Artist Failures in the Fiction of Henry James

Robert E. Terrill
Loyola University Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/1441

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 1974 Robert E. Terrill
ARTIST FAILURES IN THE FICTION OF HENRY JAMES

by

Robert E. Terrill

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May

1974
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the director of the dissertation, Dr. John Gerrietts, and the members of the committee, Dr. Joseph Wolff and Dr. Martin J. Svaglic.

I also acknowledge the assistance of the staff of the E. M. Cudahy Library in obtaining materials on interlibrary loan.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>JAMES'S INTEREST IN THE FINE ARTS, ARTISTS, AND THE ISSUES OF AESTHETIC CONSCIOUSNESS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.</td>
<td>RODERICK HUDSON</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.</td>
<td>THE TRAGIC MUSE</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.</td>
<td>THE SACRED FOUNT</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.</td>
<td>THE STORIES OF ARTISTS AND WRITERS</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BIBLIOGRAPHY | 247
CHAPTER I

JAMES'S INTEREST IN THE FINE ARTS, ARTISTS, AND THE ISSUES OF AESTHETIC CONSCIOUSNESS

There is a great deal of evidence of Henry James's interest in the fine arts and artists. James himself wrote extensively of his introduction to the fine arts as a young man, his experiences as a traveler, and his own synthesis of these interests that influenced both his theory and practice as a novelist. Furthermore, James became a professional critic of painting, and the writer-painter analogy is one that influenced both his criticism and his practice as a novelist. His novels, as many readers have noted, are full of images drawn from the fine arts as well as situations involving experiences of them. Finally, James wrote a number of novels and tales that deal specifically with the experience of the artist, particularly the writer or painter, and the problems of artistic awareness and perception.

I.

Henry James reveals the importance of the experience of painting in his life in the volumes of autobiography, A Small Boy and Others (1913), Notes of a Son and Brother (1914), and the incomplete The Middle Years (1917).
James refers often to visits to art galleries, encounters with painters, and to attitudes toward his own and his brother's painting, and comments on the significance of the arts generally in his own intellectual development.

As a boy, he enjoyed drawing, and in retrospect amusingly notes that in his juvenile attempts at playwriting every fourth page was an illustration. The first trip to Europe gave him the opportunity to share his brother William's experiences as a painter. Returning to Newport in 1860, however, James happily records his first contact with the life of the studio artist: "Frankly, intensely—that was the great thing—these were the hours of Art, art definitely named, looking me full in the face and accepting my stare in return—no longer a tacit implication or a shy subterfuge, but a flagrant unattenuated aim."¹

While James's interests evolved from painting to literary art, he remained in close contact with both. He wrote that he could still participate in the spirit of creativity of the painter, "led captive in part by the dawning perception that the arts were after all essentially one and that even with canvas and brush whisked out of my grasp I still needn't feel disinherited."²

Such interest in the fine arts was a characteristic

² Ibid., p. 97.
of the James family. Henry James noted that the family had produced a number of descendants who "found the artistic career in general and the painter's trade in particular irresistibly solicit them."\textsuperscript{3} James praised his younger brother, Bob, who was seriously dedicated to painting during the 1880's.

Later, James increased his range of experiences with artists in the friendship with John Singer Sargent, a relationship that culminated in the portrait of James by the then-famous artist, a portrait which even James was willing to acknowledge as "a living breathing likeness and a masterpiece of painting."\textsuperscript{4}

James's interest in painting evolved to be that of the observer, and not even the minor form of illustration, an art that he praised in \textit{Picture and Text}, escaped his interest.

James's introduction to great art, however, came about during the two European tours between 1855 and 1860. The taste that was being formed during these travels would lead to some of the observations in his professional art criticism of the period of the 1870's and 1880's. In London and particularly in Paris, James wrote that the streets seemed to cry, "'Art, art, don't you see? Learn,

\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., p. 45.

little gaping pilgrims, what that is!"  

Further evidence of James's interest in the arts is provided by the travel books, *Transatlantic Sketches* (1875), *Portraits of Places* (1883), *A Little Tour in France* (1885), *English Hours* (1905), *The American Scene* (1907), and *Italian Hours* (1909). His biography, *William Wetmore Story and His Friends* (1903), like James's study of Hawthorne, often reveals more of the author than the sculptor subject of the book. But the travel sketches are full of references to the art works in the areas he traveled, particularly the sections on Rome and Florence.

The travel sketches are more than guides to the great art of these cities, however, for James wrote often of the significance and suggestiveness of great art that prefigures his later critical pronouncements on literary art as well as his own practice as a novelist and writer of tales.

For example, James associated the apprehension of beauty with the apprehension of values in human experience. In describing a statue of Marcus Aurelius in Rome, he wrote,

If to directly impress the soul, the heart, the affections, to stir up by some ineffable magic the sense of all one's human relations and of the warm surrounding

---

5 *A Small Boy and Others, Autobiography*, p. 338.
presence of human life— if this is the sign of a great work of art— this statue is one of the very greatest. 6

The arts, furthermore, in capturing life, making the past part of the present, appeal to the "retrospective imagination." 7 Even James's attitude toward murder was colored by such an aesthetic reaction, as he writes of the "extraordinary relief" that the conditions of the murderer Madeline Smith afforded the observer and expresses the wish that it were possible for him to have a "veracious portrait of her... face." 8

---


7 A Little Tour in France, quoted in ibid., p. 11.

8 The source of the observation is a letter to William Roughead, June 16, 1914:

The case represents indeed the type, perfect case, with nothing to be taken from it or added, and with the beauty that she precisely didn't squalidly suffer, but lived on to admire with the rest of us, for so many years, the rare work of art with which she had been the means of enriching humanity. With what complacency must she not have regarded it, through the long backward vista, during the time (now twenty years ago) when I used to hear of her as, married and considered, after a long period in Australia, the near neighbour, in Onslow Gardens, of my old friends the Lyon Playfairs. They didn't know or see her (beyond the fact of her being there), but they tantalized me, because if it then made me very, very old it now piles Ossa upon Peion for me that I remember perfectly her trial during its actuality; and how it used to come to us every day in the Times, at Boulogne, where I was then with my parents, and how they followed and discussed it in suspense and how I can still see the queer look of the 'not proven,' seen for the first time, on the printed page of
II.

The synthesis that emerged from James's personal experiences with the fine arts developed the taste expressed in his professional art criticism, related to his literary criticism, practical as well as theoretical, and influenced his practice as a novelist.

As Edwin Bowden points out, "Not only does he constantly echo his intimate knowledge of the visual arts in the novels, but he also makes extensive use of the arts to define and to illustrate the themes of his novels." 9

There is for James a close analogy between the literary and visual arts. He compares the two in Picture and Text:

The forms are different, though with analogies; but the field is the same—the immense field of contemporary life observed for an artistic purpose. There is nothing so interesting as that, because it is ourselves; and no artistic problem is so charming as to

the newspaper. I stand again with it, on the summer afternoon—a boy of 14—in the open window over the Rue Neuve Chausee where I read it. Only I didn't know of its—the case's—perfect beauty and distinction, as you say.... She was truly a portentous young person, with the conditions of the whole thing throwing it into such extraordinary relief, and yet I wonder all the same at the verdict in the face of the so vividly attested, and so fully and so horribly, sufferings of her victim. It's astonishing that the evidence of what he went through that last night didn't do for her. And what a pity she was almost of the pre-photographic age—I would give so much for a veracious portrait of her then face.


9 p. 21.
arrive, either in a literary or a plastic form, at a close and direct notation of what we observe.\textsuperscript{10}

His concept of the novelist as an artist is "basic to his writing and his way of thought" and a "necessary key to understanding of the man and his work."\textsuperscript{11}

James explicitly makes the painter-novelist analogy in \textit{The Art of Fiction}:

\begin{quote}
The advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility, of the novelist, is that there is no limit to what he may attempt as an executant—no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes. Here it is especially that he works, step by step, like his brother of the brush, of whom we may always say that he has painted his pictures in a manner best known to himself.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

In the preface to \textit{Roderick Hudson}, James writes of his revisions for the collected edition of his work in terms of the painter's freshening sponge and varnish bottle. But revision means more than this: it involves re-seeing, as evidenced from the three novels that James most revised, \textit{Roderick Hudson}, \textit{The American}, and \textit{The Portrait of a Lady}. He was "determined that no abstractions should lie inertly on his pages."\textsuperscript{13} Even casual commentators on the Jamesian style have noted the painter-writer analogy, and Owen

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{10}Quoted in \textit{ibid.}, p. 65.

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., p. 21.


\end{flushright}
Wister tried to explain the "inscrutable style" as a result of the attempt to produce on the reader, "as a painting produces upon the gazer, a number of superimposed, simultaneous impressions."14

III.

The writer-painter analogy extends to James's theory as well as practice of fiction. The influence of pictorialism on the precepts developed in The Art of Fiction has often been noted in connection with James's concept of the relationship of painting to fiction in that the novelist is the "painter of life."

James sees the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist as complete, complete in the sense of "inspiration," "process," and "success." He thought that the painter and novelist could learn from each other as well as explain and sustain each other. Assuming that painting is essentially a representational art form, James assumed that the painter, who aimed to create the illusion of reality, begins with "nature," and then "organizes and shapes his perceptions into an aesthetically appropriate form." If painting should aim to represent real life, then "the only reason for the existence of

---

a novel is that it does attempt to represent life."\textsuperscript{15}

In description, the novelist comes close to sharing the intention of the painter: the attempt to render "the look of things, the look that conveys their meaning, to catch the colour, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle" is one that the novelist shares "with his brother the painter."\textsuperscript{16}

The frequency of James's use of terms from the fine arts to describe the writing of fiction has been extensively noted.\textsuperscript{17} James, for example, describes the artist as the "embroiderer of the canvas of life,"\textsuperscript{18} and defines the experience of artistic creation in figures of abundance and luxury. The novelist is sometimes a builder piling brick upon brick, the packer filling a ship with valuable cargo, or the embroiderer of a tapestry, surveying the multitude of spaces that his thread will color. The images suggest the artist is "possessed of a rich abundance, which he must strive to fit into place." The


\textsuperscript{17} Joseph Warren Beach, \textit{The Method of Henry James} (Philadelphia: Albert Saifer, 1954), p. 31. Beach finds the terms from the fine arts are next in frequency only to those of dramatic reference.

artist enjoys a "luxurious immersion" which enables him to enjoy "the great extension, great beyond all others, of experience and consciousness."\(^{19}\)

In the process of representing life, the writer like the painter must be an observer, with the ability to enter into a state of consciousness he feels separate from his own. The process of representing life James describes as the "multiplication of the candid consciousness."\(^{20}\)

The artist is a watcher, a "posted presence" in the House of Fiction, standing at a window through which he views "the spreading field, the human scene" and receives an impression "distinct from every other."\(^{21}\)

The fictional technique of the center of consciousness is analogous to that of the painter in his relation to his subject and the viewer of the painting: like the painter, the center of consciousness provides a frame which can organize and focus the otherwise inchoate external realities.

This "frame" device suggests the value of making an artist himself that center of consciousness, as James often does in the tales of artists and writers:

\(^{19}\)Ibid., p. 29.

\(^{20}\)The Art of the Novel, p. 214.

\(^{21}\)Ibid., p. 46.
It is as if James placed the painter in the novel so that we are given a view of the action or the life depicted in the novel both clarified through the formal unity provided by the individual consciousness and enriched, for the consciousness is almost inevitably that of a person endowed with the imagination of the artist. Because the artist is one on whom nothing is lost, he sees beyond the surfaces to the meaning at the heart of things.22

James's justification for the novel as an art form is based on an analogy with painting, since as representational art, painting does not require a moral or social justification for its existence. The center of consciousness, performing the function of the painter confronting his subject, places the subject at another remove from the realities the author aims to represent. The center of consciousness can interpret a fictional world, a world which is the author's distillation of real life. The subject, then, is the object of perceptions. Thus, the Jamesian ideal is an aesthetic distance, a detachment of the author from his creation necessary to maintain the illusion and to create the form.23

The value of the artist-protagonist as the center of consciousness is that the technique can reveal a "mind dramatized," can make the nondramatic experience dramatic, and present the effects of that experience on the mind as it reveals the inner life. The center of consciousness

22 Winner, p. 13.
23 Ibid., p. 16.
dramatizes as the consciousness participates in the events of the narrative. 24

Even those who have found James's style and technique "appalling" acknowledge the predominant theme of consciousness as the real subject to which that style and technique are subordinated: James's real subject may have been his own ceaselessly expanding consciousness, which perhaps accounts for the characteristic stylistic device of parenthesis which Wright Morris notes. 25

IV.

James's practical criticism of the visual arts further attests to his belief in the close relationship of literature and painting. Just as his critical theory and practice as a writer are influenced by painting, his art criticism is often strikingly literary. The essays collected in The Painter's Eye 26 demonstrate this essentially literary approach to art criticism. 27 Adeline Tintner argues that James understood painting, in fact, only when "it was convertible to literature, when its meaning emerged


not through the autonomy of its formal relations but through the story implied in the choice of subject matter."

The painter and the writer both "record the immense field of contemporary life observed for an artistic purpose," their only distinction being in the difference of their tools. 28

James defends the value of his approach in the essay, "An English Critic of French Painting." 29 James values the picture and particularly the portrait as a form of expression, "to make of it the supreme goal of the writer of fiction." 30 He mentions "man's general appetite for the picture" and regards the novel "of all pictures the most comprehensive and most elastic." He contrasts the constructed and integrated novel with the over-documented novel, "the art of the brush as opposed to the art of the slate-pencil" and claims that it is "to the art of the brush that the novel must return." 31

James's comments on Delacroix strikingly parallel some of his critical precepts in the theory of fiction.


29 The Painter's Eye, pp. 33-42. The essay is dated 1868.


31 "Lecture on Balzac," quoted in ibid., p. 54.
He writes that Delacroix must be judged by the total impression; the painter does not select grotesque or exceptional subjects but "sees them in a ray of that light that never was on land or sea--which is simply the light of the mind." What James calls "the sentiment of the attitudes, the accidents, the 'form and presence' of the scene which throb there with such a vital warmth, that we can imagine ourselves seeking and enjoying it, in its permanent human significance" is the supreme imaginative power that he admires in literary art.

Delacroix, he continues, has the great merit of having "an eye for that which...we may call the mystery of a scene, and...under his treatment its general expression and its salient details are fused into the harmony of poetry itself." The harmony and wholeness of the artist's vision is to James an essentially humane one. He writes elsewhere of Delacroix that "Art is really but a point of view, and genius but a way of looking at things. The wiser the artist, and the finer the genius, the more easy it will be to conceive of other points of view, other ways of looking at things, than one's own." Delacroix "intimates that life is a perplexing rather than an amusing business" and sees his subject as a whole. It is this "reflective element" in the painter that James admires--"the artist we

value most is the artist who tells us most about human life." Delacroix "had a great imagination; he conceived things richly and comprehensively, and yet he was tender, grave, contemplative. He was reserved and delicate...yet he had...a grand sweep and energy of execution." 33

It is one of the ironies, maybe even an embarrassment, of studying James's comments on painters to note his inconsistent attitudes toward impressionism in the visual arts. While James admired Turner and Sargent, he disliked Whistler and was curiously blind to the value of the French impressionist painters at the 1876 Paris exhibition. He wrote that Turner's genius can manifest itself only in narrow restrictions:

Magic is the only word for his rendering of space, light, and atmosphere.... It is hard to imagine anything more masterly than the sustained delicacy of the gradations which indicate the shifting mixture of sun and mist. 34

In John Singer Sargent, James found "the highest artistic result" achieved when

to this element of quick perception a certain faculty of brooding reflection is added. I use this name for want of a better, and I mean the quality in the light of it, absorbs it, discovers in it new things that were not on the surface, becomes patient with it, and almost reverent, and, in short, enlarges and humanizes the technical problem. 35


James found Whistler's paintings "beautiful in color...indicating an extraordinary power of representing the atmosphere" but "being also hardly more than beginnings, and fatally deficient in finish."\(^{36}\) It is more surprising that James disliked the French impressionists since his own style can be considered impressionistic and one of his values is the necessity of the artist's receptiveness to impressions.\(^{37}\) Yet, when he attended the Paris 1876 exhibition, he disliked the paintings of Renoir, Monet, Sisley, Pissarro, and Morisot. While he claimed to have understood the "metaphysics" of impressionism--"the painter's proper field is simply the actual, and to give a vivid impression of how a thing happens to look, at a particular moment, is the essence of his mission"\(^{38}\)--and acknowledges the debt of the impressionists to the English Pre-Raphaelites, he maintains that to embrace their doctrine one "must be provided with a plentiful absence of imagination"!\(^{39}\) The impressionists raised for James a "moral question of subject and treatment which blurred his view of their technical experiments and pictorial accomplishment."\(^{40}\) James observes:


\(^{38}\)The Painter's Eye, pp. 114-115.

\(^{39}\)Ibid., p. 115.

\(^{40}\)Ibid., intro. John L. Sweeney, p. 10.
When the English realists 'went in'...for hard truth and stern fact, an irresistible instinct of righteousness caused them to try and purchase forgiveness for their infidelity to the old more or less moral proprieties and conventionalities, by an exquisite, patient, virtuous manipulation--by being above all things laborious.41

But the impressionists, he thinks, "abjure virtue altogether, and declare that a subject which has been crudely chosen shall be loosely treated. They send detail to the dogs and concentrate themselves on general expression."42

In other ways, James seems to acknowledge the achievement of the impressionists, however. In Roderick Hudson, he uses the tableau vivant visual art device at the conclusion of the party given in honor of Roderick's first success in Rome. He dramatically uses lighting and expressive posture in this set piece in which "Roderick's was certainly the beau rôle."43 In The Ambassadors, it is the memory of a Lambinet painting that sets the dramatic moment for Strether's final insight. Strether is in open air at last in this perception. Finally, in a late essay, "New England: An Autumn Impression" (1905) James seems to use the word impressionism favorably.44

The significance of the articles written during

41 Ibid., p. 27.
42 Ibid.
44 The Painter's Eye, pp. 29-30.
their insistence on the seriousness of criticism of the fine arts. In defending the value of art criticism, James admits that critics often talked much nonsense, "but even ... nonsense is a useful force" because "it keeps the question of art before the world, insists upon its importance, and makes it always in order."45

Perhaps James remained indifferent to Whistler and the impressionists generally because of his insistence on the value of the capacity of great art to engage the active participation of the observer: the enjoyment involves the participation of the intellect as well as the senses of the observer. This is similar to James's insistence that the reader of the novel should be an active participant, contributing the sympathetic intelligence that it is the writer's responsibility to evoke.

Yet, it is ironic that James overlooked the appeal of the impressionist painters not only since he uses techniques in his mature fiction analogous to those of impressionistic pictorial art but because he also insists on the suggestive and evocative qualities of great art. For example, he praises Alfred Parsons in Picture and Text because "he paints from a full mind and from a store of

assimilated knowledge." Parsons communicates "something of the thrill of the whole--we feel the innumerable relations, the possible variations of the particular objects." Great art achieves seriousness by suggesting "associations... human uses...general sentimental value." 46

Another attitude toward what James considers to be this evocative quality is revealed in his analysis of the sculpture of William Wetmore Story:

There are things in the arts, of a truth, that have more eloquence and value for us by that reference than they offer in any other way; so that positively, at moments, we find ourselves turn insistently from the work itself to the evoked spirit of its place and hour, which become in its light, almost as concrete as itself.47

V.

James often uses art images and art experiences in his fiction, particularly in the novels of his mature period. Figures from the fine arts can be both rewarding and challenging when he likens one of his characters to a specific personage from an English novel, an Italian painting, or a French play. Sometimes he points up the unique quality of a voice by using a musical image, catching "what is eternal in a passing gesture by means of a sculpture trope" or accentuating a formal relationship by an allusion

46 "Boston," Picture and Text, p. 90, quoted in Bowden, p. 19.

to architecture. James is also fascinated by theatrical behavior and by situations in which people are treated as objects of art.

In his late works, James extends his use of art figures and art experiences. In them, the art works have value as rare and beautiful things in themselves, but they function not just as items in private collections so much as "clues to motives and drives of the people to whom they are addressed and for whose use they are disposed."

In The Ambassadors, for example, Strether realizes the effect of Madame de Vionnet's effect on Chad when he sees the taste for fine things which she had developed in the youth. Strether further perceives the value of the woman herself when he receives impressions from these fine things in her own home. Strether comes to realize that he cannot convert life into art himself and comes to accept the fact that he cannot be converted into a different human being. Thus, his self-awareness is related to the

---


52 Poirier, p. 139.
ability to perceive the value of fine arts in human relationships. Seeing, perception, is one of the themes of the novel. Strether's vision determines the meaning of his experiences. For example, when Strether encounters Madame de Vionnet in Notre Dame, he resolves to overcome his scruples as to what Mrs. Newsome would think, invites Madame de Vionnet to lunch, a situation that James describes as an "impressionistic canvas" 53:

How could he wish it to be lucid for others, for any one, that he, for the hour, saw reasons enough in the mere way the bright clean ordered water-side life came in at the open window—the mere way Madame de Vionnet, opposite him over their intensely white table linen, their omelette aux tomates, their bottle of straw-colored Chablis, thanked him for everything almost with the smile of a child, while her grey eyes moved in and out of their talk, back to the quarter of the warm spring air, in which early summer had already begun to throb, and then back again to his face and their human questions. 54

In The Wings of the Dove, James uses the device of the portrait to evoke character. The Bronzino portrait, which resembles Milly, becomes a projection of her own death. Milly senses on viewing the portrait that she has entered a "mystic circle" where "things melted together—the beauty and the history and the facility and the splendid midsummer glow: it was a sort of magnificent maximum, the pink dawn of an apotheosis coming so curiously soon." What makes the situation poignant is that Milly herself

54 Ibid., p. 541.
realizes that the canvas lady is "dead, dead, dead." In yet another way, the art object reveals human motive. Milly compensates for her failure to live by retreating to the world of art:

She wouldn't let him call it keeping quiet, for she insisted that her palace--with all its romance and art and history--had set up round her a whirlwind of suggestion that never dropped for an hour.... Hung about with pictures and relics, the rich Venetian past, the ineffaceable character, was here the presence revered and served.... Millie moved slowly to and fro as the priestess of the worship.

The most complex use of the art object in James's fiction is, of course, the golden bowl, symbolically representing an almost obsessive attraction to the life of art. Sometimes the bowl represents the Prince himself, "the prize of Adam Verver's collection as pure and perfect crystal"; sometimes it stands for the relationship of the Prince and Charlotte (in first purchasing the bowl in the antique shop, the Prince sees the defect beneath the gilt which Charlotte does not); once broken by Fanny Assingham, the bowl splits into three pieces, salvaged by Maggie; ultimately the bowl becomes the means of potential happiness with the Prince. Adam Verver tends to view European civilization, both art and life, as objects for his collection. Adam becomes a patron of the arts, the Prince becomes crystal, Charlotte becomes oriental tiles, and his

---

55 Ibid.
daughter Maggie some "draped antique of Vatican or Capitol­ine halls."

The golden bowl is an active symbol and James keeps it actively alive by involving the bowl in every possible association and situation, thus succeeding in making an objet d'art "the cohesive center of his own intricate creation." 58

Finally, in the unfinished novel, The Sense of the Past, James returns to the device of the portrait to suggest motive and character. The portrait of a dead gentleman of 1820 seems to suggest a secret meaning about the past to Ralph Pendrel, who sees the painting in the empty house of his ancestors. The man in the painting averts his face, but when Ralph himself returns to the past, the figure has turned around! 59

VI.

In the novels and tales of artists and writers, the artist, whether the center of consciousness or the subject of the narrative, represents a kind of ultimate heroism.

James wrote to H. G. Wells that the painter of life, the storyteller, is distinguished by his particular quality

57 Ibid., pp. 152-153.


The consciousness of the artist is equivalent somehow to experience itself: the workings of the artistic mind are the whole meaning and purpose of art.

If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions are experience.\(^{61}\)

James was convinced that "the moral and spiritual emergencies of the human experience are every bit as spectacular as physical emergencies" and that "the adventurer in the infinite realms of consciousness is just as heroic as the adventurer in the more palpable realms of the physical." James conceived of the artist as the supreme example of the heroism of consciousness, defining the adventure of the craft of the artist, "the intricate ins and outs of the compositional problem" as "adventure transposed."\(^{62}\)

With the adventure, however, comes an ordeal, the element of risk and potential danger. As an example of the artist-adventurer, the imagery of danger is part of the moral development of Strether: "to celebrate the


\(^{62}\)The Art of the Novel, p. 319.
bravery of the human consciousness in action with unprecedented fullness and directness" James often uses images of emergencies at sea, in the jungle, and on the battlefield. 63 James was "committed to developing the internal, the psychological experience of character" and demonstrated "that the territories of the mind are as fraught with perilous adventure as the more rugged territories traversed by Scott, Stevenson, and Kipling."64

James believed that each human consciousness carries its own adventure of reality, and that this is what should be captured and preserved in art.65 James wrote that the "pangs and agitations, the very agitations of perception itself" were "of the highest privilege of the soul and there is always...a saving sharpness of play or complexity of consequence in the intelligence completely alive."66

The artist as this center of consciousness has a power that James defines as a going outward to sources of being beyond himself. The artist, to James, could carry "the field of consciousness further and further, making it lose itself in the ineffable...the artistic consciousness

64 Ibid., pp. 296, 301.
66 Notes of a Son and Brother, p. 371.
and privilege in itself that thus shines as from immersion
in the fountain of being." 67

Consciousness is both an ideal as well as a tech-
nique of fiction since James proposes that the withdrawal
and sometimes even the isolation of consciousness finds
its formal expression in the technique of point of view
characterized by the stream of consciousness. As James
defines experience in The Art of Fiction, he speaks to the
modern predicament of the alienated and isolated conscious-
ness, "an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web
of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of
consciousness...the very atmosphere of the mind." 68

This attitude perhaps explains the pervasive theme
of renunciation in the novels and tales of artists and
writers. Consciousness involves a liberation, but some-
times this condition can lead to unhappiness and unpro-
ductiveness. Renunciation may be an ultimate virtue of
the artist, but it requires an expense and sometimes a
waste of spirit. 69

It is one of the rich ironies of James's fiction

67 "Is There a Life after Death?" quoted in Nettels, p. 543.

68 Mark Spilka, "Henry James and Walter Desant: 'The
Art of Fiction' Controversy," Novel, VI:2 (Winter, 1973),
112.

69 Edward Engelberg, The Unknown Distance: From Con-
sciousness to Conscience/ Goethe to Camus (Cambridge:
that the expanded awareness can create a situation that can include the certainty of failure which gives life and purpose to the dedication of the artist-protagonists. In the novels--Roderick Hudson, The Tragic Muse, and The Sacred Fount--and the tales of artists and writers which will be discussed in the following chapters, James creates an imagined world for his artist failures that can allow "some longer existence to the hero's momentary expansions of consciousness."70

70 Poirier, p. 15.
CHAPTER II

RODERICK HUDSON

Roderick Hudson is an artist failure. His excessive sensibility combined with almost complete lack of self-control prevents him from realizing the self-awareness essential to the mature, productive creative personality. While Roderick does seem to represent the Jamesian ideal of saturation, he fails to attain another value, that ability to perceive the distinction between involvement and detachment essential to a rich creative life. Roderick represents the "divine fit" of creative genius, an inspirationist position that James rejects. The divisiveness of such a personality, perceived by Rowland Mallett and others in the novel, prevents Roderick from developing full consciousness. Ultimately, Roderick's failure is a failure of will.

Rowland Mallet as a center of consciousness is both a technical device for presenting the theme of the failed artist and a participant in the ideas embodied in the narrative action. Rowland offers a perspective for the fall of the gifted young sculptor, but James carefully avoids making Rowland merely an opposite of Roderick or simply a spokesman for James's own position.
Because Rowland has the artist's sensitivity without the artist's talent, he participates ambivalently and ambiguously in the action of the novel. He is not simply a voice of conscience or the representative of will power, in opposition to the protagonist, nor does he ever achieve the ideally full consciousness himself. It is the depth of the characterization of Rowland in fact that enriches Roderick Hudson.

The considerable attention to art works and artists helps to develop the theme of the failed artist in Roderick Hudson. Roderick's art works symbolize his grand aspirations and pre-figure his ultimate decline. Again, James is subtle in presenting the works of art in such a way as to reveal the character and motives of their creator. The treatment of the artist types in the novel also helps to set Roderick in perspective as an artist as well as to project some of the qualities of the ideal artist, the fully developed artistic consciousness, of some of James's later works.

I.

Roderick Hudson is a portrait of the artist as a failure, significantly the failure of consciousness or self-awareness, ultimately responsible for the decline of the protagonist. While the young artist has abundant talent and a genuine thirst for experience, he remains incapable of developing the detachment or self-insight that are
critical, in James's view, to the successful, mature artist. The divisiveness of Roderick's personality, present from the start, prevents him from developing that self-insight: he remains a noble innocent, a talented primitive, a naive participant in events which he is unable to control. He lacks the will power to direct the course of his experience, and his egotism prevents him from the self-examination that could have prevented his fall. While his proved talent brings him early success and while a friend offers him the opportunity to enlarge his experience through travel, the success intoxicates him, and the experience is accumulated in such an uncritical manner that it prevents genuine self-understanding.

What distinguishes Roderick Hudson from James's later novels is this presentation of the complete deterioration of character. While it has been pointed out that Roderick is hardly the only character of James to yield to passion, he lacks both conscience and consciousness, unique in seeing himself as "the clear-cut, sharp-edged isolated individual, rejoicing or raging...but needing in any case absolutely to affirm himself." Because Roderick remains incapable of caring about or even understanding the feelings of anyone else, much less himself, he can be redeemed by no one. His deterioration is swift and inexorable, manifesting itself in outbursts.

---

1 Elsa Nettels, "Action and Point of View in Roderick Hudson," *English Studies*, LIII:3 (June, 1972), 240.
of despair; in drunkenness and debauchery, and finally in utter apathy, to which he is reduced by a series of acts of physical and emotional excess without parallel in James's later novels.2

Largely self-educated, Roderick is an "inspired natural." Rowland Mallet envies "the happy youth who, in a New England village, without aid or encouragement, without models or examples, had found it so easy to produce a lovely work." 3 Roderick significantly advocates an American art and wants to be its "original genius." He reasons that because America has the greatest people, they ought to have the greatest conceptions--wrongly concluding that "the biggest conceptions...would bring forth in time the biggest performances." He thinks that American artists should forget imitation and follow "our National individuality." Finally, he wants to become the "typical, original, aboriginal American artist! It's inspiring!" (40)

His exclamation reveals his inspirationist attitude toward art, the sacred rage or divine fire. He continues, "There's something inside of me that drives me...a demon of unrest!" (32) He belongs, James writes, "to the race of mortals, to be pitied or envied accordingly as we view the matter, who are not held to a strict account for their aggressions." (39) Roderick boasts of the "restless demon

2Ibid.

3Roderick Hudson, intro. Leon Edel (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), p. 32. The novel was first published in 1875; this text incorporates the 1909 revisions. Further references made in parentheses in the text are to this edition.
within," to which he attributes the responsibility for his self-destruction. He cannot face himself honestly: though a man of considerable talent, he has not yet fully acquired genius. Instead of exerting himself to learn, he resorts to theatrical and exaggeratedly romantic behavior that alternates with bursts of cynicism. He believes that if he were not so torn with passions, he could achieve greatness. Pretending, then, that it is his fate to suffer more than common men, "he vents bellows of rage at the evil genius which is destroying him." 4

Rowland notes the excessive sensibility of the artist-hero in the comparison he makes of Roderick to "some beautiful, supple, restless, bright-eyed animal, whose motions should have no deeper warrant than the tremulous delicacy of its structures and seem graceful to many persons even when they should be least convenient." (30)

The defense of the artist's sensitivity is qualified, however, since James emphasizes the necessity of tempering that fine sensibility with actual experience. Early in the novel, Rowland defends what seems to Striker to be purposeless inactivity, arguing that there can be no lost time to an artist who loves his work: "Everything he looks at teaches or suggests something." (56) Roderick seems to exemplify here the Jamesian ideal of saturation when he says

that he means "to live freely and largely and be as interested as occasion demanded." (75) The qualification ironically prefigures his failure: as his expression of interest is conditional, so his exertion of will, of critical self-insight applied to that experience, becomes so conditional as to be eventually self-defeating.

Similarly, Roderick's means of expressing his enthusiasm serves as a corrective to the grandeur of his aspiration: "We've really lost the faculty to understand in the large ideal way," Roderick argues. "I mean to go in for big things; that's my notion of art. I want to thrill you, with my cold marble, when you look. I want to produce the sacred terror...." (88-89) Roderick's weakness, personally and morally, comes from this excessive ambition.\(^5\)

In another instance of self-dramatization, James has Roderick ironically reveal himself as the demonically inspired artist:

The fermentation of beatitude in Roderick's soul reached its climax a few days before the young men were to make their farewells.... Lounging back against a column muffled in creepers and gazing idly at the stars, he kept chanting softly and with that indifference to ceremony for which he always found allowance, though it had nothing conciliatory but what his good looks gave it. At last springing up, 'I want to strike out hard!' he exclaimed; 'I want to do something violent and indecent and impossible--to let off steam!' (62)

His aspirations are indeed cosmic: "There are all the

Forces and Elements and Mysteries of Nature." Roderick has good intentions: "I mean to do the Morning; I mean to do the Night! I mean to do the Oceans and the Mountains, the Moon and the West Wind. I mean to make a magnificent image of my Native Land." (89)

As a theory of art, if Roderick's wild enthusiasm should be seriously considered, the attitude is that of the idealist. Significantly, Rowland sees Roderick as a "nervous nineteenth-century Apollo." Yet, the conflict between his lofty aims and innate powers may be intended "to make his destruction seem all the more tragic and wasteful."  

Roderick's expansiveness, his drive to power--James describes him as "the beautiful image of a genius which combined sincerity with power" (92)--contains the very source of his self-destruction. Roderick is a "romantic genius in disintegration." Christina Light sees the "sacred fire" in Roderick's fine eyes, but these eyes also possess the "sacred rage" that can be destructive. She knows that Roderick "seems to have something urging, driving, pushing

---


him, making him restless and defiant."  

Roderick seems to speak for James when he justifies this expansive faculty, his desire to live, to experience life totally and widely:

What becomes of all our emotions, our impressions... all the material of thought that life pours into us at such a rate during such a memorable three months as these? There are twenty moments a week--a day, for that matter, some days--that would seem ultimate, that appear to form an intellectual era. But others come treading on their heels and sweeping them along, and they all melt like water into water and settle the question of precedence among themselves. The curious thing is that the more the mind takes in, the more it has space for, and that all one's ideas are like the Irish people at home who live in the different corners of a room and take boarders. (72)

While the deliberately ironic figurative language seriously defends the ideal of the developed consciousness, the quality of the concluding simile serves as a corrective to the young man's elaborate self-assertion. Roderick elsewhere asserts that he "must take life as it comes." (153) Both the willingness to intensify one's receptiveness to experience and the determination to broaden one's range of experience have their dangers. Freedom is a necessary, though James shows it can also be a potentially dangerous, quality to the developing consciousness of the artist.

Roderick insistently justifies the necessity of freedom and license to the artist:

I think that when you expect a man to produce beautiful and wonderful works of art you ought to allow him a

---

9 Leon Edel, Introduction, Roderick Hudson, pp. xii-xiii.
certain freedom of action, you ought to give him a long rope, you ought to let him follow his fancy and look for his material wherever he thinks he may find it.... An artist can't bring his visions to maturity unless he has a certain experience. You demand of us to be imaginative and you deny us the things that feed the imagination. In labour we must be as passionate as the inspired sibyl; in life we must be as regular as the postman and as satisfactory as the clock. It won't do.... When you've an artist to deal with, you must take him as he is, good and bad together.... But if you suffer them to live, let them live on their own terms and according to their own inexorable needs! (152-153)

It has been pointed out how closely this defense approximates the idea of Walter Pater of "expanding the interval." ¹⁰

It is ultimately Roderick's egotism, however, rather than self-insight that is responsible for his defense of artistic license. In the final conversation with his sponsor, Roderick criticizes Rowland for assuming to be able to participate in a "state of sensibility with which he's unacquainted." (321) Assuming his own feelings are unique, Roderick accuses his friend of ingratitude and arrogance: "What do you know about my needs and senses and my imagination?" (321)

The artist must, then, maintain a delicate balance between involvement in and detachment from experience. If he must be allowed more than the usual freedom from conventional morality, the abuse of this freedom can also

potentially destroy him. James shows that respectability, however, may also be death to the artist, for the opposite extreme of Roderick's impulsive self-determination is the scrupulously respectable but vapid genteel artist, Miss Blanchard. Like Roderick, James wants to believe that the artist is superior, has license and freedom; yet James seems equally committed to the importance of will, control, and discipline along with that freedom and expansiveness of spirit. This commitment may be responsible for what have been considered the inconsistent and unconvincing attributes of Roderick as a fictional protagonist. An early reviewer, for example, noted the necessity for "more human feeling" in the representation of the catastrophe. But James's qualification of artistic license also accounts for the liveliness and interest of this presentation, the fascination in the decline of the gifted young sculptor that creates what one reader considers "an enthralling spectacle." 

---

11 Winner, pp. 107-108.


13 Joseph Warren Beach, The Method of Henry James (Philadelphia: Albert Saifer, 1954), p. 199. It has been suggested that James learned from Turgenev that the most appealing characters for writers of fiction are not moral successes but moral failures. In an article on Turgenev,
Like Balzac in his characterization of the failed artist Lucien de Rubempre, James draws extensively on the imagery of the Icarus myth. The cynical Gloriani, commenting on Roderick's lack of inspiration and inability to work, tells Rowland that the young sculptor "couldn't keep up that flapping of his wings in the blue, and he has already come down to earth." (106) Roderick, however, feels that in his receptiveness to new experience in Italy he is just beginning to live up to his potential, "just beginning to spread his wings." (123)

On inspecting the photograph of Roderick's statuette of the water-drinker, Gloriani says, "This sort of thing is like a man trying to lift himself up by the seat of his trousers." The parallel is extended: "He may stand on tip-toe, but he can't do more. Here you stand on tip-toe, very gracefully, I admit; but you can't fly; there's no use trying." Gloriani implies that Roderick has already reached the summit of his achievement, his metaphor indicating Roderick's inability to go any higher in the future. 14


 Appropriately, Roderick's death involves a fall from a great height. When he becomes lost in a storm, Roderick's "stricken state had driven him, in the mere notion of flight, higher and further than he knew." (333) Some parallels with Euphorion, who also disastrously flies before he can walk, have been pointed out. 15

The theme of the failed artist can explain, if not justify, what are commonly held to be some of the weaknesses of James's early novel. First, the author himself criticized in his Preface what he considered the "too precipitous" depiction of Roderick's decline. Yet, the causes of Roderick's failure, as indicated, are already present and what James thought was a flawed dramatization of character might in fact be intentional. It is Roderick's egotism that prevents him from developing consciousness, so there can be little dramatic development of the character.

Accordingly, if Roderick seems sometimes to be inconsistent or unconvincing as a characterization, these qualities can be explained by the deliberate intention of showing Roderick responding to experience in an absurd, deliberately self-dramatizing manner consistent with the personality of the possessed romantic genius.

Roderick himself conceives of this power of

possession as a force externally imposed: "The whole matter of genius is a mystery...if it gets out of order we can't mend it.... Do I more or less idiotically succeed—do I more or less sublimely fail?" Typically, Roderick assumes that the source of responsibility lies outside himself: "I seem to myself to be the last circumstance it depends on." (157)

If, then, Roderick seems unconvincing because he is acted upon rather than because he himself acts, this is consistent with the very component of his character that prevents him from acting. This is his weakness of will. Rowland, for example, sees Roderick "standing passive in the clutch of his temperament." (152)

Roderick repeatedly reveals his temperament in a series of gestures, detached postures, and self-dramatizations that can sometimes border on the ridiculous—for example, when he asserts "'the end of my work shall be the end of my life.... But I have a conviction that if the hour strikes here,' and he tapped his forehead, 'I shall disappear....'" (157) Similarly, when questioned about his affections for his fiancee, "he placed his hand on his heart and held it there a moment. 'Dead--dead--dead.'" (232) Such "attitudinizing produces the form of dramatic significance without the substance" while the "staginess"
of Roderick's behavior fails to explain his real distress.  

Roderick maintains a curiously passive and helpless relationship to some of the crucial moments of the action of the novel, as though he were a spectator:

Say he trembled in every nerve with a sense of the beauty and sweetness of life; say he rebelled and protested and struggled; say he was buried alive, with his eyes open and his heart beating to madness.... say it was the most pathetic thing you ever beheld.... Good-bye, adorable world! (297-298)

Even in the climactic revelation that Rowland has been in love with Mary Garland since he first knew her, we see only Roderick's outward reaction despite the fact that "the last spark of life in Roderick has been killed through Rowland's false play." Perhaps deliberately James conflates the imagery to suggest hidden motives in an attempt to render an action plausible, recognizing that any other reaction would at this point be out of character.

Ultimately Roderick fails because he is unable to put his lofty abstractions into performance. Critical of the falseness of one of his own works, Roderick knows that the problem is not the art but "the manner of sustaining it": "I haven't a blamed idea. I think of subjects, but

---

17 Holder-Barell, pp. 89-90.
18 Levy, p. 20.
19 Engelberg, p. 149.
they remain idiotic names. They're mere words--they're not images." (107-108) Roderick has not learned the fundamental lesson of the artist as James conceived it, "that abstractions need to be embodied in concretions, which are in turn rooted in reality."²⁰

Rowland perceives the divisiveness in Roderick which prevents the artist from developing critical self-insight. It seems that tension is a necessary component of this full consciousness, in Rowland's claim that he approves of "a certain tension of one's being.... It's what a man is meant for." (50) This attitude is qualified, however, as Rowland continues to affirm his belief in the "essentially good health of the sincere imagination." (50)

Roderick's divisiveness not only lacks the potential for this productive kind of tension but also prevents him from achieving any real self-awareness. The young artist's beautiful faculty in productiveness can be a "double-edged instrument, susceptible of being dealt in back-handed blows at its possessor." Rowland knows that genius is "priceless, beneficent, divine, but it was also at its hours capricious, sinister, cruel...." (152)

Roderick, too, seems to accept his genius as a mystery, assuming that it must be acknowledged since it cannot be controlled. The consequence of such an attitude is that when genius runs out, life must run out too.

²⁰Ibid., p. 103.
Fatalistically, Roderick accepts this idea and is predisposed, intellectually at least, "to fizzle out." But his expression of that acceptance undercuts his sincerity: his romantic egotism is again responsible for the desire "to be carried off in something as pretty...as the drifted spray of a fountain." (157)

Rowland's perception of the divided nature of his friend represents a growth in his own consciousness:

It seemed to him that he had never so clearly perceived him [Roderick] as all strangely and endlessly mixed—with his abundance and his scarcity, his power to charm and his power to hurt, the possibilities of his egotism, the uncertainties of his temper, the delicacies of his mind.... (151)

Rowland sees Roderick "standing passive in the clutch of his temperament" (152) and in the letter to Cecelia finds his friend "the most extraordinary being, the strangest mixture of the clear and the obscure. I don't understand so much power...going with so much weakness, such a brilliant gift being subject to such lapses." (194) While Rowland perceives the dualities in the personality of Roderick, it is not easy for him to understand or to accept them: "Sometimes I think he hasn't a grain of conscience and sometimes I find him all too morbidly scrupulous.... Roderick can be both loose and rigid, indifferent and passionate." (195) Finally, Rowland asks the question that James himself seems to be posing in the novel: "I think it established in the long run egotism (in too big a dose) makes a failure in conduct: is it
also true that it makes a failure in the arts?" (195)

Significantly, the divisiveness exists in Roderick from the very beginning: it does not develop from the challenge and opportunity of experience in Italy. Cecelia regards the young man as "practically a child," (32) and his ambiguous nature, like that of Lucien de Rubempre, is indicated in his voice, described as "soft and not altogether a masculine organ." (33) He is youthfully petulant; in a fretful mood, he complains of a minute personal discomfort on his first appearance in the novel. (33)

The physical description is that of the sensitive, neurasthenic type. Roderick has a narrow forehead, jaw, and shoulders, creating the effect of "insufficient physical substance"; yet, the "fair and slender stripling could draw upon a fund of nervous force outlasting and outwearing the endurance of sturdier temperaments." (34)

Roderick remains an undisciplined genius, gifted with great personal charm and ambiguous handsomeness, significantly unaware of the real depths of his abilities. Rowland notes that Roderick "sees nothing, hears nothing, to help him to self-knowledge." (33) Significantly, early in the novel, James shows that it is weakness of will and lack of sense of purpose rather than lack of intelligence or sensitivity that prevents Roderick from acquiring that self-knowledge. When Rowland says that Roderick only need to work hard to fulfill his high promise, Roderick retorts,
"Work—work?.... Ah, if I could only begin." (43)

James makes it clear that there has been little inner change in his protagonist when Roderick admits that an artist is supposed to be a man of fine perceptions but acknowledges that he has not had a single one. (325)

Because Roderick remains incomplete as a man, the divisiveness of his character is ultimately responsible for his inability to develop the consciousness that would both enable him to create consistently and to accept himself as a personality. Rowland is willing, for example, to grant Roderick as a genius larger moral freedom than the ordinary person, but "when the artist ceases to invest his experience in his work, instead of indulging it for its own sake, both the artist and human being suffer." 21 It is Roderick's lack of moral awareness, his blindness and insensitivity to the feelings of others that weakens Rowland's faith in that "essential salubrity of genius" (151): Rowland comes to believe that only the complete man can be the complete artist and it "dimly occurred to him that [Roderick] was without that indispensable aid to completeness, a feeling heart." (150) 22

Roderick's fall results as much from the crisis of consciousness as from the divisiveness of character. While James intends consciousness to be an ideal, a state of

---

21 Winner, p. 105.

22 Ibid.
liberation, in *Roderick Hudson*, Roderick's consciousness is shown to be ultimately a "dangerous, even barren condition." As an example of the dilemma of the consciousness of the artist, Roderick can be considered part of the late Romantic belief that the "august Imagination could conquer Life." Yet, the problem arises that as the imagination becomes an agent not necessarily or automatically of wider perception but of narrowing self-containment, it can sometimes die for lack of sustenance: "When consciousness enlarges itself by focussing on a single line of vision...it also, paradoxically, becomes exclusive, narrow, obsessive." If this reading has merit, Roderick's decline can be compared to the exclusive, narrow, and obsessed consciousness of the narrator of James's later novel, *The Sacred Fount*. The decline of Roderick's genius comes from a paralysis of creativity as well as from a dissipation of character. As Roderick himself admits, "My mind is like a dead calm in the tropics, and my imagination is as motionless as the blighted ship in the Ancient Mariner." (157)

While Roderick defends the free and unlicensed consciousness of the artist, this is a position that

---

23 Engelberg, p. 107.
24 Ibid., p. 94.
25 Ibid., p. 95.
26 Ibid., p. 97.
Rowland can never completely accept. Roderick justifies his behavior to Rowland by affirming his belief that "under certain circumstances a man's power to choose is destined to snap like a dry twig." Roderick suggests that imagination, the very source of his creativity, is responsible for his unsatisfactory personal conduct. He has discovered that his imagination has been "damnably susceptible" not only to ideal forms but to actual ones as well, "to the grace and the beauty and the mystery of women, to their powers to turn themselves 'on' as creatures of subtlety and perversity." Thus, he argues that the source of art might well be the cause of behavior that disregards moral questions. Again, Rowland qualifies this attitude. Because he believes that character is antecedent to one's destiny, he cannot accept Roderick's view. He protests, "Don't talk about any part of you that has a grain of character in it being 'destined.' The power to choose is destiny." (103)

Roderick, in a rare moment of self-insight, ironically reveals some understanding of the conflicts of his genius:

The will...is an abyss of abysses and a riddle of riddles. Who can answer for his properly having one? Who can say beforehand that it's going in a given case to be worthy of anything at all? There are all kinds of uncanny underhand currents moving to and fro between

---

one's will and the rest of one--one's imagination in particular. People talk as if the two things were essentially distinct; on different sides of one's organism, like the heart and the liver. Mine, I know—that is my imagination and my conscience—are much nearer together. It all depends upon circumstances possible for every man, in which his power to choose is destined to snap like a dry twig. (102-103)

Of course James proceeds to involve Roderick in a "group of circumstances" so powerful in their appeal to his aesthetic responsiveness yet at the same time so confusing in their moral ambiguities that the distance between Roderick's intellectual realization and personal self-insight precipitates tragedy.

The confrontation with art, beauty, and love in Rome constitutes this appealing set of circumstances. Christina Light, as a representative of European sophistication, is almost an art work herself. Rowland tells Roderick that it has taken almost twenty years of Europe to make Christina what she is, a creation of her mother, determined that she should be perfection. (131, 169) But Christina lacks the patina of virtue: as she is in manner the product of an effete civilization, she is by birth illegitimate. However, Roderick "appreciates" Christina's "atmosphere" (131) and is "intoxicated with her beauty." (141) Rowland as well seems to be taken in by the supersophistication of the young woman: "What an education, what a history, what a school of character and morals." (171) While Christina is motivated by an apparently honest desire for self-insight, she expresses that desire as a
"search for inspiration" and labels the object of her search "what you call in Boston one's higher self." (262) Her decision to leave Prince Cassamassima, refusing a good marriage according to her mother's warped, falsely European-ized value system, is inherently courageous and based to an extent on precisely the restraint and self-insight that Roderick can never develop. Ironically, however, this decision only brings her back to Roderick and directly causes his ruin. Roderick's final mad pursuit of Christina, near the close of the novel, becomes the frenzied pursuit of the fallen muse.

Rowland, wondering why Roderick willingly goes "marching back to destruction" in his pursuit of the girl, is told that Christina's beauty has "the same extraordinary value as ever and that it has waked me up amazingly." (317) Christina appears to Roderick "like a goddess who has just stepped out of her cloud...the spell was cast." (317)

Infatuated with Christina, Roderick knows that he has "gone utterly to the devil" (272) if not precisely why: "I'm an angry, savage, disappointed, miserable man. I can't do a stroke of work nor think a profitable thought.... I'm in a state of helpless rage and grief and shame. Helpless, helpless--that's what it is.... there's nothing left of me to be proud of." (272) He feels betrayed by Christina, who promised to keep herself "free and sacred and pure" for him. (273)
The betrayal suggests that love can be an enemy of art, that sensual experience and artistic creation are incompatible. When Rowland pleads to Christina to use her influence for the good, he claims that Hudson, as I understand him, doesn't need, as an artist, the stimulus of strong emotion, of precarious passion. He's better off without it; he's emotional and passionate and precarious enough when left to himself. The sooner passion is at rest therefore the sooner he'll settle down to work, and the fewer emotions he has that are mere emotions and nothing more the better for him. (189)

Christina, however, is only partially responsible for the crisis of Roderick's failure to develop consciousness as an artist. As indicated, the causes of his destruction are present already. It is his incapacity to experience freely and objectively, because of his "crippling egotism," that makes it possible for him to be destroyed by Christina. The real problem is that Roderick desires to possess Christina for himself alone, and "his headlong pursuit of her...proves to be his undoing," the beginning of the final stage of the deterioration of his character. James makes explicit the alienation of Roderick's sensibility: "He never saw himself as part of a whole; only as the clean-cut, sharp-edged, isolated individual, rejoicing or raging, as the case might be, but needing in any case absolutely to affirm himself...." (285) Roderick

28 Winner, p. 102.
29 Powers, p. 43.
sedulously persists, however, in abortive attempts at self-realization, supposing that the cause of failure is somehow outside himself. He thinks that Italy is responsible for the loss of his inspiration: "An essential spring had dried up within him." (285) He naively supposes that a change in scene will bring about the desired renewal of inspiration: "Take me out of this land of impossible beauty and put me in the midst of ugliness. Set me down where nature is coarse and flat and men and manners are vulgar." (294) It is this decision that precipitates the fateful journey to Lucerne.

Roderick's failure is a failure of will, the inability to develop his consciousness, to discriminate among his experiences. Roderick lacks self-control, contending that he must not be held responsible for his actions, claiming the artist's special license from convention. Consistently self-centered, he excuses his impetuosity as beyond his power of control and easily gives way to passion. He denies will, assuming that both moral responsibility and artistic inspiration lie somewhere outside himself. Assuming that work (will power) and genius (inspiration) are separate, he claims at one point that he has worked hard for three months, "now let my genius do the rest" as he chooses to "pause and breathe, to give the desired visions a chance to descend." (72) When Rowland persists in arguing that achievement is "only effort"
passionate enough," Roderick misinterprets this and ques-
tions why he has not gotten up sufficient steam to begin
work. (71)

Even Christina, given a sudden and perhaps unchar-
acteristic moment of insight, perceives the inner nature
of Roderick: "You've never chosen, I say you've been
afraid to choose.... You've faltered and dodged and
drifted, you've gone on from accident to accident." (175)
She also recognizes the egotism that is responsible for
his weakness of will: "You're one of the men who care
only for themselves and for what they can make of them-
selves." (176)

While Rowland realizes that his power of helping
Roderick is very slight beside his power of helping him-
self, he does assert will. In an attempt to persuade
Roderick to return to work on a commissioned sculpture in
Rome, he pleads:

You are standing on the edge of a gulf. If you suffer
anything that has passed to interrupt your work on
that figure, you take your plunge. It's no matter
that you don't like it; you will do the wisest thing
you ever did if you make that effort of will neces-
sary for finishing it. Destroy the statue, then, if
you like, but make the effort.... (201)

Rowland makes his last appeal when, depressed and passive,
Roderick sees Christina again for the first time since her
marriage to the Prince:

If you have the energy to desire, you also have the
energy to reason and to judge. If you can care to go,
you can also care to stay, and staying being the more
profitable course, the inspiration, on that side, for a man who has his self-confidence to win back again, should be greater. (318)

Rowland knows the true meaning of experience as an object to learn from instead of a medium of self-exploitation. Roderick, on the other hand, wants "to take what comes and let it fill the impossible hours."
The final appeal to experience in the terms in which Roderick understands it "neatly juxtaposes with our sense of Rowland's immense moral restraint and self-sacrifice and helps to define the implications of the novel":

The acceptance of moral law involves an appreciation of the claims of others as it liberates the individual from the tyranny of the unregulated self. Behind James's conclusions one still senses this tradition of the rational conquest of passion and immediate desire, the supremacy of will over appetite. 30

James suggests that true freedom is based on the conscious exertion of moral discrimination. Rowland knows that the proper use of power is the power to choose, necessary to the developed consciousness, and that moral responsibility involves the ability of the individual to retain an integrity in the face of 'experience' with all the equivocality that the word implies. It is, profoundly, a moral issue involving the status of an artist as a man, subject to the laws of ordinary men, and being requested to offer the same resistance to temptation that ordinary men are expected to do. Thus imagination has its claims, but they are not involved in any order outside the moral human order; and to treat imagination as if they were is to betray one of the deepest needs of the imagination, that requirement to be 'regular'

which is the particular moral contribution of the little painter, Sam Singleton.31

Rowland, however, wonders whether "for men of his friend's large easy power there was not an ampler moral law for narrow mediocrities like himself." James's answer seems clearly negative, "for there is in all human beings, artists and others, the necessity of that indispensable aid to completeness, a feeling heart."32

Rowland tells Cecelia that he knows that great talent in action is a "kind of safe somnambulism," that the artist "performs great feats in a lucky dream," and that "we musn't wake him up lest he should lose his balance." (36) But Roderick never achieves that balance. Finally, Rowland explains to Cecelia, apparently voicing a Jamesian ideal: "I believe that a man of genius owes as much deference to his passions as any other man, but not a particle more, and I confess I have a strong conviction that the artist is better for leading a quiet life." (49-50)

Significantly, Roderick's personal tragedy does not resolve the issue of the ideally developed consciousness of the creative artist. The experience of Roderick shows that he is unable to develop this ability to develop the difficult balance of saturation and detachment. This

31 Ibid., 169.
32 Ibid.
is a conflict that permeates all of James's artist-protagonists, a conflict "between the desire to plunge too deeply into experience and the prudent resolution to remain a spectator."  

James intends his novel in the presentation of this conflict to embody as well as to illustrate what Leon Edel thinks is an unanswerable question, "How can the artist, the painter of life, the recorder, the observer, stand on the outside of things and write about them, and throw himself at the same time into the act of living?"

The problem of the artist's development, then, involves the necessity of facing life and making choices despite the frustrations, risks, and ambiguities inherent in human experience. Roderick Hudson makes the point that man is responsible for his own destiny: the artist is no exception and cannot blame his weakness of character and lack of will on the stars. While the novel poses the issue seriously, there are no simple answers. James knew that "life achieves its full human potential" only in a synthesis of "both freedom and morality," but in Roderick

33Stephen Spender, "The School of Experience in the Early Novels," Hound and Horn, VII (April-June, 1934), 420.
35Powers, p. 44.
Hudson he shows no more than that the synthesis is humanly necessary. 37

II.

The characterization of Rowland Mallet and his function in the narrative help to set the failure of Roderick in perspective. While James himself wrote that Roderick and Rowland "were as different as two men could be," this is not really true although it has given considerable support to the interpretation of Rowland as Roderick's other self, his conscience, and his opposite. 38 Leon Edel thinks that Rowland "completes" Roderick in his possession of the cool, measuring mind, the dispassionate heart, and finds "something chilly" in Rowland, the "rational man, with no real sense of what it means to be an artist." 39

But Rowland is more than Roderick's other self—if, indeed, he is even that—nor do Roderick and Rowland make up two sides of the complete man or Henry James the writer, as another reader suggests. 40

Roderick, certainly, has the proved artistic temperament with the power to realize itself in production while Rowland has the will power, the self-control and the

37 Kraft, p. 499.
40 Kelley.
sufficient financial means and a generally selfless regard for others, but he completely lacks the inborn faculty to create. Stephen Spender extends this distinction to a Freudian interpretation, finding that James represented the "split" aspects of his own personality in the two characters, with Rowland "the spectator at the edge of life" and Roderick "the projection of James's worst fears about his own future as an artist." Spender thinks that James sides with Rowland, who does not participate in life. Another writer thinks that James portrayed in Roderick the kind of artist James himself did not want to become. Edel thinks that James "was sufficiently a Rowland to realize that he could never be a Roderick," explaining that in this novel "the feeling self had to die" because it "was too great a threat to the rational self."

Another explanation for the difference between the characters has been offered, with the reading of Roderick and Rowland as split between Arnoldian Hellenism and Hebraism, consciousness and conscience. As a representative of conscience, Rowland is indifferent to the question of what is to fire the artist's imagination in order that he be

41 Spender, p. 420.
42 Holder-Barell, p. 149.
enabled to create. Rowland, this reading contends, thinks that the artist must act, do, and perform: he must work. Any "contact with life as a source of stimulation" will, according to Rowland's point of view, "merely contaminate the artist."\(^{44}\)

Rowland, as an observer, however, is not meant to be identified with James, nor is he a surrogate for the omniscient author. Observers, if they are to be convincing characters, must be allowed no more clairvoyance "than befits a perfectly natural relation of themselves to what they observe."\(^{45}\) Far from representing the ideal, Rowland also fails to perceive the true cause of Roderick's failure. Although Rowland repeatedly "notes what is evidence of Roderick's egoism and instability," he "either fails to see it as such or refuses to regard it as the portent of moral collapse."\(^{46}\) Furthermore, he is made fallible by his emotional dependence on Roderick. This emotional commitment motivates him to "discount his own awareness of Roderick's weak side and attributes to him capacities for abstinence and self-restraint that Roderick does nothing to show that he possesses."\(^{47}\)

Paradoxically, Rowland holds to his belief in the

\(^{44}\)Engelberg, p. 99.

\(^{45}\)Nettels, p. 241.

\(^{46}\)Ibid., p. 242.

\(^{47}\)Ibid.
"essential salubrity of genius" (151) but at the same time intimately reveals the weaknesses of the character who will destroy this illusion:

What James does...is to allow Rowland insight sufficient to provide the reader with knowledge which enables him not only to understand Roderick but also to recognize Rowland's faith for the wishful thinking that it is, and in so doing enjoy the illusion of seeing farther than the character who initially directed him to his conclusion.48

As a technical device, then, Rowland as a center of consciousness can convey to the reader the perceptions James strives to create: James can make in this way his observers "sufficiently limited to be credible characters and sufficiently acute to guide the reader and ultimately to perceive for themselves the true nature of the persons they observe."49

Nor can it be argued that Rowland, in his role as the observer, personifies James's moral imagination. It has been pointed out that the moral distance between James and Rowland Mallet is a long one, and James was perfectly aware of this.50 Rowland falls short, in the first place, of the Jamesian ideal of heroism and virtue. His is a "rampant case of conscience."51 As James himself puts it,

---

48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
51 Ibid., p. 67.
"he had at least been made to feel that there ran through all things a strain of right and of wrong as different, after all, in their complexion, as the texture, to the spiritual sense, of Sundays and weekdays." (26) This attitude may represent "petrified dogmatism." 52

Rowland's perceptiveness and his dramatization of himself in the role of the observer offer a better understanding of his personality and his relations with others. He conducts himself, for example, as if he were at a show and sees himself as an observer from the earliest moments of the story. When he explains his reasons for the European tour, he claims that "there at least if I do nothing I shall at least see a great deal; and if I'm not a producer I shall at any rate be an observer." (65)

Rowland is not an artist, but a collector, a judge, and a critic: "He was extremely fond of all the arts and had an almost passionate enjoyment of pictures. He had seen a great many and judged them sagaciously." (23-24)

The action of Rowland's observing eye is presented as part of the growth of his consciousness:

Coming back to the drawing-room, he was struck by the group formed by the three men.... Rowland stood looking on, for the group appealed to him by its romantic symbolism. Roderick...seemed the beautiful image of a genius.... Gloriani, with his head on one side, pulling his long moustache like a genial Mephistopheles... represented art with a mixed motive.... Poor little Singleton...might pass for an embodiment of aspiring candour afflicted with feebleness of wing. (92-93)

52 Ibid.
Here, the observer "imposes definitions and fixed roles."\(^5^3\) In his role as an observer, Rowland anticipates the trapped and ineffectual narrator-protagonist of *The Sacred Fount*, particularly in the involvement of others in the complex patterns of his own observations. When he suggests to Mary Garland that she return to America, for example, he admits that he "should like to ship you back without delay and see what becomes of you. If that sounds uncivil I admit that there's a cold intellectual curiosity in it."

(226) He sees Mary Garland for the first time in a similar context; he notes that the young woman is "not pretty as the eye of habit judges prettiness" but knows "that when he made the observation he had somehow failed to set it down against her, for he had already passed from measuring contours to tracing meanings." (52) This is the eye of the observer, "which replaces generous receptivity with analysis, and which implicitly locates human significance in the consciousness of the perceiving subject rather than in the human person perceived."\(^5^4\)

Rowland does participate, however, and not simply as the foil or double for Roderick nor is he a passive spectator. Significantly, it is Rowland's capacity for active commitment (in his continued love for Mary Garland and his plea to Christina that she leave Roderick) that Roderick


\(^5^4\) *Ibid.*
cannot understand, the lack of which understanding causes his disillusionment in his friend. Rowland has the power, the willingness to act that Roderick lacks, but is without Roderick's faculty to create. Possessing the temperament, Rowland lacks the talent.

Furthermore, Rowland is not meant to be the "flawless antithesis" to Roderick. Both Rowland and Roderick are romantics, lacking true sophistication. There is an element of self-deception in Rowland's decision to bring Mary Garland to Rome, and though "the most rational of men" Rowland himself admits his guilt.  

Rowland's goodness is combined, then, with self-interest and sometimes with foolishness. In trying to fulfill the needs of his nature through Roderick, "he makes a fool of himself and is then made a fool of by others in a way that is both pitiful and comical." Rowland admits that he is "cursed with sympathy...as an active faculty," the sympathy that causes him to be able to enter so easily yet vicariously into the lives of those around him. He

---


56 Eileen Douglass Leyburn, Strange Alloy: The Relation of Comedy to Tragedy in the Fiction of Henry James, forew. William T. Stafford (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), p. 17. Leyburn claims that Rowland lacks a sense of humor, that "throughout the novel James keeps Rowland the same suffering, long enduring friend, who is something of a bore, and who cannot supply the deficiency in his nature by any satisfactory relation with others." (p. 19)
seeks to help them realize their potential, but the potential is "measured by his own limited imagination: the gesture of liberation is at the same time one of restriction." Thwarted, unsure of his own identity, neither "irresponsibly contemplative" nor "sturdily practical," Rowland finds in Roderick the solution to his own problem of consciousness. But his faith in Roderick is built on inadequate belief. Rowland naively assumes in Roderick his own moral qualities, with the addition of creative genius. While Roderick's imagination is insufficient to assess Roderick properly, he is perceptive where Roderick is blind. Though uncreative, Rowland is persistently observant.

Ambivalent in his role, "both self-implicated and selfless in his commitment to Roderick's career," Rowland is incapable of viewing that career with detachment. The conflict between desire and intention that follows humanizes Rowland, but it also constrains him as he "finds himself imprisoned in his role as guardian angel." Initially, at least, Rowland is guilty in a naive sense of the same set of mistaken assumptions regarding the enlargement of experience as Roderick. Rowland commits the experiential fallacy in assuming that Roderick will

58 Ibid., pp. 22-23.
"put forth some wonderful flowers" once he is "transplanted to Rome," supposing the young artist is only "vegetating" in Northampton. (50). Impressed with the demonstrated talent of his protege, Rowland willingly offers the opportunity for that genius to flourish, thinking it possible that Roderick "will prove some day the happier artist for some of these very same lazy reveries." (56) Confusing talent with production, Rowland thinks that "achievement's only effort passionate enough." (71) Finally, like Roderick, Rowland senses that his own experience is somehow incomplete. Educated as though he were a poor man's son by Jonas Mallet, who was determined not to corrupt his son by luxury (27), Rowland, though aware of the value of plain and disciplined living, is left with the sense that "his young experience was not a fair sample of human freedom." (28) Though generous, aesthetically sensitive, and extraordinarily perceptive, Rowland remains an incomplete person.

Rowland, despite his cool, measured mind, dispassionate heart, taste, appreciation, and the artistic temperament, is not an artist. He not only lacks the talent but "stands on the outside of things, fearing his own intensities." He acknowledges his passivity, his willingness to follow examples of virtue: "My genius is altogether imitative." (32) He says that he is too young himself to

strike his grand coup: "I'm holding myself ready for inspiration." (23) He is a man of genius "half-finished." The genius has been left out, the faculty of expression is lacking, but "the need for expression remains, and I spend my days groping for the latch of a closed door." (25)

Rowland's voice is that of reason and restraint, consistently warning Roderick to exert his will and conveying the awareness that Roderick is a "remorseless egotist." (322) Despite his capacity to be selfless and his final renunciation of love, qualities that are generally admirable in Jamesian protagonists, however, Rowland is not an ideal. With his independent income, combined with the ability to use the leisure that James thinks is essential for the proper self-cultivation and enjoyment of the arts—Mary Garland remarks that Mallet is the first unoccupied man she ever knew—Rowland is intelligent and receptive, completely equipped to choose his own future. Yet, he reveals in the early discussion with Cecelia that he has no idea what to do with himself. His vicarious participation in the true artist's life is meant to complete his own search for personal realization, but because he depends far too much on the response the young artist gives him, he fears outright conflict with his protege.

---

60 Bruce R. McElderry, Jr., Henry James (New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press, 1965), p. 44.
and allows his good will to be abused."61

Eventually, Rowland's restraint arouses a sense of injustice and he speaks his mind, unintentionally contributing to the death of Roderick. Rowland believes that he must not interfere with the individual rights of others, but this understanding ends in futility for both Roderick and himself. Rowland at the end is destined never to achieve creative fulfillment, either.62 Thus, Rowland's predicament, like that of the artist, involves the necessity of finding the proper balance between self-realization, self-assertion, and the desire to help others.

To the extent that Rowland is committed not to action but to sensibility, "a sensibility so finely charged that all involvement turns finally inward upon itself," he anticipates the observers in James's later fiction, particularly the narrator of The Sacred Fount, the painter-narrator Oliver Lyon in "The Liar," and even John Marcher in "The Beast in the Jungle."63

As a center of consciousness, then, Rowland participates ambiguously if not ambivalently in the action of the novel. Though Rowland asserts his role as "an observer"


62 Ibid., p. 41.

(187), that his main function is "to feel certain things happening to others" and James defines in the Preface that the "drama is the very drama of that consciousness," James qualifies the presentation of consciousness:

It had, naturally, Rowland's consciousness, not to be too acute—which would have disconnected it and made it super-human: the beautiful little problem was to keep it connected, connected intimately, with the general human exposure, and thereby bedimmed and befouled and bewildered, anxious, restless, fallible, and yet to endow it with such intelligence that the appearances reflected in it, and constituting together there the situation and the 'story,' should become by that fact intelligible.64

The same ambiguity has been noted in James's description of the "subject," which he begins to define as the particular adventure, the degeneration of Roderick himself. James continues, however, to define the subject "as not directly, in the least, my young sculptor's adventure. This it had been but indirectly, being all the while in essence and in final effect another man's, his friend's and patron's, view and experience of him." James presently comments that Rowland Mallet is not the subject "but the centre from which the subject has been treated."65

The ambiguous involvement-detachment, observer-participant roles of the center of consciousness not only heighten the experience of the narrative action but help to set the theme of the novel in perspective. Both Rowland and Roderick must find a balance: the fact that

65 Ibid., p. 15.
Rowland can perceive the divisiveness in his friend does not really enable Rowland himself to resolve his own problems of self-realization. Because Mallet is responsible, to some extent, for Roderick's ultimate tragedy, he becomes involved in events that he cannot always completely perceive. His consciousness, like that of the failed artist, remains incomplete. The similarities to Hawthorne's theme of moral ambiguity in *The Marble Faun* have been noted in this connection. What enriches both novels is moral ambivalence: "the beauty of the situation in both novels is that although both point-of-view figures are spectators to the action, they are also too deeply involved in it to be sufficiently aware of their own moral culpability."  

III.

Roderick Hudson's art works, the sculptures, symbolically represent the artist's conflict, his failure to develop self-awareness.

The first work described, completed while Roderick still lives in Northampton, is a bronze statuette representing a naked youth drinking from a gourd: its inscription is the Greek word for thirst. The beauty of the statue is the beauty of natural movement: "Nothing had been sought to be represented but the perfection of an attitude."  

Roderick and Rowland discuss the symbolism of the work: the youth represents innocence, health, strength, and curiosity, and the cup represents knowledge, pleasure, and experience. Rowland revealingly exclaims, "Then he's drinking very deep," and tells Cecelia that Roderick is "a case of what is called the artistic temperament." (36)

Roderick's thirst represents the American who takes to Europe too readily, who loves it too much, whose "facility of assimilation is unleavened by judgment and experience." America had not provided Roderick with the experience necessary for responding to the challenge of European experience on a level of emotional maturity. Thus, Roderick's death becomes doubly symbolic: he has been able to ascend heights, by means of his talent, but his footing has remained insecure. 67

James writes that Roderick "had fallen from a great height" but was "singularly little disfigured," and in Roderick's death Rowland sees "only a noble expression of life." (332) Roderick rejects the American or New England tradition in favor of the European, but he is unable to become part of that tradition because he has "the appetite, morbid and monstrous, for colour and form, for the picturesque and romantic at any price." Desiring to drink deeply of life, like the figure of his early sculpture, he "mistakes

in his innocence the mirage of colour and plashing fountains for the reality itself."\(^{68}\)

The second, more monumental work of Adam and Eve is created by means of a "divine facility" in a "sublime act of creation" (Eve was finished in only three months!), leaving the artist "flushed with triumph." (80-82)

The third work of sculpture, of a lazzarone lounging in the sun, symbolizes of course Roderick's impending lack of inspiration and resulting inactivity. The work is an "image of a serene, irresponsible, sensuous life," the real (model?) lazzarone "a vile fellow," but "the ideal lazzarone--and Roderick Hudson's had been subtly idealized--was the flower of a perfect civilization." Yet, the lazzarone is intoxicated. Mr. Leavenworth, an early representative of James's philistine American commercial travelers, thinks that sculpture should not deal with such transitory attitudes, however idealized, but Roderick justifies both his subject and treatment: "Nothing's more permanent, more sculpturesque, more monumental than lying dead drunk." Leavenworth observes that this is an interesting paradox! (197)

Each statue marks a stage in Roderick's experience of life. The water drinker represents Roderick himself in Northampton--thirsty, innocent, curious, and youthful with the cup of knowledge at hand. Adam and Eve symbolizes

\(^{68}\) Ibid., p. 235.
his own godlike powers, gaining him early success in Rome with the reputation for Adam's partaking of the miraculous. The statue of the listening woman is a clever and superficial work, as though Roderick had come down to earth—at least according to the cynical Gloriani, who sees evidence in this work of Roderick's disappointment in love. Roderick's last completed works are artistically successful portrait busts of Christina Light and Mrs. Hudson, Christina having awakened in Roderick his dormant vision of ideal beauty and his mother that of filial piety.

The question arises why James did not try to articulate Roderick's decline by showing his later works to degenerate as works of art as the sculptor himself grows more irresponsible. The final portrait busts are, in fact, finely idealized works. There can be, however, no other works to represent the deterioration of the artist because his decline itself is characterized by the absence of creativity. ⑥⁹

Roderick's failure is also set in perspective by James's treatment of the other artist types in the novel. One, Augusta Blanchard, conveniently possessed of a small fortune, sells a picture occasionally. Generally her pictures are of dew-sprinkled roses, "with the dew-drops very highly finished." She paints people with their backs turned because "she was a little weak in faces." (34-35)

⑥⁹Winner, p. 107.
Like Roderick she has great sincerity but unlike the sculptor lacks real talent.

Sam Singleton, an American in Rome, is the modest but persistent artist type. James's "little noiseless laborious artist" paints small landscapes, chiefly in water color, and has improved through patient industry without genuine ability. He is "so perfect an example of the little noiseless devoted worker" (94) and "might pass for an embodiment of aspiring candour afflicted with feebleness of wing." (92-93) Though aware of his own rather minimal talents, he senses Roderick's brilliance. To Singleton, Roderick has a "beautiful completeness.... Nature has made him so.... He has more genius than any one." Singleton sees Roderick himself as a fine subject for the painter and envies the man when "the most beautiful girl in the world" seems so casually to offer "to feed him with her beauty." Singleton thinks "if that is not completeness where shall one look for it?" (133) As a foil to the romantic frenzy of Roderick, Singleton reminds Roderick of a watch that never runs down and Singleton is not embarrassed to admit that he is very regular and finds pleasure in being regular. Singleton, then, despite his shortcomings, does seem to have what Roderick so conspicuously lacks--discipline and solid working habits.70

Finally, James introduces Gloriani, not the master he is to become in The Ambassadors, but in Roderick Hudson a cynical, independent artist of "aesthetic tendencies." Gloriani has a definite, practical scheme of art; thinking that there is no essential difference between beauty and ugliness, he says he aims at expressiveness and reaches it by way of ingenuity. He says that the prime duty of an art work is to puzzle, amuse, fascinate, "to report on a real aesthetic adventure." (83) A "genial Mephistopheles," Gloriani represents "art with a mixed motive, skill unleavened by faith, the mere base maximum of cleverness." (92) Suspicious of passion, the muse, and inspiration, Gloriani knows that the frenzied inspiration of Roderick "burns out, the inspiration runs to seed" and warns Roderick that art is learning to do "without the muse." (92)

This has been interpreted to mean that devotees of an absolute aesthetic become aloof, withdrawn, and ultimately inhuman, their perfect taste that of the museum rather than of the studio, their personal relationships based on domination rather than on freedom. Such men are merely collectors, not creative artists. Gloriani, though cynically, probably speaks for James in justifying the relevance of art to life: "Art is referable to the human situation, relative to its contexts."71

Gloriani is destined to outlive his flashiness and achieve true greatness as an artist. Eventually, he gains an awareness and insight into life and becomes the master. James comments on "the deep human expertness in Gloriani's smile--oh, the terrible life behind it." Gloriani comes to achieve that ideal balance between man and artist, refuses to confuse his social being with his genius, and manages to live fully though he continues to produce art work of questionable significance. Like the animal sculptor in "The Madonna of the Future," Gloriani represents the artist who can never produce art of the highest order despite his great skill and his ability to create merely representational likenesses or pleasant formal patterns of line, mass, and tone. While Gloriani has the will and the craft to make the most of his talent, his art remains superficial.

Gloriani is a realist both as a man and an artist, relying on something other than inspiration, unlike Roderick. He is successful, worldly, and industrious, depending on his knowledge of "the phenomenal world, immersion in the mixed, pluralistic, European environment." As an

---


opposite to Roderick the inspirationist in his rejection of
the divine spark, intuition, and insight into some world of
divine forms, Gloriani may speak for James, who also opts
for a realistic theory of art. When an artist tries to
create according to a theory of the ideal, like Benvolio,
he fails. Art must maintain its relevance to life, James
insists, "referable to the human situation, relative to its
contexts. It rises from life and is not imposed on life.
It is an art which has learned to do without the Muse." 75


William Wetmore Story has been suggested as the
basis of the characterization of Gloriani. His statues
had "the hideous grimace out of the very bosom of loveli-
ness" like those of Gloriani, according to Leon Edel,
has also been suggested as the source of the character of
Roderick Hudson by Paul A. Kewlin, "The Development of
Roderick Hudson: An Evaluation," Arizona Quarterly, XVII:2
(Summer, 1971) [101]-123. Robert L. Gale suggests a more
likely source: "Roderick Hudson and Thomas Crawford,"
CHAPTER III

THE TRAGIC MUSE

In The Tragic Muse, Henry James presents not the failed artist but the conditions that must be met and the choices that must be made in order to avoid artistic failure. There are several conflicts in the novel that create the potential difficulties and failures of the creative temperament—the conflict between the public and the private, that between love and art, and that between commitment and escape. Nick Dormer as the emerging artistic consciousness in the novel learns to resolve, or at least comes to understand the bases for the resolution of these conflicts.

James acknowledged the presence of these conflicts and difficulties in his own comments on the theme of art in the novel. Wanting "to do something about art" as a "human complication and a social stumbling-block," James mentions the conflict between the claims of the private and the public, art and the world. He explains that he wanted to create a "dramatic picture of the 'artist-life' and of the difficult terms on which it is at the best secured and enjoyed, the general question of its having to be not
altogether easily paid for."¹

The Tragic Muse, however, does not create an entirely negative definition of the "artist-case" since it contains the justly famous statement of what appears to be James's own defense of the value of style—the idea that art makes life. While it is true that the defense is given to a rather ambiguous character in the novel, Gabriel Nash, there is some evidence to assume its seriousness.

The Tragic Muse is further unusual in James's treatment of the theme of the artist in that it features a successful practicing artist, in the title character Miriam Rooth, and in that the protagonist seems to be destined for a successful career as a portrait painter. By the end of the novel, Nick's potential creativity and talent have been amply demonstrated, and his developed self-insight into the conditions that must be avoided as well as the correct choices that must be made is assured.

The novel is furthermore characterized by a veritable surfeit of artistic talent. Many of the minor characters are imbued with the artistic temperament or talent, and Peter Sherringham, like Rowland Mallet in Roderick Hudson, is given the artistic temperament and faculty of appreciation without the talent of the artist. It is largely through James's manipulation, in fact, of Peter's

insights that the reader can come to appreciate the talent of both Miriam and Nick as artists.

Viola Hopkins Winner notes that the artist types in the novel seem to fall into two categories, those who live for the world and worship material gain, power, and practical results, and those who stand outside society, "preoccupied...with essences and pure forms." 

Even the protagonist's sister Biddy, whose voice is "like the tinkle of a silver bell" is described in an art figure, creating the "momentary sense of being a figure in a ballet, a dramatic ballet." 

James was aware of the problems of integrating and unifying this abundant material of the artist types in a novel that has nevertheless been considered the "simplest of James's parables" on the relation of the artist to society. James thought that The Tragic Muse would be his last long novel and acknowledged that he had perhaps undertaken "to tell and describe too much," attenuating his story

---

by attempting to make it too big. He was aware of the difficulty, too, of integrating the Nick Dormer--Julia Dallow and Peter Sherringham--Miriam Rooth relationships and significantly expressed the awareness in an art figure, indicating his "moral horror of two stories, two pictures in one."  

Yet, James was really not interested in presenting convincing narrative action, even in what might be considered his most naturalistic of long fictions, so much as he was in presenting states of mind. An early reviewer noted the emphasis on thinking rather than doing in the book, that both Peter and Nick and most of the minor characters are "less interesting for what they do than for what they think, for mental activity." According to this reviewer, James devoted his greatest energy "to the exhibition of the storehouses of their complexities, the mind."  

Despite the fullness of the narrative and the abundance of artistic talent, however, there is really no fully developed Jamesian consciousness, much less an artistic consciousness, in the novel. It has been pointed out that


neither Miriam nor Nick is very interesting or convincing as a character and some reasons, particularly in the case of Miriam, can be suggested for the deliberateness of this intention. Consequently, the novel appears to be less ambiguous than either The Sacred Fount or Roderick Hudson, but it is probably also not as appealing.

I.

The problem of making the conflicts of the artist-protagonist, Nick Dormer, convincing is one that James was aware of. Noting that Nick did not emerge as interesting as he was "fondly intended to be," James writes that the presentation of the artist in a state of triumph must be necessarily "flat in proportion as it really sticks to its subject" since the artist in triumph is rarely, in fact, visualized. What we see is "the back he turns to us as he bends over his work." Unlike the conventional romantic hero, the romance of the artist is the romance of accomplishment in relative isolation from the world, "the romance he himself projects." The artist-hero becomes expressed in his accomplishment rather negatively, as James argues, when we see the "artist deluded, diverted, frustrated or vanquished." 10

Nick Dormer is presented as a potential rather than

9 James himself admits this in the Preface.
10 "Preface," The Tragic Muse, pp. 96-97.
as a finished artist, however. The potential for success is suggested by his name: his talent is for the most part latent. He is further considered a dreamer, with a "wandering blankness" in his eyes "as if he had no attention at all" and has been given "the indulgent name of dreaminess" by his friends. (10)\(^1\) Faced with the problem of showing Nick's consciousness of himself as a potentially successful artist, James develops this emerging self-insight in several ways.

First, the sense of place becomes a device for presenting growth of consciousness. At the Paris annual exhibition, Nick notes that the Salon is an "immense stimulus" to him as it "refreshes" and "excites" him: "It's such an exhibition of artistic life...full of ideas, full of refinements; it gives one such an impression of artistic experience...." (15) In fact, all Paris becomes a place that has the power to quicken the young man's sensitivity, "the life of reflection and of observation within him...." James hints at what later becomes developed as the "nervous" theory of artistic creation in the following comment that the restlessness caused by this quickened sensitivity is not disagreeable to Nick despite "the nervous quality in it." (21)

James makes it clear that Nick's personal crisis

\(^1\)Maxwell Geisnar, Henry James and the Jacobites (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1963), p. 103 gives the clue to the name, finding Nick a "sleeper" or a "sleeping artist."
of consciousness is heightened by the experience of seeing the works of art at the Salon exhibition: the experience makes him "think fast," producing "that effect which he had spoken of to his mother as a sense of artistic life." (21) The situation of Nick initially, then, is that of the character of already heightened sensitivity, both capable and motivated to exploration of the inner self.

Yet this exploration is not, as is generally true of the Jamesian consciousness, to be a passive one. Nick seems to speak for James in defending the value of observation just as he later defends the life of action, or at least the active commitment to his goals as an artist. Nick argues that the "observer is nothing without his categories, his types and his varieties." (31) Nick is similarly committed to action: "The great point is to do something, instead of standing muddling and questioning...." (139-140)

As in the case of Roderick Hudson, what complicates the search for the sense of self lies just as much within Nick Dorner as in the forces imposed upon him from without as a result of his involvements in politics and love. Like Roderick Hudson, Nick is not governed consistently by rational behavior, but unlike Roderick he is aware of this fact, confessing to Julia Dallow "that reasons do not always govern my behavior." (86) Like Roderick, Nick is aware of his divisiveness: he sees the difficulty in what
he calls the strange feeling of being "two men" as though he were "two quite distinct human beings, who have scarcely a point in common...." (192)

It is generally the conflict between art and politics, however, particularly expressed in the love relationship of Nick and Julia, that needs to be resolved before Nick is prepared to realize his dedication to the cause of art. Cleverly, James shows Nick sceptical of the value of the political life early in the novel: the insight into the shallowness of the diplomatic mind is one that does not really develop but is granted to Nick from the beginning. Nick probably speaks for James when he pronounces the diplomatic mind "dry, narrow, barren, poor... wanting in imagination, in generosity, in the finest perceptions and the highest courage" (73).

In another criticism of the value of public life, Nick rejects the point of view that politics represents a commitment and active involvement in life. Political activity he rather sees as "not really action at all, but only a pusillanimous imitation of it...." (205)

The potential for conflict in love, like Nick's insight into the realities of the political mind, is prefigured in Nick's response to the appealing physical grace of Julia Dallow as opposed to what seems to be a comparative gracelessness of spirit. James deliberately softens the description of the woman's physical appeal: "if it
had not been for her extreme delicacy of line and surface she might have been called bold; but as it was she looked refined and quiet—refined by tradition and quiet for a purpose." Yet, given James's skepticism of the purposefulness of the political vocation, even accompanied by such a gracious person as Julia, one is inclined to suspect the description ironic, particularly as it continues with the figures of Julia's hair "like darkness, her eyes like the early twilight, and her mouth like a rare pink flower." (77)

In any case, Nick knows that Julia's mind is less appealing and less graceful than her person. The effect of the personality is one of too much a compulsion; not the coercion of design, of importunity, nor the vulgar pressure of family expectation, a suspected desire that he should like her well enough to marry her, but something that was a mixture of diverse things, of the sense that she was imperious and generous—but probably more the former than the latter—and of a certain prevision of doom, the influence of the idea that he should come to it, that he was predestined.... (75)

This implies that Julia is a predator of personality. Another clue to the unsuitability of Julia as the companion of a man of artistic temperament is her remark concluding their discussion on the virtues of serving the state versus Nick's fondness for the arts. When Nick playfully questions Julia whether she has never heard of the arts, adding that he is "awfully fond of painting," Julia insensitively replies, "Don't be odious!" and bids him good-night. (90) This is the "tone" (James's word) of the
uncomprehending Mrs. Briss in The Sacred Fount.

While Mrs. Dormer considers Julia Dallow the "ideal companion for a public man" (195), Nick knows better and even before the climactic scene between the lovers suspects the predatory nature of his betrothed. He knows that the coercive nature of a woman of public position will limit his own freedom, a freedom that he values personally and a freedom that is certainly necessary to the full development of consciousness in the pursuit of the artist's vocation: "What I seem to know better than anything else in the world is that I love my freedom. I set it far above everything." (194)

With Nick's initial political victory in Harsh, he has already grown in consciousness, seeing things in a new perspective, "conscious of a double nature" as though "there were two men in him, quite separate, whose leading features had little in common and each of whom insisted on having an independent turn at life." Yet, the sense of divisiveness is kept under control: unlike Roderick Hudson and the artist-narrator of The Sacred Fount, Nick is determined not to parade his "inconsistencies" or to allow his "unrectified interests" to "become a spectacle to the vulgar." He deliberately avoids trying "to appear complicated which is at the bottom of most forms of fatuity." Instead, he wants to be "simple" and "continuous." (204-205)

Yet, Nick is brought to a further level of self-
awareness because he understands that his mistake has been one of not choosing and allowing others to make choices for him. This is a significant insight inasmuch as it is exactly the inability to direct the will that condemns Rod-erick Hudson to failure, failure as an integrated personality as well as a productive artist. Nick, on standing for Harsh assuming that he would lose the election, learns his mistake: "He had done something even worse than not choose--he had let others choose for him." (206)

Nick's consciousness, then, is significantly developed even before what is meant to be the climactic scene between Nick and Julia, the excursion by boat to the temple of Vesta in the middle of the ornamental lake at Broadwood.

Significantly, the conflicts between Julia and Nick, art and politics, and love and art are heightened by this experience of a rather formal visitation to a place of deliberate artifice. The experience of visiting the temple, itself a work of art, becomes the occasion if not the symbol of imaging the consciousness of the emerging artist.

The temple, a small ornamental structure, had been erected on an island in the middle of the lake "on artificial foundations" as an "architectural pleasantry as nearly as possible a reminiscence of the small ruined rotunda which stands on the bank of the Tiber...dedicated to Vesta." (211)
James deftly sketches the attitudes of the characters toward this pleasant ruin to reveal the basis of conflict. Nick values the temple because it was "absurd," but Mrs. Dallow never held "particular esteem" for it. While Nick wants to go inside the temple, Julia prefers to wait in the boat because "there was too much malice prepense in the temple." A woman of practicality, Julia thinks it is ridiculous "to withdraw to an island a few feet square on purpose to meditate" declaring that she had "nothing to meditate about which required so much attitude." (211)

Attitude, however, is something that Nick sees not in the architectural folly so much as in precisely the public life that means more to Julia than to him. The real artificiality is found in politics, Nick implies, not in art—even as represented by the debased architectural conceit of the temple in the lake. The temple provides the necessary opportunity for leisurely aesthetic contemplation—"to be for half an hour where nobody's looking and one hasn't to keep it up is just what I wanted to put in an ideal, irresponsible day for." (212) Clearly the artistic sensibility is in conflict with the demands of public life. Julia remains uncomprehending, preoccupied with the number of people she plans to have to dinner that evening, a state of mind that Nick questions, "Must you always live in public?" Significantly, Julia admits twice during this scene that she does not understand Nick, and
James describes Julia as seeing only the water, the sky, and the trees while Nick's attention is directed toward the beauty of the temple itself. (212)

Nick continues to regard the ruined island as a place for meditation, a "capital place to give up everything"—to forget his representation of the burgesses of Narsh. (213) Nick finds the temple itself "charming," "delicate," and "elegant." (213) As the scene continues, the conflict deepens. Nick admits to Julia that she is right about his not knowing her, and Julia accuses Nick of being not a man but a child. (214) Nick further argues for the Jamesian ideal of freedom, claiming that "we must look at life in a large, bold way." (218) This freedom is threatened by his imminent proposal of marriage, a proposal that one reader thinks comes from sympathy. The possibility that Nick will have to forfeit his interest in the fine arts is great, an interest that Julia finds frightening anyway. (221) Nick knows that he will be sacrificing his interest in art for that of politics: there will be no time for art as all his effort would be devoted to performing what Julia expects of him as a public, political figure. In the idea of sacrifice, there is an extension of the symbolic value of the visit to the temple:

Like the praetors, consuls and dictators of ancient Rome who sacrificed to the Vesta at Lavinium before taking office, Nick offers marriage to Julia in the

---

beautiful, useless temple of Vesta before assuming his office, sacrificing his private ambitions for the sake of her hand and the useful public life in which she is in her element.13

Nick knows that Julia understands nothing of his interest in art; acknowledging his own limited talents, he sees that Julia knows little "about the honourable practice of any art." (222) The ultimate conflict between the lovers is suggested in Nick's vehement insistence that he will never paint Julia; and the abortive nature of their romance is further captured by the failure of Julia to wait, as she had promised, for Nick to return from his return trip to the temple to retrieve a magazine left there. (223)

Once Julia and Nick have broken their engagement, the conflict becomes more clearly involved with the issue of freedom. Nick objects to Julia's attempts to "challenge and overhaul" him (295) just as Julia pathetically thinks the resolution of their problem is to offer to be a "perpetual sitter" for Nick to paint "all the rest of his life"! (301)

Significantly, Nick comes to value the sense of freedom he experiences while he is parted from Julia. Full of "confused feelings" toward his studio, Nick nevertheless experiences there the "sense of release and recreation" (301) and the more he meditates on his confusion, the clearer it becomes that he would be "letting something precious go" if he were to give up his studio. In the

13Winner, pp. 120-121.
milieu of the studio, furthest from his constituents, he feels "the consciousness that for the hour the coast was clear and his mind was free." (302)

Once determined to give up the studio, however, Nick experiences only joy in the spirit of renunciation. James permits Nick to see the possibility of Miriam Rooth as a subject for a new portrait, and communicates the sense of artistic elation in a prose style projecting the insight:

There was both embarrassment and inspiration in the strange chance of snatching back for an hour a relinquished joy: the jump with which he found he could still rise to such an occasion took away his breath a little, at the same time that the idea—the idea of what one might make of such material—touched him with an irresistible wand. (320)

The sense of sacrifice is accompanied by an awareness of the difficulty of making both the choice and the sacrifice. James writes that the "difficulties" were what made his story, the tale of a young man giving up public life for art.14

Nick's consciousness of the meaning of his dedication to the cause of art deepens as the conflict between himself and Julia is intensified. Julia comes to realize that freedom is the real issue of the conflict, though she finds this out too late for either Nick or herself to be set free. Julia realizes that if Nick wants to paint, he must be free to do so, which means they must part. (343)

At last, Julia realizes Nick's dedication to art,

14"Preface," The Tragic Muse, p. 81.
remarking "You're an artist, you are, you are!" (344) and finds new respect for a man who can accept the uncertainty of the artistic life: "You must be a great artist.... It's beautiful of you to want to give up anything, and I like you for it." (346) While the vehicle of expression is intentionally inane, the sentiment is sincere and introduces the theme of renunciation, the paradoxical exaltation in the uncertain freedom to pursue one's goals as opposed to the definite but according to James narrow and sterile certainty of public success. In fact, James becomes positively ecstatic about Nick's decision. Seeing that art will exact a price, Nick "saw a great mystery become simple": "He paid the heavy penalty of being a man of imagination; he was capable of far excursions of the spirit, disloyalties to habit and even to faith, and open to wondrous communications." (345)

Significantly, the insight and full consciousness of Nick Dormer as the potentially successful man of art are earned at considerable expense. Art requires freedom, but with that freedom comes the danger of self-isolation—like that which is self-imposed by the artist-narrator of The Sacred Pount. Yet, even Biddy sees the necessity of the artist's being isolated or detached to the extent that he must learn to please himself rather than everyone else. (371) James suggests, then, that the artist must be somewhat selfish.
Peter Sherringham, too, recognizes that there is a price to pay in renouncing the life of politics for self-dedication to art. Peter admires Nick's courage in renouncing "the forum for the studio," a courage that seems greater than that required to marry the actress he loves because "the reward in the latter case was so much more immediate." (373) It is precisely the indefiniteness of the reward that makes Nick's sacrifice heroic, suggesting again the Jamesian value of the potential appeal of the uncertain and unknown to the artist.

James develops Nick's sense of purpose and commitment, however, at the same time he deals with the necessity of resignation before the uncertainties of the future. The heroic nature of Nick's decision is considerably qualified: this is to be no grandiose withdrawal from life and pursuit of the ethereal but rather an understanding that life will if anything become more difficult as a result of that decision. Significantly, the dedication that excites Nick must be made in the spirit of solitude. Nick resolves to "ask nothing of any one but would cultivate independence, mulishness and gaiety and fix his thoughts on a bright if distant morrow." He accepts the uncertainty, however unpleasant, as well as the promise:

It was disagreeable to have to remember that his task would not be sweetened by a sense of heroism; for if it might be heroic to give up the muses for the strife of great affairs, no romantic glamour worth speaking of would ever gather round an Englishman who in the
prime of his strength had given up great or even small affairs for the muses. (430)

James makes it clear that Nick's decision is made in a spirit quite different from that of the frenzied flights of the imagination of Roderick Hudson. Biddy finds Nick "very romantic and beautiful," using the flight figure that James chose for the tragic career of the young sculptor—"all ready for heroic flights and eager to think she might fight the battle of the beautiful by her brother's side." (430) But Nick knows better. The business of the artist is "not a crusade, with bugles and banners, but a gray, sedentary grind, whose charm was all at the core." (431) In accepting the indefiniteness of the rewards, Nick is prepared to commit himself to action. This is not romantic escape, Roderick Hudson fashion, into the mist, but the resolution to do his "part" and to work "like a beaver." (435)

Nick's awareness that his life as an artist will demand work does not mitigate the self-doubts, however. James suggests that the conflicts in the man will persist once the choice has been made. Nick's developed consciousness, "his imagination," has "become conscious of a check which he tried to explain by the idea of a natural reaction." Yet, Nick knows that any important change, any new selection in one's life was exciting, and exaggerate that importance and one's own as little as one would, there was an inevitable strong emotion in renouncing, in the face of considerable opposition, one sort of responsibility for another sort. (486)
While renunciation is both pleasurable and painful, renunciation makes "life not perhaps necessarily joyous, but decidedly thrilling for the hour." Yet, once the thrill disappears, "the romance and the poetry of the thing would be exchanged for the flatness and the prose." (486)

At precisely the depth of Nick's self-doubts James places the scene of visiting the National Gallery. Nick desperately at this point seeks reassurance and sustenance of spirit in his awareness of the indefiniteness of the rewards, once having dedicated himself to art, and this reassurance is subtly attained through the experience of the art works themselves.

Initially, Nick calls the whole art of portraiture into question: "What was it after all, at the best, and why had people given it so high a place?" He senses what seems to be its "weakness and narrowness," qualities that portraiture produces because he thinks it is not "one of the greatest forces in human affairs" because "their place was inferior and their connection with the life of man casual and slight." He thinks that portraiture can "represent so inadequately the idea," assuming it is the "idea that won the race, that in the long run came in first." (488) The banality of the figure suggests that James introduces the doubt, the questioning of the value of the art itself, only to dispel it. Nick remembers accordingly Gabriel Nash's position that there were more
ideas, in actuality "more of those ideas that man lived by in a single room of the National Gallery than in all of the statutes of Parliament." (488)

Nick resolves himself of what he considers his "subjective ambiguity" (488) and sees the value of doing "the most when there would be the least to be got by it." (489) The ultimate defense of the superiority of the choice of art over politics, then, is that art is in the best sense useless.

Resolved of doubt, Nick again accepts the challenges of his decision and the consequences of his choice. Confessing that his work is not as good as Gabriel Nash seems to think, he knows that he needs not only freedom and leisure but more technique. He realizes that he has had "no time, no opportunity, no continuity" and that he "must go and sit down in a corner and learn my alphabet." (496)

While Nick learns "the beauty of obstinacy" in choosing art, James makes it clear that technique and talent are prerequisite even to the finely developed sensitivity that predisposes the individual toward the creation of works of art.

The rejection of Gabriel Nash at this point of Nick's awareness is significant. Nash is the detached artist, contrasting with the Jamovian ideal of commitment and involvement. Thus, Nick becomes impatient with Gabriel by the end of the book, and the character significantly
disappears from the narrative. Just as Nick's portrait of him is dim and blurred, Gabriel as a subject fades from view. Dorothea Krook finds Nash an idealist artist, the blood brother to Theobald and Roderick. Art necessarily involves some compromise, to James, the bringing of the idea down to earth in its representation, something that Theobald and Roderick never learn to do. Art "makes order out of chaos and rescues life from that waste which according to James is life sacrificed."\textsuperscript{15}

Nick sacrifices not only his seat in Parliament, but the brilliant political career and the opportunity to serve his country; he also sacrifices marriage to Julia Dallow, her fortune, and the inheritance from Carteret. He gains nothing in return but self-awareness; that is, he gains everything in the Jamesian system of values.

Yet, when he closes the studio door on the public world in order to realize himself in the pursuit of his art, he is not renouncing life but dedicating himself more intensely to it. Realizing that what lies ahead of him is the potential for boredom, obscurity, and hard work, realizing further that he will not be able to experience the immediate and tangible rewards that Miriam has gained, he concludes on the second visit to the National Gallery that art represents the real opportunity for action which politics cannot offer. Thus, Nick's decision, though at first

\textsuperscript{15}Winner, pp. 122-123.
he finds his spirits depressed, is based on a full commitment to life, action, and experience. 16

Leon Edel finds another significance in the spirit of Nick's renunciation. Only his sister seems able to understand the young man, everyone else seeing Nick not for what he is but for what he wants him to be. The aspiring artist is totally rejected for himself, "the quiet thoughtful artistic young man" that Nick is and offered a public self that he neither desires nor values. His ultimate decision is that of the true artist who "must be prepared to sacrifice everything to his commitment." Nick learns that "one cannot be half artist and half something else," that "he must strip himself of all worldliness, or accept the easy compromise society exacts." This is the lesson of the master that Edel finds stated much less cynically but also much more forcefully in The Tragic Muse than in the short story, "The Lesson of the Master." 17

James knew that he had to present the spirit of sacrifice indirectly because "the case of the sacrifice for art can ever be, with truth, with taste, with discretion involved, apparently and showily 'big.'" 18

One of the techniques of indirection is the use of

16 Ibid., pp. 119-120.
18 "Preface," The Tragic Muse, p. 82.
images drawn from the theater, images that have been traced extensively through the novel by Lotus Snow. Another device is the variation on the renunciation theme in the situations of Sherringham and Miriam. Sherringham is unwilling to sacrifice his public life for Miriam, while both Miriam and Nick are willing to make personal sacrifices. Miriam, possessed with the strength of the idea of great art, is aware of the circumstances her career exposes her to, but Nick's "solitary consecration" demonstrates the necessity of the complete surrender of the artist to his art.

The uncertainty of reward in the dedication to art is deliberate. Nick's decision is left open-ended, an exceptional condition in the stories of artists and writers, precisely because James may be suggesting the possibility of compromise. Powers argues that James comes the closest to expressing the idea of compromise in showing Nick as the "continuing" artist, yet enjoying already some recognition from the usually imperceptive world along with entertaining the possibility that even the reward of marriage and a happy life may be just within his grasp.

19 "The Prose and the Modesty of the Manner": James's Imagery for the Artist in Roderick Hudson and The Tragic Muse, Modern Fiction Studies, XII:1 (Spring, 1966), 61-82.

20 Ibid., pp. 81-82.

The final stage of Nick’s developed consciousness is suggested in several instances at the end of the novel. When Miriam becomes effusive about art, Nick can only burst out laughing "on such a presentment of 'art'...at its contrast with the humble fact." (515) Furthermore, Nick is suspicious of gaining a facile and early success with the promise of a premature exhibition of his work. He knows that he is not really ready, remarking on his immature artistic facility. He knows that his "talent for appearances" could be a "fatal thing," and despises mere cleverness and "cheap and easy results." (564) When Miriam admits that she is "too clever" and that she is a "humbug," Nick revealingly admits that this is the way he used to be himself. (585-586)

Similarly, Nick chooses to remain in London rather than to travel immediately to Paris or Florence. He resists the "temptation to persuade himself by material motion that he was launched" on a successful career. (565) This contrasts sharply with Roderick Hudson's ceaseless traveling, his restlessness, and his assumption that changing scene can itself change attitude and destiny. Remaining in London becomes part of Nick's self-dedication, then, because by staying there "it seemed to him that he was more conscious of what he had undertaken and he had a horror of shirking that consciousness." (565)

Furthermore, Nick comes to see Miriam more clearly
as he knows himself better. Seeing the girl as less serious than she seemed to him earlier—"he was conscious of no obligation to reprehend her for it" (579)—Nick seems to gain a new gentleness with his self-insight.

On another visit to the National Gallery, the ultimate level of Nick’s consciousness is reached, however clumsily integrated this scene may appear to be in the narrative. James seems to intrude, speaking for himself rather than from the point of view of Nick in expressing the "perfect nosegays of reassurance" that Nick plucks "right and left" as he strolls through the National Gallery and Museum. James tries to create a situation for the resolution of Nick’s doubts by having him experience the thrill the great portraits of the past can provide:

These were the things that were the most inspiring, in the sense that they were the things that, while generations, while worlds had come and gone, seemed most to survive and testify. As he stood before them sometimes the perfection of their survival struck him as the supreme eloquence, the reason that included all others, thanks to the language of art, the richest and most universal. Empires and systems and conquests had rolled over the globe and every kind of greatness had risen and passed away; but the beauty of the great pictures had known nothing of death or change, and the ages had only sweetened their freshness. The same faces, the same figures looked out at different centuries, knowing a deal the century didn't, and when they joined hands they made the indestructible thread on which the pearls of history were strung. (581)

James affirms the value of an art that can extend man's limited vision of himself. Elsewhere, James writes that "art is an embalmer, a magician" because "it prolongs, it
preserves, it consecrates, it raises from the dead."²²

While James attempts to communicate in such a passage a state of heightened consciousness, Nick's success as an artist is left ultimately uncertain. Nick has already the necessary talent and sensitivity. Further, unlike Roderick Hudson, he is capable of directing and controlling that talent and exerting his power of will and choice. Unlike the artist-narrator of The Sacred Fount, he does not permit that sensitivity to isolate him completely from observed life. But his future career, James makes clear, will involve risk, uncertainty, and doubt: Nick Dormer chooses art with the indefiniteness of its reward, accepting "the madness of art" and dedicating himself to experiencing the great thrill as well as the responsibilities involved in accepting that uncertainty.

II.

As in Roderick Hudson and The Sacred Fount, James uses works of art and experiences of art works to present the difficulties and conflicts of the artist temperament.

James himself uses images from art in the Preface to the novel, discussing what he attempted to do. He refers to his own "stretched canvas," fearing that it may have been "too ample." But this was a fear eventually dispelled, as he writes of his earlier horror of writing

²²Quoted in Winner, p. 120.
two stories, "two pictures," in one. Elsewhere defending what he calls the organic form of the novel, he comments on its "complete pictorial fusion."

Turning from the narrative to the characters, James describes Miriam as a system, a link between the other "cases" of the novel, defending "the sense of a system" which "saves the painter from the baseness of the arbitrary stroke." James describes Miriam's energy and egotism as "the very colours of her portrait." Finally, James writes of the idea of the book as a "picture" of some of the consequences of the "art-appetite raised to intensity."  

In the novel itself, one technique to make convincing Nick's talent as a portrait artist is to provide reports and impressions of others who see his work. While Sherringham finds the portrait of the "complicated" Gabriel Nash "lamentably dim," James qualifies the criticism by having Nick point out his perception that it is precisely because Nash is a simple rather than complex character that he lacks the sufficient light and shadow to be a rewarding subject for portrait art—he is "too simple" and "too cool." Anticipating the argument of the story, "The Real Thing," James further describes Nick's perception:

to pick the flower you must break off the whole dusty, thorny worldly branch; you find you are taking up in

23 "Preface," The Tragic Muse, pp. 82-95.
your grasp all sorts of other people and things, dangling accidents and conditions. Poor Nash has none of those ramifications; he's the solitary blosssom. (68)

Another work of the young artist, Nick's portrait of Miriam, is described even in its unfinished state by Biddy and Sherringham as "strong, brilliant and vivid," having already "the look of life and the air of an original thing." What Nick has captured in this portrait, apparently, is the expression of a pose, a mood of the subject: "She had a grand appearance of being raised aloft, with a wide regard, from a height of intelligence, for the great field of the artist, all the figures and passions he may represent." Peter is so overwhelmed with the portrait, in fact, that he "almost gasped at the composition of the thing and the drawing of the moulded arms."

(375) Just as Biddy is interested in finding Peter's "impression" of the portrait, the impressions themselves deepen Peter's experience of Miriam's beauty. He experiences "a quickened rush, a sense of the beauty of Miriam, as well as a new comprehension of the talent of Nick." (376)

The appearance of being raised aloft is consistent with Miriam's ability in her dramatic portrayals to transcend herself. James suggests again the permanence of great art which he openly advances in the apostrophe to the portraits in the National Gallery: even if art exists only for the moment, for that moment it transcends time. James's vision of art as eternal seems to be corroborated
by his description of Miriam: "She was beauty, she was music, she was truth." (531) 24

Nick, then, already seems to qualify for potential greatness as a portrait painter. By James's own standards, he has managed to see his subject, capture a mood, which in turn elicits the active participation of himself as subject and his own impressions in the finished work. This is the ideal of portraiture. Gabriel Nash seems to represent James's position in this regard, exalting the possible greatness of the art of the portraitist--its reach, its range, its fascination, the magnificent examples it had left us in the past: windows open into history, into psychology, things that were among the most precious possessions of the human race. He insisted, above all, on the interest, the richness arising from this great peculiarity of it: that, unlike most other forms, it was a revelation of two realities, the man whom it was the artist's conscious effort to reveal and the man (the interpreter) expressed in the very quality and temper of that effort. It offered a double vision, the strongest dose of life that art could give, the strongest dose of art that life could give. (328)

The portraits serve other purposes in developing the facets of artistic conflict in the novel. As extensions of the image of Miriam herself as a work of art, her portraits tend to increase the clarity of insight and vision of Nick. They also represent Miriam's completeness as an artist and the fulfillment of the ambitions of Nick.

From the first time Nick meets Miriam he wants to paint her, and the wish expresses his commitment to art. In dedicating himself to art, Nick first chooses to paint the portrait of Miriam, which represents the achievement of his desire.\(^{25}\)

The portraits also serve the purpose of clarifying Nick's uncertain future. The strange effect of Nick's portraits on their subjects has been noted—the Dormer portrait version tends to remove its subject from involvement in Nick's life! He paints Miriam and she marries Basil Dashwood, refusing to allow him another portrait. Miriam recognizes the effect after her refusal to become a subject for a second time: "It kills your interest in them [the subjects] and after you've finished them you don't like them any more." Nick recognizes "the usual law" but suggests it might be reversed if he paints Mrs. Dallow. He "risks the daub" but as the novel ends, he and Julia have not become married.\(^{26}\) Significantly, the final decision of Julia to break her engagement with Nick comes as a result of finding Nick in the act of painting Miriam: "For her that portrait represents all the lost political and social hopes for Nick, the symbol of his refusal to


\(^{26}\) Powers, pp. 110-111.
Painting itself can be a way of seeing. The experience of the finished work by the observer can be a means of developing awareness. When Nick attempts to paint Gabriel Nash, for example, he seems to see the man for the first time:

It struck our young man that he had never seen his subject before, and yet somehow this revelation was not produced by the sense of actually seeing it. What was revealed was the difficulty--what he saw was the indefinite and the elusive.... (595)

Significantly, what Nick does see is the value of the elusive and the indefinite to the artist. Because Nick accepts the importance of the observed life in all its component parts, including the ugly, ambiguous and complicated, he comes closer, it seems, to the Jamesian ideal of the artist who can accept the "madness of art" as Dencombe can and the narrator of The Sacred Fount cannot. However, with the completion of Nick's perception, the portrait itself remains unfinished, an "interrupted study" and "shadowy affair." (601)

Other readers have commented on the difficulties of presenting convincingly the inner life of the developing creative artist.

Dorothea Krook, for example, finds that the visits to the National Gallery and the extended conversations

---

27 Bowden, p. 71.
about art deliberately evoke "alternating cycles of elation and depression which form such a familiar part of the inner life of the artist." The cycles produce "corresponding vacillations in the young artist's attitude to the very art that he is practicing." Elated, Nick feels that the art of the portrait painter is "one of the sublimest expressions of the creative spirit and that no claim for its sublimity can be too extravagant," but when the other mood, that of depression, comes upon him, "he will find himself 'calling the whole exhibited art' into question and 'tacitly blaspheming' as he looks at the world-famous performances in the National Gallery with a lustreless eye." 28

Similarly, the conversations about art attempt to render the unique qualities of the inner life of the creative artist. Conversation can "communicate excitement and the sense of adventure that the artist enjoys in his good periods" as well as "the more sober satisfaction he receives from his sense of growing mastery of his art." James suggests that as Nick's understanding of art's complexities increases, he develops a corresponding facility in the management of the technical problems: "It can communicate the pleasure that the artist--especially the Jamesian artist--will find in the criticism and analysis

of his own work; how he will enjoy seeing his 'idea' really working itself out in the paint on the canvas." 29 The art talk can further reveal the inner life of the artist as it celebrates "in his own flamboyant personal style and his own extravagant idiom" the world of art and the life of the artist. Gabriel Nash, "whose main gift was for talk," assists James in solving the artist problem, of making his artist-hero as "interesting" as the conditions of the case permit. 30

Despite these attempts, however, Oscar Cargill finds Nick ultimately unconvincing as the characterization of a young painter mastered by a passion for his art. Cargill finds Nick convincing "only on the score of his renunciations." 31 Yet, he admits that it is Nick's aloofness to the appeal of Miriam as a beautiful woman that helps to develop the reader's impression of the young man as a dedicated artist. Nick seems unable to respond to Miriam, for example, except as a model for art, placing art over the human. 32

III.

James develops several attitudes and sources of

29 Ibid., pp. 82-83.
30 Ibid., p. 87,
31 Cargill, p. 189.
32 Ibid., p. 187.
conflict that must be avoided in the pursuit of artistic success. The demands of the public life and the complications of one's love life must be overcome if the artist is to avoid failure.

As indicated in the "conversion" of Nick Dormer, James is completely skeptical of the value of a political career to a refined sensibility, much less of the possibility of combining such a career with that of the artist. Nick Dormer comments that politics is "far more for the convenience of others" and "still worse for one's style," a point of view with which Gabriel Nash agrees, citing that politics "has simply nothing in life to do with shades." (32) As well as interfering with the proper cultivation of the value of style in life, politics seems to deal in inferior material itself. Gabriel Nash comments that while "great poets build cathedrals out of words" parliamentarians deal only in verbiage. (140) Even Miriam is perceptive of the conflict that the requirements of the diplomatic life impose on Nick: she confesses not being able to understand how Nick can be both an artist and in Parliament. (116)

In the scene with Charles Carteret, Nick perceives the impossibility of an artistic idea even being considered in such an atmosphere of politics (227), and James makes it clear that Carteret's life has no style precisely because he is the politician personified: Carteret "had never made
a reflection upon anything so unparliamentary as Life."
To Carteret, life is a "purely practical function, not a
question of phrasing"--that is, of style. (232) Carteret
has the politician's distrust of the ambiguous and un-
certain (241) and criticizes the "pencil and brush" as
not being the appropriate weapons of a gentleman. (419)

Even Biddy is given the position of defending art
against the claims of society. She comments to Peter:

Don't you think one can do as much good by painting
great works of art as by--as by what papa used to do?
Don't you think art is necessary to the happiness, to
the greatness of a people? Don't you think it's manly
and honorable? Do you think a passion for it is a
thing to be ashamed of? Don't you think the artist--
the conscientious, serious one--is as distinguished
a member of society as any one else? (505)

Specifically, the object of James's criticism, ac-
cording to an analysis made by Leon Edel, is the coercion
of the individual artist into forms of action alien to his
temperament. James implies that society would like to
destroy and use the artist because he refuses to conform
to rules. But the artist "who by his very nature is a
rebel, must protect himself even at the risk of being de-
stroyed by his own rebellion."33

Other attitudes toward art are explored and in-
directly rejected in the process of Nick's development.34

33"Henry James: The Dramatic Years," Guy Domville:
   57.

34Krook, pp. 68-69.
Lady Agnes, whose initial violent reaction to Nick's decision to become a portrait painter disturbs the young man, holds the attitude that art is a kind of disease that eats "the healthy core out of English life." Biddy notes that her mother feels that art is "pardonable only so long as it's bad--so long as it's done at odd hours, for a little distraction, like a game of tennis or whist." Mrs. Dallow fears the "dangerous, the criminal element in art." (19)

Both Lady Agnes and Julia Dallow regard art and the artist with suspicion. Because art makes claims that oppose those of the life of public service, both women detest and despise art and find Nick's choice incomprehensible. The fact that George Dallow had been a collector --collecting things "laboriously, devotedly" for years--and even though "no such intelligent collection of beautiful objects has been made in England in our time" according to Nick's estimation (13)--indicates the unsuitability of his widow as the wife a serious artist.

Another attitude toward art might be described as the "nerves theory" of creativity. James is not, however, consistent in developing this attitude. While he seemingly defends the value of the nervous temperament as essential to the perfection of the dramatic artist's skill, the same attitude given to Mme. Carre emerges at least partially

comic. Mme. Carré declaims that "the nerves, the nerves—they are half of our trade" (96) finding nothing "more beautiful" than "the fine artistic life." (101) As an artist herself, the woman, however shrewd and experienced, is not completely convincing, perhaps because she has become cynical like Gloriani. James writes that "she relieved herself, with the rare cynicism of the artist, all the crudity, the irony and intensity of a discussion of esoteric things, of personal mysteries of methods and secrets." (155) She represents, too, the idea of art as demanding service of its creators, that "art was everything and the individual nothing, save as he happened to serve it." (157)

Yet, James defends the individual nervous temperament in another context. Gabriel Nash claims that one cannot be a great actress "without quivering nerves." He tells Miriam, "Your nerves and your adventures, your eggs and your cake, are part of the cost of the most expensive of professions." (439-440) Nash clarifies his position when he rejects the value of seeking the expression of this individual nervous temperament in the art work itself, however: "You never find the artist—you only find his work, and that's all you need to find." (440) This prefigures the position of James's story, "The Figure in the Carpet."
IV.

The characterization of Peter Sherringham affords other perspectives to the difficulties and conflicts of making the choice to become an artist. Like Rowland Mallet, Sherringham has the sensitivity of the artist without his talent or productivity. Another similarity to the young sculptor's mentor is the use of Peter as a reflecting consciousness. Peter's developing awareness and insights not only into the creative arts but into the conflicts of the demands of the public and private within himself help to clarify Nick's ultimate decision.

Peter has a potentially fine consciousness as a "representative of the nervous rather than the phlegmatic branch of his race," his face expressing both intelligence and vitality. Yet, as a successful diplomat, he cultivates an outward expression, "the mask of an alien." (43) As the other characters in the novel are frequently described in art figures, Peter is no exception in the description of the physical attractiveness that Biddy notes, thinking Peter looks "like a Titian." (43)

Peter senses the divisiveness within himself that the adoption of the diplomatic mask has created. He finds the fascination for the drama, his fondness for representation, which he says he likes better than the real thing, a mixed blessing:

There is a fascination to me in the way the actor does it, when his talent...has been highly trained. The
things he can do, in this effort at representation, seem
to me innumerable...and I take a great pleasure in ob-
serving them, in recognizing them and comparing them....
One can lose one's self in it, and it has this recom-
mendation...that the further you go in it the more
you find. (66-67)

Nick senses that this fascination is antagonistic to the
art of the diplomat, and Peter confesses that Nick sees
that this quality will prevent him from rising high in
the public life.

Along with his appreciation of the art of the ac-
tor (92), Mme. Carre remarks on Peter's excellent critical
ability. (103) Peter's fascination with the stage becomes
no idle pastime or luxury, but rather a means of developing
consciousness. Himself a mixture of impulse and reflec-
tion, he finds "illusions necessary." (147) The interest
in the theater, while it creates conflict with the diplo-
matic life, nevertheless becomes a means of a "new infu-
sion in his consciousness--an element in his life which
altered the relations of things." (169) Experience of art
itself, then, becomes a means of developing consciousness.
As Peter experiences the polished recitative ability of
Miriam, he has grown in his perception

of the perfect presence of mind, unfocused, unhurried
by emotion, that any artistic performance requires and
that all, whatever the instrument, require in exactly
the same degree: the application, in other words,
clear and calculated, crystal-firm as it were, of the
idea conceived in the glow of experience, of suffering,
of joy. (263)

He sees that acting is more than a "bag of tricks" and is
capable of the Jamesian ideal of liberality of vision:
"The interest of the whole thing depended on its being considered in a large, liberal way, with an intelligence that lifted it out of the question of the little tricks of the trade, gave it beauty and elevation." (177)

On at least two occasions James applies the idea that art makes life to the perception that Sherringham experiences seeing Miriam as though for the first time as a result of her dramatic performance. He finds the liveliest thing in his impression the certitude that if he had never seen Miriam before and she had for him none of the advantages of association, he would still have recognized in her performance the most interesting thing that the theatre had ever offered him. (378)

The performance causes him to seem to be suspended in the "sense of the felicity of it...in the almost aggressive bravery of still larger claims for an art which could so triumphantly, so exquisitely render life." (378) James introduces the concept that art "renders" life only to qualify it: "Render it? Peter said to himself. Create it and reveal it, rather; give us something new and large and of the first order." Peter knows that through art, "he had seen Miriam now; he had never seen her before; he had never seen her till he saw her in her conditions." (378) The intensity of vision becomes part of Peter's consciousness of the conditions, "the great and complete ones," which would eventually give the girl's talent a "superior" and "more glorious stage." (378)
The theater becomes a means, then, of heightening Sherringham's consciousness as he sees Miriam for the first time: Miriam "had never been more present to him than at this hour; but she was inextricably transmuted—presented essentially as the romantic heroine she represented." (533-534) The effect of the experience on the young diplomat's self-awareness is made clear: "His state of mind was of the strangest, and he was conscious of its strangeness; just as he was conscious, in his person, of a cessation of resistance which identified itself absurdly with liberation." (534) Experiencing a mixed reaction—feeling weakened as well as excited—Peter sees things in their "shining confusion" yet with something "monstrously definite... surging out of them":

Miriam was a beautiful, actual, fictive, impossible young woman, of a past age and undiscovered country, who spoke in blank verse and overflowed with metaphor, who was exalted and heroic beyond all human convenience, and who yet was irresistibly real and related to one's own affairs. But that reality was a part of her spectator's joy, and she was not changed back to the common by his perception of the magnificent trick of art with which it was connected. (534)

Despite the therapeutic value of art—Peter blesses "the beneficence, the salubrity, the pure exorcism of art" (183)—his interest in art becomes a source of conflict in his public life. With the developed consciousness comes self-doubt. Along with the "completer vision" of the "artist who happened to have been born a woman," Peter feels himself in conflict, "warmed against a serious connection...
with so slippery and ticklish a creature." (183-184)

Yet, while given the insight into the source of the conflict, Peter is no better able to resolve his difficulties than either Nick Dormer or Roderick Hudson. He knows that his interest in the theater places him in an area of irresponsibility, claiming that heretofore he had always been able to control what he supposed were his intellectual weaknesses. But once he has fallen in love with the actress, he naively assumes that he can instantly extinguish the interest he finds irresponsible in the theater if it should get in the way of his professional identity and ambitions. Indeed, he realizes that "his scheme for getting on had contained no provision against falling in love." (246)

The conflict between the demands of art and those of political life parallels that of Nick and Julia. Asking Miriam to give up her career on the stage for him, Peter offers himself as replacement for "the world of art" and the "intense artistic life." (289) Peter's fascination with art has become the source of this conflict. Recognizing the conflict, the inner divisiveness that it causes, does not, however, necessarily enable him to deal with it. Miriam notes that Peter is a "curious mixture" trying to serve both God and Mammon, "muddling up the stage and the world" (322-323), and Peter himself remarks how he was drawn in different directions at once, finding himself "both disappointed and relieved" on coming to Balaklava
Place finding Miriam already gone to the theater, "at the end of his pilgrimage he was greeted by a disappointment he suddenly found himself relieved and for a moment even saved." (357) The relief he senses prefigures the ultimate separation of the lovers.

Another conflict involves the loss of will power that Peter experiences when he is in Miriam's presence--"his life struck him as a thing disconnected from his will"

as if he had been one thing and his behavior another; he had glimpses of pictures of this difference drawn as they might be, from the coming years--little illustrative scenes in which he saw himself in strange attitudes of resignation, always rather sad and still, with a slightly bent head. Such images should not have been inspiring, but it is a fact that they were decidedly fascinating. The gentleman with the bent head had evidently given up something that was dear to him, but it was exactly because he had got his price that he was there. (475)

The passage significantly expresses Peter's growing consciousness in terms of art figures as well as the reference to the idea of the price that must be paid in resigning oneself to the artistic vocation.

The climactic parting scene of Sherringham and Miriam, like that of Julia and Nick, involves the issues of freedom and the idea of the consuming and predatory personality. Peter accuses Miriam now of being "a kind of devouring demon," but the more vehemently Miriam defends her ability to be disinterested and asserts her claim to have a soul, Sherringham becomes more aware that

the expression of this was already...a strange be-devilment: she began to listen to herself, to speak
dramatically, to represent. She uttered the things she felt as if they were snatches of old play-books, and really felt them the more because they sounded so well. This however didn't prevent them from being as good feelings as those of anybody else. (477)

Paradoxically, the false emotions produced by the practiced artist can seem more convincing, more real than the actual ones. Art makes life, but Peter's insight into this truth does not lessen his sense of personal conflict and discom-fort.

Peter can intellectually accept the idea of the artist's license although the issue of freedom later becomes personally distressing to Miriam and himself. He knows that Miriam should be allowed to "be beautiful--be only that" because the artist's ability to experience and to communicate the beautiful is the "glimpse of perfection" that can "lift one out of all the vulgarities of the day." (269)

Peter knows that art exacts a special price on the part of the artist, as well as that it imposes a special set of conditions. The artistic character is one that Peter knows is "unscrupulous, nervous, capricious, wan-ton" and accepts the point of view that art must use, even abuse life, and be granted the freedom to do so. He knows that an artist's makeup is a "splendid organization for a special end," an organization "so rare and rich and fine" that one ought not to grudge its conditions. The conditions are the "need to take its ease, to take up space,"
to make itself at home in the world, to square its elbows and knock others about." (279)

Sherringham believes that he can keep the drama as a "private infatuation," "a passion exercised on the easiest terms." While one can trifle with one's passions, this is a position that Nick rejects, knowing that the choice he makes for art must be a complete and honest one. 36

Another mistaken assumption is the confusion between appropriation and appreciation of personality in the conflict between Peter and Miriam. Peter makes the mistake of trying to possess, to appropriate the actress whose beauty he has come to appreciate so intensely. While Nick's attention in Miriam is that of the appreciator, too, he does not want to possess the woman. When Peter attempts to divert her beauty and her talent to his own selfish use, even though he is aware that these gifts are "connected with universal values," he becomes a "classic Jamesian appropriator." 37

It is Miriam, like Nick, who defends the necessity of freedom for the artist. She knows that while Peter admires her as an artist, he would "deprive her of the very freedom essential to the artist." (542) Peter, however, makes the mistake of assuming that the public life he can

36 Edel, Henry James: The Middle Years, p. 195.

offer Miriam is more valuable, a "larger life than the largest you can get in any other way." He thinks that the world is greater than the stage and believes they should "go in for realities instead of fables" of the theater. (543)

Miriam points out that the paradox that Peter's consciousness has been heightened by his experience of art while he persists in assuming the superiority of life to art. She comments that it has been her own talent that has been responsible for transforming Peter's consciousness; yet the appeal of that talent can play tricks with his power to see things as they are. (544)

Peter, however, persists in thinking that the talent should be applied as an ornament or merely decorative embellishment to the public life: "You were made to charm and console, to represent beauty and harmony and variety to miserable human beings; and the daily life of man is the theatre for that." (545)

Miriam seems to speak for James in the ultimate defense of applying her talent to the theatrical art:

The better the cause, it seems to me, the better the deed; and if the theater is important to the 'human spirit,' as you used to say so charmingly....I don't see why it should be monstrous to give us your services in an intelligent indirect way. (546)

V.

Miriam Rooth, one of the few successful artists in the James novels and tales, offers another way of
considering the choice that Nick makes for art. At the same time, while Miriam does become a successful actress during the course of the narrative, hers is not a fully developed artistic consciousness. In fact, James goes to considerable lengths to show that it is precisely her lack of a fine intelligence and of a subtle sensitivity that makes it possible for her to realize her goals in the theater.

James himself described this special quality in his description of the "study of a certain particular nature d'actrice" which he found "a very curious sort of nature to reproduce." He deliberately sought to evoke a certain mindlessness in the representation: "The girl I see to be very crude.... The thing a confirmation of Mrs. Kemble's theory that the dramatic gift is a thing by itself--implying of necessity no general superiority of mind." James wanted to suggest "the strong nature" and the "vanity" of the girl, "her artistic being, so vivid, yet so purely instinctive. Ignorant, illiterate...."38

It is not surprising, then, that few readers have found Miriam totally convincing or even satisfactory as a character. Edmund Wilson finds that the novel becomes "almost a blank" after the arrival of Miriam in London, that

38 Notebooks, pp. 63-64.
the reader is never taken into her life and knows nothing first hand of her emotions. 39

Peter Sherringham, too, is perplexed on finding that Miriam does not seem to have a private life, but Beach points out that "the revelation of the artist-life to him is the revelation of her complete absorption in artistic self-expression." 40

But not all readers have found the character unconvincing. An early reviewer noted Miriam's enormous vanity, her imperturbable self-assurance, adding that Miriam seemed to be a woman "capable of assuming every emotion and incapable of feeling any not connected with public applause and the receipts of the box office." This "tragic muse" the reviewer found "by far the most brilliant and faithful representation of the successful modern actress that has ever been achieved in English fiction." 41

Edel confirms the energy of the characterization, claiming that nowhere else in James's work is there a "more carefully documented picture of the evolution of a certain type of artist, and of an artist-nature, and of its


implacable selfishness and self-assurance.\textsuperscript{42}

As an artist in the rough, Miriam, it is true, is recognized to have "no nature" of her own. Peter Sherringham senses the rare quality of Miriam's being able always to play without "intervals." It is the absence of intervals that confuses Peter, however, who finds Miriam initially "an embroidery without a canvas." (167) Significantly using art figures to express these insights, what Peter really perceives is the young woman's ability of negative capability. Yet, as a youthful and infatuated artist, Miriam shares with Roderick Hudson "the refined, sentimental, tender view of the universe, beginning with her own history and feelings." (173) Peter perceives that the girl lacks proper saturation, remarking that both her experience and her innocence had been accidental and irregular. (127) Like the romantic young sculptor, Miriam is "tremulously affected by artistic inspiration": admiring a great artist more than anything in the world, Miriam's "heart beat so fast" in the presence of art. (112)

Miriam has inherited the predisposition toward art from her collector-stockbroker father, and now that Mrs. Rooth has disposed of the valuable collection, her daughter remains her only possession, "a precious vase of another kind--less fragile, I hope, than the rest." The insight is again that of Peter Sherringham. (52-53)

\textsuperscript{42}Edel, \textit{Henry James: The Middle Years}, p. 194.
Miriam is not intellectual, perhaps not even very sensitive. She admits that she is not so fond of reading as her mother, saying that she "goes for the book of life." (128) Miriam possesses the potential of the artist's power of observation which James insists is essential. In the cafe life she has been living with her mother, she claims that this has been "the book of life." (159) As a dedicated artist, Miriam, like Nick, comes to value action and decision:

She was convinced more than ever that the artist ought to live, to get on with his business, gather ideas, lights from experience--ought to welcome any experience that would give him lights. But work, of course, was experience, and everything in one's life that was good was work....(389-390)

Yet, this lack of intellectuality or fine sensibility becomes a positive attribute of the dramatic artist, as James shows that it is her lack of breeding along with her plastic quality that makes it possible for her to become so successful in theatrical representation. The mixture becomes a positive virtue of the successful dramatic artist--a mixture that creates the "quickening spectacle" in Miriam's being "intelligent and clumsy... underbred and fine." (128) At this point, Peter persists in questioning whether Miriam really possesses "the celebrated artistic temperament, the nature that made people provoking and interesting." (129)

James develops the idea that it is precisely the
lack of a clearly defined temperament, individuality, and personality, along with the limitations of the girl's intellect, that makes it possible for Miriam to realize success. Lacking this clear individuality, it is her plastic quality rather than her intellectual ability or her sensitivities that becomes a positive virtue.

James writes that the actor's talent, though a great gift, is "instinctive" and "accidentally" unconnected with intellect and virtue. (178) Early in the narrative, Miriam's lack of style, indicated by her inability to comprehend the essential style of the verses she recites, is extended to the physical appearance of the young woman. Her face displays no feeling, but "only a kind of vacancy of terror which had not even the merit of being fine of its kind, for it seemed stupid and superstitious." (94) Consistent with the vapidness of expression is her "long, strong, colourless voice" that comes "quavering from her young throat." (102) When she recites the verses, she adopts the tone of a "solemn, droning, dragging measure, adopted with an intention of pathos, a crude idea of 'style.'" (104) Miriam's intellect is crude, operating by a "process of understanding that never attains to the intellectual yet surpasses the intellectual--the mere grasp of the idea in the power it gives to translate the idea into act."43

43 Krook, p. 94.
The idea that the successful dramatic artist must lack a personality or learn to efface it rests on the Jamesian paradox that is developed in the story "The Real Thing," the idea that to the degree that a woman creates a striking impression of her own, she has limited her range as a stage performer. Conversely, the actress capable of the most variety of expression is the one with the least personality of her own. Peter tells Miriam that she has a hundred personalities, and William Dean Howells noted that Miriam seems "most herself when her whole nature is straining toward the realization of some one else." 44

While Miriam seems ill equipped to represent the Jamesian ideal--the sense of style that makes life, the value that Gabriel Nash affirms--James does show that the plastic nature, manifest early in the young woman's career, becomes a positive quality for ultimate success. He tries to capture this plasticity in the physical description of Miriam: "the element of outline and attitude, the way she stood, the way she turned her eyes, her head, and moved her limbs" were what "held the attention" in their "natural felicity" having "a sort of grandeur":

Her face...something delicate dawning in it, a dim promise of variety and a touching plea for patience,

as if it were conscious of being able to show in time more expressions than the simple and striking gloom which, as yet, had mainly graced it. In short, the plastic quality of her person was the only definite sign of a vocation. (105)

Mme. Carre, however, finds no nuance, not a single "inflection or intention" in what the aspiring actress can produce, confirming what she finds in the girl as a lack of intelligence. (107) James implies that the actress can dispense with the fine intelligence, but she must learn the ability to develop nuance, a feature of style essential even to the successful dramatic artist. Peter Sherringham becomes the means of convincing the reader that Miriam learns to develop this skill of inflection and nuance. He notes that under Mme. Carre's tutelage Miriam "might do what she liked with her face" which he finds "an elastic substance." On this subsequent observation, Miriam's face seems to be a "finer instrument than old Madame Carre's because of its promise of future." (151)

By the end of the novel, Miriam's plasticity has reached full development as part of her skill and talent. She has perfected an "essential fondness for trying different ways" (45) and has become perfect as a "living thing, with a power to change, to grow, to develop, to beget new forms of the same life." (390-391)

Ironically, Miriam has to do nothing to produce an effect in others of seeing, of perceiving her. Nick notices the paradox of this kind of negative appeal:
She had done nothing at all, which was precisely what was embarrassing; only staring at the intruder, motionless and superb. She seemed, somehow, in indolent possession of the place, and even in that instant Nick noted how handsome she looked; so that he exclaimed somewhere, inaudibly, in a region beneath his other emotions, 'How I should like to paint her that way!' (331)

Gabriel Nash sees Miriam in a similar manner: "You simply are—you are just the visible image, the picture on the wall. It keeps you wonderfully in focus. I have never seen you so beautiful." (330)

Like Gabriel Nash, Miriam has adopted something of a mask as part of her success. Along with her ability to manipulate emotions and exploit her expressive plasticity, Miriam has a "delight in novels, poems, perversions, misrepresentations and evasions" and "the capacity for smooth, superfluous falsification" which convinces Peter Sherringham that she is "an amusing and sometimes a tedious inventory." (173) Her face itself is described as a "splendid mobile mask" (183) She seems adept at dealing in the ersatz emotion of the dramatic artist. Sherringham observes that "from the moment she felt her strength, the immense increase of her good-humoured inattention to detail—all detail save that of her work, to which she was ready to sacrifice holocausts of feelings when the feelings were other people's." (267)

Gabriel Nash further sees Miriam's "fine artistic nature" as a kind of "divine disgust," an insight precipitated by Miriam's own admission that she speaks "as if
she were always posing and thinking about herself, living only to be looked at, thrusting forward her person." (318)

If Miriam's vanity is representative of those who generally belong to the group of artists and creators, this vanity may be explained if not excused by the fact that the total dedication of the artist to his art elicits an "appearance of heartless narcissism." The dramatic artist may be particularly vulnerable in this respect because the actress cannot, like the painter or writer, "interpose the barrier of a medium but must be the material in which he works." 45

Miriam's ability to adopt the mask, to develop nuance and style, becomes the ability to transform life and experience to art. James comments that while Mrs. Rooth makes even the true seem fictive, Miriam's great accomplishment is to make the fictive true. (174) Just as Miriam's art transforms life, James shows Peter expressing his heightened perception of Miriam in the language of art. He recognizes that Miriam has no "personal emotion on seeing him again," that "the cold passion of art had perched on her banner and she listened to herself with an ear as vigilant as if she had been a Paganini drawing a fiddle-bow." Now, Miriam appears to Peter "like a finished statue lifted from the ground to its pedestal."

Convinced that Miriam would continue to live in the

---

45 Anderson, p. 104.
"guiding light of her talent," the conviction ironically only makes Miriam seem to Peter to be more intelligent than she is in fact! (261)

As Miriam's success in her career becomes assured, James writes that she becomes a "rare incarnation of beauty" (396), a beauty that creates exaltation in the observer as it enables Peter to "live at altitudes": "Beauty was the principle of everything she did and of the way, unerringly, she did it—an exquisite harmony of line and motion and attitude and tone." (396) For Peter to see this talent in action is "a supreme infallible felicity, a source of importance, a stamp of absolute value." The experience is partly therapeutic: "To see it in operation, to sit within its radius and feel it shift and revolve and change and never fail, was a corrective to the depression, the humiliation, the bewilderment of life." (396) The experience of the beauty of Miriam's art changes Peter in another way as it "transported Sherringham from the vulgar hour and the ugly fact" and "drew him to something which had no reason but its sweetness, no name nor place save as the pure, the distant, the antique." (396)

Miriam has learned style, then, the ability to use her plastic talent of nuance and impression in the deliberate creation of artistic illusion. One of the difficulties in the novel, however, is that Miriam's growth in this respect is not consistently shown but often reported,
sometimes as in the earlier references to Peter's reactions to her art. Sometimes the report comes not from any center of consciousness but from James himself:

The powerful, ample manner in which Miriam handled her scene produced its full impression, the art with which she surmounted its difficulties, the liberality with which she met its great demand upon the voice, and the variety of expression that she threw into a torrent of objurgation. It was a real composition, studded with passages that called a suppressed 'Brava!' to the lips and seeming to show that a talent capable of such an exhibition was capable of anything. (262)

Another earlier reviewer called attention to the indirectness of Miriam's transformation into a great artist. Rather than developing this change, what James manages to show is not how to make a great artist out of unpromising material but rather "when the artist is made, how everything looks to her." Accordingly, Miriam is always shown en face: when she appears in the novel, she is always on exhibition, the reader seeing her as her audience sees her. 46

James himself calls attention to the "indirect vision" of Miriam:

As to whether Miriam had the same bright, still sense of the distinctively technical nature of the answer to every situation which the occasion might give birth, that mystery would be cleared up only if it were open to us to regard this young lady through some other medium than the mind of her friends. We have chosen,

as it happens, for some of the advantages it carries with it, the indirect vision....47

In the middle of the novel, the omniscient author boasts of his lack of omniscience! Edel points out the anomaly of the novelist's direct intrusion to plead his case for the indirect vision.48

Miriam's success as an artist, then--a success that helps to set in perspective the theme of the failed artist--is achieved mainly through her ability to direct her minimal talent and sensitivity, combined with a genuine if rather limited self-insight. Unlike the divisive and self-tormented artist failures, particularly Roderick Hudson and the artist-narrator of The Sacred Fount, she has a completeness. Peter Sherringham notes that Miriam is "complete in her way." (173) Significantly, Miriam is given the insight that Nick must struggle to develop as part of his self-awareness--the impossibility of bridging the requirements of a public and of a private career. She knows that "you can't be everything, a consummate actress and a flower of the field. You've got to choose." (168)

VI.

Another aspect of the technique to present Nick's development as an artist is the character of Gabriel Nash.

47 Quoted in Edel, Henry James: The Middle Years, pp. 200-201.
48 Ibid.
and his interaction with Nick. Nash is an ambiguous character in The Tragic Muse, and while he seems to be at least partially a satiric portrait of the aesthete, James also gives him the serious role of defending his own value of style.

Nash, considered a caricature of the fin de siècle aesthete, supposedly is modeled on Oscar Wilde. Cargill deduces the evidence: a graduate of Oxford, a prodigious talker with a genius for paradox, a man whose actions are primarily negative ones, Gabriel Nash shares physical characteristics with Wilde as well (both men are fat). Cargill thinks the "very clever book...a sort of novel" that Nick tells Biddy that Nash has written is an allusion to The Picture of Dorian Gray.

The reading has been challenged despite the similarities in appearance and behavior. Dorothea Krock finds the characterization a "conscious criticism of the historic Oscar Wilde" which is both "more radical and subtle" than Cargill gives James credit for. She thinks

49 Bowden, p. 70.

50 Cargill, pp. 191-193. See also Oscar Cargill, "Mr. James' Aesthetic Mr. Nash," Nineteenth Century Fiction, XII (December, 1957), 177-187.

51 Lyall Powers, "Mr. James' Aesthetic Mr. Nash--Again," Nineteenth Century Fiction, XII:4 (March, 1959), 341-349. Cargill rejected the rejection, arguing that Powers wanted to see as much of James in Nash as Wilde to support his argument that the novel represents James's farewell to the theater: "Gabriel Nash--Somewhat Less than Angel?" Nineteenth Century Fiction, XIV (December, 1959), 231-239.
that in Gabriel Nash James deliberately idealizes the actual—"what the great aesthete of the age would have been if Henry James had had the making of him, and what he should have been if he had had the wit and the imagination that the living pretender to the title did not have." 52

Another explanation for the ambiguity of the character is the idea that Gabriel Nash is not based on any aesthete at all but on Henry James, Sr., a "gamesome and affectionate portrait of the elder James in Nash's persona." Quentin Anderson explains the inconsistent characterization on the basis that James is both celebrating Nash and criticizing his view of the artist at the same time. 53

Nash is sometimes assumed to represent James's own views, the spokesman for which views as the "intrusive Gabriel Nash who talks undiluted Henry James." 54 Yet, in the third volume of his biography, Edel changed his mind, indicating that James intended "some of Nash's trumpetings to sound loudly his own beliefs" but that Nash was "far from being the novelist." 55

The essentially ambiguous personality of Gabriel

52 Krook, p. 84.

53 Anderson, chapter 4, pp. 101, 116. Anderson finds the clue to Gabriel's name in James's reference to "the feather from the angel's wing." The name suggests the prophet: Gabriel foretells Miriam's marriage to Dashwood and Nick's final summons from Julia.


55 Henry James: The Middle Years, p. 259.
Nash as an artist is frequently noted by observers in the novel itself. Nick admits that Gabriel is "full of contradictions and inconsistencies" (141) and confesses that he cannot in the least make him out—whether he is "the greatest humbug and charlatan on earth, or a genuine intelligence." (135) Granting that Gabriel may be an "excellent touchstone," Nick finds him an "ambiguous being" (307) and that the man does not seem to belong to "any sort of society, however bad." (449) With his genius for suggestive paradox, Gabriel is a "wonderful talker" (65) and Miriam Rooth calls him "the great explainer." (333)

As an aesthete, the characterization is not entirely consistent. While Gabriel Nash has written "a sort of novel, a very clever book" (27), he insists that his real art lies in his actions rather than his work. In a combination of Wildean paradox and Paterian aesthetics, Gabriel claims that

People's actions, I know, are for the most part the things they do, but mine are all the things I don't do. There are so many of those, so many, but they don't produce an effect. And then all the rest are shades—extremely fine shades. (29)

He defends, again suggesting Pater, "the happy moments of our consciousness—the multiplication of those moments" of which as many as possible must be saved from "the dark gulf." (39)

Questioned by Biddy whether he is an aesthete, Gabriel rejects the label. He claims that he has no
profession, keeping to the simplest way—"Merely to be is such a métier: to live is such an art; to feel is such a career." (31) He further admits to Nick that while he cannot afford the uniform (of the aesthete) he does worship beauty. (449)

Despite the ambiguity of the characterization and the probable insincerity of many of Gabriel's remarks, he does serve a serious purpose in the novel. Sometimes he seems to speak for James himself, particularly in the famous defense of the value of style, and he serves as a catalyst in the development of Nick's consciousness.

When Gabriel, for example, characterizes the modern audience as essentially brutal, an audience to whom the dramatist has "to make the basest concessions," he seems to speak for James in the implication that the modern dramatist should deal with states of consciousness, but must attempt this by presenting "character...idea...feeling between dinner and the suburban trains." (57-58)

In another instance, questioned by Julia Dallow about the nature of his life as artist, Nash admits that he tries to be that artist, working in the difficult material of life. Mrs. Dallow's imperceptive reaction to this admission is to assume that Gabriel drew from the living model "or some such platitude as if there could have been any likelihood that he drew from the dead one." (122) The genuine artist, James implies, draws impressions liberally
from life rather than seek photographic representation.

Another function of Gabriel Nash is to confirm and direct the talent of Nick. He introduces Nick into the life of art and persuades him to continue in that pursuit. Significantly, it is also Gabriel who introduces Miriam to Mme. Carré, whose instruction starts Miriam toward success in the theater. Gabriel confirms Nick's talent, telling him that he has "a regular Stradivarius" and thinks Nick would be justified in "really going in" for the practice of pictorial art. (310)

Gabriel Nash has even been considered as the real center of consciousness of *The Tragic Muse* in his role as "chorus, raisonneur and prime mover of events," both an "ambiguous being" and "excellent touchstone." He functions in this manner first at the level of narrative development by introducing Miriam and her mother into the novel under circumstances that enable Biddy and Nick to see Miriam for the first time; he brings Miriam deliberately to the attention of Peter Sheringham; he arranges the evening at Mme. Carré's; he encourages Nick in his determination to reject politics for art; he confirms Nick's decision to become an artist by approving of Nick's painting; and he brings Miriam to Nick's studio, responsible for the scene in which Julia Dallow surprises Miriam there, precipitating the crisis between Julia and Nick.

---

From this point, the critical actions in the novel occur because of Nash's initiative: he tells Nick that Miriam is in love with him rather than Peter Sherringham; he interprets practically all of the motives of Miriam; and he forecasts Nick's future, arguing that "Mrs. Dallow will swallow your profession.... You'll become a great social institution, and everyone will think she has a delightful husband." (592-593)

In another sense, Gabriel Nash may be considered the real center of the novel, a representative of the ideal consciousness, the artist as a contemplative human being. In this context, the argument has been advanced that Gabriel offers "the clearest direct statement of James's views on both art and experience to be found anywhere in the fiction, or anywhere, for that matter, in James's work outside the Prefaces." Nash defends the happy moments of consciousness, says that to live is an art, describes himself as an artist who works in life, constantly defends the value of perception and awareness, and proclaims himself as immortal and eternal as an artist.

If Nash can represent the ideal consciousness, there is considerable evidence for this interpretation in James's own observations as well as in the novel itself.

---


58 Ibid., pp. 174-175.
According to James, the ideal consciousness is one "subject to fine intensification and wide enlargement"--what "makes absolutely the intensity of...adventure" for such a consciousness is its "being finely aware." Elsewhere, James notes that Nash represents "the best life, the most complete life as the one that takes full account of such things as personal relations."

Nash proclaims himself eternal, suggesting the Jamesian affirmation in the belief in the immortality of an ideal artistic consciousness:

The artistic consciousness and privilege...thus shines as from immersion in the fountain of being...to the effect of feeling itself qua imagination and inspiration, all scented with universal sources. What is that but an adventure of our personality, and how can we after it hold complete disconnection likely.

But it is chiefly in his defense of style that Gabriel speaks for James. This defense is anticipated when Gabriel claims that "having only one manner" justifies the purity of one's motives--"by being the same to every one...if one is conscious and ingenious to that end." (137) His defense of living according to the value of life's style is extended:

Life consists of the personal experiments of each of us, and the point of an experiment is that it shall succeed. What we contribute is our treatment of the material, our rending of the text, our style. A sense

60 Notebooks, p. 23.
61 Hall cites this from a late essay.
of the qualities of a style is so rare that many persons should doubtless be forgiven for not being able to read.... (138)

With or without public approval or recognition, art has its own rewards, according to Gabriel.

The fact that perseverance and industry are involved in this defense of style seem to elevate the observation from the level of trivial "aesthetical" conversation. The artist must insist on creating according to the dictates of his conscience—as James believed—rather than to please an eager public, and sheer industry just as much as refined insight is the necessary means to his accomplishment. Questioned, for example, by Nick as to whether his own style may be "a little affected," Gabriel retorts, "Of course one isn't perfect; but that's the delightful thing about art, that there is always more to learn and more to do; one can polish and polish and refine and refine...." (139)

Affirming the belief in style, Gabriel opts for the value of the artist's detached point of view. He defends the "beauty of having been disinterested and independent; of having taken the world in the free, brave, personal way." (144) Another perception is that being and becoming rather than duty or doing is the essence of the artistic life. Defending the Jamesian ideal of consciousness, Gabriel defines what he means by "conduct" and "life":
The brute, the ass, neither feels, nor understands, nor accepts, nor adopts. Those fine processes in themselves classify us. They educate, they exalt, they preserve; so that, to profit by them, we must be as perceptive as we can. We must recognize our particular form, the instrument that each of us—each of us who carries anything—carries in his being. Mastering this instrument, learning to play it in perfection—that's what I call conduct, what I call success. (308-309)
CHAPTER IV

THE SACRED FOUNT

The puzzling quality of The Sacred Fount has been generally acknowledged and is, in fact, the one point of agreement among the bewildering accumulation of critical commentary. Leon Edel comments that the novel is "perhaps the strangest of Henry James's experiments in fictional narrative," seconding the remarks of an earlier commentator who found that "We enter a maze at the book's beginning and are still in a labyrinth at its close." The perplexing nature of the novel has even been held in its own defense, that the story is meant to be a puzzle—a story seen through the eyes of a narrator who can never be certain whether he has seen correctly, "who realizes how many possible solutions to the problem he has posed lie open, but is unable in the end to choose any one of them."


Critical commentary at the time of the book's publication tended to be largely negative. The novel was considered a misapplication of James's genius, the most eloquent expression of which point of view being that of Rebecca West:

The type of these unhappier efforts of Mr. James' genius is The Sacred Fount...where, with a respect for the mere gross largeness and expensiveness of the country house which almost makes one write the author Mr. Jeames, he records how a week-end visitor spends more intellectual force than Kant could have used in The Critique of Pure Reason in an unsuccessful attempt to discover whether there exists a relationship not more interesting among those vacuous people than it is among sparrows. The finely wrought descriptions of the leisured life make one feel as though one sat in a beautiful old castle, granting its beauty but not pleased, because one is a prisoner while the small, mean story worries one like a rat nibbling at the wainscot. One takes it as significant that the unnamed host and hostess of the party never appear save to 'give signals.' The tiny, desperate figures this phrase shows to the mind's eye, semaphoring to each other across incredibly extended polished vistas to keep up their courage under these looming, soaring vaults, may be taken as a symbol of the heart and intellect which Mr. James had now forgotten in his elaboration of their social envelope.4

Other contemporary reviewers considered the book "sublimated gossip,"5 regretted that James "should continue to squander his immense talent on the study of malarial psychology,"6 and claimed that in producing The Sacred


James "really seems to be sinking into a chronic state of periphrastic perversity."\(^7\)

The Sacred Fount has even been considered to be no novel at all while another reader has found it to be two novels, "a moral allegory of ultimate evil and an epistemological comedy of ultimate imperception."\(^8\) While more than one commentator has pointed out that even the sex of the narrator is left in doubt,\(^9\) Edel claims that it becomes clear early in the novel that the narrator is a man but does not cite definite evidence for believing so.\(^10\)

James's own comments on his novel combined with the fact that he chose not to include it in the revised, collected edition of his works have often provided evidence for less rather than greater clarity in discussing the meaning and significance of The Sacred Fount.

---

\(^7\) Henry Thurston Peck, Review, Bookman (America), XIII (July, 1901), 442, ibid., p. 308.


Because James considered the book a "little concetto" and a "fine flight...into the high fantastic," the Sacred Fount has probably received less serious critical attention than the major late works. Much has been made of the issue of James's apparent rejection of the book with attempts even to rationalize that rejection. Significantly, the book was conceived in the middle of James's dramatic period when James wrote several short stories involving the technique of the detached narrator, usually a critic or man of letters who relates the story. Perhaps James judged the finished work not on its own merits but rather to the extent that it measured up to his initial design. "Unaware of the radical shift of emphasis, from the observed to the observer, which occurred in the process of its composition," James perhaps considered the finished work a failure.


14 The Notebooks of Henry James, p. 275.


The great attention the book has received in recent years has centered on its unique feature, the only full-length novel of James to use the first-person narrative point of view. Thus, the subjective responses of the narrator are considered of primary critical significance in evaluating The Sacred Fount. Edel, in fact, considers the work "almost a reductio ad absurdum of the point of view method."

The issue of point of view, then, becomes central to the theme of the story. The emphasis shifts from the nominal protagonists to their observer, who becomes "a usurping consciousness." The peculiar function of the narrator-observer is not "his deviation from his analytical role but rather his fulfilment of it with the utmost zeal and devotion." The narrator can be considered the quintessential Jamesian observer in that he "displays all the generic traits of the Jamesian observer on a lavish scale and in dazzling style." The narrator has quickness of mind, ingenuity, subtlety, sophistication, high lucidity, sharp wit, ironical sense of humor, extreme

---

17 Isle, p. 207.

18 The Modern Psychological Novel, p. 47.


20 Segal, p. 145.
sensitivity, and obsessive scrupulosity. As he fulfills his functions as interpreter, he is at the same time an "objective witness-narrator," a "subsidiary choric commentator," and a "center of consciousness through which the story is filtered." As he registers impressions, serves as a source of information, contributes elements of intelligent sympathy, diagnoses the situation, predicting its outcome, distilling its essence, and finally reflecting upon it, he "serves as the vehicle of observation, speculation, analysis, appreciation and criticism." 21

Furthermore, the observer-narrator represents the great difficulty which any Jamesian observer faces:

the uncertainty as to whether he has discovered the truth or merely succumbed to the temptation, characteristic of a highly imaginative and speculative nature, of discovering a meaningful pattern where there exists only the senseless confusion of 'clumsy life and stupid work.' 22

The difficulty involves the inescapable consequences of being in the position of the observer-narrator:

his authorial role as a story's guiding intelligence requires that he possess great interpretive skill, but the limitations inherent in his position inevitably makes [sic] his insights uncertain and creates the danger of his reading too much into the situation he is confronted with. 23

21 Ibid., p. 149.

22 Ibid., p. 148. The (mis)quotation "clumsy life and stupid work" seems to be from James's "Preface," The Spoils of Poynton, The Art of Fiction, p. 121. James wrote that in the action taken by the "engaged adversaries" of that story he saw "clumsy Life again at her stupid work."

23 Ibid.
The technical considerations of point of view are related to the problems of artistic failure, the consciousness of the creative artist, and the function generally of art works, art experiences, and art images in *The Sacred Fount*.

For example, the magical or mysterious qualities of the novel that have elicited attention are relevant to James's interests in impressionistic pictorial art. It has been argued in this connection that *The Sacred Fount* is not a portrait "built up, but suggested," with its "atmosphere of magic" in the suggestion of "fleets of Palladian rooms, opening out of each other and...on to wide scapes of lawn and terrace," the "sense of space and of an eternity of still summer trees basking in a hush of unclouded sunlight," and "the taste of civilized ripeness, as of a pear just before it turns wooly." Aptly, James lights each phase of his drama according to the appropriate hour. All of these features, calculated and "laid into the background of our consciousness," Edward Sackville-West points out. "leave us with the impression—brilliant as a canvas by Monet—of those accumulations of expressions in which for James the fascination of a great country house consisted."24

The darker aspects of the preoccupation with art

---

have been noted as well. The novel has been considered a parable of the difficulties and beliefs of an artist, "conceived in a moment of despair." Another reader thinks that The Sacred Fount can be read "almost as the bible of a Jamesian religion of art," dealing with the wrong kind of artistic practice, represented by the narrator who masters an artistry of death rather than of creativity. According to this interpretation, the narrator represents a perversion of art in his excessive self-certainty that prevents him from being able to love.

Yet, Dorothea Krook defends the positive aspects of the creative artistry represented by The Sacred Fount, considering the "irreducible, insoluble mystery in the heart of the creative process itself" central to the novel, which she claims is the definitive statement of the predicament of the creative mind! Thus, James was determined to be as exhaustive as possible, "to establish the reality of the phenomenon by exploring it in aspects as numerous and varied as possible, and, in each instance, pursuing it to its furthest implications...."27

As in the other stories and novels of artists and

25 Isle, p. 229.

26 Ralph A. Ranald, "The Sacred Fount: James's Portrait of the Artist Manque," Nineteenth Century Fiction, XV (December, 1960), 244-245.

writers, consciousness is a device for the telling of the story as well as part of the subject of the fiction. In *The Sacred Fount*, James "pushes this new primacy of consciousness to its utmost boundaries and almost eliminates external reality altogether,"\(^{28}\) while the narrator, unnamed and undescribed, is "more of a consciousness than an identity, a watcher rather than a participant."\(^{29}\) Just as the subject of the late novels is the inner life itself, James concerns himself with the "complicated operations of human consciousness."\(^{30}\)

Because the narrator filters the action through his conscious awareness of it, becoming a "menace to bright reality," he has been considered defeated in his struggle to attain perfect consciousness because his endowments are imperfect.\(^{31}\) Similarly, he fails to see that the operations of consciousness upon the other characters are different from the effects on himself: "interested in the thrill and sport of intellectual exercise," he tends to resist moral claims "which would involve him more intimately


\(^{30}\)Raeth, p. 314.

\(^{31}\)Ibid., p. 321.
in attacking the aggressors and defending the victims."\textsuperscript{32}

In the milieu of social caste at Newmarch, where manners and conventions seem to play so large a part, "the discovery of a psychological truth and real human relations demands a rigorous acuteness of observation"\textsuperscript{33}—that is, the Jamesian play of full consciousness.

The theme of consciousness, as the narrator struggles for self-awareness at the same time he seeks a solution to the intellectual puzzle, helps to explain or qualify the elaborate quality of the prose style. Chapter VI, for example, considered an "almost impenetrable example of [the narrator's] mental activity" represents James's prose "at its densest and most abstract."\textsuperscript{34} Yet, it is intended to present that density, the convolutions and intricacies of the intellectual processes of the mind of the narrator. The involved sentence structure destroys simple clarity, deliberately, not to portray the tormented mental state of the narrator so much as to attempt to achieve a "larger aim," of plunging characters into situations wherein previously established frames of reference no longer possess validity, and they are forced to make a fresh adaptation to

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid., p. 310.


\textsuperscript{34}Ise, pp. 216-217.
environment, particularly to moral environment. Their very epistemology must be born anew.35

If the narrator becomes trapped in his own superior awareness--trapped and isolated in the sense that he is unable to speak directly to others of what he knows--his consciousness produces a rich effect "as if one were reading two novels at once."36

I.

The narrator of The Sacred Fount shares significant qualities of the artistic temperament. He admits that he has the tendency to ascribe to experience qualities that it may not possess. Like the artist, he articulates his material, sometimes excessively and obsessively, becoming so entangled in his imaginatively created structures that he feels that they threaten the very reality that is their basis and inspiration. Being sensitive and articulate, he also becomes infatuated with the beauty and order of his imagined constructs--sometimes to the point of being egotistical, but consistently to the extent of attempting to maintain a position of insight and full consciousness superior to that of the other human beings with whom he is involved.


The narrator is supersensitive and hyperobservant. Like the creative artist, he finds significance in every word and gesture, even on one occasion, in Mr. Brissenden's "eloquent" back and the "singular stoop of his shoulders." His sensitivity creates a remarkably acute empathy with Mrs. Server: "I see her now; I shall see her always; I shall continue to feel at moments in my own facial muscles the deadly little ache of her heroic grin." (197) After speaking with Mr. Brissenden for the last time, he has tears in his eyes, and his sensitivity extends to an awareness of the significance of the unstated, the unspoken, and the unsaid. He claims "We knew ourselves--what moved me, that is, was that she knew me--to mean, at every point, immensely more than I said or that she answered." (272)

Like the artist, the narrator treads the ambiguous path of detachment and involvement. He finds that he cannot maintain his aesthetic detachment and becomes, like Rowland Mallet, the involved spectator.

Early in the narrative, the observer remarks on the "happy ambiguities" (1) that the party at Newmarch offers--ambiguities that he is eventually unable to accept as part of his imagined explanation of events. At the first assembly of the guests, the narrator describes his role using images of creative art. He explains that the

---

assembled guests "enrich the picture," that "new images" and "impressions" introduce "substance" to the links of a chain which form "the happiest little chapter of accidents." (13)

As the excitement of completing his explanation for the changed appearances of the guests increases, the narrator seems aware of the dangers of his supersubtlety. He realizes that, once "on the scent of something ultimate" (22), he must maintain a certain detachment from the others lest he risk exposure of his "reflections." (27) He knows that he cannot waste either his "wonder" or "wisdom":

I was on the scent—that I was sure of; and yet even after I was sure I should still have been at a loss to put my enigma itself into words. I was just conscious, vaguely, of being on the track of a law, a law that would fit, that would strike me as governing the delicate phenomena—delicate though so marked—that my imagination found itself playing with. (23)

The narrator is aware of his tendency to read meaning into situations that may not warrant such a wealth of interpretation in fact. Mrs. Brissenden calls him "an intelligent man gone wrong" (292) but the narrator himself admits that what he does is something wrong. His first realization is shown in the conversation with Mrs. Brissenden in the reference to his acceptance of the possible lack of taste in his curiosity, and later he takes a "lively resolve to get rid of my ridiculous obsession." (89)

On at least three occasions he admits the relationships may be none of his business (111, 199, 201), calls his curiosity "indiscreet" (100), and feels that "no one
had really any business to know what I know." (161) He even at one point admits that he may have gone too far: "Nothing need have happened if I hadn't been so absurdly, so fatally meditative." (137) Aware of his tendency to over-interpet events, he takes artistic license and becomes defensive with Mrs. Brissenden, making no attempt to account for his having gone wrong.

The narrator is similarly aware of his tendency to exaggerate the importance of his conscious impressions:

A part of the amusement they yielded came, I daresay, from my exaggerating them--grouping them into a larger mystery (and thereby a larger 'law') than the facts, as observed, yet warranted; but that is the common fault of minds for which the vision of life is an obsession. The obsession pays, if one will; but to pay it has to borrow. (23)

Yet, he becomes "possessed" by the persistent need to explain his imagined theory, and he seems to have forgotten his fondness for the happy ambiguities when he states that he now wishes "absolute certainty," the confirmation of his theory. (25) Already the narrator seems to have lost whatever ability he had to participate in life's ambiguity in this possessed state of consciousness with which he now seeks such absolute certainty.

Another change occurs in the experience of the narrator at the end of his first confidential exchange with Grace Brissenden in Chapter III. Searching for what he calls "the evidence of relations" (38), the narrator begins to suspect a lack of taste in "the curiosity to
which he had so freely surrendered himself. (45) He begins to experience, despite the "awakened and confirmed keenness," of intensified consciousness, scruples: he questions whether the "amusing question was stamped...as none of my business." Yet, he persists in his fascination with the ambiguity of the situation: "For what had so suddenly overtaken me was the consciousness of this anomaly: that I was at the same time as disgusted as if I had exposed Mrs. Server and absolutely convinced that I had not exposed her." (46)

While he seeks reassurance for his consciousness of the changed state of May Server, he realizes that he cannot persist in his imaginative interpretations of human relationships without himself becoming responsibly involved. The detached spectator, then, becomes committed and involved, just as the artist, James implies, must become an involved participant in his conscious experience of life.

The narrator is not only super-observant but like the artist preoccupied with method, craft, and technique. When he limits himself to "psychologic evidence" (66), he indicates a disinclination to use the "material clue" because he "should feel ashamed; the fact would be deterrent." (66) His fondness for conversation is based on a similar preoccupation: "It could not but be exciting to talk, as we talked, on the basis of those suppressed processes and unavowed references which made the meaning of our
meeting so different from its form." (272) When the narrator reports the first talk with Mrs. Server, he admits that he gives the sense of her comments rather than the comments themselves, explaining that her remarks "were a little scattered and troubled, and I helped them out." (49) This is consistent with the shaping, ordering activity of the narrator as artist.

In the final conversation with Mrs. Brissenden, the narrator again claims to know what the woman is thinking and disregards altogether what she tells him. He seems to be more concerned, that is, with the meaning rather than the form of her remarks:

I had measured with every word she uttered a sharper sense of the pressure, behind them all, of a new consciousness. It was full of everything she didn't say, and what she said was no representation whatever of what was most in her mind. (145)

The narrator's attitude toward himself and the language he chooses to express this attitude also suggest his role as a creative artist. He views his analysis not only as "high sport," an intellectual game, but as a valid artistic activity. He confides to Ford Obert, "I only talk...as you paint, not a bit worse." (30) On several occasions, he alludes to the idea that art creates or shapes life. He speaks of the joy of determining, almost of creating results; reflecting on poor Mrs. Server's case, for example, he claims:

It appeared then that the more things I fitted together the larger sense, every way, they made.... It justified
my indiscreet curiosity. It crowned my underhand process with beauty. (128)

The narrator uses the language of fabrication just as much as that of observation or speculation. He speaks of "the uneasiness that I conceived I had fastened on," gives rein to the "constructive joy" he finds in his inventiveness, feeling "as inhumanly amused as if one had found one could create something" says that he "created nothing but a clue or two" and warms with a "mild artistic glow." (104) Becoming more emboldened with his theory, he less cautiously declares of one character: "I must, with an art, make him not want to." He exults in "that joy of determining, almost of creating results, which I have already mentioned as an exhilaration attached to some of my plunges of insight" (214) He speaks later of another character: "I feel somehow the wish to make her say it in as many ways as possible--I seemed so to enjoy her saying it." (267)

The narrator's choice of language similarly relates him to the creative artist. Like Roderick Hudson, he is sometimes seized with the divine fit of poetic inspiration, akin to madness. His intense intellectual passion informs his narrative style. It has been demonstrated how the coupling of an emotionally charged adjective with an abstract logical noun conveys the passion of intellectual involvement: "haunting principle," "immense confirmation,"
"dreadful logic," "ferocious logic," and "frenzied fallacy." Further, the narrator uses the language of mystical ecstasy when the intellectual passion rises to a higher pitch: he feels a "mystic throb" (137), later experiences "an undiluted bliss, in the intensity of consciousness that I had reached" (177); feels a "rare intellectual joy, the oddest secret exultation" with Lady John (102); recalls "the joy of intellectual mastery of things unnameable" (214); and rejoices in the "intensity of an amusement I had at last enabled my private madness to yield me." (162)

The narrator persists in attempting to articulate the meaningless human experience at Newmarch into a coherent theory or an ordered art work. Now viewing his experience at Newmarch as a "tense little drama" (143), he persists in the search for form and meaning at the same time he acknowledges his inability to "take up" all of the "unexpected suggestions." (49) Again, while the ambiguities of life provide the inspiration if not the content of art, the problem for the artist is to learn to accept or to deal with them meaningfully.

James strategically places the discussion of the portrait--the "picture, of all pictures, that most needs an interpreter" (55)--at this point of the narrative. The guests struggle to make sense of the symbolism of the portrait of a young man in black holding what seems

---

38 Segal, p. 162.
to be a mask. While May Server thinks the mask represents death, the narrator insists that it represents life. Significantly, the narrator, ever conscious of art, insists on the reality of the artificial face as opposed to the real one of the young man: "The artificial face...is extremely studied and, when you carefully look at it, charmingly pretty." (56) Just as the guests try, in vain, to make meaning of the portrait, which resists explanation, the narrator tries to make meaning of the human events at Newmarch he has become inevitably involved in. But life, as art, can be ambiguous. The portrait refuses to "give up" its symbolic meaning, just as the human complexities and ambiguities of the social situation ultimately prove to be elusive even for the ingenuity of the narrator.

Meanwhile, the narrator experiences an even greater sense of involvement that threatens the detachment he consciously accepts as necessary for completing his explanation of the changed appearances among the guests. He acknowledges the change in himself, a change he is unable to ignore (60), and questions his obsessive concern for Mrs. Server, wondering whether he had himself suddenly fallen so much in love with her that his concern for her reputation, his regard for her danger, threatens his detached state as an observer. (60-61) His intensified consciousness and perceptiveness are further threatened by his tendency "to nose about for a relation that a lady has her
reasons for keeping secret." (68) Yet, the observer justifies to Fred Obert the "honour" of confining his search to what he calls "psychologic evidence." (66) The artist's search for truth has the honor of disinterested investigation: "Resting on the kind of signs that the game takes account of when fairly played--resting on psychologic signs alone, it's a high application of intelligence. What's ignoble is the detective and the keyhole." (66)

The narrator extends the justification for his inquisitiveness into a sense of superiority to the other guests. He begins to see Mrs. Brissenden's "fatuity and cruelty" and finds these qualities irritating even if "unconscious." (71) While Mrs. Brissenden is aware of what she suspects is the narrator's love for Mrs. Server (72), the narrator becomes less certain of how to deal with either Mrs. Brissenden's perception or his own consciousness of his altered state.

For example, he begins to regret having become more involved than he intended or expected and is conscious that the involvement has directly resulted from his excessive articulateness and sensitivities: "I saw other things, many things, after this, but I had already so much matter for reflection that I saw them almost in spite of myself." (89) Sensitivity and responsiveness, then, seem not always to depend on the narrator's exercise of will and his sense of direction: "The difficulty with me was in the
momentum already acquired by the act—as well as, doubtless, by the general habit—of observation." (89) The narrator wants to get rid of the difficulty by resolving to dispel what he considers his "ridiculous obsession": "It was absurd to have consented to such immersion, intellectually speaking, in the affairs of other people." (89) Aware, then, now that he is involved, he yet insists on the intellectual detachment necessary to the artist: "A whole cluster of such connections, effectually displacing the center of interest, now surrounded me, and I was—though always but intellectually—drawn into their circle." (90) However, the "connections" and "relations" have an ambiguous appeal to the narrator:

I did my best for the rest of the day to turn my back on them, but with the prompt result of feeling that I meddled with them almost more in thinking them over in isolation than in hovering personally about them.... Reflection was the real intensity.... (89-90)

The narrator's search for an explanation for events, now intensified and now an involved one, becomes a search for the meaning of his own perceptions and feelings. His search thus assumes an acknowledged shift in direction:

In resisted observation that was vivid thought, in inevitable thought that was vivid observation, through a succession of, in short, of phases in which I shall not pretend to distinguish one of these elements from the other, I found myself cherishing the fruit of the seed dropped equally by Ford Obert and by Mrs. Briss. (94)

He begins to question what is the matter with himself. He
becomes acutely conscious of his own emotional relationship to the search to which he is committed:

My original protest against the flash of inspiration in which she had fixed responsibility on Mrs. Server had been in fact, I now saw, but the scared presentiment of something in store for myself. This scare, to express it sharply, had verily not left me from that moment; and if I had been already then anxious it was because I had felt myself foredoomed to be sure that the poor lady herself would be. (94)

The narrator becomes increasingly self-conscious of this relationship to Mrs. Server: "Why I should have minded this, should have been anxious at her anxiety and scared at her scare, was a question troubling me too little on the spot for me to suffer it to trouble me, as a painter of my state, in this place." (94)

His search for certainty and consciousness of self, then, becomes an attempt to find meaning by exercise of his expressive and articulating abilities. As he becomes conscious of his own regard for May Server, which he calls loyalty (97) as well as love, he is frustrated, as an artist, by the human blandness of Newmarch. He is aware of the distance between his own actual vision and the inanity and inarticulateness of the other guests. This is the dilemma of the artist who must wrench coherence and meaningful vision from sometimes uncompromising or unpromising human material.

Extending his theory to include Lady John's ascribed role, the narrator experiences "a rare intellectual
joy, the oddest secret exultation." (102) He admits that
he "read into Lady John's wonderful manner...all that was
implied in the lesson" that he had "extracted from other
portions of the business," and tries to justify his ex-
planation on the assumption that Lady John's manner
"quite clamoured...for an interpretation." (103)

In the conversation with Gilbert Long, however,
the narrator seems to be bent on concealment rather than
revelation. In fact, the narrator, while consciously in-
volved and committed, seems most anxious about not being
himself "found out" as he is not certain that he had "es-
caped showing him the flush of my effort to show nothing."
(110) He wants to continue participating in the tangle
of human events without betraying his own intentions:
"I contrived to breathe consolingly on his secret without
betraying an intention." (111) Once he learns that May
Server is reportedly inarticulate--in the estimation of
Guy Brissenden, "She has no flow of conversation whatever"
(113)--the narrator's psychological interest is checked.
Yet, persisting in the solution to his self-imposed prob-
lems, he insists on the beauty, gentleness, and strange-
ness of Mrs. Server as attractive qualities in themselves
and again asserts his commitment "up to the intellectual
eyes, to ascertaining just how queer the person under dis-
cussion might be." (121) Ironically, the narrator describes
his discovery in terms of revelation and concealment: he
explains that the effort that others discern in Mrs. Server is an effort of concealment, an effort with which he is intimately concerned in his "supernatural acuteness." (125)

The narrator's immediate reaction to his further discoveries is a "mystic throb" at his "sharpened perception." (127) He questions whether the beauty his imagination is in the process of creating might be only for himself, the beauty of having been right. Is this to be art's own reward? He describes his pleasure as a child experiences the world of the fanciful and wonderful:

I scarce know what odd consciousness I had of roaming at close of day in the grounds of some castle of enchantment. I had positively encountered nothing to compare with this since the days of fairy-tales and of the childish imagination of the impossible.... It was the coming true that was the proof of the enchantment, which, moreover, was naturally never so great as when such coming was, to such a degree and by the most romantic stroke of all, the fruit of one's own wizardry. (129)

Proud of his work, the narrator feels almost that Mrs. Server appears "by the operation of my intelligence," as though his imagination can now control and create reality instead of merely working with the materials provided to his fancy. The art images are extended as he imagines that he and Mrs. Server were "in a beautiful old picture... a beautiful old tale." (130)

Because the narrator has the aesthetic temperament, he insists on evaluating Mrs. Server's response to him according to her "form of expression," the expressions of the
real person as valuable to him as his own impressions.
Again, he justifies and rationalizes his habitual introspectiveness. (133) He assumes superiority, furthermore, in this attitude: "My extraordinary interest in my fellow-creatures. I have more than most men. I've never really seen anyone with half as much. That breeds observation, and observation breeds ideas...." (147) At the end of their interview, he assumes that Mrs. Server's "consciousness" is "more charged" with the new discoveries he thinks he has made. Yet, his suspicions that Brissenden loves May Server are checked with a sense of moral responsibility—"a process of providential supervision" (154)—which he says intensifies his scruples.

His scruples seem to remind him of not only the dangers of the artist's becoming too involved in his subject matter, but the tendency of the "supersubtle" to read into the recalcitrant raw material of mundane existence the insights and beauties that his own temperament seems to require:

I remember feeling seriously warned...not to yield further to my ideal habit of reading into mere human things an interest so much deeper than mere human things were in general prepared to supply.... I think the imagination, in those halls of art and fortune, was almost inevitably accounted a poor matter; the whole place and its participants abounded so in pleasantness and picture, in all the felicities, for every sense, taken for granted there by the very basis of life, that even the sense most finely poetic, aspiring to extract the moral, could scarce have helped feeling itself treated to something of the snub that affects—when it does affect—the uninvited reporter in whose face a door is closed. (156)
The narrator realizes that his "transcendental intelligence" has no application to such a social setting (157), acknowledging that he knew too much—"the state of my conscience was that I knew too much." (161) He acknowledges his ability to perceive subtly, defending the "high sport of such intelligence" and the "play of perception, expression, sociability." (164)

In the curiously Proustian episode that follows, the narrator's personal revelation occurs as a result of an experience of music, described in the manner of the completion of a painting. James intensifies the situation of the pianist's entertainment by having the narrator describe the composition of "the whole scene...as if there were scarce one of us but had a secret thirst for the infinite to be quenched." (166) While the pianist plays, the narrator's "wandering vision played and played as well." (169) He tries to piece together his perceptions, searching for the "controlling image...the real principle of composition" as an artist might. The extravagance of the prose seems to convey the ecstasy of artistic creativity:

What, for my part, while I listened, I most made out was the beauty and the terror of conditions so highly organized that under their rule her small lonely fight with disintegration could go on without the betrayal of a gasp or a shriek, and with no worse tell-tale contortion of lip or brow than the vibration, on its golden stem, of that constantly renewed flower of amenity which my observation had so often and so mercilessly detached only to find again in its place. (167)
Yet, the narrator is aware of being "too much tangled and involved" to dispose so easily of the elements of his imaginative composition. He acknowledges, now shifting to another metaphor, that of theatrical art, that "every actor in the play that had so unexpectedly insisted on constituting itself for me sat forth as with an intimation that they were not to be so easily disposed of." (168)

It is as though a last unexpected action were waiting to be performed before the final curtain. As the pianist strikes his last note, the narrator hopes his own creation could be so easily and perfectly complete, but knows that it cannot because "ideal symmetry" presupposes that his impressions will continue only as long as the music lasts. But the narrator is only too aware that there will be "new combinations" (of impressions) as soon as the music ends.

One of these new impressions is his fear of being exposed. He "tremble[s] for the impunity of [his] creation." (174) He feels again the necessity of checking his over-active imagination: admitting that the sense of establishing his "superior vision may perfectly have gone a little to his head," he questions the "intensity of consciousness," his absurd awareness. (177) He even begins to doubt his analogies of the human reality with artifacts. Wondering to what extent the others at Newmarch share his awareness, he acknowledges the
posibility into which my imagination could dip even deeper than into the depths over which it had conceived the other pair as hovering. These opposed couples balanced like bronze groups at the two ends of a chimney-piece, and the most I could say to myself in lucid deprecation of my thought was that I mustn't take them equally for granted merely because they balanced. Things in the real had a way of not balancing; it was all an affair, this fine symmetry, of artificial proportion. (182-183)

The narrator feels that he may have over-estimated the value of perception, as he has failed to apply this quality to others while being very proud of the ability in himself. (183-184) This apparent reversal of attitude disturbs him in the following chapter, his "consciousness... aware of having performed a full revolution," a condition that he describes as a "state lost... of exemption from intense obsessions." He experiences "something of the threat of a chill to [his] curiosity." (193) Yet, he is also disturbed by the awareness "that even in the stress of perceiving myself broken with I ruefully reflected on all the more, on the ever so much, I still wanted to know!" (193) Even in the extremity of self-doubt and near disillusionment, he remains faithful to his self-dedication to becoming fully aware.

The narrator's insight into the complexities of this full consciousness is indicated in his confession to Ford Obert that he may have taken his detachment too much for granted, openly acknowledging his "failure of detachment." (209-210) He regains some of his former self-
confidence in his perceptive abilities, however, as he experiences "again the joy of the intellectual mastery of things unnameable, that joy of determining, almost of creating results, which I have already mentioned as an exhilaration attached to some of my plunges of insight." (214) But the narrator knows that he cannot share his insights with Obert, who does not share his perceptiveness despite the fact that Obert is an artist. The narrator realizes that one of the consequences of his failure to maintain adequate distance, as an artist must, is the misconception that the perceptions of those with whom he is involved can equal his own.

The first part of the next episode intensifies the narrator's sense of exhilaration in what he presumes is complete consciousness and awareness of the solution to his masterful intellectual and aesthetic design. Significantly, the art metaphors are plentiful in the descriptions of the narrator's consciousness, the "most marked intensities of [his] own sensations." (249) He finds a suitable image with which to convey this sense of exhilaration:

It was in any case what evoked for me most the contrasted image, so fresh with me, of the other, the tragic lady--the image that had so embodied the unutterable opposite of everything actually before me. What was actually before me was the positive pride of life and expansion, the amplitude of conscious action and design; not the arid channel forsaken by the stream, but the full-fed river sweeping to the sea,
the volume of water, the stately current, the flooded banks into which the source had swelled.... (245)

But Mrs. Brissenden fails to provide the conclusive part of the much-anticipated total design, claiming that the narrator only "build[s] up houses of cards" (262) and tells him, "The trouble with you is that you over-estimate the penetration of others. How can it approach your own?" (262-263)

The narrator naively assumes that he can get rid of his obsession, appease his overactive imagination by finding out the truth, thus hopefully exorcising what he calls his false gods. (277) Granting his "purely intellectual" (288) tension, the narrator persists in trying to fit the pieces together. (290) As the narrator refuses to give up, James leaves little doubt that consciousness is the real issue involved. In the first place, the narrator wants to think that Long is capable of being clever, of being as fully conscious as himself. While he confesses that he has been responsible for spoiling the "unconsciousness" of Long and Mrs. Brissenden, he is not really surprised at their reaction:

I had spoiled their unconsciousness, I had destroyed it, and it was consciousness alone that could make them effectively cruel. Therefore, if they were cruel, it was I who had determined it, inasmuch as, consciously, they could only want, they could only intend, to live. (293)

He seems to be paralyzed by the sense of responsibility that this insight incurs: "I could only say to myself that
this was the price—the price of the secret success, the lonely liberty and the intellectual joy." He agrees to forfeit, acknowledging the "special torment" of his "case": "that the condition of light, the satisfaction of curiosity and of the attestation of triumph, was in this direct way the sacrifice of feeling." (296)

The "lonely liberty" is the price the artist pays for his superior awareness, his "secret success." Iron­
ically, full awareness completes consciousness, but is sometimes gained at the expense of personal satisfaction and fulfillment. This is one of the insights of Dencombe in James's story "The Middle Years."

Ultimately frustrated in his attempt to elicit fur­
ther information from Mrs. Brissenden, who calls him crazy and bids him good-night, the narrator responds by escape. Yet, his decision to leave Newmarch so precipitately cannot prevent his realization that the experience will affect him permanently: "I should certainly, never again, on the spot, quite hang together, even though it wasn't really that I hadn't three times her method. What I too fatally lacked was her tone." (319) The spirit of resignation or withdrawal, then, is accompanied with yet further self­
insight. The distinction the narrator draws between "method" and "tone" seems to complete his awareness of the powers of articulation and the difficulties of apply­
ing them in the social milieu of Newmarch.
II.

As in Roderick Hudson and The Tragic Muse, an artwork itself—the portrait of a man in black holding a mask—becomes a means of enriching the narrative and symbolic texture of the novel. The portrait as well as the guests' discussion of its symbolic meanings have received a great deal of attention and interpretation.

First, in the suggestion that the worried, obsessed narrator attempting in his own compulsive fashion to discover some principle of unity in his impressions and observations, the portrait and its discussion are related to the problem of the narrator's desire to verify those observations: "If the same picture can give such opposing impressions to those who look upon it, how real—or how fanciful—are his own observations?"\(^{39}\)

Further, the painting and the speculations it provokes image the drama of The Sacred Fount itself:

the hazard of smothering life's face with the death-like grimace of artifice; the chance of removing a death-like mask to reveal the features, at once pale and livid, of life itself; the prospect of covering the face of death with a mask of life and beauty; the hope of so composing the grimace and the beauties of masking artifice, and so presenting the drama of using it, as to protect life while revealing its intimate presence and constructing imagined possibilities for it.\(^{40}\)

---


The portrait seems to mirror the dilemma of the narrator. Given his imagination, he alone is capable of transcending entrapment in what he calls the "crystal cage" of artificiality (142) but refuses to remove his own mask. The portrait helps James also to establish the validity of the narrator's point of view at the same time it provides an ironic comment on the dramatic situation. The scene is prepared for in a studied manner with the description of May Server as she enters the baroque hall, "with her eyes raised to the painted dome." (50) The ideas suggested by the discussion of the portrait--the dropped mask, the ability of the artist to penetrate a disguise, and the suggested element of the supernatural--are connected to another scene involving the narrator and Mrs. Server in which his impressions play freely in the "general shade" (127) as Mrs. Server's "form of expression broke down" (131-132) and the narrator sees the woman "as I had never seen her before." (135)42

Despite Obert's denial, the portrait resembles the narrator. Later, when the narrator sees his companions at Newmarch as old, he adds the qualification, "I cast about for some light in which I could show that I--a plus


forte raison--was a pantaloon." According to this reading, the narrator is both clown and fool, thrusting off the mask of life and carrying the menace of death by reading implications into the relations of everyone else at Newmarch.43 Jean Blackall entertains the speculation that the narrator himself may be the man with the mask: "The narrator reminds one of a wide-eyed clown, like the man in the portrait, and yet is to be taken seriously because symbolically he represents a kind of death, the hardening of the heart." 44

The portrait further serves to bring the narrator and Mrs. Server closer together. Later, the narrator states that he and May Server "were in a beautiful old picture" (130), significantly indicating that his role is becoming less detached as he is less disagreeable to placing himself in a picture with her. Significantly, it is at this point that he sees her smile as a grimace, recognizing her unhappiness for the first time.45

The narrator's detachment, however, is qualified by the reluctance that another commentator finds characteristic of his response to the portrait. The mask is "blooming and beautiful" to the narrator because it is the

---

43 Ibid.


"symbol of his depersonalized self, the compulsive onlooker for whose 'life' is accessible by means of observation alone." According to this interpretation, the "awful grimace" that Mrs. Server sees, with her assertion that the man in black is "dreadful...awful," represents the distaste she has for the role the narrator himself plays. 46

The narrator may be in a symbolically relevant relationship to the artist of the portrait as well. Both narrator and portrait painter seek the essential in personality,47 and just as the artist of the portrait presents a situation of unmasking, the narrator busily tries to lift masks from those under his scrutiny. Guy Brissenden has already been exposed: the narrator says that he adds him "to my little gallery." (22) But May Server still remains a puzzle during the gallery scene, as she is not yet exposed. The first time the narrator glimpses her at Newmarch, her back is turned (44), but when he takes a closer look he cannot agree with Mrs. Brissenden's suggestion that May is Long's sacred fount because he cannot yet decide whether May presents a frank face or a concealing mask to the world. Soon thereafter, however, when the narrator sees May close up in the room of pictures, he compares her "exquisite face" to a figurative "old dead pastel

46 Leo B. Levy, "What Does The Sacred Fount Mean?" College English, XXIII (1962), 382.
47 James's general high regard for the art of portraiture should be noted in this respect.
under glass" since she is "all Greuze tints, all pale pinks and blues and pearly whites and candid eyes." (51) This description is consistent with the use of the mask in the picture to symbolize her later on. Thus, in another context, "the unknown artist who portrayed the person unmasked may be likened to James's narrator, who sees almost creatively to place his subjects, call up their smiles, and expose what is beneath."48

Both the man and the mask form the picture, deriving their existence from the "phantasmagoric powers of some artist's imagination," the artistic imagination that is central to The Sacred Fount itself:

the metaphysical problem itself--which is reality, which appearance?--shall remain unresolved, while at the same time allowing a bias in favour of the narrator's (artist's) view of the superior reality of the phantasmagoric over the evidential.49

Even if the position is tenable that the portrait bears an ironic or negative relationship to the narrator, the relationship does exist. The significance of the shift in tone supports such an interpretation: instead of being described by the first person narrator or one of the other characters, the description of the experience of the portrait seems to be evoked "by a cold, intrusive voice in the present tense, setting out the facts." The ensuing


49 Krook, p. 177.
discussion only further isolates the narrator from the other characters who wear masks in their prescribed social personas:

The black-costumed Pierrot, with mask in hand, figures the only mode of escape from death-in-life for the performing clowns in the social circus on exhibition. As the description of the ambiguous covering indicates, it displays the dehumanization of man, his conversion into the puppet of the sterile artifices of civilization.50

The life and death symbolism has also been much discussed. The portrait does not represent life to Mrs. Server, who sees the terrible grimace which the narrator does not. She equates the awfulness of the mask with that of the man, implying that the man and the mask are one. The narrator, then, perceives the painting as representative of life and death in a sort of indefinite relationship, while Mrs. Server sees the painting only in its own aspect. This is relevant to the situation of May and Brissenden, "emblems of two kinds of death: the death of the body (manifested by outward signs) and death of mind or spirit, which may conceal itself to some extent beneath a blooming and beautiful exterior."51 Just as May Server is the only one to perceive that which at first appears to be a smile on the mask is in fact a painted grimace, she is herself later seen, perceived, in an unguarded moment, her own mask now off, her "lovely grimace...

50Stein, p. 169.

51Blackall, pp. 130-131.
as blurred as a bit of brush-work in water-colour, spoilt by the upsetting of the artist's glass." 

The symbolism of the portrait is related in other ways to the novel's pervasive ambiguity.

First, while customary symbolical interpretation would seem to support Mrs. Server's explanation that the mask represents appearance and lifelessness while the face represents life or reality, the sort of reality that is hidden behind the narrator's theory of the sacred fount is death in life. This is the quality of the portrait in general, "blooming and beautiful" but with a "grimace" which the narrator cannot see. Like the narrator's theory, then, the portrait is an "obscure" and "ambiguous work of art" for "he can perceive only intermittently the grimace that is embodied in his theory, the horror that is transformed to art by his imagination." Representing both life and death, the portrait itself is intentionally ambiguous in the reality of the death-in-life of the face and the artifice of life-in-art of the mask, reflecting the central ambiguity which keeps the narrator's romantic, artistic vision separate from the vision of all others in the novel. 


53 Isle, pp. 226-227.
Furthermore, the portrait represents the transcendent imagination of the creative artist. The man in the portrait is described as holding at first what appears to be "some obscure work of art": "In the real world he may have an existence which is represented by such a mask, but in the world of art, where the artist's imagination has put him, he may, indeed must, appear otherwise." The artist, then, in his role of providence—like the narrator, in his role of superior consciousness—can change ordinary reality. Particularly in an ambiguous work of art the artist can choose to have it both ways:

He may put a mask of life on mundane reality or he may put a mask of death on human vitality; yet, it is a mask created by the artist, and as such it represents a new reality, separate from and subject to different laws than ordinary reality.

Ultimately, the discussion of the painting's symbolism is frustrating to the reader because of its inconclusiveness and the shortcomings of all of the individual interpretations by the guests.

As a symbol, the portrait's significance remains obscure. Only the narrator tells the reader what it looks like, "directly by presumably accurate description and indirectly through his perhaps biased reporting of the words of other observers of it." Furthermore, James does

---


55 Ibid.
not follow through to make the picture an explicit "allegorical representation of the relationships of specific characters" but instead only has the four persons who view it do "a little tentative hinting at identifications and then wander away."\textsuperscript{56}

Another deficiency of the individual interpretations by the guests is that they all assume that the man and the mask are somehow existentially involved with one another, that the man and the mask are mutually dependent. Independent relationships may be a possibility, with the relationship between the man and the mask being only an apparent or accidental one, just as the relationships the narrator deals with are sometimes imagined ones.\textsuperscript{57}

Typically, James underlines the picture's significance by asking for its meaning and yet not seeming to accept any given answer.\textsuperscript{58}


\textsuperscript{57}James K. Folsom, "Archimago's Well" An Interpretation of The Sacred Fount," \textit{Modern Fiction Studies}, \textit{VII:2} (Summer, 1961), 139-140.

\textsuperscript{58}Ibid., p. 139.
CHAPTER V

THE STORIES OF ARTISTS AND WRITERS

In the stories of artists and writers, James approaches the problems of artistic failure from more than one point of view. He shows that failure can result from the attempt to satisfy a fickle public, implying a necessary conflict between the artist and society. But sometimes the artists and writers themselves are responsible for their failures in their inabilities to develop the proper balance of detachment and involvement, their incomplete perceptions, and their misunderstandings of the relationship of the artist to the work of art.

James does not present as an ideal the position of art for art's sake. In several stories he traces the obligation of the artist and writer to be aware of moral as well as aesthetic considerations. James implies that while detachment is an ideal, the true artist can never afford to be indifferent to the claims and actualities of human experience.

The technique of point of view becomes part of the meaning of many of these stories: the detached, yet necessarily involved, narrator of the tales becomes both a means of telling the story and a representation of its theme.
In many of the short stories dealing with writers and artists, James considers the problem of the conflict between the artist and society. The inability on the part of the writer or artist to resolve this conflict nearly always leads to his failure or incompleteness as an artist. To James, there seems to be an inevitable conflict in the creative person between his private and public commitments. Furthermore, James suggests the necessity of detachment, separation, and even resignation as the means to dealing with the conflict. The artists and writers in the short stories who fail to achieve the proper quality or quantity of detachment necessarily fail in their attempts to fulfill their creative ambitions and goals. Whether the inability to achieve the proper detachment results from the artist's weakness of will or his excessively zealous pursuit of worldly reward and recognition, the artist or writer who expects to find fulfillment as a member of society or who seeks the approval of society necessarily fails.

The biographical basis for James's concern with this kind of conflict has often been cited, and Leon Edel traces James's own failure in his attempts to win the approval of the public as a playwright in the 1890's as the basis for some of the stories. Edel assumes, in fact, that some of the stories are so completely autobiographical that James identified himself with the writers he
Portrayed. Often, for example, the hero of the story is the same age as James was at the time of writing. As tales of writers who are generally unappreciated and ignored, they project James's own sense of anxiety and frustration caused by the failure of his venture in the theater. As public failures and sometimes private successes, the artists and writers triumph only in their art.

James himself provides confirmation for the extensive autobiographical basis for some of the stories. He wrote that he "'found' my Neil Paradays, my Ralph Limberts, my Hugh Verekers and other such supersubtle fry in their designer's own intimate experience."\(^2\) James admitted that the artist-protagonists were derived "in each case, from some noted adventure, some felt embarrassment, some extreme predicament, of the artist enamored of perfection."\(^3\) To seek such perfection by means of some worldly approval, however, is to pursue almost certain failure. James himself, as has often been noted, was a detached observer of life and he often defended the value of such detachment.


to the creative life. In a letter to H. G. Wells, for example, he argues the necessity of detachment in order to create:

There is, to my vision, no authentic, and no really interesting and no beautiful, report of things on the novelist's, the painter's part unless a particular detachment has operated, unless the great stewpot or crucible of the imagination, of the observant and recording and interpreting mind in short, has intervened and played its part--and this detachment, this chemical transmutation for the aesthetic, the representational, end is terribly wanting in autobiography brought, as the horrible phrase is, up to date.

In Notes of a Son and Brother, James likens the artist to the man in the audience detached from the action on stage. Like Lambert Strether, the artist imagines himself as one who perceives at a distance: "He has...almost like a gaping spectator at a thrilling play, to see himself see and understand."

The detachment requisite for the creative artist, however, can often lead to isolation or even indifference and renunciation, but this is the risk, the price to pay, that the artist must take. It is the artist's isolation that after all makes possible his art, the art justifying in turn the isolation. The artist tends to be asocial by

---


nature, seeking no definite relationship with society.\(^7\)

In order to make meaning of life, James argues, the artist has to live as an aesthetic adventurer: art should reflect the awareness of the sensitive observer of life. Yet, the problem is that awareness is achieved only by exercising detachment, the detachment paradoxically leading to a greater ability to be and to see rather than to do or to get. The artist must be detached from the life of doing and getting "if he is to be certain that his awareness is unqualified by a selfish interest and acquisitive intent, for when so qualified, consciousness is impure."\(^8\)

James defends the adventure of art despite its insecurities. The life of art may leave the artist "weary and worn, but how, after his fashion, he will have lived!"\(^9\)

The artist, convinced that life is an aesthetic adventure, must deny or renounce the unbeautiful aspects of ordinary life. Thus, his response to society involves indifference: "he turns his back on society to find in his art a realm where life is [that] aesthetic adventure."\(^10\)

The artist cannot serve two masters, and the sense of

---


\(^9\)The *Art of the Novel*, pp. 29-30.

\(^10\)Beebe, pp. 230-231.
renunciation and unhappiness in many of the stories points up the incompatibility between the commitment to art and the search for private happiness and public acclaim. The artist ultimately refuses to live in the world of reality in order to live more fully in the work of art. 11 James apparently came to the conclusion that a nearly unbridgeable chasm divided the truly dedicated artist from the general public. The solution is to cultivate isolation, not from the daily life of society or the environment, but rather a kind of "spiritual independence which makes it possible for the artist to dedicate himself unconditionally to the creation of art of the highest and finest quality." 12 The theme is worked out in the stories in terms of surrender and self-reliance. While the artist is outside the mainstream of human activity, he realizes "that he could not become part of that stream without submerging his spiritual and artistic integrity." 13 The success of an artist must remain antithetical to worldly accomplishment. While the mob demands performance, the artist requires patient and leisure. The conflict of the demands for production and performance is a variation of the conflict of doing and being: to

13 Ibid., p. 138.
James and the true artist artistic doing without artistic being leads to failure.  

The creative temperament, the artist type, prevails in James's fiction even when the sensitive, perceptive protagonists are not themselves painters or writers. Yet, there are more than fifty stories dealing with representatives of the artistic temperament either as heroes or minor characters as artists. The advantage in presenting the artist himself as the narrator of the story, however, is that the character's point of view can become part of the meaning of the events he narrates. At the same time that the narrator takes in impressions of the physical world, he sees deeply into human character and motive: he has "the painter's special perspicacity" which makes him "sensitive to the inner life as well as to physical beauty."  

The rarified nature of the Jamesian hero has been generally acknowledged and often criticized. E. M. Forster found that these characters were "incapable of fun, of rapid motion, of carnality, and of nine-tenths of heroism."

---

14 Powers, pp. 103-106.
15 Beebe, pp. 198-199.
He thought that "their clothes will not take off." Yet, the appeal of the stories lies in the presentation of this artist-hero: each one of the artist-protagonists is a restless soul engaged in an effort at individual self-determination and consciousness. This is no rarified and irrelevant search, not a "blank liberty" but the "freedom to be oneself in relation to the world." 18

James himself acknowledges the difficulty of making a fictional hero out of a perfect artist, and it is the attempt, the struggle, to seek perfection in an imperfect world that gives the stories much of their energy as well as their appeal. James presents his writers and artists in the process of seeking that ideal world, "a great good place in which art could flourish, freed alike from the pressures and disorders of society and the cares that beset the artist's mind." 19

Because the imperfections can also exist in the artist himself as a human being, the stories of artists and writers necessarily deal with failure, often deprivation and resignation accompanying the failure. Richard Blackmur comments on the pervasiveness of this theme in the stories:


The man fully the artist is the man, short of the saint, most wholly deprived. This is the picture natural to the man still in revolt, to the man who still identifies the central struggle of life in society as the mere struggle of that aspect of his life of which he makes his profession, and who has not yet realized, but is on the verge of doing so, that all the professions possible in life are mutually inclusive. One's own profession is but the looking glass and the image of others; and the artist is he who being by nature best fitted to see the image clear is damned only if he does not. If he sees, his vision disappears in the work, which is the country of the blue. That is why the only possible portrait to paint of the artist will be a portrait of him as a failure.20

I.

In "The Death of the Lion," the conflict between the artist and society is developed from the perspective of the failure of society to appreciate the artist's talent. James exposes the superficial literary adulators whose worship not only exploits the artist's talent and potential but eventually causes him to become mistreated as a human being.

Neil Paraday, the writer-protagonist, had already developed the appropriate distance from this society. He only wants to be left alone in order to finish his work. As the narrator explains, Paraday knew that the artist's real work requires detachment: "Observation too was a kind of work and experience a kind of success." He acknowledges the necessity of wining and dining with his public, but is not deluded about their inability to

20"In the Country of the Blue," Kenyon Review, V (1943), 615-616.
appreciate him: "No one has the faintest conception of what I'm trying for...and not many have read three pages that I've written...."\(^{21}\)

Once appropriated by Mrs. Weeks Wimbush, "wife of the boundless brewer and proprietress of the universal menagerie," Paraday is forced to change "his old ideal": "Say what one would, success was a complication and recognition had to be reciprocal." The artist's sense of detachment is destroyed: "the monastic life, the pious illumination of the missal in the convent-cell were things of the gathered past." The change does not bring despair immediately to Paraday but does create "agitation" and requires "adjustment." (225)

Paraday sits for the painters in Mrs. Wimbush's coterie, is forced to visit her country home, where he provides entertainment for the assemblage of feeble-minded aristocrats who never get beyond the twentieth page of his latest novel and who lose the notes for his new one. Fallen ill, Paraday is abandoned to the most remote room of the house, where he is cared for by his faithful secretary. At his death, only the doctor, the servants, and the secretary remain in the house. Meanwhile, the new literary lions have already appeared on the scene: Guy Walshingham, a popular novelist who turns out to be a pallid Miss Collop,

and Dora Forbes, a florid gentleman with a red moustache and bright knickerbockers. Eventually, Paraday's lost manuscript is found, which brings him sudden if posthumous fame. The climax epitomizes the fate of the artist in the world of the country house. 22

The narrator of the story, himself a journalist and reporter, becomes aware of the conflict of the artist in society. He warns his hostess of the inviolability of the artistic temperament: "When you meet with a genius as fine as this idol of ours let him off the dreary duty of being a personality as well." He knows that if Paraday "doesn't look out people will eat a great hole in his life." (229) The conflict between social engagements and his "beautiful imagination" is a variation on the Jamesian theme of the violation of human personality. Paraday is "beset, badgered, bothered--he's pulled to pieces on the pretext of being applauded. People expect him to give them his time, his golden time, who wouldn't themselves give five shillings for one of his books." (229) The really sublime act of homage, the narrator points out, would be to "succeed in never seeing him at all," in the sense that the true writer lives in his works: "The more you get into his writings the less you'll want to, and

---

you'll be immensely sustained by the thought of the good you're doing him." (230)

"The Birthplace" extends the theme of the public's mistaken attitude toward literary greatness, an attitude that can cause failure on the part of the artist as well as confusion on the part of posterity. Probably suggested by the idolatry and commercialization surrounding Shakespeare's birthplace, the story is contemptuous and satirical of hero worship.

Morris Gedge first regards his appointment as custodian of the birthplace, the shrine, ideal, but he soon becomes bored and indignant with the irrelevant and dubious "facts" that he is supposed to repeat to uncomprehending tourists. His resulting cynicism nearly costs him his job, and he decides he must learn to lie if he can. He succeeds admirably: "I daresay, if we looked close enough we should find the hearthstone scraped by his little feet."

Gedge's reward is a higher salary. Gedge's new account of the birthplace is designed to appeal to the tastes of the visitors to the shrine:

We stand here, you see, in the old living-room, happily still to be reconstructed in the mind's eye, in spite of the havoc of time, which we have fortunately,

---

of late years, been able to arrest. It was of course rude and humble, but it must have been snug and quaint...

As a parody of official and pseudo-critical utterance with serious intent, the story is the sharpest of James's criticisms of the sentimental curiosity about the private life of the great artist in contrast to the genuine interest in his works. The story is more, however, than a clever exposure of public gullibility since the development of Gedge's personal crisis is treated seriously. In fact, there are significant parallels in Gedge's developing self-awareness to the perceptiveness and sensitivity of the artist. Though Gedge is aware of the immorality of his deceit, his "critical sense" (which James seems to equate with "conscience" in this context) tells him that he must choose between security and honor. He sacrifices honor to conform to the public concept or expectation of truth, giving up his critical sense, the only quality that he has ever taken pride in. His only hope is in self-awareness: he knows that he is lying, his critical sense having


permitted him to recognize the truth.\textsuperscript{27} Gedge resolves his dilemma in triumph by deceiving an insensitive and credulous public, a deception that saves him his job, his peace of mind, his self-respect, and even "in a strange way saves Shakespeare, saves the values of the imagination."\textsuperscript{28}

Gedge, however, achieves the wrong kind of success: this is not the kind of recognition that true art deserves or requires. Gedge cynically knows that the tourists who come to the shrine know little of art and would not recognize it if they were exposed to it. Gedge gives the tourists what they want, "and their request is not for art but to be deceived by the appearance of it."\textsuperscript{29} There is a sense of failure on the part of Gedge, too. The implication is that prostituting art for the gullible public affects the man who makes the adjustment. He cannot remain unaffected by the impurity of his own motives. While Gedge achieves success, the victory is at the expense of his own honesty. Aware of his duplicity and hypocrisy, he admits a sense of failure: "He must go straight on, since it was what had for a year now so handsomely answered; he must brazen it out consistently, since that only was what his dignity was at last reduced to."\textsuperscript{30}


\textsuperscript{28}Clifton Fadiman, quoted in Ross, p. 323.

\textsuperscript{29}Holleran, p. 80.

\textsuperscript{30}Ross, pp. 327-328.
Another story defending the private life of the artist, the inviolability of which must be preserved if he is to avoid failure, "The Great Good Place" is a late version of "Benvolio," its writer-hero an elderly, more integrated personality who is given an opportunity by a mysterious visitor to regain his lost detachment in an experience of the "great good place."

George Dane, the writer-hero of the story, has been driven by success beyond any atmosphere in which he can work. Harried by the attention that accompanies public recognition, he risks the danger of becoming submerged in life and losing his art. "Granted the setting of controlled form and arrangement, complete freedom from distractions, and aesthetic consciousness of the initiate" the result of a brief stay in the great good place is what Dane considers a return of "the vision and the faculty divine." 

In the great good place, which can only be found through personal awareness and which seems to be "centered at the core in a consciousness," Dane experiences a sense of reawakened inner life, of having recovered something. He had not really achieved detachment before, but "there

---

31 Vaid, p. 201.
32 Beebe, p. 221.
33 Ibid.
was detachment here—the sense of a great silver bowl from which he could ladle up the melted hours." (XI, 34) The place is not an escapist paradise, however, for Dane "must arrive by himself and on his own feet" and the experience enables him to return to work. Nor can the great good place be described in exact terms: Dane struggles to articulate his reaction to the place in his search for suitably synonyms, but has no idea who the host may be. It is an extremely personal haven: Dane recognizes every book in the library, "the paradise of his own room" (XI, 330), a refuge that provides not truth itself but the conditions for the discovery of truth.  

The desire for escape and isolation survives in the sensitive, world-weary artist. Dane knows that leaving the place was "difficult" and "impossible" and "that the only remedy, the true soft effacing sponge, would be to be left, to be forgotten. There was no footing on which a man who had liked life...could now escape it." Only when Dane reaches this extreme position could he admit the truth that the "inner life, for people of his generation, victims of the modern madness, were maniacal extension and motion, that was returning health."  

A variation on the theme of the artist threatened

---

34 Ibid., pp. 227-229.

by an overzealous public is that represented by the threats of marriage, women, romantic love and domestic life, all of which seem to be disruptive to the artist's real work. As a contemporary commentator noted, the fatal effect of "importunate society upon talent" is an effect "not always the less fatal when the claims of society are tempered by those of domesticity." 36

Woman, particularly in her function as mother, seems to pose a great threat to the freedom and dedication of the artist. James often develops a triangle involving an older man and a younger man, the younger being an admirer and friend of the older, in opposition to a threatening female. This is the situation in "The Author of Beltraffio" and "The Lesson of the Master." 37

As early as 1876 in one of his letters for the Tribune James entertained the "germ" for a story on the theme of the impossibility of prostituting one's talent for the claims of domesticity: "The idea of a poor man, the artist, the man of letters, who all his life is trying—if only to get a living—to do something vulgar, to take the measure of the huge, flat foot of the public... to make, as it were, a sow's ear out of a silk purse." 38

36 Lena Milman, "A Few Notes upon Mr. James," Yellow Book, VII (October, 1895), 81.


"The Next Time," the story that resulted from this idea and which was the only piece of fiction James published in the year following Guy Domville, is significantly the story of a writer who tries for years to meet the popular taste and who fails.39 The story elaborates the dangers of marriage and domesticity to the creative artist. Ralph Limbert, the writer-hero, lives in genteel poverty with his many children and a contemptuous mother-in-law. He desperately struggles to write a popular success "the next time" to support his family, but can only succeed in producing a masterpiece for the select few.

The irony of the story is that the narrator unintentionally contributes to Limbert's continued bad luck by publishing favorable reviews of each new work. He admits that "mine was in short the love that killed, for my subtlety...produced no tremor of the public tail!" (278)

James wanted the attitude of the narrator to become a part of the story, questioning whether his narrator could have a "fine grotesque inconscience" so that "the whole thing becomes a masterpiece of closed and finished irony":

My narrator might be made the ironic portrait of a deluded vulgarian (of letters too), some striving confere who has all the success my hero hasn't, who can do exactly the thing he can't do, and who, vaguely, mistily conscious that he hasn't the suffrage of the

raffines, the people who count, is trying to do something distinguished....

The solution was to discover a suitable narrator, and James suggests that he himself become the narrator, "either impersonally or in my unnamed, unspecified personality." More than a mere observer, then, the narrator is critic as well as commentator of the action: "I am a critic who doesn't sell, i.e., whose writing is too good— attracts no attention whatever." Though not entirely aware of his responsibility for ruining the chances of Limbert for popular success, the men have a great deal in common: the distinguished writing of the narrator fairly damages the reputation of the writer in the attempt to do good:

To keep me quiet about him becomes one of his needs—one of the features of his struggle, that struggle to manage to do once or twice, remuneratively, the thing that will be popular, the exhibition of which...is the essence of my subject.

Again, James insists that real accomplishment lies in the work itself, not in its public relationship or reception. Ray Limbert points out to the narrator that he himself had defined success as achieved when the man of craft achieves complete expression of a beautiful subject.

Accepting the "law of one's talent," success must be a consequence of the art work itself though Limbert wishes it could be otherwise:


We've sat prating here of 'success'...like chanting monks in a cloister, hugging the sweet delusion that it lies somewhere in the work itself, in the expression...of one's subject or the intensification, as somebody else somewhere says, of one's note. (262)

Ironically, Limbert's talent is responsible for his public and financial failure. He persists in producing the masterpiece for the select few: an Olympian, he cannot hope to please the public. Like Paraday, he dies before completing his last manuscript, a novel called "Derogation" which the narrator thinks a "splendid fragment" but unlikely to "wake up the libraries." (279)

"Broken Wings" deals more briefly but more optimistically with the problem of the artist's sensitivities and their complications in love and marriage involvements that can potentially cause failure to an artist. It is excessive sensitivity that causes the initial misunderstanding between the artists in this story, each blundering "as sensitive souls of the 'artistic temperament' blunder" (327), into mistaken concepts of each other's attitudes and material situations.

One of the artists, Stuart Straith, a painter, thought that Mrs. Harvey had achieved literary success while Mrs. Harvey thought that Straith had been a success as a painter. Following a later accidental encounter at a theater, the two discover their mutual errors, are "united in the identity of their lesson" (329) and become married, dedicated to "be beaten together." (330)
They renounce the fashionable world which had separated them. The artist finds that he must retreat from the worldliness of the country house in self-protection, and James uses an episode of isolation and exclusion to make his point. Finding himself unaccompanied by any other guest in the procession to the dining room and so obliged to enter alone at the end of the line, the painter realizes that the artist may be invited to decorate the fashionable world but remains excluded from its inner circles. 42

The story is unusual among those that deal with the artists and writers as failures. Here, the attitude toward artistic collaboration is a favorable one, a point of view that James does not always take. Furthermore, the woman as artist is exceptional in James's stories since she is neither presented as predatory nor treated satirically. 43

Yet, the potential for success in this artistic collaboration is qualified because James deliberately avoids a sentimental or facile resolution. Now that the artists are prepared to face together an indifferent public whose opinions they realize have no real value, they commit themselves to work: "When they had recovered themselves enough to handle their agreement more responsibly

42 Gill, pp. 78-80.
43 Matheson, p. 228.
the words in which they confirmed it broke in sweetness as well as sadness from both together: 'And now to work!'" (330)

"The Real Right Thing" uses the device of the supernatural to express the inviolability of the writer's private life and its irrelevance to considering the meaning of his work.

George Withermore, requested by his publisher to work on the life of Ashton Doyne, recently deceased, faces the problem of dealing with the widow's objections to including the intimate detail of the writer's private relations. However, Mrs. Doyne agrees to place the materials for the planned biography into Withermore's hands, with the restriction that the "biography...be a solid reply to every imputation on herself." (X, 472) Though Withermore is young and inexperienced, a journalist-critic "with little to show," he is allowed to work in the study of the late Doyne. Working through the voluminous material, Withermore admires the great art of biography but realizes "the artist was what he did—he was nothing else." (X, 474-475)

Yet, the young writer refuses to give up such an opportunity and proceeds with the work. He experiences a curious sensation of Ashton Doyne's presence in the room, then discovers that books and papers are mysteriously left open for him. After a few weeks, the spirit seems
to forsake him and Withermore begins to question whether he
should pursue the biography. Mrs. Doyne, who also seems
to know of the ghost, tells Withermore that she wants him
to do "the real right thing." (X, 482)

Withermore knows that delving into Doyne's private
life, "to lay him bare, to serve him up, to give him to
the world," is a violation and that the ghostly visitation
represents a protest against an official "Life," in an at­
tempt to save his own: "He's there to be let alone." (X,
484) At the end of the story, Withermore sees the ghost
of Doyne "distinct and immense. But dim. Dark. Dreadful"
(X, 484) guarding the threshold of the study. After Mrs.
Doyne acknowledges that she sees the ghost as well, Wither­
more is able to give up the projected biography and to es­
cape gracefully.

II.

In making the claim that the artist must reject
society in order to avoid failure, James is not, however,
opting for a theory of art for art's sake. When he writes
that "art makes life" he means that the artist can inten­
sify life, but that the intensity of the artist's involve­
ment in that life needs to be carefully controlled. Nor
does he suggest that the artist can afford to be com­
pletely indifferent to the claims of actual experience
or the questions of morality.

The intensification must occur, rather, as a total
involvement of the artist in the material for his work. James insists that art requires "the act of throwing the whole weight of the mind, and of gathering it at the particular point...in order to do so." His criticism of William Wetmore Story as an artist is based on the assumption that Story was present only in part in this process.44

James specifically satirizes the aesthetic position and qualifies the art for art's sake ideal in an early story, "A Bundle of Letters." Jumbling the ideas of Pater, Ruskin, Swinburne and perhaps even James himself, Louis Leverett, a young man from Boston in Paris in search of "life" defends the position that "the great thing is to live, you know--to feel, to be conscious of one's possibilities; not to pass through life mechanically and insensibly, even as a letter through the post office."

To "live and to feel," however, involves more than being a passive recipient of beautiful impressions. It is necessary for the artist to be aware of the sensuous impressions life offers him, "but also to force these impressions to open as a window upon a perspective of character and yield a deeper understanding of human nature, of social conditions, of spiritual elements functioning in human behavior." If the impressions do not

multiply the relationships with life, they lead to curiosity for the sake of curiosity, art for the sake of art, and ultimately to ennui.\textsuperscript{45}

The idea of art for art's sake is furthermore injurious to life itself. James shows that the morality of the purely aesthetic life leads to another kind of failure, the death of the spirit and moral stasis. Just as James considered the violation of human personality a supreme moral transgression, he thought that the artist must learn to leave the human will intact: "The man who worships art exclusively will, in adjusting people to his museum scale of values, destroy their freedom."\textsuperscript{46}

The quality of the artist's relationship to life with the claims that life exerts on the writer to make the correct choices in human relationships is explored in the story "The Lesson of the Master." It is possible that James smiles, in this story, at his own idea of the religion of art which Paul Overt takes too literally (too overtly?\textsuperscript{47}).

Paul Overt, an aspiring young writer, visits Henry St. George, a successful novelist no longer


productive but whom Overt idolizes. In a series of conversations, St. George warns Overt not to worship false gods, "the idols of the market...money and luxury and 'the world', placing one's children and dressing one's wife."

(115) Later, Paul falls in love with Marian Fancourt and becomes himself unable to produce artistically because of the conflict between his love for the woman and the belief in the "lesson of the master," that children, wife, and marriage can interfere with the pursuit of artistic perfection. (135) Paul follows the master's advice to live intensely, but independently, and goes to Europe. Meanwhile, Mrs. St. George dies and Henry marries Miss Fancourt. The young man's disillusionment and disappointment are complicated by his inability to determine whether the advice of the master was a joke or whether St. George married in order to "save" him.

The serious point of the story is Overt's inability to understand the inherent as opposed to the explicit statement of the lesson. Because he is infatuated with the possibility of literary success as measured by the superficial glamor of St. George's life--naively assuming, for example, that he could write great works if he were only blessed with as magnificent an estate as Summersoft--Paul Overt misunderstands the lesson. Though apparently speaking for James in his acknowledgment of the potential dangers of marriage and domestic life to the creative
temperament, St. George does not advocate complete withdrawal from life. The artist's dedication to art does not imply that the artist should not live and should not experience life.

Paul questions whether St. George does allow the artist "the common passions and affections of men" but misunderstands the answer—which is that the artist must be both less and more than a man--because he lacks the imagination to conceive of the ambiguous in life, a lack manifested by his confusion occasioned by the ambiguous behavior of his idol at the end of the story. What Overt fails to perceive is the necessity of the artist's commitment to life, a commitment that the master specifies as being expansive and inclusive: "Hasn't [the artist] a passion, or affection, which includes all the rest?" James suggests that the creation of art necessitates the most intense experience of life just as Miss Fancourt questions, "What's art but an intense life--if it be real?" (106)

"The Author of Beltraffio" deals with the relationship of the artist and morality, the conflict of the artist's vision with the concept of good and evil as conceived by society. In this story, James qualifies his defense of aesthetic detachment, the commitment of the artist to the

---

48 Cromphout, p. 135.
purely aesthetic requirements of the profession.

Mark Ambient, a great literary artist, is visited by the narrator, a young American follower. The young man meets Beatrice Ambient, a thin priggish woman who disapproves of her husband's work, is blind to its beauties, and fears that it exerts an immoral effect on their young, angelic son, Dolcino. The narrator, single-minded in his admiration of Ambient's talent, is so enraptured with the proofs of the latest novel that he persuades the wife, against her will, to read them. She does so and is so shocked that when Dolcino falls ill she allows him to die by refusing to admit the doctor, rather than risk the peril to his soul which she feels latent in his father's prose. 49

Ambient sees the conflict between himself and his wife as "simply the opposition between two distinct ways of looking at the world." (77) But this does not imply that the oppositions can be resolved: James in fact suggests that either way of looking at the world is vulnerable. An implicit attack on the aesthetic point of view, the position that art and morality are unrelated, the story in fact shows that the artist's devotion to the purely aesthetic can be just as potentially destructive as an exaggerated commitment to moral considerations.

James wrote of his intention to develop "the opposition

49 Putt, pp. 215-218.
between the narrow, cold, Calvinistic wife, a rigid moral-
ist, and the husband impregnated—even to morbidness—with
the spirit of Italy, the love of beauty, of art." James
intended that the man would be "aggravated, made extrava-
gant and perverse, by the sense of his wife's disapproval." 50

If the personification of the philistine hatred
and fear of art is ridiculed in Mrs. Ambient's "air of in-
corruptible conformity," 51 the aesthetic attitude is set
in proper perspective in the characterization of Ambient's
sister, Gwendolen, who "made up very well as a Rossetti." 52
Indirectly, Ambient's responsibility for the child's death
is linked, however tenuously, to his aesthetic approach
to life. Attuned to physical beauty, "sensitive to sur-
faces and styles," Ambient married Beatrice in the first
place for her appearance and finds in her beauty "the
grand air" of an art masterpiece (72) just as he views,
in his passion and sensitivity for form, the evanescent
beauty of his son. Aware that the child is the victim of
marital incompatibility, Ambient refuses to act upon this
awareness, a failure that results from his artistic tempera-
ment, of feeling life through the imagination and

50 The Notebooks of Henry James, pp. 58-59.

51 Viola Hopkins Winner, "The Artist and the Man in
'The Author of Beltraffio'," PMLA, LXXXIII:1 (March, 1968),
105.

52 Marius Bewley, The Eccentric Design: Form in the
Classic American Novel (New York and London: Columbia Uni-
responding to it as a "spectacle," a feeling that represents a detachment from real life as well as a "passivity in his role as a husband and father." 53

The central moral problem of the story, the implications of the dangers in the determination to mold the will of another human being, is further set in perspective by the narrator's involvement in the conflict. More deeply committed to the idea of art for art's sake than Ambient himself, the narrator, victimized by his own overworked aesthetic sensibility, nourishes Ambient's ego, which only adds to Beatrice's hostility toward her husband. It is the narrator who is responsible for forcing the issue, seeing Dolcino as an angel and persuading Mrs. Ambient to read the proofs of her husband's new work. The narrator is indirectly responsible, too, for the death of the child, knowing the consequences of Beatrice's reading the book. The narrator understands even less than Ambient: his limited sensibility grasps only the superficial aspects of his master's doctrine. His idolization is the epitome of the aesthetic attitude in his indifference to the moral consequences of his actions. The narrator ironically exposes his own guilt, though unaware of it himself, when at the end of the story he says, "apropos of consciences, the reader is now in a position to judge of my compunction for

my effort to convert my cold hostess."54 (94)

"The Author of Beltraffio" is thematically significant in the merging of the theme of the evils of hyper-aestheticism with the theme of the evil of tampering with the lives of other human beings, and technically significant in James's development of the narrator's intimate moral involvement in the events he relates.

III.

Another cause of failure in some of the stories is the inability of the artist himself to understand his relationship to the art work and the raw material of his craft. Whether these failures involve the misunderstanding of the nature of the creative process, the frustrations accompanying the development of proper appreciation, or unrealistic expectations and desires beyond one's talent or one's will power, the errors in judgment lead to a seriously debilitated condition for the creative artist.

The paradoxical relationship of the artist to his material and of inspiration to the realities of human and social relationships is the theme of "The Real Thing."

This story is told from the point of view of an artist-narrator who aspires to be a great portrait painter—he cannot get "the honours, to say nothing of the emoluments,

of a great painter of portraits" out of his head (170) -- but whose immediate problem is to find the proper model "types" for book illustrations.

Major and Mrs. Monarch apply as models, but they turn out to be too perfect for the job. Because they are "gentlefolk," they wish to be discreet, a quality the illustrator anticipates as potentially troublesome as is their desire to be "artistic." When Major Monarch reveals that his wife had been known as "the Beautiful Statue," the narrator senses their woodenness and emptiness, for his purposes, and indicates that he would prefer "a certain amount of expression." (172) The "meagre little Miss Churm," on the other hand, while lacking the social station of the Monarchs, "could represent everything, from a fine lady to a shepherdess." (176) But the Monarchs initially disdain the Cockney girl, "in their spotless perfection," as they wince at her wet umbrella. Although the narrator hopes that the Monarchs would get the idea of what would be expected of them when he asks Miss Churm to dress in black velvet as a Russian princess, they miss the narrator's intention (but ironically express precisely James's point) when they argue that it is the painter's ability, not Miss Churm's, that will transform her. The narrator admits, "Oh, you think she's shabby, but you must allow for the alchemy of art." (178)

Mrs. Monarch poses conscientiously, sitting "with
great intensity," as though for a photographer, but the narrator perceives that the ability which has served her so well for that purpose "unfitted her" for his. She lacks "variety of expression" (179): "She was the real thing, but always the same thing." He finds her "too insurmountably stiff; do what I would with it my drawing looked like a photograph or a copy of a photograph." (180) The narrator realizes that the value of Miss Churm as a model "resided precisely in the fact that she had no positive stamp," that--like Miriam Rooth--she had a "curious and inexplicable talent for imitation." (180) Abruptly, Oronte applies to the artist for a position as servant. Seizing on his "very attitude and expression which made a picture," the illustrator hires the "bright adventurer" to model as well as to serve. Oronte has the ability to look like an English gentleman, just as Miss Churm could be requested to look like an Italian. (183)

The conflict is brought to a crisis when the narrator-illustrator realizes that he must overlook the superior social position of the Monarchs and accept the real superiority, for the purposes of artistic representation, of Miss Churm and Oronte. He realizes "the lesson that in the deceptive atmosphere of art even the highest respectability may fail of being plastic" (189), dismisses the Monarchs, and proceeds to work with his new models. At the end of the story when the Monarchs ironically take over
the tasks of servants, Mrs. Monarch arranging the "rough
curls" of Miss Churm and the Major removing the breakfast
dishes, the artist sees in them a new magnanimity that
transcends a superficial social code and confesses that he
should like to have been able to paint them in their new
roles:

They had accepted their failure, but they couldn't ac­
cept their fate. They had bowed their heads in bewil­
derment to the perverse and cruel law in virtue of
which the real thing could be so much less precious
than the unreal; but they didn't want to starve. (191)

James suggests that the actuality of life cannot
be imitatively transformed into an aesthetically viable
representation: the real thing is the alchemy of art
that can make that transformation, the artist's imagina­
tion that can force the recalcitrant material of real life
into plastic representation.

The story suggests more than the defense of the
artist's powers of imagination, however. James is con­
cerned with an ethical relationship as well, the inhuman
use of people, the attempt to bend the will of human be­
ings to one's own purposes. If there is a suggestion of
"something a bit brutal and even inhuman" in the artist's
treatment of the Monarchs, he is justified because as
models the Monarchs are of no value. 55 If we sympathize

55 Lyall H. Powers, "Henry James and the Ethics of
the Artist: 'The Real Thing' and "The Liar'," Texas Stud­
with the artist, it is because the Monarchs remain unsatisfactory for all their fine appearance and superior station as human beings. Symbolic of their emptiness, however, is the fact that they have no children. "Frozen into the forms prescribed by caste," the Monarchs are "completely incapable of moral spontaneity," as symbolized by their "fixed, intractable pictorial 'values.'"\textsuperscript{56} The Cockney girl and the young Italian represent the ideal in life as well as in art because they have moral spontaneity, "a quality that can be exploited to illustrate dramatic situations because they are capable of love for others unlike themselves."\textsuperscript{57}

If the meaning of the story is expanded to include the concept of the portrayal of the art of living, the full development of consciousness, then the Major and his wife do represent the ideal, the true gentleman and lady. They willingly resign themselves to life, live with intensity, love each other sufficiently to withstand hardships, possess the self-discipline that makes them not only unobtrusive but interesting, and have the resilience to adjust to changes in fortune.\textsuperscript{58}

\begin{footnotes}
\item Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
In "The Real Thing," two themes converge: the real thing to an artist is his imaginative power, but the ideal life requires both the ability to be morally spontaneous as well as independently resigned. The facts, the raw materials of art, are valuable to the artist only as a starting point. The artist must construct his work from his apprehension, imagination, and consciousness. What finally matters is the quality of the artist's perceptions, "not the kind or amount of crude experience he enjoys or is exposed to." 59

The painter-narrator of "The Beldonald Holbein," though a story of slighter substance than "The Real Thing," does perceive the real in relationship to the false. In this story, where James returns to the issue of the necessity of perceiving the genuine in life as well as in art, a proud and beautiful lady persuades the narrator to paint her portrait. Lady Beldonald wants her own portrait to be so fine that it will distract attention from the Beldonald Holbein, a famous portrait which flatters its subject, a servant-companion to Lady Beldonald. In actuality, the subject is ugly while Lady Beldonald is beautiful. At the end of the story, the artist concludes that "She will have the real thing." (XI, 306)

The irony is that the noblewoman already has the

59 Winner, Henry James and the Visual Arts, p. 112.
real thing but remains unaware of this, for "we have always
seen her inside the glass case of illusion in which her
vanity has preserved her. The case is inseparable from
her; it is part of her personality." (XI, 297)

Although the narrator has only limited insight into
the serious aesthetic point James seems to be making, he is
an example of the fully conscious, involved narrator who
avoids failure as an artist by perceiving the proper dis-
tinction between the merely photographic and the richly
representational in art.

"The Figure in the Carpet" focuses on another kind
of failure, the imperceptiveness of the less than ideal
critic of the work of literary art. James extends his
theme in this story, which has been considered a parable
for literary critics, by showing the professional failure
as well as atrophy of spirit and will that accompany im-
proper or incomplete appreciation of the art work itself.
Again, the story offers another narrator whose impercep-
tions are ironically exhibited in the very process of what
the narrator assures his reader is the development of a
supposedly superior consciousness on his part regarding
the depths of his perceptiveness of literary art.

James wrote that the point of the story was this
idea of perceptiveness or consciousness:

I had long found the charming idea of some artist
whose most characteristic intention, or cluster of
intentions, should have taken all vainly for granted
the public, or at the worst the not unthinkable private, exercise of penetration...the conception of an intent worker who should find himself to the very end in presence but of the limp curiosity....

Of the problems in developing this narrator's awareness, James further wrote:

Vereker's drama indeed—or I should perhaps say that of the aspiring young analyst whose report we read and to whom, I ruefully grant, I have ventured to impute a developed wit—is that at a given moment the limpness begins vaguely to throb and heave, to become conscious of a comparative tension. As an effect of this mild convulsion, acuteness, at several points, struggles to enter the field, and the question that accordingly comes up, the issue of the affair, can be but whether the very secret of perception hasn't been lost.

The anonymous narrator of the story is himself a critic who manages to obtain an interview with the great Hugh Vereker. Vereker, who considers critics "little demons of subtlety," tells the narrator that a great secret lies in his work, a clue, "the organ of life," an "extraordinary general intention," the "loveliest thing in the world." The narrator wonders whether the secret (which he refers to as "the buried treasure") is an element of style or of thought, "an element of form or an element of feeling," but Vereker refuses to tell.

The narrator feverishly collects and reads all of Vereker's work, finds no "secret," and, expasperated in his search, renounces the attempt as ridiculous. His

---

60 The Art of the Novel, p. 229.

61 Ibid.
renunciation brings him both the advantage of a reputation for critical astuteness (though paradoxically he had "irremediably missed his point") and the disadvantage of the sense of loss and unproductiveness. The narrator realizes that he has lost not only his books but Vereker himself: "They and their author had been alike spoiled.... I knew too which was the loss I most regretted. I had taken to the man still more than I had ever taken to the books."

(296)

Meanwhile, George Corvick, who has married Gwendolen Erme (both of these characters are critics), journeys to India where, the narrator later discovers, both find "the secret," the "figure in the carpet." But Corvick dies and Gwendolen refuses to divulge what they had together learned. The narrator is left wondering whether the figure in the carpet could be "traceable or describable only for husbands and wives--for lovers supremely united." (306)

Later, Drayton Deane, a reviewer, marries Gwendolen; meanwhile Vereker and his wife both die. Gwendolen Deane then dies in childbirth, leaving, the narrator thinks, only Drayton with the secret. He attempts to discover the precious knowledge, only to find that Drayton knows nothing of the entire matter. The narrator experiences partial insight in seeing that Gwendolen could not have married Drayton for his "understanding" but for something else; he learns from Drayton that whatever the secret
was, it could be used, that Gwendolen had "lived" on it.

(312) The narrator experiences, further, a kind of revenge in revealing to Deane the extent of his wife's lack of trust in him. Though both men are "victims of unappeased desire," the narrator feels "almost" consolation in poor Drayton's discomfort.

The narrator, himself a searcher of minds in his role as a professional critic, is an ironic center of revelation in this story, unlike the other narrators in this respect in that he seems to belong to the class of critics that James satirizes. At the beginning, it is established that the narrator is a young reviewer who "had done a few things and earned a few pence" but whose real competence has not been proved. (285) As his comment quoted above reveals, James was aware that the critical insight and wit of his narrator were out of character. 62

But neither George Corvick nor Gwendolen Erme, and certainly not Drayton Deane, has anything but "imputed wit" and there is no really ideal critic in the story. The point of "The Figure in the Carpet" is that the quest for the figure proceeds along lines that are fatuous--the inquiry is approached as though the figure were a puzzle. In fact, the quality that Vereker himself isolates in his work as "this little trick of mine" is either no trick at

---

62 Ibid.
all or if it is it cannot be discovered by means of mere cleverness. On the one hand, then, this story can serve as a warning to the critic not to take a self-important author too seriously, specifically a warning against what has come to be fashionably known as the intentional fallacy. On the other hand, James warns the critic against the dangers of inappropriate methods of pursuit or investigation.63

What Vereker wants his readers to recognize is that his meaning is as much a matter of the form and texture as of the content: "The order, the form, the texture of my books will perhaps some day constitute for the initiated a complete representation of [the secret]." (287) Vereker appeals for perception on the part of his readers, whether professional critics or not, people to whom the torments of incomprehension, "literature was a game of skill, and skill meant courage, and courage meant honour, and honour meant passion, meant life." (287)64

James protested the lack of perception, what he considered the marked collective mistrust of anything like close or analytical appreciation...this odd numbness of the general sensibility, which seemed ever to condemn it, in presence of a work of art, to a view scarce of half

63Vaid, pp. 78-79.

the intention embodied, and moreover but to the scantest measure of these.65

The issue of the secret, then, is not what it is but how to look at the carpet that contains the figure, to recognize the importance of the "attention of perusal" and of the "exercise of penetration," to refuse to be satisfied with mere "limp curiosity," and to bolster the hope that "the very secret of perception hasn't been lost."66

Hugh Vereker's subtlety as a novelist does not stem from a willful desire to confuse, but from his intimate knowledge of life. No amount of critical finesse can get as much out of a novel, James suggests, as a selfless and affectionate reading, one in which the reader would manifest, in James's phrase, "a sense of life."67

The narrator's selfish motive, in seeking self-advancement and self-promotion as the practical rewards of discovering the secret, thwarts his very search. The narrator is incapable of the requisite selflessness: too intent on the investigation, he is not really interested in the literary accomplishment so much as the secret of its creator. The sterility that results from such motives is implicit in the final situation. Though Gwendolen has "gotten" the secret

65 The Art of the Novel, pp. 227-228.
66 Ibid., p. 229.
67 Seymour Lainoff, "Henry James's 'The Figure in the Carpet': What is Critical Responsiveness?" Boston University Studies in English, V (1961), 126-128.
and admits, "It's my life!" she loses her life after marrying Drayton Deane, who is as spiritually empty as the narrator seems to be. 68

The love element of the story helps to clarify the theme. Beattie has observed how curiously the literary theme becomes involved with the feelings and events that are not at all literary, in fact "with love, with marriage, with the communion of lovers and the sharing of sacred secrets within the bonds of marriage." 69 It is Corvick's involvement with Gwendolen, for example, which provides the direct and unexpected occasion for the narrator's initial meeting with Vereker. And Corvick and Gwendolen's engagement is mysteriously off so long as the secret is unguessed and on again the instant she receives Corvick's announcement of discovery from Bombay.

The "secret" further seems to serve not only as a bond between married lovers; it is also a means of discriminating between husbands. Gwendolen's second husband, Drayton Deane, is loved with a lesser passion that seems to disqualify him from sharing the supreme confidence. The narrator, too, remains isolated from this supreme confidence, excluded from emotional as well as intellectual gratification. Though he is almost prepared

to offer marriage to Gwendolen, when after Corvick's death she has become an eligible young widow, he remains at the end a "victim of unappeased desire" and questions whether the figure in the carpet is perceptible only to those initiated into love. 70

Since the narrator insists on pursuing the secret as though it were a piece of a puzzle and an intellectual fact, 71 he never acquires the understanding that can result from intellect combined with love, just as form in art is not mechanical or external, James suggests, but the essence, the soul of meaning. The art work is never independent of the reader's experience, but draws upon the reader's capacity to bring to it an appropriate "moral and psychological readiness." The creative act is a collaborate venture, the qualified reader participating in and completing the artist's labor. In this sense, the art work "tests the humanity of its reader." 72

Like Roderick Hudson, "The Madonna of the Future" involves the failure of a talented artist, a failure caused as in the case of Roderick by the artist's inability to separate dream from reality, vision from craft, and immersion in life from the necessary detachment. Theobald, the

70 Ibid., p. 97.
71 Leo B. Levy, "A Reading of 'The Figure in the Carpet,'" American Literature, XXIII:4 (January, 1962), 460.
72 Ibid.
artist-hero of the story, has lived for years with his con-
cept of the perfect madonna, but meanwhile the model Sera-
fina has grown old and plump and Theobald dies with the
magnificent work still incomplete.

Early in the story, Theobald tells its narrator
that he had only begun to live, "really lived, intellec-
tually and esthetically speaking," since he came to
Florence. His idealization of the model for the perfect
madonna has purified him, he says, of "all profane desires,
all mere worldly aims" and has left him "the worship of
the pure masters, those who were pure because they were
strong!" But the distillation of his experience has not
enabled Theobald to produce, though he excuses his lack
of results for choosing "never to manifest myself by im-
perfection." When the narrator chides him for being an
idealist, Theobald justifies the artist's power: "No one
so loves and respects the rich realities of nature as the
artist whose imagination intensifies them." (22)

Theobald's weakness becomes further objectified
in the judgment of the narrator, who thinks that Theobald
must be a "natural rhapsodist, or even a harmless madman"
if not a genius since he seems to know so little of the
world: "a creature more unsullied by the accidents of
life it's impossible to conceive." The narrator doubts
"the reality of an artistic virtue, an esthetic purity,
on which some profane experience hadn't rubbed off a little
more." (29)
Eventually the narrator is introduced to the "sublime Serafina," to whom Theobald bends "in a sort of Platonic ecstasy" while he asks questions about "her health, her state of mind, her occupations, and the progress of her needlework"! (35) Serafina impresses the narrator, however, as having a "certain mild intellectual apathy," or in other words, though a beautiful woman, "this bourgeoise Egeria...betrayed rather a vulgar stagnation of mind." Instead of exhibiting spiritual perfection, in fact, her face seems vapid and her demeanor more of the matron than the madonna. On a later visit to the model, the narrator finds her holding a plate of steaming macaroni in the company of her lover, a cynical, clever, and extremely prolific sculptor of statuettes of animals made to look like human beings, manufactured in quantity for the tourist trade. He justifies the art of caricature and crudely representational imitative art: "Cats and monkeys--monkeys and cats--all human life is there!" and finds classic art boring. (45)

Theobald falls ill but before he dies experiences his moment of self-recognition in the company of the narrator, who discovers the "canvas that was a mere dead blank cracked and discoloured by time," the immortal work never begun. Theobald acknowledges his failure, claiming that he is "half a genius" and dies of brain fever. What James suggests is that the true artist, the man whose genius for
art is complete, must have both technique and vision, the ability to produce as well as the ability to imagine. Theobald has both talent and seriousness of purpose but never manages to distill from his experience anything sufficiently impure to admit of life. His vision is magnificent but sterile. His obsession with perfection, significantly composed of purity and innocence, leaves him impotent as a creator.

Theobald is committed to a vision of art as the expression of ideal conceptions in the artist's imagination to which he must give material shape: "He has all the theory of the true and the beautiful, of the conquest of vulgar actuality by the spiritualized ideal" but Theobald is "paralyzed as an artist, as maker, and in the end has only his blank canvas to show for his idealism." 73

The artist who conceives of his craft as the conscious realization of the ideal is destined to fail: to elevate heart and mind over hand and craft is to become paralyzed as a creator. James suggests that it might be better for the artist to shape imperfectly, fully committed to the making of art, rather than to await the inspiration of the ideal.

IV.

In the stories of artists and writers, James does not consistently approach the issues of artistic conflict and failure from a negative point of view. Several stories present the Jamesian norm of the successful artist. To succeed, the artist must first grasp the essential irrationality and ambiguity of the practice of art, what Dencombe in "The Middle Years" calls the "madness" of the artist's commitment to his art. To succeed, the artist has to bridge the tenuous but necessary distinction between involvement and detachment, the separation from life, love, marriage, and worldly experience and the necessary immersion and acceptance of the value, meaning, and significance of that experience to his work and art. To succeed, the artist must be prepared to accept an essentially lonely life of commitment to an ideal, a commitment that often involves personal renunciation. To succeed, above all, the artist must gain self-insight, the full consciousness.

In several stories, James deals with various levels of development of this necessary insight.

"Greville Fane" is a light treatment of the theme of the unsuccessful writer, the title character being unusual in the stories of artists and writers because she completely lacks self-awareness and remains generally indifferent to developing any. In fact, the narrator of the story states that he is interested in the life of the
widow whose pseudonym is Greville Fane because though "only a dull kind woman...she rested me so from literature. To myself literature was an irritation, a torment; but Greville Fane slumbered in the intellectual part of it even as a cat on a hearthrug or a Creole in a hammock."

(154)

The irony of the narrator's position is that he is capable of feeling the "torment of form" and in telling his story James uses this freedom to develop the selfishness of the son and daughter who work their mother literally to death to provide them with luxuries after the market for her works has long disappeared.75

As a writer, Greville Fane lacks distinction in style and tone: "from the moment she took her pen in her hand she became a creature of passion.... Passion in high life was the general formula of this work, for her imagination was at home only in the most exalted circles."

(155) Unlike the narrator who tells her story, Greville Fane "never recognized the 'torment of form'; the furthest she went was to introduce into one of her books...a young poet who was always talking about it." (156) She had a "calm independence of observation and opportunity" which constituted her strength; it is her "ignorance of life"

that constituted her success. But the narrator in contrast says he tries to be "in some direct relation to life."

(157) A very prolific writer, Greville Fane is exploited by her simple-minded daughter Ethel and loutish son Leolin.

Greville Fane loves her son, romantically carried away by Leolin as she is herself transported by her creations, impressed by the "whole question of youth and passion." She impresses on Leolin the importance of living "because that gave you material." (164) Leolin accepts the advice uncritically, however, becoming a kind of dilettante-aesthete with his rings and breastpins, fancy embroidered clothing, even "his eyes [looking] like imitation jewels."

(163-164) His mother projects a liaison with a countess, but Leolin is destined to be as unfortunate in love as in his literary aspirations. The narrator learns, on meeting Greville Fane at a soiree, that her son "had been obliged to recognize the insupportable difficulties of the question of form—he was so fastidious." Consequently, the mother offers to "do the form" if Leolin "would bring home the substance." (167) Furthermore, Greville Fane reveals that her son is paid by the piece: "He got so much for a striking character, so much for a pretty name, so much for a plot, so much for an incident, and had so much promised him if he would invent a new crime." (167)

The relevance of this amusing story to the theme of the failed artist is in the ironic perspective it sets some
of James's serious considerations—that living, saturation, is worthless without the talent to discriminate among those experiences; that form and content are organic and inseparable; that the artist deals with the universal human passions with which he is himself familiar, uninhibited by mistaken concepts of gentility and social appropriateness; and that the only valuable kind of artistic collaboration is between the artist and his own material.

"The Story In It" is unique among the stories of artists and writers since none of its three characters is himself an artist or writer. The story is rather a "dialectical parable" in which the author's own point of view is represented by a charming widow who refutes a "general truth" about the nature of fiction, a refutation that must be understood by the artist who seeks to avoid failure.

Maud Blessingbourne's fondness for French novels and d'Annunzio contrasts with the simple absorption in social life of her hostess, Mrs. Dyott. Colonel Voyt pays the women an afternoon visit; Maud does not know that the Colonel is Mrs. Dyott's lover. Their conversation centers on Maud's reading, from which she draws the contrast between English and French fiction. The Colonel thinks that "they do what they feel, and they feel more things than we." But granting the superior continental maturity, Maud holds that their fiction lacks variety, that their

---

76 Vaid, p. 213.
lovers are all the same, and that they never portray "a
decent woman." The Colonel contends that the writer must
choose, since "the subject the novelist treats is the
rise, the formation, the development, the climax and for
the most part the decline of a relation." The Colonel
questions when "a relation stops, where's the story? If
it doesn't stop, where's the innocence?" But if the op-
posite choice is made, there remains the "floundering
evasions of the English novel." (341)

Maud is not convinced. After the Colonel leaves,
she indicates why she is so certain of her own position.
She herself is involved in the kind of inner drama which
French fiction seems to neglect. She is in love, but will
not admit with whom; the man does not even suspect it, and
she is determined, for unspoken reasons, that he should not
know. Mrs. Dyott tacitly guesses the truth, that Maud is
in love with the Colonel, and when she next sees him tells
him so. The Colonel is astonished, but then has to grant
that Maud's

consciousness, was, in the last analysis, a kind of
shy romance. Not a romance like their own, a thing
to make the fortune of any author up to the mark--
one who should have the invention or who could have
the courage; but a small scared starved subjective
satisfaction that would do her no harm and nobody else
any good. Who but a duffer--he stuck to his conten-
tion--would see the shadow of a 'story' in it? (346)

The story defends James's insistence on conscious-
ness and self-awareness as potential subject matter in
fiction. James rejects such terms as "passion," "life,"
"adventure," and "romance" as too inflexible definitions, resisting the arbitrary legislation of subject matter and arguing that this must be determined by the "artist's own seasoned vision of experience" and that "substance could be produced only through form." 77

Further defending the use of perception and consciousness itself as the proper subject matter of literary art, James extensively commented on the background of "The Story In It." The story was suggested, he wrote, by the observation of a distinguished novelist on being asked "why the adventures he imputed to his heroines were so perversely and persistently but of a type impossible to ladies respecting themselves." The novelist replied, "Ladies who respected themselves took particular care never to have adventures." In turn, he challenged the criticism: "A picture of life founded on the mere reserves and suppressions of life, what sort of performance--for beauty, for interest, for tone--could that hope to be?" The novelist answered, "doing credit equally to his Puritan cleanliness and his Yankee ingenuity," that "the thing is, all beautifully, a matter of interpretation and of the particular conditions; without a view of which latter some of the most prodigious adventures...may vulgarly show for nothing...." 78

---

77 Ibid.
"The Private Life" extends James's preoccupation with the conflict between the worldly and the aesthetic in the creative artist, but from a new perspective. In this story, there is less resolution of the duality than its illustration, particularly the presentation of the idea that it is fatuous to attempt any facile resolution.

The story has four artists and two protagonists. The narrator is an aspiring playwright, Blanche Adney a successful one; the protagonists are Lord Mellifont, a successful painter, probably modeled on Lord Leighton, and Clare Vawdrey, a successful writer, probably suggested by Robert Browning. The story may be a fantasy about James himself, reflecting the "dichotomy which he envisaged in his own life: his dedication to art, and his willingness, at this moment, to accept the worldliness of the stage." James thought that there were "two Brownings," as he wrote to his sister Alice, "an esoteric and an exoteric.... the former never peeps out in society and the latter has not a ray of suggestion of Men and Women." James observed that the poet and the man of society were

dissociated in Browning as they can rarely elsewhere have been.  

The narrator, another inquisitive Jamesian spectator who gratuitously pries into other people's affairs, wants to satisfy his curiosity regarding Clare Vawdrey, whose work can be of such genius though in his social appearance such a mediocrity: his "talk suggested the reporter contrasted with the bard." (VIII, 197) By contrast, Lord Mellifont was nothing but splendid appearance: "He was all public and had no corresponding private life."

The narrator perceives that "There are two of them"—two Vawdreys, the poet and the bourgeois, the private and the public, the reticent and the social.  

What prevents the narrator from discovering the truth—which is the real Vawdrey—is his inability to meet the demands of society in order to satisfy his own creative impulses. James suggests that the true artist needs no outside help, that his public and private selves must collaborate if his creative energies are to find their proper expression. The narrator, however, seeks help for his creative work and fails to find the proper balance. He enlists the help of Blanche Adney to search out the secret of Vawdrey and to collaborate in a playwrighting

---

82 Lind, p. 317.

venture: he fails in either attempt. Unable to balance the demands of his own public and private claims, so his talents are dissipated into meddlesome, obsessive activities that benefit no one. The narrator and Blanche Adney alike remain ignorant of the central truth revealed by their snooping.

The narrator lacks the self-knowledge of Vawdrey, his meddling investigations bringing him no insight whatsoever into his own artistic life. As a result, he is isolated at the end of the story, his investigations sterile in the manner of the narrator-artist of The Sacred Fount, with neither insight into himself as an artist nor his friendship with Blanche though he had intended their mutual search to bring them closer together. The sense of loss is explicit in the closing paragraph:

I did my best to comfort him [Vawdrey] for what he feels is Blanche Adney's sudden dislike... I have a beautiful [play] in my head, but [Mrs. Adney] doesn't come to see me to stir me up about it. Lady Mellifont always drops me a kind word when we meet, but that doesn't console me. (VIII, 227)

As an extension of the issue of the artist's conflict with society, the story presents the successful artist as one who can control his energies but does not insulate himself from the world as a means to regulate the demands that society makes on his talents. The narrator, on the other hand, exults in the power of his meddling, expecting

---

that the experiences he has shared with Blanche will create a permanent association with her. But at the end of the story he is left alone, his isolation projecting the failure of an artistic partnership predicated on an ambiguous and naive basis of sentiment and love. 85

"The Middle Years" presents the most fully conscious artist-protagonist of the stories in Dencombe, who succeeds in his resignation to the ambiguous elements in the practice of his art.

James comments extensively on the kind of self-knowledge and awareness he attempted to present in "The Middle Years."

The idea of an old artist, or man of letters, who, at the end feels a kind of anguish of desire for a respite, a prolongation—another period of life to do the real thing that he has in him—the things for which all others have been but a slow preparation. He is the man who has developed late, obstructedly, with difficulty, has needed all life to learn, to see his way, to collect material, and now feels that if he can only have another life to make use of this clear start, he can show what he is really capable of. Some incident, then, to show that what he has done is that of which he is capable—that he has done all he can, that he has put into his things the love of perfection and that they will live by that. Or else an incident acting just the other way—showing him what he might do, just when he must give up forever. The 1st idea the best. A young doctor, a young pilgrim who admires him. A deep sleep in which he dreams he has had his respite. Then his waking to find that what he has dreamed of is only what he has done. 86

The spirit of resignation, accepting the consequences

---

85 Ibid., pp. 194-195.
86 The Notebooks of Henry James, pp. 121-122.
of the choice to be an artist, pervades the story. The novelist Dencombe experiences a personal crisis just after publishing his latest, "perhaps his last" book, The Middle Years. Dencombe becomes "conscious of a strange alienation" as he opens the package containing the new book, and "utters a low moan as he breathed the chill of this dark void." Aware that "something precious had passed away," Dencombe felt that he had had his last chance to accomplish what he intended: as he reads his own prose, he realizes that his career was finished. He realizes that he had "surrendered to his talent" and had been "hindered and retarded by experience." (194-195)

It had taken too much of his life to produce too little of his art. The art had come, but it had come after everything else. At such a rate a first existence was too short--long enough only to collect material; so that to fructify, to use the material, one should have a second age, an extension. This extension was what poor Dencombe sighed for. As he turned the last leaves of his volume he murmured 'Ah for another go, ah for a better chance!' (195)

Dencombe accidentally meets a Doctor Hugh, a young man who is "enamoured of literary form" (198) and specifically devoted to the genius of Dencombe. Doctor Hugh's devotion inspires in Dencombe a desire to fulfill what might be his second chance. He realizes that only with The Middle Years had he finally "taken his flight" and questions how he could "bribe...fates to give him the second chance." (101-102) Overwhelmed by his sense of loss--"I've outlived, I've lost my way," he says, revealing
to Doctor Hugh the premature deaths of his wife and child. Dencombe at last begins to see that "he had followed literature from the first, but he had taken a lifetime to get abreast of her," that "he had ripened too late and was [so] clumsily constituted that he had to teach himself by mistakes." (203) There is a parallel insight on the part of Doctor Hugh, who says he wants to be like Dencombe, to learn by his mistakes, to "want to what they call 'live'." (203)

Apparently jealous of the interest of the young doctor in the literary genius, the Countess, fallen ill, threatens to disinherit Doctor Hugh. After a Miss Vernham reveals this to Dencombe, who himself is ill at this point, Dencombe decides to sacrifice his "extension" of life to ensure the good future prospects for the young doctor and consents to see his own physician, closing his door to Doctor Hugh. But Doctor Hugh chooses to accept "the consequences of his infatuation" (209) and gives up the Countess (who dies anyway). Doctor Hugh loses his fortune, and Dencombe, about to die, realizes that the idea of a second chance is a delusion in one's proper dedication to art:
"There never was to be but one. We work in the dark--we do what we can--we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art." (210) Doctor Hugh's sacrifice is symbolic of Dencombe's final vision of himself, the meaning of his
life, of the lives of all creators. The most important thing is not whether there is to be another chance, a second existence, but to have created work which, as James writes elsewhere, "could arouse a response, make someone vibrate: It is glory—to have been tested, to have had our little quality and cast our little spell. The thing is to have made somebody care." 

"Benvolio," a variation on the doppelgänger theme, is a parable of the successful artist who manages to accept, if not resolve, the contradictions of his nature, the dualities of the worldly and the spiritual, involvement and detachment, doing and being. His home symbolically has two rooms, one cell-like and meager in its furnishings but the other with a great window opening onto a beautiful garden vista. The two rooms represent the essential divisiveness of the creative temperament. Benvolio is both the man of fashion and the scholar, in love with a Countess who with her "felicity, gaiety, and success" represents society, and also in love with Scholastica, the poet "longed to embark on a voyage of discovery on the great sea of pure reason" but tires of reason and goes back to his Countess. When the Countess tries to remove Scholastica by securing her a position as

88 Edel, Henry James: The Middle Years, p. 252.
89 Ward, pp. 259-260.
governess in a distant country, Benvolio tells her, "Don't you see--can't you imagine that I cared for you only by contrast? You took the trouble to kill the contrast, and with it you killed everything else...." (III, 401)

The artist, then, must not only acknowledge and accept but absolutely thrive and flourish in the dualities, the conflicts that make up the "spectacle of life." Benvolio makes use of everything without succumbing to anything: he accepts the risk and the challenge, capable of being sufficiently detached even while in the midst of society. In his moods of expansiveness, he uses the world as material for his drama; in moods of detachment, he accepts knowledge as the muse of his poetry. His poetic imagination unites the two interests. He successfully manages to enjoy peaceful co-existence in his two manifestations: "The monastic cerebrating side does not find the artistic worldly self unfriendly."  

The explicit meaning of the tale is that the poet, in order to do full justice to his poetic genius and temperament, must achieve a balance between the world and the cloister, for both are indispensable to the proper expression of his genius.  

---

93 Vaid, p. 152.
balance, the risk must, paradoxically, be accepted only to be escaped or transcended. Scholastica's advice that "a poet ought to run all risks—even that one which for a poet is perhaps most cruel. But he ought to escape from them all!" (III, 383) is an echo of James's own advice to the aspiring novelist: "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!" 94

V.

The technique of point of view in the stories of artists and writers, as indicated in the discussion of the individual stories, relates to the theme of the failed artist. The detached observer as narrator is both a technical device and a point of view towards life. Alienation is a good thing, and the great artist is necessarily in this sense detached from society. But saturation in life as well as detachment is necessary for the artist: thus, ideally, the artist—like the teller of the story—is a kind of superior observer. 95

Because the teller is an observer, a participant in the tale, he often becomes part of the action he narrates. Thus, the failure of the narrator as a center of consciousness to perceive aesthetic principles as well as


human relationships can often parallel the failure of the artist in the same narrative to develop consciousness himself. Thus, the energy and the richness of the stories involve the ironic presentation of the not always consciously participating narrator. Furthermore, sometimes the teller is an artist himself, usually a younger and less experienced man than the subject of the tale, often an artist working in a medium inferior to that of the subject of the tale, who participates in the narrative by consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally, contributing to the failure, or more rarely, the success of the subject artist. The narrator is often a young devotee of a great artist, relating the story with sympathetic concern for the artist himself, dramatically involved yet not the central actor. 96

In "The Next Time," as indicated, the narrator reviews favorably each novel of the writer, which ironically assures Limbert of a discerning readership but does not bring him the expected financial rewards from each successive, abortive attempt to produce the potboiler.

In "The Author of Beltraffio," the moral failure of the protagonist of the tale, Mark Ambient, corresponds to the failure of the narrator-writer to accept his moral responsibility in meddling with human personalities.

The narrator of "The Middle Years," Doctor Hugh, makes a sacrifice that parallels Dencombe's recognition of the necessity of resigning oneself to the essential "madness of art." In "The Beldonald Holbein," the perceptive narrator sees the distinction between the photographic and the representational portrait which is a significance that remains hidden to the self-deluded, vain subject of the portrait as well as of the story.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

I.


II.


247


C.


D.


III.


--- The Guerdon. [New York]: Privately printed, 1925.


---


---


---


---


---


---


---


---


---


---


---


Thurber, James. "The Middle Years" (Mr. and Mrs. Monroe). The Owl in the Attic and Other Perplexities. New York: Grosset and Dunlap (Universal Books edition), n.d. (First published in 1931).

---


IV.


________. "The Lord of Burleigh' and Henry James's 'A Landscape Painter'," Notes and Queries, n.s. II (1955), 220-221.


Cargill, Oscar. "Gabriel Nash--Somewhat Less than Angel?" Nineteenth Century Fiction, XIV (December, 1959), 231-239.

________. "Mr. James' Aesthetic Mr. Nash," Nineteenth Century Fiction, XII (December, 1957), 177-187.


Gale, Robert L. "James's 'The Middle Years',' Explicator, XXII (1963), Item 22.


Gordon, Jan B. "The Imaginary Portrait: Fin-de-Siecle Icon," University of Windsor Review, V (Fall, 1969), 81-104.


Kaye, Julian B. "The Awkward Age, The Sacred Fount, and The Ambassadors: Another Figure in the Carpet," Nineteenth Century Fiction, XVII (March, 1963), 339-353.


Levy, Leo B. "A Reading of 'The Figure in the Carpet'," American Literature, XXIII:4 (January, 1962), 457-465.

—. "What Does The Sacred Fount Mean?" College English, XXIII (1962), 381-384.


Murray, Donald M. "James and Whistler at the Grosvenor Club," American Quarterly, IV (Spring, 1952), 49-65.


Powers, Lyall H. "A Reperusal of James's 'The Figure in the Carpet'," American Literature, XXXIII (May, 1961), 224-228.


Tyler, Parker. "The Child as 'The Figure in the Carpet'," Chicago Review, XI (Winter, 1958), 31-42.


Westbrook, Perry D. "The Supersubtle Fry," Nineteenth Century Fiction, VIII (September, 1953), 134-140.


The dissertation submitted by Robert E. Terrill has been read and approved by members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

May 16, 1974

Date

Signature of Adviser