),” and Petty shows that Ames’s attitude “is representative of the way most [women’s rights activists contemporary with James] received his novel” (Petty 169). Quoting Ames’s review, Petty writes “although Ames claims that ‘[I]t seems hardly worth while to take the trouble to protest against this caricature’ she issues a rather lengthy one,” calling *The Bostonians* ‘inartistic’ and claiming that Olive Chancellor and Verena Tarrant belong to a ‘fictional ‘world of abnormal women’’ (169). Petty argues that by concerning ourselves, “not with James’s agenda, but with his insights,” we can recuperate James and *The Bostonians* from these charges; she sees his “insights” about the personal and political spheres as offering valuable lessons for feminist activists (170). For a careful study of the contemporary feminist sources on which James drew in *The Bostonians*, see Davis.
gives us character after character who take Verena to be the dazzlingly brilliant pathway to his or her ideal of success (James, *Bostonians* 859, 864-865). While James has been criticized for casting his feminist characters in a ridiculous light, it would be a mistake to read the novel’s portrait of the feminist movement as a flat gauge of James’s sympathy—or lack thereof—with the emerging New Woman. Rather, the characters’ preoccupation with matters of invention and style suggests that James’s edgy, ambivalent, and complexly nuanced treatment of the women’s movement will be illuminated by placing it in the context of the contemporary anxieties and debates about the status of style and by recognizing James’s own belief that “form and content are intricately related” (Boudreau 19). Furthermore, James’s focus on Verena as an artist of oratory makes salient the connection between aesthetics and the conventions of rhetorical style.

Barred from the professions that demanded an education in rhetoric, women were not trained in the art of public address until the end of the nineteenth century, when those who had access to higher education “could study rhetoric devoted in the classical spirit to public address on issues of civic importance” (Bizzell, Herzberg 987). But because women were “not supposed to speak in public,” their “practices were non-traditional by definition” (987). Rhetoric for women was not based on “culturally dominant values and well-established occasions for oratory” because it was often these very values that the women had to overcome or subvert in order to speak publicly (987). Many of the first female public speakers were “itinerant preachers who exhorted crowds extemporaneously, using deliberately colloquial, earthy, moving language” (987). Women were able to play around with style more than men, but the limited options for women’s political speech, further undermined the political possibilities of style. It makes
sense that James would be interested in the feminist rhetoricians’ attempts to spread
justice while perhaps avoiding the slant towards mechanistic efficiency that ruled most
political speech. He creates, in Verena Tarrant, a model of a female, American public
speaker, whose unique style adds to her immense appeal and rhetorical artistry.

Olive is drawn to style and beautiful surfaces, including Verena’s, but she is filled
with anxiety about her attention to style and denies and conceals her tendency. She
realizes at one point that “it was not of importance that Verena should be just like herself;
she was all of one piece, and Verena was of many pieces, which had, where they fitted
together, little capricious chinks, through which mocking inner lights seemed sometimes
to gleam.” Verena’s “many pieces” cause a “want of continuity” of which “Olive was
conscious enough,” for she had seen how Verena “could be passionately serious at times,
and then perversely, even if innocently, trivial” (James, Bostonians 936-937). Olive
perceives Verena as being “serious” when she is working for the movement and “trivial”
when she is attracted to the pleasures of men and beauty (937). Verena, on one hand, is
made of so many pieces because she allows herself to oscillate freely between two
polarities, paying attention to both substance and style. Olive, on the other hand, sees
herself as “one piece” because she does not allow herself the same freedom of oscillation;
indeed, she fears that when she pays attention to what she regards as “trivial,” she is
unable to pay attention to the women’s movement (937).

Olive’s lack of comfort with her own attraction to style colors her reactions to
Basil Ransom and causes him to question both why she invites him to her house and why

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4 James demonstrates his interest in women and justice in both "The Manners of American Women" and
"The Speech of American Women." The former article originally appeared in Harper’s Bazaar in 1907 and
sparked a certain amount of editorial and public comment.
she brings him to the gathering at Miss Birdseye’s house. Basil almost immediately feels an ambiguous awkwardness in his relationship with his Yankee cousin, who, at least initially, is attracted to his exoticism before she is disgusted by his misogyny. Olive’s initial reactions to Basil reveal her precarious relationship with style and substance. Olive “had never yet encountered a personage so exotic, and she always felt more at her ease in the presence of anything strange. It was the usual things of life that filled her with silent rage” (811). This observation reinforces and explains the earlier one that Olive “never went through any forms”; she does not force herself to be polite to Basil when he eventually makes her uncomfortable (807). Basil’s exoticism is attributed partly to his accent by a strange aside in which the narrator addresses “the reader who likes a complete image, who desires to read with the senses as well as with the reason” (804). This reader, who James privileges with a direct address, is “entreated not to forget that [Basil] prolonged his consonants and swallowed his vowels, that he was guilty of elisions and interpolations which were equally unexpected, and that his discourse was pervaded by something sultry and vast, something almost African in its rich, basking tone, something that suggested the teeming expanse of the cotton-field” (804). Although Basil’s presence first throws Olive into one of her “fits of tragic shyness,” we soon hear that “the effect of his tone was to dispel her shyness” (809, 810). Olive is “reassured at finding that her visitor was peculiar,” and her initial attraction to Basil is a product of her attention to style (811).

The opposition between Olive’s animosity to form and Basil’s almost extreme embrace of the chivalric code sets the stage for their ongoing battle over Verena, and the contest is complicated by Olive’s tumultuous and anxiety-charged relationship to style.
Olive’s romantic dream of herself as a hero further compels her to feel sympathy for Basil, who she imagines is “much bereaved,” and she envies him that “he had fought and offered his own life, even if it had not been taken” in the Civil War (811). Despite her conscience telling her that she should not invite “an offshoot of the old slave-holding oligarchy” to her house, “she could not defend herself against a rich admiration—a kind of tenderness of envy—of any one who had been so happy as to have that opportunity. The most secret, the most sacred hope of her nature was that she might some day have such a chance, that she might be a martyr and die for something” (811). Olive endows Basil’s southern style and manners with her own romantically imagined content, perhaps to justify or explain her initial comfort and attraction to a Southerner. Yet Basil’s presence in Olive’s house quickly sends her into an “unreasoned terror” (820). In fact, she challenges him to debate with her about her beliefs “as a punishment” for the anxiety he causes her (821). All Basil admits to at this point is that he has not the “least idea” what the “new truths” are (819). But Olive knows that Basil is not being sincere, and “she observed to him that she was sure he knew what she meant; he was only pretending he didn’t” (819). Basil continues to belittle and condescend, referring to the gathering at Miss Birdseye’s as “this little reunion” and claiming that his attendance will give him a chance to “fix” the problems of humanity (820). Olive’s fear of Basil, who subtly mocks her while upholding his gentlemanly façade, can be attributed to her reaction both to his tone, style, and manner and to the genuinely misogynistic views that Olive correctly suspects underlie his style.

The interior spaces of Olive’s home further reflect her interest in style, and her insistence that the spaces remain private demonstrates her anxiety about what her own
attention to taste may mean about her moral substance. Basil is struck by her “cushioned feminine nest,” and he feels, on exploring her drawing room, that “he had never seen an interior that was so much an interior…never felt himself in the presence of so much organised privacy or of so many objects that spoke of habits and tastes” (814, 816). Unlike the habits and tastes of Basil’s other acquaintances, Olive’s require “much upholstery,” which softens her interior much as Basil’s sultry tones soften his words (815). Basil is similarly struck by the inside of Olive’s house in Maine. Although the furniture that comes with the rental house is so sparse that “the paucity of chairs and tables and bedsteads was such that their little party used almost to sit down, to lie down, in turn,” the rooms are “garnished” with photographs, a piano and other “embellishments” of style and taste (1132). But Olive is only comfortable if the evidence of her attention to style and comfort is kept private, and she allows few visitors, whether to the house in Boston or the “cottage-fortress” in Maine (1163). We have a deep sense of the tension Olive feels when Basil, Mr. Tarrant, and Matthias Pardon invade her private spaces, which hold evidence of her sense of taste. Olive confines the clues that point to her attraction to beauty to private areas because she feels that they take away from how she will be perceived as a moral agent and political activist.

Olive fears, like Cicero, that style is only “frivolity in the disguise of knowledge,” a perspective which recognizes the possibility of style as a form of deception and which elucidates James’s old-fashioned investment in distinctions between truth and appearance (827). Olive becomes annoyed with Basil for teasing her about her comfortable position, and he can see that “she disliked to be reminded of certain things which, for her, were mitigations of the hard feminine lot” (822). Olive hides from Basil that she “mortally
disliked” the interior of Miss Birdseye’s house, and “that in a career in which she was constantly exposing herself to offence and laceration, her most poignant suffering came 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” (827). Despite her attempts to hide and kill her attraction to style, “her susceptibility was constantly blooming afresh and making her wonder whether the absence of nice arrangements were a necessary part of the enthusiasm of humanity” (827). While Olive attempts to hide her aesthetic tastes and expresses concern about the moral implications of having an aesthetic sensibility, she cannot purge herself of her attraction to style.

Olive’s attraction to and passion for Verena Tarrant represent her attraction to style, and Olive’s discomfort with her own artistic tastes underlies her murky relationship with Verena. Olive, like all of the characters who are drawn to Verena, is captivated by her charismatic and brilliant style, not by the substance of her speeches or her commitment to feminism. While we are not given much of the substance of Verena’s talk at Miss Birdseye’s house, we hear that she “had far more colour than any one there,” and Basil, who imagines she is “like a moving statue,” realizes that her “effect was not in what she said, but in the picture and figure…the visible freshness and purity of the little effort” (853, 854, 856). While the narrative voice distances itself from Basil’s perspective by saying “I know not whether Ransom was aware of the bearings of this interpretation, which attributed to Miss Tarrant a singular hollowness of character,” Basil is not the only person in the audience who attributes Verena’s appeal to her style (857). It is “affirmed within [his] hearing” by supporters of the women’s movement that if there were more people like Verena, “the matter would soon be fixed; and it was rejoined that they could
not expect to have a great many—the style was so peculiar. It was generally admitted that the style was peculiar, but Miss Tarrant’s peculiarity was the explanation of her success” (859). Olive’s desire to possess Verena forms almost immediately after Verena’s first performance at Miss Birdseye’s, when Olive invites Verena to visit her on Beacon Street.

Olive and Verena both recognize that Olive’s attraction to Verena is at least partly, if not primarily, based on Verena’s visual appeal and eloquent style. Verena’s “gilt buttons,” “bright, vulgar clothes,” and “salient appearance” make her seem, to Olive, to “belong to the ‘people,’” and conjure up, for Olive, romantically artistic images of “the social dusk of the mysterious democracy which Miss Chancellor held that the fortunate classes knew so little about” (873). It is worth noting that Olive seems to assign a certain populist content to Verena’s style, as if she is uncomfortable appreciating her for her style alone. In fact, when Olive feels that “Miss Tarrant might wear gilt buttons from her head to foot, her soul could not be vulgar,” we understand that, for Olive, Verena’s “gilt buttons” are only attractive to Olive, are only not vulgar, because they are transformed by what Olive believes to be the substance of Verena’s “soul” (873). Olive has the ability to “take possession of Verena” with a “quick survey,” which she does on Verena’s first visit to her house, and the importance Olive places on her gaze and visual stimulation is highlighted by her wish to further frame Verena, not only inside her cushioned and upholstered interior, but also by the branches of a tree (873). Verena tells her mother that Olive is “going to have a tree in, next week; she says she wants to see [Verena] under a tree” (893). Although Olive is attracted to Verena’s surface or style, her anxiety about how her own attention to style may jeopardize her moral sense complicates her relationship with Verena.
Olive not only fears that attention represents a limited form of capital, and that she squanders attention when she, according to her perspective, wastes it on beauty, she also worries that Verena will forsake her and the cause if she gets swept away by the world of beauty and pleasure which Mr. Burrage represents. Although she recognizes Verena’s composition is of “many pieces,” she worries that if Verena pays too much attention to beauty she will not have enough attention to spend on substance, which is what Olive sees herself as providing (937). Olive tells Verena that “taste and art” are only “good when they enlarged the mind, not when they narrowed it,” yet Olive gives in to her own attraction to beauty completely, if only briefly, when they visit Mr. Burrage’s rooms at Cambridge to see his collections and hear him play piano (940). Olive, who is “extremely susceptible to music,” allows herself to be “soothed and beguiled by the young man’s charming art” (943). She can “for half an hour…surrender herself” amidst the “faint fragrance from the burning logs, which mingled with the perfume of Schubert and Mendelssohn” (943). So strongly does she feel that “harmony ruled the scene” and that “human life ceased to battle” that she asks “herself why one should have a quarrel with it; the relations of men and women, in that picturesque grouping, had not the air of being internecine” (943). Therefore her attentiveness to the beauty of the music does indeed threaten, just for the moment, her commitment to social justice, and she repents her lapse of control. Before the evening ends “Olive felt that they were both (Verena and she) quite demoralised” (944). It is as if Olive believes that because she becomes wrapped up in the music and for a moment feels that she need not “quarrel” with life, she will never again be able to devote herself to her cause (943).
Olive’s statement that taste and art ought to enlarge the mind indicates that style and beauty have a place in the world of substantive things. But because Olive is usually uncomfortable with any settlement between style and invention, she is more likely to exaggerate her disdain for style than to find a way to accommodate her political views to it. When Verena later breaks out “into a reflection very similar to the whimsical falterings of which [Olive] herself had been conscious while they sat in Mr. Burrage’s pretty rooms,” asking if Olive felt “the want of a vote” while listening to the music, Olive feels it is so “necessary to give her a very firm answer” that she lies, telling Verena “I always feel it—everywhere—night and day” (945). Olive cannot admit to Verena that she has lost herself in the music even for a moment. Although, at first glance, Olive’s lie is only a minor misrepresentation of her feelings about music, her compulsion to lie is more meaningful than the lie itself because Olive has such a strong moral sense and high standard for her friendship with Verena. But her fear that the effects of style will demoralize them both overrides that moral sense when she lies.

Once she has lied to Verena, Olive clearly articulates her construction of their relationship, setting herself up as the provider of substance and Verena as the provider of style. After Verena confesses that Olive is her “conscience,” Olive replies that she would like to call Verena her “form—[her] envelope. But [Verena is] too beautiful for that” (946). Olive is flattered and feels a sense of security that Verena thinks Olive provides her with substance, and Olive admits that she sees Verena as the “form” that frames and carries the substance she gives (946). And even though Olive is highly anxious about her own attraction to style, she feels that a “partnership” of her mind with Verena’s, “each of them, by itself, lacking an important group of facets—made an organic whole”; Olive
recognizes that her lack of style, or rather her repression of her attraction to style, prevents her from being a success without Verena’s help (946-947). In this moment, Olive and Verena become the two ends of the substance and style spectrum. Because Olive is uncomfortable paying attention to both ends of the spectrum, she clings to the extreme that represents substance and externalizes the other, style, in the form of Verena. But Olive fails to recognize how she engages physically and stylistically with the world, ignoring her own form, and, instead, demanding that the world take her only for her content.

Olive betrays her anxiety about the attention she pays to style in her attempts to efface her own form and style. Her sister, Mrs. Luna, touches on Olive’s fear of style when Olive first meets Basil. Mrs. Luna tells Olive that she looks like she is dressed for a “sea voyage” and goes on to happily proclaim, “I am glad I haven’t opinions that prevent my dressing in the evening…The amount of thought they give to their clothing, the people afraid of looking frivolous” (808). Not only does Mrs. Luna directly recognize the conflict Olive feels between substance and style, noting that her opinions are directly related to her fear of frivolity, but she also indirectly points to the irony of Olive’s dilemma: Olive has to pay attention to her style in order to appear as though she does not care about it. Later, when Verena declares that Olive is “quite a speaker” and tells Olive “you would far surpass me if you would let yourself go,” Olive denies that she has any such talent (928). Although she has just delivered a beautiful speech to Verena, Olive implies that she only speaks well because Verena is her audience. Completely ignoring the effect her style has on Verena, Olive declares: “the very stones of the street—all the dumb things of nature—might find a voice to talk to you. I have no facility; I am
awkward and embarrassed and dry” (928), yet the narrator continues with a description of Olive that focuses, almost completely, on her style:

she presented her most graceful aspect; she had a tone of softness and sympathy, a gentle dignity, a serenity of wisdom, which sealed the appreciation of those who knew her well enough to like her, and which always impressed Verena as something almost august. Such moods, however, were not often revealed to the public at large; they belonged to Miss Chancellor’s very private life. (928)

Thus, just as Olive hides away her soft upholstery and beautiful interiors, as if she is ashamed of her attention to taste, she also keeps her impressive rhetorical style private. Even the distance created by the use of “Miss Chancellor” in this passage, instead of Olive, suggests that her display might be too private even for the narrative voice to intrude more than necessary (928).

Although Olive only unveils her use of style when she is in private, she clearly is rhetorically skilled, and her tone and style play a large part in her ability to convince Verena to commit herself further to the feminist cause. After revoking her first demand that Verena promise she will never marry, Olive explains to Verena that she “must be saved; but your safety must not come from your having tied your hands.” She goes on to insist to Verena that safety must come from “the growth of your perception; from your seeing things, of yourself, sincerely and with conviction, in the light in which I see them; from your feeling that for your work your freedom is essential, and there is no freedom for you and me save in religiously not doing what you will often be asked to do.” While Olive claims to be concerned with Verena’s safety, her speech also reveals her belief in her complete dependence on Verena. She manages to unite the image of Verena’s
liberation with the idea that she and Verena are two parts of a whole. Not only does Olive state that when Verena grows enough to see herself sincerely, she will see things “in the light in which” Olive sees them. She also implies that her own liberty, that is Olive’s, depends on Verena’s not marrying. She ends the speech with the strange, interrupted “and I never,” followed by an exclamation point and the observation by the narrator, focused on her style, that she “brought out these last words with a profound jerk which was not without its pathos.” Olive does not finish saying what she never will do, but instead pleads “don’t promise, don’t promise…I would far rather you didn’t. But don’t fail me—don’t fail me, or I shall die.” The narrator yet again addresses Olive’s style and its effect on Verena, saying “the manner of her inconsistency was altogether feminine,” and “the girl was now completely under her influence; she had latent curiosities and distractions—left to herself, she was not always thinking of the unhappiness of women; but the touch of Olive’s tone worked a spell.” Not only do we hear that Verena is enchanted by “Olive’s tone.” The narrator also indicates how Olive’s vision of Verena’s is made of many pieces, observing that in Olive’s tone Verena “found something to which at least a portion of her nature turned with eagerness.” Verena’s multifaceted nature supports her bivalent vision, and what Olive perceives as the resulting inconsistency in Verena’s behavior terrifies her. Olive pulls out all of her rhetorical weapons, including her highly developed manipulation of style, to try to prevent Verena from leaving her (929).

Despite Olive’s insistence that she wants Verena to realize true freedom, Olive really “would have been delighted to put Verena into the enjoyment of that freedom…by preventing her exercising it in a particular direction” (929). Olive, therefore, will allow
herself to restrict Verena’s enjoyment of life and freedom if that restriction leads to what Olive feels is a higher good. Olive is passionate about Verena and her style, believing that she is dependent on Verena, and hopes that she can use her own knowledge to make Verena just as dependent on her. While visiting Verena at her parents’ house, Olive notes that Verena’s “qualities…were like some brilliant birthday-present, left at the door by an unknown messenger, to be delightful for ever as an inexhaustible legacy, and amusing for ever from the obscurity of its source” (908). The narrator’s remark that Verena’s qualities are “superabundantly crude” is said to be a happy thing “for Olive, who promised herself…to train and polish them” (908). But Olive’s plans to educate Verena and fill her with history and German philosophy are just as much about keeping Verena from being involved with men as they are about improving her contribution to the women’s movement.

We can see evidence of Olive’s success in convincing Verena that each is half of one whole, each of them one end of two seemingly opposed polarities, when Verena, who often avoids taking credit for her ability to command a crowd, admits to Basil that Olive makes her speeches, “or the best part of them. She tells me what to say—the real things, the strong things. It’s Miss Chancellor as much as me” (1008). Verena feels that Miss Chancellor also commands the audience. Her use of the pronoun, “it,” is unclear; Verena may be telling Basil that the speeches, as they are written on a sheet of paper, are just as much Olive’s as they are hers, but perhaps the “it” is the actual speech as it is performed. After all, Verena is responding to Basil’s question, “do you still make speeches…and does she make speeches too” (1008). Verena may also be saying that her success in eliciting enthusiastic responses from listeners is not just her own but Olive’s also. It is Olive who
moves the audiences to applause and commitment to the cause. Basil gives the
impression that he is asking Verena whether or not she still gets on stage and speaks, not
if she sits with a pad of paper and writes. Before she met Olive, in fact, Verena did not
prepare her speeches by writing them, but rather she improvised, or the knowledge would
“pass into her” with her father’s help (849). If, then, the “it” in Verena’s statement, “it’s
Miss Chancellor as much as me,” is the performance of the speech, then Verena imagines
herself, at least when she is on stage, as Olive imagines her; Verena becomes only half of
a whole, and Olive makes up the other half (1008). Verena’s habit of allowing herself to
be seen as a stylish but hollow container, a mere envelope for someone else’s substance,
developed before she met Olive, but this habit makes her more susceptible to Olive’s
suggestions that she sacrifice certain pleasures in order to fight for justice.

Olive’s insistence that one must choose between a sense of justice and an
appreciation for art, beauty, and even pleasure prevents her from being sincere with
Verena about the depth of her passion and her full intentions for keeping Verena involved
in the movement. Verena is much more to Olive than a partner in fighting for social
justice; Olive wants “to keep [Verena] quite for herself” (899). Olive even admits to
Verena “that she was jealous, that she didn’t wish to think of the girl’s belonging to any
one but herself” (902). But when Olive says that losing Verena would kill her, she
implies that it would be Verena’s absence from the movement, from the fight for female
liberation (not from their increasingly intimate friendship), that would strike the blow.
When Olive imagines that Verena may be lost or dead after a boat ride with Basil, she felt
“above all…how she had understood friendship, and how never to see the face of the
creature she had taken to her soul would be for her as the stroke of blindness” (1182). Yet
she never fully expresses to Verena exactly how she understands their friendship; instead, Olive’s “most passionate protest was summed up in her saying that if Verena were to forsake them it would put back the emancipation of women a hundred years” (1151). Olive thus masks her fear of losing a partner in life with her fear of losing her partner in a social movement. In other words, Olive pretends she is merely concerned that when Verena pays attention to pleasure and beauty she fails to pay attention to morality, but equally as disturbing to Olive is the idea that Verena will fail to pay attention to her.

We might say that Verena’s attention becomes the currency during much of *The Bostonians* and certainly during the final chapters, and that Olive and Basil battle each other to possess more of Verena’s attention than the other. Verena must negotiate with Olive, using the very gift of speech that Olive helps her develop, to spend time with Basil, who has followed Verena to Maine. Yet her rhetorical skills, her “artlessly artful facilities, were not a part of her essence, an expression of her innermost preferences. What was a part of her essence was the extraordinary generosity with which she could expose herself, give herself away, turn herself inside out, for the satisfaction of a person who made demands of her” (1152). Olive recognizes again that Verena “was very deficient in the desire to be consistent with herself,” and Olive would rather keep Verena hidden away where Verena will not be tempted by outside influences (1153). Basil also recognizes and uses Verena’s generosity in Maine when he determines “to show her how much he loved her, and then to press, to press, always to press” (1159). Basil and Olive are both relentless in their pursuit of Verena’s attention, but their manners of pursuit are quite different.
Olive’s attempts to efface her own style and possess Verena often lead her to act unethically; she not only often lies to Verena, as she does after hearing Mr. Burrage play piano, but she also has hidden intentions for keeping Verena involved in the movement and allows herself to restrict Verena’s freedom. Yet the complexity of Basil’s psyche and of his motives for pursuing Verena make him, of the two, a far more sinister seducer. Basil is not afraid, as Olive is, to appeal to Verena’s sense of style to make her believe that “the idea of giving herself to a man” is “more agreeable to her than that of giving herself to a movement,” and he intensifies his hold on her by finding “the means to deepen this illumination, to drag her former standard in the dust” (1159). Reflecting on a response he has written to Verena’s letter, in which she asks him to leave the town where they are vacationing, Basil “liked to think that he had great tact with women,” and he feels that “to go away proved how secure he felt, what a conviction he had that however she might turn and twist in his grasp he held her fast” (1173). James’s layering of chivalry (Basil’s “great tact”) over violence (his tight “grasp”) furthers Basil’s earlier feeling that he need not be chivalrous with Olive because “chivalry had to do with one’s relations with people one hated, not with those one loved” (1163). This revelation, of the hate beneath chivalry, may lead us to question Basil’s real feelings for Verena, with whom he is almost always a gentleman. Basil wants to quiet or erase Verena’s substance. While at Miss Birdseye’s side, Verena “cried, with a sudden violence of emotion” that Miss Birdseye is their “heroine,” their “saint,” and it was as if “a wave of contrition, of shame, had swept over her—a quick desire to atone for her secret swerving” (1170). Thinking about this incident later, Basil recognizes that Verena’s effusion was genuine, for he feels that “the emotion she had expressed…was only one of her instinctive
contortions,” yet he plans on wiping out parts of Verena; he takes “due note” of these “instinctive contortions” and “said to himself that a good many more would probably occur before she would be quiet” (1173). Here Basil’s taste in women resembles Osmond’s, whose aestheticism requires his consort, Isabel, to have no ideas of her own and to reflect in her polished surface only his ideas and his exquisite taste. While Olive frequently hides from Verena her personal attraction to Verena’s style and to beauty in general, Basil is more open about his tastes.

Basil lacks the strong moral sense that drives Olive, he is not torn by divided attention, and he does not pretend that morality motivates him. He admits to Verena that he becomes more hopeful about winning her when an editor accepts a paper he wrote because he had “before him a vision of distinction, of influence, of fortune” (1150). Verena seems to feel a sense of satisfaction that she “pleased him more than any one,” even though she knows that he is disgusted by her beliefs (1151). Basil also realizes that “the situation between [Basil and Olive] was too grim; it was a war to the knife, it was a question of who should pull the hardest,” and they are pulling, of course, on Verena’s attention (1155). Although Olive allows herself to restrict Verena’s enjoyment of life, Basil is willing to pull even harder. At one point, when he feels “simply sickened” by the idea that Verena will “become widely popular,” he feels that he is “almost capable of kidnapping her” (1164). We get the sense that Verena’s surface—“her light, bright texture, her complacent responsiveness, her genial, graceful, ornamental cast”—contributes to her “desire to keep on pleasing others” (1158). And in the final scenes of the novel, Basil’s almost violent removal of Verena from the Boston Music Hall borders on kidnapping; “by muscular force” he “wrenched her away” as she cries out for Olive.
He wins “his victory” by brute force, ignoring Verena’s plea to let her give the speech and save Olive from humiliation (1218).

Yet James leaves it ambiguous whether or not Olive is actually humiliated when she walks onto stage in Verena’s place. For although Olive tells Mrs. Farinder that she is going on stage “to be hissed and hooted and insulted,” when she does walk out, “the hush was respectful” (1218). The audience is already furious about Verena’s delay; we hear that “the combined effort of Mr. Filer,” Verena’s agent, and of “Selah Tarrant to pacify the public had not, apparently, the success it deserved; the house continued in uproar and the volume of sound increased” (1213). But the audience wants to hear Olive speak, and we are left wondering whether, in the end, Olive reclaims for herself a sense of her own style, which she has tried to efface throughout the novel. She appears and speaks in front of a large audience, something she has insisted she would never do, and since Basil has wrenched away Verena, who represents, for Olive, attention to style, Olive loses the platform on which she imagines her substance will be presented. Olive, therefore, out of a sense of duty and moral obligation to the crowd and despite her utter terror, allows herself to be the platform, or form, for her own content.

Olive’s struggles first to repress and erase her own form and style and then, perhaps finally, to incorporate that attention to style into her commitment to justice, represent James’s exploration of the possibility of having a flexible identity not restricted by rigid concepts of self. This is an amazing transformation for Olive, who has worried that if she honors her sense of taste by paying attention to style she will jeopardize her moral sense and ability to fight for women’s equality. For Olive, artistic sensibility and moral sense, no less than issues of gender, class or sexuality, play a role in defining
identity. *James* highlights these aspects of identity formation in *The Bostonians* and again in *The Princess Casamassima*.

IV. Transcendence and Fatality in *The Princess Casamassima*

Hyacinth Robinson, oft-bewildered though he is, embodies in *The Princess Casamassima* James’s ideal artist-observer on whom “nothing is lost” (“Art of Fiction” 13). Seeing too many sides of things at once is both Hyacinth’s doom and his engine of transcendence. His attention is almost always divided between seemingly opposed positions, which may be variously formulated—tradition and revolution, for example, or justice and beauty, or substance and style, or, in both traditional humanistic readings like Lionel Trilling’s and revisionary Foucauldian readings like Mark Seltzer’s, art and power. Hyacinth’s story is unusual in the James canon for the decisive closure of Hyacinth’s suicide; his story does not go on beyond the circle the novel draws around it as do, say, Isabel’s story, or Verena’s story, and or indeed the stories of most of James’s protagonists, who are typically left *en l’air*. Think of Maisie at the end of *What Maisie Knew* en route to an unknowable future. And yet despite the finality of Hyacinth’s end, he achieves in one brief interlude on the Continent, as we shall see, a triumph of attention that collapses all of those conflicting pulls into a single vision, a moment that Hyacinth treasures and that James valorizes even though Hyacinth cannot long outlive it.

Only from the vantage point of autobiographical hindsight or, for a biographer or commentator on a life, from the even more distanced hindsight looking over the expanse of a life that has been completed, do the patterns and coherent meaning of the life fully emerge. Henry James provides very little commentary within *The Princess Casamassima*.
about Hyacinth Robinson’s suicide other than Shinkel’s remark that it would have been better if it had been the duke, and one is left wondering what meaningful patterns can be found in the life of a hero who destroys himself. While it may seem that Hyacinth has utterly despaired of being able to reconcile the conflicting claims of sensibility and justice and that he kills himself to escape the pressure he feels to choose between them, such readings may be too simple.

Hyacinth’s suicide, though perhaps inevitably viewed in conventional terms as a failure, follows a period in his life of philosophical and emotional resolution on terms and in a key that James’s narrator regards as nothing short of heroic. Just as James creates characters in *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Bostonians* who struggle with what they perceive to be an incompatibility between invention and style, in *The Princess Casamassima* he creates in Hyacinth a character who is bewildered by a world that seems to set up art and justice on opposite sides of a wall that cannot be crossed; yet he finds a way to bring the two sides together. While Hyacinth often takes pleasure in the seeming incoherence that allows for this reconciliation, it also bewilders him and causes him anxiety. Hyacinth feels external pressures pushing him to have a more consistently coherent identity, the same pressures that prompt Olive Chancellor to lie to Verena about her constant political commitment and her aesthetic sense, and it may be his apprehension, rather than a failure to reconcile the conflicts between art and morality, that causes him to choose suicide. Although Hyacinth does accomplish transitory moments of collapse between two seemingly opposed poles, so that he pays attention to beauty and justice at the same time, he still fears that the attention he pays to the surface
of the world is attention that cannot be paid to substance and that his love of style and art will lead to his demoralization.

Hyacinth’s fears reflect a common Victorian belief that one cannot look in two directions at the same time and that choosing to focus on art may mean ignoring morality. James’s appeal in “The Art of Fiction” for artistic freedom, for the right of the fabulist to follow his own lights and not to be compelled to reward the virtuous, punish the wicked, and produce happy endings, only partially allies him with Pater’s aestheticist progeny, who relished impressions, sensations, and art for art’s sake. James’s own commitments were at once aesthetic and moral, and in The Princess Casamassima James makes Hyacinth’s consciousness the field on which art and morality battle for attention, primacy, and allegiance. As we will see, this battle reaches its most intense pitch during Hyacinth’s time in Paris and Venice. When Hyacinth writes to Millicent Henning from Italy, his motives for radical political action have deepened, for his travels have increased his conviction “that want and toil and suffering are the constant lot of the immense majority of the human race.” Yet the antidote to human misery, “the great rectification” of a revolutionary “redistribution,” would threaten “[t]he monuments and treasures of art, the great palaces and properties, the conquests of learning and taste, the general fabric of civilization as we know it.” The revolutionary Hoffendahl, whom Hyacinth admires tremendously and from whom he has accepted an assignment to assassinate a duke, would, Hyacinth knows, “cut up the ceilings of the Veronese into strips, so that every one might have a little piece” (354). No wonder poor Hyacinth is bewildered by these competing claims on his loyalty and attention.
Paul Armstrong indirectly addresses Hyacinth’s bewilderment when he states that Henry James’s writing represented a breakthrough because of its “portrayal of the vicissitudes of consciousness in their own right” (Armstrong 6). Armstrong explains, “James did not invent the hermeneutic circle, obviously, but he did discover that its movements could themselves form the action of the novel—and not just serve as the means to other ends in the development of a plot or a character” (6). Armstrong then observes, “James abandons monism and embraces pluralism when he declares that ‘the measure of reality is very difficult to fix…Humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad of forms’” (8). The naturalistic settings in the novel, such as Millbank prison, where Hyacinth visits his mother, and the Sun and Moon, a bar where Hyacinth meets with his revolutionary friends, are among the “myriad of forms” that engage Hyacinth’s attention (8). But Hyacinth’s struggle with these different forms (and not the forms themselves) is the real focus of the novel. Hyacinth’s suicide forces readers to focus on his attempts to interpret the various realities of his conflicting loyalties—loyalties to the values of the established order, especially its achievement in art and aesthetics, on the one hand, and to the revolutionary action that would overthrow that order, on the other hand—and not on political unrest and revolutionary forms or settings like the Sun and Moon and Millbank prison, which at first seem to make this novel decidedly different from the rest of James’s work. In his discussion of *The Ambassadors* Armstrong states, “this is not a case where reality exists in the middle between opposing extremes. Instead, James reopens the plurality of interpretations,” something James also frequently does in *The Princess Casamassima* as Hyacinth negotiates his conflicting loyalties (8). Hyacinth’s sensitive,
indeed, highly perceptive, temperament allows him to travel among his different interpretations of the world, sometimes making him feel he is inconsistent.

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s distinction between consistency of deeds and a coherent temperament shows that while Hyacinth, unlike Olive in *The Bostonians*, allows himself to be somewhat inconsistent, his feelings and deeds are all strung along a coherent temperament. In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson writes that consistency is a “terror that scares us from self-trust,” and he seems to define consistency as “a reverence for our past act or word, because the eyes of others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past acts, and we are loath to disappoint them” (Emerson 265). Although Hyacinth fears that his simultaneous promises to advance the revolution and to surrender fully to the adoration of beauty will cause his friends to reject him for being inconsistent, it is Hyacinth’s perceptive temperament—the “iron wire” on which the beads of his sensations are strung—that both draws his attention to beauty and shapes his strong identification with the marginalized and his divided loyalties to the members of his surrogate family (474). Emerson celebrates inconsistency in “Self-Reliance,” and continues his discussion of it in “Experience” when he writes, “if I have described life as a flux of moods, I must now add, that there is that in us which changes not, and which ranks all sensations and states of mind” (485). When Hyacinth first visits Paul Muniment and his sister, Rosy, for example, he is as interested in the way Rosy, surrounded by a “counterpane of gaudy patchwork… had the air of having gone to bed in a picture gallery,” as he is in hearing about Paul’s revolutionary beliefs (James, *Princess* 133).

Furthermore, Hyacinth’s loyalties to Paul, who draws him into the scene of revolutionary action, on the one hand, and to Mr. Vetch, who hopes to help Hyacinth
appreciate the beauty of his brief life, on the other hand, and even to the Princess, who draws him both to beauty and revolution, are a product of his perceptive temperament because these attachments involve his affection for them as members of his constructed family and not his belief or disbelief in their ideology or politics. Hyacinth’s trust in his own perceptive temperament, which draws him to both artistic beauty and social action, allows him to form connections with the diverse group of individuals who make up his surrogate family despite the seemingly irreconcilable differences in the ideology of the members. His movement among the members of such a diverse group is temperamentally, not logically, motivated, and constitutes an inquiry out of which Hyacinth attempts to develop his own flexible philosophy about art and morality. While Olive held herself to a high standard of consistency, Hyacinth is more like Olive’s conception of Verena; he too, is made of “many pieces” (James, Bostonians 114), and his refusal to adopt completely the philosophy either of the revolutionaries or of the aristocrats can be seen as an independent act of self-definition and also as an attempt not to leave anything out of his experience of life. Similarly, Hyacinth’s reactions to the beautiful surfaces of the world such as the art of bookbinding, “the high polish of the great floors” of the Louvre, and even the physical beauty of the Princess and Millicent are more products of his sensibility than of analysis (James, Princess 339).

Hyacinth’s almost obsessive love for Paul in the only scene that actually takes place in the Sun and Moon, which precipitates his vow to serve the revolution, points to the role Hyacinth’s temperament, both affectionate and artistic, plays in his decision-making: “when [Paul] talked Hyacinth listened, almost holding his breath; and when he said nothing Hyacinth watched him fixedly, listening to the others only through the
medium of his candid countenance” (238). Hyacinth spends his time at these gatherings waiting “for a sign” from Paul, a sign that will give him a role that he can “play with brilliancy, to offer an example—an example, even, that might survive him—of pure youthful, almost juvenile, consecration,” an artistic and not political view of the part he dreams of playing (241). Hyacinth fantasizes about the dramatic role that he will perform and does not focus on the political goals that he will help to realize. He is drawn in not by the logical rhetoric of the group’s social complaints, but by Paul’s voice and Paul’s “candid countenance” (238). The culmination in the Sun and Moon scene of both his affection for and desire to please Paul, along with his aesthetically idealized vision of his theatrical role in a passionate revolution, catapults him into Hoffendahl’s apartment, where he makes the tragic pledge.

Despite Hyacinth’s proud declaration to the Princess that he “gave [his] life away,” it is clear from the rest of the novel that Hyacinth has promised only his physical body and not his mind (285). Describing his reaction to Hoffendahl, Hyacinth states, “he made me see, he made me feel, he made me do, everything he wanted,” but Hoffendahl is not the only person so to inspire Hyacinth, suggesting that the response has less to do with Hoffendahl’s political agenda than with Hyacinth’s tendency to devote himself to people he finds either physically or intellectually beautiful (289). He is willing to do as much for the Princess as he is for the revolution when he offers to kill Captain Sholto, “if he troubles” her, and he recognizes that even Millicent’s beautiful vitality would easily dominate him if they ever were to marry (313). Hyacinth’s artistic, affectionate temperament, not his intellect, keeps him oscillating between such seemingly incompatible worlds, and part of his vulnerability to conflict between art and morality is
caused by his unwillingness to embrace one dogma to the exclusion of other points of view or to the possible exclusion of any member of his surrogate family.

Hyacinth’s internal conflicts are reflected in his construction of relationships with the various people who serve as his parents, both biological and surrogate. Although Hyacinth only meets his mother once, when he is very young, and has only read about his father, only once is he referred to as an orphan, when the narrator describes Amanda Pynsent’s fear that twelve-year-old Millicent will teach “the innocent orphan low ways” (45). Miss Pynsent acts as his adoptive mother, saving him from the workhouse and the streets, and Mr. Vetch becomes his first and most touching father figure. His loyalty to Miss Pynsent and Mr. Vetch, and indeed to all of his surrogate parents including the Poupins, and to Paul and the Princess, who are interestingly also, potentially, notionally his lovers, affects his sense of identity until his death.

Hyacinth is also affected by the ideas he creates from the small amount of information he has about his biological mother and father. He struggles to incorporate the knowledge he has about his parents into his self-image, but “there was no peace for him between the two currents that flowed in his nature, the blood of his passionate, plebeian mother and that of his long-descended, super-civilised sire.” He feels a strong loyalty to both parents whom he has never really known, attributing his “first impulses toward social criticism” to his mother and attempting to create for his father “some conceivable and human countenance…some expression of honour, of tenderness and recognition.” The memory of each biological parent is a combination of fact and artistic invention, yet Hyacinth feels “to desert one of these presences for the other—that idea had kind of a shame in it, as an act of treachery would have had.” He even imagines his father’s voice,
a voice he has of course never heard, reprimanding him for his involvement in revolutionary societies. (436)

Hyacinth’s loyalty to the memories he constructs of his biological parents and his affectionate attachment to his various surrogate parents combine in him to create a mind that not only cannot be pinned down by any single ideology but that also—more troublingly for Hyacinth—seems at times incoherent. When Paul declares that the conditions for the poor in London are “abominable” and the “present arrangements won’t do,” Hyacinth agrees, but he only does so with “a dolefulness begotten of the rather helpless sense that, whatever he saw, he saw (and this was always the case), so many other things beside. He saw the immeasurable misery of the people, and yet he saw all that had been, as it were, rescued and redeemed from it: the treasures, the felicities, the splendours, the successes, of the world” (404). Hyacinth is able to sympathize all at once with the misery and the beauty, which allows him to sympathize even further with the many members of the family he creates. Cynthia Weinstein examines nineteenth-century interpretations of the word sympathy, pointing out that in most cases it was necessary that a person recognize diversity or difference in order to feel sympathy.³ Hyacinth’s ability to create such a large and diverse surrogate family requires him to sympathize with each member of the family even if he does not fully subscribe to each person’s beliefs.

William James notes in The Principles of Psychology that “sympathetic people…can feel a sort of delicate rapture in thinking that however sick, ill-favored, mean-conditioned, and generally forsaken they may be, they are yet integral parts of this

³ Weinstein’s study in Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature focuses on the role of sympathy or lack of sympathy in biological and adoptive families in sentimental fiction.
brave world,” and, because they experience this sense of sympathetic connectedness, furthermore, “the outline of their self often gets uncertain” (W. James, *Principles* 189).

Perhaps William James’s analysis can be invoked to illuminate the observation by Henry James’s narrator that Hyacinth “had become vague, he was extinct” just when he felt “an insurmountable desire to do justice” to Paul by not challenging his friend “even in imagination” (H. James, *Princess* 544). Similarly, when Hyacinth imagines the Princess’s voice speaking “so bravely in the name of the Revolution…he had a sense of his mind, which had been made up, falling to pieces again” (544). His feelings of loyalty for Paul and the Princess and his desire to maintain a connection with each of them make him feel “vague,” or as though his mind is “falling to pieces” (544). Hyacinth’s sympathy for other characters further incorporates them into his diverse family, while contributing to his flexible, artistic temperament and to his apparent incoherence.

Although Hyacinth allows himself to travel among and try on the many perspectives of his biological and surrogate family, he is also aware of what Emerson recognizes in “Self-Reliance,” that the only “data” others have “for computing our orbit” is “our past act or word…and we are loath to disappoint them” (Emerson 265). Not only is Hyacinth deeply devoted to the members of his surrogate family, but he also depends on them to help him understand his role in the world. Because of his reliance on them to help him interpret his identity, Hyacinth is deeply troubled when he feels misunderstood by his friends. His sensitive awareness of audience and his overriding concern with the regard of others reverberate in his actions and feelings throughout the novel. Hyacinth is philosophically open-minded in his tendency to reject dogma and his “desire to do justice” to his friends, but he does not trust that the people he admires most will be as
open-minded with him (James, *Princess* 544). His fear of being classified and judged or even of being disregarded by the people around him sometimes undermines his resistance to dogma, making him vulnerable to manipulation by ideologues. Paul senses Hyacinth’s fear of being judged when they are at the Sun and Moon, telling him, “you’re the boy he [Hoffendahl] wants”; Paul knows Hyacinth’s self-consciousness will make him easy to control, a good tool for the revolution (254).

Hyacinth’s dependence on his friends and his fear that they will forsake him for his inconsistency make him question his perceptive temperament and desire to honor both his appreciation of beauty and his moral sense. Hyacinth’s shame about his background, for example, makes him feel that he must “go through life in a mask, in a borrowed mantle,” and throughout his life he attempts to regulate people’s perceptions of his identity (60). Since he was a child, and with Miss Pynsent’s encouragement, Hyacinth has sought to distinguish himself from what he perceives to be the vulgar and miserable life of Lomax Place. Yet the word “vulgar” is also used to describe certain aspects of the upper classes. For example, we hear that in Madeira Crescent the Princess finds “a delightful detachment from the invasive, vulgar, gossiping, distracting world she had known hitherto,” and that Lady Aurora finds Captain Sholto to be vulgar, but says that the working poor are not (388). Hyacinth is as much averse to being seen as a swell as he is to being seen as too low, and he often feels that he should hide his aesthetic sensibility as much as he hides the story of his mother and father. In this way, Hyacinth is less philosophically forgiving of himself than he is of the rest of the world; for while he allows his views of society to be loose and forgiving, shaped by his artistic and
affectionate temperament, he often worries that his friends would love him more if his identity were more narrowly circumscribed.

The conflict Hyacinth feels between his loyalty to art and order and his loyalty to his revolutionary friends is at least temporarily transcended when Hyacinth uses Mr. Vetch’s money to travel to Paris and Venice. One of the most beautiful examples of Hyacinth’s construction of family and avoidance of solitude occurs on his trip to Paris where he imagines his grandfather as a travel companion. “All Paris struck him as tremendously artistic and decorative,” and he stops at Tortoni’s to escape the danger of becoming “incoherent to himself,” for he feels he is in need of “balancing his accounts” (339, 336). Hyacinth is worn out from paying attention to the decoration and style of the beautiful city and must rest; wandering alone through Parisian streets, he has indulged his artistic and affectionate temperament to the fullest, and as he sat in the “dandified café…and felt his pulse and took stock of his impressions… ‘Splendid Paris, charming Paris’—that refrain, that fragment of an invocation, a beginning without an end, hummed itself perpetually in Hyacinth’s ears” (336-337).

This description of his experience demonstrates Hyacinth’s success, in the Paterian sense, which is “to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy” (Pater 152). Although Hyacinth feels that he needs to “balance his accounts,” that is, to balance his attention to style with attention to substance, he also sits down to take “stock of his impressions” so that he can draw his artistic experience out, so that he can “maintain this ecstasy” (James, Princess 339; Pater 152). When Pater warns that “we are all under sentence of death,” he also allows that it is with “a sort of indefinite reprieve,” and his counsel is that “our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in
getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time” (Pater 153). The wisest, from Pater’s perspective, spend “this interval…in art and song” (153). As one would expect with Hyacinth, who is more immediately and literally under sentence of death, more aware of his fleeting reprieve, than the generic humans to whom Pater refers, his impressions of Paris are clearly artistic, for they are extremely sentimental, visual, and even musical, but they also become moral when Hyacinth connects them to his family.

According to Robert Pippin, James was not a moral skeptic. Pippin argues that James is interested in and deals with the increasing complexity of making moral assessments, a complexity that has to do with the increasing unavailability of what we used to be able to rely on in interpreting and assessing each other, on the new role of money and the social mobility it made possible, the psychological suspicions it engendered, on new, much more extensive and deeper forms of social dependencies, and on very new ways of understanding the fluid, relatively unfixed, quite variously interpretable dimensions of psychological life.

(Pippin 11, 12)

Hyacinth’s perceptive temperament allows him to pay attention to two seemingly opposed polarities. He struggles with the resulting inconsistency of this temperament. James engages Hyacinth in a world of moral complexities, and Hyacinth embodies what Pippin describes as “the fluid, relatively unfixed, quite variously interpretable dimensions of psychological life” (12). Furthermore, Pippen explains that James “seems to have more idealist views about the reality of these moral terms…seems to make them depend somehow (for their sense and authority) on the communities that institute such
commitments,” demonstrating James’s belief that modern moral ambiguity necessarily leads to dependency on others (9,10). This dependency “and some ‘lived out’ acknowledgment of such dependency…makes up the new moral experience” (11).

Pippin’s account of James’s morality provides a useful context for reading Hyacinth’s disclosure to the Princess that “there was something demoralising in his particular situation” of “accepting thirty pounds” from Mr. Vetch to travel to Paris and Venice (James, *Princess* 385). Although the narrator pretends to tell us what Hyacinth means by his “particular situation” by stating that “it disposed one to take what one could get, made one at least very tolerant of whims that happened to be munificent,” it is not clear whether Hyacinth refers only to his lack of money or if he is also talking about his promise to Hoffendahl, his rapture with the beauty of Paris, his taking money from someone who opposes the revolution, or his struggle to interpret his place in the world (342). Whatever Hyacinth feels his particular situation is may actually be unimportant, which is why James leaves it vague. Of more importance is the notion that when he accepts the money from Mr. Vetch, Hyacinth sustains and strengthens his connection to his surrogate family, which serves as his moral community. While using Mr. Vetch’s gift to explore Paris, Hyacinth recognized, he greeted, with a thousand palpitations, the seat of his maternal ancestors—was proud to be associated with so much of the superb, so many proofs of a civilization that had no visible rough spots. He had his perplexities, and he even had now and then a revulsion for which he made no allowance, as when it came over him that the most brilliant city in the world was also the most blood-stained; but the great sense that he understood and sympathized was
preponderant, and his comprehension gave him wings. (337)

Hyacinth’s observation that the city had “no visible rough spots” demonstrates his attention to style and surface beauty, while the sympathy he feels for its bloody history reveals his ability to look through the surface to the substance (337). This scene represents bivalent attention balanced between an artistic and a moral perspective, and it is in this moment of balance that Hyacinth feels liberated from the conflict with which he has been struggling for much of the novel: “his comprehension gave him wings”(337). Hyacinth’s sensation of synthesis in this passage is reminiscent of Isabel Archer’s feeling that her immediate sense of happiness as she explores the beauty of Rome mingles with her sense of the “terrible past” and “give[s] it wings that it could wave in the blue” (James, Portrait 245). Hyacinth, like Isabel in Rome, feels liberated by his dual attention.

Hyacinth’s creation of his grandfather as a traveling companion is both an artistic and a moral act; the narrator paints the picture with such an abundance of visual imagery, we feel that Hyacinthe Vivier really “roamed about with Florentine’s boy, hand in hand, sat opposite to him at dinner…and treated him to innumerable revelations and counsels” (James, Princess 338). Hyacinth knows little more about his watchmaker grandfather than that he “had known the ecstasy of the barricade and had paid for it with his life,” but Hyacinth imagines him as a complete character (337-338). The imagined grandfather, like Hyacinth’s observation of the beautiful but “blood-stained” city, demonstrates a sort of artistic morality (337). Not only is Hyacinthe Vivier an artistic creation as part of Hyacinth’s active imagination, but he is also an artisan, making watches just as Hyacinth binds books. The grandfather is moral not only because of his role on the barricades, but also because of the way he “gazed at [Hyacinth] with eyes of deep, kind, glowing
comprehension and with lips which seemed to murmur that when one was to die
tomorrow one was wise to eat and drink today” (338). Hyacinthe Vivier’s appearance
represents Hyacinth Robinson’s need to create a community for himself, which Pippin
would classify as a moral act when he says that “the key issue in morality” might be “the
proper acknowledgment of, the enactment of, a dependence on others” (Pippin 10).
Hyacinth needs someone else, someone who is part of his community or surrogate
family, to tell him to “maintain this ecstasy” that he feels in Paris, and when no one else
is available, he creates someone (Pater 152). Hyacinthe Vivier’s existence is therefore
further evidence of Hyacinth’s ability to look at the world philosophically through an
ever-changeable series of lenses that allows for the coexistence of many seemingly
incompatible ideologies. Yet an even closer examination of this at once real and
imaginary character points to Hyacinth’s dependence on others to help him define his
identity, his need for a community to institute a moral commitment. Some might argue
that because the grandfather is only imaginary he cannot represent for Hyacinth the
reconciliation of art and morality, but the real reconciliation takes place not in the
imaginary person but in Hyacinth and his ability to craft another family member who
embodies seemingly conflicting characteristics. Although Hyacinth sets out to travel
alone, he creates yet another parental figure to guide him, advise him, and most
importantly approve of him. And then, like a ghost, Hyacinthe Vivier disappears as
smoothly as he came.

Hyacinth strikes the same balance between superficial and penetrating vision
when he stands alone at the Place de la Concorde. Although he recognizes “its
tremendously historic character,” what is even more present to him is “the spirit of life
that had been in it, not the spirit of death” (James, *The Princess* 350). “That shadow was effaced by the modern fairness of fountain and statue, the stately perspective and composition”; Hyacinth’s attention to the aesthetics of the square erases, or at least hides, the substance beneath the surface. His admiration of the “stately perspective and composition” makes it hard for him to care about the “turpitude and horror” that once occurred there (350). Despite the seeming erasure of substance, the apparent lack of attention to justice or morality, it is actually Hyacinth’s attention to surface that leads him into moral contemplation and assessment. The beauty of the square’s composition causes him to linger and “a sudden sense overtook him, making his heart sink with a kind of desolation—a sense of everything that might hold one to the world, of the sweetness of not dying…The tears rose to his eyes” and he asks himself in reference to his beloved Paul, “‘How could he—how could he’…for Hyacinth had dreamed of the religion of friendship” (351). Thus, Hyacinth’s artistic sensitivity leads to a moral inquiry in which he reveals the one dogma that he does not resist—friendship—and in which he exposes the moral limitations of Paul’s ideology, which apparently enables him to sacrifice a friend without a shudder or compunction.

Although Hyacinth finds a balance between his artistic response and his sense of justice in Paris, he is not completely aware of his success and in fact fears that his attention to beauty has left him demoralized. When he visits Venice, his letter to the Princess reveals his shifting loyalties and the attention he pays, on his travels, to surface beauty, again imagining himself as part of a “composition” in which he reclines “on a faded magenta divan in the corner” (352). Although he writes that the Venetian women’s faces “all look underfed,” Hyacinth pays less attention to their hunger than to how those
faces are “framed” by their shawls and to their “cheap cotton gowns, whose limp folds make the same delightful line that everything else in Italy makes” (351). Hyacinth directs his attention to the surface rather than to the substance of the hungry women, turning their outlines into part of the landscape of the beautiful city.

Further on in the letter, Hyacinth worries that when he returns to London he will find his work to be a “terrible grind,” which will mean that he is “deeply demoralized” (353). By the end of the letter, he declares that he will not participate in the destruction of “the great achievements…the splendid accumulations of the happier few,” of which people have been capable in spite of the toil and suffering, for he says he has “a devout hope that if [he] is to pass away while [he] is yet young it may not be with that odious stain upon [his] soul” (354). He turns his adoration of the beautiful and his desire to protect “the ceilings of the Veronese” which he imagines Hoffendahl would cut “into strips, so that every one might have a little piece,” into morality when he imagines that his participation in the destruction of such beauty would cause a “stain” on his soul (354). Morality, for Hyacinth, whose flexible identity allows for more contradiction and incoherence than someone like Paul, includes the protection of human achievement and beauty.

Hyacinth recognizes and wonders about the incoherent aspects of his identity when he compares himself to Paul. Hyacinth “already knew that his friend’s view of him was that he was ornamental and adapted to the lighter kinds of socialistic utility,” and, when he has to “remodel a good deal of his original conception” of Paul, he finds himself “awe-stricken…by the spectacle of his sublime consistency” (347). Although Hyacinth dislikes the idea of being classified by his friends, he also fears that they would love him
more if he had a more consistent or coherent identity, and he is convinced that Paul’s consistent allegiance to revolutionary action over social bonds is admirable. Hyacinth knows that “he himself could never have risen to that point,” and he feels that “most enviable of all was the force that enabled [Paul] to sink personal sentiment where a great public good was to be attempted and yet keep up the form of caring for that minor interest” (347-348). Although he feels that it makes him less worthy, Hyacinth’s knowledge that he “could not have detached himself from the personal prejudice so effectually as to put forward in that way, for the terrible ‘job’, a little chap he liked” renders him, in the Jamesian sense, more morally upstanding than Paul (347).

On his return to London, Hyacinth “gave a little private groan of relief when he discovered that he still liked his work”; in fact, he finds that “his taste had improved” as he proves to be a “genuine artist” working the “impressions he had accumulated” in Paris and Venice into his craft, and he begins to dream that someday he might “write something” (360). Hyacinth may relish the artistry of bookbinding and not his association with other workers, but his ability to come home and continue his craft with some enjoyment proves that he is able to be both creative and productive. Despite these signs that his travels have not ruined or demoralized him as he feared they would, Hyacinth becomes increasingly anxious about whether or not his friends will recognize the morality in his seemingly incoherent identity.

Twice before he kills himself Hyacinth demonstrates his distaste for solitude, a symptom of his increasingly desperate reliance on his constructed family to help him resolve his identity conflict. The first series of visits takes him from Millicent, who rejects his plan to be with her for the evening, to Lady Aurora’s house, where Lady
Aurora is kind but is preparing to reenter the world of society, and then to the Poupins’ house. Hyacinth’s search for company ends here, and his quest for a clear-cut and tightly defined identity that would please his friends is answered with the letter from Hoffendahl. Hyacinth finally receives an external call to action that gives him a clear and definite purpose, yet the moral obligation he discovered on his trips to Paris and Venice to protect the beauty that might be destroyed by revolutionary action prevents him from feeling any relief at the end of his quest.

When Hyacinth makes his final visit to the Princess, he has already decided that he will not keep his promise to Hoffendahl, but he almost changes his mind. He is tormented by her passionate bravery and her ignorant sense of assurance that he will never be called to act, and “he had a sense of his mind, which had been made up, falling to pieces again; but that sense in turn lost itself in a shudder which was already familiar—the horror of the public reappearance, on his part, of the imbrued hands of his mother” (544). Even in these last moments, Hyacinth bases his decision-making on his awareness of audience. His sensitivity to, and desire to control, the Princess’s ideas about him almost cause him to commit the assassination and incur the “stain upon his soul” that he has so hoped to avoid, while the repugnance of the idea of the reintroduction of his mother’s shame prevents him from doing it (354).

Hyacinth’s death, then, does not simply represent the artistic sensibility’s inability to assimilate into the world of politics or morals. Such a view of Hyacinth is inadequate partly because it ignores his highly artistic and moral experiences in Paris and Venice and partly because it fails to consider the role his dependence on others for self-definition plays in his dilemma and ultimately his death. His self-conscious awareness of audience
destroys his trust in his own perceptive temperament, and in the end, Hyacinth reveals a truth that may be universal: philosophic open-mindedness is more easily applied to external dogma than to truly internal and intimate ideas about one’s own identity, intimate because they are no longer abstract but linked to the human being associated with them.

Although one might plausibly think that his suicide means that his balancing act has failed, Hyacinth can still be viewed as a successful hero, a “genuine artist” who is not only highly concerned with doing justice to the family he constructed for himself, but who also reconciles the almost life-long tension he feels between art and morality and who learns in Paris and Venice to make the most of his brief time (360). According to Pater, “with this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch”; Pater argues that any theory “which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience...has no real claim upon us” (Pater 152-153). Hyacinth is not always comfortable with the liberating incoherence that his temperament allows, yet Pater would applaud his artistic temperament and his rejection of the revolutionary dogma that threatens his enjoyment of the physical, sensual world.

Despite James’s observation in a notebook entry on *The Portrait of a Lady* that “the whole of anything is never told,” he does not leave Hyacinth “en l’air” as he had left Isabel Archer in the earlier novel (James, *Notebooks* 18). The sense of closure conferred on Hyacinth’s story by his suicide is another quality of *The Princess Casamassima* that distinguishes it from much of James’s other fiction. Hyacinth’s suicide provides a
stronger sense of unity than one may be used to with James, and the lack of authorial commentary on Hyacinth’s death compels us to search out patterns and find the definitive elements of meaning that only come into full focus when a life is completed. As we have seen in the foregoing commentary, Hyacinth has met the challenge of bewilderment through an integration of invention and style that, while unsustainable, has truly qualified him as “one upon whom nothing is lost”: thus, although Hyacinth dies young and alone, he does not “sleep before evening” (James, “The Art of Fiction”; Pater 152).

In his 1913 TLS piece “The Younger Generation,” James famously nodded in condescending to D. H. Lawrence, but had James lived to read The Rainbow and Women in Love, he might have been torn between revulsion from Lawrence’s frankness about “the great relation between men and women” (James, “The Future of the Novel”) and recognition of a kindred spirit in Lawrence’s passionate and typically unresolved—en l’air—struggle with multivalent vision. For Lawrence, like James, valorizes figures who strive to reconcile or to hold in suspension seemingly antithetical perspectives and whose moments of transcendence are marked by an exhilarating collapse of polarities or else, alternatively, by the mystic, dynamic balance of oppositions that Birkin in Women in Love calls “star-equilibrium.” In that respect, at least, the urbane old novelist and the ferociously intense young rebel were surprisingly, akin, marking one of the many ways in which James was, as Virginia Woolf observed, “the bridge” to the modern novel, and to novelists as seemingly different from each other as Lawrence and Woolf herself.
CHAPTER 3
DIVIDED ATTENTION IN THE RAINBOW AND WOMEN IN LOVE

I. The Geometry of Lawrentian Attention

D.H. Lawrence’s approach to divided attention in The Rainbow and Women in Love is no less steeped in issues of identity and morality than James’s, but Lawrence conceptualizes the problematics of attention quite differently. The characters Lawrence upholds as morally superior—notably Ursula Brangwen and Rupert Birkin—defy the social conventions and forms that interfere with authentic self-expression. These characters, like the most interesting characters in James’s novels, struggle with anxiety about the divisions to which their attention is subject. In The Rainbow and Women in Love, the struggles unfold in the rejection of putatively worn-out social, moral, rhetorical, and artistic conventions through Ursula and Birkin’s resistance to the idea that one must choose to pay attention to only one side of seemingly radical dichotomies.

Yet, as I examine Lawrence’s tendency to favor and admire Janus-like figures, I want to resist readings of Lawrence ranging from those of Harry T. Moore to Daniel Albright (see page 72 below) that imagine his treatment of attention playing itself out among many sets of seemingly binary terms (general especific, male/female, the sacred/the mundane, spirit/flesh, union/independence). While these sets appear throughout The Rainbow and Women in Love, and while his characters attempt to reconcile them, wrestling with them sometimes as if they are binaries, Lawrence’s point
is that they are constantly oscillating and circling. A straight line in which points A and B are antitheses represents the binary trap into which readers may be tempted to fall. But the continuum that supports the oscillation and at times fusion of the two poles in Lawrence’s novels is geometrically different. The straight line becomes the rotating diameter of a circle, and the characters look out from the center down both ends of the diameter as it moves around the circumference. Reading Lawrence in terms of simple binaries is like picturing Janus with his line of vision as a straight and, of course, bidirectional line. If instead we see Janus in the middle of a circle so that his double gaze creates the diameter, it becomes clear that he can conjure ideas that are much more complex than those that a fixed binary allows, rotating the diameter so that it hits any number of points on the circle, which is exactly what Ursula and Birkin do. In the world of The Rainbow and Women in Love, the notion that oscillation can be a balancing phenomenon or technique offers an aesthetic, ethical, and philosophic solution to the problem inherent in the idea that oscillation and divided attention create instability.

Though attention in The Rainbow seems more susceptible than attention in Women in Love to being read in binary terms, the attention of the characters in The Rainbow shifts within and across the generations, forming a variety of vectors or radii stretching between potential binaries. Just as important as the binaries, to Lawrence, is the tendency of human attention, or at least of the attention of open, authentic, and moral human beings, to oscillate between any number of perspectives—some of them seemingly in opposition to each other—in an attempt to reconcile or resolve experience into a coherent wholeness of being. Although my description of Lawrence’s representation of divided attention accounts most comprehensively for the way attention
operates in *Women in Love*, we can understand Ursula’s development in *The Rainbow* much more fully when we recognize that many of her struggles to grow up and become independent revolve around her methods of grappling with divided attention.

Henry James’s characters, more than Lawrence’s, fall into the binary trap of having their attention and allegiance divided between polar oppositions, and they are often deeply troubled by what they believe to be the moral implications of divided attention. I do not, by any means, mean to imply that James himself falls into the same trap. Virtually any page of any of his novels, short stories, or essays will furnish evidence that he, like Lawrence, understands the intense complexity of attention. But because James represents the world as he sees it, he creates extremely realistic characters who worry about the moral implications of their divided attention. Lawrence, however, seeking not only to represent but also to change the world, creates characters who wildly and often madly oscillate and who, in sometimes seemingly superhuman ways, bypass the binary trap because their radial attention continually revolves through all the points on the circumference of the circle at whose center they stand. We might think here of Lawrence’s famous statement to Edward Garnett (letter of 5 June 1914) about the “Wedding Ring” (the original title of *The Rainbow*) that he eschewed “the old-fashioned human element—which causes one to conceive a character in a certain moral scheme and make him consistent” (*Letters II*, 183). Instead, Lawrence told Garnett, his interest was in the “non-human, in humanity,” militating for a departure from “the old stable ego of character” in favor of “another ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognizable and passes through, as it were, allotropic states” (183). While the oscillations in Lawrence’s work certainly create a sense of instability at times for Ursula
and Birkin, they do not trouble them to the same extent that divided attention disrupts the sense of moral selfhood in Isabel Archer, Hyacinth Robinson, or Olive Chancellor.

Ursula struggles with divided attention, and at times agonizes over it, but we never fear that it will lead her to commit suicide or destroy her chances for happiness. Lawrence’s representation of attention as oscillating and revolving, however, does create a more extreme anxiety for Ursula’s father and grandfather, suggesting, perhaps, that in Ursula’s less troubled relationship with her thoughts about divided attention, she is more evolved and developed than the older generations of her family.

The dialectical nature of Lawrence’s work—its persistent embodiment of an oppositional interplay between radical dichotomies in its themes, disposition of characters, and narrative structures, and the inscription of binary oppositions in the Lawrentian metaphysic—has been a persistent topic in Lawrence criticism over the decades. For Harry T. Moore, for instance, “the Figure in the Carpet” in Lawrence’s work and thought is the opposition of instinct, the flesh, and blood-consciousness to rational thought, intellection, and mind-consciousness. Moore argues that “many of Lawrence’s other oppositions . . . stemmed from this blood-versus-mind doctrine” (317). Similarly, Mark Spilka builds his reading of Lawrence around the dialectical categories inscribed in Lawrence’s metaphysic, notably as Lawrence laid out his beliefs, on the threshold of writing *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, in his *Study of Thomas Hardy*, about which more shortly. Like Moore, Kingsley Widmer sees the Lawrentian dialectic as marking Lawrence’s kinship with Blake—think of Blake’s “Without Contraries is no Progression” in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*—and Widmer calls Lawrence’s statement in “The Crown” that “It is the fight of oppositions which is holy” a “Blakean declaration” (2).
M. Daleski’s *The Forked Flame* is built around a similar sense of the Lawrentian dialectic, as is indicated, for example, in the Blakean title of his opening chapter, “The Tiger and the Lamb: The Duality of Lawrence” (19). Daniel Albright’s supple and complex reading of Lawrence’s project is similarly attentive to oppositions, as when Albright describes the Lawrentian body (and the self, or soul, that inhabits the body), as “an exact analogue of the complexities of centrifugal and centripetal forces in the cosmos . . . with urges to merge with other bodies (sympathetic) and urges to retain its own private individuality (volitional)” (26). Cornelia Nixon tells a complex story in reading Lawrence as moving from a “dualistic” vision “based on a perception of balanced contraries in all creation,” a vision that Nixon reads as consonant with what she sees as the “democratic socialism” of *The Rainbow* to a belief that “creation and destruction are pure equivalents,” a position that Nixon reads as the basis of what she alleges is Lawrence’s authoritarian, phallocentric, proto-fascistic “leadership politics” in *Women in Love* (3-5).

None of these representative invocations of dualism in Lawrence frames the issue in terms of the problem of divided attention. The commentator who most closely approaches my position is Michael Levenson. Levenson questions Nixon’s view of *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* as representing two different Ursulas, each framed in consonance with the opposed ideological positions Nixon reads in those texts. After having shown in some detail the oppositional paragraph structure inveterate to Lawrence (“Lawrence constructs paragraphs that depend on the reversals identified by ‘but’ and ‘yet’ . . . creating sudden reversals which are themselves frequently reversed” [152]), Levenson comments:
The difficulty in situating Ursula coincides with our difficulty in following the argumentative rhythm of the book as a whole, a rhythm of reversal reversed, the act of opposition itself opposed. This pattern repeats on a broad scale what the Lawrentian paragraph so often achieves in microcosm, a play of posits and oppositions incompatible with continuous development, a sequence that affirms a belief, invokes a value, expresses a desire; then cancels the affirmation, the invocation, the expression; and then cancels the cancellation without restoring the original positive terms. (154)

Levenson’s account resonates with mine, even though I read what he sees as a sequence of reversals as, rather, a matter of oscillation and as a recurrent instantiation of simultaneity, of grasping opposing and often multiple perspectives at once, a visionary trick achieved sometimes, if only fleetingly, by the characters themselves, notably by Ursula and Birkin in *Women in Love*. This is the transcendent visionary collapse for which Lawrence (or the implied author of both *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*) is continually striving. Levenson’s rejection of Nixon’s reading of two different Ursulas in two diametrically opposed novels is aligned, moreover, with my reading of Ursula’s development as continuous across the two texts, and I find Levenson’s analysis of the inscription of multiple reversals at the level of paragraphs and broad narrative structures like chapters to be persuasive and supportive of my argument.

Like James’s, Lawrence’s novels prioritize individual interiority and relationships. Unlike James, however, Lawrence is preoccupied with creating a new and superior love. For Lawrence, all other interests—political, aesthetic, social, and intellectual—are subordinate to love. According to George H. Ford in *Double Measure,*
Lawrence’s characters seek “transforming relationship[s]” that will wake them up and make them more alive and more aware of life (Ford 16). I could add that those of Lawrence’s characters who struggle with their “drive to love and to be loved” and who reach any moments of satisfaction in their struggles, however transitory those moments may be, necessarily grapple with their own divided attention (16). Ford claims that Lawrence equally values “the mode of ‘discourse’ and of ‘image,’” and that “it is on these grounds that the terms double rhythm or double measure suggest” (and here he borrows from Henry James) the figure in Lawrence’s carpet (24). The balance that Ford notes in Lawrence between the “advocacy of a position” and the impression which provides a “semblance of detachment and suspended judgment” begs the question of how readers of Lawrence pay attention to both (24). Lawrence enjoins each reader to be aware—as Lawrence’s characters themselves are so often acutely aware—of her own divisions of attention as a prerequisite for understanding how the dynamics of attention in his novels allow his characters—and potentially his readers—to evolve human relationships beyond traditional love.

In *Women in Love* Rupert Birkin struggles with but also values his own divided attention and his compulsion to pay attention to seemingly opposing extremes. Birkin sees inveterately in this Janus-like way, and he is also seen by others as constantly changing, as when the Contessa at Breadalby pegs him as “a changer”: “‘He is not a man, he is a chameleon, a creature of change’” (92). He maintains his struggle with multivalent vision because he finds in Ursula Brangwen a partner who relates to and allows his multivalence. Contrary to Cornelia Nixon’s argument that *Women in Love* cannot be read as a continuation of the earlier novel, Lawrence’s treatment of attention in *The Rainbow*
both illuminates Birkin’s relationship with Ursula in *Women in Love* and explains how she prevails as the strongest character in that novel. In *The Rainbow* Lawrence explores Ursula’s roots and reveals how her family history and her own childhood will contribute to her strength in *Women in Love*.

II. Ursula’s Inheritance

*The Rainbow* not only focuses on three generations of the Brangwen family (on Ursula and Gudrun’s generation, on her parents’ generation, and on her grandparents’), but also examines tendencies in the family dynamics that reach even farther back into the family’s history. From the beginning of the novel Lawrence uses the pronoun “they” to enforce the idea that the Brangwens share collective modes of perception and attention just as they share physical characteristics and behaviors. Not only are they a “fresh, blond, slow-speaking people,” but they also “came and went without fear of necessity…they felt the rush of the sap in spring, they knew the wave which cannot halt, but every year throws forward the seed to begetting, and, falling back, leaves the young-born on the earth” (9-10). In the span of three paragraphs the narrator shifts from referring to the Brangwen “women,” who, because they “looked out from the heated, blind intercourse of farm-life, to the spoken world beyond” were different from the Brangwen men, to the one representative Brangwen “woman” (10, 11). Lawrence does not use “woman” here to signify an individual person; rather, he refers to a female archetype. While “the Brangwen men faced inwards to the teeming life of creation, which poured unresolved into their veins,” the symbolic “woman wanted another form of life than this, something that was not blood-intimacy” (11). The men here are a collective
group of individual men, while the women have become an essentialized archetype. “The Brangwen men” very quickly becomes the more specific “Brangwen,” one man to whom the narrator refers by his last name. And fairly quickly (three pages into the novel), he becomes the even more personal “Tom” who has a father named Alfred, while the woman, the “Polish lady” from the chapter title, remains a more impersonal “she,” (29) “Mrs. Lensky,” or “the Polish lady” (32) throughout the whole first chapter.

The female archetype does shift toward the personal, but the tension that Lawrence creates by referring to the men and the women so differently suggests something strange within these dichotomies that he seems intent on exploring. We often cannot be sure whether Lawrence is referring to one particular person or to the collective group of all Brangwen men or women. According to Lawrence’s narration, the Brangwen family practices two modes of attention, directed inward and outward, and not only does Lawrence tend to gender these perspectives, but he also individuates the male side of the equation more rapidly than the female side, assigning the female side to an archetype. But Tom’s granddaughter Ursula resists this bipolar gendered division in her attempts to embody seemingly opposed perspectives.

Lawrence uses the relationships between the male and female characters in *The Rainbow* to describe the dual attractions that lead to the struggles of various family members with divided attention, gendering the construction of attention in much the same way as he would five years later in *Women in Love*. Tom Brangwen, Ursula’s grandfather, offers an example of the battles of attention that recur throughout the book and, indeed, throughout much of Lawrence’s fiction. Tom’s relationships with women and sex form the battleground of his struggle with dual attention; he is compelled by his
seemingly conflicting attractions both to the female body and to his idea of the female soul. His subservience to the convention that he cannot pay attention to both torments him. At nineteen, Tom is like a pendulum, swinging between two stereotypically opposing views of women: the sister and mother versus the prostitute. Before his encounter with the prostitute there was “only one kind of woman—his mother and sister,” but the prostitute introduces something new that diverts his attention (20). Although he first feels “a slight sense of shame before the prostitute, fear that she would despise him for his inefficiency” and “a cold distaste for her,” the narration reassures us that he quickly regains his “balance” and concludes that “really it did not matter so very much” as long as “he had no disease” (20).

Yet this sense of balance is precarious, illusory, and at best temporary. Lawrence ends one paragraph with the claim that Tom is balanced. The next paragraph starts with the word “but” and provides an instant qualification: “but it had shocked him, and put a mistrust into his heart, and emphasized his fear of what was within himself” (20). This qualification is itself restricted by the next sentence’s conditional word, “however”: “he was, however, in a few days going about again in his own careless, happy-go-lucky fashion, his blue eyes just as clear and honest as ever, his face just as fresh, his appetite just as keen” (20-21). So ends this confusing paragraph. And we are immediately sent in the other direction again when the following paragraph opens with “or apparently so,” and this back and forth movement between comfort and anxiety goes on and on (21). We may be reminded here of Lawrence’s closing comment in the Foreword to *Women in Love*, a response to the reception of *The Rainbow*: “In point of style, fault is often found with the continual, slightly modified repetition. The only answer is that it is natural to the
author; and that every natural crisis in emotion or passion or understanding comes from this pulsing, frictional to-and-fro which works up to culmination” (486). Levenson further explains what Lawrence claims is his natural style:

. . . it is at least worth mentioning that the principles of structure that govern the paragraph reappear in the broadest movements of *Women in Love*. In the succession of chapters within the novel, as in the succession of sentences within a paragraph, Lawrence parts with the notion that a subsequent event must expand a prior one, or unfold from its presuppositions, or stand in causal relation to it. Individual chapters often function as single coherent propositions (“Man to Man,” “Threshold,” “Snowed Up”), as self-contained as grammatical units, and it is often easy to imagine an implied “furthermore” or “but” at the beginning of new chapters. (153)

If Tom does find balance after his encounter with the prostitute, it is because he oscillates so swiftly between two extreme reactions to sex—acceptance and disgust—not because he has found a way to reconcile his attractions to the female body and the feminine soul.

Opposing forces simultaneously work on Tom’s attention, and the effect is almost torturous to him. When he begins to spend time with Lydia Lensky, her embodied contradictions disturb him. When she moves from his arms to “set a tray,” Brangwen feels that “she ignored” him, and “he sat up, unable to bear a contradiction in her” (46). His intolerance of her seeming contradictoriness explains why he is “afraid” of her “ugly-beautiful mouth” (46). Directly before he asks her to marry him he feels that “her eyes, with a blackness of memory struggling with passion, primitive and electric away at the back of them, rejected and absorbed him at once” (47). When she moves to kiss him, he
feels “agony,” and he cannot stand that as they embrace his attention focuses on both their closeness to and their distance from each other:

> They were such strangers, they must forever be such strangers, that his passion was a clanging torment to him. Such intimacy of embrace, and such utter foreignness of contact! It was unbearable. He could not bear to be near her, and know the utter foreignness between them, know how entirely they were strangers to each other. (47,8)

When they are married and living together, Lydia fluctuates between being “attentive and instinctively expectant before him, unfolded, ready to receive him” and being “closed again, away from him…sheathed over, impervious to him, oblivious” (54). But when Lydia is open to closeness, Tom “could not act, because of self-fear and because of his conception of honour towards her,” and so the two cannot come together frequently in a satisfying way (54). Tom “was ever drawn to her, drawn after her, with ever-raging, ever-unsatisfied desire. He must always turn home, wherever his steps were taking him, always to her, and he could never quite reach her, he could never quite be satisfied, never be at peace, because she might go away” (58). Although this passage describes his longing for an emotional union with Lydia, it is steeped in language that suggests a connection between his attraction to her substance and the desire her physical body produces in him. When she touches him, “there was that in him which shrank from yielding to her, resisted the relaxing towards her, opposed the mingling with her, even whilst he most desired it” (90). Tom’s oscillations between a fulfilling connection—both physical and emotional—with Lydia and a desire to retreat from her are propelled by anxiety and self-preservation. When he finally does relax and yield he “relinquished
himself” (90). He has to lose “himself to find her, to find himself in her” (90). Thus, when he finds himself again, he is no longer separate and independent. Rather he is subsumed in her being. It is this loss of individuality that he both fears and desires.

Although Tom’s oscillating perceptions of Lydia cause him discomfort, he experiences his own contradictions, not only in his need both to seek a complete connection with his wife and to maintain complete independence, but also in the form of divided attention as a means of escaping uncomfortable or scary situations. When Lydia is giving birth to their first son, Tom cannot cope with paying attention to only one thing. Listening to her moaning upstairs,

Brangwen, sitting downstairs, was divided. His lower, deeper self was with her, bound to her, suffering. But the big shell of his body remembered the sound of owls that used to fly round the farmstead when he was a boy...he lifted his cup to his lips, he watched the child with the beads. But his mind was occupied with owls, and the atmosphere of his boyhood. (71)

Despite this narration, we know that his mind is only partially “occupied with the owls” because he also feels the cup on his lips, sees the child in front of him, and knows that the moans are coming from his wife (71). Brangwen defies physical laws and manages to look in several seemingly opposed directions at once, and his imagination places him in two different locations simultaneously, both separate from where he actually is sitting downstairs. Moved by the magnitude of the birth of his first biological child and the weight of having to grow up himself rather than remain a partner in crime with Lydia’s daughter, Anna, he moves in two separate directions, one spatial and one temporal, and manages to pay attention to both at once. His “lower deeper self” is with his suffering
wife, while only his outer shell escapes to the pleasure of childhood memories that are removed from the substantive responsibilities of being a father (71). Here divided attention is a kind of coping mechanism.

Yet the terms are somewhat confused in this passage. Though his body is with Anna downstairs, something that the narrator refers to as “his lower deeper self” is outside of his body and upstairs with his wife (71). Then we read that it is the “big shell of his body” that has escaped to his “boyhood” (71). We might, at this point, be able to project substance onto this “deeper self” and style onto the “big shell”; by the end of the passage, however, his outer body—as in his actual mouth and two eyes—are feeling the cup and watching Anna play with beads, while his “mind,” the more internal mode of attention, is occupied with his memories (71). Lawrence’s narration creates distance between Tom’s mind and his innermost self and associates his mind, to which we would usually attribute substance, with his outer shell.

Lydia’s attraction to the vicar demonstrates her ability to pay attention to both substance and style and, in fact, her tendency to conflate the two. She feels that the vicar has a “higher being” that she wants to “achieve…if not in herself, then in her children” (11). He has a “power over her husband” just as “Brangwen had power over the cattle,” and she wonders what “raised him above the common man as man is raised above the beast” (11). Although she somewhat determines that it is “a question of knowledge,” her observations of his power and status center as much on the vicar’s style as on his substance. The vicar speaks a “magic language, and had the other, finer bearing, both of which she could perceive, but could never attain to” (11). In order to achieve this same “higher being” for her children, she focuses on “education and experience,” yet she
strives for these attainments in order to give them the “freedom to move,” by which she means the freedom to enter “the finer, more vivid circle of life” (12). It seems that for Lydia, knowledge becomes useful because it is key to an aesthetically pleasing life.

Style and ornament motivate Lydia’s attraction to “the squire’s lady at Shelly Hall,” and for Lydia, the lady’s style indicates something about her innate substance (12). Directly after the discussion of Lydia’s respect for the vicar and the life that education and experience could provide for her children, we hear that her imagination was fired by the squire’s lady at Shelly Hall who came to church at Cossethay with her little children, girls in tidy capes of beaver fur, and smart little hats, herself like a winter rose, so fair and delicate. So fair, so fine in mould, so luminous, what was it that Mrs Hardy felt which she, Mrs. Brangwen did not feel? How was Mrs Hardy’s nature different from that of the common women of Cossethay, in what was it beyond them? (12).

It is unclear whether Lydia believes that Mrs. Hardy’s “fine…mould” makes her nature different from the “common women of Cossethay” or that her style merely reflects her exceptional nature (12). It is, in fact, unclear to Lydia herself, and she makes these conflicting, provisional propositions indistinguishable from each other when she “aspired beyond herself, towards the further life of the finer woman, towards the extended being she revealed, as a traveler in his self-contained manner reveals far-off countries present in himself” (12-13). Though the traveler’s “manner” reveals a substance changed by its interaction with different countries, it is this substantive change that makes a “man’s life a different thing, finer, bigger” (13). It is as if, at least for Lydia, the traveler wears his
knowledge as adornment, and this conflation of substance and style is what makes “man more than the beast and the cattle that serve him” (13).

Although Lawrence characterizes the Brangwen women as outward-looking while the Brangwen men turn their attention inwards, and though Lydia is attracted to the ornament and style of the vicar and his family, Tom and Lydia also share the ability to ignore elements of the outer world. Their recurrent eschewal of the outward gaze may be a form of repression, an avoidance of the demands of divided attention. We read, for example, that “her husband, her two sons, and Anna…staked out and marked her horizon…she scarcely noticed the outer things at all. What was outside was outside, non-existent. She did not mind if the boys fought, so long as it was out of her presence” (96).

She retreats to the inner realm as a way to avoid the facets of life that are aesthetically distasteful to her: “certain forms of clumsiness, grossness, made the mother’s eyes glow with curious rage. Otherwise she was pleased, indifferent” (96).

Lydia’s response to religion reflects her lack of concern for outer forms and her inward-facing tendencies, a retreat from the demands of divided attention. Lydia was “brought up” as a Roman Catholic in Poland, but she joins the “Church of England” for protection when she settles in England (97). Her religious beliefs are “never defined,” so she is indifferent to the “outward form” of worship (97). Instead, “it was as if she worshipped God as a mystery, never seeking in the least to define what He was” (97).

Her perspective on religion is partly attributed to her foreign background. The English does not reach her because “the language was too foreign,” and conversely, “she shone and gleamed to the Mystery, Whom she knew through all her senses, she glanced with strange mystic superstitions that never found expression in the English language, never
mounted to thought in English” (97). Lydia embodies the inward-facing, more instinctual and almost primitive mode of seeing and knowing—in that it is divorced from logic and form, it is “unthinking knowledge” (97). Furthermore, it is Lydia’s example that draws Tom to be similarly inward-facing. Tom “existed with her entirely indifferent to the general values of the world” (Lawrence 97). Tellingly, the narrative voice seems to consider Tom’s imitation of Lydia’s self-limiting, inward perspective to be a diminution, stating, “to this [her perspective] she had reduced her husband” (97).

Although Lydia and Tom’s manner of viewing the world and religion “made the pair of them apart and respected in the English village,” it also causes a division between Anna and Tom (97), and Anna, like her parents, seems to repress, rather than embrace, the division of attention between inward and outward perspectives. Anna turns to her father to escape Lydia’s rages, but “she tried to discuss people, she wanted to know what was meant. But her father became uneasy. He did not want to have things dragged into consciousness” (99). The mystic aspects of religion move Anna, as they do Lydia; but even more than Lydia, Anna is tormented by the discrepancy between the language of religion, in particular the English translations of Latin phrases, and the deeper reality of the passion she feels holding her “mother-of-pearl rosary…between her fingers” (97-98).

Anna experiences religion as both an embodied and a disembodied phenomenon, but the conflict between these two ways of paying attention to spirituality turns her off both. In fact, she seems to turn things inside out when she “avoided her rosary, because, moving her with a curious passion as it did, it meant only these not very significant things” (98). Despite the fact that holding the rosary while speaking the Latin prayers moves her deeply, she avoids it because she allows the English translations to become the substance
and the meaning rather than viewing them as a feeble attempt to describe and connect with others in a shared understanding of spiritual truths that can never be expressed fully with reason or “thinking” (98). Anna’s “instinct” is “to avoid thinking, to avoid it to save herself,” her father displays the same kind of avoidance, and thus Anna is prevented from having the intimate relationship that she seeks to have with him (98).

Not only is Anna bothered by the discrepancy between the Latin and the English translations, but she also seems to feel that the English translations are morally suspect. It was not right somehow. What these words meant when translated was not the same as the pale rosary meant. There was a discrepancy, a falsehood…She became an assiduous church-goer. But the language meant nothing to her: it seemed false. She hated to hear things expressed, put into words. Whilst the religious feelings were inside her they were passionately moving. In the mouth of the clergyman, they were false, indecent. She tried to read. But again the tedium and the sense of the falsity of the spoken word put her off. (98-99)

Thus, while her mother is unmoved by religious dogma because the English language is not her native tongue, it is precisely because English is her native tongue that the clergyman’s words disgust Anna. And her “instinct to avoid thinking” is something she must do “to save herself” (98). If the English translations are somehow immoral, and if they are also what the rosary and the Latin phrases actually “meant,” that is the substance of religion, then the heart of religion, for Anna, must also be suspect and immoral (98). But Anna commits to attending church services because it is one of the “many ways she tried of escape” from her parents’ “spell,” another of which takes the form of her relationship with Tom’s nephew, William (99).
Anna’s reactions to Will reflect the puzzling relationship between the ways in which knowledge and consciousness operate in her. The first physically and emotionally charged scene between Anna and her step-cousin, Will, takes place when Will first leaves his home in Nottingham to take his place as a “junior draughtsman, scarcely more than an apprentice, in a lace factory” in Ilkeston, and Tom asserts that Will should join Anna and her siblings on their trip to church (99). There is a deep kind of knowledge, it seems, that she inherits from her family and that evades consciousness. Anna sits in the church “without knowing it, conscious of the hands and motionless knees of her cousin” (103). Will evokes in Anna the curious tension between instinct and thought, though the language surrounding these states of being is just as slippery with Anna as it is with her parents. Here her consciousness of his physical closeness is a more primal feeling than the idea that she would actually acknowledge his physical touch. Yet, in earlier passages, the narrative voice speaks of Lydia’s and Anna’s preference for instinctual knowledge over consciousness. In one paragraph, Anna may reject consciousness to favor instinctual knowledge. And a few lines later, without changing the general thrust of her attitude, she lacks knowledge but revels in consciousness.

In this confusing terminology of instincts, knowledge, consciousness, and related words, Lawrence enacts the ineffectiveness of language to describe the human condition and the messiness of what we often like to think are well defined and clear-cut signifiers. Furthermore, Lawrence creates a continuum that resists the binaries that govern attention economies that are more conventional and crude than the Brangwens’. As Anna and Will’s courtship progresses, we hear that “Anna had a new reserve, a new independence. She began to act independently of her parents, to live beyond them” (108). But is unclear
at this point if Anna has gained authentic independence, or if she has merely found another force in which to subsume herself: “a spell was cast over her. And how uneasy her parents were, as she went about the house unnoticing, not noticing them, moving in a spell as if she were invisible to them. She was invisible to them. It made them angry. Yet they had to submit. She went about absorbed, obscured for a while” (108). But Will is also under Anna’s spell, which allows him to experience “the darkness of obscurity” in which “he seemed to be hidden in a tense, electric darkness, in which his soul, his life was intensely active, but without his aid or attention. His mind was obscured” (108). Will and Anna each become obscured in the relationship with the other, and the lack of mindful attention that this creates in Will leads him to produce “swiftly and mechanically…some beautiful” wood-carvings (108).

Anna and Will’s uncontrollable oscillation links the pendulum like movements of attention divided between seemingly opposed poles with which the characters struggle with the back and forth movement of two lovers—both the emotional back and forth struggle between achieving union and maintaining individuality and the physical back and forth friction of two new lovers reaching orgasm. The first carving Will makes for Anna is a butter-stamper with a “phoenix, something like an eagle, rising on symmetrical wings,” and the bird becomes a symbol both for the building physical and emotional tension between Anna and Will and for the recurring theme of oscillation, the rhythm of union and separation inherent in all relationships (108). As Anna and Will stand “in the cool dairy the candle-light lit on the large, white surfaces of the cream pans” holding the “round blocks of butter, where the emblematic bird lifted its breast from the shadow cast by the candle flame” (109). The bird imagery is projected onto Anna with the repetition
of the word *breast*— “her breast was near him”—and onto Will, whose “head lifted like an eagle’s” and who “put his arms round her and drew her to him…cleanly done, like a bird that swoops and sinks close, closer” (109). The bird imagery permeates this passage that describes their developing relationship, first with the powerful swooping desire of the eagles and the hawks, and then in the dirty “fowl-loft” where the chickens “sat in fat bunches on the perches” and where Anna declares to Will that she loves him (110). Then, like two birds, they “together seemed to be swinging in big, swooping oscillations, the two of them clasped together up in the darkness” (111).

The coming together and pulling apart of couples like Tom and Lydia as well as this passionate paired swinging of Will and Anna tells us something about Lawrence’s approach to the problems of divided attention. Lawrence is not exploring matters of attention for attention’s sake. Rather, he designs characters who attempt to master the problems of divided attention in order to solve the dilemma of maintaining authentic human relations while preserving an individual identity and to reach a level of spiritual and emotional living that is more genuine than what we can express with language and logic. Where James grapples with attention for the sake of gaining a better understanding of human relationships and art, among other things, as they exist in his world, Lawrence puts the battles of attention to the service of creating a new kind of love and individuality that will heal the modern world.

The connection Lawrence makes between oscillating attention and romantic and sexual relationships becomes even more obvious when Anna and Will walk into an open moonlit field during the corn harvest. Anna suggests that they “put up some sheaves,” and as they move through their work, their physical movements away from and towards
each other mimic their attention rapidly swinging between the more abstract senses of union and disconnection (113). Only some of the long sheaves of corn “rode erect,” while the rest of the field “was open and prostrate,” so Anna and Will move rhythmically away from each other to gather the “lying sheaves” and then back towards each other to set their sheaves against each other’s, erect (113). At first their movements are not synchronized, and “the rhythm of the work carried him away again” and again just “as she was coming near” (114). Will’s attention, while focused partially on his work, is clearly preoccupied by the rhythm of his and Anna’s movements. Will is tormented by the “space between them,” so he speeds up in order to slowly overtake Anna so that they will come towards their center point at the same time (115). He longs for them “to meet as the sheaves that swished together,” so “he lifted the sheaves and swung striding to the centre with them, ever he drove her more nearly to the meeting, ever he did his share and drew toward her, overtaking her” (115).

Here Will’s physical movements and the movements of his attention as well are clearly inscribed stylistically in the “continual, slightly modified repetition” Lawrence describes in the Foreword to Women in Love (486). Anyone who reads just a few pages of any Lawrence novel should be struck by his rhythmic repetitions that create poetic and intensely sexual prose that mimics the movements of waves or a swing. Here the continual reappearance of the image of Anna turning towards the moonlight, which “seemed glowingly to uncover her bosom every time she faced it,” the repetition of their “coming and going” movements, and the repeated references to Anna turning away and the space keeping them apart add up to an immense amount of sexual tension for a scene that ends only in a kiss and show the movements of Will’s attention as its focus moves...
back and forth between their proximity to each other and the distance between them (114).

As newlyweds, Anna and Will spend their honeymoon in their house, and Will’s attention oscillates between the outside world and its conventions and the world inside their walls. Will feels “as if the heavens had fallen, and he were sitting with her among the ruins, in a new world, everybody else buried, themselves two blissful survivors,” but despite his having “had some weeks of holiday after his marriage” he “could not get rid of the culpable sense of license on his part” and wonders about the “outside” duties that are “calling him” (134). He feels guilty lying in bed with Anna when he hears the noises of the world carrying on without them. Though he partly feels that “being alone in the world, they were a law unto themselves, they could enjoy and squander and waste like conscienceless gods,” he also “could not help feeling guilty, as if he were committing a breach of the law—ashamed that he was not up and doing” (134). His and Anna’s isolation creates anxiety for Will, who considers their lying in the bed “so still and peacefully” to have closed them off “in tacit denial of the world” (134). Contrastingly, Anna “took her responsibility lightly. When she spilled her tea on the pillow, she rubbed it carelessly with a handkerchief, and turned over the pillow. He would have felt guilty. She did not” (137). When their honeymoon begins, Anna is not as concerned about external forms and expectations as Will is. But when she becomes ready to enter the outside world again, or, rather, to invite the outside world into her house, Will “wanted to have done with the outside world, to declare it finished forever. He was anxious with a deep desire and anxiety that she should stay with him where they were in the timeless universe of free, perfect limbs and immortal breast, affirming that the old outward order
was finished” (140). Anna is comfortable transitioning from the mood that accompanies their lounging in bed to the motivation it takes her to get food from the kitchen to bring back to their nest when she is hungry. These moves from space to space disturb Will, however.

While the terms shift—changing, according to the focalizer and the occasion, from body and soul to public and private, among other opposing terms—the constant in the wealth of scenes in *The Rainbow* that demonstrate Anna’s and Will’s oscillating attention and the discomfort and anxiety it causes Will. Lawrence’s preoccupation with divided attention embodied in these characters is in play when Will juxtaposes “the rind of the world” with “the inside, the reality: one’s own being,” when Anna’s spirit rebels against a world in which “[e]verything seemed to be merely a matter of social duty, and never of her self,” and whenever the reader encounters the recurrent imagery with which the oscillating sexual and spiritual tensions between Will and Anna are developed (139, 146). It is no surprise that the older of the two children they bring into the world, Ursula, becomes the ultimate vehicle for Lawrence’s titanic effort, extending from *The Rainbow* through *Women in Love*, to forge a new, world-renovating dynamic of divided attention.

III. Ursula Brangwen in *The Rainbow*: Toward *Women in Love*

The inconsistencies and confusion that we face in Lawrence’s novels and that Ursula grapples with in Birkin’s rhetoric in *Women in Love* may be explained as part of Lawrence’s understanding of the value of the metaphorical over the literal. We can see this in Ursula’s grappling with religion and particularly with religious texts. As a teenager, Ursula returns home from school to go to church on Sundays with her family,
and she is only able to contemplate religion by attempting to maintain divided attention. In general “the Brangwens shrank from applying their religion to their own immediate actions. They wanted the sense of the eternal and immortal, not a list of rules for everyday conduct. Therefore they were badly behaved children, headstrong and arrogant though their feelings were generous” (255). Embedded in the Brangwen family culture is the idea that the spiritual and the everyday need not overlap to coexist. The Brangwens allow themselves to pay attention to these two separate spheres without being concerned that the two may contradict each other.

Although Ursula instinctually separates the spiritual and the everyday (the “Sunday world” and the “week-day world,” as she refers to them), she struggles with this separation and eventually attempts to reconcile the two (263). Ursula first gets “a peculiar thrill from the application of salvation to her own personal case,” but this is “followed almost immediately by a sense of dreariness” (255). She is attracted to “the shadowy Jesus with the Stigmata…but Jesus the actual man, talking with teeth and lips, telling one to put one’s finger into His wounds, like a villager gloating in his sores, repelled her” (255). This tension between an abstract ideal and a concrete reality appears again at the beginning of Women in Love when Ursula and Gudrun discuss their ideas on marriage. In this scene, as with the first discussion of Ursula’s reaction to religion, it only seems that Ursula prefers one perspective to the other; she seems to choose her father’s abstract spirituality over her mother’s concrete reason. Anna rebels against Will’s mysticism, asking “what did the unrevealed God matter, when a man had a young family that needed fettling for? Let him attend to the immediate concerns of his life, not go projecting himself towards the ultimate” (256). Ursula at first sides with her father: “Ursula was all
for the ultimate. She was always in revolt against babies and muddled domesticity. To her Jesus was another world...was beautifully remote, shining in the distance like a white moon at sunset, a crescent moon beckoning as it follows the sun, out of our ken” (256). But Ursula’s rejection of the everyday is not ultimate or complete; she “lived a dual life, one where the facts of daily life encompassed everything, being legion, and the other wherein the facts of daily life were superseded by the eternal truth” (257). According to Ursula, the everyday simultaneously encompasses everything and is superseded by spiritual truths.

She expresses and tries to understand this duality using terms that relate to the relationships between men and women, to her “desire” that “the Sons of God should come to the daughters of men,” and “she believed more in her desire and its fulfillment than in the obvious facts of life” (257). Yet this attempt at reconciliation “left her confused, but not denied” (257). The syntax of this statement implies that the ability to not deny either the everyday or the spiritual may be worth the confusion that recognizing both ends of the spectrum causes.

Ursula’s effort to pay attention to the spiritual world and the everyday leads her to contemplate the nature of language. “On Sundays” Ursula is stirred by “the Voice...that spoke the language of creation,” and she conflates her own concrete reality with the myths of her religion when she wonders if “in those days...the Sons of God [would] have found her fair” (256, 257). Her preoccupation with the relationship between the “Sons of God” and the “daughters of men” parallels her tendency to try to pay attention to the spiritual and the material, the metaphorical and the literal (256). Because time is divided for Ursula into the days of the week, and the spiritual world is isolated to Sunday, she
does not have to worry, at least initially, about the overlap, though other people who try to conflate the two frustrate her. The Sunday school teacher, for example, “explained” the parable, “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into heaven,” and by making the passage literal she also makes it, at least to Ursula, ridiculous (258). Whereas Ursula understands the passage as literature—reflecting that “it pleased her to know, that in the East one must use hyperbole, or else remain unheard; because the Eastern man must see a thing swelling to fill all heaven, or dwindled to a mere nothing, before he is suitable impressed”—the Sunday school teacher tries to decode Scripture and turn it into information (258).

Ursula begins her examination of the inconsistencies that literature allows when she worries about how to divide her attention between what seem to her to be two opposing poles, the spiritual and the material. Though she sympathizes with the “Eastern mind,” she also realizes that the parable of the camel and the needle continues “to have a meaning that was untouched either by the knowledge of gateways,” the literal explanation that the Sunday school teacher provides, “or hyperboles,” the metaphorical explanation that she believes the Eastern man prefers (258). Neither literal nor metaphorical language is sufficient to interpret the spiritual facts, and so Ursula concludes that the parable “means the Absolute World, and can never be more than half interpreted in terms of the relative world” (258). Yet she cannot escape using language to understand the parable because it is presented to her in words. And because the literal translation is distasteful to her—“she had her qualms, when in imagination she saw her father giving away their piano and the two cows, and the capital at the bank, to the labourers of the district, so that they, the Brangwens, should be as poor as the
Wherrys”—Ursula “reverted to the non-literal application of the scriptures,” which, for Ursula, takes the form of visual rather than verbal art (258).

One aspect of Ursula’s struggle with divided attention is illuminated by the contrast between her response to sacred art and her father’s. Ursula seeks out the pictures in her father’s book of reproductions of the “early Italian painters” (259). For Will, “the pathway of open graves, the huddled earth on either side, the seemly heaven arranged above, the singing progress to paradise on the one hand, the stuttering descent to hell on the other, completed and satisfied him” (259). Will has a spiritual reaction of self-completion to what seem to be aesthetic elements of the painting: the symmetry, the seemliness and arrangement of heaven. He is so moved by the beauty of the picture that “he did not care whether or not he believed in devils or angels” (259). The foundationalist rhetoricians in ancient Greece might have used this passage, if they had somehow had access to it, as evidence of the dangers of sophism and even of ornament in rhetoric.

When the information becomes art, especially art that offers a non-literal experience, the moral message becomes less of a priority and may even disappear. But Ursula, unlike her father, does not find satisfaction even in the non-literal depictions of religion because “the figure of the Most High bored her, and roused her resentment…the angels were so lovely, and the light so beautiful. And only for this, to surround such a banality for God” (259). Ursula is “dissatisfied,” and is not content to revel in the artistic production if there is nothing deeper for her to believe in beneath the beauty (259).

Ursula struggles to navigate the space between the spiritual and the material worlds and between purely aesthetic and metaphorical (with clear literal referents) depictions of the spiritual world. The narrative voice mimics Ursula’s movement between
the Sunday world and the week-day world when it oscillates between a general and a specific sense of time. As the narrator moves seamlessly between these two modes of handling time in the context of the Brangwens’ winter routine, we also move easily back and forth between an abstract and a concrete perspective. Coming out of these descriptions of Ursula’s reactions to metaphorical and literal interpretations of spirituality, we find ourselves in a specific scene in winter when “there was the wonderful, starry, straight track of a pheasant’s footsteps across the snow imprinted so clear”; because it is “a” pheasant and not a more abstract “the” pheasant, we can imagine that a very specific bird has just recently crossed the yard. This is not just any winter; rather, this is the winter when “the boys were learning the old mystery play of St George and Beelzebub,” a winter when “twice a week, by lamplight, there was choir practice in the church, for the learning of old carols Brangwen wanted to hear. The girls went to these practices” (259).

Lawrence increasingly focuses our attention, drawing us closer to the material world of the family and further away from the abstract relation of Ursula’s beliefs. “The time came near,” Lawrence writes, as if describing his method of drawing us towards the concrete. This is not just any week during the winter of the play; it is the very day and hour when “the girls were decorating the church” and “in the cow-shed the boys were blacking their faces for a dress-rehearsal…the time was come to make pies” (260). Time is given an active power here—time comes and moves, making itself either more distant or more proximate and changing our perspective on the family members and their relation to spirituality and Christmas traditions. When we spend too much time in the concrete and specific moment of their world we find that “Christmas day, as it drew on to
evening, and night, became a sort of bank holiday, flat and stale,” and the narrator asks, “why did not the grown-ups also change their everyday hearts, and give way to ecstasy” (260). The narrator, it seems, like the Brangwens, “passionately craved for it, the ecstasy,” because the narration soon moves back to what could be a more distant, general, and abstract perspective (260). “Year by year the inner, unknown drama went on in” the Brangwen children, “their hearts were born and came to fullness, suffered on the cross, gave up the ghost, and rose again to unnumbered days, untired, having at least this rhythm of eternity in a ragged, inconsequential life” (261). The narrator’s attention oscillates between a concrete, specific perspective and an abstract, general perspective, until it explodes at the end of the chapter, becoming an “I” and making a direct address to the reader (262).

At the end of the chapter the narrator, through a chain of interrogatives that from their sheer volume suggest a sort of urgency, if not desperation, questions as to why one must pay attention to either the spiritual or the material instead of somehow combining the two on one plane where they can both be entertained at once. The narrator laments “that a risen Christ has no place with us,” despairing at the apparent separation between heaven and earth in Christian doctrine (262).

The resurrection is to life, not to death. Shall I not see those who have risen again walk here among men perfect in body and spirit, whole and glad in the flesh, loving in the flesh, begetting children in the flesh, arrived at last to wholeness, perfect without scar or blemish, healthy without fear of ill-health…is the flesh which was crucified become as poison to the crowds in the street, or is it as a strong gladness and hope to them, as the first flower blossoming out of the earth’s
The narrative voice reflects Ursula’s struggles with dividing her attention between the Sunday world and the week-day world, and the narrator’s own oscillations between the general and the specific culminate in an attempt to conquer the space between the two poles of Ursula’s spectrum so that the spiritual and the material come together and become indistinguishable from one another.

In fact, the last few pages of “The Widening Circle” contain paragraph after paragraph peppered with narrative interrogatives. It is hard to get at whether or not these questions are the narrator’s or whether they represent the collective voice of all of the Brangwens. One paragraph begins,

How passionately the Brangwens craved for it, the ecstasy. The father was troubled, dark-faced and disconsolate, on Christmas night because the passion was not there for him... upon the mother was a kind of absentness, as ever, as if she were exiled for all her life. Where was the fiery heart of joy, now the coming was fulfilled; where was the star, the Magi’s transport, the thrill of new being that shook the earth? (260).

Who asks these questions? Here it seems to be expressing the consciousness of the mother and the father, but within a few short paragraphs the focalization shifts from the Brangwens to the narrative “I” at the end of the chapter. Lawrence’s effort to encapsulate in a series of interrogative paragraphs the spiritual quest and questioning of the family culminates in the narrative voice merging with theirs. He builds the strong narrative presence and voice out of his characters’ inquiries.
“The Widening Circle” ends with this narrative attempt to pay attention to the spiritual and the material at the same time, but the next chapter begins with Ursula’s rejection of doing so and her insistence on choosing one extreme over the other. However, her denial of one extreme in favor of the other is not ultimate or lasting. Directly after the narrator’s attempt to collapse the space dividing the spiritual and the material worlds, the next chapter, “First Love,” begins with Ursula’s passage “from girlhood to womanhood,” a transition that ends “the old duality of life, wherein there had been a week-day world of people and trains and duties and reports, and besides that a Sunday world of absolute truth and living mystery” (263). Ursula concludes that a person lives “by action,” and because “the Sunday world was not real, or at least, not actual” the material “triumphed over” the spiritual (263). At this point Ursula does not see the possibility of paying attention to what she assumes are two incompatible perspectives. But, though she claims that “only the weekday world mattered” and that “her soul must have a weekday value, known according to the world’s knowledge,” the narrator immediately counters with “nay, one was more than responsible to the world. One was responsible to oneself” (263, 264). Despite Ursula’s feeling compelled to deny the spiritual to focus on the actual, “there was some puzzling, tormenting residue of the Sunday world within her, some persistent Sunday self, which insisted upon a relationship with the now shed-away vision world” (264). The spiritual world torments and insists that Ursula not ignore it. Try as she might to choose one extreme over the other, Ursula’s nature will not allow her to deny completely one end of the spectrum.

Ursula’s struggle with the division of her attention between the spiritual and the material has an insistently moral bearing. Because she believes now in the supremacy of
the week-day world, she feels “there was a necessity to choose one’s action and one’s deed. One was responsible to the world for what one did” (264). It is this sense of attention divided between dueling responsibilities that produces tension and anxiety. Perhaps it is also the anxiety about growing up that compels her to try to ignore the spiritual. After all, the chapter begins with a description of “the cloud of self-responsibility” that “gathered upon her” as she transitions “from girlhood” to “womanhood,” and she wonders “why…one must inherit this heavy, numbing responsibility of living an undiscovered life” (263). Where does this “self-responsibility” that scares and troubles Ursula lie (263)? Is it part of the spiritual or the material world? Her acknowledgment of her responsibility to the person she is becoming recalls the “vision world” with which the “Sunday self” insists on having a relationship (264). Although at this point Ursula’s attention seems to oscillate between the spiritual and the material, her moral dilemma is finding a way to pay attention to both at once. Because she has both a Sunday self and a weekday self, only by combining the two worlds and acknowledging them together can Ursula fully be self-responsible.

Grappling with the problem of paying attention to two seemingly opposed perspectives leads Ursula to attempt to solve her problems of divided attention through language.

She turned to the visions, which had spoken far-off words that ran along the blood like ripples of an unseen wind, she heard the words again, she denied the vision, for she must be a weekday person, to whom visions were not true, and she demanded only the weekday meaning of the words. There were words spoken by the vision: and words must have a weekday meaning since words were weekday
stuff. Let them speak now: let them bespeak themselves in week-day terms. The vision should translate itself into weekday terms. (264)

The words that come from the “visions” are “far-off,” and though words are “weekday stuff,” they have both kinds of meaning, the weekday and the spiritual. Even though she says she will deny the visions, she tempers her claim with her allowance that the visions “bespeak themselves” as long as they do it in “weekday terms.” Ursula seems to want to use language to bridge the gap between the two extremes vying for her attention. The process of making the spiritual literal, however, disappoints her again because it is distasteful to her (264).

Ursula’s oscillations between the spiritual and material, between the “far-off words” and the “weekday” meanings of those words, are dizzying (264). Ursula experiences anxiety and shame when she approaches the “Sunday morning” lessons from a “Monday morning” perspective (264). She feels “horror” at the thought of living like the “poor Wherrys” if she follows the teaching to sell all she has and “give to the poor,” and when she turns her “other cheek” in response to her sister Theresa’s slap, only to be hit again, “anger, and deep, writhing shame tortured her, so she was not easy till she had quarreled with Theresa and had almost shaken her sister’s head off” (264, 265). Ursula begins to reverse for herself old moral standards and definitions. When she retaliates against Theresa, she may be “unChristian,” but she is also “clean,” and she decides “there was something unclean and degrading about this humble side of Christianity” (265). “Ursula suddenly revolted to the other extreme,” hating the Wherrys and wishing “they were dead” (265). She reverses traditional moral codes when she is violent with Theresa, wishes the Wherrys dead, and imagines herself as “Lady Ursula” (265). Her
acknowledgment of authentic emotions is a reaction to the “unclean…side of Christianity” (265).

When Ursula finds a way to mix the spiritual and the material, she experiences both ecstasy and anxiety. But now her anxiety comes from her fear “lest anyone should see” her apply her religious sentiments to the weekday world rather than from the shame she feels when she focuses only on the literal translation of the Sunday school lessons or the neglect of responsibility to the self she attributes to herself when she pays attention only to the weekday world (266). Though she decides that a “passionate confusion” between the two worlds is the key to “religious ecstasy,” she worries that others will judge her, for “it was a betrayal, a transference of meaning, from the vision world, to the matter-of-fact world” (266). Ursula feels that there is something wrong and almost dishonest when she answers Christ with her “weekday fact[s]” because for the Brangwens the spiritual and the everyday have always been separate (266). But clearly there is something different between Ursula’s mixing of the two worlds and her Sunday school teacher’s literal translations of biblical lessons. Whereas the Sunday school teacher’s language turns the literature into information, detracting from the aesthetic value of the spiritual words, Ursula’s “confusion” allows for a call and response between the two worlds that creates something new, something aesthetically appealing, steeped in Christian visions, and connected to the everyday life of the countryside (266).

It is not enough for Ursula to shift her attention back and forth between the spiritual and the material or between the metaphorical and the literal. Although she revolts against religion, “in the end there returned the poignant yearning from the Sunday world” (265). But she must know how her “passion…for Christ, for the gathering under
the wings of security and warmth” applies “to the weekday world” (265). Walking one morning and looking up the hill at Ilkeston, her “heart surged” with a Bible verse that mixes the spiritual and the everyday in its most basic form, instinctual life forces: “Oh, Jerusalem—Jerusalem—how often would I have gathered thy children together as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings” (265). Ursula immediately imagines Christ holding her to his breast “as a mother holds a child,” and her vision quickly becomes sexually charged when Christ’s breast becomes the more generic “breast of Man, where she should have refuge and bliss for ever! All her senses quivered with passionate yearning” (266). She recognizes the figurative nature of the verse, not only in the obvious metaphor of the hen and her chicks, but also in the metaphorical nature of all religious language. She muses that Christ spoke of Jerusalem “In the vision world…something that did not exist in the everyday world. It was not houses and factories He would hold in His bosom: nor householders nor factory workers nor poor people: but something that had no part in the weekday world” (266). But she cannot help mixing the spiritual and the material in her imagination: “she must have it in weekday terms—she must…he must gather her body to his breast, that was strong with a broad bone, and which sounded with the beating of the heart, and which was warm with the life of which she partook, the life of the running blood” (266). It is not enough for Ursula to pay attention to the sacred and the everyday separately. She is preoccupied by her desire to attain the power of bivalent vision.

Yet the mixing of the abstract and the material in her interpretation of the Bible verse causes her to feel shame even though that same mixture is a trope of the original Bible verse that depends on material images to express spiritual lessons. The shame is
mitigated, however, by the “passionate confusion” she experiences as she feels “Jesus in the countryside” (266). She imagines Jesus lifting “up the lambs in his arms” and then “she was the lamb” (266). She is still walking down from Cossethay as she toils with the Bible verse where the religious imagery becomes disembodied as she projects it on the surrounding scenery. Not only does she imagine that she is a lamb in Jesus’s arms, but she also observes a literal mother ewe calling to her lambs, who “came running, shaking, and twinkling in their newborn bliss” (266). A scene describing lambs nursing on farmland could express the epitome of the everyday. Yet Ursula not only infuses the sacred with the material, but in doing this she also necessarily makes the everyday sacred.

The fusion of the two is so intense it creates a Keatsian confusion of pleasure and agony: “Jesus—the vision world—the everyday world—all mixed inextricably in a confusion of pain and bliss. It was almost agony, the confusion, the inextricability” (267).

Ursula’s inclination to endow the everyday act of lactation with spiritual imagery recalls the description of Anna nursing newborn Gudrun. When Ursula is born, Anna is disappointed and angry that she is not a boy. But by the time she gives birth to Gudrun, something has changed. The traditional societal preference for male offspring no longer affects her because

It was enough that she had milk and could suckle her child: Oh, oh, the bliss of the little life sucking the milk of her body! Oh, oh, oh the bliss, as the infant grew stronger, of the two tiny hands clutching, catching blindly yet passionately at her breast, of the tiny mouth seeking her in blind, sure, vital knowledge, of the sudden consummate peace as the little body sank, the mouth and throat sucking, sucking, sucking, drinking life from her to a make new life, almost sobbing with passionate
joy of receiving its own existence…this was enough for Anna. She seemed to pass off into a kind of rapture of motherhood, her rapture of motherhood was everything. (197-198)

Anna becomes Mary, holding her child to her breast and giving it life, or like Christ in Ursula’s later vision, holding Ursula to his chest. The description is at once intensely physical and deeply emotional and spiritual. Like Ursula’s perception of the nursing lambs in the field, it is impossible to separate the material and transient everyday from the spiritual and transcendent eternal. Lawrence’s narrative bypasses the social judgments that might be passed on either the very open description of naked female breasts or of the passionate pleasure Anna and Gudrun receive from breastfeeding. And Anna is not troubled by the mixing of the everyday and the spiritual in the same way Ursula is.

But for Ursula, the shame is not simply about the degradation of the spiritual by the material. Although Ursula may be embarrassed about her own burgeoning sexuality, we can understand her tortured reaction to the mixing more fully when we recognize it as anxiety about mixed attention. Ursula wonders if she can pay attention to the literal meaning of Biblical verses and to the artistry of religious language and still hold onto the substance of that language, or if that attention to the material somehow detracts from how much she can focus on the underlying spiritual messages. Ursula’s continued struggles with divided attention in *Women in Love* play themselves out over a myriad of seemingly opposed dichotomies. Just as she attempts to mix the sacred and the everyday in *The

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6 We recall Ursula’s adolescent embarrassment about the mixture of spirituality and sexuality in the suckling lamb passage, where “she would take His words of the spirit and make them to pander to her own carnality. This was a shame to her. The confusing of the spirit world with the material world, in her own soul, degraded her” (267).
*Rainbow*, and just as she experiences anxiety about the moral implications of that mixture, when she is older she wrestles with paying attention to tradition and change, to the body and the soul, to independence and unity, among many others. The sacred and the everyday are just two points on a circle of which Ursula’s attention forms the diameter. As she matures and continues to develop a Janus-like gaze, her attention will rotate, and the diameter of her gaze will intersect many other points along the circumference of her vision. This variety demonstrates that Lawrence’s interest lies not only in the obvious dichotomies with which the characters struggle, but also, and perhaps more importantly, with the nature of attention in and of itself. Lawrence’s exploration of attention, furthermore, provides a connective thread between *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, a progression and an evolution that substantiates readings in which the latter book springs from the former and in which the characters remain coherent from the first book to the second.

IV. The Design of *Women in Love* and Divided Attention

I want to close my discussion of divided attention in Lawrence with three assertions: that the diptych *Women in Love* composes with *The Rainbow* is centrally concerned with the anxieties and opportunities for transcendental experience presented by polarized oscillations of attention; that *Women in Love*, as far as it briefly achieves a representation of perfected modern love, does so through the exhilarating collapse of opposing perspectives, values, and states of being; and that Ursula Brangwen’s development in the second novel is continuous and coherent with her development in the first, contrary to views such as Cynthia Nixon’s.
Whereas Birkin’s manner of paying attention to seemingly opposed poles of various dichotomies renders him, in the eyes of his society, inconsistent, untrustworthy, and, ironically, inauthentic (ironically because authenticity, for Birkin, constitutes the highest form of morality), Skrebensky, stiffer and more wooden than James’s Caspar Goodwood in *The Portrait of a Lady*, “seemed perfectly, even fatally established” (271). Ursula is attracted to Skrebensky’s surety because she is at a stage in her life when she is establishing independence from a family whose members inveterately experience the flux of divided attention. When she first meets him, she repeatedly compares Skrebensky to her father and her Uncle Tom. What Ursula is perhaps too inexperienced to recognize at this point is that Uncle Tom’s “unsatisfactory flux” may not be a sign that he is too easily swayed by the desires and needs of others (271). Rather, it may suggest his desire not to focus his attention in only one direction and risk missing out on other perspectives that are equally true and equally fulfilling.

Ursula’s initial attraction to Skrebensky signals her desire to separate herself from the Brangwens and their somewhat unstable habits of attention. Although seemingly counterintuitive, Ursula feels it is “an adventure…to put direct questions” to Skrebensky “and get plain answers. She knew what she might do with this man” (272). His predictable straightforward nature attracts Ursula precisely because he is so different from the Brangwens, with their unpredictable, oscillating modes of attention. When she first meets Skrebensky “he seemed perfectly, even fatally established, he did not ask to be rendered before he could exist…this attracted Ursula very much. She was used to unsure people who took on a new being with every new influence” (271). She compares Skrebensky to her father and Uncle Tom, noting that in some ways he is like them, but
finer. Her admiration of his style recalls Lydia Brangwen’s admiration of the vicar’s family, who are “so fair, so fine in mould” (12). Ursula finds Skrebensky “wonderful” because “he was so finely constituted, and so distinct, self-contained, self-supporting. This, she said to herself, was a gentleman” (271). Ursula’s comparison of Skrebensky to her father and uncle intensifies her attraction to him. Skrebensky seems always “in possession of himself” so that “other people could not really give him anything nor take anything from him,” whereas Uncle Tom “was always more or less what the other person would have him. In consequence, one never knew the real Uncle Tom, only a fluid, unsatisfactory flux with more or less consistent appearance” (271). We might easily transplant this description of Uncle Tom to Women in Love as a description of Birkin, and readers would not miss a beat at the change.

When Ursula spends time with Skrebensky, she escapes from reality into a fantasy world, suggesting that a relationship with someone with such an established and solid identity will not provide real satisfaction, will not produce anything worthwhile, and will not endure. When they ride home from tea in town in a “motor-car,” Ursula sees the landscape almost as a painting:

She saw the familiar country racing by. But now it was no familiar country, it was wonderland…Strange it looked on this wet, early summer evening, remote, in a magic land…Ah, if only she and Skrebensky could get out, dismount into this enchanted land where nobody had ever been before! Then they would be enchanted people, they would pull off the dull, customary self. If she were wandering there, on the hill-slope under a silvery, changing sky, in which many rooks melted like hurrying showers of blots. (283)
She is happiest when she dreams of him “only vaguely” (284). She only thinks of him concretely when she is “less happy, out of sorts,” and when he has to return to his post in the military, she has trouble writing to him because “words on paper had nothing to do with him and her” (285).

It is evident that Ursula is in a false position in her relationship with Skrebensky, living in a fantasy world. Lawrence’s account of Ursula’s romanticized fairy tale construction of her relationship with Skrebensky is a sure sign that it is a dead-end, a realization that comes home to Ursula in the wake of her pregnancy and miscarriage. Skrebensky offers a brief reprieve from the uncertainty of divided attention, but ultimately Ursula will continue to try to make sense of the complex dynamic of attention that may not provide sure and definite answers but that will expose her to a more realistic and authentic view of life, the view that she fully develops in Women in Love.

In Women in Love, Gudrun Brangwen complains that Rupert Birkin “has no real critical faculty—of people, at all events…I tell you, he treats any little fool as he treats me or you—and it’s such an insult,” and her sister Ursula replies, “Oh, it is…One must discriminate” (Lawrence, Women in Love 21. This critique of the chameleon-like Birkin echoes the critique, in The Rainbow, of Tom Brangwen’s “fluid, unsatisfactory flux.” Gudrun concludes that because of Birkin’s apparent lack of discrimination, one “can’t trust him” (21). Yet though we hear that Birkin “subordinated himself to the common idea, travestied himself,” it would be reductive to take his egalitarian treatment of a wide variety of people as an example of his subordination (20). Rather, Birkin’s behavior is symptomatic of his refusal, like Hyacinth’s, to embrace any one perspective to the exclusion of others. Throughout the novel, especially in his relationships with Ursula and
with Gerald Crich, Birkin maintains an interest in sustaining a multivalent perspective, his attention oscillating between the apparently conflicting needs of his mind and soul and the appetites of his body.

What is particularly interesting about Lawrence’s treatment of the various dichotomies with which his characters struggle is that the implied author himself seems to bounce back and forth between the two ends of the diameter. At some points, for example, the demands of the soul take precedence over those of the body, but at other points both *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* seem to obtain the opposite. In either case, however, the characters whom Lawrence invests with the most moral value tend be those who are vital and alert, too sinuous to adopt any morally rigid posture or bearing. Although Gudrun, Hermione Roddice, and Gerald Crich often seem to embody the cold human will that destroys impulse and therefore makes any kind of redemptive love impossible, Birkin does not simply reject their mode of living in favor of the blood impulse represented by the sensuous Pussum or the statue of the African woman in Halliday’s apartment. Rather, he seeks to combine the intellectual and the sensual, the abstract and the concrete, and his attraction to the idea of taking both Ursula and Gerald as lovers becomes a metaphor for his compulsion to embody in one instant two seemingly oppositional extremes.

Yet Ursula Brangwen is much more than a simple representation of one of the extreme poles that attracts Birkin’s attention. Ursula both relates to and is able to cope with Birkin’s divided attention; she overcomes the instability of loving a man whom Hermione Roddice describes as “not a man…because he was not consistent” (92). Ursula withstands the anxiety of multivalence and even maintains a level of conflict with Birkin
that encourages his perspective. My examination of Ursula through the lens of Birkin’s preoccupation with attention reads Ursula, in her vitality and dynamism, as arguably the strongest character in the novel. Furthermore, Ursula serves as a model for Birkin because she has more finely refined than he has the ability to adopt a multivalent perspective, which allows her to express herself authentically, embracing her own divided attention without hurting others.

Although Lawrence is not interested in the morality of attention in the same ways as James, he also gives us Janus-like dualists who attempt to be both concrete and abstract, intimately connected with others and yet completely independent. These characters, like James’s, worry that their divided attention compromises their moral soundness and threatens their ability to have meaningful relationships, but their anxiety does not threaten to destroy them in the same way anxiety about divided attention does for many of James’s characters, which is perhaps a sign of the more advanced modernity of Lawrence and his characters. Though James’s sentences are complex, even sometimes problematically so, he seeks ever to refine, to clarify; when he opens up our view to allow for multiple interpretations and possibilities, he does so to create a more realistic portrait, to complete his painting with ever finer brush strokes. James’s language closes in, and even when this closing in obscures simple clarification, it simultaneously opens up and deepens our understanding of characters and of human nature. When he casts confusion, it is because the situations that he dramatizes address complex and confusing matters or
because his characters or even his narrators are confused about the moral implications of what is happening in his fiction.\(^7\)

Lawrence, on the other hand, often casts readers into confusion for confusion’s sake. Birkin’s inconsistencies at times confound Ursula and Lawrence’s readers alike. Unlike James, Lawrence mimics the incoherence that the dualist experiences by painting over his own images with wider brush strokes. Lawrence’s language in *Women in Love*, for example, is sometimes incomprehensible, contradicting itself because it relates to concepts like modern love that, according to Lawrence’s philosophy, are not yet invented. With James, we see attention divided between abstract concepts: substance and style, art and morality. Lawrence gives us attention divided between poles that are both abstract and concrete. Birkin’s struggles—between soul and body, between intellect and blood impulse, between individuality and union—are, much more than the struggles of any of James’s characters, shaped and defined by actual human relationships, relationships that are meant to be both realistic and symbolic of different modes of modern attention. Furthermore, of course, the relationships in Lawrence’s work are mired in sex and in his characters’ bodies in a way we never see in James, even in James’s most sensual scenes, such as Isabel Archer’s kiss with Caspar Goodwood. Part of the confusion in trying to figure out the characters in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* stems

\(^7\) This account is, I believe, apt for the novels of 1880s discussed in the second chapter of this dissertation. A more complex description would be required for James’s novels of the early twentieth century. In *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl* especially, and in *The Ambassadors* as well, James’s pervasive use of conjectural tropes—in *The Golden Bowl*, for instance, when the image of Maggie Verver as a sea creature “cradled upon depths, buoyant among dangers . . . might have been making once more present to him [Adam Verver] . . . her probable enjoyment of a rapture” (italics added; II 263)—displaces the actual into the hypothetical in ways that go beyond the realistic intentions of James’s earlier work. The recurrent conjectural mode in late James in the context of divided attention and multivalent vision requires fuller treatment that lies beyond the scope of this dissertation.
from their inconsistent rhetoric or the inconsistent rhetoric of the narration describing their thoughts.

Birkin fears that he will lose himself as a distinct individual if he loses control of his relationships with women. Lawrence’s narrator complains “fusion, fusion, this horrible fusion of two beings…Why could they not remain individuals, limited by their own limits…why try to absorb, or melt, or merge? One might abandon oneself utterly to the moments, but not to any other being” (309). Here we access Birkin’s thoughts and complaints about Hermione and Ursula, but Ursula has similar complaints about Birkin, that he wants to merge with her completely, and at some points she fears that she will utterly lose herself in their relationship. Lawrence’s narrator, like his characters, can be inconsistent and confusing. Either Lawrence’s treatment of attention depends on his reinvention of love, on human relationships requiring at least two people rather than on purely subjective moments of isolation, or his reinvention of love depends on his treatment of attention. In any case, the symbolic roles that his characters play create a world in which attention and love are intricately mixed and reliant on each other. As a result, Lawrence uses divided attention to describe a new kind of love and uses the reinvented ideas about love to refine his representation of attention. Perhaps James comes closest to Lawrence’s use of relationships to illustrate attention when he writes Olive Chancellor and Verena Tarrant. As we have seen, Olive uses Verena’s style to envelop her own substance when she teaches her to use her rhetorical charisma to further the feminist movement. But even the relationship between these two women does not approach Lawrence’s obvious level of symbolism when Birkin’s desire to have a simultaneous union with a man and a woman represents his approach to divided attention.
Lawrence’s *Study of Thomas Hardy* is an essential text for coming to grips with his idiosyncratic and always evolving metaphysic, particularly in the period when he was writing *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. Lawrence wrote the posthumously published, book-length Hardy study during the period in which he was finishing *The Rainbow*, which he had originally envisioned as a single novel (provisionally titled *The Sisters* or *The Wedding Ring*) that would have comprised *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. The *Study of Thomas Hardy*, like such other treatises on one novelist by another as Henry James’s *Hawthorne*, is really more about its author than its ostensible subject. Particularly notable is Lawrence’s intense articulation of a full-blown vitalist mysticism (or, perhaps better, a mystified vitalism), as in the following excerpts:

The via media to being, for man or woman, is love, and love alone. Having achieved and accomplished love, then the man passes into the unknown. . . .

(*Study of Thomas Hardy* 20)

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So life consists in the dual form of the Will-to-Motion and the Will-to-Inertia, and everything we see and know and are is the resultant of these two Wills. But the One Will, of which they are dual forms, that is as yet unthinkable. . . .

The dual Will we call the Will-to-Motion and the Will-to-Inertia. These cause the whole of life, from the ebb and flow of a wave, to the stable equilibrium of the whole universe, from birth and being and knowledge to death and decay and forgetfulness. And the Will-to-Motion we call the male will or spirit, the Will-to-Inertia the female . . .
But it must first be seen that the division into male and female is arbitrary, for the purpose of thought. The rapid motion of the rim of a wheel is the same as the perfect rest at the centre of the wheel. How can one divide them? Motion and rest are the same, when seen completely. (Study of Thomas Hardy, 59-60)

To see completely, as Janus might see looking simultaneously outward to the rim of the turning wheel of attention and inward to its center, is to achieve a vision of wholeness of being that Lawrence is careful to say is only gendered “for the purpose of thought.” When the “One Will” becomes apprehensible, if not thinkable, the “arbitrary” gendering of the duality collapses, as the divisions within the field of attention collapse like black stars upon themselves. Then man and woman, however briefly, enter into the Unknown, the sacred vitalistic source of being at the core of Lawrence’s metaphysic: in The Rainbow, it is the “unknown” toward which the Brangwen men gaze on the opening page of the novel (9); it is the “Unknown” before which the pregnant Anna Brangwen dances naked—“When there was no one to exult with, and the unsatisfied soul must dance and play, then one danced before the Unknown” (179); and it is precisely because Anton Skrebensky does not offer Ursula a “via media” into the Unknown that she breaks with him as the novel draws to a close: “... not on any side did he lead into the unknown” (473).

The star seems an apt metaphor here because it is precisely the trope that Lawrence makes central to the thematic core of Women in Love. The key passage comes about a third of the way into the novel, in Chapter XIII, “Mino,” and the theme reaches its apotheosis in Chapter XXIII, “Excurse,” after passing through a number of illuminating intermediate points. Birkin is turning toward Ursula in “Mino,” though his
conflict of commitment between Hermione Roddice and Ursula will not be unambiguously resolved in Ursula’s favor until much later in the novel. Of course, the division of his affections between Ursula and the longed-for male intimate embodied in Gerald Crich—a longing seemingly intensified after Gerald’s death—is never fully resolved, and its lack of resolution provides the thematic fulcrum for Lawrence’s construction of *Women in Love* as open-ended and unresolved, as we have noted earlier. In “Mino,” when Ursula goes to tea with Birkin alone, having concealed from Gudrun that she too had been invited, the occasion resonates with the terms we have seen Lawrence deploy in the Hardy study. “‘But there is a beyond, where there is no love,’” Birkin tells Ursula, “‘... a beyond, in you, in me, which is further than love, beyond the scope, as stars are beyond the scope of vision’” (146). That beyond is the unknown, the primal source of being; it lies beyond personality, and the way into it is through each other. Birkin continues, “I deliver *myself* over to the unknown, in coming to you, I am without reserves or defences, stripped entirely, into the unknown. Only there needs the pledge between us, that we both cast off everything, cast off ourselves even, and cease to be, so that which is perfectly ourselves can take place in us” (147).

The dualism of the passage in the Hardy study, with its Blakean contraries of male Will-to-Motion and female Will-to-Inertia making up “the whole of life,” becomes the polarized trope of star-equilibrium in “Mino” (*Hardy* 448). “‘What I want,’” Birkin tells Ursula, ‘‘is a strange conjunction with you... not meeting and mingling; – you are quite right: – but an equilibrium, a pure balance of two single beings: – as the stars balance each other’” (*Women in Love* 148). The trope, which at first may seem static, develops dynamically, first when Birkin says that “‘Adam kept Eve... single with
himself, like a star in its orbit’” and Ursula responds with spirited resistance to Birkin’s male chauvinist, metaphysical strong-arming—“‘There – there – you’ve given yourself away,’” she says, “pointing her finger at him. . . . ‘You want a satellite, Mars and his satellite’”—and then when Birkin, asserting that he meant not a satellite but “‘two single equal stars balanced in conjunction,’” gives that “‘mystic conjunction’” direction and velocity: “‘if you enter into a pure union, it is irrevocable . . . And when it is irrevocable it is one way, like the path of a star’” (150-151). The trope is simultaneously static and dynamic: “Motion and rest are the same, when seen completely” (Hardy 448). The path is into the Unknown—for woman, through man; for man, through woman—but the point I want to emphasize is not that Ursula and Birkin look in opposite directions—he toward and through the female, she toward and through the male—but that, as they each do so, each entertains the conception of a polarized relation—the “star-equilibrium”—that collapses into the beyond of the Unknown, beyond single personhood, where the dual forms become the as yet unthinkable One Will that they manifest. At the same time, Birkin’s insistent yet faltering, irritable exposition of his conception and Ursula’s skeptical yet fascinated resistance to the way he unfolds it over the course of the chapter bespeak the anxiety of multivalence that we saw manifested in James’s protagonists like Hyacinth Robinson.

In the wake of Birkin and Ursula’s discussion in “Mino,” and of the drowning of Diana Crich and her would-be rescuer Dr. Brindell in “Water Party” (the following chapter), both Ursula and Birkin are deeply troubled. Levenson offers an apt observation about the organization of the chapters in Women in Love:
Individual chapters often function as single coherent propositions . . . , as self-contained as grammatical units, and it is often easy to imagine an implied “furthermore” or “but” at the beginning of new chapters. . . . Indeed the paragraph serves as a useful rudimentary form for both Lawrentian narrative form and Lawrentian characterization; a sequence of definitive assertions that follow no smooth trajectory of meaning, that can be either intensified or challenged, and that hold open the possibility of a radical break with what had appeared to be a definitive judgment. (153)

In Chapter XV, “Sunday Evening,” Ursula finds herself “in a state of complete nullity,” feeling “crushed and obliterated in a darkness that was the border of death,” and after Birkin visits briefly, following Diana’s funeral, Ursula feels “such a poignant hatred of him,” not for any particular reason but out of a sense of their pure polarity: “She saw him as a clear stroke of uttermost contradiction, a strange gem-like being whose existence defined her own non-existence” (Women in Love 191, 197-198). Almost simultaneously (at the end of “Sunday Evening,” we read that “When she heard he was ill again, her hatred only intensified itself a few degrees, if that were possible”), Birkin falls ill, and the following chapter, “Man to Man,” opens on Birkin’s wallowing in a malaise more spiritual than physical, and relishing it: “He liked sometimes to be ill enough to take to his bed. For then he got better very quickly, and things came to him clear and sure” (198, 201).

What is troubling both Ursula and Birkin smacks of the old Lawrentian battle of the sexes, but theirs is a predicament at once more abstract and more amenable to remediation than the bitter, corrosive clash of values and temperaments that divides
Gertrude and Walter Morel in *Sons and Lovers*. Having shared the vision of star-equilibrium, they are both ill with the anxiety of that polarized vision, though Birkin, when he is laid up, muses on an imagined condition of being “perfectly polarized,” and begins to come out of his funk as he does so:

There is now to come the new day, when we are beings each of us, fulfilled in difference. The man is pure man, the woman pure woman, they are perfectly polarized. But there is no longer any of the horrible merging, mingling self-abnegation of love. There is only the pure duality of polarization, each one free from any contamination of the other. In each the individual is primal, sex is subordinate, but perfectly polarized. Each has a single, separate being with its own laws. The man has his pure freedom, the woman hers. Each acknowledges the perfection of the polarized sex-circuit. Each admits the different nature in the other. (201)

Briefly reparative though this vision is, Birkin’s attention is almost immediately drawn along an opposing vector: Gerald comes to see him, evoking “the deep uneasy feeling” the two men had for each other, a current of attraction that culminates physically in their naked wrestling match several chapters later in “Gladiatorial” and that runs as an intensifying current of feeling in Birkin beyond Gerald’s death (201). That current of feeling supercharges the closing dialogue between Ursula and Birkin, making for a denouement as resistant to closure as anything one encounters in Henry James’s novels, from *The Portrait of a Lady* to *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*.

'Did you need Gerald?’ she asked one evening.

'Yes,’ he said.
'Aren't I enough for you?' she asked.

'No,' he said. 'You are enough for me, as far as a woman is concerned. You are all women to me. But I wanted a man friend, as eternal as you and I are eternal.'

'Why aren't I enough?' she said. 'You are enough for me. I don't want anybody else but you. Why isn't it the same with you?'

'Having you, I can live all my life without anybody else, any other sheer intimacy. But to make it complete, really happy, I wanted eternal union with a man too: another kind of love,' he said.

'I don't believe it,' she said. 'It's an obstinacy, a theory, a perversity.'

'Well—' he said.

'You can't have two kinds of love. Why should you!'

It seems as if I can't,' he said. 'Yet I wanted it.'

'You can't have it, because it's false, impossible,' she said.

' I don't believe that,' he answered. (481)

Birkin wants to swing both ways along Janus-like lines of vision, desire, and commitment, despite Ursula’s denial of any such possibility. And there Lawrence ends his novel.

But not before dramatizing in “Excurse,” Chapter XXIII, the culmination of Birkin and Ursula’s journey toward star-equilibrium, a mystical peak of being that they cannot sustain through the ensuing chapters in which they move in fits and starts toward and beyond their legal marriage, in which Gerald and Gudrun’s relationship disintegrates as Gudrun falls under the corrosive spell of the German artist Loerke, and in which
Gerald’s death is followed rapidly by that open-ended closing dialogue. It is in “Excurse” that Birkin and Ursula, on a drive that eventually leads them into an enchanted, grassy circle in Sherwood Forest where they make love, submit their letters of resignation, he from his position as school-inspector, she from her position as school teacher. It is in “Excurse,” also, that Ursula recalls “again the old magic of the Book of Genesis,” and her old longing in *The Rainbow*, as she struggles in the earlier novel to maintain a bivalent vision of the spiritual and everyday worlds, that she might be one of the “daughters of men” destined for one of “the Sons of God” (*Women in Love*, 312). Readers like Cornelia Nixon who see a disjunction between the two novels manifested especially in what they believe is the discontinuity of Ursula’s character (Nixon 21-22) seem not to have reckoned with her utterly coherent and sustained effort to feel and see both ways along vectors that run between seeming contraries, an effort marked by anxiety and strain, to be sure, but also by momentary exhilaration when the oppositions collapse, as they do at the climax of “Excurse,” into the mystic otherness of the Unknown. Embracing Birkin as she kneels before him in the inn where they will write their letters of resignation, Ursula has an intense foretaste of what they will experience in the forest, discovering in him “one of the Sons of God from the beginning,” feeling “a new current of passional electric energy, between the two of them, released from the darkest poles of the body and established in perfect circuit,” and she experiences with Birkin “a perfect passing away . . . and at the same time the most intolerable accession into being . . . out-flooding from the Source of the deepest life-force” (313-314). It is only later, however, as they drive deeper into Sherwood Forest, that they approach the unalloyed fulfillment of “this star-equilibrium which alone is freedom” (319). Then at last they achieve the mystic, bivalent unison in
separateness that is the “star-equilibrium,” in a “night masculine and feminine, never to be seen with the eye, or known with the mind, only known as a palpable revelation of living otherness” (319, 320). Having entered through each other into the Unknown, into “the mystic body of reality,” they lapse back from the transcendental collapse of oppositions into ordinary consciousness, “afraid to seem to remember” hiding “away the remembrance and the knowledge” (320). From this climax of unsustainable vision the novel falls away into its troubled, closing chapters, moving toward that final unresolved debate between Ursula and Birkin. As we turn in the next chapter to Virginia Woolf’s treatment of attention and the possibilities of multivalent vision, we will see again a vision of transcendence that is all the more precious for being only momentary in the mind, the “fitful tracing,” as Wallace Stevens has it, “of a portal” (“Peter Quince at the Clavier”).
CHAPTER 4

VIRGINIA WOOLF’S EMERSONIAN METAPHORS OF SIGHT IN *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*: VISIONARY OSCILLATION

I. Introduction: Oscillation and Vision

The modern preoccupation with bivalent vision plays out quite differently in Woolf from James and Lawrence. For Woolf, James was a clear and acknowledged precursor (see, for example, Maud Ellman’s *The Nets of Modernism*) while Lawrence served as an eccentric and often unpalatable antagonist. Although she is interested in Lawrence and although they both are interested in the threat that modern life “poses to the mode of individualised and subjective experience which they were trying to represent— if not construct— in their writings,” she is clearly irritated by him, as we see in several of her diary entries (Feyel). Woolf works out in *To the Lighthouse* a vision of aesthetic salvation embodied in two key figures, one being the ghost-to-be-laid of her own mother, Mrs. Ramsay, and the other a solitary woman striving to be an ideal painter, Lily Briscoe, both of whom work not through the Lawrentian interplay of spirit incarnated in flesh held in suspense in star equilibrium but in a more abstract perspectival oscillation between the close and the distant, the near and far. In this final chapter, it is by analogy with an Emersonian dynamic involving relations between the eye and the horizon that Lawrence elides in his dismissal of Emerson’s idealism.
For Lawrence, Emerson is stuck in the ideal world at or near the horizon and ignores the close, the concrete, the actual, the near. Lawrence writes:

Emerson was an idealist: a believer in “continuous revelation,” continuous inrushes of inspirational energy from the Over-Soul. . . . Emerson listened to one sort of message and only one. . . . He was only connected on the Ideal phone. “We are all aiming to be idealists,” says Emerson, “and covet the society of those who make us so, as the sweet singer, the orator, the ideal painter.” (Lawrence, Review of Sherman, *Americans, Introductions and Reviews* 224).

Everything Emersonian, in Lawrence’s view, is about the transcendental over-soul. But Emerson’s true eye sees both the proximate and the distant. In fact, the “first circle,” in Emerson’s “Circles,” is the actual human eye. The horizon it forms is the “second” circle (Emerson 403). Emerson sees both the up-close zig-zag tacking of a boat as well as the overall course, which looks like a straight line. What I am tracing in Woolf can be illuminated by a nuanced and careful analogy to Emerson that takes into account his complexity more than Lawrence does in his reading of Emerson as “only connected on the Ideal phone” (*The Phoenix* 317).

At the end of *To the Lighthouse* as Lily Briscoe finally completes the painting she began years earlier, she realizes that “so much depends…upon distance: whether people are near us or far from us” (191). Throughout the final scene, Lily’s attention oscillates between Mr. Carmichael, who sits “close at hand,” and the distant boat carrying Mr. Ramsay with two of his children out to the lighthouse (191). Critics note that Mr. Carmichael is the one character of whom we never get an internal view. Yet the contrast between his proximity to Lily and Mr. Ramsay’s remoteness from her in this final scene
reminds us of the important role distance plays in our understanding of two of the novel’s most important characters: Lily and Mrs. Ramsay.

Acknowledging the essential function of both proximate and distant vision in Lily’s creative production allows us to focus not just on the differences between Mrs. Ramsay and Lily but also on their similarities, especially as they are embodied in their common modes of vision. The novel seems to have two obvious climaxes: the dinner party scene and the final scene in which Lily finishes her painting. This bi-focal structure asks us to compare the two women, and an examination of each woman’s ability to oscillate between proximate and distant vision reveals the depth of Mrs. Ramsay’s artistry. This lies not only in her ability to arrange her dinner guests and create a beautiful centerpiece, but also in the oscillating mode of vision with which she takes in the meal and the people around the table.

Woolf endows Mrs. Ramsay and Lily with the same interest in discovering how to balance perception and expression between the proximate and the remote. Mrs. Ramsay and Lily are compelled to navigate the space between the near and the distant, and Woolf, sometimes accepting and sometimes rejecting a paradigmatic Emersonian metaphor of vision, makes this concern with sight and space a vital trait in both characters. Like Ann Banfield’s account in *The Phantom Table*, my argument focuses on Woolf’s vision of epistemological perfectionism. But my reading of Woolf is unlike Banfield, and unlike Emily Dalgarno in *Virginia Woolf and the Visible World*. Banfield and Dalgarno center their theses on what they characterize as Woolf’s move from Impressionism to Post-Impressionism, whereas I intend both to highlight the suggestive parallels between Woolf’s epistemological philosophy of sight and that of Emerson and to track her
departures from his vision, thus advancing understanding of Woolf’s epistemology and, collaterally, offering new perspectives on *To the Lighthouse*. This reading will demonstrate that though Lily has traditionally been read as the prime figure of the artist in the novel—a reading that often relegates Mrs. Ramsay to the qualified role of domestic artist—Mrs. Ramsay’s ability to manipulate space with her vision profoundly parallels, and resonates with, Lily’s artistic vision, so that each illuminates the other. Recognizing Mrs. Ramsay’s exemplification of the complex visionary oscillation essential to the artist moves us beyond Jane Lilienfeld’s claim (important despite and perhaps even because of its limitations) that “more than a celebration of Mrs. Ramsay, *To the Lighthouse* is plotted to take the reader through a successful reconsideration and rejection of Mrs. Ramsay’s mode of life” (346).

For both Mrs. Ramsay and Lily, attention travels back and forth along a spectrum, running from the distant and the proximate, searching it seems, at least for Lily, for a vision that will answer her deepest questions. Kenneth Burke claims that “every way of seeing is a way of not seeing” (“Permanence and Change” 70). As Richard Lanham explains, Burke’s apothegm “mean[s] that paying attention in one way means you cannot pay attention in another. And the manner of attention changes the object” (Lanham 164). Here Burke is discussing world-views or perspectives, meaning, for example, that a spiritualist and a communist will see the world very differently. But Lanham uses Burke’s theory to demonstrate what often has been seen as the difficulty of paying attention simultaneously both to the substance of an object or text and its surface.

Whereas Lanham discusses the influence of modern technology and the ease with which, in the modern era, attention moves back and forth along the continuum
between distant and proximate vision, Woolf’s creation of the abstract philosopher Mr. Ramsay, who frustrates his wife and others with his inability to look at and see the physical world, demonstrates Woolf’s awareness that some observers may be uncomfortable making such quick transitions. The metaphors of distance and vision in *To the Lighthouse* playfully engage and transmute Emersonian metaphors of visionary insight, which, like Woolf’s, insist on the dependence of reason on nature. Furthermore, the application of Emersonian tropes to Woolf discloses a surprisingly modernist or proto-modernist Emerson. Although there is ample evidence of Woolf’s general knowledge of Emerson (with references to him in her fiction and non-fiction), and though there may be a case for specific literary influence, it is not my intention to make that argument here. I simply wish to use the example of Emerson to elucidate Woolf’s project, to show how the two resonate with and reciprocally illuminate each other.

II. Emerson’s Metaphors of Distance

Emerson’s perspectival spectrum, which gives us permission to resist the negation of either the transcendent or the material, is illuminated when read in the light of his ideas about vision and distance. Mrs. Ramsay’s attempts to balance distant and proximate vision, especially when engaged with her guests during her dinner party, resonate with Emerson’s metaphors of fluid vision. Emerson’s metaphor of the eye and the horizon highlights his belief in the perspectival spectrum and the importance he places on using scope and distance to move beyond subjective vision.

Emerson focuses on the hierarchy of sight and the way the circle leads upwards from the organ of perception to the subjectively framed natural world, and then
perhaps—but only if the horizon is distant enough—to the transcendent. At the beginning of “Circles,” he declares, “the eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world” (403). Here, of course, is the Romantic Platonism or idealism that Lawrence found so objectionable. Emerson’s metaphors of scope and perspective imply that we might use the two circles, one formed by the eye and one formed by the eye’s framing of the horizon, as a kind of intuitive telescope that can reveal what the eye alone does not perceive. Although the eyes of the observer subjectively form both of these circles, Emerson implies that through the manipulation of the distance between the two, one might see beyond the subjective. In To the Lighthouse, Mrs. Ramsay becomes both ends of Emerson’s telescope—Mrs. McNab even compares Mrs. Ramsay to “the circle at the end of a telescope”—suggesting that Woolf had a more acute impression than Emerson that the subjective eye forms both the near and the distant circles (136). We get a real sense of this awareness when Mrs. Ramsay—like John Keats’s “camelion Poet,” who becomes the object he contemplates—sees the beam from the lighthouse and feels that it is “her own eyes meeting her own eyes” (Keats 387, Woolf 63). According to Emerson, even though “the voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks,” when we view the track from far away “it straightens itself to the average tendency” (Emerson 266). One can see that the line of the ship is straight only when the track is viewed from a “sufficient distance”; it is the distance between the two circles that allows us to understand more completely the course of the ship (266).

The use of vision and of the connection formed by the eye between the subject and the object in Emerson’s ship metaphor illustrates how one might move back and forth
along the perspectival spectrum without negating either end. Emerson’s imagined
eraser, the observer views the ship’s track both as a “zigzag line” and as a straight path, depending
on the distance between the observer and the ship (266). Emerson considers both of these
images, the ship’s crooked movements and its straight path, to be accurate descriptions of
reality. The eye does not deceive us by giving different pictures; rather, it provides two
answers to two different questions (in this case, either what is the immediate, material,
proximate reality of the ship’s path, or what is the overall outcome, which is also a
reality, of the first reality). Both the observer and the ship the observer views are products
of the material world, but by manipulating the distance between the two, the philosopher
might arrive at a reality that does not quite exist in the material world, a reality that is
transcendent; the average of the zigzags exists as a mathematical truth rather than a
physical reality.

Since both truths (the crooked line and the straight path) exist simultaneously, the
subject can acknowledge them both without negating either one. The more abstract truth
of the ship’s straight line reveals itself as we navigate the distance between our (material)
eyes and our eyes’ vision of the (material) ship. Emerson refers to the concepts of
phenomenon and noumenon by using a variety of terms, such as understanding and
reason; for Emerson, understanding and reason correspond to perception and intuition.
But for even more clarity, we can look to the terms he uses in “The Transcendentalist” to
describe the two classes of thinkers: “Materialists and Idealists” (Emerson 193). The
idealist “does not deny the sensuous fact: by no means; but he will not see that alone. He
does not deny the presence of this table, this chair, and the walls of this room, but he
looks at these things as the reverse side of the tapestry, as the other end, each being a
sequel or completion of a spiritual fact which nearly concerns him” (194). While the material fact is a completion of the spiritual fact, the spiritual fact’s “sequel,” our perspective must work in reverse; it is by moving first through and then beyond the natural world that we can intuit spiritual laws (194). But we must return to the natural world, the world of concrete words and images, in order to express what we perceive when we move beyond them.

Woolf’s imagery also stresses the importance of both the materialist’s and the idealist’s perspective when Lily Briscoe prepares, for the second time, to complete her painting; Lily compares the simultaneous simplicity and complexity of her idea to how “the waves shape themselves symmetrically from the cliff top, but to the swimmer among them are divided by steep gulfs, and foaming crests” (157). Both Emerson and Woolf are interested in the role distance plays in revealing two equally valid realities, but they differ in their treatment of what that revelation produces. Emerson promises a mathematical truth, whereas Woolf offers the possibility of connection with others through shared vision, an outcome that is still subjective.

III. Woolf’s Mutation of Emersonian Metaphors

In keeping with her intense interiority, Woolf turns Emerson’s metaphors of vision outside in: when Mrs. Ramsay views her own distant horizon, she often does not look at the material world outside of her but, rather, revels in prospects that she imagines inhabit her own interior, her body. “Her horizon seemed to her limitless” because it exists in her imagination, and all she has to do is close her eyes to “visit the places she had not seen” (62). But we also read that looking at the physical world around her, she often
“became the thing she looked at”; oscillating vision, for Mrs. Ramsay, can be either an embodied or a disembodied act (63). While Banfield’s interest lies in Woolf’s transition from the language of personal ethics to the Post-Impressionistic language of disembodied impersonality, what I want to emphasize here is the similarity between Emerson’s and Woolf’s embrace of both ends of the spectrum—the near and the distant, the embodied and the disembodied. Like James Harker’s “Misperceiving Virginia Woolf,” my argument “consolidates the inward and outward approaches” (1).

Emerson’s metaphors of spatial and temporal distance represent his perspectival spectrum on two levels. Not only do they illustrate the use of distance in discovering the transcendent through the material, but they also, by their very function as linguistic representations of laws that are so hard to express, demonstrate the necessity of using nature to understand and express reason. These metaphors reappear, though mutated, throughout Woolf’s work and most abundantly in To the Lighthouse, and the novel’s treatment of perspective adopts and transforms Emersonian metaphors that connect vision and distance to an intuitive understanding of universal laws. When Lily sits down to dinner with Mrs. Ramsay and her guests, she reflects on how “remote” Mrs. Ramsay looks, and she imagines that Mrs. Ramsay is a ship “fading” on the horizon, “drifting into that strange no-man’s land where to follow people is impossible and yet their going inflicts such a chill on those who watch them that they always try at least to follow them with their eyes” (84). We continue to trace Mrs. Ramsay through the dinner scene as she uses her own eyes and imagination to project herself into the distance and then back again to her family and friends at the table; she is “like a hawk” that moves with ease between two positions (105). Although for a time she finds herself “suspended…like a
flag floated in an element of joy which filled every nerve of her body fully and sweetly,” when her attention is called back to serving her guests, she can “like a hawk which lapses suddenly from its high station, flaunt and sink on laughter easily, resting her whole weight upon what at the other end of the table her husband was saying” (105). Both the distant and the proximate vision are important to Mrs. Ramsay’s sense of happiness. Although she knows that it will not last, when she dissociates “herself from the moment” she feels that she has “reached security” and believes she has discovered that thing that “endures” (104, 105).

Despite the claim in A Room of One’s Own that domestic interruptions prevent women from reaching artistic greatness, Woolf’s twist on the Emersonian metaphor of vision suggests that there also might be some benefit in these disruptions. The sentence structure throughout the dinner scene embodies interruption and suggests the rapidity with which Mrs. Ramsay is able to navigate the space between the near and the far. Just as Mrs. Ramsay believes she has discovered what makes up the thing that “endures,” we read that “here, she felt, putting the spoon down, was the still space that lies about the heart of things; where one could move or rest; could wait now (they were all helped) listening” (105). The sentence continues with Mrs. Ramsay’s descent from her great height and distant vision to return to the table and the conversation.

Woolf merges Mrs. Ramsay’s feelings of distance and security with her attention to the proximate, material world. For while Mrs. Ramsay “felt” the “still space that lies about the heart of things,” she also felt the hardness of the “spoon” in her hand (105). Domestic interruptions trigger her oscillation from visionary or transcendent distance back to the close, material perspective of the table. Her sense of peace comes not from
her ability to project herself into the distance, but from the combination of that far-ranging flight with her capacity to descend to the proximate, represented here by the spoon and by her awareness that “(they were all helped)” (105). We should note that for Woolf the placement of this phrase in parentheses does not suggest a hierarchy or priority of attention; rather it implies simultaneity and equivalence, as if Mrs. Ramsay experiences at once the distant vision of the suspended hawk and the proximate vision of a dinner hostess and devoted wife. Woolf asks herself in a diary entry discussing the final scene in the novel if she might use parentheses to give the sense that we are “reading the two things at the same time” (Diary III 106). Lily attributes some of her own attraction to Mrs. Ramsay to Mrs. Ramsay’s ability to move between near and distant vision, but we do not expect that Lily will admire how Mrs. Ramsay makes use of her oscillations. After all, what Mrs. Ramsay’s sense of security affords her at the dinner party is merely the ability to listen and “rest her whole weight” on what “her husband was saying” (105).

Although Mrs. Ramsay is compelled to navigate the space between the near and the distant, her oscillations often are unsatisfying. When she imagines she is the light from the lighthouse, using her vision to project herself through a window and across the water, she does not feel as though she has had a glimpse of reality or a deep insight. Rather she feels bound to say “we are in the hands of the Lord” and she becomes “instantly annoyed with herself for saying…something she did not mean” (63). Emerson’s metaphors of vision rest on the claim that we might use the natural world to catch glimpses of universal laws. To the Lighthouse also implies that manipulating distance and vision will provide “illuminations” of something, but Woolf teases us by making ambiguous what that something is (161). Lily admires, relates to, and tries to
emulate Mrs. Ramsay’s ability to oscillate rapidly between the near and the distant, but she doubts that the process grants Mrs. Ramsay any deeper understanding of life or of the visitors whom Mrs. Ramsay tries to arrange according to her own vision. Her flights into the distance and subsequent descents, brought on by domestic interruptions, offer Mrs. Ramsay a sense of security and even joy, but they do not provide answers to Lily’s questions about the meaning of life and representation.

One might conclude here that Mrs. Ramsay is unable to glimpse the universal laws, despite her use of the perspectival spectrum, because she is overwhelmed by interruptions. But we have to remember that the interruptions catalyze her oscillations. We might be tempted also to draw a parallel between Mr. Oliver’s complaint in *Between the Acts* that his sister, Mrs. Swithin, “would have been…a very clever woman, had she fixed her gaze” and Woolf’s disparagement of interruption in *A Room of One’s Own* (*Between the Acts* 17). Mr. Oliver wants his sister to both maintain and correct her gaze, implying that her lack of uninterrupted attention to distant vision, her inability to ignore the near, prevents her from reaching intellectual heights. But because of the suggestive parallels between Emerson’s metaphors of distance and the role interruption plays in allowing Mrs. Ramsay to travel between the near and the distant, we should not accept the simplified argument that Woolf wants women to practice only the uninterruptible vision suggested by Mr. Oliver’s corrective observation that his sister’s gaze is not “fixed” (17).

Rather, we must consider Woolf’s use of various forms of interruption and the way each one functions—as either a disruptor or a stimulator of progress—for each character. Lucio Ruotolo understands interruption as a catalyst for transcendent thought
when he contrasts the average citizens who appear in Woolf’s non-fiction and who either are not interested in thoughtfully examining the complexities of human life or do not have the capacity to move beyond formulaic explanations for that complexity with the heroines of her novels, who accommodate and even indulge interrupted moments. My interest lies in Mrs. Ramsay’s self-interruption as a form of self-consolidation. As I have already mentioned, the parenthesis around “(they were all helped)” implies simultaneity, and here it represents her capacity for merging her attraction to the distant with her dependence on the near (To the Lighthouse 105). Quite different from the external and sometimes painfully disruptive interruptions that infuse much of Woolf’s writing, Mrs. Ramsay’s self-imposed interruptions are integral to her attempts either to balance or unite distant and proximate vision. Mrs. Ramsay breaks out of the isolated state of distant vision “by laying hold of some little odd or end, some sound, some sight,” and although she leaves the distant “solitude reluctantly,” it is important that “always, she felt, one helped oneself” into the interruption and the return to the material world (64). Even though “her remoteness pained” Mr. Ramsay, though it “hurt him that she should look so distant…he would not interrupt her,” yet Mrs. Ramsay intentionally self-interrupts her distant viewing of the lighthouse to give him “of her own free will what she knew he would never ask” (65). Lily resists Mrs. Ramsay’s attempts to encourage her to marry, and her observations during the dinner scene demonstrate her distaste for the role Mrs. Ramsay plays as a devoted wife who does not fully understand the people she arranges but who, nonetheless, laughs at them. Yet Lily is equally put off by Mr. Ramsay’s abstraction and lack of sensitivity in his dealings with his family.
Both Mrs. Ramsay and Lily are irritated by the “long-sighted” Mr. Ramsay’s blindness, his inability to look at the things in front of him: the view, Prue’s beauty, or the “pudding” and “roast beef” on his plate (207, 70). Mrs. Ramsay worries that her husband’s attention to the abstract has made him “awkward,” and she stops herself from pointing out the “pulse of the full-throbbing star” that “gave her such keen pleasure” because he never looks at things, because she knows, as Cam does, “that when he looked up…it was not to see anything; it was to pin down some thought more exactly” (71, 190). Lily realizes that she does not mind Mr. Ramsay’s insatiable quest for sympathy, but she dislikes him for his “narrowness, his blindness” (46). Cam similarly connects her father’s blindness with his tyranny when she rides out with him in the boat (170). Emerson’s metaphors of vision and distance imply that if we do not recognize the dependence of reason on nature, we will be left in spiritual or intellectual isolation. Mr. Ramsay is desperate for sympathy because his inattention to the material world separates him from his family and their guests and prevents him from achieving the kind of connection Mrs. Ramsay and Augustus Carmichael make when the act of “looking together” at Rose’s table arrangement “united them” (97). Domestic interruptions save Mrs. Ramsay from the loneliness and terror of perpetual distant vision.

In the end, Lily is grateful that even though Mrs. Ramsay is gone, “the problem of space” still “remained” (171). Although she feels “an obscure distress” from the lack of balance when she is “curiously divided” between the painting in front of her and the sight of “the brown speck of Mr. Ramsay’s sailing boat” on the horizon, she seems to believe that achieving “that razor edge of balance” will reveal her vision, “something that evaded her” (193, 192). She recognizes that in her quest to find the elusive answers to her
questions about reality and to complete her project, “so much depends…upon distance: whether people are near us or far from us” (191). But whereas Emerson offers us two perspectives, the near and the distant, both of which are valid, true observations, both necessary for intuiting the transcendent laws, for Woolf neither the near nor the distant vision provides a transparent representation of reality. We cannot understand what, for Lily, is meant by the “so much” that “depends” on distance (191). Woolf’s language here is mysteriously vague.

We hear that Lily’s view of “Mr. Ramsay changed as he sailed further and further across the bay,” but Woolf describes the sensation that Lily’s oscillating vision provides her more than she shows its effect on Lily’s understanding (191). Her “feeling for Mr. Ramsay…seemed to be elongated, stretched out; he seemed to become more and more remote. He and his children seemed to be swallowed up in that blue, that distance; but here, on the lawn, close at hand, Mr. Carmichael suddenly grunted…she laughed…that was different altogether, because he was so near” (191). The repeated use of the Jamesian “seemed” in this passage emphasizes Lily’s lack of confidence in the ability of vision to reveal reality. Even her sense that Mr. Ramsay’s boat moves closer to the lighthouse, that he becomes more “remote,” is tempered by the word “seemed,” as if she cannot even be sure that there is more space between them than there was when he was on land (191). Her feelings for Mr. Carmichael are completely different from her feelings for Mr. Ramsay, and she attributes the disparity to Mr. Carmichael’s proximity; she hears him grunt and sees him as he “clawed his book up from the grass” (191). But Woolf conceals the substance of Lily’s affections for each man, focusing instead on Lily’s discovery that distance changes our understanding in an important way, refusing to reveal
what those changes are and avoiding any claims about whether either distant or proximate vision represents universal truth or even provides a glimpse of it.

The average tendency of Emerson’s ship, the straight line, exists as a mathematical truth even if there is no observer to manipulate the distance and discover it. While Woolf’s interest in disembodied vision is significant, the formation of Lily’s vision, fueled by her combination of disembodied and embodied perception, is not void of ego or personality like a mathematical equation. Her vision, rather, depends on her individual perception of the material world, her personality, and her understanding of the Ramsays and of herself. We might more fully understand Lily’s dependence on embodied vision, or, rather, the dependence of her vision on a balance of disembodied and embodied perception, when we look more closely at how interruption functions in relation to her attempts to navigate the space between the near and the distant and to reproduce that navigation in her painting.

Mrs. Ramsay, as we have seen, employs domestic self-interruptions to trigger her oscillations between near and distant vision. In Lily’s case, however, interruptions tend to disrupt her progress towards finding a balance between nature and reason. As Lily toils to complete her painting, she reflects that “one must keep on looking without for a second relaxing the intensity of emotion, the determination not to be bamboozled. One must hold the scene—so—in a vise and let nothing come in and spoil it” (201). When Lily struggles to resist interruption and distraction, it is not only distant vision that she wishes to maintain. Rather, she fights to hold onto the kind of attention that can be paid, at once, both to the material and to the transcendent. She thinks, “one wanted…to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that’s a chair, that’s a table, and yet at the same
time, It’s a miracle, it’s an ecstasy” (202, emphasis mine). The effort is too much, for something as small as “the air” stirring “some flounce in the room” defeats her resolve, and “her heart leapt at her and seized her and tortured her” (202). It is not only her distant gaze that the stir in the room jolts; rather, the interruption knocks her attention, which was positioned to note, at once, both the near and the far, both the “table” and the “ecstasy,” off balance (202). Mrs. Ramsay uses the interruptions imposed by the material world to merge the near and the distant, while Lily’s ability to hold onto that merger is thwarted by the same kind of material disruptions. Perhaps the contrast between Lily’s resistance to and Mrs. Ramsay’s preoccupation with marriage can account for the dissimilarity between the two women’s perceptions and experiences of interruption.

Yet even though Lily fights against interruption, her desire to connect with others makes her dependent on it. While working on her painting for the second time, Lily reflects on the problem of distance and how it makes us question even what we see. She remembers that once, when Mrs. Ramsay looked at something far out in the water, she put on her “spectacles” and asked, “Is it a boat? Is it a cork” (171). Lily sinks deeply into memories of Mrs. Ramsay when “against her will she had come to the surface, and found herself half out of the picture, looking, a little dazedly, as if at unreal things, at Mr. Carmichael” (178). As happens throughout this scene when interruptions call her attention back to the material world, Lily “wants to go straight up” to him to speak. Yet, she reminds herself, “little words that broke up the thought and dismembered it said nothing” (178). She recollects feeling glad “to rest in silence,” by Mrs. Ramsay’s side, “uncommunicative; to rest in the extreme obscurity of human relationships,” yet she also feels repeatedly the urge to speak to Mr. Carmichael (171). This same tension between
thought and verbal communication is mirrored on the boat where James and Cam both
wish to ask Mr. Ramsay what he wants. “Ask us anything and we will give it to you,” the
children think but do not speak, and Mr. Ramsay “did not ask them anything. He sat and
looked at the island and he might be thinking, We perished, each alone, or he might be
thinking, I have reached it. I have found it; but he said nothing” (207). Mr. Ramsay’s
children can only guess what he feels when he reaches the long-awaited destination
because they do not speak and neither does he. Lily’s idea that shared vision, even in the
absence of language, can result in deeper understanding and strengthened personal
connections does not work for the family on the boat.

Lily believes that her visionary oscillations allow her to connect, without using
language, both with Mr. Ramsay in the distance and with Mr. Carmichael on the shore.
Banfield writes that Woolf understood that “the novelist must first undo ordinary
language and register sense-data in a defamiliarizing language of appearances, one multi-
perspectival and atomized, with, among the seen atoms, selfless unseen ones” (298).
Banfield notes, moreover, that although “the novel will begin to strip ordinary language
of the ‘I’…modern fiction ultimately aims to describe a reality beyond privacy,” citing
Bertrand Russell’s statement about “really the most essential function of words, namely
that, originally through their connection with images, they bring us into touch with what
is remote in time and space” (298). Looking out across the distance, imagining that Mr.
Ramsay’s boat has reached the lighthouse, Lily observes that “the Lighthouse had
become almost invisible, had melted away into a blue haze, and the effort of looking at it,
and the effort of thinking of him landing there, which both seemed to be one and the
same effort had stretched her body to the utmost” (Woolf, To the Lighthouse 208). Lily
reacts as though she has glimpsed the transcendent. She feels that “whatever she had wanted to give him, when he left her that morning,” she can finally give to Mr. Ramsay just by staring into the distance and thinking of his arrival at the lighthouse. We do not know, however, if whatever she feels she has given, whether it is the sympathy that Mr. Ramsay begs for or something else, actually reaches him. And despite Lily’s belief that she and Mr. Carmichael “had not needed to speak,” that “they had been thinking the same things and he had answered her without her asking him anything,” the final scene does not imply that Lily is right. Although she feels that words are unnecessary, she also feels the urge to say “aloud” her thought that Mr. Ramsay “has landed,” and she does not conclude that she and Mr. Carmichael can share their thoughts until he responds to her, saying out loud, “they will have landed” (208). Lily’s desire to speak to and be in communion with Mr. Carmichael belies and balances her quest for isolation, daring us to qualify Lilienfeld’s claim that by the end of the novel Lily “accepts her singleness” (346). The necessity of speech in the face of Lily’s desire for a more transcendent form of connection and communication reinforces Emerson’s claim, which he often expresses through metaphors of visionary oscillation, that logic and reason are two sides of one “tapestry,” each dependent on the other (Emerson 193).

Perhaps Woolf’s lack of confidence in the ability of distant vision to reveal the transcendent is simply symptomatic of her moment in the history of letters and thought—reflecting the breaking up of old certainties and even of traditional planes of vision characteristic of modernism, from the questioning of traditional religious traditions, to the breaking of narrative form (in Joyce, Woolf, and others), to the visual dislocations of cubism (in Picasso and Braques), and the sonic dissonances of modernist
music (for example, in Schoenberg). Nonetheless, reading her metaphors in the light of
their sometimes parallel and sometimes divergent relationship with Emersonian
metaphors of vision reveals the function of visionary oscillation and helps us unravel the
complex role interruption plays in the development of Woolf’s characters.

Mrs. Ramsay’s and Lily’s experiences with near and distant vision do not give
them the complete picture that would require even more than “fifty pairs of eyes” really
to see, nor do their adventures in seeing necessarily even grant them glimpses of anything
universal (198). But their capacity to shuttle swiftly between the near and the far is
nonetheless instinctive and necessary, affording them moments of power in domestic
happiness, in freedom from the tyranny and judgments of other characters, and in acts of
artistic creation energized by Woolf’s Emersonian exploration of the dynamic oscillation
of visionary perception.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

Imagine that you are looking at a beautiful painting hanging on a wall in front of you. On the wall directly behind you hangs another equally compelling painting. You cannot decide which one you want to contemplate, as they both pull your attention, so you turn from wall to wall, attempting to see them both. As quickly as you can, you turn your body back and forth, oscillating your attention from one to the other. But you realize that as rapidly as you switch visual direction, you still can never look at both paintings at the exact same time. It is a physical impossibility, and your attention remains divided.

This dissertation traces the ways in which Henry James, D.H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf treat divided attention. Through their artistry and imagination, these three authors manage to defy the laws of physics so that they as writers, we as readers, and the characters in their novels can pay attention to multiple, seemingly opposed ideas at the same time. These moments, although transitory, transcend the limits of attention, providing illuminating and liberating experiences. While Walter Benjamin and Jonathan Crary discuss the fragmentation imposed on our psyches by modern life with the emerging technologies and the developing fast-paced modes of transportation of the late nineteenth century, I read in James, Lawrence, and Woolf a treatment of the liberating and transcendent possibilities of divided attention. Although there is much natural anxiety produced by divided attention both for these authors (and therefore necessarily their
readers) and for the characters in the novels I discuss, it is a fundamental anxiety that alone can lead to deliverance and release.

Viewing Henry James’s novels of the 1880s (specifically *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Bostonians*, and *The Princess Casamassima*) through the lens of divided attention provides insight into James’s ambivalent and nuanced relationship with aestheticism. James, as we have seen was acutely aware of and anxious about his own divided attention and what it could either bring to or take away from his art, and his disavowal of a clear division between art and morality engaged him in the conversation about aestheticism. He creates characters like Isabel Archer, Olive Chancellor, and Hyacinth Robinson, who mirror this anxiety when they are equally drawn to what they fear are irreconcilable opposites. When left to their own imaginative devices and when they are able to tune out the real or fancied judgments of others, they experience brief moments of emotional and philosophical resolution that qualify them as Jamesian heroes.

D.H. Lawrence recognizes that the problem of divided attention does not center on polar opposites. His writing in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* contradicts itself and then contradicts his contradictions, sometimes leaving his readers feeling dizzy, unstable, and unsure of where he and his characters stand. Ursula Brangwen and Rupert Birkin epitomize Lawrence’s valorization of the ability to hold seemingly antithetical positions and to shift rapidly among many perspectives, among angles of vision more fluid than what we expect in simple binary oppositions. They both strive for and experience ephemeral moments of mystical and dynamic consolidation and, in doing so, resist putative social conventions that interfere with authentic self-expression. While their oscillations may sometimes create a sense of instability, their movements of attention
ultimately achieve aesthetic, ethical, and philosophical balance. Tracing the history of Ursula’s divided attention from *The Rainbow* to *Women in Love* reveals the continuity between the two novels and places Ursula as the strongest, most developed, and most enduring character in *Women in Love*.

For Woolf in *To the Lighthouse*, the rapid oscillation of attention between proximate and distant vision, sometimes capturing both at once, is the key to producing true art. Viewing the novel through the lens of divided attention in the context of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s metaphors of sight helps explain how Woolf uses divided attention as a vehicle for Lily Briscoe’s and Mrs. Ramsay’s aesthetic salvation. Misperceived by some, including by D.H. Lawrence, as being stuck in the world of the transcendental, Emerson was really interested in how balancing our attention between the near and the far or the material and the spiritual can lead to an understanding of truths that we cannot perceive by focusing on only one end of the spectrum. Both Lily and Mrs. Ramsay are enticed by the near and the far, both in their perception and expression.

While I have discussed divided attention as a critical feature of modernism, the exploration of the drama of multivalence extends beyond the early twentieth century. In fact, as literature has continued to tackle and even embrace ethical ambiguity throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, themes that revolve around divided attention have become almost commonplace. My next step will be to explore the work of James Baldwin, starting with *Giovanni’s Room*, a novel set in 1950s Paris but with a narrator who indulges, somewhat unwillingly and painfully, in memories of his childhood in Brooklyn, NY. Baldwin presents suggestive parallels with all three of the authors I discuss in this dissertation. His use of windows as a symbol of subjective perception and
reflection recalls Henry James’s Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, in which James, feeling both inspired and distracted by the Venetian scene outside of his window, uses the word “window” or “windows” nine times. And, of course, most famously, Baldwin invokes James’s “house of fiction,”

which has in short not one window, but a million — a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. (James, Preface to The Portrait of a Lady 7)

According to David Leeming, Baldwin kept a photo of the John Singer Sargent portrait of Henry James (signed by Sargent and James) on his desk, a tribute to James’s centrality for Baldwin’s life and writing, and Leeming and others have convincingly assayed the relationship between the two expatriate writers. In Giovanni’s Room, Baldwin’s narrator, David, begins his contemplation while staying in a resort in Southern France, looking out of a window at night where he sees the “countryside reflected through [his] image in the pane” (Baldwin 4). David understands that when he searches for “the crucial moment, the definitive moment, the moment that changed all others, one finds oneself pressing, in great pain, through a maze of false signals and abruptly locking doors” (10). David cannot find “the germ of the dilemma which resolved itself, that summer, into flight”

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8 For important treatments of the Baldwin-James relation, see, in addition to Leeming, Newman, Powers, Savoy and Stuart.
because it is “locked in the reflection [he] is watching in the window” and because he is
cutely aware that he sees things through “the eye of [his] memory,” or as James figures
it in the Preface to Portrait, “with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for
observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression
distinct from every other” (Baldwin 10, 11, James 7).

Baldwin’s narrator’s struggles to reconcile his desire for contact with flesh with
his wish for social and familial acceptance is reminiscent of Lawrence’s highly
sophisticated exploration of multivalent attention. David’s homosexuality or, at the very
least, his bisexuality, is pitted against the social norms that he both shuns and wishes to
avoid affronting. On the one hand, David sacrifices his attention to the pressure produced
by his childhood memories of his father, whom he once overheard yelling “in a voice
which frightened” him, “all I want for David is that he grow up to be a man. And when I
say man … I don’t mean a Sunday school teacher” (Baldwin 15). On the other hand, he
also feels anxiety over whether or not he will conform, and whether or not he wants to
conform, with the group of men who congregate at Guillaume’s bar, men who consider
themselves to be “le milieu,” and to whom David is “intent on proving” that he “was not
of their company” while, at the same time, not arousing their mistrust (22). Not only does
he want to prove to the denizens of the sexual underworld that he is not one of them, but
he also wants to prove this to himself, demonstrating his attraction to and repulsion from
the group of men through whose company he is introduced to Giovanni. He accomplishes
this dual intent by “being in their company a great deal and manifesting toward all of
them a tolerance which placed” him, he believes, “above suspicion” (22-23).
Like Lawrence, for whom being inauthentic is the highest form of moral failure, David recognizes that he is “one of those people who pride themselves on their willpower, on their ability to make a decision and carry it through” but that “this virtue, like most virtues is ambiguity itself,” because “people who believe that they are strong-willed and masters of their destiny can only continue to believe this by becoming specialists in self-deception” (20). Lawrence’s most provocative and powerfully dynamic characters are those who do not deceive themselves, those who accomplish moments of authenticity in the face of social pressures to conform; and his prose, as we have seen, reflects this authentic morality most clearly when it embraces contradiction, generating a more complex and original vision of the human psyche than classic realism allows for.

Baldwin’s novel is similarly replete with thematic and stylistic contradictions. We read, for example, that Joey’s body “suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which [David] would be tortured till madness came,” in which he would lose his “manhood,” but although the scene makes David feel shame, he “wanted to know that mystery and feel that power and have that promise fulfilled” (9). David describes the bed where Joey is still sleeping as “sweet disorder” that “testified to vileness” (9). He recognizes in a photograph of his mother that “somewhere beneath this tense fragility” there is a “a strength as various as it was unyielding,” and when he talks to Jacques about Giovanni’s sentencing, he feels “as cold and distant as the sun” (13, 24). The novel abounds with these small contradictions, and although David “decided to allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened” him, and although he only succeeds at this “by not looking at the universe, by not looking” at himself, the narration in Giovanni’s Room provides him with the opportunity to counteract his self-deceit and to
realize an integrity of attention that is authentic in its multiplicity and in its eventual reconciliation of his homosexuality with his desire to be moral (a combination that he at first regards as impossible).

As far as I have been able to tell, no one has written about the connections between James Baldwin and Virginia Woolf, and there is no evidence that Baldwin even read Woolf. Yet there are clear and provocative parallels between *Giovanni’s Room* and *Jacob’s Room*. In both novels we are introduced to the title characters through another person’s (*Giovanni’s Room*) or other people’s (*Jacob’s Room*) perspectives on and recollections of those characters, both stressing the way the present and future are sustained and determined by memories. The novels share the themes of grief, loneliness, and self-sufficiency. In *Giovanni’s Room*, David grieves his mother’s death and mourns for the relationship he wishes he had had with his father: he “understood, at the bottom of [his] heart” that he and his father “had never talked, that now [they] never would” (19). Ultimately, the whole book is a study of loss (of innocence and life) as David bemoans Giovanni’s death well before Giovanni is executed (19). This overwhelming grief repeatedly arrests David’s attention, linking him to his past and to the important people in his life and preventing him from realizing the full self-sufficiency for which he longs. And, of course, his attention is divided in his realization that while he attempts to manage his own life to escape his feelings of shame, any triumph of self-will is really self-delusion.

In *Jacob’s Room* almost every character is grieving or lonely, from Jacob’s mother, Betty Flanders, who has lost her husband and who feels isolated—even in the midst of her visitors and suitors—to Betty’s neighbor, Mrs. Jarvis, who wants leave her
husband but cannot because of his social standing, to Captain Barfoot’s wife, who knows her husband visits Betty and can do nothing to stop him. These characters charge Woolf’s narrative with heightened tension as their attention oscillates between their loneliness, their need for connection, and their seeking of self-sufficiency. Jacob’s attention is torn between his knowledge that to live in any society, one must conform to certain rules, and his longing for solitude. When he finally travels to Greece, he celebrates solitude, recognizing “how tremendously pleasant it is to be alone; out of England; on one’s own; cut off from the whole thing,” but other people (namely Evan Williams and Sandra Wentworth Williams) both disturb his privacy and ease his loneliness, confirming the idea that a person can never accomplish total self-sufficiency (Woolf, *Jacob’s Room* 141).

We can find something of James, of Lawrence, and of Woolf in the account in *Giovanni’s Room* of the loss of innocence and memory. After meeting Giovanni for the first time, David muses that “everyone, after all, goes the same dark road—and the road has a trick of being most dark, most treacherous when it seems most bright—and it’s true that nobody stays in the garden of Eden” (Baldwin 25). Although he acknowledges that “everybody has a garden of Eden” that is distinct from everyone else’s, it is because of this shared movement down “the same dark road” that “living is so banal” (25). He imagines, however, that we might find a kind of salvation from this sameness and banality:

Perhaps…life only offers the choice of remembering the garden or forgetting it. Either, or: it takes strength to remember, it takes another kind of strength to forget, it takes a hero to do both. People who remember court madness through
pain, the pain of the perpetually recurring death of their innocence; people who forget court another kind of madness, the madness of the denial of pain and the hatred of innocence; and the world is mostly divided between madmen who remember and madmen who forget. Heroes are rare. (25)

By David’s definition (and perhaps Baldwin’s), many of James’s, Lawrence’s and Woolf’s characters are heroes. David himself becomes a heroic character in the moments when he is able both to remember and forget, a capacity that is reflected, perhaps, in his bisexuality.

Our current political climate of rigidity and distrust of flexibility is reflected in Donald Trump’s rejection, even as he displays remarkable inconsistency, of anyone who does not constantly and consistently agree with him and in his reality-show revolving door of cabinet members who must live in perpetual fear of suddenly being voted off the island, just as Baldwin’s narrator opines that he is “too various to be trusted” (Baldwin 5). For David, however, this realization comes on the heels of his acknowledgment that after what has happened to Giovanni, David will “never be able to have any more of those boyish, zestful affairs—which are, really…a kind of higher, or anyway, more pretentious masturbation,” because he now knows that “people are too various to be treated so lightly” (5). What so many of our political leaders might be missing is an awareness of our own and others’ subjectivity, their blindness to this signaling a return to the Victorian climate that was sometimes so suspicious of people who vacillate. Oscar Wilde makes fun of just this perspective when the ridiculous Lady Bracknell complains that the imaginary Earnest is “irretrievably weak and vacillating” (Wilde 2311).
In *Giovanni’s Room*, David imagines himself realizing the rare and heroic accomplishment of remembering and forgetting all in the same instant. Although he is already mourning Giovanni, who he knows will “be rotting soon in unhallowed ground near Paris,” he also knows that he will revive him: “Until I die there will be those moments, moments seeming to rise up out of the ground like Macbeth’s witches, when [Giovanni’s] face will come before me, that face in all its changes, when the exact timbre of his voice and tricks of his speech will nearly burst my ears, when his smell will overpower my nostrils” (Baldwin 42). In the next moment he projects an image of the future that is infused with the past. He imagines that “in the days which are coming…in the glare of the grey morning, sour-mouthed, eyelids raw and red, hair tangled and damp from my stormy sleep, facing…last night’s impenetrable, meaningless boy who will shortly rise and vanish like the smoke, I will see Giovanni again … so vivid, so winning, all of the light of that gloomy tunnel trapped around his head” (42-43). Here David forgets that he made his decision to avoid hollow affairs because “people are too various to be treated so lightly” and because he has learned something about compassion, humanity, and responsibility from his relationship with Giovanni, therefore, in a sense, forgetting Giovanni himself (5). But he also clearly remembers Giovanni and, in fact, knows he will not be able to escape that memory; we do not see him as actively holding onto his love affair with the Italian boy even though the whole book is an act of retrospection. Rather the memories “rise up” and “overpower” him (42). In his most Jamesian novel, Baldwin’s protagonist (although not the titular character) imagines that Giovanni’s image, like a ghost, will confront him well after Giovanni’s death, much like
Hyacinth Robinson’s deeply meaningful interactions in Paris with his grandfather who is not really there.

This brief, concluding meditation on James Baldwin’s mid-twentieth-century treatment of divided attention in relation to the similar dynamics in Henry James, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf explored throughout this dissertation points me toward further investigation. Criticism has long queered each of these authors—queer Henry James, queer D. H. Lawrence, queer Virginia Woolf, queer James Baldwin—and it occurs to me now that the queer position for each of them is always already one of divided attention and perspectival instability, as between the homosexual and the heterosexual, for example, the one (queer) and the many (heteronormative), and the particular (the queer subject) and the universal (the meaning beyond the particulars of the queer subject to which their work aspires). Perhaps the problem of divided attention is foregrounded in these writers because they are particularly, queerly attuned to the theoretical construct according to which, beyond questions of genital sexuality, identities and modes of vision that are unstable and multiple are inherently queer. Thus my treatment of divided attention in James, Lawrence, and Woolf, and collaterally in Baldwin, may open up not only a view of a major line in modernism that departs from the line of impersonality discussed Maude Ellman, Max Saunders, and James Longenbach, but also a view of a queer line in modernism that may be intricately intertwined with it.
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