

**HENRY JAMES'S "VARIOUS AMERICA": THE NOVEL,  
FREEDOM, AND MODERNITY**

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This dissertation examines the modern, worldly dimensions of Henry James's literary practice evident across his criticism, nonfiction, and novelistic fiction, which James described to be his "various," comparative response to U.S. culture and society. Drawing upon contemporary critical turns to ethical and affective-oriented aesthetic modes of interpretation, I show that James's "various" literary practice expresses worldly and comparative thinking that opposes the private, Protestant-informed "business enterprise" society developing in the United States around the turn of the twentieth-century. In describing James to be an oppositional critic to American business enterprise, my dissertation contributes to ongoing interventions in Henry James studies that have re-constructed James to be a more historically-minded and politically-engaged thinker than asserted in canonical, twentieth-century formalist and New Critical approaches to James's literary work.

My dissertation proceeds through readings of his late criticism in the Prefaces to the New York Edition, his three-volume autobiography, his mid-career essay "The Art of Fiction" (1884), and finally, to his first novelistic masterpiece at the outset of his career, The Portrait of a Lady (1881/1908). My dissertation's formal construction forefronts

James's contributions as a literary critic, and I describe an oppositional, critical reading practice in his thought based upon ethical, aesthetic, and political modes of reading. James's practice as a critic, I argue, not only enables critics today to confront and challenge the ongoing contentious politics of interpretation in Henry James studies, but it allows readers to discern the critical and oppositional dimensions of his novelistic literary fiction, which I show to be particularly evident in The Portrait of a Lady.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

My reading of Henry James's criticism, nonfiction, and fiction aims to demonstrate that his novelistic practice accomplishes a redirection of American literary art away from the insular, Puritan-derived liberal culture he inherited from Hawthorne toward an expression of literary art as a secular mode of engagement with the world. I argue that James's conceptualization of the vocation of the novelistic literary artist articulates a "worldly" practice that functions to create the possibilities of new modern relationships, thought, and activity premised upon the artist's activation of an ethos of freedom both with and against the social, cultural, and economic determinants of the artist's existence in the world. I further show that James directs this conception of literary art as criticism of the liberal premises of the U.S. state in its relationship to the modern business enterprise economy. In the following four chapters, I examine core texts from James's body of work, aiming to discern a modern Jamesian "text" that suggests the possibilities of different and other (even oppositional) ways of thinking and acting distinct from the imperatives of the turn-of-the-twentieth century American business economy and the determining Protestant cultural apparatus informing its development.

In my first chapter, I examine the Prefaces to the New York Edition (1907 - 1909) in order to describe James's conceptualization of novelistic practice to be a mode of creating "interest" in the world that functions to create transitional possibilities for thinking and artistic expression that may not be contained by preexisting hegemonic

social relations; in chapter two, I examine his three autobiographical books, A Small Boy and Others (1913), Notes of a Son and Brother (1914), and The Middle Years (1917), and I argue that in these works James offers an especially strong claim for the “worldly” dimensions of novelistic literary art to be a mode of articulating a modern realm of freedom within and against the given historical, cultural, and social forms of thought and institutions underlying the development of American business; in chapter three, I examine “The Art of Fiction” (1884) to be an articulation of the possibilities of literary art to produce difference in a modern realm of freedom that especially criticizes the U.S.’s underlying Protestant capitalistic cultural ethic; and lastly, in chapter 4, I argue that James articulates in The Portrait of a Lady the possibility of contingent freedom as an ethos of modernity relinquishing the philosophically-liberal, Protestant-derived, capitalistic ethic of possessive individualism, embracing instead attitudes of openness, experience, and “feeling” life.

My interpretation of the Jamesian “text” involves deployment of a range of theoretical orientations as an effort to articulate more fully the critical, oppositional possibilities of James’s practice of novelistic literary art, which I intend as a contribution to recent efforts at dismantling the all-too familiar and now-hackneyed charges against James as a quietist devoted to formalist abstraction and social disengagement. I enlist the criticism and insights of a number of contemporary theoretically-oriented critics who have advanced the field of James studies beyond polemical pro- and anti-Jacobite criticism, who have evaded the traps of ideological Liberal and Marxist frameworks as applied to James’s work, and who have sought to understand better James’s commitment to modernity in literary art.

In my reading of James's work, I suggest that a theoretical, critical orientation will help readers to understand better James's novelistic literary practice to be an articulation of a modern critical consciousness: to this end, I examine J. Hillis Miller's deconstructive "interpretive" approach to the Prefaces; I argue James's concept of literary art functions as a kind of "worldly" secular criticism in the sense that Edward Said articulated worldliness; I consider Raymond Williams's concept of "structures of feeling" as "emergent" ways of thinking in relation to James's claim for the novel as a generator of "interest" premised upon its representation of a "feeling" sensibility; I examine James's claims for the freedom of literary art as an anticipation of Jacques Derrida's characterization of writing as the purposeful occasioning of différance; and, I suggest an affinity between James's claims for the "exercise" of freedom in artistic creation and Michel Foucault's conception of an Enlightenment ethos of modernity premised upon aesthetic self-making. In my readings of James's critical, autobiographical, and fictional works in light of these selected works of criticism and theory, I aim to demonstrate that Henry James critics may comprehend a discernible Jamesian "text" that in toto expresses a new, modern way of thinking in American novelistic literary art that occasions difference from a business-dominated, theocratically-inclined, Protestant American culture.

Despite the particular, historically-distinct discrepancies between these somewhat disparate theoretical orientations, I aim to demonstrate their value for revealing Henry James's commitment to the democratic conditions of a still-emergent form of modernity that he practices in novelistic literary art. As a result of formalist-oriented New Criticism and polemical Left criticism, James has typically been taken to be anything but a

democrat or a promoter of democratic values. It is a commonplace to view James's fiction negatively compared to the novelistic fiction of his friend and editor at "The Atlantic Monthly," William Dean Howells, whose portrayal of the working poor and indictments of wealthy capitalists in his novelistic fiction, for example in A Hazard of New Fortunes and The Rise of Silas Lapham, customarily have been taken to be ipso facto demonstrations of democratic literary art. It has been equally conventional to compare James negatively to the poet of the American multitude, Walt Whitman, whom James criticizes at the time he began writing reviews in the 1860s, as being too "egotistical" to "respect the public." For example, writing well over a century ahead of radical critics of the 1970s-1980s, James notably detects an imperializing will in Whitman's expressions of individualism: "For a lover you talk entirely too much about yourself. In one place you threaten to absorb Kanada. In another you call upon the city of New York to incarnate you, as you have incarnated it."<sup>1</sup> James was twenty-two at the time of publication of his review of Whitman's Drum-Taps, yet it offers one of James's most evident expressions of his aversion to a liberal conceptualization of the individual as the material basis for social organization. In addressing James's criticism of a philosophically liberal conceptualization of freedom, I aim to articulate in James's commitment to novelistic literary work a form of democratic thinking premised upon its capacity to generate difference and pluralism. Along these lines, I argue that James's practice of novelistic literary art functions in terms of what Posnock has called (following Adorno) a "politics of non-identity," premised upon an "insistence on the value of

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<sup>1</sup> Henry James, "Walt Whitman's Drum-Taps," in Henry James Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers, ed. Leon Edel (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 633.

tolerating and encouraging difference.”<sup>2</sup> I assent to Posnock’s claim that James’s commitment to difference lays bare his “urgent hope” for the “creation of a more pluralistic democracy.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ross Posnock, The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), 82.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

**2.0 CHAPTER ONE: THE PREFACES TO THE NEW YORK EDITION:  
READING, INTERPRETATION, AND INTEREST**

**2.1 “A RECOGNITION OF DIFFERENCES”: EZRA POUND’S PROTEST**

Writing in the August 1918 edition of The Little Review magazine dedicated in memoriam to Henry James, expatriate American poet Ezra Pound inveighs against American journalistic appreciations of James, saying, “They do not even know what they lost.”<sup>4</sup> Specifically, Pound says the American press had failed to articulate the significance of James’s “last public act” adopting British citizenship, which he implies to have been James’s protest against the U.S. for remaining isolated during World War I until the war was well underway. Pound similarly observes James’s literary fiction and nonfiction to register criticisms of American cultural isolation and provinciality, and he affirms James’s fiction instead on the grounds that it suggests possibilities of communication between nations.

Pound’s essay appeared in print some two years after the novelist’s death at the age of 72, and just months before a November 1918 armistice agreement ended World War I. While James’s efforts supporting the Allied cause inform Pound’s comments, Pound launches his protest in accordance with his sense of the import of James’s literary writing. He especially denounces American periodicals for their provincial standards of

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<sup>4</sup> Ezra Pound, “Henry James,” [1918] in The Little Review, (Aug. 1918). Republished in Make It New (New Haven: Yale UP, 1935), 252.

judgment dismissing James's complex writing style. Opposing their narrow standards, Pound characterizes James's novels to have been works of criticism and dissent: "Book after early book against oppression, against all the sordid petty personal crushing oppression, the domination of modern life ... The passion of it, the continual passion of it in this man who, fools said, didn't feel."<sup>5</sup> Pound describes personal recollections of James's sympathetic, observing approach to life, and he recalls their conversations:

The massive head, the slow uplift of the hand, gli occhi onesti e tardi, the long sentences piling themselves up in elaborate phrase after phrase, the lightning incision, the pauses, the slightly shaking admonitory gesture with its 'wu-a-wait a little, wait a little, something will come'; blague and benignity and the weight of so many years' careful, incessant labour of minute observation always there to enrich the talk. I had heard it seldom, yet it is all unforgettable.<sup>6</sup>

Pound's evident appreciation for James's labored manner of speech producing "minute observation" implicitly pays homage to a writing style whose lengthy sentences similarly produced an "elaborate phrase after phrase" "piling" effect.

Pound's comments in Make It New are typically cited in James studies today to be an example of modernist critical mystification.<sup>7</sup> I would disagree, and I argue instead that Pound's criticism exemplifies something other than the tropes of detachment and retreat from social reality valued by the New Criticism. Pound's essay importantly directs readers of The Little Review toward consideration of James's fiction and nonfiction in global, international contexts, which I hope to show in this dissertation,

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<sup>5</sup> Pound, "Henry James," 251.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 251-252.

<sup>7</sup> David McWhirter, "Henry James: (Post)modernist," The Henry James Review 25, no. 2 (2004), 169-170.

provides an instructive line of thought for my interpretation of James as an oppositional critic of American “business enterprise.”

Pound notably directs readers toward James’s critical nonfictional works, such as The Middle Years, and The American Scene, the former of which I discuss at length in chapter two of this dissertation, and the latter of which contains some of James’s most evident dissenting judgments of an increasingly business-oriented society. Decades ahead of contemporary critical appraisals of the book, Pound describes The American Scene to be a “creation of America” and a “book that no ‘serious American’ will neglect.”<sup>8</sup> It is not difficult to envision Pound assenting to James’s caustic evaluations about the conditions of American democracy as having been reduced to the lowest common denominator of a profit-driven, standardized business economy. In The American Scene, James’s account of his year-long return to the United States in 1904 after a twenty-year period of exile, he makes explicit what is implicit in much of his fictional writing, that in the United States of his day, “To make so much money that you won’t, that you don’t ‘mind,’ don’t mind anything – that is absolutely, I think, the main American formula.”<sup>9</sup>

More than anything else, Pound praises James’s commitment in fiction for its articulation of variety and difference, and it is this claim that fiction may generate difference in history that makes Pound’s criticism apropos for my initial point of departure here. Pound asserts: “Peace comes of communication. No man of our time has so laboured to create means of communication as did the late Henry James. The whole of great art is a struggle for communication. And this communication is not a leveling, it is

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<sup>8</sup> Pound, “Henry James,” 292.

<sup>9</sup> Henry James, The American Scene, [1907] ed. W.H. Auden (New York: Scribner’s, 1946), 237.

not an elimination of differences. It is a recognition of differences, of the right of differences to exist, of interest in finding things different.”<sup>10</sup> James’s literary art not only expresses difference and variety to be positive values – intrinsic “interests” – they are also critical values directed against inherited forms of American culture – literary, social, and political – which I am claiming avails for readers today an oppositional mode of thought to the dictates of a “business enterprise” capitalist society.

Henry James’s sense of literary art as a generator of actual difference – evident in Pound’s reading of James – informs my title to this dissertation, “Henry James’s ‘Various America,’” the latter two words of which come from his second volume of autobiography, Notes of a Son and Brother (1914). James applies this phrase, “a various America,” to his response to Boston, Massachusetts, a place he describes on the one hand to be a rural “Puritan capital,” while on the other, to be a unique “town of history.” Asking himself, “How did it manage to be such different things at the same time?” James describes the question to be “interesting to study in proportion,” and he observes that his response identifying in Boston both the rural village and the historical town provides a lesson for him as a literary artist.<sup>11</sup> For James, Boston falls short of the complete “cosmopolitan” worldliness he found in New York City and in European capitals like London, Paris, and Rome. But he also favorably describes Boston as attesting to the possibilities of “variety” in the world, without which the literary artist would simply cease to exist:

I am not sure that the comparatively – I say comparatively – market-town suggestion of the city by the Charles came out for me as a positive richness, but it

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<sup>10</sup> Pound, “Henry James,” 255-256.

<sup>11</sup> Henry James, Henry James: Autobiography (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), 444.

did essentially contribute to what had become so highly desirable, the reinforcement of my vision of American life by the idea of variety. I apparently required of anything I should take to my heart that it should be, approached at different angles, “like” as many things as possible – in accordance with which it made for a various “America” that Boston should seem really strong, really quaint and amusing and beguiling or whatever, in not having, for better or worse, the same irrepressible likenesses as New York.<sup>12</sup>

James’s characteristic affirmation of comparative thought, which he supplies for Boston precisely where he determines its lack thereof “on the spot,” as he might put it, reflects his sense of the difference-making capacity of aesthetic literary production to other modes of production, particularly industrial and commercial, which he makes evident in The American Scene.

It is not such a great leap from Pound’s favorable appraisal of James’s The American Scene, to Pound’s more general appreciation of the international dimensions of James’s literary art, and to finally, Pound’s celebrated poem of exilic opposition, “The Rest.” Pound’s essay also importantly suggests a line of criticism connecting James to other exiled American novelists and poets, not only to Pound himself and to T.S. Eliot, but also to Gertrude Stein, Hemingway, and later, to James Baldwin, whose Another Country (1960), takes as its epigraph memorable lines from James’s Prefaces to the New York Edition:

They strike one, above all, as giving no account of themselves in any terms already consecrated by human use; to this inarticulate state they probably form, collectively, the most unprecedented of monuments; abysmal the mystery of what

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<sup>12</sup> Henry James, Henry James: Autobiography, 445.

they think, what they feel, what they want, what they suppose themselves to be saying.<sup>13</sup>

While the significance of Baldwin's epigraph citing James may be understood as criticism of James for perhaps trivializing the "they" who give "no account of themselves," conversely it might be taken to affirm James's conceptualization of literary art as a thoroughly creative, productive form of "communication" (as Pound would have it) making possible the sense of a society still in formation. As I see it, Baldwin's epigraph attests to the difference-making "interest" of Henry James's literary art that I will trace out in this dissertation: that, as an "interesting" art, James's fiction contributes toward the production of a break with inherited forms of culture, which along the lines of what Marxist critic Raymond Williams describes to be literature's major role in society, might also avail the "articulation and formation of latent, momentary, and newly possible consciousness."<sup>14</sup>

## 2.2 HENRY JAMES STUDIES: THE ETHICAL TURN

In his 1990 study Professions of Taste, Jonathan Freedman offers a compelling but lamentable assessment over the lack of movement in Henry James studies over several decades, and he notes especially the dead-end that ideological and formalist-orientations of criticism have brought the field. Freedman, whose study focuses on Henry James's engagements with British Aestheticism, observes that the linkage of James to aestheticism has provided the basis for negative political criticism of James's fiction, and he notes this judgment permeates a great deal of twentieth-century criticism:

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<sup>13</sup> James Baldwin, Another Country (New York: Random House, 1960).

<sup>14</sup> Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (New York: Oxford UP, 1977), 212.

It might be said without too much exaggeration that the entire course of James criticism from the time of Van Wyck Brooks and Vernon Parrington has consisted of a series of arguments over their vision of Henry James as a second Gilbert Osmond: an effete aesthete expatriate whose works are marred by his withdrawal from the soil of social reality (an exclusively American terrain) into the consoling never-never land of art (the country of the mauve as well as the blue); a figure of fastidious reserve and mandarin hauteur whose proclamation of his own status as Master masked and mystified his own severe will to power. Despite all the transformations of critical approach or idiom that the last 65 years have witnessed, this strain in the discourse of anti-Jacobitism has proved astonishingly stable, down even to the patterns of figuration.<sup>15</sup>

Much of the polemical anti-Jacobite criticism prior to the New Criticism constructed Henry James to be detached from social reality on the grounds of his lifelong expatriation to Europe in adulthood (first to France, briefly, and then to England). It also carried with it a purportedly Marxist-oriented class criticism that deduced from the content of James's fiction his class affinity with both European aristocrats and the American nouveau-riche banking and financier class of robber baron capitalists. After the New Criticism's appropriation and canonization of James's fiction and criticism to further its own

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<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Freedman, Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1990), xiii. Freedman juxtaposes selections from Van Wyck Brooks's The Pilgrimage of Henry James (1925) with Parrington's Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920 (1930), Maxwell Geismar's Henry James and the Jacobites (1963), and with Michael Gilmore's essay, "The Commodity World of The Portrait of a Lady" (1986). These works publication dates, spanning from the 1920s to the 1980s, tellingly reveal the persistence of ideological criticism within James studies. A complete list of critics who have made similar arguments against Henry James would include works from every decade of the twentieth century, beginning with H.G. Wells in the 1900s. Some of the critics whom I discuss in this dissertation, and whom I am linking to this lineage of ideological criticism deployed against James, include the following: Irving Howe, Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, Mark Seltzer, Carolyn Porter, and Alfred Habegger. Earlier critics, including F.O. Matthiessen and R.P. Blackmur, offer much less polemical criticism of James, but nevertheless suggest political questions that inform my readings.

politically quietist goals, attacks on James took hold on the basis of his purported promotion of formalist criteria as cover for a reactionary agenda serving patriarchal and bourgeois social powers: feminist readers attributed a masculinist ethos to James's treatment of his women characters, and Marxist readers identified James's fiction with reified bourgeois subjectivity.<sup>16</sup>

Against these critical orientations, I examine in this chapter James's Prefaces to the New York Edition, and I suggest they offer his articulation of an ethical, critical reading practice (directed at his own fiction) premised upon a commitment to literary art as a generator of actual "difference" in the world. I first identify James's commitment to literary art around his articulation of "interest," a key word that runs throughout not only the Prefaces, but also much of his critical and autobiographic writings.<sup>17</sup> In my readings, James's practice of literary art functions to produce a particular kind of "interest." I aim to show that James's articulation of the "interest" of fictional, novelistic practice may not be wholly reducible to capitalist profit "interest" (in fact, I am claiming the "interest" of literary art to have oppositional qualities), and that James's sense of "interest" instead operates as a kind of ethos, by which literary creation constitutes a generative "act" in the world. In this chapter, I develop my reading in relation to relatively recent "ethical" approaches to literature, in particular J. Hillis Miller's deconstructive readings of

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<sup>16</sup> See Sara Blair, "In the House of Fiction: Henry James and the Engendering of Literary Mastery," in Henry James's New York Edition: The Construction of Authorship, ed. David McWhirter, (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995). 58-73. See also, Alfred Habegger, Henry James and the "Woman Business," (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989). Blair views the Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, particularly the "house of fiction" metaphor, offering "powerful defenses of formalism," which imbued with a "proprietary interest in femininity and the female power of reproduction" (66), constructs a monument to "mastery ... built, 'brick by brick,' on the plot of the femininity he surveys in order to interrogate such acts of surveillance" (69).

<sup>17</sup> I examine James's articulations of "interest" throughout his autobiographic writings in my second chapter, and also throughout the essay "The Art of Fiction" in my third chapter.

James.<sup>18</sup> I also discuss in this chapter R.P. Blackmur's writings on the Prefaces as criticism that helps to focus critical attention on James's representations of consciousness in "feeling." As I read Blackmur, his discussion of "feeling" in James articulates it to function as a concrete mode of apprehending social domains of experience. This articulation of feeling crucially informs my claim that James's concept of the "interest" of the novel functions as its ultimate measure of value, and that it is not reducible to capitalist business "interests." In examining James's linkage in criticism and novelistic practice between "feeling" and "interest" as a way of articulating dynamic social experience, I examine how the "interest" of literary practice for James functions similarly to what Raymond Williams has famously called a "structure of feeling," by which critical attention to the immanence of the language of literary works may avail political, social, and historical criticism of the world and the institutions in which it has been produced.<sup>19</sup> I argue that critical understanding today of the Prefaces would benefit especially from a politicization of ethical ways of reading, and that political, ideological readings would especially benefit from a better understanding that James's critical and novelistic practice functions best in terms of what Miller calls an "ethics of reading."

The "ethical turn" in Henry James studies occurs as a result of a critical weariness and fatigue with especially polemical, overly-politicized readings that run throughout Henry James studies. Political readings of James have consistently relied upon an ideological approach to interpreting his fiction and, as Posnock notes, ideology has brought the field to a dead-end: "James is praised by liberals for fleeing from modern life

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<sup>18</sup> See J. Hillis Miller, *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James*, (New York: Fordham UP, 2005). See also, J. Hillis Miller, "Re-reading Re-Vision: James and Benjamin," in *The Ethics of Reading*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), 101-127.

<sup>19</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 128-135.

yet damned for it by leftists.”<sup>20</sup> The criticism of Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, and Fredric Jameson on Henry James’s fiction exerts an especially strong influence upon contemporary Marxist-oriented critics. Through their deployment of an explicitly ideological analytic, they offer the paradigmatic construction of James as bourgeois apologist. Especially in Williams’s and Eagleton’s early criticism (of the 1970s), they forcefully argue that James’s fiction offers little more than liberal subjectivity. (Though, Williams later qualifies his argument, describing James to be profoundly materialist). Jameson echoes this position in The Political Unconscious: “Jamesian point of view, which comes into being as a protest and a defense against reification, ends up furnishing a powerful ideological instrument in the perpetuation of an increasingly subjectivized and psychologized world, a world whose social vision is one of a thoroughgoing relativity of monads in coexistence and whose ethos is irony and neo-Freudian projection theory and adaptation-to-reality therapy.”<sup>21</sup> For all three critics, James’s identification with the “forms” of fiction reveals a profoundly ahistorical conceptualization of literary art. Attributing the formalist values of “unity,” “harmony,” and “stability” to James’s criticism and fiction, Jamesian form is judged to represent a flight from historical reality into the “organic enclave”<sup>22</sup> of art. As Eagleton says: “James’s work ... represents a desperate, devoted attempt to salvage organic significance wholly in the sealed realm of consciousness – to vanquish, by the power of such ‘beautiful,’ multiple yet harmoniously unifying awareness, certain real conflicts and divisions.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Posnock, 77.

<sup>21</sup> Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1981), 222.

<sup>22</sup> Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology (London: Verso, 1985), 145.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 141

Like Williams before him and Jameson afterwards, Eagleton's argument turns upon James's representation of consciousness, which Eagleton conceptualizes to be an abstract category equivalent to James's conceptualization of form. Eagleton concludes that James's formalist fiction enacts literary strategies that construct consciousness to be a wholly subjective agency subsuming and transcending material determinants in a totalizing organic artwork. In occluding the material base of art, James's aesthetic participates in, and furthers, the logic of predatory capitalism. According to Eagleton, Jamesian form functions by means of "subdoing and absorbing ... raw contingencies into the transmutative structures of consciousness."<sup>24</sup> The suggestion is implicit: James's literary aesthetic operates identically to the reifying processes governing capitalistic accumulation, as typified by the "phantom objectivity" of the commodity-structure.<sup>25</sup>

In Eagleton's analysis, Jamesian form culminates in totalized, reified consciousness. In History and Class Consciousness, Georg Lukács describes "the phenomena of reification" to be an occurrence when "a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity,' an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people."<sup>26</sup> The reified forms of Henry James's fiction, as organized around consciousness, function to subsume any and all possible critical, historical representation of capital. Eagleton concludes: "Knowing – consciousness itself – is the supreme non-commodity, and so for James the supreme value; yet in a society where commodity reigns unchallenged it is also absence, failure, negation. ... This,

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<sup>24</sup> Eagleton, 145.

<sup>25</sup> Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, trans. Rodney Livingstone. (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1971), 83.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

finally, was the contradiction which even Henry James was unable to transcend.”<sup>27</sup> James’s fiction thus offers two unacceptable and uncritical positions in the face of modern capitalist exploitation: 1) a totalizing, reifying consciousness that furthers the capitalist system of production; and 2) abnegation, renunciation, and despair.

Carolyn Porter develops a similar argument around Lukács’s concept of reification in her study of the American novel, Seeing and Being (1981). As found in Eagleton, Porter argues James’s novels seek to preserve an ahistorical “detached contemplative stance” that further mystifies historically-determined class conflict.<sup>28</sup> Porter acknowledges James’s fiction exposes the reified subjectivity of his bourgeois characters – though she says he resolves the contradictions such exposures produce by representing society in its totality as reified:

James is led to solve the problems attendant upon reified consciousness by conceiving a completely reified society. The finally exposed condition of The Sacred Fount’s narrator becomes essentially the condition of everyone in The Golden Bowl, insofar as everyone here is simultaneously both a detached seer and a complicit participant. It is only in a world made up entirely of people constituted as seers and seen that the activity of the visionary artist can proceed without her abandoning her detached contemplative stance.<sup>29</sup>

Porter concludes the analysis noting James’s “devotion” to “imaginative” contemplation produced in him an utter failure to recognize the conflicts in American and European

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<sup>27</sup> Eagleton, 145.

<sup>28</sup> Carolyn Porter, Seeing and Being: The Plight of the Participant Observer in Emerson, James, Adams, and Faulkner (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan UP, 1981), 42.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

“civilization”; such that, “with the outbreak of WWI, James was brought up short by a spectacle of human waste the likes of which shocked even his Olympian imagination.”<sup>30</sup>

The canonization of James as the high “master” of literary form by the New Critics in the 1940s and 1950s has done little to focus attention upon James’s representations of the material determinants of capital. These critics typically focused upon James’s mastery of technique, his skillful use of symbols, and his superior styling of prose. These orientations have done little to advance critical study that could more fully articulate James’s historical conceptualization of the world and his sense of the possibilities for the emergence of modernity. Whenever critics trained in the practices of the New Criticism have grappled with James’s representation of money, for example, they treat it as literary symbol, or an immaterial image, that might be understood in relationship to other symbols in fiction: symbols of innocence, symbols of evil, etc. Such a schematizing approach may successfully produce a taxonomy of terms that might be found in James’s fiction (or any other writer), but it fails as criticism of novelistic practice that might reveal fiction’s historical relationship to the world, its position within the actual workings of institutions: in other words, its ethical and political relationship to the world in which readers and critics actually live and work.

### **2.3 ETHICAL ACTS, INTERPRETATION, AND READING THE PREFACES**

F.O. Matthiessen suggests an important lesson for the literary critic whose first, and perhaps only, task in regards to Henry James can be “to read” his fiction. For Matthiessen, as well as for R.P. Blackmur (whose essay on the Prefaces to the New York Edition I discuss below), “reading” involves attention to both the content and the form of

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<sup>30</sup> Porter, 163.

fiction. For both critics, without attention to form, the “how” of expression as opposed to the “what,” readers miss James’s significance as a literary artist. As Matthiessen notes in the preface to his influential study, Henry James: The Major Phase (1944), “You must be equally concerned with what is being said and with the how and why of its saying. The separation between form and content simply does not exist as the mature artist contemplates his finished work.”<sup>31</sup> Matthiessen’s critical reading practice develops a line of thought he traces through Emerson’s adaptation of Coleridge’s “organic” theory of language, which asserts the wholeness of literary and social domains of experience. In three important ways, reading a literary work for Matthiessen proceeds from this conception of “wholeness”: a literary work’s form and content are taken to be inseparable, the literary work’s relationship to social and historical domains of experience is understood to be inextricable and non-transcendent, and finally, individual literary and non-literary works may be juxtaposed with each other to reveal valuable connections between them that illuminate their interrelations. As I discuss at greater length in chapter four, Matthiessen’s practice has provided an example for subsequent critics on James (particularly Laurence Holland in his book, The Expense of Vision (1964)), and it has informed my selection and reading of James’s literary and non-literary texts in this dissertation.

In contemporary criticism, J. Hillis Miller offers another approach to reading James in his formulation of an “ethics of reading.” Miller takes Henry James’s Prefaces to the New York Edition to exemplify a critical reading practice valuable for understanding that the act of reading proceeds from attention both to the text as object

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<sup>31</sup> F.O. Matthiessen, Henry James: The Major Phase (New York: Oxford UP, 1970), x.

and the “present” scene of reading as subject.<sup>32</sup> Miller’s reading of James deploys not only Derrida’s concept of writing, but perhaps more directly, Paul de Man’s concept of reading. Following the deconstructive practice of both Derrida and De Man, Miller views James’s prefaces to be a critical demonstration of reading as an “act” that first calls for interpretation respecting the temporal discontinuity between the past moment of the generation of the text and the critic’s own generative, interpretive possibilities for it in the present. To begin “to read” a text requires – at a minimum – the freedom to interpret for purposes other than ascertaining absolute empirical origin. Reading that activates the text for purposeful activity in the present is what Miller calls ethical reading – it allows the text to “do” and to “make” over, to produce new results, and new consequences.<sup>33</sup>

James’s Prefaces, Miller observes, offer readings or interpretations of his own novels, novellas, and short stories, and they inscribe temporal discrepancy in the narrative of his composition of fiction. As Miller notes, James “gives the priority to his present vision.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, for example, James makes explicit the difficulties he experiences in writing about his fiction as a result of an inability to recover the exact “germ” of any given novel. He repeats this move throughout the Prefaces, usually deferring conclusive accounts of origin indefinitely. Rather than trying to recover empirical origin, James offers interpretations from the vantage point of his situation in the present, which in the case of the first novel he included in the New York Edition, Roderick Hudson, occurs more than three decades after he composed it.

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<sup>32</sup> See also Paul B. Armstrong, “Reading James’s Prefaces and Reading James,” in Henry James’s New York Edition: The Construction of Authorship, ed. David McWhirter (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), 125-137.

<sup>33</sup> Later, in my third chapter, I address “The Art of Fiction” and I link Miller’s interpretive conceptualization of reading to the act of “writing,” as I observe particularly that James’s claims for literary art as the instantiation of a particular kind of “freedom” strongly anticipates Derrida’s concept of writing.

<sup>34</sup> J. Hillis Miller, The Ethics of Reading (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), 112.

Paul B. Armstrong similarly adduces this lesson of “interpretation” from the Prefaces, noting that James himself grants priority to the present “play of his imagination” in reading and writing about his fiction. The reader, too, must share with James the desirability of producing new interpretations from the fiction, as Armstrong says, “The reader’s role re-creates in different form the doubleness of James’s own relation to the ‘germs’ from which he got the inspiration for many of his fictions. In both instances it is important to be responsible but to be free from the controlling influence of an originating authority.”<sup>35</sup>

James offers an example of this “freedom” to “read” his fiction for the purposes of interpretation and re-creation that would surpass the accounts of empirical origin in his Preface to The Portrait of a Lady. In providing an account of the origins of the novel in his sense of its principal character, Isabel Archer, James abruptly ceases his train of thought and poses a rhetorical question that aims at determination of the novel’s origin:

Thus I had my vivid individual, vivid in spite of being still at large, not confined by the conditions, not engaged in the tangle, to which we look for much of the impress that constitutes an identity. If this apparition was still all to be placed how came it to be vivid? – since we puzzle such quantities out, mostly, just by the business of placing them.<sup>36</sup>

Yet, in posing this question, James strongly resists any attempt to locate meaning or significance in an essential origin: “One could answer such a question beautifully, doubtless, if one could do so subtle, if not so monstrous, a thing as to write the history of

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<sup>35</sup> Armstrong, 134.

<sup>36</sup> Henry James, Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, in Henry James Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1076.

the growth of one's imagination."<sup>37</sup> James's clear resistance to this line of thinking, this "monstrous" way of reading or writing about any text, suggests the danger for him to lie in the potential to foreclose interpretation and lock up meaning in the past, in a moment of origin. James suggests this way of reading would limit possibilities for generating new meanings in interpretation for the present.

#### **2.4 THE PREFACES: "THE PROMISE OF INTEREST"**

In the first of the Prefaces to the New York Edition, the 1907 Preface to Roderick Hudson, James argues for the inextricable relationship between the literary representation of reality and the productive making, or "doing," of things, in the activity of art. Here he famously criticizes his early novel for his failure to "represent" fully an actual, named place; in short, he says he failed "very much to 'do' Northampton, Mass." Notably, James consistently places the verb "doing" in quotation marks to emphasize its provisional use for him as a mode of conceptualizing literary representation:

The whole question of the novelist's 'doing,' with its eternal wealth, or in other words its eternal torment of interest, once more came up. He embarks, rash adventurer, under the star of 'representation,' and is pledged thereby to remember that the art of interesting us in things – once these things are the right ones for his case – can only be the art of representing them. This relation to them, for invoked interest, involves his accordingly 'doing'; and it is for him to settle with his intelligence what that invariable process shall commit him to.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Henry James, Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, 1076.

<sup>38</sup> Henry James, Preface to Roderick Hudson, in Henry James Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1044.

Thus, the artist's activity is not ever wholly reactive or passive, it must both develop from "interest" and encourage further "interest." James tells us fiction makes itself known as a result of these productive capabilities of the artist, which are "worldly" in the sense that they involve the artist's deeply personal and social sense of his or her "interest."

From James's phrase, "the torment of interest," we note the etymological sense of the English term "interest," deriving from the French cognate intérêt and the Latin interesse: "it make[s] a difference, concerns, matters, is of importance."<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, the Latin interesse literally designates "to be or lie in between," comprised of the two parts, inter (between) and esse (to be).<sup>40</sup> James's deployment of "interest" evokes both these senses of "being in between" and making a "difference." And, it is especially relevant that in "The Art of Fiction" (which I discuss in my third chapter) James claims the only "obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel ... is that it be interesting."<sup>41</sup> Fiction that aims to represent the world, in James's particular sense of "doing," thus offers the possibility of radical "difference," it "is in between," sharing an affinity with Nietzsche's sense of artistic "becoming."<sup>42</sup> Roland Barthes, in S/Z, provides a useful orientation for this kind of reading as an act of interpretation: "This new operation is *interpretation* (in the Nietzschean sense of the word). To interpret a text is

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<sup>39</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, "Interest."

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in Henry James: Major Stories and Essays (New York: The Library of America, 1999), 577.

<sup>42</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 318. Artistic activity, according to Nietzsche, instantiates an intermediate, "in between" condition of "becoming": "Artists, an intermediary species: they at least fix an image of that which ought to be, they are productive, to the extent that they actually alter and transform; unlike men of knowledge, who leave everything as is."

not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it.”<sup>43</sup>

Recent criticism utilizing a pragmatist approach characterizes the ethical imperative of James’s practice of literary representation, conceptualized as an act or a kind of “doing,” as functioning to articulate immanent transitional states in reading. Jonathan Levin argues, for example, that James’s fiction offers a “poetics of transition” as a result of his depiction of characters’ lives, existing in a world of “open-ended dynamic processes,” which call forth new acts of reading: “The remarkable elusiveness of James’s late fiction, which so discouraged William as a reader of his brother’s fiction, encourages readers to summon energy and pitch it, enacting their own attentive responsiveness to the unfolding dynamic web of relations, both of fiction and of life.”<sup>44</sup> Levin’s pragmatistic Henry James puts him in relationship to Emerson as his immediate American literary precursor, to Charles Sanders Pierce and his brother, William James, as important contemporaries, and to Gertrude Stein as his major literary descendent.

Throughout the Prefaces, James deploys the term “interest” to function as a critical conceptualization of a kind of thought and expression particular to novelistic literary art. For James, literary art that makes a difference and that matters may be described as “interesting,” yet its interest is entirely dependent upon its capacity to produce “feeling” and occasion the representation of “felt life.” For example, James says

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<sup>43</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 5.

<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Levin. *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke UP, 1999), 144. The relationship of Henry James to the American pragmatist writing and thinking has been an especially fertile area for critics and scholars over the decades. I have invoked this underlying pragmatist outlook in Henry James’s writing in light of recent studies on Henry James, especially in relationship to his older brother William. Posnock notes Henry’s famous comment on William’s *Pragmatism* (1907), “I was lost in wonder of the extent to which all my life I have ... unconsciously pragmatized... .” Posnock distinguishes, nevertheless, between Henry’s pragmatism from William’s on the grounds that “Henry’s pragmatism avoids being rooted in William’s defensive dualisms, in ‘arbitrary .... separations’ like action and speculation, ‘behavior and its fruits’” (51).

in the Preface to The Princess Casamassima: “The figures in any picture, the agents in any drama, are interesting only in proportion as they feel their respective situations; since the consciousness, on their part, of the complication exhibited forms for us their link of connexion with it.”<sup>45</sup> In this formulation, “interest” and representation of characters’ capacities to “feel” are inextricably linked. Notable as well is James’s characterization of “consciousness” to be a function of “feeling,” which produces the capacity for readers (“us”) to apprehend the characters’ “connexion” to “their respective situations.” Noting “there are degrees of feeling,” James says that it is by the reader’s “fond attention” that he or she “participates” in fictions that depict connecting, sensible consciousnesses. Consciousness of this sort, which James ascribes to protagonist Hyacinth Robinson, allows the reader of The Princess Casamassima to participate in the “specific knowledge” of a working-class bookbinder who registers through “feeling” the deprivations of modern-day London. Hyacinth is a character who undergoes “experience[s] of the meaner conditions, the lower manners and types, the general sordid struggle, the weight of the burden of labour, the ignorance, the misery and the vice.”<sup>46</sup> For James, the “complication” of the situation involves Hyacinth’s registering these deprivations in light of his exclusion from London’s “freedom and ease, knowledge and power, money, opportunity and satiety.”<sup>47</sup> That the registering of this situation, the “record” of it, fundamentally involves the “feeling” capacity, James is quite clear: “The question of what the total assault, that of the world of his work-a-day life and the world of his divination and his envy together, would have made him, and what in especial he would

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<sup>45</sup> Henry James, Preface to The Princess Casamassima, in Henry James Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1088.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 1087.

have made of them. As tormented, I say, I thought of him, and that would be the point – if one could only see him feel enough to be interesting without his feeling so much as not to be natural.”<sup>48</sup>

In just this one brief claim, James articulates a condensed theory of the novel that affirms the capacity of the novel to be “interesting” to the degree that it “connects” readers to concrete social and historical situations as they may be apprehended in characters’ “feeling” consciousness of them. It is this claim that underlies James’s social conceptualization of the novel. In noting the imperative that the novelist must respect an “economy of interest,” James describes the task to consist in providing as “much experience as possible ... but keep down the terms in which you report that experience.”<sup>49</sup> This balance between providing as much experience as possible, but not too much, may be measureable in terms of characters’ social relations: “Experience, as I see it, is our apprehension and our measure of what happens to us as social creatures – any intelligent report of which has to be based on that apprehension.”<sup>50</sup> Further in this preface, James locates in the fiction of George Eliot a model for the capacity of “feeling” to register the records and histories of her characters. James notes Eliot’s “effort to show their adventures and their history – the author’s subject matter all – as determined by their feelings and the nature of their minds. Their emotions, their stirred intelligence, their moral consciousness, become thus, by sufficiently charmed perusal, our very own adventure.”<sup>51</sup> While the claims of this preface permeate all 18 prefaces, James offers in this preface one of his most succinct articulations of the “interest” of novelistic literary

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<sup>48</sup> Henry James, Preface to The Princess Casamassima, 1088.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 1090.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 1091.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 1095.

art to depend upon the artist's ability to represent his or her characters' "feeling" consciousness of concrete social and historical situations.

## 2.5 AN AFFECTIVE ART

R.P. Blackmur, who in the 1930s edited the republication of the prefaces in The Art of the Novel, observes in his essay "The Critical Prefaces of Henry James" that James's fictional form functions as a means of generating "feeling." Although for many critics, Blackmur's emphasis upon the formal unity in James's fiction contributed to the New Criticism's appropriation and canonization of James as master formalist, I am arguing here that Blackmur posits James's fiction to have a fundamental concern with the relationship of "art" to "life" and society, which Blackmur says particularly depends upon the form of the novel and a "feeling" consciousness.<sup>52</sup> While not yet a claim for the sociality or historicity of fiction, Blackmur's identification of the "relation of art and life" to be one of James's major "themes" helps direct attention to the form of his fiction as it exists in relationship to the social and historical world.<sup>53</sup>

In his essay, Blackmur observes James positing themes that point both towards novelistic form and back toward their "relation to society." Noting what he views to be the general narrative pattern of the Prefaces, Blackmur says:

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<sup>52</sup> R.P. Blackmur, Studies in Henry James, ed. Veronica A. Makowsky (New York: New Directions, 1983), 5. Makowsky stresses that Blackmur's reading of James contributed to the New Criticism's formalistic agenda: "His criteria ... amounts to a précis of the values and methods of the New Criticism: 'The things most difficult to master will be the best.'" Makowsky further notes important antecedents for the New Criticism in other early twentieth century appraisals of James, including Joseph Warren Beach and Percy Lubbock. As their titles suggest, Beach's The Method of Henry James (1918) and Lubbock's The Craft of Fiction (1921), both critics claim the significance of James's fiction to be purely a function of its formal compositional elements. Makowsky observes: "Lubbock introduces the view of a text as a higher reality which is independent of its audience or creator, a separation the New Critics would later enforce."

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

There is an account – frequently the most interesting feature – of how the author built up his theme as a consistent piece of dramatization. Usually there are two aspects to this feature, differently discussed in different Prefaces – the aspect of a theme in relation to itself as a balanced and consistent whole, the flesh upon the articulated plot; and the aspect of the theme in relation to society, which is the moral and evaluating aspect.<sup>54</sup>

Blackmur's observation that the "moral and evaluating aspect" of James's fiction depends upon his themes' relationships to "society" provides an important insight. But most importantly, Blackmur identifies "felt life" to be the grounds for this "moral sense."

Blackmur suggests in James an emphasis upon "sensibility" and "feeling" to be modes of consciousness that function to establish relationships between characters and their world. Following James, Blackmur also says that only the degree of represented "feeling" in novelistic fiction provides the measure of its "moral" sense, and he explicitly quotes four sentences of James on this point:

"There is, I think, no more nutritive or suggestive truth in this connexion than that of the perfect dependence of the 'moral' sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it. The question comes back thus, obviously, to the kind and degree of the artist's prime sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs. The quality and capacity to 'grow' with due freshness and straightness any vision of life, represents, strongly or weakly the projected morality. ... Here we get exactly the high price of the novel as a literary form – its power not only, while preserving that form with closeness, to range through all the differences of the individual relation to its general subject-matter, all the

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<sup>54</sup> Blackmur, "The Critical Prefaces of Henry James," 18.

varieties of outlook on life, of disposition to reflect and project, created by conditions that are never the same from man to man (or as far as that goes, from woman to woman), but positively to appear more true to its character in proportion as it strains, or tends to burst, with a latent extravagance, its mould.” These sentences represent, I think, the genius and intention of James the novelist, and ought to explain the serious and critical devotion with which he made of his Prefaces a vademecum – both for himself as the solace of achievement, and for others as a guide and exemplification.<sup>55</sup>

It is characteristic of Blackmur that in James “felt life” is accessible only through formal literary devices. He identifies a number of forms in James’s work that function to bring forth and articulate “felt life”: among them, “the indirect approach, “the dramatic scene,” and the “plea for a fine central intelligence.”<sup>56</sup> It is only through these formal literary devices that James’s literary art registers “life” as “felt experience,” or in what Blackmur describes in the highest of terms, the relationship of “form” to “moral sense.”

James’s representation of experiential life in novelistic form, however, does not imply that he deploys a “formalistic” method that allows for valorization of the text as an abstract expression of transcendent literary values. Blackmur asserts that James’s representation of “experiential life” in literary form is premised upon its concrete specificity. Blackmur’s stress upon the specificity of James’s literary art underlies his claims to its “moral sense,” and he further identifies it with James’s critical practice: “James unfailingly, unflaggingly reveals for his most general precept its specific living source. ... That is his unique virtue as a critic, that the specific object is always in hand;

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<sup>55</sup> Blackmur, 36-37.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 21-37.

as it was analogously his genius as a novelist that what he wrote about was always present in somebody's specific knowledge of it."<sup>57</sup> In describing James to be a writer whose practice both in fiction and criticism attends to "the specific object," in which he reveals a "specific living source" for every one of his "most general precept[s]," Blackmur suggests the concrete, even historical, grounds for the art and criticism of James.

One of James's major formal devices, according to Blackmur, is his deployment of the "indirect approach," which functions in relationship to "the plea for a fine central intelligence." More importantly, the "indirect approach" functions to produce a feeling aesthetic in which "sensibility" connects the reader to the "felt experience" of the fiction's subject. Blackmur explains the indirect approach functions by means of a "created sensibility interposed between the reader and the felt experience which is the subject of the fiction."<sup>58</sup> In most all the fiction collected in the New York Edition, "sensibility" occupies the foreground of every novel or story. And, it is this "created sensibility" in a character that reveals "specific knowledge."

That Blackmur identifies sensibility to be a primary feature of James's fiction calls for a re-consideration of Jamesian form. For Blackmur, form is a mode for the representation of the concrete specificities of life as it is experienced; and while this is distinguishable from life as it is lived, which avails no "concrete specificity" in thought, it represents life in all of its concrete actuality. For James, according to Blackmur, this concrete specificity resides in "feeling," in what "someone felt about what happened."<sup>59</sup> Blackmur's claim for the "created sensibility" in James's fiction as a device by which

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<sup>57</sup> Blackmur, 19.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

“what happened” may be made visible and apparent suggests the “feeling” domain of experience to be a unique mode of representing the actual. Furthermore, this insight into James’s deployment of “sensibility” as a way of accessing the actual – “what happened” – provides a locus of examination for James’s fiction from a range of non-formalist perspectives.

Blackmur’s emphasis upon the capacity of “sensibility” in James’s fiction functions as one instance in a line of critical thought about James that may be distinguished from a parallel critical tradition exclusively focused upon a formalist James (as may be located in Lubbock and Beach). Friend and fellow novelist Edith Wharton claims “feeling” to be the primary basis of James’s aesthetic principles, which she notes as a defense of James against charges of solipsistic, self-referential formalism. In her short essay on James, “The Man of Letters” (1920), Wharton diverges from an emerging critical consensus proposing a formalist James, as valued and exemplified in Percy Lubbock’s Craft of Fiction. While Wharton notes the high function of form in James’s practice, saying he valued novels “constructed with a classical unity and economy of means,” she also observes the “subject” to be a primary concern in his fiction: “Subject and form – these are the fundamentals to which he perpetually reverts; and of the two (although he would hardly have admitted that they could be considered separately) subject most concerned him.”<sup>60</sup> Wharton’s observation is significant for its assertion of the basis in “feeling” of this concrete “subject” as distinct from formalism: “There is an inveterate tendency on the part of the Anglo-Saxon reader to regard ‘feeling’ and ‘art’ as antithetical. A higher sensibility is supposed by the inartistic to inhere in artless effort;

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<sup>60</sup> Edith Wharton, “The Man of Letters,” in Henry James: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Leon Edel (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 31.

and every creative writer preoccupied with the technique of his trade – from grammar and syntax to construction – is assumed to be indifferent to ‘subject.’”<sup>61</sup> Needless to say, Wharton does not believe this presumed opposition applies to James’s fiction: “James is still looked upon by many as a supersubtle carver of cherry stones, whereas in fact the vital matter for him was always *subject*, and the criterion of subject the extent of its moral register.”<sup>62</sup> According to Wharton, James’s concern with the representation of subject is “conterminous” with “the question of form,” and it is the function of form in James’s fiction to produce its “three-dimensional qualities.” She further remarks that this mode of representation surpasses the art of earlier realists, Balzac and Thackeray in particular, whose methods she says produced a “flat” art.<sup>63</sup>

Wharton says that in later years James “formalized his observance” as he “fell increasingly under the spell of his formula.”<sup>64</sup> However, in claiming this, Wharton notes a contrary, more primary impulse in James, in which he “continued, to the end, to take the freest, eagerest interest in whatever was living and spontaneous in the work of his contemporaries.” This free, eager “interest” formed the basis of his “feeling” art, as Wharton concludes, “So his rich nature comes full circle, the intellectual and the ‘affective’ sympathies meeting in a common glow of human kindness and human understanding.”<sup>65</sup>

The modernist American poets Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot also observed James’s fiction to depend upon affect and feeling. Eliot’s reading of James’s fiction is especially significant, insofar as he identifies sense to be its primary element. Eliot’s claim for

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<sup>61</sup> Wharton, 31.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 36

sense in James's writing resonates in important ways with the concept of "sensibility" he first articulates in "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921). In this essay, Eliot posits "sensibility" to be a particular poetic capacity that comprehends both "thought" and "feeling," and which pertains to the empirical domain of "experience." Eliot describes poetic "sensibility" to be a faculty of thinking that is distinct from a purely rational, idealized mode of apprehending the world, and it is this difference that constitutes the unique capacity of poetic thought to articulate the "wholes" of experience. This wholeness, constituted by language operating as a representation of thought and feeling, disappears with the "dissociation of sensibility" beginning in the seventeenth century. Insofar as this "sensibility" remains wholly within an experiential, empirical domain, Eliot indicates its opposition to idealist modes of apprehending the world and reality through "ideas."

It is this kind of "sensibility" that underlies Eliot's famous, often-quoted comment about James that "he had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it."<sup>66</sup> As a pithy formulation, Eliot's assertion claims James for a poetic mode of thought in which thinking and feeling exist as a "whole" activity. Anticipating claims he later makes in "The Metaphysical Poets," Eliot characterizes James's writing practice to be constituted by this kind of anti-idealist "sensibility":

James's critical genius comes out most tellingly in his mastery over, his baffling escape from, Ideas; a mastery and an escape which are perhaps the last test of a superior intelligence. He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it. ... In England ideas run wild and pasture on the emotions; instead of thinking with our

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<sup>66</sup> T.S. Eliot, "On Henry James" [1918], in *The Question of Henry James*, ed. F.W. Dupee (New York: Henry Holt and Company), 110.

feelings (a very different thing) we corrupt our feelings with ideas; we produce the political, the emotional idea, evading sensation and thought. ... James in his novels is like the best French critics in maintaining a viewpoint, a viewpoint untouched by the parasite idea. He is the most intelligent man of his generation.<sup>67</sup>

Eliot's claims about James, particularly the suggestion that James's fiction displays "thinking with feelings," specifically reject non-empirical modes of apprehending the world and reality. In this criticism of idealism, Eliot characterizes the faculty of sensibility to be constitutive of thinking, and he strongly claims this faculty to inform James's fictional practice. Unlike the fiction of other English writers of his time, James does not prioritize the abstract, "parasite idea" over sensuous, direct experiential thought. "Thought and feeling" constitute the grounds of James's representational practice, a judgment Eliot reiterates in "A Prediction" (1924), an essay he published after "The Metaphysical Poets": "James did not provide us with 'ideas,' but with another world of thought and feeling."<sup>68</sup>

Eliot's claim for the sensibility of James's fiction in "thought and feeling" suggests his fiction "thinks" in a way that may not be found in other literary, scientific, or philosophical modes. Eliot describes the capacity of James's "sensibility" to apprehend the "historicality" of the world in its experiential domain in his second essay in the Little Review 1918 edition, "The Hawthorne Aspect." In this essay, which I also address in chapter four, Eliot claims the historicality of James's fiction to consist of its "sense of the past." In making this claim, Eliot compares James to Hawthorne, and he makes an important distinction between the two:

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<sup>67</sup> Eliot, "On Henry James," 111.

<sup>68</sup> Eliot, "A Prediction" [1924], in Henry James: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Leon Edel (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 56.

In one thing alone Hawthorne is more solid than James: he had a very acute historical sense. His erudition in the small field of American colonial history was extensive, and he made most fortunate use of it. Both men had the sense of the past which is peculiarly American, but in Hawthorne this sense exercised itself in a grip on the past itself; in James it is a sense of the sense.<sup>69</sup>

The formulation that James's writing offers the "sense of the sense" of the past aptly characterizes the kind of "thinking" expressed in his works. Both his fiction and non-fiction registers the "historicality" of the experiential world. But, James offers the "sense of the sense" as an indirect apprehension. Eliot anticipates Blackmur's identification of "the indirect approach" in James, by which the "sensibility" of a principal character indirectly registers the things that happened to it ("what someone felt about what happened"). Eliot finally observes James's sensuous registering of historical change to be especially evident in his last, unfinished novel, The Sense of the Past: "The interest in the 'deeper psychology,' the observation, and the sense for situation, developed from book to book, culminated in The Sense of the Past (by no means saying that this is his best), uniting with other qualities both personal and racial. James's greatness is apparent both in his capacity for keeping his mind alive to the changes in the world during twenty-five years."<sup>70</sup> As Adeline Tinter observes, The Sense of the Past offers an affirmation of modern sensibility against an exclusively historical consciousness, reading Ralph Pendrel's rescue from fantastical eighteenth century oblivion by his twentieth century fiancée to note that, "Ralph, under the optimistic eye of James, leaves the closed world of

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<sup>69</sup> T.S. Eliot, "The Hawthorne Aspect" [1918], in The Question of Henry James, ed. F.W. Dupee (New York: Henry Holt and Company), 115.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 118. Eliot notes The Sense of the Past offers "the tragedy of that 'Sense,' the hypertrophy, in Ralph, of a partial civilization; the vulgar vitality of the Midmores in their financial decay contrasted with the decay of Ralph in his financial prosperity" (118).

his fantasy to behave normally once more in the modern world where one's consciousness can form relationships with the consciousnesses of one's contemporaries. Ralph walks back into 'the world of 1910' and 'he *re-connects*, on the spot, with all the lucidity and authority we can desire of him.'"<sup>71</sup>

Insofar as Eliot identifies sensibility to be a primary element of James's aesthetic practice, which may be located in both his fictional and nonfictional works, it marks an important point of departure for criticism on James. Traces of this emphasis are evident in Blackmur's readings of James. It also suggests perhaps what is James's most primary emphasis in his criticism on both his and others' fiction, what he calls in the preface to The Portrait of a Lady a "criticism based upon perception, a criticism which is too little of this world."<sup>72</sup> That this kind of critical emphasis upon "sensibility" as "thought and feeling" avails access to a concrete historical domain of experience – and does not produce an ahistorical formalism as a final effect – may be apparent especially in light of the criticism of Raymond Williams. In my consideration of James's claims for "feeling" as the basis of novelistic "interest," I am positing a link between his articulation of "feeling" not only toward Eliot's concept of "sensibility," but also to Williams's "structures of feeling."

## **2.6. SENSIBILITY AND FEELING: FROM JAMES TO ELIOT TO WILLIAMS**

Raymond Williams conceptualizes "structures of feeling" to be "emergent," counter-hegemonic cultural formations that have not already been "precipitated" from other social

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<sup>71</sup> Adeline Tinter, The Book World of Henry James: Appropriating the Classics, 177.

<sup>72</sup> Henry James, Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, 1081.

semantic formations.<sup>73</sup> For Williams, “structures of feeling” articulate domains of experience that may not be accounted for in “dominant” ideological formations. These “emergent” formations exist in concrete specificity as “practical consciousness,” or in other words, in language as “semantic figures.”<sup>74</sup> Williams’s conceptualization of language as “practical consciousness” suggests its capacity to register lived experience, by which the human, social, and historical domains of experience may be revealed.

It is within the “active and changing” domain of society that “structures of feeling” acquire their oppositional, counter-hegemonic quality. In hegemonic relationships, Williams says, “There is always, though in varying degrees, practical consciousness, in specific relationships, specific skills, specific perceptions, that is unquestionably social and that a specifically dominant social order neglects, excludes, represses, or simply fails to recognize.”<sup>75</sup> “Emergent” and “pre-emergent” formations, Williams’s terms for articulations of “practical consciousness” the “dominant” of any hegemonic relationship “neglects, excludes, represses, or simply fails to recognize,” are not recognizable primarily as instances of a counter-hegemonic “ideology,” or as formal or coherent beliefs. Oppositional formations that have not yet coalesced into clearly definable cultural patterns or social practice exist in a “pre-emergent” domain that may yet be recognizable in their concrete specificity. Oftentimes, these “excluded” but oppositional formations reveal their affinities with working-class practice, though these formations are not definable exclusively in class terms:

This complex process can still in part be described in class terms. But there is always other social being and consciousness which is neglected and excluded:

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<sup>73</sup> Williams, Marxism and Literature, 134.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 125

alternative perceptions of others, in immediate relationships; new perceptions and practices of the material world. In practice these are different in quality from the developing and articulated interests of a rising class. The relations between these two sources of the emergent – the class and the excluded social (human) area – are by no means necessarily contradictory. At times they can be very close and on the relations between them much in political practice depends. But culturally and as a matter of theory the areas can be seen as distinct.<sup>76</sup>

Williams's distinction of the "excluded social (human) area" and "the class," and his claim for the affinities of these distinct social areas, has particular importance as it helps to theorize the relationship of "literature" and the "intellectual function" to Marxist practice. It especially helps to examine the critical dimensions of Henry James's novelistic literary art and criticism, especially as they exist almost entirely as an "intellectual function."

Insofar as Williams's "structures of feeling" exist in specific forms of language, they are nearly indistinguishable from Eliot's concept of "sensibility," as Eliot discusses the term in "The Metaphysical Poets."<sup>77</sup> In Williams's Keywords, a book he published one year before Marxism and Literature, Williams calls special attention to Eliot's term "disassociation of sensibility" as part of the etymology of "sensibility." Williams additionally notes the close relationship of "sensibility" to "experience" in Eliot's thinking, and it is this latter term that he applies to "structures of feeling." On the historical usages of "sensibility," Williams says:

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<sup>76</sup> Williams, Marxism and Literature, 126.

<sup>77</sup> T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets" [1921], in The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1998), 122-130.

What T.S. Eliot, in the 1920s, called the dissociation of sensibility was a supposed disjunction between “thought” and “feeling.” Sensibility became the apparently unifying word, and on the whole was transferred from kinds of response to a use equivalent to the formation of a particular mind: a whole activity, a whole way of perceiving and responding, not to be reduced to either “thought” or “feeling.” Experience, in its available sense of something active and something formed, took on the same generality.<sup>78</sup>

By comparison, Williams characterizes “structures of feeling” to function similarly to this notion of “experience”; in fact, he suggests “structures of experience” to be a more accurate term for his concept. At any rate, Williams’s debt to Eliot’s concept of “sensibility” as a mode of “thought and feeling” as a whole is apparent: “structures of feeling,” Williams says, refer to “affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity.”<sup>79</sup>

Eliot’s concept of “sensibility,” which he ascribes to James, is pivotally important for my suggestion of the purposefulness of Williams’s “structures of feeling” in examining James’s claims about novelistic art in the prefaces.<sup>80</sup> Williams suggests that “practical consciousness of a present kind” – in “thought as felt and feeling as thought” – expresses powerful possibilities of human agency:

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<sup>78</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords* [1976] (New York: Oxford UP, 1983), 282.

<sup>79</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 132.

<sup>80</sup> Posnock in *The Trial of Curiosity* again offers useful considerations for my purposes, as he explicitly characterizes James’s articulation of “curiosity” to function as a “structure of feeling”: “The Jamesian construction of curiosity is akin to what Raymond Williams calls a ‘structure of feeling actively lived and felt.’ ... curiosity is a ‘specific structure of particular linkages, and suppressions.’ In other words, Jamesian curiosity is a pragmatic historical practice suspicious of any discourse equating the social with fixed or finished forms” (23-24). Posnock does not directly follow up on the significance of his claim – though it seems clear that his characterizations of curiosity would correlate to what Williams calls “pre-emergent” or “emergent” cultural formations.

It is then not a question of any temporal priority of the ‘production of material life’ considered as a separate act. The distinctively human mode of this primary material production [language] has been characterized in three aspects: needs, new needs and human reproduction – ‘not of course to be taken as three different stages ... but ... which have existed simultaneously since the dawn of history and the first men, and still assert themselves in history today.’ The distinctive humanity of the development is then expressed by the fourth ‘aspect,’ that such production is *from the beginning also* a social relationship.<sup>81</sup>

It is this “fourth aspect” to language, it being constitutive of humans in social relationships, that provides it with its possibilities for practical agency. As “signification,” language simultaneously represents and re-creates, and as Williams observes, it exists in “an active and changing society.” Describing this capacity of language, Williams says, “Language is the articulation of this active and changing experience; a dynamic and articulated social presence in the world. ... Signification, the social creation of meanings through the use of formal signs, is then a practical material activity; it is indeed, literally, a means of production. It is a specific form of that practical consciousness which is inseparable from all social material activity.”<sup>82</sup>

James’s assertions in the prefaces that the “interest” of novelistic literary art consists of its capacity to register characters’ “feelings” suggests that what makes the novel matter and what makes it different is its capacity to express a “practical consciousness” capable of critical response to a social and historical world in which it

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<sup>81</sup> Williams, Marxism and Literature, 30.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38.

exists. As James clearly suggests, critical response inheres in the act of reading as much as it does in the act of novelistic composition. To return to the passage from James's Preface to Roderick Hudson quoted above, James observes that the "interest" of novelistic literary art, that which makes a difference or matters, does not necessarily depend upon the original writer of the work of fiction. Rather, the novel's "interest" depends upon "somebody's having ... a *sense* for it – even the reader will do, on occasion, when the writer, as so often happens, completely falls out. The way in which this sense has been, or has not been, applied constitutes, at all events, in respect to any fiction, the very ground of critical appreciation."<sup>83</sup> Importantly, that "critical appreciation" or critical response devolves upon the reader calls for the production of significance in repeated acts of reading and writing. These acts are what matter, what make a difference, and what produce the "interest" of any given novel. Reading of this kind, considering Williams's articulation of "practical consciousness" to function as a "means of production" that contains possibilities for re-creation and re-making of the world, suggests the availability of interpretation to oppositional (pre-emergent and emergent) ways of thinking. Thus, the lesson James provides in the prefaces for the generative possibilities of novelistic "interest" in acts of interpretation is instructive.

Recalling the Preface to The Awkward Age, James observes, "We live notoriously, as I suppose every age lives, in an 'epoch of transition.'"<sup>84</sup> In my reading of James's practice and criticism of novelistic art, its "interest" resides in its capacity to make apparent the dimensions of the "transition," the possibilities of the "present"

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<sup>83</sup> Henry James, Preface to Roderick Hudson, 1044.

<sup>84</sup> Henry James, Preface to The Awkward Age, in Henry James Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1124.

contained within a given epoch. Eliot's claim for James's "sense of the sense" of the past is instructive here as well. Unlike Hawthorne, whose art Eliot describes to be an articulation merely of the "sense of the past," James's novelistic practice suggests a different relationship to the past: one may have a "sense of the past," but one may also maintain distance from it – a "sense of the sense." This, I suggest, is a position Isabel Archer acquires in The Portrait a Lady, as I explain in my fourth chapter.

### 3.0 CHAPTER TWO: A “WORLDLY” LITERARY ART

#### 3.1 ART OF THE WORLD

In this chapter, I examine A Small Boy and Others (1913), Notes of a Son and Brother (1914), and The Middle Years (1917), Henry James’s autobiographical accounts late in his life of his upbringing in Europe, his aesthetic “education,” and his matured sense of literary vocation. Broadly speaking, a critical consensus asserts the autobiographical works function to be a statement of James’s affirmation of his development into a literary artist. Readers of the autobiography have posited variations on this theme ever since Frederick Dupee edited and republished the three books in 1956, and titled the volume, Henry James: Autobiography. Dupee himself helped to initiate this reading, as he compares James’s autobiographical books favorably to the major works of Joyce, Proust, and Yeats, noting, “James, like his younger contemporaries, seems to conceive of the literary vocation as a kind of second birth, a new soul which struggles into being out of pain and loss and humiliation.”<sup>85</sup> Adeline Tinter, writing 20 years later, describes the volumes to be “a new form of fiction, creative autobiography.”<sup>86</sup> She similarly claims an affinity between James’s autobiography and major works by Joyce and Proust. James’s “creative autobiography,” she says, moves toward affirming the “climax of his artistic vocation,” just as Joyce suggests the “discovery of ... artistic vocation” in A Portrait of

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<sup>85</sup> Frederick W. Dupee. “Introduction” [1956], in Henry James: Autobiography (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), xii.

<sup>86</sup> Adeline Tinter, The Twentieth-Century World of Henry James (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2000), 121.

the Artist as a Young Man, and “very much in the way Marcel explains at the end of Remembrance of Things Past the justification for his long work, the discovery by the very writing of it that he is a writer.”<sup>87</sup>

While Tinter claims James for inclusion in the modernist pantheon of experimental literary artists, William Goetz posits James’s adherence to romanticist tropes and figures in his study Henry James and the Darkest Abyss of Romance.<sup>88</sup> Goetz productively and compellingly examines the permeability of James’s fiction with his critical writings in the Prefaces and his autobiography (a view to which I explicitly assent in claiming that a discernible Jamesian text extends through his criticism, his autobiographical works, and his fiction).<sup>89</sup> Yet, I contest Goetz’s claims that James’s autobiography evades critique, as he asserts James “[indulges] in his own childhood vision of the world” by which “he prefers the note of elegy, romance, and pathos.”<sup>90</sup> In particular, my reading of James’s autobiography dissents from Goetz’s view that James’s deployment of romanticist figures, particularly the imagination, “is explicitly predicated on a postromantic belief in the individual soul.”<sup>91</sup>

More productive still for my purposes are critics who have proposed historicized readings of the autobiography. John Paul Eakin, for example, calls attention to the present situation of James’s writing in 1913, noting the earlier examples of Leon Edel and Robert Sayre, who claim the composition of autobiography allowed James to recover from a number of setbacks and disappointments starting in 1909. As Eakin notes, James

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<sup>87</sup> Tinter, The Twentieth-Century World of Henry James, 131.

<sup>88</sup> William Goetz, Henry James and the Darkest Abyss of Romance (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1986).

<sup>89</sup> See also William Hoffa, “The Final Preface: Henry James’s Autobiography,” in The Sewanee Review 77, no. 2 (1969), 277-293.

<sup>90</sup> Goetz, 80-81.

<sup>91</sup> Goetz, 36.

suffered from “depression and illness” following the poor sales of the New York Edition in 1909 and his brother William’s death in 1910. Edel, Eakin notes, “believes that the act of composition ministered not only to James’s physical recovery but to his psychological health as well, allowing him to resolve the old ‘family’ drama of tensions and sibling rivalries.”<sup>92</sup> Eakin proposes to evaluate James’s “mediation of the past by the present,” encouraging readers to consider especially the present situation of James writing the autobiography while retaining its usefulness for the purposes of critical biography that would allow access to – and historicization of – James’s past. In particular, Eakin usefully examines James’s relationship to his father, Henry James, Sr., around James’s account of his developing sense of literary vocation in opposition to the beliefs and wishes of his father.

Carol Holly, following Eakin, encourages a contextual approach toward James’s autobiography respecting both the present and the past temporalities of autobiographical writing: “Imagine, if we can, a study of James’s life and work in which an entire chapter – not a smattering of pages, as we have in Edel’s The Master – is devoted to the role of the autobiographies in the life of an older James. ... Eakin suggest[s] a direction for such a biographical account when he addresses ‘the importance of a *contextual* understanding of autobiography’s recreation of biographical fact,’ both for the time written about and for the time of the writing.”<sup>93</sup> Holly herself employs a contextual approach in her study Intensely Family, insofar as she examines James’s autobiography as part of a “family drama” in light of both his father’s own autobiography and the record of grandfather

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<sup>92</sup> Paul John Eakin, Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985), 58.

<sup>93</sup> Carol Holly, “The Autobiographies: A History of Readings,” in A Companion to Henry James Studies, ed. Daniel Mark Fogel (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 440.

William James of Albany. While Holly usefully observes the Protestant underpinnings to what she calls the James family's "heritage of shame," her reading and conclusions nevertheless pertain strictly to a psychological mode of analysis.<sup>94</sup>

Andrew Taylor's study, Henry James and the Father Question has been far more pertinent for my purposes. Taylor examines the autobiographies of both father and son, and he locates each work within particular nineteenth-century American cultural and intellectual contexts, including the example of Emerson, the Protestant cultural tradition, and developing business culture. Taylor observes that the father's "intellectual inheritance ... provided James with both a productive narrative framework and subject matter for his own writing."<sup>95</sup> The distinction of the son from the father on the crucial point of vocation, as examined by Taylor, informs my claims about James's conceptualization of literary art to be an engaged, "worldly" mode of thought. In this respect, Taylor offers the instructive observation that James's affirmations of vocation in novelistic fiction marks a secular departure from the father's spiritual, near other-worldly response to American Protestant traditions:

One generation on from a New England still predominantly guided by religious authority (although in the process of fragmentation and division), the novelist's concerns were more secular and cosmopolitan; instead of the freedoms for polemic offered by the philosophical treatise, his preference was for the competing demands of fictional narrative.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Carol Holly, Intensely Family: The Inheritance of Family Shame and the Autobiographies of Henry James (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

<sup>95</sup> Andrew Taylor, Henry James and the Father Question (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 15.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

Both James Sr. and his son express tremendous dissatisfaction in their autobiographies with the dictates of a Protestant-oriented culture as it emanated forth from New England, and for both, the development of American business culture marks the apotheosis of its moralistic dictates. Notably, as Taylor suggests, Henry James's account of his development of his vocation as literary artist functions as a critique of a developing American business cultural apparatus that nevertheless departs from Henry James Sr.'s adoption of a liberal, Emersonian philosophical worldview. In this regard, I intend in this chapter to historicize James's account of his development into a literary artist, as asserted in consensus critical views of James's autobiography. In particular, I argue that James's claims for his vocation in literary art specifically articulates a secular, worldly response to the theocratic underpinnings of American business culture, which his grandfather, William James of Albany, especially exemplified.

I am calling James's claims for his literary vocation to be a "worldly" practice following Edward Said's articulation of the term "worldly" to be a "secular critical consciousness" that establishes cultural and social "affiliations" allowing for the production of "new" relationships to given historically-made social institutions.<sup>97</sup> I claim James's "worldliness" to be apparent in his account of educational experiences in the informal and haphazard study of European artworks and novels, which he says availed for him a comparative perspective toward U.S. society and culture, and which culminates for him in a specific sense of his literary vocation. Following Said, who associates this "worldly" critical consciousness with a number of modernist literary artists (Conrad, Yeats, Joyce, Eliot, and Pound), as well as the literary criticism of Erich Auerbach and

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<sup>97</sup> Edward Said, "Secular Criticism," in The World, The Text, and the Critic (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1983), 24-25.

Raymond Williams,<sup>98</sup> I am arguing that James's aesthetic education and his affirmation of literary vocation in his autobiographical writings generates a critical, historical response to American culture and society that produces an engaged mode of thought. As Said says, the work of each of these writers and critics operates by means of critical "affiliation," a turn away from a purely natural form of filiation (i.e. biological/hereditary ways, as well as nationalistic ways, of relating oneself to given cultures) as a way of thinking "a kind of compensatory order that, whether it is a party, an institution, a culture, a set of beliefs, or even a world-vision, provides men and women with a new form of relationship ... which is also a new system."<sup>99</sup>

I examine Henry James's criticism of grandfather William James's legacy of business enterprise through, first, his discussion of the activity of literary art to be constitutive of a source of difference from the activity of American business enterprise, and secondly, in his discussion of his own father's "free-spirited" response disavowing "paying" professions and eschewing religious orthodoxy. In examining these parts of James's autobiographical writings, I argue James conceptualizes the activity of literary art to be productive of a "worldly," historical way of thinking that purposively opposes the informing cultural apparatus of American capitalism as it exists in business enterprise.

To develop my claims in this chapter, I argue that this informing cultural apparatus has two strong determinants: the first, a Protestant conceptualization of faith as demonstrable in labor and the accumulation of wealth; and the second, a corresponding philosophically-liberal conceptualization of the individual as the distinct basis of western

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<sup>98</sup> Edward Said, "Secular Criticism," 19-24.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 19.

capitalism. I briefly examine Max Weber's classic study on the development of western capitalism and Protestant culture, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, as well as Michel Foucault's account of the development of economic liberalism in his lectures, The Birth of Biopolitics, in order to examine the oppositional quality of James's articulation of the "worldliness" of literary art. I take Foucault's description of economic liberalism to be an "art of government" premised upon a conceptualization of "homo economicus," an "entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of his earnings," to offer an instructive point of departure for considering the social and historical claims of Jamesian literary art. In contrast to this liberal conceptualization of the individual, I suggest James articulates fiction and the production of literary art to be "of the world," by which the sources of fiction do not express or offer relations toward exclusively private individual consciousness, but rather that fiction exists in the world, in "a sphere the confines of which move on even as we ourselves move and which is always there, just beyond us, to twit with us the more it should have to show if we were a little more of it."<sup>100</sup> That James's fiction encourages readers to be "a little more of it [the world]" I argue underlies his claims for literary art's opposition to a Protestant-derived, culture of business enterprise.

### **3.2 "DAZZLING POSSIBILITIES": HENRY JAMES IN EUROPE**

Henry James's account of his decision to live in Europe and away from the United States has provided some of his most polemical critics with evidence of his fiction's social

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<sup>100</sup> Henry James, Notes of a Son and Brother [1914], in Henry James: Autobiography, ed. Frederick Dupee (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1956), 290.

irrelevance and its failure to engage, to criticize, and to oppose the political and social developments of the post-Civil War era of the U.S. For critics both past and recent, much of James's fiction neglects to engage the social reality of the U.S. as it developed into a global, corporatist power in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Writing in the 1920s, Vernon L. Parrington exemplified a kind of criticism on James that denounced him on the grounds of class position, opposing James to what he characterized to be proletarian American novelists, critics, and writers, and in the process, ascribing upper-class sympathies and social orientations to James. While Parrington lauded writers who wrote about "American reality," describing Sherwood Anderson to be an "authentic product of American consciousness," he criticized James's fiction on the grounds of his expatriation to Europe as an adult: "He suffered the common fate of the *déraciné*; wandering between worlds, he found a home nowhere. It is not well for the artist to turn cosmopolitan, for the flavor of the fruit comes from the soil and sunshine of its native fields."<sup>101</sup>

Directly responding to reductive readings of James's autobiographical writing, F.O. Matthiessen in Henry James: The Major Phase called for a renewed, attentive practice of reading, which Matthiessen noted to be lacking in the denunciatory mode of writing favored by a developing contingent of Americanist critics, including Parrington and Van Wyck Brooks. Matthiessen offers a valuable corrective to critics who would prioritize explicitly social-political concerns over the act of reading a literary text:

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<sup>101</sup> V.L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought, Vol. 3 (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press), 240.

“Aesthetic criticism, if carried far enough, inevitably becomes social criticism, since the act of perception extends through the work of art to its milieu.”<sup>102</sup>

In his autobiographical writings, Henry James describes the condition of exile from the United States to have defined his family’s way of life as he grew up, and he especially describes the condition to have enabled his developing sense of himself as an imaginative writer of fictional art. James’s narrative asserts a positive claim for an upbringing that brought him away from the United States and into contact with European art and history through readings of literary magazines, visits to museums, and studies of western languages, all of which he describes in terms of his aesthetic “education.”

Writing in *A Small Boy and Others*, Henry James recalls from a distance of over fifty years his upbringing in the United States and Europe in the 1840s and 1850s. Initially, the James parents’ Atlantic crossings took Henry and older brother William from Manhattan to London, Paris, and Geneva for a one-year stay in 1845; later, following a move back to New York, then to Albany, and the birth of two younger brothers, Wilky and Bob, and a sister, Alice, the family moved again for a longer stay in Europe between 1855-1858. From the vantage point of 1913, Henry characterizes this introduction to Europe to have been the result of his parents’ “quest of the ancient,” which he describes to have had a lasting, formative intellectual influence. Having claimed Europe to be his home in adult life (maintaining a residence in England from 1877 until his death in 1916), James shared his parents’ view that contact with Europe could provide him with a measure of “success in life”: “I never found myself deterred

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<sup>102</sup> F.O. Matthiessen, *Henry James: The Major Phase*, xiv.

from this fond view, which was implied in every question I asked, every answer I got, and every plan I formed.”<sup>103</sup>

In locating the beginnings of his fiction in this familial “quest of the ancient” in Europe, James retrospectively ascribes to his childhood self the particular role of Euro-American social critic and cultural interpreter that he would fulfill as a professional author. His experience of the inter-Atlantic world – involving “modern” U.S. and “ancient” European cultures – provided him with an implicitly comparative perspective toward the United States, a perspective that saturates his literary and critical writings. Notably, James describes himself to be an avid reader of novels who approached Europe linguistically as “the other world,” intelligible to him through its “signs” and “names.” And while the society and arts of France and Italy occasioned a substantial amount of literary and critical output for James, England provided him with an especially valuable point of reference:

To press my nose against the sources of the English smell, so different for young bibliophiles from any American, was to adopt that sweetness as the sign of my “atmosphere”; roundabout might be the course to take, but one was in motion from the first and one never lost sight of the goal. The names of places and things in the other world ... became to me values and secrets and shibboleths.<sup>104</sup>

James here describes his access to Europe to exist in the realm of culture, and he characterizes culture to pertain to the world of man-made aesthetic objects, displaying in material form the substance of a way of life and thought. He describes the “sense of freedom and contact and appreciation really too big for one” that he encountered even as

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<sup>103</sup> Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others* [1913], in *Henry James: Autobiography*, ed. Frederick Dupee, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1956), 50.

<sup>104</sup> Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others*, 50.

a child at the museums he and his brother William visited in Europe: “leaving such a mark on the very place, the pictures, the frames themselves, the figures within them, the particular parts and features of each, the look of the rich light, the smell of the massively enclosed air.” Noticing first the materiality of these cultural objects, James precociously takes them to be “image[s] of the world,” revealing historical differences between European and American societies.<sup>105</sup>

In lieu of any continuous formal education, James describes his experience with the museums of Europe as having constituted the substance of his education. At the Louvre, for example, James writes:

I had looked at pictures, looked and looked again, at the vast Veronese, at Murillo’s moon-borne Madonna, at Leonardo’s almost unholy dame with the folded hands, treasures of the Salon Carrè as that display was then composed; but I had also looked at France and looked at Europe, looked even at America as Europe itself might be conceived so to look, looked at history, as a still-felt past and a complacently personal future, at society, at manners, type, characters, possibilities and prodigies and mysteries of fifty sorts.<sup>106</sup>

Insofar as the study of artworks allowed James to compare the U.S. to Europe, to look “at America as Europe might be conceived so to look,” James provides an account of his incipient “worldly” education. And he characterizes it to exist as a particular mode of understanding he later names to be “aesthetic.”

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<sup>105</sup> Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others*, 198.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

In The Middle Years, James describes the culmination of this education occurring around the age of 26 in the achievement of a sense of vocation as a literary artist.<sup>107</sup> Pinpointing this moment to the first day of March 1869, shortly after his arrival to England for his first extended stay as an adult, James describes his sense of the “dazzling possibilities” now available to him, especially as he feels his mind, his “intensely ‘reacting’ small organism,” to be fully engaged.<sup>108</sup> James describes the significance to him of this immense activation of his mind in the form of artistic imagination as surpassing any tangible reward or benefits, especially as such rewards may be measureable in terms of money or property. Instead, the sense provides his mind with opportunities he believes to be far superior to the acquisition of property, and which he measures in terms of the possibilities of the “play of imagination”; his mind, he says, “couldn’t have been in higher spirits or made more inward fuss about the matter if it had come into a property measured not by mere impressions and visions, occasions for play of perception and imagination, mind and soul, but by dollars and ‘shares,’ lands and houses or flocks and herds.”<sup>109</sup> James says he encountered a sense of possibility in “immense fantastication,” which he describes arriving to him at a particular moment of a particular day, and whose value he apprehends as a “gage of experience ... [such] that I had but to take straight up.”<sup>110</sup>

Importantly, James notes the possibilities available for him in a literary vocation rested upon his mind’s capacity in “fantastication” to “take straight up” some particular “experience”; doing so, he says, occurred in the form of an “act.” His subsequent literary

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<sup>107</sup> Henry James, The Middle Years [1917], in Autobiography, ed. Frederick Dupee (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1956), 548.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

career, he observes, resulted from perpetual renewal of this kind of “act”: “My life, on so complacently near a view as I now treat myself to, having veritably consisted but in the prolongation of that act. I took up the gage, and as I look back in the fullest as well as simplest account of the interval till now strikes me as being that I have never, in common honour, let it drop again.”<sup>111</sup>

James relates his claim of literary vocation, consisting of “acts” calling forth the capacities of imaginative “fantastication,” to his presence in England. For James, the condition of being away from the United States and in England, “having landed in Liverpool” and for the first time on his own, provokes his imaginative capacities toward apprehension of the particular place and the particular moment. The consequence of this situation appears momentous and especially pleasing, producing foremost a welcomed sense of difference: “This in particular was of the perfect felicity, that while the fact of difference all round me was immense the embarrassment of it was nil – as if the getting into relation with the least waste had been prepared from so far back that a sort of divine economy now fairly ruled.”<sup>112</sup>

The immediacy of place serves James as the impetus for his apprehension of difference. He describes, for example, his impressions of breakfasting at the Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool. Observing this “coffee room,” he describe his mind’s apprehension of it in all its “appearances, aspects, images, every protrusive item almost,” and he notes the range of his observation, spanning the most trivial points (the manner of placement of muffin on the slop-bowl) to the slightly more consequential (the “strong draught of British ‘sea-coal’ fire, much more confident of its function than the fires I had left”) and

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<sup>111</sup> Henry James, *The Middle Years*, 548.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 550.

finally to the human and social elements (“the incomparable truth to type of the waiter”). It is, in fact, this last observation which James describes to be most consequential, availing for him “truth to history, to literature, to poetry, to Dickens, to Smollett and to Hogarth, to every connection that could help me to appropriate him and his setting, an arrangement of things hanging together with a romantic rightness that had the force of a revelation.”<sup>113</sup> This he describes to be his “bedazzled state of comparative freedom.”<sup>114</sup>

### 3.3 A RUPTURE

In re-constructing his childhood to have been a series of “aesthetic adventures,” James describes his family’s “detachment” and “disconnectedness” from the United States to have been not only the result of their numerous trips to Europe. As James describes his upbringing, his father and mother had been compelled in their preference for Europe by their strong aversion to business-oriented America. He observes the absence of any knowledge of “business” to be an especially notable feature of the education of himself and his siblings:

Our consciousness was positively disfurnished, as that of young Americans went, of the actualities of “business” in a world of business. As to that we all formed together quite a monstrous exception; business in a world of business was the thing we most agreed (differ as we might on minor issues) in knowing nothing about. We touched it and it touched us neither directly nor otherwise, and I think our fond detachment, not to say our helpless ignorance and on occasion (since I can speak for one fine instance) our settled density of understanding, made us an

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<sup>113</sup> Henry James, *The Middle Years*, 549.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 552.

unexampled and probably, for the ironic “smart” gods of the American heaven, a lamentable case.<sup>115</sup>

Corresponding to James’s stated lack of “consciousness” of business activity while growing up, he also notes business to have been the primary characteristic of the way of life of his grandfather, William James.

James does not explicitly state anything about William James’s sources of income, except to make the association of him to business generally. But, as James family biographers have noted, William James died one of the richest individuals in New York state, leaving about \$3 million in inheritance to be split among his eleven children. His rise in social class began in eighteenth-century Ireland in rural County Cavan, as the son of a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian farmer who held 25-acres of farmland. His major holdings included several import-export businesses along the Hudson River in Albany, as well as valuable real estate in developing towns and cities. Perhaps his most profitable acquisition came in 1824, when he purchased the Syracuse Salt Company.<sup>116</sup>

In contrast to this grandfather, whose “fine old ability” James says “decently provided for so large a generation,” James portrays his father to have been an especially renegade “free spirit” whose unorthodox views of religion, profession, and education put him (and his children) at odds with the narrow, upper-class values of the New England and New York societies in which the James family lived while in the U.S.<sup>117</sup> James recalls, for example, growing up in the vicinity of Washington Square in New York knowing the professions of his friends’ parents to include a number of lawyers and

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<sup>115</sup> Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others*, 35.

<sup>116</sup> Alfred Habegger, *The Father: A Life of Henry James, Sr.* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 1994. 9-29. See also Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 3.

<sup>117</sup> Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others*, 35, 205.

bankers, while also knowing of the positive “absence of any profession” at his own home.<sup>118</sup> James also describes the sense of “detachment” surrounding the James family at Newport, Rhode Island, following their 1855 return from Europe, to have been especially apparent as a result of his father’s lack of vocation.<sup>119</sup> That Henry James Sr. was not “in business” – a term James suggests in this particular situation to include the vocations of a lawyer, a doctor, or even a minister – contributed to his children’s sense of “detachment.” James says, “[business] alone was respectable,” and he recalls questioning his father, ““What shall we tell them you *are*,”” noting his father’s response: ““Say I’m a philosopher, say I’m a seeker of truth, say I’m a lover of my kind, say I’m an author of books if you like; or, best of all, just say I’m a Student.””<sup>120</sup> This “abject” response, James writes, “saw us so very little further.” James characterizes his father to have been averse not only to profession, but also to orthodox forms of religion. He recalls his father suggesting to him to respond to questions about which church the family attends, that “we could plead nothing less than the whole privilege of Christendom and that there was no communion, even that of the Catholics, even that of the Jews, even that of the Swedenborgians, from which we need find ourselves excluded.”<sup>121</sup>

James’s portrayal of his father Henry James Sr. strongly informs his claims of a “rupture” spanning at least two generations with the grandfather’s “tradition,” which he consistently characterizes with the word “business.”<sup>122</sup> Yet, for his own generation, James describes the activity of art, which he and his siblings (along with their cousins the Temples and the Barkers) cultivated in recreation, to have been the basis of a “rupture.”

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<sup>118</sup> Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others*, 146.

<sup>119</sup> Henry James, *Notes of a Son and Brother*, 277.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>121</sup> Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others*, 133-134.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

Artistic activity, James says, was “suggestive of our sudden collective disconnectedness.”<sup>123</sup> In recalling the childhood endeavors of his cousins in the fields of music and sculpture, James observes especially the imbalance between their attempts at art and the much more pervasive presence of business enterprise. He notes that “[t]he ghostliness of these aesthetic manifestation, as I allude to them, is the thinnest conceivable chip of stray marble, the faintest far-off twang of old chords.”<sup>124</sup> That their attempt at producing art appears to James at the moment of his writing years later about them as a “ghostly” impression figures the obscurity of their intentional aesthetic-making impulse in a society in which business presides.

Yet, James tellingly posits the grounds of a rupture from his grandfather’s tradition only in rhetorical and figurative modes of address. At no point does James assert a literal, factual basis for the “rupture.” Rather, James’s prose proceeds through deployment of an array of rhetorical and figurative tropes that assert “disconnectiveness” and “rupture.” James, in fact, initiates his reflections on his generation’s ruptured relationship to business with a profoundly rhetorical gesture that calls attention to the present state of his autobiographical writing (“I ask myself ...”):

I ask myself, for the odd obscurity of it, under what inspiration music and sculpture may have tinkled and glimmered to the Albany ear and eye (as we knew these organs) and with what queer and weak delusions our unfortunates may have played. Quite ineffably quaint and falot this proposition of *that* sort of resource for the battle of life as it then and there opened; and above all beautifully suggestive of our sudden collective disconnectedness (ours as the whole

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<sup>123</sup> Henry James, A Small Boy and Others, 109.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

kinship's) from *the* American resource of those days, Albanian or other. That precious light was the light of "business" only; and we, by a common instinct, artlessly joined hands, went forth into the wilderness without so much as a twinkling taper.<sup>125</sup>

As James proceeds, his assertion of a discrepancy between art and business denies a simple, moralistic premise that would idealize the condition of art (literary or otherwise) to be essentially opposed to capitalistic business. In what follows, he suggests that the creation of any actual difference from the activity of American business will not make itself known in any self-evident, natural act. Instead, James proposes the difference may be measurable only by the kinds of effects each activity produces, effects that are not measurable beforehand, but only in their performance, and only measurable in terms of "the complete play of intelligence." James figures the basis of disconnection to be a "rupture" that he understands to be a sort of "spell":

The rupture with my grandfather's tradition and attitude was complete; we were never in a single case, I think, for two generations, guilty of a stroke of business . . . . What was the matter with us under this spell, and what the moral might have been for our case, are issues of small moment, after all, in face of the fact of our mainly so brief duration. It was given to but few of us to be taught by the event, to be made to wonder with the last intensity what *had* been the matter. This it would be interesting to worry out, might I take the time; for the story would not be any mere rueful glance at other avidities, the preference for ease, the play of the passions, the appetite for pleasure. These things have often accompanied the business imagination; just as the love of life and the love of other persons, and of

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<sup>125</sup> Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others*, 109.

many of the things of the world, just as quickness of soul and sense, have again and again not excluded it. However, it comes back, as I have already hinted, to the manner in which the “things of the world” could but present themselves; there were not enough of these, and they were not fine and fair enough, to engage happily so much unapplied, so much loose and crude attention. We hadn’t doubtless at all a complete play of intelligence – if I may not so far discriminate to say *they* hadn’t; or our lack of the instinct of the market needn’t have been so much worth speaking of: other curiosities, other sympathies might have redressed the balance.<sup>126</sup>

As the actual world of mid-nineteenth century U.S. society appears to James to be ordered by the “light of ‘business’ only,” it clearly impinges upon “the manner in which the ‘things of the world’ could but present themselves.” These things, as given in a society of “business ‘only,’” James says were not “fine and fair enough.” It is this apparent waste of intelligence that a society given over to “‘business’ only” that is suggestive to James, as he perceives its overflow in his cousins’ attempted acts of art, however “unapplied” and “loose and crude” the attempts may have been. These “fine and fair” things that might have “happily engaged” his cousins’ “attention” do not exist in the (American) society in any natural or preexisting way: the limited range of discussion between himself and his cousins at Albany, speaking in the negative register about “our lack of the instinct of the market,” provides him with prima facie evidence of an incomplete state of intelligence.

James says that the condition of “disconnectedness” appears to him to have been a “spell,” by which the condition of “what *had* been the matter” seems to him to be still

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<sup>126</sup> Henry James, A Small Boy and Others, 109-110.

elusive. The movement and shift in emphasis in James's prose at this point is exemplary: while positing the "what" of the "spell" in "disconnectedness," James subordinates identifying knowledge of this condition as a verifiable fact – "what was the matter" – to an act of narration that would call for the operation of a supremely aesthetic imagination. James reiterates "what" three times in this brief passage before indefinitely deferring the authority of any verifiable "factual" basis of "disconnectedness" in favor of narration, in story-telling, in the production of aesthetic "wonder," as a form of knowledge that itself is constitutive of the fact. This alternate mode of knowing "disconnectedness" substitutes the grammatical emphasis on the "what" to the "how," by which one might be "taught by the event." Thus, the basis of disconnectedness lies less in any verifiable "what," or a locatable "fact," but rather in the "how:" "in the manner" of demonstration.<sup>127</sup>

It is worth recalling again that for James the possibility of a "rupture," or what I am calling "difference," will not be identifiable in an a priori mode of knowledge, or in

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<sup>127</sup> This emphasis on the how, on the manner, underlies James's aesthetic conceptualizations throughout the autobiography; and we find James offering a similar point in the second volume of autobiography, Notes of a Son and Brother, in which James describes himself at the age of 20, while a law student, attending lectures at Harvard (of which the details James entirely omits) having nothing to do with the law. Offering descriptive accounts of these lecturers, noting their style of speech, their dress, the manner of standing in the room, etc., James recalls himself to the present scene of his writing and poses a rhetorical question in which would privilege the "how" of seeing to the "what" of knowing. Entirely in keeping with his statements earlier in the autobiography, James again argues the aesthetic sense of "seeing" to have greater value in apprehending the "thousand relations" of life to the philosophical activity of "knowing," which he implies exists at an exceptional remove from the actual relations of life: "If I had put it to myself that there was no excuse for the presence of a young person so affected by the idea of *how* people looked on the scene where the issue was altogether *what* they usefully taught, as well as intelligently learned and wanted to learn, I feel I should, after my first flush of confusion, have relied assuredly enough that just the beauty of the former of these questions was in its being equal application everywhere; which was far from the case with the latter. The question of *how* people looked, and of *how* their look counted for a thousand relations, had risen before me too early and kept me company too long for me not to have made a fight over it ... It worked for appreciation – not one of the uses of which as an act of intelligence had, all round, finer connections; and on the day, in short, when one should cease to live in large measure by one's eyes (with the imagination of course all the while waiting on this) one would have taken the largest step toward not living at all" [italics mine for emphasis]. In this passage, I note the explicit shift in James's attention from the "what," or the content of the lectures, to the "how" of the presentations in the lecturers' styles and clothes, and in their physical relationship to the people and spaces around them. See Notes of a Son and Brother, 443.

the apprehension of any existing object, or in any actual pre-existent thing at all. Given the potentially homogeneous effects of a “‘business’ only” society, whatever might constitute a present rupture from them will have to be performed and not simply posited, created and not simply recovered; in a word, it will have to be “made,” precisely in the sense of making that James suggests in foretelling an act that would occasion others (explicitly, his close relatives; implicitly, his readers) to be “made to wonder with the last intensity what had been the matter.” James, in fact, goes halfway toward calling forth the “wonder,” as he presents a series of rhetorical questions that suggest a provisional, halting intention to produce a narrative that would reveal “what had been the matter” with his family’s “disconnectedness” from “‘business’ only.” Yet, insofar as what follows in the chapter (as well as the rest of the autobiography) fulfills James’s intent-to-narrate, unsurprisingly James offers an especially subjective account of “disconnectedness,” notable for his perpetual deferral of statement that would establish an objective basis for the condition. Rather than positing the essential grounds of a “rupture,” James narrates its possibility in a present act of writing that calls for its fulfillment in supplementary acts of reading and interpretation. It is reading of this sort that would produce the effects James says he sorely missed in the atmosphere of his Albany childhood: it would allow one to be “taught by the event,” and it would be accomplished by an “interesting,” “wondrous” act that would intend to “worry out” the “story” of their “disconnectedness.”

Characterizing his family members’ relationship to his grandfather’s “tradition” as having been “ruptured” raises expectations and suggests the kinds of questions I have posed above; thus the figuration of a “rupture” impels James to produce narrative to meet these heightened expectations. In other words, James’s rhetorical gesture designating the

word “rupture” to his family’s present condition impels him to produce narrative that would “interpret” the ambiguity inherent in the rhetorical deployment of its literal/figurative senses. Rhetorical usages of language thus beget the production of narrative, which then provides the opportunity for further rhetorical usages of language, or extended troping, which calls for production of further interpretive narrative, and so on.

James concludes this chapter with a paragraph arguing for imaginative capability as a kind of “educational ‘relief.’” In linking imagination to a particular style of education, James describes himself as a boy naively calling upon its resources in a way that would produce an “interest,” an anomalous, unregulated mode of intelligence against the prescriptive atmosphere of a “‘business’ only” social and economic system. It was “interest,” however, in the wrong matters: “There was interest always, certainly – but it strikes me to-day as interest in everything that wasn’t supposedly or prescriptively the question at all, and in nothing that *was* so respectfully involved and accredited.”<sup>128</sup> Thus, without official sanctioning or any necessarily given social resource for development of his “rare” interest, James as a boy nevertheless “clutched with a sense of its value” his favored activity: “I imagined things – and as if quite on system – wholly other than as they were and so carried on in the midst of the actual ones an existence that somehow floated and saved me while cutting me off from any degree of direct performance, in fact any degree of direct participation, at all.”<sup>129</sup> And, perhaps most significantly, James describes this activity of imagining things “other than as they were” as forming the basis

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<sup>128</sup> Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others*, 112.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

of a highly differential activity, a difference not only productive of variety and otherness, but in opposition to existing figures of authority, “pastors and masters”:

There presumably was the interest – in the intensity and plausibility and variety of the irrelevance: an irrelevance which, for instance, made all pastors and masters, and especially all fellow-occupants of benches and desks, all elbowing and kicking presences within touch or view, so many monsters and horrors, so many wonders and splendors and mysteries, but never, so far as I can recollect, realities of relation dispensers either of knowledge or of fate, playmates, intimates, mere coevals and coequals. They were something better – better above all than the coequal or coeval; there were so thoroughly figures and characters, divinities or demons and endowed in this light with a vividness that the mere reality of relation, a commoner directness of contact, would have made, I surmise, comparatively poor. This superior shade of interest ...<sup>130</sup>

In this reflective passage, James writes of the difference resulting from an imaginative performance in the effects of his incipient capacity for art. This difference appears as a kind of education, which as James reveals, contrasts with the inability of the American school system to produce or encourage further development of imaginative, difference-making activity. The school system James encounters as a boy encourages, for him, adherence to knowledge immediate and directly relevant. In a society in which “‘business’ only” presides, direct relevance of this kind could only serve to replicate redundantly a ready-made order, particularly the order of an American capitalistic economy from which his grandfather William James maintained his social standing and

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<sup>130</sup> Henry James, A Small Boy and Others, 112.

that he helped to facilitate through his numerous endeavors leading simultaneously to personal private profit and capital accumulation for the purposes of state-building.

In the narrative that follows, James posits the actual difference that would constitute this “rupture” in terms of a way of imagining things “wholly other than as they were.” For James, the act of imagining things “wholly other” occasion for him “figures and characters” simply not apparent in the actual world. In recalling himself imagining things otherwise, James tellingly reveals a relationship between fiction and the actual world, in which the fiction-making activity of producing figures and characters suggests another world, literally things “wholly other.” Production of this “other world” opposes the imperative to respond to the world directly in adherence to its given, ready-made modes of understanding, especially as dictated by business. James, for example, begins the passage describing “disconnectedness” in terms of his relatives’ ignorance of forms of knowledge that privilege sheer quantitative accumulation, knowledge entirely associable with business: “We couldn’t and shouldn’t, understand these things, questions of arithmetic and of fond calculation, questions of the counting-house and the market.”<sup>131 132</sup>

American deconstructive literary critic Paul De Man describes figurative, rhetorical usages of language to be constitutive of all knowledge. De Man shows acknowledgement of these linguistic features in discourses of philosophy and science to be typically suppressed, while he also observes that literary discourse announces its figurality and metaphoricity as part of its mode of speech. Philosophical knowledge, for

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<sup>131</sup> Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others*, 109.

<sup>132</sup> James’s association of mathematical forms of knowledge with business – and against an “aesthetic education” – in this instance recalls characterizations of businessmen protagonists occurring throughout his novels. In *The American*, for example, James describes Christopher Newman suffering from an “aesthetic headache” at the Louvre Museum in Paris, given that “Titian and Rubens were a new kind of arithmetic” for him.

example, may only be known in a discursive form that nevertheless speaks figuratively – a limitation that undermines any particular philosophy’s claim to knowledge of the world outside the domain of language. Accordingly, “philosophy has either to give up its own constitutive claim to rigor in order to come to terms with the figurality of language or that it has to free itself from figuration all together.”<sup>133</sup>

De Man’s position informs my reading of James above, as I am stressing that it is precisely the literary elements of James’s writing, precisely that which is figurative and therefore necessarily ambiguous, that produces the possibilities an actual “rupture” with American business culture. The significance of producing such a rupture could not be higher for James, insofar as the literary act generates for him a sense of the possibilities of “freedom,” which in turn generates the possibility of imagining a “wholly other” world *different* from the Albany/American world of “‘business’ only.”

### **3.4 “WHAT HAD BEEN THE MATTER”: THE REVOLT OF HENRY JAMES SR.**

When James says his family’s “sudden collective disconnectedness” spanned two generations, he implicitly figures his father’s response to grandfather William James to mark a beginning. As numerous James family biographers have written, the William James family was strongly Presbyterian, a condition that Henry James Sr. especially disliked while growing up. Leon Edel notes, “The father, preoccupied with his ever-growing business empire, found little time for his numerous progeny, save to exercise

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<sup>133</sup> Paul De Man, “The Epistemology of Metaphor,” in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 34.

them in the rugged Presbyterian manner.”<sup>134</sup> As Henry James Sr. describes in his own autobiography, the doctrine of the Calvinist-derived Presbyterian strain of Protestantism had been an especially disheartening experience for him. He describes its conceptualization of duty as a practical expression of faith toward God to have been especially alienating, as it fostered in him a sense of isolation; he particularly observes its teaching to have run contrary to his natural inclinations, especially as it taught that “an essential conflict of interests exists between man and his Maker” and that “practically every man or woman born comes into the world charged with a weight of Divine obstruction of limitation utterly hopeless and crushing, unless relieved by actual faith in the atoning blood of Christ.”<sup>135</sup> He writes that this Protestant doctrine of actual faith, encouraging discipline and duty, denied him a “spontaneous relation” to “Divine knowledge.”<sup>136</sup>

“The revolt of Henry Sr.,” as Matthiessen puts it in his 1947 biography, The James Family, took the form of his rejection of his father’s wishes for profession and faith. As Matthiessen notes, “[Henry James Sr.] opposed his father’s desire that he study law, and he brooked his father’s wrath by his deviations from unquestioning faith.”<sup>137</sup> Alfred Habegger has recently written that upon reaching young adulthood, Henry James Sr.’s departure from William James’s sway became especially apparent, particularly as a result of his performance at Union College, where his drinking, his poor academic results, and his rejection of advice from his father’s friends and colleagues at the college culminated in him leaving the college for a number of months, despite his father’s

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<sup>134</sup> Leon Edel, Henry James: A Life (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 4.

<sup>135</sup> Henry James Sr., Autobiography, quoted in The James Family, ed. F. O. Matthiessen (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2008), 32.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>137</sup> Matthiessen, The James Family, 6.

injunction that he “must not drop out of college.”<sup>138</sup> While Henry Sr. did return and graduate, he had initiated a pattern of disobeying and incurring the disapproval of his father, whose expressions of Presbyterian morality coincided with attempts to regulate the lives and careers of his children.

William James’s moralistic conceptualization of success in business extended to the stipulations in his will. Habegger notes William stipulated that any of his sons and grandsons who wished to enter a trade or profession would receive a large “advance,” while he also stated executors must deny inheritance to any son who led a “grossly immoral, idle or dishonorable life.”<sup>139</sup> The qualifications also extended to female heirs, who if they “did not behave ‘dutifully and affectionately’ toward his widow and her relatives ... the executors were empowered to withhold the standard marriage allowance of \$3,000.” Habegger also notes that “the executors were enjoined to give their ‘scrupulous attention especially to the personal merits and demerits of each individual.’”<sup>140</sup> In these statements in his will, William expresses a clear conception of the bounds of his sense of paternal authority, which he intended to extend after his death. William not only offers justification for his authority in terms of wealth, but he also makes of the will an instrument for perpetuation of his authority, which he expressed in requiring his would-be heirs to pursue certain occupations and ways of life that he deemed to be virtuous:

“Although the extensive and extraordinary power herein conferred of punishing idleness and vice and rewarding virtue, must from its nature be in a considerable degree discretionary, and although its faithful exercise may prove to be a task at

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<sup>138</sup> Habegger, 94.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

once responsible and painful, yet it is my full intention and earnest wish that it shall be carried into execution with rigid impartiality, sternness and inflexibility.”<sup>141</sup>

In justifying his apportionment of the inheritance, William explicitly cloaks his display of power in moralistic language: not only is his task of allotting the inheritance a “faithful exercise,” it is painful but “responsible,” and it involves “punishing idleness.” Perhaps most tellingly, William characterizes his wish for its mode of execution in terms that especially evoke the Puritan conception of God’s will: “rigid, impartial, stern, and inflexible.”

Conceptualized as an instrument of Protestant morality then, the will reveals the degree to which Henry Sr. had his father’s controlling attitudes directed toward him. Entirely consistent with his father’s stern disciplinary attitude, Henry Sr. found himself cut out of the trust his father established for his other children. William allotted Henry Sr., along with another brother, the Rev. William James, an annuity of a much smaller amount than he made available to the other siblings in the trust. “It was Henry, just turned twenty-one, whose bad example and dissolute and spendthrift ways obsessed William James as he meted out his final judgment.”<sup>142</sup>

While Henry Sr. rebelled against his father by not choosing a career and by ultimately rejecting his Presbyterian familial background, his dissent also registered dissatisfaction with an American way of life that he actively discouraged his children to pursue. As Matthiessen notes, “When Henry Senior started to bring up his children, he

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<sup>141</sup> Habegger, 108.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 110.

was reacting against the conception of the family fostered in his own years.”<sup>143</sup> Henry James recalls his father’s “highly liberal way” to be his attitude rejecting the particularly Protestant conception of material success to be a demonstration of “virtue.”<sup>144</sup> James recalls especially his father’s injunction for his children against their pursuit of any vocation that would result in making money – even through artistic production. Rather, James recalls his father “caring for our spiritual decency unspeakably more than anything else.”<sup>145</sup> While James renders his father’s conceptualization of “spiritual decency” to consist of avoidance of professional careers, Henry Sr. associated such a condition with freedom:

“I desire my child to become an upright man, a man in whom goodness shall be induced not by mercenary motives as brute goodness is induced, but by love for it or a sympathetic delight in it. And inasmuch as I know that this character or disposition cannot be forcibly imposed upon him, but must be freely assumed, I surround him as far as possible with an atmosphere of freedom.”<sup>146</sup>

As a consequence, Matthiessen notes, Henry Sr.’s conception of freedom as the family guide distinguished James children from other children of the era (both American and European): “Freedom through exposure, freedom through choice between all varieties of sensuous, aesthetic, and religious experience, inevitably separated the James children from those of less favored families, in this country as well as abroad, a sense of living on a kind of blissful island.”<sup>147</sup> Favored with his father’s “atmosphere of freedom,” Henry James recalls its manifestation in talk and conversation, noting his father’s preference for

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<sup>143</sup> Matthiessen, The James Family, 69.

<sup>144</sup> Henry James, A Small Boy and Others, 123.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>146</sup> Henry James Sr., Autobiography, in Matthiessen, The James Family, 70.

<sup>147</sup> Matthiessen, The James Family, 70.

“paradox” over “literal” expression, and in the absence of “method” in any aspect of education.<sup>148</sup>

But above all, Henry James Sr.’s attitude encouraged the suspension of the hard facts of American life – especially as those might be understood to be reducible to financial profit:

The effect of his attitude, so little thought out as shrewd or as vulgarly providential, but in spite of this so socially and affectionally founded, could only be to make life interesting to us at the worst, in default of making it extraordinarily “paying.” He had a theory that it would somehow or other always be paying enough – and this much less by any poor conception of our wants (for he delighted in our wants and so sympathetically and summarily wanted *for* us) than by a happy and friendly, though slightly nebulous, conception of our resources. Delighting ever in the truth while generously contemptuous of the facts ... he held that there would always be enough ... .<sup>149</sup>

James renders his father’s attitude toward vocation in terms that resonate with his critical writings (especially the Prefaces). In particular, the assertion of a contrast between resources that would “make life interesting” and resources that could only result in “making it extraordinarily ‘paying’” resonates with James’s claims for the difference-making “interest” of fiction in a world of “business only.” While for Henry James Sr. the latter kind of “making” tended to preclude the former, for the son Henry James, how exactly the novelist as literary artist may or may not “make the difference” between that which is “interesting” for life and that which is simply “paying” is a question that

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<sup>148</sup> Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others*, 126.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

underlies much of his fiction, as well as a significant number of his essays, works of criticism, and books of non-fiction.

### **3.5 AMERICAN THEOCRACY: THE PROTESTANT ETHIC, ECONOMIC MAN, AND THE FOUNDING OF THE U.S. STATE**

Evident in James's comic, sympathetic portrayal of Henry Sr.'s aversion to "paying" professions and to orthodox forms of faith, as well as from Henry Sr.'s own explicit advocacy for an "atmosphere of freedom" for his children entirely distinct from the authoritarian paternalism of his own father, is their rejection of the "Protestant ethic." German sociologist Max Weber has famously described this Protestant ethic to have had an especially determinative cultural influence upon the development of western capitalism from the sixteenth-century onward. Writing ten years prior to Henry James's autobiographical accounts of the James family, Weber links the development of capitalism throughout Europe and the U.S. to the doctrines of the Protestant churches and sects that emerged from the sixteenth-century Reformation.<sup>150</sup> Henry James Sr.'s professed antagonism toward his father's Presbyterianism, his preference for a "spontaneous" relationship to God, and his rejection of professional vocation strikingly reveals this dissent from an American, Puritan-derived conjunction of Protestant cultural ethics and "the spirit of capitalism."

In Weber's account, the Calvinistic concept of predestination, premised upon a conception of an absolute indivisible gap between man and God and asserting that only the chosen or elect may share in the grace of God, particularly encouraged the

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<sup>150</sup> Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 1992).

development of the spirit of western capitalism. Notably, it was the Presbyterian strain of this very doctrine that Henry Sr. described to have been detrimental to him while growing up in William James's household.

First, the doctrine of the separation of man from God promoted an entirely individualistic conception of the world. As Weber notes, it produced "a feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual."<sup>151</sup> The "pessimistically inclined individualism" of Calvinistic doctrine crucially informed Puritan culture: for example, early Puritan literature may be distinguished, Weber notes, by the "strikingly frequent repetition ... of warnings against any trust in the aid of friendship of men."<sup>152</sup>

This strongly individualized conception of man permeates the writings of the American Puritan era. As Sacvan Bercovitch has shown, the Puritan writings of the auto-machia genre, or the spiritual biography, encouraged followers to adopt methods of self-examination as a (paradoxical) way of reconciling the divide between man and God. Self-knowledge, for these Puritans, may "drive us to 'desire to be found, not in ourselves.'"<sup>153</sup> Yet, Puritan injunctions against the "self" only reinforced a fundamentally individualistic and self-interested worldview. Bercovitch's observation concerning the genre's reliance upon the first-person pronoun "I" proves to be especially instructive, insofar as it displays the "dilemma of Puritan identity" to consistently reaffirm the individualized "self":

The interminable-because-unresolved incantations of the "I" over itself – every aspect of style betrays a consuming involvement with "me" and "mine" that resists disintegration. ... [T]he Puritans' urge for self-denial stems from the very

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<sup>151</sup> Max Weber, 61.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>153</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, The Puritan Origins of the American Self (Yale UP, 1975), 18.

subjectivism of their outlook, that their humility is coextensive with personal assertion. Necessarily, the militancy they hoped would abase the self released all the energies of the self, both constructive and destructive.”<sup>154</sup>

The consequences of America’s Puritan-based culture of “militant” individualism proved to be especially harsh for its adherents. As Bercovitch observes, the Puritan “theocracy insisted upon it with unusual vigor – where anxiety about election was not only normal but mandatory – hysteria, breakdowns, and suicides were not uncommon.”<sup>155</sup> The James family provides an abundance of evidence for the persistence of these harsh consequences. Criticism on Henry James’s A Small Boy and Others has especially noted his account of “the deepening and final darkneses” that befell the heirs of William James: “our father’s family was to offer such a chronicle of early deaths, arrested careers, broken promises, orphaned children.”<sup>156</sup>

Corresponding to these early American Puritans’ near-obsessive emphasis upon their individualism, the Protestant doctrines they followed additionally encouraged followers to view the accumulation of wealth as the observable, verifiable evidence of their elect status. Never knowing absolutely whether one shared in the grace of God as a member of the elect, followers could only hope to achieve certainty through demonstrable activity in the world (a worldview particularly contrasting with monastic Catholicism): “In order to obtain that self confidence intense worldly activity is recommended as the most suitable means. It and it alone disperses religious doubt and gives the certainty of grace.”<sup>157</sup> Consequently, the Protestant conception of “worldly

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<sup>154</sup> Bercovitch, 18.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>156</sup> Henry James, A Small Boy and Others, 10.

<sup>157</sup> Weber, 67.

activity” ultimately functioned as a moral imperative: “Faith had to be proved by its objective results in order to provide a firm foundation for the certitudo salutis. It must be fides efficax, the call to salvation an effectual calling.”<sup>158</sup> For its adherents, faith in the Calvinist sense could only be demonstrated in practical, efficient displays: firstly, through dutiful fulfillment of a Christian conduct of life, entailing a strictly ascetic regulation of behavior; and secondly, fulfilling the imperative to increase one’s material wealth. In meeting these requirements, a Protestant follower may hope to provide empirical evidence that he or she enjoyed God’s state of grace.

This Protestant conception of faith entailed a notion of a “calling,” requiring demonstrable objective results and providing an imperative for followers to increase their material gains. This “calling” provided an important reinforcement for a developing capitalistic ethos, particularly as a result of its “providential interpretation of profit-making.”<sup>159</sup> In its cultural manifestations, Protestant doctrine thus encouraged a particular way of life, or an ethos, that decisively impelled the development of capitalism into at least the nineteenth-century (when, as Weber notes, its determinations began to function less explicitly, but they certainly did not disappear). “Truly what is here preached is not simply a means of making one’s way in the world, but a peculiar ethic. The infraction of its rules is treated not as foolishness but as forgetfulness of duty,” Weber writes. “It is not mere business astuteness, that sort of thing is common enough, it is an ethos.”<sup>160</sup>

Particularly relevant to Weber’s analysis of “the Protestant ethic” and its manifestations in the U.S. has been the relatively recently-translated writings of late

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<sup>158</sup> Weber, 68.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>160</sup> Weber, 17.

French philosopher Michel Foucault on the development of western economic liberalism. Describing economic liberalism to be an “art of government,” Foucault analyzes its functioning in terms of its principle ethos, homo economicus, “the man of enterprise and production,”<sup>161</sup> a conception closely akin to Weber’s Protestant ethic, which in many ways is inseparable from it. Self-interest premised upon “atomistic individual choice” characterizes the new homo economicus, which as Foucault notes, developed as a result of the historical conjunction “of the empirical conception of the subject of interest and the analyses of the economists.”<sup>162</sup> Defenses of homo economicus against the political state further underlie laissez-faire articulations of capitalism, locatable most notably in Adam Smith’s The Wealth of Nations theory of the invisible hand. As Foucault notes, homo economicus “tells the sovereign: You must not.”<sup>163</sup> It is this positive assertion of economic man that is new in western forms of political-economy. According to Foucault, “economic liberalism [amounts to] ... a disqualification of a political reason indexed to the state and its sovereignty.”<sup>164</sup>

The liberal economic promotion of homo economicus as a disqualification of the sovereign undergoes a unique transformation in the founding of the U.S. state, which strongly bears upon the development of the “‘business’ only” milieu that Henry James identifies to be the definitive cultural atmosphere surrounding the James family in nineteenth-century America. “Liberalism in America,” Foucault notes, “is a whole way of being and thinking. It is a type of relation between the governors and the governed

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<sup>161</sup> Foucault, Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-1979, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 147.

<sup>162</sup> Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 276. Foucault describes this new economic man emerging as the object of western political economy from the thought of British empiricist philosophers, most notably John Locke.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

much more than a technique of governors with regard to the governed.”<sup>165</sup> As an anti-statist project, the liberal conceptualization of limited government in the name of the invisible hand reaches its apotheosis in the eighteenth-century founding of the U.S. state. Madison’s assertion in The Federalist Papers defending the “rights of property [to be] the first object of government” closely expresses what Foucault identifies to be the notable feature of a liberal style of “governmentality” found in the U.S.<sup>166</sup> In other words, Madison, Hamilton, and Jay, those thinkers most responsible for drafting the principles of the U.S. state and formulating the particulars of its organization in the U.S. Constitution, designated the primary purpose of the U.S. state to be the furtherance of private property interests through the development of commerce and industry exclusive to any other common interest. The claims of Madison, Hamilton, and Jay limiting the state to promotion of commerce constituted the founding liberal premise of the U.S. state, as Foucault suggests:

Liberal type claims, and essentially economic claims moreover, were precisely the historical starting point for the formation of American independence. ... [L]iberalism was appealed to as the founding and legitimizing principle of the state. The demand for liberalism founds the state rather than the state limiting itself through liberalism.<sup>167</sup>

In Foucault’s description, the founding of the U.S. state not only marks the historical expression of a kind of government subordinating the reason of state to capitalistic market relations. It also impelled and furthered a style of thought and a way of being in

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<sup>165</sup> Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 218.

<sup>166</sup> James Madison, “Federalist Paper No. 10” in The Federalist Papers [1788], ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York, Penguin Books, 1987), 124.

<sup>167</sup> Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 217.

the world that conceptualized new economic man, by which “the worker himself appears as a sort of enterprise for himself,”<sup>168</sup> to be the starting and the end point of all social relations: “An economy made up of enterprise-units, a society made up of enterprise-units, is at once the principle of decipherment linked to liberalism and its programming for the rationalization of a society and an economy.”<sup>169</sup> In their expressions of laissez-faire principles, the founders of the U.S. state effectively inaugurated the dawn of the age of homo economicus on a world stage. In effect, they made the private entrepreneur – not the political citizen – the sovereign principle of the U.S. state.

The founders’ radically liberal economic program encouraged development of private commercial and industrial interests exclusive to other possible interests. In this way, the U.S. state fulfilled not only the laissez-faire dream of eighteenth century French and English thinkers, but equally important, it did so in accordance with the profound asceticism of the Puritan founders of New England who defined their conception of “worldly activity” in terms of the private commercial activities of a devout would-be elect. In the founders’ era, the overtly “utilitarian worldliness”<sup>170</sup> of the Puritans expressed itself in arguments that nevertheless reinforced fundamentally Protestant conceptualizations of society. Weber makes the correlation between liberal, laissez-faire capitalism and Puritanism evident, writing that, “The spirit of capitalism [is] the same as what we have shown to be the content of the Puritan worldly asceticism, only without the religious basis.”<sup>171</sup> Madison’s defense of private property and Hamilton’s conceptualization of the U.S. state to promote an active “spirit of enterprise” for the

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<sup>168</sup> Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 225.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Weber, 119.

<sup>171</sup> Weber, 123.

purposes of “foreign commerce” not only rest upon liberal economic principles. Their views typify the world-historical, new morality rooted in Protestant asceticism; they harken to Puritanical conceptualizations of “worldly activity”; and insofar as they express the founding principles of the U.S. state as a new global empire, they effectively provide the instrumental means for the diffusion of Puritan morality worldwide.

The impetus that the founding of the U.S. state gave in developing narrowly-private individualized relationships as the expression of private “worldly activity” represents a triumph of the Puritans’ theocratic organization of society. Although the founders articulated a formal political basis for separation of church and state powers in the Constitution’s First Amendment, their explicit subordination of the U.S. state to the rule of capitalist market relations codified a Puritan-Protestant cultural ethos of a profoundly anti-secular nature. Inherent in the founders’ framing of the Constitution to promote and to protect the expansion of capitalist commerce and industry rests a discernible Protestant morality traceable to Martin Luther’s imperatives for his followers to ascertain their state of grace in the dutiful exercise of a “calling.” As a result, the founders’ legitimization of capitalist social relations to be the founding principle of the U.S. state impelled development of the Protestant ethic in the decades that followed, though usually without an explicitly theological justification for it. Weber notes “religious asceticism” to have permeated U.S. society at the turn of the twentieth-century to the degree that the U.S. existed as “the field of its highest development.” Accordingly, Weber observes “the idea of duty in one’s calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious

beliefs.”<sup>172</sup>

### **3.6 IDEOLOGIES OF FREEDOM: POST-CIVIL WAR AMERICA, “BUSINESS ENTERPRISE,” AND CORPORATE CAPITALISM**

By the time Henry James began writing fiction and criticism, the U.S. Civil War had already produced radical economic changes in the capitalist organization of U.S. society toward an increasing corporate capitalist system, which then developed between 1890 and 1916.<sup>173</sup> If, as Foucault posits, the drafters of the U.S. Constitution grounded the reason of the U.S. state upon liberal anti-statist principles, subsequent political and leaders invoked such reasoning with its implicit Protestant morality to further imperial commercial expansion in the conquest of the western half of the continent, to justify the U.S. war with the secessionist South during the Civil War, and to further the corporate capitalist consolidation at the turn of the twentieth century. Ideologies of freedom were central to these liberal conceptualizations, and promoters of the corporate capitalist development of U.S. society subsequent to the Civil War especially deployed the rhetoric of freedom to be its grounding principle.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Weber, 124.

<sup>173</sup> I quote these dates from Martin Sklar’s book, The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988).

<sup>174</sup> In his study of the Reconstruction era, Eric Foner identifies liberal principles grounding the justification of the U.S. war with the South. Northern industrialists who viewed the Southern expansion of plantation slavery westward to be a threat to their own imperial interests marshaled support for a war effort lauding the principles of “free labor” against slave labor. Foner writes, “Republicans had brought into the war an ideology grounded in a conviction of the superiority of free to slave labor, which saw the distinctive quality of Northern society as the opportunity it offered the wage laborer to rise to the status of independent farmer or craftsman. At the outset, Lincoln placed the struggle firmly within the familiar context of the free labor ideology.” Capitalists proclaiming “freedom” and “independence” for their laborers in a competitive marketplace transformed liberal principles into a successful ideology justifying expansion of their commercial interests through war into the South and across the continent. Abolitionism was not immune to freedom as imperial ideology either, and abolitionists in fact it often promoted it, as Foner notes: “With ‘the whole continent opened to free labor and Northern enterprise,’ an abolition journal exulted just two days after the Emancipation Proclamation, “‘the imagination can hardly exaggerate the glory and power of the

James in his criticism and fiction marks the U.S. Civil War to be a temporal break in U.S. society, and he notes that literary writers of his post-Civil War generation would express a more “critical” outlook. In his 1879 study, Hawthorne, James specifically describes one lesson of the war to be that it marked a new era of critical thought in America that would identify the U.S. to exist in a global, historical domain:

The subsidence of that great convulsion has left a different tone from the tone it found, and one may say that the Civil War marks an era in the history of the American mind. It introduced into the national consciousness a certain sense of proportion and relation, of the world being a more complicated place than it had hitherto seemed, the future more treacherous, success more difficult.<sup>175</sup>

The novel he wrote next, The Portrait of a Lady, would feature a heroine whose imagination had been enlivened by the Civil War, Isabel Archer, noting of her that, “[w]hile the Civil War went on she was still a very young girl; but she passed months of this long period in a state of almost passionate excitement in which she felt herself at times (to her extreme confusion) stirred almost indiscriminately by the valour of either army.”<sup>176</sup>

When the Civil War economy finally crashed in the 1870s, culminating in the major recession of 1876, a new crisis of capitalism precipitated the advent of finance

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American republic. Its greatness will overshadow the world.” In the subsequent post-Civil War Reconstruction era, northern industrialists would promote “freedom” to be reducible to “free labor” on plantations in a way that opposed former slaves’ conceptualizations of freedom, as “freedmen” who would not be dependent upon existing capitalist market relations. Foner notes of the South Carolina, Sea Island experiment, that northern investors bought land and hired freedmen to work the cotton plantations: “As Northern investors understood the term, ‘free labor’ meant working for wages on plantations; to blacks it meant farming their own land, and living largely independent of the marketplace.” See Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877 (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 29, 54.

<sup>175</sup> Henry James, Hawthorne [1879], in Henry James: Major Stories and Essays (New York: Library of America, 1999), 570.

<sup>176</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady [1908], ed. Robert Bamberg (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1995), 41.

capital, which American sociologist Thorstein Veblen would describe to be attendant upon the development of “business enterprise.” This U.S. economy superseded the liberal, laissez-faire organization traceable to the state’s foundation upon liberal premises. While the latent religious “duty” implicit in capitalist social relations persisted, promoted under the guise of liberal ideology, a distinctly new material basis of social organization developed as “business enterprise,” which further consolidated itself as corporate capitalism beginning in the 1890s.

Veblen conceptualizes “business enterprise” to be the outcome of a shift in the 1870s from an industrial economy toward a finance economy, identifiable by two primary features, “the machine process and investment for a profit.”<sup>177</sup> Veblen notes a core contradiction in economists’ accounts of this advent of this particular organization of political economy, observing that as capital consolidated itself along business enterprise lines, “business enterprise” as a material organization of economy rendered obsolete liberal philosophical assumptions resting upon Lockean, natural law theories of labor and social organization. For Veblen, these liberal principles no longer accorded with the material organization of money and capital in a “business enterprise” system:

[T]he received theoretical formulations regarding business capital and its relations to industry proceed on circumstances that prevailed in days of the “money economy,” before credit and the modern corporation methods became of first-class consequence in economic affairs. ... The theory, or what there is in the way of a theory, of business capital in the received body of doctrines is worked out from the point of view and for the theoretical purposes of the eighteenth-century

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<sup>177</sup> Thorstein Veblen, The Theory of Business Enterprise [1904] (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1978), 1.

scheme of natural liberty, natural rights, and natural law; and the received theorems concerning the part played by capital and by the capitalist are substantially of the character of laws of nature, as that term was understood during the period to which these theorems owe their genesis. ... Modern business management does not take that point of view, nor does “capital” carry much meaning to the modern business man; because the guiding circumstances under which modern business is carried on are not those supposed to be given by a beneficent order of nature, nor do the controlling purposes of business traffic include that general well-being which constituted the final term of Adam Smith’s social philosophy.<sup>178</sup>

For Veblen, the U.S. “business enterprise” arrangement of political economy constituted a qualitative shift intensifying the accumulative capacity of capitalists, insofar as the end-goal of its activity focused upon unproductive profit exclusive to the production of actual goods or any sort of industrial output. As Veblen notes, in an economy organized for “business enterprise,” “[i]ndustry is carried on for the sake of business, and not conversely; and the progress and activity of industry are conditioned by the outlook of the market, which means the presumptive chance of business profits.”<sup>179</sup>

This shift toward an economy in which pursuit of business profits comes to be an end in itself produced a determinative effect upon the whole existing capitalist system: a company’s economic value came to be assessed not on the basis of its production of industrial goods, but rather its possibility to produce mere profit. As an index of this shift in terms of valuation, Veblen describes the advent of market “capitalization,” a measure

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<sup>178</sup> Veblen, 135.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

by which banks and potential stock holders would determine the value of a given company based upon its possible future profits. The higher the market capitalization of an industrial company, the better it could access capital directly from banks and by selling stock, and the greater its owner's "differential advantage" over other companies.

The tremendous rise of loan credit in the form of finance capital for industrial production – on the basis of market capitalization – exemplifies this late nineteenth-century shift from laissez-faire style of capitalism toward business enterprise. Industrial companies claiming high market capitalizations would significantly increase their potential financial resources, yet which would produce "no aggregate advantage to the community."<sup>180</sup>

In James's autobiographical writings late in his life, written in the wake of the full development of corporate capitalism in American society, James instructively observes a latent Puritan ethos expressing itself in developing "'business' only" society to have been the basis from which the James family generally sought grounds for a "rupture." In one especially telling passage, James indicates a correlation between nineteenth-century American business and seventeenth-century Puritan asceticism in his expression of relief at not having been native to New England. Knowing the family to have been "afloat and disconnected" while residing in Newport, Rhode Island, following its return from Europe in 1858, James measures the family's condition of separateness by the fact that it had not been engaged in any sort of business activity.<sup>181</sup> By contrast, James characterizes New England to be primarily a place knowable for the "intensity" of its business activity, which he defines in terms of "buying and selling over a counter or a desk": "[t]o attend

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<sup>180</sup> Veblen, 139.

<sup>181</sup> Henry James, Notes of a Son and Brother, 305.

strictly to business was to be invariably *there*.” James further characterizes himself at this young age considering the family’s disconnection from “intense” business activity to have been a mode of disconnection from New England as a place. That James considered it then to have been a stroke of good fortune not to be from New England in any sense carries over into his act of composing autobiography in his present:

I have not, for myself, forgotten, or even now outlived, the particular shade of satisfaction to be taken in one’s thus being in New England without being of it. To have originally been of it, or still to have had to be, affected me, I recall, as a case of the condition as a danger after all escaped. Long would it take to tell why it figured as a danger, and why that impression was during the several following years much more to gain than to lose intensity.<sup>182</sup>

As James indicates, just what exactly was at stake in the family’s condition of disconnection from New England surpasses his capacity to recollect or articulate. In the direction of the narrative, James moves on to other recollections, though he emphasizes the significance of the particular situation for the “history of a mind” (his own): “Infinitely interesting to recover, in the history of a mind, for those concerned, these movements of the spirit, these tides, and currents of growth – though under the inconvenience for the historian of such ramifications of research that here at any rate I feel myself warned off.”<sup>183</sup>

Although James does not follow these comments with a particular “history of a mind,” his literary writings in fiction and criticism suggest a mind highly attentive to the increasingly contingent basis for expression of freedom in a developing U.S. business

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<sup>182</sup> Henry James, Notes of a Son and Brother, 305.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

society. As I will show in my reading of The Portrait of a Lady in chapter four of this dissertation, James never entirely forecloses upon the possibility of literary art to express freedom despite these increasingly contingent grounds as a result of power exercised by capital – industrial, banking, and land (the forms of capital associated with each of Isabel Archer’s rejected or would-be suitors, Caspar Goodwood, Ralph Touchett, and Lord Warburton). This is not to say James’s conceptualization of fiction is fantastical, ideological, or utopian, but rather that it is practical to the degree that it may be experienced in novelistic literary art. When James says in the Preface to The American that actual literary art accomplishes a kind of freedom, he does not subordinate it to political freedom. Instead, he characterizes literary art to be a kind of expression of democratic freedom, asserting that the difficulty of literary art produces a sense of living, incomparable in actual “real world” non-literary experience. Notably, James characterizes literary art to be radically different from the logic of a business economy that counts production to be justifiable only on the basis of “payment” for labor sold in capitalist market relations:

He [the artist] enjoys it, so to speak, without a tax; the effort of labour involved, the torment of expression, of which we have heard in our time so much, being after all but the last refinement of his privilege. It may leave him weary and worn; but how, after his fashion, he will have lived! As if one were to expect at once freedom and ease! That silly safety is but the sign of bondage and forfeiture. Who can imagine free selection – which is the beautiful, terrible *whole* of art – without free difficulty? This is the very franchise of the city and the high ambition of the citizen. The vision of the difficulty, as one looks back, bathes one’s course

in golden glow by which the very objects along the road are transfigured and glorified; so that one exhibits them to other eyes with an elation possibly presumptuous.<sup>184</sup>

For James, literary art instantiates the democratic possibility of freedom, “the very franchise of the city.” As I will show in the following chapter three of this dissertation, this principle asserting the freedom of literary expression – what James calls “selection” – underlies his core principles of novelistic practice. James does not mystify or occlude the material basis of this freedom, as his attention to capital in his novelistic fiction shows, particularly in The Portrait of a Lady. Rather, James in his fiction and criticism produces figures of freedom corresponding to his experience in the world as a literary artist, a topic to which I turn now, in examining the conclusion to James’s autobiography, The Middle Years.

### **3.7 A “COMPARATIVE FREEDOM”**

I will argue that it is Henry James’s expression of literary art to be a “worldly” performance of imaginative thinking that registers its difference from American business culture. In advancing my claim, I am suggesting that for James literary art functions as a mode of engagement with the world in terms of a newly modern, secular critical consciousness. In accordance with James’s demonstration of literary art in his autobiography, his practice is distinguishable from both the narrowly Protestant, theocratic imperative of “worldly activity” as a religious calling as well as the philosophically individualistic expressions of liberalism – both of which have accompanied the development of business in U.S. society. In fact, I am claiming here

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<sup>184</sup> Henry James, Preface to The American, 1061.

that James's expression of literary art directs itself against both of these significant cultural corollaries of American business enterprise.

In making these claims, I first will examine Edward Said's conceptualization of "worldly" secular criticism. I then consider James's narration in The Middle Years to be an important expression of "worldly" thinking – particularly as he describes his impressions of London social life, and his meetings with intellectuals and novelists, such as George Eliot, to be purposeful for him in developing "the historic sense." I claim the significance of this narration of these events while in London at the age of 26 to be premised upon James's implicit contrasting of them with home, family, and the U.S. on the grounds that they avail for him a sense of, what he calls, a "comparative freedom."

Firstly, I am suggesting Henry James's literary art to function as a secular "worldly" critical consciousness in the specific sense that Edward Said conceptualizes "worldly" criticism as an act of "horizontal affiliation"<sup>185</sup> that occurs between formally heterogeneous elements of any culture or cultures both within and across a given temporality, and that is directed toward "the world of events and societies."<sup>186</sup> Disavowing natural filial relationships, these critical acts of affiliation may be formally disruptive of pre-existing traditions, even as they impose new forms and establish new traditions, as Said notes: "If a filial relationship was held together by natural bonds and natural forms of authority – involving obedience, fear, love, respect, and instinctual conflict – the new affiliative relationship changes these bonds into what seem to be transpersonal forms – such as guild, consciousness, consensus, collegiality, professional

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<sup>185</sup> Edward Said, "Secular Criticism," 18.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

respect, class, and the hegemony of a dominant culture.”<sup>187</sup> In art and in criticism, the act of affiliation may at times mimic and reiterate the purely filial relationship (Said observes nationalist canonization of literature as one such example), though it most purposively will create the possibility of critical reflection on inherited forms of culture. In its most sustained and directed forms, the act of affiliation will establish connections such that “most of the political and social world becomes available for scrutiny.”<sup>188</sup> It will make connections across cultures and discernibly distinct temporalities, as well as articulate the social and material conditions of cultural production. In making these connections, Said observes the critic and artist situating his or her cultural work in the contingent, secular, man-made domain of society – reversible, changeable, and transformable.

London provides for Henry James a vantage point for expression of this “affiliative” mode of critical reflection. The way of life of Londoners particularly provides James with near-endless opportunity for development of what he calls the “historic sense,” which he describes himself producing as a result of feeling “disconnected” from the everyday routines of Londoners.<sup>189</sup> He even notes this condition to have been the object of his visit. Yet, he further notes that it would require artistic activity to realize the significance of disconnection for the purposes of articulating “historic sense.” It would take the care of cultivation: “To be so disconnected, for the time, and in the most insidious manner, was above all what I had come out for, and every appearance that might help it was to be artfully and gratefully cultivated.”<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Edward Said, “Secular Criticism,” 20.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>189</sup> Henry James, *The Middle Years*, 558.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*.

The artful cultivation of “historic sense,” being entirely a product of a feeling of “disconnection,” avails a kind of critical reflection for James. He questions, for example, whether the illustrated magazines that abound throughout London (whose covers he observes used as a mural décor in the sitting-room of his hotel) suggest “the modern ... [or rather] the fine classicism of a bygone age, as literature and the arts had handed down that memory?” He notes himself reflecting on the condition of the United States as a place of historical “interest”:

There were, it appeared, things of interest taking place in America, and I had had, in this absurd manner, to come to England to learn it: I had had over there on the ground itself no conception of any such matter – nothing of the smallest interest, by any perception of mine, as I suppose I should still blush to recall had taken place in America since the War.<sup>191</sup>

He observes England to be a far more developed society politically than the U.S. He notes “politics walked abroad in England ... [while] they took their exercise in America but through back streets and the ways otherwise untrodden and the very darkness of night.”<sup>192</sup>

London also offers to James a “social order in which everyone wasn’t hurled straight, with the momentum of rising, upon an office or a store.”<sup>193</sup> He contrasts London to the U.S. in terms of it offering a social order not devoted exclusively to business, which encourages for him cultivation of imagination and literary art:

The mere vision in numbers of persons embodying and in various ways sharply illustrating a clear alternative to that passivity told a tale that would be more and

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<sup>191</sup> Henry James, The Middle Years, 559.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 560.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 561.

more worth the reading with every turn of the page. So at all events I fantasticated while harassed by my necessity to weave into my general tapestry every thread that would conduce to a pattern . . . .<sup>194</sup>

Staying in London provokes James to active “fantastication,” impelling him toward the process of fiction-making, as one who would “weave” a “pattern” from a variety of “threads.” This relationship between “fantastication” and the “harassing necessity” to produce a general “tapestry” tellingly figures James’s conception of literary art to consist of both individual originality and the competing claims of an antecedent social domain.

London puts him in contact with “the world,” which he had first encountered in fiction. Here he meets George Eliot, and he observes his anticipation for meeting her to have been stoked by his sense of her fiction, “a great treasure of beauty and humanity, of applied and achieved art, a testimony, historic as well as aesthetic to the deeper interests of the intricate English aspects.”<sup>195</sup> Eliot’s rendering of these “intricate English aspects” had for a long time provided James with a conception of the world as the historical and social domain of human experience that surpassed anything he encountered at home in his family’s unique circumstances in the U.S. He describes himself in awe of the intelligence of her observations, and he cherishes the relation he felt toward her in fulfilling an errand of finding a doctor for her injured nephew, to whom she attended during James’s meeting. This meeting produces for James a sense of the “rage for connections,” which he describes carrying into the future and informing his reading of her next published novels, Middlemarch and Daniel Deronda.

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<sup>194</sup> Henry James, The Middle Years, 561.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 574.

The meeting especially recalls James's earlier discussion in Notes of a Son and Brother of her art's significance for instructing him toward comprehension of a complete social order – which he did not find at home through his family. He notes, for example, that her depictions of religious figures and institutions had provided him with a source of historical imagining that he had not known in American society as a result of his father's opposition to ministers: "To see them portrayed by George Eliot and Anthony Trollope the effect was a disclosure of a new and romantic species. ... I had finally to draw my nearest sufficiency of a true image from pictures of a social order largely alien to our own."<sup>196</sup> In reading English novelists, he further observes the acutest of differences between himself and his father's "sense," noting that in appreciating novels he "felt ... [a] detachment of sensibility from everything, everything that is, in the way of great relations, as to which our father's emphasis was richest." Tellingly, James describes the difference of "sensibility" in regard to certain "sets of relations" between himself and his father to have mattered insofar as it impinged upon the manner in which he would and could "frame stories":

I gaped imaginatively, as it were, to such a different set of relations. I couldn't have framed stories that seemed most present to *him*; while those most present to myself, that is more complementary to whatever it was I thought of as humanly most interesting, attaching, inviting, were the ones his schemes of importances seemed virtually to do without. Didn't I discern in this from the first a kind of implied snub to the significance of mine?<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Henry James, Notes of a Son and Brother, 338.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

James's claim for his desire to "tell stories" in a way that would be "humanly most interesting" to be distinct from his father's "schemes of importances" anticipates his most significant point of articulation of literary art in the autobiographies. His "philosophizing" father offered primarily what James calls a "limited" and narrow basis for thinking of one's relationships beyond one's self. By contrast, literary art suggests a way of making connections in concrete expression that embodies both thinking and actual life:

Was not the reason I suffered, I might almost have put it, under the impression of his style, which affected me as somehow too philosophic for life, and at the same time too living, as I made out, for thought? – since I must have weirdly opined that by so much as you were individual, which meant personal, which meant monotonous, which meant limitedly allusive and verbally repetitive, by so much you were not literary or, so to speak, *largely* figurative. My father had terms, evidently strong, but in which I presumed to feel, with a shade of irritation, a certain narrowness of exclusion as to images otherwise – and oh, since it was a question of the pen, so multitudinously! – entertainable. Variety, variety – *that* sweet ideal, *that* straight contradiction of any dialectic, hummed for me all the while as a direct, if perverse and most unedified, effect of the parental concentration, with some of its consequent, though heedless, dissociations.<sup>198</sup>

The "literary," for James, exists as a mode of writing opposable to a number of philosophical presuppositions, especially "the individual" and the "personal," which he ascribes to his father's writings. James's criticism of his father's writing and "style" as "monotonous" and "repetitive" is especially telling, and his association of the "literary"

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<sup>198</sup> Henry James, Notes of a Son and Brother, 344.

with “other-ness,” characterized positively as “variety,” are aspects of a relationship to the world that he finds in his mother’s attitude more than in his father, as he recollects fondly her capacity to make “connections.”

As a culminating moment in James’s development as a literary artist, the visit to London suggests fulfillment of directed, purposeful movement away from the insularity of family, home, and the U.S. It also fulfills the general direction James maps for himself in coming into his own as a literary artist. From first reading the English novelists (such as Eliot, Trollope, and Dickens) to now establishing contact with the people and places depicted in their works, James suggests his stay in London permitted him to acquire valuable material for his fiction that he simply could not have gained otherwise. London – as found both in the works of English novelists and in first-hand impressions – offers to James a near-inexhaustible immensity of impressions. In staking this claim upon what London offers, James suggests a strong contrast with what he has left at home that reflects critically upon the cultural milieu of nineteenth-century American society.

For the first time in these three autobiographical volumes, James allows himself to occupy the focus of the narrative, rather than other family members, such as his father and brother. This explicit shift in focus fulfills his earlier claims concerning his difference in sensibility from both father and brother, and it sets the terms for this difference in claiming a mode of relating to a society greater than oneself, one’s home, or one’s family. “Experience of English life”<sup>199</sup> avails for James a particular mode of “affiliation,” without which he says his fiction would not develop. London’s variety, its immensity of particulars, impels him toward creative acts of fiction, which he says he would not fulfill until years later.

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<sup>199</sup> Henry James, The Middle Years, 553.

It is while in London that James experiences what he calls a “bedazzled state of comparative freedom.”<sup>200</sup> Similar words are not spoken elsewhere in the autobiographical volumes: it is only in this cultural contact with London, on his own for the first time, that James articulates this sense of the beginnings of his literary career:

What began, during the springtime of my actual reference ... simply an establishment all in a few days of a personal relation with London that was not of course measurable at the moment – I saw in my bedazzled state of comparative freedom too many other relations ahead, a fairly intoxicated vision of choice and range – but that none the less set going a more intimately inner consciousness, a wheel within the wheels, and led to my departing, the actual, the general incident closed, in possession of a return-ticket “good,” as we say, for a longer interval than I could then dream about ... .<sup>201</sup>

James’s “establishment” of a “personal relation with London” suggests a point of departure for his conception of himself as an artist. Inasmuch as London provides for him a sense of “freedom” as a result of an immensity of a “vision of choice and range” in artistic impressions, he describes these impressions to consist typically of the “local and social contact.”<sup>202</sup> He describes his “interest” to inhere in the particularities of London, which avail for him a mode of comparative thinking that permits reflection upon historical situations of circumstance and conditions. In fact, he says the circumstances of history constituted for him his primary source of “interest.” And, these circumstances illuminate for him his sense of freedom, which he defines by his capacity to compare and reflect.

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<sup>200</sup> Henry James, *The Middle Years*, 552.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

It is in this paradoxical relationship of artistic observation upon a historically-conditioned society of circumstance and conditions that James makes his highest claim for artistic freedom. The sources of interest, he says,

Attached itself to objects ... by no merit or virtue – above all – repeatedly, by no “cleverness” – of their own, but just by the luck of history, by the action of multiplicity of circumstance. Condemned the human particle “over here” was to *live* on whatever terms, in thickness – instead of being free, comparatively, or as I at once ruefully and exquisitely found myself, only to feel and to think in it. Ruefully because there were clearly a thousand contacts and sensations, of the strong direct order, that one lost by not so living; exquisitely because of the equal number of immunities and independences, blest independences of perception and judgment, blest liberties of range for the intellectual adventure, that accrued by the same stroke. These at least had the advantage, one of the most distinguished conceivable, that when enjoyed with a certain intensity they might produce the illusion of the other intensity, that of being involved in the composition and the picture itself, in the situations, the complications, the circumstances, admirable and dreadful; while no corresponding illusion, none making for the ideal play of reflection, conclusion, comparison, however one should incline to appraise the luxury, seemed likely to attend the immersed or engaged conditions. ...<sup>203</sup>

James’s expression of the contingency of freedom, as for him freedom may only be understood to be a comparative condition, locates its presence not in the “individual” or in the exclusively personal domains of experience. Instead, he encounters it as a result of his making connections with the historically-produced realm of human society. The

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<sup>203</sup> Henry James, The Middle Years, 563.

“thicknesses” of London’s social density prove to assist him toward artistic, imaginative figurations of the world. At the same time, the act of imagining opens up relations and possibilities toward that historically-determined social density that are not reducible to it. Artistic imaginative acts avail the “ideal play of refection, conclusion, [and] comparison,” in the very act of revealing the limitations of “the immersed or engaged conditions.”

In James’s conceptualization of literary art as expression that avails new possible relations to historical reality, he does not suggest absolute negation of history in the name of personal or individual freedom. It is in this regard that James offers an especially secular, worldly conceptualization of literary art. Given the narrative direction of his literary autobiography, such a conceptualization suggests critical reflection upon the wholly insular, deeply anti-secular culture of “‘business’ only” America that informed his family’s way of life from at least the time of William James of Albany.

#### 4.0 CHAPTER THREE: “THE ART OF FICTION”: FRENCH (CON)TEXTS, WRITING, AND FREEDOM

“You each have an impression colored by your individual conditions; make that into a picture, a picture framed by your own personal wisdom, your glimpse of the American world. The field is vast for freedom, for study, for observation, for satire, for truth. ... I have only two little words for the matter remotely approaching to rule or doctrine; one is life and the other freedom. Tell the ladies and gentlemen, the ingenious inquirers, to consider life directly and closely, and not to be put off with mean and puerile falsities, and be conscientious about it. It is infinitely large, various and comprehensive. Every sort of mind will find what it looks for in it, whereby the novel becomes truly multifarious and illustrative. That is what I mean by liberty; give it its head and let it range. If it is in a bad way, and the English novel is, I think, nothing but absolute freedom can refresh it and restore its self-respect.”

– Henry James, Letter to the Deerfield Summer School, 1889.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Henry James, quoted in Richard Poirier, The Comic Sense of Henry James: A Study of the Early Novels (New York, Oxford UP, 1967), 188.

#### 4.1 AN ETHOS OF FREEDOM

In this chapter, I argue that Henry James's theory of novelistic literary practice expressed in his major mid-career critical essay "The Art of Fiction" (1884) constitutes a defense of literary art as a secular articulation of an ethos of freedom in writing. This ethos may be traced across James's writings, as my epigraph citing his 1889 letter to the Deerfield Summer School suggests. For James, novelistic fiction requires a kind of "absolute freedom" for the artist "to consider" life in its full "large, various" scope. While other critics have identified sources of James's theory of literary art with British aestheticism, Jonathan Freedman most notably among them, I identify the theory of literary art in "The Art of Fiction" with James's reading of French sources, most notably Balzac, whose Comédie Humaine he takes to offer the supreme example of literary art's aesthetic capacity to produce and to transform perceptible, observable social reality – however limited to imaginative fiction. I suggest that James's reading of Balzac in his 1875 essay, "Honoré de Balzac," not only informs the novelistic theory he expresses in "The Art of Fiction," but that this theory resonates with theories of writing, aesthetics, and modernity articulated by French poststructuralist critics much later in the twentieth-century, particularly Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. I examine resonances between the nineteenth-century French conceptions of literary art expressed in James's reading of Balzac, his own criticism in "The Art of Fiction," and these later theorists of modernity for the purposes of discerning how James's novelistic practice opposes the anti-modern, prescriptive, theocratic attitudes (particularly Protestant ethics) that informed the development of business enterprise in the U.S. in the nineteenth century (a development I described in chapter two of this dissertation).

#### 4.2 THE EXERCISE OF FREEDOM: ART AND NOVELISTIC PRACTICE

For any number of critics, Henry James's theory of the novel in "The Art of Fiction" expresses a retrograde, conservative defense of art stressing its values for the perpetuation of tradition. For example, Marcia Jacobson notes, "there is something very traditional about the essay. In granting the private vision of the artist so much importance, James is instinctively if not consciously restoring to the artist the authority which the mass market and its demands had taken from him."<sup>205</sup> Published in 1983, Jacobson's reading of the essay shows an affinity with historicist-minded critics who observe in expressions of literary art a capacity to occlude the social and material determinants of artistic production in veiled ideological mystification. Thus, for Jacobson and like-minded critics, this essay's explicit affirmation of novelistic literary art to live on the exercise of freedom must offer an especially powerful example of false consciousness.

In Raymond Williams's influential and important study, The Sociology of Culture, published a couple years before Jacobson's book, he notes the increasing tendency of artists to claim for themselves and their work a domain of freedom as a response to developing capitalist market relations. Something develops in the nineteenth-century market phase of production, distinct from an earlier artisanal, or patron-based economy, according to Williams: "It is significant, for example, that the artist's claim to 'freedom,' to 'create as he wishes,' was much more commonly made after the institution of dominant market relations, and must be both positively and negatively related to

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<sup>205</sup> Marcia Jacobson, Henry James and the Mass Market (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1983), 11.

them.”<sup>206</sup> For literary artists claiming themselves to work in a domain of freedom, such a condition more often than not depends upon a publisher’s providing advances for work. As a result of publishing advances and royalties, writers gained a sense of “professional independence within integrated and dominant market relations.”<sup>207</sup> Assertion of individual independence within market relations, of course, is the ideology par excellence of western liberalism generally and American capitalism particularly. In addition to Williams, Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton have thoroughly analyzed the function of the novel as a literary genre helping to perpetuate this ideology (as I discussed in chapter one).

Henry James was acutely aware of his dependence on the literary marketplace. Michael Anesko’s studies, particularly “Friction with the Market”, have observed James’s scrupulous attention to the sales of his stories and novels in American and English periodicals. Similar to his friend and contemporary novelist, William Dean Howells, James viewed the artist’s vocation to be a profession. In writing to aspiring sculptor Hendrik Anderson in 1905, James explicitly describes the profits an artist may receive from the sale of his or her works to provide grounds for freedom: “Make the pot boil, at any price, as the only real basis of freedom & sanity. Stop building in the air for a while & build on the ground. *Earn* the money that will give you the right to conceptions (& still more to executions,) like your fountain.” Over a year later, James would add, “You are attempting what no young artist *ever* did – to live on air indefinitely, by what I can make out. ... Stop your multiplication of unsaleable nakedness for a while & hurl

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<sup>206</sup> Raymond Williams, The Sociology of Culture [1981] (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 46.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

yourself, by every cunning art you can command, into production of the interesting, the charming, the vendible, the *placeable* small thing.”<sup>208</sup>

That James registers an acute awareness of the determinations of the marketplace for artistic freedom in his private letters should only surprise readers and critics who overlook or dismiss his attention to capital and capitalist market relations in his novelistic fiction (which I discuss in my fourth chapter in relation to The Portrait of a Lady). Nowhere in his criticism or in his fiction does James claim the artist – or anyone else – to exist in a free state of independence from capitalist market relations. In fact, James from the start of his writing career to the end depicts characters believing themselves to live in a state of individual freedom to be especially susceptible to sudden discoveries of the utter contingency of their liberty as a condition of particular relations of social class and economic wealth.

Yet, James’s claim for freedom to be a necessary condition and consequence of the production of literary art is a guiding premise of the essay “The Art of Fiction,” unquestionably his most significant critical statement toward a theory of the novel other than his later Prefaces to the New York Edition. James’s claim that the novel “lives upon exercise, and the very meaning of exercise is freedom” exists at the core of his theory of the novel.<sup>209</sup> However, readers eager to ascribe to James traditional or conservative values on the basis of his affirmation of the relationship of art to freedom (which runs, in fact, throughout his fictional writings) in novelistic practice must overlook and disregard what James reveals to be modern and new about the form of the novel. Literally, the

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<sup>208</sup> Henry James’s letters to Hendrik Anderson (August 1905 and November 1906), quoted in Michael Anesko, “Friction with the Market”: Henry James and the Profession of Authorship (New York: Oxford UP, 1986), 5-6.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 577.

English word novel means, in one sense, “something new,” and its etymological origins are traceable to the Latin term novella, which designates “a new shoot of a plant.” Traces of the Latin novella are especially evident in the French, Italian, Spanish words for the novel: nouvelle, novella, and novela.<sup>210</sup> James’s claims in “The Art of Fiction” resonate with these literal meanings of the word “novel,” especially as he describes the novel to avail difference in variety and particularity.

In this essay, James explicitly opposes the novel as literary form to “convention” and “tradition,” saying that, “[m]any people speak of it [the novel] as a factitious, artificial form, a product of ingenuity, the business of which is to alter and arrange the things that surround us, to translate them into conventional, traditional moulds.”<sup>211</sup> While James clearly opposes any view of novel writing that would identify it with tradition and convention, it is also significant that he associates these reductive characterizations about novel writing with the word “business.” As I noted in chapter two of this dissertation, James identifies business activity with a kind of quantitative, applied mathematical schema of knowledge, as for example when he says in his autobiography that while growing up his family and his cousins were not to “understand these things, questions of arithmetic and of fond calculation, questions of the counting-house and the market.”<sup>212</sup> In The American, James explicitly opposes business knowledge to aesthetic styles of thought, particularly when he describes American businessman Christopher Newman suffering an “aesthetic headache” at the Louvre Museum in Paris.

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<sup>210</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, “novel.”

<sup>211</sup> Henry James, “The Art of Fiction” [1884], in Henry James: Major Stories and Essays (New York: Library of America, 1999), 586.

<sup>212</sup> Henry James, A Small Boy and Others, 109.

Rather than representing a retreat from the conditions of the late nineteenth century capitalistic marketplace, James affirmations of literary art expresses a criticism of developing business conditions that, to some degree, resonate with the sociological writings of Thorstein Veblen. In Theory of Business Enterprise (1904), Veblen conceptualizes developments in late nineteenth century U.S. society criticizing business enterprise on grounds that would accord with James's values for the "irregularity" of art and fiction. For example, Veblen describes the organization of economy developing as "business enterprise" to entail the standardization of thought, as a result of business "profit-seeking" through increased mechanization of the industrial workplace. He notes nineteenth-century urban city centers became increasing homogeneous in their ways of life as a result of this re-organization of industrial workplace toward intensive mechanization for increased business profits. He says "[a]musements and diversion, much of the current amenities of life, are organized into a more or less sweeping process to which those who would benefit by the advantages offered must adapt their schedule of wants and the disposition of their time and effort." Adaptation to this style of life entails a limitation on the "free discretion of the individuals who participate." A widespread growth in conformity becomes apparent, Veblen says:

Throughout the scheme of life of that portion of mankind that clusters about the centres of modern culture the industrial process makes itself felt and enforces a degree of conformity to the canon of accurate quantitative measurement. There comes to prevail a degree of standardization and precise mechanical adjustment of

the details of everyday life, which presumes a facile and unbroken working of all those processes that minister to these standardized human wants.<sup>213</sup>

In Veblen's analysis, business enterprise seeking quantitative accumulation of capital dominates society in such a way that curtails non-standardized expressions of thought. Similarly, whenever James in his fiction and criticism treats business, he invariably identifies it with an imaginatively-limited style of thinking, capable of producing repetitions in thought and society, but nothing that might be fundamentally "new." Importantly, Veblen identifies this increase in "conformity" and "standardization" precisely with the latter decades of the nineteenth century, precisely the historical moment at which James in "The Art of Fiction" claims his sense of the novel's value for expressing variety and difference.

In "The Art of Fiction," James opposes any view that would associate the novel with mere convention and tradition – or with mere "business" transactions – on the grounds that it fails to express the "new" quality of the form, saying that "[t]his, however, is a view of the matter which carries us but a very short way, condemns art to an eternal repetition of a few familiar clichés, cuts short its development, and leads us straight up to a dead wall."<sup>214</sup> Opposed to any view that would limit the novel as form to "eternal repetition" of the same, James instead describes the novel as literary form to emphasize its generative, productive, and "new" qualities. The novelist's task, he says, impels him or her toward apprehension of the different and the unique elements of life. As James puts it: "Catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life, that is the

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<sup>213</sup> Veblen, Theory of Business Enterprise, 14.

<sup>214</sup> Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," 586.

attempt whose strenuous force keeps Fiction upon her feet.”<sup>215</sup> While the oppositions here are implicit – strangeness to convention, and irregularity to tradition – his suggestion that the novelist produces these differences in accordance with a “rhythm of life” is especially notable in light of his opposition to a reductive conception of novelistic production as a “business” transaction. Whereas capitalist profit seeking in an age of “business enterprise” achieves its ends through standardization, James’s ethos of freedom for novelistic literary practice proposes its availability for revealing radical difference and particularity to be the condition of life itself (not the sort of “freedom” that capitalist exhortations about the free market assert).

James further opposes his ethos of freedom to the ingrained moralistic cultural attitude of Protestantism, which since Weber, has been understood to have strongly contributed to the expansion and development of western capitalism.<sup>216</sup> Recalling my discussion of Weber in chapter 2, “the spirit of capitalism,” understood as the duty to constitute oneself as a competitive entrepreneurial unit with the single-minded purpose of applying one’s intelligence “toward the increase of ... capital, which is an end in itself,”<sup>217</sup> relies upon a Protestant conceptualization of a “calling.” James’s ethos of freedom in novelistic literary practice explicitly opposes moralistic attitudes, including those that would propose the increase of capital to have intrinsic value for life. Rather, James proposes that the freedom of novelistic literary art activates another mode of life entirely distinct from the regulation of conduct in duty and discipline. This mode of life lives upon acts of aesthetic creation, which requires freedom for the artist from moralistic

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<sup>215</sup> Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” 586.

<sup>216</sup> See also R. H. Tawney, Religion and the Rise of Capitalism, [1922] (New York: The New American Library, 1954).

<sup>217</sup> Weber.

strictures, which is particularly evident when James writes, “You wish to paint a moral picture or carve a moral statue: will you not tell us how you would set about it? We are discussing the Art of Fiction; questions of art are questions (in the widest sense) of execution; questions of morality are quite another affair, and will you not let us see how it is that you find it so easy to mix them up?”<sup>218</sup> In the place of traditional moralizing attitudes, James asserts that attitudes of experimentation, curiosity, and again, freedom, best serve the novelist in developing his or her attempt at catching “the strange irregular rhythm of life.”

#### **4.3 FRENCH READINGS: BALZAC’S “DUPLICITY” AS AESTHETIC JUDGMENT**

Henry James’s essays on Honoré Balzac, the early-to-mid-nineteenth century French novelist of the Comédie Humaine, reveal his thinking about the relationship between art and historicity in novelistic fiction years before “The Art of Fiction.” He published his first essay on Balzac in the December 1875 edition of Galaxy the same year he moved to Europe and took up residence in Paris. Now in his early thirties, he remained in Paris from August 1875 through November 1876 before settling in London.

Upon arriving in Paris, James made acquaintance with a number of French writers of the day, Flaubert, Zola, Daudet, Goncourt, etc., along with the Russian cosmopolite novelist, Ivan Turgenev. His letters of this period reveal that he shared throughout his stay in Paris a dialogue with these poets and novelists, whom he regularly met at Sunday salon gatherings at Flaubert’s Paris residence. While James in his letters at times

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<sup>218</sup> Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” 590-591.

expresses dissatisfaction with the group, he makes no doubt about their importance for his experience in Paris, especially as he came to know Ivan Turgenev personally.<sup>219</sup>

Writing on Turgenev in an essay he published in the Atlantic Monthly of 1884 (the same year he published “The Art of Fiction” in Longman’s Magazine), James describes attending gatherings at Flaubert’s house at the “end of the Fauborg Saint-Honoré.” That their discussions of literary art turned primarily upon aesthetic evaluation of fiction – as opposed to moralistic criteria – strikes James as notable, as he recalls,

What was discussed in that little smoke-clouded room was chiefly questions of taste, questions of art and form; and the speakers, for the most part, were in aesthetic matters, radicals of the deepest dye. It would have been late in the day to propose among them any discussion of the relation of art to morality, any question as to the degree in which a novel might or might not concern itself with the teaching of a lesson. They had settled these preliminaries long ago, and it would have been primitive and incongruous to recur to them. The conviction that held them together was the conviction that art and morality are two perfectly different things, and that the former has no more to do with the latter than it has

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<sup>219</sup> In a letter to William Dean Howells dated May 28, 1876 from the Rue de Luxembourg, James urges the novelist-editor to make the journey to Paris, saying that “Paris itself meanwhile is a sort of painted background which keeps shifting and changing, and which is always there, to be looked at when you please, and to be most easily and comfortably ignored when you don’t. All this, if you were only here, you would feel much better than I can tell you – and you would write some happy piece of your prose about it which would make me feel it better, afresh. *Ergo*, come – when you can!” About Flaubert’s literary salon, James on this occasion is dismissive: “I have seen a number of people all winter who have helped to pass the time, but I have formed but one or two relations of permanent value, and which I desire to perpetuate. I have seen almost nothing of the literary fraternity, and there are fifty reasons why I should not become intimate with them. I don’t like their wares, and they don’t like any others; and besides, they are not accueillants. Tourguéneff is worth the whole heap of them, and yet he swallows them down in a manner that excites my extreme wonder” (52). Quoted in Henry James Letters, Vol. 2 (1875-1883). Cambridge, Mass. The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1975.

with astronomy or embryology. The only duty of a novel was to be well written; that merit included every other of which it was capable.<sup>220</sup>

The views expressed in Flaubert's literary salon provided James with an artistic model for literary art, and he agreed with their valuation of fiction and literature for its aesthetic effects.

James expresses views in "The Art of Fiction" that are directly traceable to his comments on Flaubert's salon. For example, James revises his comment describing Flaubert's group to value the novel solely upon aesthetic grounds, that they maintained "[t]he only duty of a novel was to be well written," directly into a statement of principle in "The Art of Fiction,": "[t]he only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting."<sup>221</sup> As I noted in chapter one of this dissertation, James's claim turns upon "interest" as definitive evaluative criteria for any novel.

While Flaubert's literary salon provides a direct French source for James's assertion of the novel's aesthetic value in "The Art of Fiction," the claim is also consistent with his reading of Balzac, Flaubert's most important literary forerunner in the French novelistic tradition. In his 1875 essay, "Honoré de Balzac," James characterizes Balzac to be an exemplary creative artist whose fiction produces new values different from inherited cultural standards. For James, the appeal of Balzac's fiction lies in its artistic capacity to transform the world anew in imagination. Yet, the capacity to transform requires the active portion of Balzac's imagination to figure the world in observing – actively and attentively figuring – its constitutive elements. More than any

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<sup>220</sup> Henry James, "Ivan Turgénieff," [1884] in Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1014.

<sup>221</sup> Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," 577.

other novelist, it is Balzac who offers to James the model of criticism and fiction-making as a production of the real in an aesthetics of “looking.”

Balzac’s novels attentively observe contemporary social reality, though the force of his novels are a function of his capacity to represent especially particular elements. “The real” in Balzac is inseparable from this specific, particular kind of aesthetic activity:

The real, for his imagination, had an authority that it has never had for any other. When he looks for it in the things in which we all feel it, he finds it with a marvelous certainty of eye, and proves himself the great novelist that he pretends to be. When he tries to make it prevail everywhere, explain everything and serve as a full measure of our imagination – then he becomes simply the greatest of dupes.<sup>222</sup>

Figuring Balzac to be an observer, endowing him with “the marvelous certainty of the eye,” James suggests one lesson from Balzac: observation as a directed, critical activity succeeds to the degree it apprehends “the real” in specific, particular aspects of life. In other words, it is observation of “the things in which we all feel” reality that occasions his fictional realism.

Balzac’s realism for James is nothing more and nothing less than an aesthetic art, which registers the real in sensory, perceptible elements. In affirming the concrete sensory qualities to Balzac’s fiction, James implicitly suggests historical usages of the English term “aesthetic,” which the Oxford English Dictionary traces from the Greek term for “sense perception,” aisthetikos, to the Latin aesthetica, to modern post-classical Latin iterations. Notably, the French esthétique developed from eighteenth-century

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<sup>222</sup> Henry James, “Honoré de Balzac” [1875/1878] in French Poets and Novelists (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964), 116.

usages, meaning, “‘philosophy of the beautiful or of art,’” to the nineteenth-century’s “science of perception by the senses.”<sup>223</sup> It is this latter nineteenth-century French sense of esthétique, close in meaning to the Greek term for sense perception, that most strongly informs James’s criticism and his evaluative criteria of fiction, which his comments on Balzac exemplify. That, for James, Balzac’s fictional realism depends upon sensory, aesthetic domains of experience is clear in his praise for his fiction’s capacity to capture the real “look[ing] for it in the things in which we all feel it,” accomplished with a “marvelous certainty of eye.”

Balzac’s aesthetic offers for James a fictional chronicle of the “things” of contemporary life, and the “values” his fiction reveals are double-sided. It is a fiction of a “realistic romancer.” On the one hand, Balzac’s fiction offers representation of “the real” in minute, concrete specificity, and it particularly attends to nineteenth-century French society in its most elemental, material aspects: “This world of our sense, of our name, of our blazon, (or the absence of it) – this palpable world of houses and clothes, of seven per cents and multiform human faces, pressed upon his imagination with an unprecedented urgency.”<sup>224</sup> Balzac’s imagination, however, was not only “pressed upon.” It also responded and it observed, just as it figured and represented. The reversal implied in active, attentive observing, in “figuring” the “actual,” requires for James a fundamentally artistic “imaginative” faculty.

In James’s characterization, Balzacian “realistic romance” avails this doubling of the actual and the imaginative response. On the grounds of “experience,” James suggests the drawing of any separation between these realms of life involves at most a qualitative

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<sup>223</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, “aesthetic.”

<sup>224</sup> Henry James, “Honoré de Balzac,” 90.

distinction: “The things he invented were as real to him as the things he knew, and his actual experience is overlaid with a thousand thicknesses, as it were, of imaginary experience. The person is irrecoverably lost in the artist.”<sup>225</sup> Balzac’s fiction, James suggests, is an “art” that occasions possibilities for making, remaking, creating, and re-creating the world through imaginative acts in novel form.

While Balzac’s fiction strongly affected James for its attention the social and material determinants of his characters’ situations, one of its most important lessons for him was its expression of a supremely artistic attitude:

If he had been asked what was, for human purposes, the faculty he valued most highly, he would have said the power of dissimulation. He regards it as a sign of all superior people, and he says somewhere that nothing forms the character so finely as having had to exercise it in one’s youth, in the bosom of one’s family. In this attitude of Balzac’s there is an element of affectation and of pedantry; he praises duplicity because it is original and audacious for him to do so. But he praises it also because it has for him the highest recommendation that anything can have – it is picturesque. Duplicity is more picturesque than honesty – just as the line of beauty is the curve and not the straight line. In place of moral judgment of conduct, accordingly, Balzac usually gives us an aesthetic judgment. A magnificent action with him is not an action which is remarkable for its high motive, but an action with a great force of will or of desire behind it, which throws it into striking and monumental relief. It may be a monumental sacrifice, a

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<sup>225</sup> Henry James, “Honoré de Balzac,” 74.

magnificent devotion, a magnificent act of faith; but the presumption is that it will be a magnificent lie, a magnificent murder or a magnificent adultery.<sup>226</sup>

James's attribution of artistic capacities to the traits of "duplicity" and "dissimulation," his linking of these capacities to a notion of power, to originality and to audacity, suggests the principal dimensions of a certain conceptualization of aesthetic activity in fiction. For James, Balzac's fictional representation of "the real" does not involve the positing of "honest," purportedly objective accounting of social facts. His spatial metaphors in this passage are instructive: the "realistic romance" does not offer a direct or "straight" representation of reality, but rather a "curved," or "indirect" apprehension of the "actual."

Thus, in reading Balzac's fiction, James articulates two contrary and opposing elements of novelistic "realism." In one facet, Balzacian realism avails a representation of the knowable, observable things of social reality in material, elemental forms (houses, clothes, furniture, clothes), all of which correspond to one another in the "total" social whole composed in terms of social classes and state and society relationships. On the other hand the hand, Balzac reveals the actuality of these "real" conditions to be susceptible to transformation – if only in the fictional imagination – by which his world is revealed to be premised upon the making and remaking of a desiring power.

#### **4.4 "OUR PROTESTANT COMMUNITIES"**

Given the generations of Protestant, Presbyterian morality running through the James family, it should not be surprising then that "The Art of Fiction" identifies in "Protestant communities" certain moralistic standards he opposes to artistic novelistic practice.

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<sup>226</sup> Henry James, "Honoré de Balzac," 91-92.

While explicit criticism of Protestantism appears only once in the essay, James actually addresses Protestantism twice, the second time simply by way of a descriptive allusion made to praise the imaginative capacity of a certain writer who depicted the “French Protestant” community. Yet, James makes the first reference to Protestantism in the essay as part of a broader judgment against the application of either moralistic criteria or simple prescriptive guidelines for the writing of fiction.

As the title suggests, James’s major claim in “The Art of Fiction” asserts the essence of fiction to be an art. In making this claim, he criticizes Walter Besant’s rule-bound prescriptions for writing novelistic fiction:

He seems to me to mistake in attempting to say so definitely beforehand what sort of an affair the good novel will be. To indicate the dangers of such an error as that has been the purpose of these few pages; to suggest that certain traditions on the subject, applied a priori have already had much to answer for, and that the good health of an art which undertakes so immediately to reproduce life must demand that it be perfectly free. It lives upon exercise, and the very meaning of exercise is freedom.<sup>227</sup>

James identifies within Besant’s claims moralistic criteria that he traces to religious, particularly Protestant, doctrine. He explicitly identifies contemporary hostility to pictorial art in Christian morality, noting its persistence despite the abandonment of explicit Puritanism: it is “odd that in the Christian mind the traces (dissimulated thought they may be) of a suspicion of the sister art should linger to this day.”<sup>228</sup> While James makes evident Besant’s suspicious views of art in order to criticize them, he launches his

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<sup>227</sup> Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” 577.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 574.

strongest attack on the moralistic evaluation of art in his treatment of the “Protestant community”:

Art in our Protestant communities, where so many things have got so strangely twisted about, is supposed in certain circles to have some vaguely injurious effect upon those who make it an important consideration, who let it weigh in the balance. It is supposed to be opposed in some mysterious manner to morality, to amusement, to instruction.<sup>229</sup>

A prevalent, moralistic criteria applied toward art typifies the Protestant belief system, which James says has produced a number of prejudices against fiction as being “too frivolous to be edifying, and too serious to be diverting.” Observing a “priggish, paradoxical, and superfluous” attitude toward fiction among Protestant followers, James aptly characterizes what he perceives to be their belief in the positive function of fiction in restrained, moralistic terms:

They would argue, of course, that a novel ought to be “good,” but they interpret this term in a fashion of their own, which indeed would vary considerably from one critic to another. One would say that being good means representing virtuous and aspiring characters, placed in prominent positions; another would say that it depends on a “happy ending,” on a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs, and cheerful remarks. ...

But they would all agree that the “artistic” idea would spoil some of their fun.<sup>230</sup>

James’s explicit opposition of the “‘artistic’ idea” of fiction to Protestant standards suggests his experience of literary discussion in Flaubert’s salon. In his “Ivan

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<sup>229</sup> Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” 575.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 576.

Turgénieff’ essay of 1884, James expresses a similar opposition to Protestant moral standards. In obvious reference to Turgenev’s exiled state from Russia in Paris, James describes him to be “cosmopolite ... by force of circumstances,” and he then poses a set of contrasts that tells especially of his values for fiction. Turgenev, James says, “felt and understood the opposite sides of life; he was imaginative, speculative, anything but literal. ... Our Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, moralistic, conventional standards were far away from him, and he judged things with a freedom and spontaneity in which I found a perpetual refreshment.”<sup>231</sup> As I described above, James’s explicit contrast here of “freedom and spontaneity” to “Protestant, moralistic, conventional standards,” forms the nucleus of his claims in “The Art of Fiction.”

James takes novelistic fiction to be an art, and he conceptualizes it in terms of its productive, generative activity. This point James expresses to H.G. Wells decades later, arguing in a letter, “[i]t is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration.”<sup>232</sup> In asserting that art operates as an active, generative participant in life, James articulates an ethical conceptualization and defense of art: art, for James, constitutes an act, with actual effects and consequences in life; to reiterate, in a word, art “makes” life.

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<sup>231</sup> Henry James, “Ivan Turgénieff,” [1884] in Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, and The Prefaces to the New York Edition (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1010. See also Eric Haralson’s discussion of this passage from James’s review of Turgenev in the context of literary modernism. Eric Haralson, “Modernism,” in Henry James in Context, ed. David McWhirter (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 217.

<sup>232</sup> Henry James’s letter to H.G. Wells, quoted in Paul B. Armstrong, The Phenomenology of Henry James (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 67.

#### 4.5 ART AND DIFFERENCE

James's critical conceptualization of novelistic fiction to be an art claims it to be a practice that produces knowledge of particularity, otherness, variety, and difference. I suggest this term, "difference," in accordance with Jacques Derrida's conceptualization of writing as a mode of articulating différance; in Derrida's sense of différance, once the modern reader abandons reference to absolute origins of meaning, dismisses the search for theological certainty and/or "the Book" that would authorize all other books, and ceases assertion of transcendent interpretive value, then the modern reader may enter into a productive, generative relationship with the text in ever-renewable acts of interpretation.<sup>233</sup> Writing, as such, may avail new knowledge of present actualities, new thinking, and new critical consciousness.

What exists at the heart of this conceptualization of writing for Derrida, and that resonates so strongly with James's thinking in criticism and fiction, is his claim that writing and the making present of freedom produce the possibility of "the new." Interpretation for Derrida is directed not at absolute origin or transcendent meaning but at localizable, particular "difference." "Pure writing" does not look backwards or skywards for origin or transcendence; writing makes the world over anew: it articulates new meaning and forges new values. Yet, what Derrida calls the "inaugural" activity of writing does not inhere in creative capability per se; rather it is in writing's activation of freedom that gives forth its poetic creativity as the "inauguration" of new values: "If writing is *inaugural* it is not because it creates, but because of a certain absolute freedom of speech, because of the freedom to bring forth the already-there as a sign of the

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<sup>233</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification," in Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 10.

freedom to augur. A freedom of response which acknowledges as its only horizon the world as history and the speech which can only say: Being has already begun.”<sup>234</sup>

Derrida’s linkage between freedom and writing is instructive in regards to James’s critical practice, particularly as he articulates it in “The Art of Fiction.” Again, James’s title delimits the scope and parameters of his essay to be an elaboration of the artistic aspect of fiction. James writes the essay as a defense of fiction in terms of art, and as such, he targets his criticism at readers of the novel who would purport some other evaluative or interpretive criteria of it other than aesthetic critique.

Art, James suggests, makes particularity and difference from history. For James, for the novelist to really represent life, he or she must have available to him or her the freedom to represent it: “We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his donnée: our criticism is only to what he makes of it .... If we pretend to respect the artist at all, we must allow him his freedom of choice, in the face, in particular cases, of innumerable presumptions that the choice will not fructify.”<sup>235</sup> The activation of the artist’s freedom of choice in writing may produce difference, which Derrida suggests, is the constitutive force of historicity itself: “Differences are themselves effects. They have not fallen from the sky fully formed, and are no more inscribed in a topos noetus, that they are prescribed in the gray matter of the brain. If the word ‘history’ did not in and of itself convey the motif of a final repression of difference, one could say that only differences can be ‘historical’ from the outset and in each of their aspects.”<sup>236</sup> History, in Derrida’s sense of différance, becomes visible and intelligible in writing, as he expresses différance to be

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<sup>234</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Force and Signification,” 12.

<sup>235</sup> Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” 584.

<sup>236</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in Margins of Philosophy, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, Ill.: U of Chicago Press, 1982), 11.

“the movement according to which language, or any code, any system of referral in general is constituted ‘historically’ as a weave of differences.”<sup>237</sup> Inasmuch as the movement of language in a “weave of differences” constitutes historicity, it is the destructive/constructive activity of the literary artist who occasions the possibility of historicity as difference. For Derrida, différance inheres in writing that itself inaugurates historicity; différance, he says, is not within history, but rather it is, “[a]n original structure: the opening of history, historicity itself. Difference does not simply belong either to history or to structure. If we must say, along with Shelling, that ‘all is but Dionysus,’ we must know – and this is to write – that, like pure force, Dionysus worked by difference.”<sup>238</sup> Underlying Derrida’s articulation of writing as the generative maker of difference, and therefore of historicity itself, is his claim for freedom that functions to produce the “break” occasioning difference. Freedom does not precede the act of writing, it is the act of writing that calls forth freedom:

The attempt-to-write cannot be understood on the basis of voluntarism. The will to write is not an ulterior determination of a primal will. On the contrary, the will to write reawakens the willful sense of the will: freedom, break with the domain of empirical history, a break whose aim at reconciliation with the hidden essence of the empirical, with pure historicity. The will and the attempt to write are not the desire to write, for it is a question here not of affectivity but of freedom and duty.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Derrida, “Différance,” 12.

<sup>238</sup> Derrida, “Force and Signification,” 28-29.

<sup>239</sup> Derrida, “Force and Signification,” 12-13.

The awakening of freedom and duty in writing introduces différance and inaugurates historicity. For art (which, for James, is the operative term), Derrida designates “poetic inauguration,” which he identifies with criticism and opposes to philosophy.

For James, the artist’s attempt at historical representation activates his or her freedom of choice. In the choice and selection of writing, the artist expresses the novel’s historicity while he or she also cancels out that history. The result of this double action is expression of a particular reality – a non-abstract, non-general, non-transcendent singular reality. For James, then, producing a relationship of freedom and particularity in novelistic representation constitutes both “the art of fiction” and its participation in life. The freedom to choose – but to choose a particular case among particular cases – allows the literary artist to produce art, or “the air of reality.”<sup>240</sup> “It is here,” James says, “in very truth that he competes with life; it is here that he competes with his brother the painter in *his* 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.”<sup>241</sup>

In claiming that these conceptualizations of freedom and history form crucial elements of James’s theory of novelistic practice, I am arguing that James suggests a mode of criticism that calls for the productive articulation of difference. Freedom, James suggests, returns thinking to particularity and otherness. With artistic freedom of choice, the artist selects from the many: “Art is essentially selection, but it is selection whose main care is to be typical, to be inclusive.”<sup>242</sup> In making selections – in subject, in form, in character, etc. – the novelistic artist makes choices that necessarily will be unique and

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<sup>240</sup> Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” 581.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 586.

particular to his or her experience of life. To make intelligible the particular, or “the other,” in writing constitutes what Derrida calls différance, which creates the present from the past, all the while directing energies to the re-making of the present for the future.

James, in fact, characterizes experience to be a source of artistic selection: “Selection will be sure to take care of itself, for it has a constant motive behind it. That motive is simply experience. As people feel life, so they will feel the art that is most closely related to it.”<sup>243</sup> In this turn to locating a source of artistic activity in “felt” experience, James means especially the experience of the mind’s imaginative capacity, which he designates to be “sensibility”: “Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative – much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius – it takes to itself the faintest life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations.”<sup>244</sup> The artist’s imaginative, feeling sensibility thus regulates the way the artist’s freedom to choose, to select among forms and types, will be made concrete in representation. In James’s theory of the novel, it is artistic sensibility that becomes the difference-maker, the interest-producer, and the inaugural force of any new creative act.

Among James’s best critics and readers, T.S. Eliot observes that James’s practice avails “sensibility” of a “peculiar class of data.”<sup>245</sup> The activation of sensibility in James suggests to Eliot that he was “possessed” by the vision of an ideal society; he *saw* (not

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<sup>243</sup> Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” 586.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 580.

<sup>245</sup> T.S. Eliot, “A Prediction,” 55.

fancied) the relations between the members of such a society. And no one, in the end, has ever been more aware – or with more benignity, or less bitterness, – of the disparity between possibility and fact.”<sup>246</sup> It bears repeating here that, for Eliot, Jamesian artistic sensibility registers this highly critical function: a revelation of the “disparity between possibility and fact.” This critical capacity of sensibility, as James conceptualizes it here in his criticism and elsewhere in his fiction, inheres in the artistic attempt to represent the particularity and otherness of present-day life, which always necessitates the activation of freedom.

Sensibility, for James, thus functions similar to Derrida’s articulation of the “attempt-to-write” as the “reawaken[ing] [of] the willful sense of the will.” Yet, as James’s fiction shows, the activation of freedom ultimately faces tremendous obstacles as a result of the material determinants of capitalistic American society. Eliot’s observation suggests that James’s problematization of freedom in his fiction and in this essay reveals a disparity, or an irreducible gap, in the “between” of “possibility and fact.” In his fiction, James problematizes freedom most explicitly in his treatment of art, especially fine art and literary art, and its conditions of production as limited in capitalistic American society.

James’s figuration of freedom as artistic selection, drawing upon imaginative experience in the domain of sensibility, both reveals concrete interest and historical difference. Insofar as the novel advances interests, and makes difference visible, the novel participates in an ethical relationship to actual historical reality. I quote at length from the “The Art of Fiction” what I suggest to be James’s most definitive articulation of

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<sup>246</sup> T.S. Eliot, “A Prediction,” 56.

what the novel does as it produces an “in between” domain of contingent ethical freedom within history and artistic freedom from without history:

[The novel] lives upon exercise, and the very meaning of exercise is freedom. The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting. That general responsibility rests upon it, but it is the only one I can think of. The ways in which it is at liberty to accomplish this result (of interesting us) strike me as innumerable, and such as can only suffer from being marked out or fenced in by prescription. They are as various as the temperament of man, and they are successful in proportion as they reveal a particular mind, different from others. A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say. The tracing of a line to be followed, of a tone to be taken, of a form to be filled out, is a limitation of that freedom and a suppression of the very thing that we are most curious about. The form, it seems to me, is to be appreciated after the fact: then the author's choice has been made, his standard has been indicated; then we can follow lines and directions and compare tones and resemblances. Then in a word we can enjoy one of the most charming pleasures, we can estimate quality, we can apply the test of execution. The execution belongs to the author alone; it is what is most personal to him, and we measure him by that. 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.<sup>247</sup>

As a result of the activation of freedom in artistic novelistic production, the novel reveals especially “particular” and “individual” modes of life that may be especially “different from others.” It is the freedom to choose, instantiated in novelistic art as the freedom of selection, that allows for the possibility of a new and particular representation of historical life. The freedom of selection in novelistic art reveals, for James, the “[individual] temperament of man.” Living upon this freedom, the ethical value of the novel then proves itself in generating that which is “different from others.” This conceptualization of the novel, I am arguing, even attests to its attachment to pluralistic democratic attitudes. For James, it is this measure that constitutes the novel’s ultimate value for present-day life.

The novel’s ethical and political value, then, is an aesthetic function in its capacity to represent “life”: particularly, this value resides in how artistic representation bears the trace of the activation of freedom. James’s conceptualization of representation here approaches Derrida’s concept of writing that inaugurates itself not as “creativity” but as “absolute freedom of speech.”

#### **4.6 ATTITUDE OF MODERNITY**

The operative analogy of “The Art of Fiction,” linking fiction-making to painting, clearly suggests its primary function to be aesthetic, and only as an aesthetic work might the novel be productive of other values, i.e. ethical or political values. Fiction-making, James says, must take itself as seriously as an attempt to “represent life” as does painting:

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<sup>247</sup> Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” 578.

“When it relinquishes this attempt, the same attempt that we see on the canvas of the painter, it will have arrived at a very strange pass.”<sup>248</sup> Novelistic fiction that exceeds or posits some other aim or goal for itself other than the aesthetic act of “representing life” would “relinquish” its principal strength as art that actualizes life itself.

It is evident that James’s opposition to moralistic or non-aesthetic approaches to producing or evaluating fiction allows the aesthetic function of novelistic art its full range. Paradoxically, however, James’s aesthetic conceptualization of the novel suggests its capacity to produce ethical and political criticism of life. Bearing in mind the literal meaning “sense perception” of the Greek term for “aesthetic,” and its nineteenth-century French derivative esthétique meaning, “science of perception by the senses” (as I noted above), James’s strong claim for novelistic fiction as aesthetic activity suggests it offers concrete grounds – in sense and perception – for mediation of historical reality.

Importantly, the most-often quoted passage in this essay links the aesthetic properties of fiction to historical representation, when James says that “[a]s the picture is reality, so the novel is history.”<sup>249</sup> For James, fiction-writing taken to be aesthetic activity akin to painting generates a profound relationship to historical reality. Fiction – the novelist’s practice – as an art “competes with life.” As an art directed at catching “the strange irregular rhythm of life,” fiction avails a multidirectional relationship to life in its historicity: at the same time fiction reveals the present to be historically-constituted, it also opens up or occasions a “free” mode of relationship to it.

In characterizing James’s novelistic practice to be aesthetic activity occasioning a multi-directional relationship to the present, I am suggesting James’s critical and fictional

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<sup>248</sup> Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” 574.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

practice anticipates Michel Foucault's characterization of aesthetic self-making to be an "attitude of modernity."<sup>250</sup> In his essay "What Is Enlightenment?" Foucault describes modernity to be an attitude, or ethos, rather than an epoch or a specific temporal moment, particularly requiring "the exercise of freedom" in artistic transfiguration of the world.<sup>251</sup> While Foucault links Kant, Baudelaire, and ancient Greek thought in describing modernity to exist as a matter of attitude and practice, James's essay especially resonates with Foucault's thinking to the degree that both conceptualize aesthetic activity to be a privileged mode for the "exercise of freedom" – which for James avails variety, particularity, and difference within and against history, and for Foucault expresses the modernity of the present. Foucault's thought linking modernity with freedom and aesthetic creation in "What Is Enlightenment?" complements his more fully developed treatment of their relationships in Greek thought in his three-volume study, The History of Sexuality (1976-1984).

In "What is Enlightenment?" Foucault opens his essay describing his point of departure to be Immanuel Kant's essay "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" (1774), which he wrote as a response to the question, Was ist Aufklärung?, posed by a German periodical, Berlinische Monatschrift. Foucault describes these circumstances of composition to be important, noting that whereas periodicals today ask readers questions merely "in order to collect opinions on some subject about which everyone has an opinion already," in the eighteenth-century it was common practice for periodicals to "question the public on programs that did not yet have

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<sup>250</sup> Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?", in Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 309.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

solutions.”<sup>252</sup> For Foucault, the German periodical’s question encouraging reflection on the Enlightenment is, in itself, demonstrative of a style of reflective philosophizing characteristic of Enlightenment thinking. Foucault deploys both a French poetic conceptualization of aesthetic activity (in his reading of Baudelaire) and a Greek conceptualization of ethics:

By attitude I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and itself as a task. No doubt a bit like what the Greeks called an ethos.<sup>253</sup>

An aesthetic practice underlies this “attitude of modernity,” this particular way of “thinking and feeling.” Foucault reads Baudelaire’s essay on the painter Constantin Guys to be a touchstone for this conceptualization of modernity as an aesthetic practice. For Baudelaire, Foucault says, Guys’s activity as a painter enables him to create and/or re-make his reality and his world. In artistic practice, Guys “transfigures that world.” Citing Baudelaire, Foucault notes, that Guys “[remains] the last to linger wherever there can be a glow of light, an echo of poetry, a quiver of life or a chord of music; wherever a passion can *pose* before him, wherever natural man and conventional man display themselves in a strange beauty, wherever the sun lights up the swift joys of the *depraved animal*.”<sup>254</sup> Foucault suggests the practice of aesthetic activity to be the constitutive element of modernity, by which aesthetic activity creates or opens up possibilities that

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<sup>252</sup> Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, 303.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” quoted in Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, 311.

occasion “a break with tradition.” This “break,” for Foucault, occasions a specific, concrete possibility for the “exercise of freedom”:

What makes him [Constantin Guys] the modern painter par excellence in Baudelaire’s eyes is that, just when the whole world is falling asleep, he begins to work, and he transfigures that world. His transfiguration entails not an annulling of reality but a difficult interplay between the truth of what is real and the exercise of freedom. ... For the attitude of modernity, the high value of the present is indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is. Baudelairean modernity is an exercise in which extreme attention to what is real is confronted with the practice of a liberty that simultaneously respects this reality and violates it.<sup>255</sup>

For Foucault, it is artistic, aesthetic activity that occasions the emergence of modernity: “The ironic heroization of the present, this transfiguring play with reality, this ascetic elaboration of the self – Baudelaire does not imagine that these have any place in society itself or in the body politic. They can only be produced in another, a different place, which Baudelaire calls art.”<sup>256</sup> The multi-directionality of Jamesian novelistic literary practice that we find in his critical writings, opening up the possibility of the exercise of freedom at the same time that it points at reality as a “historically-produced” state, anticipates this attitude of modernity.

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<sup>255</sup> Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, 311.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 312.

## 5.0 CHAPTER FOUR: THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY:

### ISABEL ARCHER IN THE WORLD

“The world as it stands is no illusion, no phantasm, no evil dream of a night; we wake up to it again and again for ever and ever; we can neither forget it nor deny it nor dispense with it. We can welcome experience as it comes, and give it what it demands, in exchange for something which is idle to pause to call much more or little so long as it contributes to swell the volume of consciousness. In this there is mingled pain and delight, but over the mysterious mixture there hovers a visible rule, that bids us learn to will and seek to understand.” – Henry James on Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev, North American Review, April 1874.<sup>257</sup>

“Deep in her soul – deeper than any appetite for renunciation – was the sense that life would be her business for a long time to come. And at moments there was something inspiring, almost enlivening, in the conviction. It was a proof of strength – it was a proof she should some day be happy again. It couldn’t be she was to live only to suffer, she was still young after all, and a great many things might happen to her yet. To live only to suffer – only to feel the injury of life repeated and enlarged – it seemed to her she was too valuable, too capable, for

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<sup>257</sup> Henry James, “Ivan Turgenev” [1874], in Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, and The Prefaces to the New York Edition (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 998.

that. Then she wondered if it were vain and stupid to think so well of herself. When had it ever been a guarantee to be valuable? Wasn't it much more probable that if one were fine one would suffer? It involved then perhaps an admission that one had a certain grossness; but Isabel recognized, as it passed before her eyes, the quick vague shadow of a long future. She should never escape; she should last to the end." – Henry James on Isabel Archer, The Portrait of a Lady (1908).<sup>258</sup>

### 5.1 "THE INTERNATIONAL THEME," THE WORLD, AND BUSINESS

Throughout his letters, criticism, and notebooks, Henry James frequently linked his fictional writing practice to his reading of literary works. He claimed that his writing often fulfilled his readings by re-arranging, re-configuring, and re-working existing literary works. Adeline Tinter shows in The Book World of Henry James (1987) that James's fictional novels and stories explicitly and implicitly express affiliations with other works of fiction. For example, Tinter identifies Roderick Hudson to incorporate elements of English Romantic poetry (especially by Wordsworth and Coleridge)<sup>259</sup> as well as Balzac's Comédie Humaine, among many other sources, while she also observes that The Portrait of a Lady (1881/1908) displays connections to any number of other literary works, including Shakespeare's The Tempest,<sup>260</sup> George Eliot's Daniel Deronda (1876),<sup>261</sup> Walter Pater's The Renaissance (1873),<sup>262</sup> Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary (1857),<sup>263</sup> and George Meredith's The Egoist (1879).<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 466.

<sup>259</sup> Adeline Tinter, The Book World of Henry James: Appropriating the Classics (Ann Arbor, MI.: UMI Research Press, 1987), 74-75.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 119, 123.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-148.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 216-221.

While Tinter's study reveals the dense intertextuality of James's fiction, it also importantly suggests a point of departure to pinpoint and to examine how James's fiction differs – and makes a difference – from his literary antecedents, how he instantiates freedom in novelistic practice in selecting from literary tradition, and how his novelistic fiction today might be understood to articulate a modern secular consciousness activated by an active literary imagination. Her preface juxtaposing a range of James's comments about the connection between his writing and reading of literary fiction suggests that, for him, literary writing involves not only intense reading of a variety of traditions, but also a free capacity to remake those traditions for new purposes and new ends. She notes James writing in 1868, for example, "Whenever a story really interests one, he is very fond of paying it the compliment of imagining it otherwise constructed, and of capping it with a different termination" (review of "The Spanish Gypsy: A Poem," by George Eliot).

Later, James says in a 1902 letter: "If a work of imagination, of fiction, interests me at all ... I always want to write it over in my own way, handle the subject from my own sense of it. *That* I always find pleasure in. ... But I can't speak more highly of any book, or at least for my interest in any. I take great liberty with the greatest" (letter to Mrs. Cadwalader Jones); while in 1914 in Notes of a Son and Brother, he writes that "... an admirable commerce of borrowing and lending, taking and giving, not to say stealing and keeping. ... These secrets of the imaginative life were in fact more various than I may dream of trying to tell."<sup>265</sup> In this last quotation from his autobiographies, James identifies as "various" his practice of re-writing his reading of existing fiction, a term that

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<sup>264</sup> Tinter, The Book World of Henry James, 119-125.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, xix-xx.

suggests the radical difference-making capacity he attributed to the activation of imagination in novelistic fictional art.

My point of departure in this chapter examines the “worldly,” secular dimensions of Henry James’s re-writing of fiction, particularly The Portrait of a Lady, in terms of its appropriation of the Hawthornian Puritan tradition against a European novelistic tradition exemplified in the fiction of French novelist Honore Balzac and English novelist George Eliot. In my reading, The Portrait of a Lady deploys familiar Hawthornian tropes and figures (gothic melodrama, the burden of inheritance, the American idealized myth of freedom and independence, the heiress abroad, and young women characters competing with a masculine capitalist Puritan society) in the context of European literary traditions in order to articulate a modern, historically-contingent figure of freedom in Isabel Archer’s attitude of openness, human connection, and “feeling” life. My reading of The Portrait of a Lady in this chapter culminates my articulation of a “Jamesian text” that I discern across his criticism, autobiographies, and fictional literary works. This Jamesian text exemplifies his modern “various” literary practice opposing the insular, liberal U.S. culture he experienced throughout his life as it increasingly organized itself in accordance with Protestant-derived, capitalistic business enterprise.

I argue that James’s figuration of freedom in Isabel’s experience of the world instantiates his own historical “worldly” situation as well as his ethos as an American literary artist, and I do so by drawing upon, and departing from, a long critical lineage in James studies that identifies Isabel’s relationship to her freedom to be *the* core problematic in the novel. The Portrait of a Lady articulates this new figure of (contingent) freedom in the narrator’s depiction of Isabel’s experiences in London, her

refusal of suitors such as Caspar Goodwood, and her final decision to return to Rome, a place that figures for her “the continuity of the human lot.”<sup>266</sup> The connecting figures of freedom in the narrator’s depiction of Isabel at key moments of the novel contrast with conceptions of freedom linked to a notion of independence expressed by other characters, notably Caspar Goodwood and Ralph Touchett, which Isabel ultimately rejects. As I will show, the novel’s figuration of freedom in Isabel’s attitude seeking connection with humanity (and human history) instantiates the theory of the novel James describes in the Preface to The Portrait of a Lady which affirms the novelist’s “boundless freedom” and his or her “‘moral’ reference” in “feeling life,” both the “difference” and “variety” of literary art as well as the “closeness” of historical novelistic “form.”

As I noted in chapter two of this dissertation, I am describing both James’s novel and my own criticism of James’s literary fiction to be “worldly” in the sense that Edward Said conceptualizes worldliness as a kind of discernible “affiliation” that may be made apparent between seemingly disparate domains of social life. Said’s grounding claim for his practice as a critic informs my reading of James here, as he says that texts are “worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted.”<sup>267</sup> Said says worldly criticism attends to the necessary affiliations of literature with particular domains of social and historical life, for example the power of social institutions such as the corporate publishing industry to produce and reproduce knowledge about the world in book form. “Worldly” criticism articulates a given literary or critical work’s “situation” in terms of the definite historical

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<sup>266</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 430.

<sup>267</sup> Edward Said, The World, the Text, and the Critic, 4.

and social exigencies determining its production. Importantly, however, Said observes this situation to be inscribed in the work itself as “text”: “worldliness, circumstantiality, the text’s status as an event having sensuous particularity as well as historical contingency, are considered as being incorporated in the text, an infrangible part of its capacity for conveying and producing meaning.”<sup>268</sup> It is in this sense of “text” as the inscribed social situation of the literary work that I have aimed to discern a “text” from James’s myriad critical and nonfictional writings.

My dissertation “worlds” James’s novel by placing it in the actual historical circumstances in which he wrote it, which to reiterate, consisted of his experience as an imaginative young American who expatriated himself in the mid-1870s from the familiar and familial American society of “‘business’ only” that he experienced growing up around Manhattan, Albany, Boston, and Newport, R.I., and which he “contrasted” on the basis of a European “aesthetic education” that he acquired through reading European fiction and through travels abroad. My dissertation also “worlds” The Portrait of a Lady in the sense of affiliation examining how it re-writes Hawthorne’s novelistic fiction – which importantly, James described to be “Puritan” in effect (see his reading of The Scarlet Letter, discussed below) – through his deployment of European novelistic narrative toward fulfillment of its subject, as noted by James in his preface to be “a certain young woman affronting her destiny.” By reading the novel in these two senses of its “worldly” affiliations, James’s “various” literary practice may be better understood to be an actualization of “difference” opposing an American “business enterprise” economy as it developed throughout his lifetime.

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<sup>268</sup> Edward Said, The World, the Text, and the Critic, 39.

Sociological and historical critics have offered definitive descriptive accounts of the development of a “business enterprise” economy in the U.S., such as Thorstein Veblen at the turn of the twentieth-century and Alfred Chandler much later (the former of whom I drew upon in chapters two and three of this dissertation, while the latter I discuss below). By comparison, Henry James’s fiction in general and The Portrait of a Lady in particular expresses an experience of the actuality of concrete life at the time of its development. His novel achieves this effect through his narration of the character Isabel Archer’s experience and his inscription of her affective, feeling responses to characters whose lives are structured by modern forms of capital that have produced “business enterprise.” In rendering Isabel’s thinking “consciousness” to be affective, the novel reveals the limits and possibilities of a contingent, connective freedom within and against what James observed in his autobiographies to be America’s “‘business’ only” society.

The novel instantiates literary “worldliness” in its portrayal of Isabel Archer’s actions driven by her desire for independence and freedom while traveling abroad through Europe (England, France, and Italy), her experience of that freedom to be susceptible to the contingencies of the social determinants of class, money, and capital, and her insistent desire to maintain connections with humanity – the grounds for freedom with which she ultimately identifies. Notably, the worldly situation depicted in James’s fiction does not foreclose the possibility of a new, modern ethos of freedom, but rather it is suggestive of the possibilities of freedom in literary expression to differ from a social world that James knew to be organized by “the lights of ‘business’ only.”<sup>269</sup>

In claiming James’s fiction to be “worldly,” I have reconceptualized the so-called “international theme” of his fiction in order to emphasize its literary, political, ethical,

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<sup>269</sup> Henry James, A Small Boy and Others, 109.

and aesthetic dimensions. While the “international theme” has been a constant subject in James studies, my departure for it has been R.P. Blackmur’s identification of it with the corollary themes of the artist “in conflict with” society and the artist “in search of” society.<sup>270</sup> Yet, my reading also opposes Blackmur’s rather formal, categorizing description of it as a “theme,” and I instead describe the international aspects of his fiction and criticism to function as actual literary figuration availing historical representation of a modern United States society as it exists in its historical and global dimensions.

James himself describes his fiction to be “international” in the Prefaces to the New York Edition, which he says produces a critical perspective through aesthetic comparison and contrast of actual societies in the world, particularly between European countries and the U.S. Notably, James does not limit characterization of the international aspects of his fiction to a theme, and he instead emphasizes the source of the “international” in his fiction to aesthetic expression. For example, in discussing the short story “Lady Barbarina,” James puts the term international in quotation marks, as “international,” to indicate its provisional character. He then describes the “international” aspects of his fiction to be an aesthetic effect produced by a “painter of life”:

I have gathered into this volume several short fictions of the type I have already found it convenient to refer to as “international” – though I freely recognise, before the array of my productions, of whatever length and whatever brevity, the general applicability of that term. On the interest of *contrasted* things any painter of life and manners inevitably much depends, and contrast, fortunately for him, is

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<sup>270</sup> Blackmur, 95.

easy to seek and to recognise; the only difficulty is in presenting it again with effect, in extracting from it its sense and its lesson. The reader of these volumes will certainly see it offered in no form so frequent or salient as that of the opposition of aspects from country to country. Their author, I am quite aware, would seem struck with no possibility of contrast in the human lot so great as that encountered as we turn back and forth between the distinctively American and the distinctively European outlook.<sup>271</sup>

For James, the “international theme” is a consequence of an experiential aesthetic act: it is the work of a “painter of life” who creates to make concrete “the interest of *contrasted* things.” Yet, the artist’s capacity to produce any significance from these “*contrasted* things,” particularly “from country to country,” requires the faculty of “sense.” As I have noted in chapter three, “sense” is central to the English term “aesthetic,” which is etymologically traceable to the Greek *aisthetikos*, meaning “sense perception.” So, for James, while the international situation in his fiction produces contrast between countries in the world, it does so necessarily as a consequence of an artist’s (or reader’s) perceptive, aesthetic act.

Through his critical and fictional writings, James opposes the perceptive, aesthetic value of “international” figuration in fiction to the enterprise of American business. This is especially significant for *The Portrait of a Lady*, whose subject turns upon the introduction of Isabel Archer, an American, to European society, and her subsequent discovery that her fate has been, in part, determined by relations of social class and forms of business capital (industrial and banking). These forms of capital associated with

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<sup>271</sup> Henry James, Preface to “The Reverberator,” “Madame de Mauves,” “A Passionate Pilgrim,” “The Madonna of the Future,” “Louisa Pallant,” in *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1208.

characters closest to Isabel are notable for their structural links to modern business enterprise, particularly Isabel's persistent suitor, Caspar Goodwood, the Massachusetts mill owner industrialist, her uncle Daniel Touchett, an American banker, and her cousin, Ralph Touchett, also a banker. The novel's portrayal of the English progressive aristocrat Lord Warburton, a beneficiary of older, feudalistic institutions of capital, provides a significant contrast to these figures of "modern" America, which produces a kind of social thought rooted in literary, aesthetic experience.

James notes in the Preface to The Reverberator, a novella treating American newspaper publishers as businessmen out of place in European society, that he relegated American businessmen characters to secondary status, and instead he focused upon their women companions. "Before the American business-man," James says, he experienced "absolutely an irredeemably helpless[ness], with no fibre of my intelligence responding to his mystery."<sup>272</sup> In the Preface to "The Passionate Pilgrim," an early story about a young American man abroad, not unlike James himself, who expresses delight in aesthetic responses to European society and history, James contrasts aesthetic imagination to the activity of the American businessman, whom he says he "effaced" from the story. In this effacement, or "dodge" of the businessman, James indicates his opposition to the organization of American society in 'the light of 'business' only." While effacing the businessman, James says he nevertheless retained the "ground-stuff" of his fiction to be "America":

As American as possible, and even to the pitch of fondly coaxing it, I then desired my ground-stuff to remain; so that such situations as are thus offered must have represented my prime view of the telling effect with which the businessman

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<sup>272</sup> Henry James, Preface to "The Reverberator," 1203.

would be dodged. He *is* dodged, here, doubtless, to a charm – he is made to wait as in the furthest and coldest of an infinite perspective of more or less quaint antechambers; where my ingenuous theory of the matter must have been that, artfully trifled with from room to room and from pretext to pretext, he might be kept indefinitely at bay.<sup>273</sup>

In dodging the “businessman,” James says he was free instead to take as a subject for his fiction matters far more pressing and productive: his experience while visiting London at the age of 26. As he notes in the very next sentence of this preface, his aesthetic “zest” occluded consideration of the American businessman in this story:

Thus if a sufficient amount of golden dust were kicked up in the foreground – and I began to kick it, under all these possible pretexts, as hard as I knew how, he [the American businessman] would probably never be able, to my confusion, to break through at all. I had spent the spring of 1869, and again in that of 1870, several weeks in England, renewing and extending, with infinite zest, an acquaintance with the country that had previously been but an uneffaced little chapter of boyish, or – putting it again far enough back for the dimmest dawn of sensibility – of infantine experience; and had, perceptively and aesthetically speaking, taken the adventure of my twenty-sixth year “hard,” as “A Passionate Pilgrim” quite sufficiently attests.<sup>274</sup>

Whatever imaginative grounds constituted the activity of the American businessman, nothing about it signified to him to be as “interesting” as what a comparative aesthetic imagination could produce in novelistic fictional form.

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<sup>273</sup> Henry James, Preface to “The Reverberator,” 1204.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

In this chapter, I begin with James's 1908 Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, noting its staging of situations in the world (and its deferrals) from which he composed the novel. I then examine notebook entries he wrote at the time of composition of the novel in 1880-1881. These journals reveal not only James's thought about the novel's conclusion, as he defends leaving the future of Isabel Archer unresolved, or as he says, "en l'air." They also provide a way for readers to understand the novel in relation to his actual life and its historical situation. In particular, I identify a worldly context for his notebook entry describing composition of the novel while in Florence, Italy, in the spring of 1880. I read his characterization of composing the novel at this time to be an "old beginning" to be a literal and a figurative statement, indicating both the concrete situation of his writing the novel as well as his conceptualization of novelistic writing to be an intentional practice of modernity. I proceed to evaluate the novel's conclusion as a figuration of beginning and intentionality, and I draw upon ethical and historicist modes of interpretation, as well as Edward Said's well-known conceptualization of novel writing as a practice of modernity understandable as a "beginning."

Turning to the novel itself, I suggest its figuration of Isabel's contingent freedom contrasts not only with the liberal, natural law ethos of "possessive individualism" that other characters affirm elsewhere in the narrative, but that it also figures James's literary ethos of freedom as a writer of imaginative fiction in a world structured by American business enterprise. I draw upon the insights of important critics in James studies who have similarly examined James's conceptualization of freedom in this novel. On the "ethical" side, I consider the work of J. Hillis Miller; while on the "political" side, I examine the criticism of F.O. Matthiessen. For my purposes, Matthiessen's criticism sets

an important example for critics and readers of James that suggests in two major ways the “worldly” dimensions of literature: firstly, Matthiessen’s readings posit connections between James’s fiction and his notebooks, letters, autobiography, and criticism; secondly, Matthiessen conceptualizes literary fiction to exist in an organic relationship to the social and historical world. Matthiessen’s criticism suggests methods and practices allowing for evaluation and interpretation of fiction that both attends to the literary qualities and dimensions of fiction as well as its particular relationships to the actual, historical social world in which it has been produced and in which it is read.

Finally, I am describing Isabel’s acts in the novel’s final two scenes to be a figuration of contingent freedom along the lines of what the twentieth-century German literary critic Erich Auerbach conceptualized as figura, which he posits to be a form of discourse pertaining to concrete historical reality that is traceable from classical sources in Greek and Roman thought, to Old Testament Christian theologians until the era of St. Augustine, then culminating in the Middle Ages with Dante’s Divine Comedy. Figural discourse, which Auerbach describes in the essay “Figura,” may be discerned in literary texts as newly-creative and different usages of existing and historical patterns of writing. By locating a particular text’s unique figures, critics may identify the text with its own historical specificity. Critics accomplish this specification by discerning the difference in usages from antecedent past usages, or by looking forward chronologically, by examining a figure with subsequent usages by writers of a later era. As a mode of interpretation allowing discernment of new and different figures, Auerbach says, “Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two

poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of history.”<sup>275</sup> Figural aspects of literary discourse differ from allegory, symbols, or myths in that the referent of the figura is nothing abstract, such as general transcendent “virtue” or “truth.” Rather, the figura always refers to historical actuality, such as concrete literary or social usages of language. Hayden White describes Auerbach’s concept of figura quite succinctly, observing that “[t]he later figure fulfills the earlier by repeating elements thereof, but with a difference.”<sup>276</sup>

As I will show, Henry James’s conclusion to The Portrait of a Lady creates from its narration of Isabel’s acts a figuration of contingent freedom that establishes connection with the world. I trace how the narrative figures Isabel’s desire for freedom in a limited manner (she returns to Rome and rejects Caspar Goodwood) to differ from liberal conceptualizations of freedom associated with a capitalist ethic of “possessive individualism.” I also show James’s creation of Isabel acting with a sense of freedom in this conclusion to differ from his inherited, Hawthornian American literary culture, as a consequence of his appropriation of European literary figures and his placement of his American heroine in the worldly setting of Rome and Europe. These differences reveal the concluding scenes to stage a new situation for American literary art in the world, and they indicate James’s commitment to the exercise of freedom in literary writing in this worldly context. Ultimately, I suggest the figural elements of the final scenes reveal the text of The Portrait of a Lady to be a fulfillment of Henry James’s actual situation in the world as an American literary novelist desirous of freedom who nevertheless experiences

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<sup>275</sup> Erich Auerbach, “Figura” [1944], in Scenes from the Drama of European Literature, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), 53.

<sup>276</sup> Hayden White, Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1999), 91.

the world to be largely determined by modern forms of American business capital (expressed in the novel as Isabel Archer's ambivalence toward the wealth of American characters associated with modern American business capital).

## 5.2 "AN IMPRESSION DISTINCT": NOVELISTIC PRACTICE IN THE PREFACE TO THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

Written only a few years before he began composing the autobiographic books, A Small Boy and Others (1913), Notes of a Son and Brother (1914), and The Middle Years (1917), Henry James's Preface to The Portrait of a Lady (1908) perhaps reveals as much about his actual circumstances at the time of writing the novel in 1880-1881, as well as at the time of revising it and writing its preface in 1908, as it does about his sense of the significance of the fictional character Isabel Archer. As I noted in chapter two of this dissertation, it is typical of critics writing on James's autobiographies to note parallels between James's Prefaces to the New York Edition and his writing of autobiography.<sup>277</sup> For my purposes, James's Preface to The Portrait of a Lady especially reveals important "worldly" connections between James's fictional novel, The Portrait of a Lady, and his actual life as a novelist as recounted in his autobiography, and as reconstructed by the numerous literary critics and biographers of James, including F. O. Matthiessen, the critic whose example I have drawn upon most in this dissertation, and whose studies of James I examine below. My reading of the Preface to The Portrait of a Lady suggests that it levels the ground usually separating autobiography from novelistic fiction, and it importantly directs readers' attention to the actuality and the historicity of The Portrait of

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<sup>277</sup> William Goetz describes the relation of the Prefaces to the autobiographies in Henry James and the Darkest Abyss of Romance: "The Prefaces and the autobiography thus form a diptych, together claiming to furnish a complete history of the development of James's imagination" (6).

a Lady in two important ways: firstly, toward the historical Henry James's experience of the social world as an expatriate American novelist writing in and about a society increasingly arranged by "business enterprise"; and secondly, toward his fiction's "worldly" intervention in the American literary tradition that he inherited from Hawthorne, which he signals in his several allusions in the preface to his readings of European examples of fiction, particularly those of novelist George Eliot (though also Shakespeare, Ivan Turgenev, and R. L. Stevenson).

In both a social and a literary context, James in this preface offers his conceptualization of a theory of novelistic practice that locates the novel as a genre in a field of actual historical experience whose primary significance rests upon its capacity to produce difference in an expression of "variety" against certain inherited forms of culture. James's preface encourages readers to understand his actual novel, The Portrait of a Lady, to constitute a highly personal example of this theory, as James writes about his own novelistic composition, questioning exactly how this particular novel and its characters came to be, what its actual world sources might have been, and why it would demand critical attention at all. While James's preface indicates ways of responding to all these lines of inquiry about the novel, I emphasize his general claim in this preface for the novelistic literary artist's "boundless freedom," which I also discussed in chapter three of this dissertation in my reading of "The Art of Fiction," as a particular locus for better understanding how the novel functions in terms of its actual "worldly" significance. I am claiming that James's assertion of the novelist's "boundless freedom" signals his conceptualization of novelistic practice as a mode of thought availing "variety" in expressing new and "modern" social arrangements, new attitudes, and new

ways of life in novelistic figurations and imaginings, and that this conceptualization is James's response to the actual historical world he experienced as a literary novelist. Finally, I claim that this preface reflects upon the substance of the narrative it "reads," The Portrait of a Lady, which I show in this chapter to be James's critical and deeply historical engagement with the "world" that he experiences as a literary artist desirous of a kind of "freedom" – that ultimately proves to be highly contingent – in a society organized primarily in terms of business enterprise.

James in this preface provokes criticism linking the novel to actual "worldly" situations not only by opening it with an account of the circumstances of its initial publication in The Atlantic Monthly and MacMillan's Magazine, or by observing the distractions he faced in composing it in rooms overlooking the Riva Schiavoni waterfront promenade in Venice, where he says "the waterside life, the wondrous lagoon spread before me, and the ceaseless human chatter of Venice came in at my windows."<sup>278</sup> Following this opening, James makes a series of comments in which he both generally and particularly theorizes on the relationship of the novel as literary form to actual life, and on the relationship of The Portrait of a Lady to the actual circumstances of his life.

Literary critic Laurence Holland has shown in The Expense of Vision (1964) that although James's subjects in this preface range, he turns again and again to question and to comment on the relationship of the novel to his actual world experience. While often taken to exemplify formalist practice, Holland's essay also suggests possibilities for a contextual reading of the Preface to The Portrait of a Lady.<sup>279</sup> As such, Holland's book

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<sup>278</sup> Henry James, Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, 1070.

<sup>279</sup> David McWhirter, "Henry James: (Post)Modernist?" The Henry James Review 25, no. 2, 177. McWhirter, in agreement with most James critics, says The Expense of Vision "constitutes by any measure one of the great formalist readings of the major phase novels." For a slightly different response to

marks an important development in twentieth-century critical studies of James, as he takes the Preface to provoke critical reflection on the possible interrelations of traditionally distinct genres of writing: criticism, autobiography, and the novel. While Holland's reading strictly focuses upon the Preface and the novel (he does not cite James's autobiographies, his writings on culture, his notebooks or his letters, or any other complementary text), he nevertheless adduces from these texts that James's writing strongly pertains to a social domain, notable when he claims James's writings reveal "a deep concern with the very nature of authority, particularly with the sanctioned power of important institutions in the culture and society he knew."<sup>280</sup> Holland identifies James's concern with the social domain of literary art in the Preface to The Portrait of a Lady to be a result of a sustained critical reflection about his composition of his novel, and Holland's observations provide an instructive critical point of departure for reading James's fiction in context, as he says:

The preface becomes simultaneously technical and intimately personal, as concerned with the relationship of Henry James to his setting as with Isabel's to hers, and troubled by the phenomenon which is the essay's subject: namely the process by which resources, thematic and formal, and the pressures of actual life, from within and without, become the developing design of art. It is to this problem that the preface returns again and again in its tacking movement, every shift of which is significant.<sup>281</sup>

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Holland's criticism, which I would agree with more, see Sheila Teahan, "Mastering Critical Theory," in Palgrave Advances in Henry James Studies (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 22. There, Teahan says Holland's "intertextual study ... is proto-deconstructive in its attention to the often irresolvable complexity of James's figuration."

<sup>280</sup> Laurence Holland, The Expense of Vision (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1964), viii.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

While James in this preface does not directly claim “sources” for The Portrait of a Lady in his actual experience of the world, he does not deny connections between the novel and his experience either. In keeping with his guiding premises about the historicity of novelistic literary art, which he asserts in “The Art of Fiction,” James affirms the novel’s actuality, which as I will show below, resides for him in “felt life.”

Before I detail the important shifts, deferrals, and claims of James’s preface, I will focus briefly here on James’s most important English novelistic influence, George Eliot, whom he notes to provide a model of novelistic fiction offering historical representation of the actual world. As I suggested in chapter one of this dissertation, throughout the Prefaces to the New York Edition, James identifies the actual and historical domain of the novel to be locatable primarily in the expression of affective, “feeling” states of consciousness which connect characters to social situations. In the Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, James observes George Eliot’s fiction to have offered to him the preeminent example of this kind of historical representation in fiction premised upon connecting, affective consciousness. Eliot’s fiction, he says, offers for him the example of historically marginalized, disenfranchised characters (“smaller female fry”) expressing intelligence and affective consciousness in the world. Notably, he says her fiction suggested to him his challenges in composing The Portrait of a Lady as he sought to make a “subject” out of his initial “conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny,” the character who would become Isabel Archer. He says that Eliot’s novelistic fiction, Adam Bede (1859), The Mill on the Floss (1860), Middlemarch (1871-1872), and Daniel Deronda (1876), provided him with the example of a novelist generating “interest” in depicting these “smaller female fry” characters and their relations in the

world (English literary critic F.R. Leavis describes Daniel Deronda especially to have been a model for The Portrait of a Lady).<sup>282</sup> To the degree that Eliot's fiction produced for him "interest" in novelistic depictions of particular intelligences' "mattering" or "making a difference" in the world, James says he located his compositional clue to generating subjects from his own initial material, his "slim shade of an intelligent but presumptuous girl," which provided him with his novel's principal character:

Challenge any such problem with any intelligence, and you immediately see how full it is of substance; the wonder being, all the while, as we look at the world, how absolutely, how inordinately, the Isabel Archers, and even much smaller female fry, insist on mattering. George Eliot has admirably noted it – "In these frail vessels is borne onward through the ages the treasure of human affection." In "Romeo and Juliet" Juliet has to be important, just as, in "Adam Bede" and "The Mill on the Floss" and "Middlemarch" and "Daniel Deronda," Hetty Sorrel and Maggie Tulliver and Rosamond Vincy and Gwendolen Harleth have to be ... They are typical, none the less, of a class difficult, in the individual case, to make a centre of interest.<sup>283</sup>

James places readers of his and Eliot's fiction in the actual world: readers "wonder" about the substance or the subject "as we look at the world." James instructively notes that Eliot's lesson for the novelist results exactly from how she makes an "interest" of these characters in rendering their intelligence and affective consciousness while in the world. James's paraphrased quotation of Daniel Deronda here, "[i]n these frail vessels is borne onward through the ages the treasure of human affection," identifies in Eliot's

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<sup>282</sup> While James in this preface does not mention George Eliot's other novels, Silas Marner (1861), Romola (1863), and Felix Holt, The Radical (1866), he discusses each in magazine reviews he wrote in the 1870s.

<sup>283</sup> Henry James, Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, 1077.

fiction a center of interest in affective consciousness, “the treasure of human affection,” as it engages with the developing and changing human and historical world, “through the ages.”

James’s attempt to meet Eliot’s example in composing The Portrait of a Lady amounted for him to the “deep difficulty braved,” and he adds, “to see the deep difficulty braved is at any time, for the really addicted artist, to feel even as a pang the beautiful incentive, and to feel it verily in such sort as to wish the danger intensified.”<sup>284</sup> James then describes how he “intensified the danger” in narrating from his principal character’s perspective – or consciousness – in an even more concrete manner than Eliot’s fiction, while still retaining an emphasis upon connections with other characters:

“Place the centre of the subject in the young woman’s own consciousness,” I said to myself, “and you get as interesting and as beautiful a difficulty as you could wish. Stick to *that* – for the centre; put the heaviest weight into *that* scale, which will be so largely the scale of her relation to herself. Make her only interested enough, at the same time, in the things that are not herself, and this relation needn’t fear to be too limited.”<sup>285</sup>

In James’s conception of novelistic “subject,” depiction of the consciousness of a particular character as she relates to “things that are not herself” produces an inclusive and an encompassing expression of experience in the world. Particularly opposing this method of composition to others that might produce a sense only of “limited relations,” James says Eliot’s fiction availed for him a workable method capable of producing “interest”: “So far as I reasoned, and it took nothing less than that technical rigour, I now

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<sup>284</sup> Henry James, Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, 1079.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*

easily see, to inspire me with the right confidence for erecting on such a plot of ground the neat and careful and proportioned pile of bricks that arches over it ... On one thing I was determined; that, though I should clearly have to pile brick upon brick for the creation of an interest, I would have no pretext for saying that anything is out of line, scale, or perspective.”<sup>286</sup> By reacting against Eliot’s examples, James arrives at a method focusing or “centering” upon the consciousness of a “frail vessel” in its self-reflective and connective capacities.

James’s reading of George Eliot informs his wide-ranging theoretical comments on fiction in general, which culminate with his “house of fiction” metaphor, as well as his comments on composition of The Portrait of a Lady particularly. Initiating this commentary, James identifies the subject matter of novelistic fiction to depend upon expressions of affective, feeling domains of experience. In making this claim, he offers a characteristic dismissal of moralistic criteria toward evaluation of novelistic fiction, similar to his criticism of the “Protestant community” in “The Art of Fiction.” Instead of attempting to evaluate whether or not a novel is “moral” or “immoral,” James proposes that its “moral sense” depends primarily upon how it expresses actual life in the affective domain of feeling. In a passage of this preface that was especially important to R.P. Blackmur (which I quoted at length in chapter one), James says, “There is, I think no more nutritive or suggestive truth in this connexion than that of the perfect dependence of the ‘moral’ sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it. The question comes back thus, obviously, to the kind and the degree of the artist’s prime sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs.”<sup>287</sup> James here shifts the

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<sup>286</sup> Henry James, Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, 1080.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 1074.

grounds for discussion of the novel's "moral" value toward its capacity to render affective domains of experience.

Novelistic expressions of affective, feeling consciousness avails for James the historical "human scene." Notably, it is James's term "felt life" that encapsulates his conceptualization of connected, affective consciousness, and he links it to the novelist's expressions of his or her "sensibility." Importantly, however, this particular domain of historicity accessible through affective consciousness is not uniform, and it does not necessarily affirm History. Since it is the novelist's particular own "sensibility" that determines "the amount of felt life concerned in producing it," the fictions resulting from the innumerable activations of this sensibility in novel form will be distinct – "different," "various," and "unique" – rather than uniform, homogeneous, or reducible to one historical perspective. In calling forth the innumerable activations of sensibility in novel form, James writes:

Here we get exactly the high price of the novel as a literary form – its power not only, while preserving that form with closeness, to range through all the differences of the individual relation to its general subject-matter, all the varieties of outlook on life, of disposition to reflect and project, created by conditions that are never the same from man to man (or, so far as that goes, from man to woman), but positively to appear more true to its character in proportion as it strains, or tends to burst, with a latent extravagance, its mould.<sup>288</sup>

James describes novelistic fiction to express historicity both in the novelist's adherence to the novel's historical form – the novelist "preserv[es] that form with closeness" – and in his or her activation of "sensibility" responding to "conditions," which he says, "are

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<sup>288</sup> Henry James, Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, 1074-1075.

never the same from man to man (... or man to woman).” Especially significant, James describes the novel’s historicity to contain a radical element that is not reducible to History, but rather that “tends to burst” the novel’s “mold.” It is the novel’s capacity to express the “various” and “different” elements of a distinct and hitherto unarticulated domain of historicity, in accordance with its possibilities for “rang[ing] through all the differences of the individual relation to its general subject-matter, all the varieties of outlook on life,” that both affirms and cancels itself as a historical form. As James’s subsequent “house of fiction” metaphor suggests, this conception of variety is entirely predicated upon the novelist’s activation of freedom – his or her “boundless freedom” – that avails this various and differential domain of historicity. In this manner of activating but also cancelling the historical form of the novel in a novelist’s writing as “boundless freedom,” James’s conception of novelistic fiction comes close to anticipating what Derrida describes to be the capacity of “writing” to access the realm of “pure historicity,” which he says is activated through freedom (as I noted in chapter three of this dissertation).<sup>289</sup> James’s comments here also suggest the purely etymological sense of the “novel” as something new and modern (which I also discussed in chapter three).

The section of the Preface that follows from James’s claims here may be perhaps his most famous critical statements about novelistic fiction. Important for my purposes in this “house of fiction” paragraph is the implied linkage between what he describes to be the novel’s capacity to express difference in the articulation of an “impression distinct” and the novelist’s exercise of his or her “boundless freedom.” Significant as well, James in this paragraph does not conceptualize this “boundless freedom” or this differential variety to exist outside of the historical domain of the “human scene,” but rather, he

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<sup>289</sup> Derrida, “Force and Signification,” 12-13.

describes the exercise of “boundless freedom” and its subsequent effects in literary art to be a response to the observable human world.

In the house of fiction metaphor, the fictional novelist’s sensibility operates as a visual capacity, as the artist produces fiction from observation behind any one of “a number of possible windows ... of dissimilar shape and size, [that] hang so, all together, over the human scene.”<sup>290</sup> Characterizing the windows as “the form” by which literary artists apprehend the world, he notes that these windows are “mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life.” Yet, these “windows” also allow access for the literary artist to “observe” the “human scene” beyond, and it is artistic sensibility (rendered here as a visual capacity) that makes a difference in regards to the form in producing an “impression distinct.” The artist’s sensibility, James suggests in this visual metaphor, “forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other.” Activation of this “unique” observational sensibility by novelists utilizing the “not one, but a million” windows reveals the experiential world to be highly heterogeneous, and it is this sensibility acting on the experiential world that produces in literary art an “impression distinct from every other.” James says of novelists in general, “He and his neighbors are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. And so on, and so on ... .”<sup>291</sup> Noting the “range” of possibilities in observation to be “innumerable,” James nevertheless claims the subject of observation to be necessitated by both the

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<sup>290</sup> Henry James, Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, 1075.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

“spreading field, the human scene” and the “pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, [which] is the literary form.”

The “difference” in literary art comes down again to the artist’s sensibility, “the posted presence of the watcher,” as neither the form nor the subject will avail “variety” or impressions “distinct.” Notably, the artist activates his or her sensibility (or consciousness) in a domain of freedom in relation to the historical “human scene.” “Tell me what the artist is,” James says, “and I will tell you of what he has *been* conscious. Thereby I shall express to you at once his boundless freedom and his ‘moral’ reference.”<sup>292</sup> In this final phrase of the paragraph – “‘moral’ reference” – James suggests his earlier claim in the Preface that it is the “amount of felt life” expressed in any particular novel that constitutes its “moral sense.”

James proceeds next in the Preface to examine and to pose questions about the actual circumstances that informed his composition of The Portrait a Lady. Transitioning from the general to the particular, James nevertheless offers an especially oblique claim about the relationship of the novel to its actual world circumstances, saying that, “[a]ll this is a long way round, however, for my word about my dim first move toward ‘The Portrait,’ which was exactly my grasp of a single character – an acquisition I had made, moreover, after a fashion not here to be retraced.”<sup>293</sup> James does not deny the novel’s empirical status in historical actuality, though he does characteristically refuse as a means of interpretation claims premised upon literal fact. Rather, James suggests, interpretation attempting to connect this novelistic fiction to its actual world circumstances requires another approach to account for its actuality.

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<sup>292</sup> Henry James, Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, 1075.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

Following from this refusal “to retrace” the novel’s origins, James poses a highly significant rhetorical question directed precisely at accounting for the novel in its historical actuality. He notes he began composition with a character appearing to him in full “vividness,” saying that, “all urgently, all tormentingly, I saw it in motion and, so to speak, in transit. This amounts to saying that I saw it as bent upon its fate – some fate or other; *which*, among the possibilities, being precisely the question.”<sup>294</sup> While the character offered to him a concrete image, James questions exactly how this image had made an impression on him if not as a piece of actuality:

Thus I had my vivid individual – vivid, so strangely, in spite of being still at large, not confined by the conditions, not engaged in the tangle, to which we look for much of the impress that constitutes an identity. If the apparition was still all to be placed how came it to be vivid? – since we puzzle such quantities out, mostly, just by the business of placing them. One could answer such a question beautifully, doubtless, if one could do so subtle, if not so monstrous, a thing as to write the history of the growth of one’s imagination. One would describe then what, at a given time, had extraordinarily happened to it and one would so, for instance, be in a position to tell, with an approach to clearness, how, under favour of occasion, it had been able to take over (take over straight from life) such and such a constituted, animated figure or form.<sup>295</sup>

As I noted in my discussion of this preface in chapter one, James defers interpreting his novel’s historicity, particularly putting off the task of writing a “history of the growth of one’s imagination.” Instead, James offers a number of metaphors characterizing his work

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<sup>294</sup> Henry James, Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, 1075-1076.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 1076.

as novelist in composing the novel to have produced the act of “placing” the character in the circumstances.

At this crucial moment of the Preface, James switches the emphasis away from writing “the history of the growth of one’s imagination” to an account of his compositional act “placing” the character in fully-realized novelistic fiction. In the first metaphor describing this act of composition, James characterizes his work as a novelist to be akin to that of a pawn shop broker, who receives “rare objects” and must decide how to “place” the objects within a commercial marketplace. Notably, James’s commercial pawn broker metaphor develops from commentary about the possibility of historical interpretation and the “growth of one’s imagination”:

The figure has to that extent, as you see, *been* placed – placed in the imagination that detains it, preserves, protects, enjoys it, conscious of its presence in the dusky, crowded heterogeneous back-shop of the mind very much as a wary dealer in precious odds and ends, competent to make an “advance” on rare objects confided to him, is conscious of the rare little “piece” left in deposit by the reduced, mysterious lady of title or the speculative amateur, and which is already there to disclose its merit afresh as soon as a key shall have clicked in a cupboard-door.<sup>296</sup>

James contrasts his implied willingness to accede to the requirements of a commercial marketplace to those other literary artists, or dealers in fine goods, who would refuse: “For there *are* dealers in these forms and figures and treasures capable of that

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<sup>296</sup> Henry James, Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, 1076.

refinement.”<sup>297</sup> In contrast to these “refined” dealers (perhaps he means a poet who doesn’t publish, such as Emily Dickinson), James would “place” his character.

Significantly, James drops this pawn broker metaphor, again shifting his terms, and he offers a second metaphor concerning “placement” of his vivid character in terms of compositionally “organizing an ado about Isabel Archer.” While James says that “organizing an ado” in fulfilling narrative form will place the character in actual circumstances, he implies that “placing” her in this manner will additionally meet the necessity of the literary marketplace. Just after noting above that “there *are* dealers in these forms and figures and treasures of refinement [who would not “place” these objects in any commercial market],” James switches the metaphor, invoking the house of fiction metaphor, saying that he had to construct a “spacious house ... round my young woman.” The compositional process of “organizing an ado” would thus produce the novel’s “subject”: “The novel is of its very nature an “ado,” an ado about something, and the larger the form it takes the greater of course the ado. Therefore, consciously, that was what one was in for – for positively organising an ado about Isabel Archer.”<sup>298</sup> In leading to the assertion that his task in composing the novel involved “organizing an ado,” James suggests metaphorically that the “architecture” he would create around Isabel – other characters, action, setting, and plot – would fulfill the desired “placement” of Isabel in circumstances that would account for her initial “vividness.” James’s deferral of any account of origins for his initial “grasp of a single character” toward this extended metaphorical account of his production of narrative as the actual grounds for “placement” of his character instructs readers of the Preface that what happens in the fictional novel –

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<sup>297</sup> Henry James, Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, 1076.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

what, in fact, befalls Isabel Archer – instantiates the actual world sources of Isabel’s “vividness.”

The first “broker” metaphor characterizes the “worldly” actual circumstances of the novelist who produces fiction in a commercial marketplace, while the second suggests the novelist’s compositional process of producing narrative. The implied correlation between the two metaphors is highly significant, suggesting a link between the narrative of The Portrait of a Lady that “places” Isabel Archer in “the tangle to which we look for much of the impress that constitutes identity,” and the novelist’s “worldly” circumstances in “realizing” the contents of “imaginative” novelistic fiction for – in part – the purposes of commercial vendibility.

Holland, whom I noted above, observes James’s commercial, pawn broker metaphor in this preface to be significant in terms of his artistic “self-recognition,” and he suggests that James’s deployment of the language of determining commerce figures a major element of the novel’s actuality, or “worldliness,” as he notes: “The imagery of commerce is used chiefly to provide a setting for the artist himself, placing him in relation to his society and in relation to the ‘ado’ about Isabel.”<sup>299</sup> With his deferrals and substitutions of claims, James in this preface suggests that it is the novelistic narrative, The Portrait of a Lady itself, which the Preface introduces, that tells of the historical actuality of the novel, which will account for the “history of the growth of [his] imagination,” which by necessity in the climate of “business enterprise” had contended with determinative capitalist commerce.

One important connection observable between this preface and James’s autobiographical writing turns upon his phrase, “the history of the growth of one’s

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<sup>299</sup> Holland, 7.

imagination.” In the second volume of his autobiography, Notes of a Son and Brother, James suggests what he considers to be an especially appealing scenario for the fictional novelist: “the personal history, as it were, or an imagination, a lively one of course, in a given and favourable case, had always struck me as a task that a teller of tales might rejoice in.”<sup>300</sup> A few lines later, James reflexively observes of his own autobiographical writing that he could find no better source for such a scenario than telling the story of his actual life:

I had in a word to draw him forth from within rather than meet him in the world before me, the more convenient sphere of the objective, and to make him objective, in short, had to turn nothing less than myself inside out. What was *I* thus, within and essentially, what had I ever been and could I ever be but a man of imagination at the active pitch?<sup>301</sup>

His suggestion that fully-developed fictional treatment of his actual life “as a man of imagination” would produce historical “objectivity” of himself turned “inside out” intriguingly suggests his historical conceptualization of novelistic fiction writing. James, in fact, affirms a close link between the subjective life of the novelist and the objective historicity of the novel, as he asserts that for the novelist, pursuit of “objectivity, the prize to be won, shouldn’t be frightened away by the odd terms of the affair.”<sup>302</sup>

In this preface, James’s heightened attention to the determining necessity of commerce reflects upon his depiction of Isabel’s experiences upon leaving Albany, New York, notably as she experiences capital and money to be determining material influences in her life. Isabel begins her adventures only after declaring to her aunt Lydia Touchett,

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<sup>300</sup> Henry James, Notes of a Son and Brother, 454.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 455.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*

who is visiting her in her father's home, that "I'm not stupid; but I don't know anything about money."<sup>303</sup> Lydia's subsequent comment, precisely at the moment she invites Isabel to leave Albany and to live with her in Florence, so that she may expand the range of her "experience," "places" Isabel's views and character in a worldly context at this start. After Isabel tells Lydia that Albany's old homes, such as the one they are speaking in, enthrall her for being "so full of experience – of people's feelings and sorrows," Lydia responds dismissively that they pale in comparison to Florence's old homes, many of which are "palaces." As Lydia observes, Florence is "a very different affair from this. This is very bourgeois."<sup>304</sup> The conversation not only initiates one of the novel's primary thematic contrasts – bourgeois capitalist American society against traditionally monarchical and feudalistic European societies – it indicates that the "ado" James has organized for Isabel will require a testing of "bourgeois" assumptions and attitudes – or ideology – about herself and her relationship to the world.

In reading James's novel The Portrait of a Lady to be an actualization in fictional form of his experiences of the world, I am claiming the novel to avail a particular kind of historicity. It is the history of experience in a world in which freedom appears to be highly contingent as a result of an organization of society in accordance with business enterprise. While I have drawn upon Holland's reading of the Preface to The Portrait of a Lady to examine the connections between James's autobiography and the novel, both his reading and my own reading have been greatly informed by the first major critic of James who read the fiction with an eye to this kind of historicity, F.O. Matthiessen. Holland

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<sup>303</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 35.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-36.

dedicates his study The Expense of Vision to Matthiessen, and it is to his criticism and studies of James to which I will return shortly.

### 5.3 AN “OLD BEGINNING”

In a notebook sketch of The Portrait of a Lady written during the year of his composition of the novel (1880-1881), Henry James describes the major plot and character developments of the narrative following Isabel Archer’s marriage to Gilbert Osmond. He emphasizes its “incident”-driven denouement to contrast to the earlier “too exclusively psychological” sections of the novel.<sup>305</sup> For James, his depiction of the outcome of Isabel’s marriage would be especially “dramatic” in revealing that “the idea of the whole thing is that the poor girl, who has dreamed of freedom and nobleness, who has done, as she believes a generous, natural, clear-sighted thing, finds herself in reality ground in the very mill of the conventional.”<sup>306</sup> Particularly, he says, Isabel “wakes from her sweet delusion” to find that her husband, the expatriate American dilettante Gilbert Osmond, “has ended by conceiving a hatred for her larger qualities.” James notes that this fact of Osmond’s hatred and Isabel’s perception of it would not be “sufficient” by itself for the novel’s conclusion. Rather, he says, “the situation must be marked by important events.”<sup>307</sup>

In reflecting on the novel’s conclusion, James notes the final scenes of the novel leave Isabel’s future “en l’air.” The narrator observes her taking decisive action fleeing

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<sup>305</sup> Henry James, The Notebooks of Henry James [1947], eds. F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 15.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.* James likely wrote the sketch sometime in 1880 (or in January 1881 at the latest), according to the first editors of the notebooks, F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth Murdock, during his writing of the novel itself, which he began in spring 1880 in Florence, Italy. The book appeared in monthly installments in England in “MacMillan’s Magazine” from October 1880 – November 1881, and in the U.S. in the “Atlantic Monthly” between November 1880 – December 1881.

from Caspar Goodwood in response to his kiss on the lawn of Gardencourt, which the next scene punctuates with Henrietta Stackpole telling Goodwood that she has returned to Rome. The narrator says nothing else about her decision, nor does he indicate what she will do from this point forward. While James says the conclusion provides for him the “unity” of novelistic art, he also speculates that readers and critics may claim the novel lacks an end: “[t]he obvious criticism of course will be that it is not finished – that I have not seen the heroine to the end of her situation – that I have left her en l’air.”<sup>308</sup> While James agrees the novel leaves Isabel’s future to be unknown, he implicitly disagrees with readers who would make the point to criticize the novel.

That the novel is “unfinished,” James says, “is both true and false. The whole of anything is never told; you can only take what groups together. What I have done has that unity – it groups together. It is complete in itself – and the rest may be taken up or not, later.”<sup>309</sup> Matthiessen and Murdock note that James’s defense of this conclusion anticipates his “conception of structure” as formulated in the Preface to Roderick Hudson: “Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so.”<sup>310</sup> Taken as part of a whole, James clearly suggests the final scenes are necessarily and inextricably relatable to the rest of the novel: that is, these final scenes must be read not only in relation to the “important events” of the latter third of the novel, but also to the so-much-more-than “exclusively psychological” opening two-thirds of the novel.

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<sup>308</sup> Henry James, The Notebooks of Henry James, 18.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

In an entry dated November 25, 1881, precisely as The Portrait of a Lady was completing its run in MacMillan's Magazine in England and The Atlantic Monthly in the United States, James writes again about his composition of the novel. He opens the entry commenting that he now feels it to be more necessary than ever to keep a record of his thoughts about fiction. Noting that he had not previously kept a consistent record of his life or his thoughts about fiction, James provides a chronological accounting of the previous six years, starting with the plan he devised in the summer of 1875 while in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to move to Europe. He describes taking up residence in Paris for one year before moving to London in November 1876, and he covers his writing and his travels between 1877 and 1879. Almost in passing, he notes starting work on The Portrait of a Lady while in Italy (in spring 1880), saying:

Florence was divine, as usual, and I was a great deal with the Boots. At that exquisite Bellosguardo at the Hotel de l'Arno, in a room in that deep recess, in the front, I began the Portrait of a Lady – that is, I took up, and worked over, an old beginning, made long before. I returned to London to meet William, who came out in the early part of June, and spent a month with me in Bolton St., before going to the continent. That summer and autumn I worked, tant bien que mal, at my novel which began to appear in “Macmillan” in October (1880).<sup>311</sup>

James continues in the entry to describe his travels at the time of composing the novel. While residing in London, he visits Plymouth and Cornwall to see several friends and acquaintances, and then in February 1881, he goes to Venice, passing through France, “to Avignon, Marseilles, Nice, Mentone, and San Remo.”<sup>312</sup> He spends “ten days at Milan,”

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<sup>311</sup> Henry James, The Notebooks of Henry James, 29.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

and he then arrives in Venice where he passes “between three and four months” until the end of June. When he describes his work composing the novel, he says, “[h]ere I wrote, diligently every day and finished, or virtually finished, my novel,” and he adds: “It was a charming life; it seemed to me, at times, too improbable, too festive.”<sup>313</sup>

James’s characterization of starting the novel while staying in Florence, Italy, to be his resumption of an “old beginning, made long before” leaves much unsaid, and it is a comment suggestive of both literal and figural connotations. Literally, James suggests taking up the work again after a pause – implying a gap in time he does not specify. However, figuratively the phrasing an “old beginning, made long before” suggests a certain degree of intentionality and purpose in regards to his work of composition on this novel, an intentionality he does not elaborate upon very much. Yet, his notebooks set a scene for this resumption of work, as he says: “I tried to work hard, and I paid very few visits.”

Edward Said in his highly influential study, Beginnings: Intention and Method (1975), describes any number of modern and contemporary critical thinkers in philosophical, essayistic, and literary domains of writing to share a common concern with the condition of “beginnings” for their work. Said’s thinking about “beginnings” as a unique problem for the modern writer provides a way to link James’s comments in his notebooks about his actual composition of the novel with the fictional The Portrait of a Lady. Notably, Said describes James’s characterization of Isabel Archer in The Portrait of a Lady to instantiate a figure of movement corresponding to the historical situation of the novel genre as a modern form of writing that intends difference from inherited

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<sup>313</sup> Henry James, The Notebooks of Henry James, 31.

traditions.<sup>314</sup> Modern thinkers and writers – Said names “Joyce, Yeats, Conrad, Freud, Mann, and Nietzsche”<sup>315</sup> – beset by centuries of tradition in thought, both accept and resist these traditions in order to “begin,” which they accomplish by establishing an “adjacent” relationship, rather than a “dynastic relationship,” to the inherited traditions.<sup>316</sup> “Adjacent” works posit for themselves a differing relationship to traditions, allowing the possibility to select and to adapt from traditions for new and unique purposes without necessarily perpetuating the tradition. Said observes that an adjacent text “stands to the side of, next to, or between the bulk of all other works – not in a line with them, nor in a line of descent from them.”<sup>317</sup> Works establishing adjacent relationships express a writer’s “intentionality” – a purposive intervention within, or even a break from, inherited traditions. Notably, it is as non-mimetic “writing” that a writer creates an intention distinguishable from tradition.

Said resists Derrida’s deconstructive concept of pure writing as a marker and generator of différance, claiming it to be generally an ahistorical concept.<sup>318</sup> Beginnings, Said argues, are not to be discernible as “pure writing” in a blank field of atemporality, but rather they occur in actual “worldly” situations. As he notes, the realist novel as it develops in the nineteenth century exemplifies the situation of modern writers inventing new forms and new subject matter from inherited literary traditions. The twentieth-century Hungarian literary critic Georg Lukács famously characterizes the unique temporality of the novel as “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God.”<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Edward Said, Beginnings: Intention and Method (New York: Columbia UP, 1975), 95.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

<sup>319</sup> Georg Lukács, The Theory of the Novel: A Historic-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature, in Theory of The Novel, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2000), 203.

Lukács' characterization of the novel as a literary form that is distinguishable from – but traceable to – the epic generally informs Said's claims. The novel as a form resembles the epic in its narrative depiction of characters set upon accomplishing some act in the world, yet the novel's characters act without any certainty or assurances of purpose, such that the gods, or God, may guarantee. The characters' "transcendental homelessness" instantiates the novelist's experience in the actual world attempting to create anew a literary work. Said writes here of the critic, but his comments stand for the novelist as well: "He begins each work as if it were a new occasion. His beginning, as much as any modern writer's beginning, takes up a subject in order to begin it, keep it going, create it."<sup>320</sup> Comparable to Derrida, Said describes this "intentional" work to occur as "writing," an act of writing that does not posit for its authority any traditional precedent (especially transcendent god figures) nor the certainty of the world as it exists: "Intention, largely but never exclusively designated by a beginning, is a way of confining a work to one element: writing. With the discrediting of mimetic representation a world enters a realm of gentile history, to use Vico's phrase for secular history, where extraordinary possibilities of variety and diversity are open to it but where it will not be referred back docilely to an idea that stands above it and explains it."<sup>321</sup> Yet opposing Derrida, Said refers the secular work of writing to actual historical conditions.

The novel, as a particular modern literary form, fulfills the writer's work of making beginnings, as Said notes, "The novel is the major attempt in Western literary culture to give beginnings an authorizing, institutional, and specialized role in art,

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<sup>320</sup> Edward Said, Beginnings, 11.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

experience, and knowledge.”<sup>322</sup> The writer’s experience of a world without certainty, yet containing traditions and given forms, requires of him or her to invent, to adapt, and to establish by means of “adjacency” a new literary creation. The actual historical situation of the writer becomes projected into the novel as its principal subject matter: “Characters and societies so represented grow and move in the novel because they mirror a process of engenderment or beginning and growth possible and permissible for the mind to imagine. Novels, therefore, are aesthetic objects that fill gaps in an incomplete world: they satisfy a human urge to add to reality by portraying (fictional) characters in which one can believe.”<sup>323</sup>

In casting the nineteenth-century realist novel to be an exemplification of writerly attempts to posit new “beginnings” in a world of given forms and traditions, Said’s thinking about the novel confirms James’s premises about novel writing practice, and it particularly bears upon James’s characterization of composing The Portrait of a Lady to be an “old beginning.” James’s thinking in the Prefaces to the New York Edition remarkably anticipates Said’s description of the modern writer in search of “beginnings” that might depart radically from tradition. For James, this is a problem of the writer’s selecting from “life” itself, as he says in the Preface to The Spoils of Poynton:

If life, presenting us the germ, and left merely to herself in such a business, gives the case away, almost always, before we can stop her, what are the signs for our guidance, what the primary laws for a saving selection, how do we know when

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<sup>322</sup> Edward Said, Beginnings, 17-18.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

and where to intervene, where do we place the beginnings of the right or the wrong deviation?<sup>324</sup>

As James's notebook record of setting aside and resuming the novel that would become The Portrait of a Lady indicates, it is not improbable that he experienced some such process of gauging "when and where to intervene" in his apprehension of life – which provides him with the "germ" of literary art – in realizing and developing the novel's subject. Yet, the best record of what he called upon as "saving selection" for his treatment of life in The Portrait of a Lady, or any other of his novels, is the novel itself, particularly its differing deployments of inherited literary conventions.

Charles Feidelson shows in his essay, "The Moment of The Portrait of a Lady" (1968), that James accomplishes in The Portrait of a Lady a new form of novelistic composition differing from his past fictional works, which he had dismissed to some degree as "experiments of form." Noting that Henry had written to his brother, William, that "'big situations' were in the offing" at the time of composing the novel, Feidelson describes James altering his conception of novelistic form to accommodate this bigger subject.<sup>325</sup> While Feidelson particularly identifies James's later comments in the Preface that he intended to make his protagonist's consciousness a "center" of the novel, he describes James's notebook entry at the time of writing the novel to be confirmation of his re-thinking the relationship of form to subject. Feidelson, in fact, describes The Portrait of a Lady to mark a new direction in James's literary career, and he says, "One would like to know more about that *Ur-Portrait*, why it had been put aside, and why it

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<sup>324</sup> James, Preface to The Spoils of Poynton, in Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1139.

<sup>325</sup> Charles Feidelson, "The Moment of The Portrait of a Lady," [1968] in The Portrait of a Lady, ed. Robert Bamberg (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), 712.

caught his attention again just at this moment. But it is clear that James felt himself to be at a turning point in his career, in some sense at a *new* beginning.”<sup>326</sup>

Notably, Feidelson suggests James’s treatment of freedom to be central to this change in his compositional method, and he links it to the novel’s social subject. All the novel’s characters experience a sense of missing freedom, Feidelson says, “[t]he ground that they either avowedly miss or too stridently claim can be described in various ways – as knowledge, or love, or freedom. They want to believe they are in touch with truth, with each other, and with human possibility. But it is freedom that most preoccupies them.”<sup>327</sup> Yet, it is Isabel’s sense of her freedom that the shift in composition allows the novel to focus upon, as it makes her consciousness the center of the narrative, though again, her consciousness does not entirely comprehend the novel’s actual subject.

Feidelson identifies the example of Balzac to be James’s model for his conception of subject, which would necessarily have to be a “big subject,” or a social subject. Five years before composing The Portrait of a Lady, James claims Balzac to be the definitive nineteenth-century social novelist, saying in his essay “Honoré de Balzac,” “Balzac was to be preeminently a social novelist; his strength was to lie in representing the innumerable actual facts of the French civilization of his day – things only to be learned by patient experience.”<sup>328</sup> Feidelson, though, writes that James turns the Balzacian form inside out, or upside down, by depicting Isabel’s experience of freedom from the point of view of her consciousness. James only settled upon this technique after rejecting schematic formulations of the social novel, which would, as James puts it, merely “super-add” a subject “to the central figure by surrounding her with other characters and

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<sup>326</sup> Feidelson, 711.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 716.

<sup>328</sup> Henry James, “Honoré de Balzac,” 70

emphasizing their view of her.”<sup>329</sup> While the novel may be read as a narrative depicting Isabel with “superadded” characters, Feidelson acknowledges James proceeded differently: “Instead of simply devising a world to define her, [James] would discover the world entailed by her way of seeing, her view of herself and others.”<sup>330</sup> Isabel’s experience of freedom as a “discovery of the world,” with its possibilities and limitations, exists at the core of the novel’s social dimensions.

Feidelson offers instructive focal points suggesting that James’s thematization of Isabel’s experience of freedom – accomplished through concrete portrayal of her thinking and feeling – to be inseparable from the social subject of the novel. This approach, Feidelson says, “turn[s] the social novel upside down.” The novel’s social implications do not foreclose the possibility of freedom in actuality, but rather as Feidelson suggests, it indicates a distinctly contingent basis for it. Isabel must, Feidelson says, “turn away from ‘the infinite vista of a multiplied life – the ‘romantic’ imagination which has exposed her to the doom of the romantic – and embrace perilous freedom of an embattled consciousness.”<sup>331</sup>

Despite Feidelson’s astute discernment of Isabel’s experience of “perilous freedom” to be the source of the novel’s social implications, he also limits his observations and does not extend them into the literary, social, historical contexts in which James wrote. Feidelson does not, for example, link Isabel’s experience of contingent freedom to her experience of the determinations of social class or capital, as I have been suggesting in reading the “Jamesian text” to be criticism of the development of late nineteenth-century business enterprise. Feidelson’s reading adheres rather closely to

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<sup>329</sup> Henry James, Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, 1071.

<sup>330</sup> Feidelson, 713.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 719.

a long traditional emphasis identifying freedom itself to be the core problematic of the novel. For example, in a relatively formalist reading, Joseph Warren Beach in The Method of Henry James (1918) observes that James creates pathos from his depiction of Isabel's experience of "the very limitations upon her freedom."<sup>332</sup>

A less traditional emphasis however notes that James's problematization of Isabel's freedom avails a kind of historicity that especially reflects upon the material determinants of money in society. R.P. Blackmur, for example, connects James's treatment of Isabel's freedom to the presence of money, and he describes the relationship of money and freedom to be the central, nearly-dialectical core of the novel's "moral" dimension. He notes of Isabel that "[w]e have seen her act with her money as an instrument of destruction, and there is now the forward edge of a vision of money as an instrument of freedom. This is the latent question about money – and about morals, too – in James's novels: will they be instruments of freedom or of destruction?"<sup>333</sup>

English critics in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Dorothy Van Ghent and F.R. Leavis, similarly observe James's near-dialectical treatment of freedom and money at work in The Portrait of a Lady. Their criticism turns attention to James's adaptation of English literary narratives and themes to account for his strongly materialist grounding of freedom. Both note James's inversion of the English novel's convention restricting the freedom of characters as a result of their lack of money. While Van Ghent looks forward to Thomas Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles (1891), Leavis observes James reversing the situation of George Eliot's Daniel Deronda (1876), in which the heroine Gwendolen Harleth marries her aristocratic suitor, Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt, only as a result of

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<sup>332</sup> Joseph Warren Beach, The Method of Henry James, [1918] in Perspectives on James's The Portrait of a Lady, ed. William T. Stafford (New York: NYU Press, 1967), 49.

<sup>333</sup> Blackmur, 193.

economic necessity. Yet, according to Van Ghent, James's narrative inversion of this English novel convention granting Isabel a fortune results in an especially poignant rendering of necessity and freedom around the possession of money:

The vague rich gleams of money are on every cornice and sift through every vista of the world of The Portrait, like the muted gold backgrounds of old Persian illuminations; and the human correlative of the money is a type of character fully privileged with easy mobility upon the face of the earth and with magnificent opportunities for the cultivation of aesthetic and intellectual refinements. It is by visualizing with the greatest clarity the lustrously moneyed tones of the James universe that we make ourselves able to see the more clearly what grave, somber shapes of illusions and guilt he organizes in this novel. The tension between circumstances and volition, "necessity" and "freedom," is demonstrated at the uppermost levels of material opportunity where, presumably, there is most freedom and where therefore freedom becomes most threatening – and where necessity wears its most insidious disguise, the disguise of freedom.<sup>334</sup>

Van Ghent's observations linking money and freedom direct attention of The Portrait of a Lady as a unique social novel. She instructively posits a historical domain for it, "post-Civil War America euphoric with material achievement," which she says the "international theme" functions to make visible.<sup>335</sup>

Subsequent to Van Ghent's characterization of the novel as a social novel that critically treats the issue of freedom in U.S. society, Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos in her essay "Isabel's Freedom: Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady," focuses

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<sup>334</sup> Dorothy Van Ghent, "On The Portrait of a Lady," from The English Novel: Form and Function [1953], in The Portrait of a Lady, ed. Robert Bamberg (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), 678.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, 679.

upon James's treatment of freedom in terms of changing attitudes about marriage and women's identities in the late nineteenth century. Santos aptly describes James's problematization of Isabel's freedom in the novel to be, "an implicit comment on the shifting values of the late nineteenth century, such as individualism and individual freedom, integrity and dignity of mind and consciousness, inner authenticity and coherence in absolute terms (i.e. regardless of external, social circumstances)."<sup>336</sup>

From a phenomenological perspective, Paul B. Armstrong's essay, "Freedom and Necessity: The Servile Will and The Portrait of a Lady," describes the novel to suggest a criticism of American notions of self-reliance, particularly as expressed in James's immediate U.S. literary predecessor, Ralph Waldo Emerson. He cites Oscar Cargill's and Richard Poirier's claims that the novel reveals Isabel's tragic flaw to be her "extreme 'American idealism' – that is, the almost 'pure Emersonianism' behind her insistence at the beginning that her possibilities know no limits."<sup>337</sup> Armstrong concurs with these readings, adding that, "The Portrait shows Henry James's understanding that freedom and necessity depend upon each other in a kind of existential dialectic."<sup>338</sup> More recently, philosopher Robert B. Pippin demonstrates that the ethics of the novel suggest "freedom cannot be achieved alone, that the achievement of free subjectivity requires a certain sort of social relation among subjects, and that this relation of mutuality and reciprocity is highly sensitive to social arrangements of work and power and gender relations."<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos, "Isabel's Freedom: Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady," [1980] in Modern Critical Interpretations: Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 121.

<sup>337</sup> Paul B. Armstrong, 101.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>339</sup> Robert B. Pippin, Modern Moral Life, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2000), 172-173.

While the emphases of these critics differ, each has noted James's conclusion to the novel leaving Isabel Archer *en l'air* to be particularly representative of its problematization of Isabel's freedom. Each critic has offered powerful and cogent readings of how James reveals Isabel's conceptions of freedom to be overly-idealized and insufficient to the world as it exists, and they generally interpret the conclusion to reveal Isabel's reversal of her previous conceptions of freedom. Below I will discuss some of these readings in reference to the novel's conclusion. Yet, I also differ from these critics, who at times overstate James's problematization of Isabel's freedom to be primarily an issue of ethics rather than an accomplishment of literary, figural expression availing critical, historical thought. While literary critics such as J. Hillis Miller have read persuasively the novel for its textualization of ethics, as I will show and demonstrate below, he makes no claims about the historical actuality of the novel.

For my purposes, Santos' essay offers an important instance of criticism that draws upon a range of hermeneutical methods – ethical, feminist, cultural, historicist, and literary – around the novel's treatment of freedom. Her reading of Isabel's return to Rome is exemplary, as she suggests that Isabel returns in order “to ratify” her initial decision to marry Gilbert Osmond, now as a true act of freedom: “Seemingly returning to the darkness and the dumbness of her suffocating habitation, she is indeed at last enjoying for the first time the meaning of a free, responsible consciousness.”<sup>340</sup> Santos additionally historicizes Isabel's freedom observing that, “Isabel's story is not only the story of a woman's changing place in society, but also the chronicle of society itself. That the only noble and dignified way that Isabel has of refusing to be ‘ground in the ...

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<sup>340</sup> Santos, 126.

mill of the conventional' is to accept the 'ghastly form' knowingly and freely, is a telling comment on the kind of society presented in James's world.'"<sup>341</sup>

Her essay also observes that James produces this conception of freedom in the character of Isabel as an intervention in the "(American) literary tradition," re-working particularly Hawthorne's fictional romances. Santos describes Isabel's situation to be a reworking of Hester Prynne's situation in The Scarlet Letter, as both women characters suffer from and confront unequal social conditions relating to gender roles. James's novel differs in positing actual grounds for freedom in Isabel's character, as opposed to Hawthorne's deferral toward a future utopian domain of existence. Santos says:

Isabel Archer/Osmond is undoubtedly a lesser Hester Prynne but still a potential "rebel" who willingly accepts the role of an "agent of socialization." The time has obviously not yet come for the fulfillment of Hester Prynne's ambiguous prophecy at the end of The Scarlet Letter, "at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness." However, the choice of a woman's growing consciousness for the portrayal of a changing awareness of society's inconsistencies and incongruities is surely an indication that James, in questioning isolated conceptions and values and in drawing attention to their interrelation and interdependence in their large societal context, is indeed reformulating in a newer light Hester Prynne's implied conviction that a critique of society must begin with a searching critique of the relation between man and woman, not in "Heaven's

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<sup>341</sup> Santos, 129.

own time,” but right *now*, in the time of undeniable social reality – a deep reaching critique of the “bottomless idiocy of the world.”<sup>342</sup>

In observing James’s re-working of Hawthorne’s theme from his “international” perspective, Santos aptly articulates the urgency of the novel’s figuration of Isabel’s freedom.

In starting this chapter discussing first James’s Preface written for the revised edition of the novel in 1908, and then his notebook entry comments on the novel written generally at the time of its initial publication in 1881, I have suggested the novel exemplifies the actual, worldly situation of James as a literary novelist writing and working at a particular historical moment: post-Civil War America at the time of the development of business enterprise. Differing from the critics I have noted above, I will develop further in the next two sections how James accomplishes his problematization of Isabel’s freedom as a particularly literary endeavor that departs from Hawthorne’s fiction. I trace this line of thought from the criticism of T.S. Eliot to F.O. Matthiessen, noting especially James’s own criticism of Hawthorne in his biographical book, Hawthorne.

#### **5.4 HAWTHORNE-JAMES-ELIOT**

T.S. Eliot’s critical writings on James are instructive for revealing James’s difference from Hawthorne, especially as he observes James having absorbed wider influences than Hawthorne, consequently expressing a different way of relating to the Puritan past. Reading Eliot on James and Hawthorne – and reading James on Hawthorne – reveals James’s fiction to provide an important secular articulation of literary art that intends a break from Hawthorne’s Puritan tradition.

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<sup>342</sup> Santos, 129.

Eliot's own early critical writings on James include, "The Hawthorne Aspect," one of Eliot's two contributions to the 1918 Little Review edition dedicated to Henry James.<sup>343</sup> In this short appreciative essay, Eliot notes important distinctions between Hawthorne and James. Eliot, for example, describes James to have been more open to influences extending beyond the narrow confines of New England than Hawthorne. He notes The Sense of the Past to display James's indebtedness to Hawthorne, at the same time that it demonstrates James differing from Hawthorne as a result of his broader range of comparison and reading: "James has been through a much more elaborate development than poor Hawthorne ever knew. Hawthorne, with his very limited culture, was not exposed to any bewildering variety of influence."<sup>344</sup> Eliot describes James's fiction to have absorbed the major novelistic influences of Europe, which he notes to have been particularly evident in James's novels, novellas, and stories treating both American and European characters: Roderick Hudson, "Daisy Miller," The Europeans, and The American. By contrast, he notes that Hawthorne's one novel set in Europe, The Marble Faun, "is of Cimmerian opacity; the mind of its author was closed to new impressions." Eliot nevertheless observes Hawthorne's novel succeeds insofar as it "establish[es] a kind of solid moral atmosphere which the young James does not get."<sup>345</sup>

The "variety of influence[s]" and openness to "new impressions" that Eliot finds evidence for in James suggests a way of accounting for his observation of the notable difference between the two authors in their expressions of "the historical sense." The difference is significant, yet undeveloped; Eliot himself writes that "this, however, need not be dwelt upon here," and he instead explains James's commentary on Hawthorne's

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<sup>343</sup> Matthiessen, American Renaissance, 293-295.

<sup>344</sup> T.S. Eliot, "The Hawthorne Aspect," 116.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

“deeper psychology.”<sup>346</sup> As I observed in chapter one, Eliot formulated the distinction between James and Hawthorne noting a difference between each writer’s expression of “the historical sense”:

In one thing alone Hawthorne is more solid than James: he had a very acute historical sense. His erudition in the small field of American colonial history was extensive, and he made most fortunate use of it. Both men had the sense of the past which is peculiarly American, but in Hawthorne this sense exercised itself in a grip on the past itself; in James it is a sense of the sense.<sup>347</sup>

While valuing Hawthorne’s strong “sense of the past,” Eliot’s observation would seem to suggest James’s fiction avails a more dynamic relationship to both the present and the past than Hawthorne’s fiction had. While James’s fiction reveals “the historical sense,” it also suggests a way of establishing a relationship to it that is not comprehended and diminished by it, such that his fiction may avail “new impressions.”

A short gap spans Eliot’s observation of James’s “sense of the sense” of the past as a predominant thematic in his work to R.P. Blackmur’s observation regarding the technique of James’s fiction in terms of its “indirect approach.” Both critics observe James’s fiction to be productive of a “sensitivity” about experience that is not reducible to experience itself. As Blackmur observes, the emphasis in James is always on a character’s sensitivity, in an “intermediate intelligence” capable of registering and responding to “what happened”:

[T]he characterizing aspect of the Indirect Approach is this: the existence of a definite created sensitivity interposed between the reader and the felt experience

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<sup>346</sup> T.S. Eliot, “The Hawthorne Aspect,” 117.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

which is the subject of the fiction. James never put his reader in direct contact with his subjects; he believed it was impossible to do so, because his subject really was not what happened but what someone felt about what happened, and this could be directly known only through an intermediate intelligence.<sup>348</sup>

Each observation, Eliot's and Blackmur's, suggests that James's fiction offers strong possibilities for "new" constructive relationships that would be foreclosed upon by direct apprehension: new thinking, new relations to characters, and new possibilities in situations predetermined by social and historical forces.

James's own criticism on Hawthorne, published as Hawthorne in 1879, may be especially notable for James's characterization of Hawthorne as having been limited by the "simple, democratic thinly-composed" American society of his time and place.<sup>349</sup> James's treatment of Hawthorne reveals the high value he placed on literary art as demonstration of comparative, historical thinking, which he argues Hawthorne's work consistently failed to achieve. Yet, James ascribes the faults in Hawthorne's work to circumstances in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century, famously noting its lack of social and historical institutions.<sup>350</sup>

For James, Hawthorne's work revealed an essential "provinciality" in historical scope, a point eliciting criticism from a number of James's readers, particularly William

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<sup>348</sup> Blackmur, 25.

<sup>349</sup> Henry James, Hawthorne, 538.

<sup>350</sup> James's criticism of the "absences" in early nineteenth century American society bears repeating: "The negative side of the spectacle on which Hawthorne looked out, in his contemplative saunterings and reveries, might, indeed, with a little ingenuity, be made almost ludicrous; one might enumerate the items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life, until it should become a wonder to know what was left. No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools – no Oxford, nor Eton, nor harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting – no Epsom nor Ascot!" See Hawthorne, 537.

Dean Howells, who responded, “Salem and Concord [are not] societies so extinct, that the people ... can be safely described as provincial, not once, but a dozen times; and we foresee, without any very powerful prophetic lens, that Mr. James will be in some quarters attained of high treason.”<sup>351</sup> By contrast, Eliot observed that even in criticizing Hawthorne’s work, James’s biography displayed a “tenderness” toward Hawthorne revealing a broader scope of reading and historical reference: “the first conspicuous quality in it is tenderness, the tenderness of a man who had escaped too early from an environment to be warped or thwarted by it, who had escaped so effectually that he could afford the gift of affection.”<sup>352</sup> Eliot suggests exactly what James had escaped to, noting that European novelists, such as Turgenev and Flaubert, and especially Balzac, had exerted a strong influence on James. Eliot observes, for example, “James’s attitude toward Balzac is exactly that of having been very much attracted from his orbit, perhaps wholesomely stimulated at an age when almost any foreign stimulus may be good, and having afterwards reacted from Balzac, though not to any point of injustice.”<sup>353</sup>

The suggestion of escape from Hawthorne’s environment through the influences of European novelists is evident in James’s reading of the style and the substance of Hawthorne’s work. James insists that although Hawthorne “had a high sense of reality, he was “not a realist”: “he never attempted to render exactly or closely the actual facts of the society that surrounded him.”<sup>354</sup> James describes Hawthorne’s sense of reality to be relatively absent in his fiction, noting “that the reader must look for his local and national quality between the lines of his writing and in the indirect testimony of his tone, his

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<sup>351</sup> William Dean Howells, “James’s Hawthorne” [1880], in *Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays*, ed. Clara Marburg Kirk and Rudolf Kirk (USA: New York University Press, 1959), 232-233.

<sup>352</sup> T.S. Eliot, “The Hawthorne Aspect,” 114.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>354</sup> Henry James, *Hawthorne*, 555.

accent, his temper, of his very omissions and suppressions ... .”<sup>355</sup> Hawthorne’s fiction more evidently displays for James allegorical and fanciful elements as opposed to a strictly “literal” or mimetic attempt at depicting reality in its full historical dimensions. In making this criticism, James characterizes his *act* of reading to have provided the sense of reality and history for Hawthorne’s fiction.

James’s criticism corresponds to the broader generalizations he offers about Hawthorne’s mind and its relation to “simple, democratic” American society. In tending toward allegorical representation, Hawthorne’s style revealed a fundamentally ahistorical worldview, which was limited by lack of contact with the older societies of Europe. As a result, Hawthorne could not engage the actual conditions of American society in terms of its possible depth and breadth: his fiction offers neither concrete, “realist” historical representations of actual society nor the possibilities of a more global, historical point of reference. Notably, James himself adopts this global, historical perspective in accounting for the limitations of Hawthorne’s fiction as the product of a mind produced in thin social conditions:

Our hero was an American of the earlier and simpler type – the type of which it is doubtless premature to say that it has wholly passed away ... . The generation to which he belonged, that generation which grew up with the century, witnessed during a period of fifty years the young Republic; and when one thinks of the scale on which it took place there seems to be little room for surprise that it should have implanted a kind of superstitious faith in the grandeur of the country, of its duration, its immunity from the usual troubles of earthly empires. This faith was a simple and uncritical one, enlivened with an element of genial optimism, in

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<sup>355</sup> Henry James, Hawthorne, 555.

the light of which it appeared that the great American state was not as other human institutions are, that a special Providence watched over it, that it would go on joyously for ever, and that a country whose vast and blooming bosom offered a refuge to the strugglers and seekers of all the rest of the world, must come off easily in the battle of the ages. From this conception of the American future the sense of its having problems to solve was blissfully absent; there were no difficulties in the programme, no looming complications, no rocks ahead.<sup>356</sup>

James's emphases in reading Hawthorne reveal again his claims for literary art as a kind of historical thinking: his reading ascertains from Hawthorne's fictional and non-fictional writing (in both its style and its substance) a worldview typical of a particular time and place: nineteenth-century American society before the Civil War. Yet, in ascribing simplicity and a lack of "a sense of reality" to Hawthorne's fiction, James insists upon the necessity of a new American literary art, one more attuned to historical changes (such as those the Civil War would bring). That this new art would require a secular imagination, taking the United States (its state and its society) to exist in the earthly, human domain of history is apparent in James's implicit criticism of theocratic, millennial aspirations for the U.S. state, traceable to the founders of Massachusetts Bay Colony. Notable in this characterization of Hawthorne's generation, James criticizes both what he believes to be its genial "optimism" rooted in religiosity as well as its affirmation of an expansionist imperial state.

James identifies Hawthorne's limitations with a certain Puritanism, apparent less in his expressions of judgment than in the "exclusiveness" of the actual form of his fiction. James implicitly opposes the social depth and breadth of the European historical

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<sup>356</sup> Henry James, Hawthorne, 568-569.

novel, apparent to him especially in the work of Balzac and George Eliot, to Hawthorne's "coldness of treatment." The Scarlet Letter thus not only treats Puritanism as its object, the novel also makes a display of it in form:

Puritanism, in a word, is there, not only objectively, as Hawthorne tried to place it there, but subjectively as well. Not I mean, in his judgment of his characters, in any harshness or prejudice, or in the obtrusion of a moral lesson; but in the very quality of his own vision, in the tone of the picture, in a certain coldness and exclusiveness of treatment.<sup>357</sup>

In James's judgment, the novel's faults include its "superficial symbolism" as well as its limited depictions of people, whom he says appear "not as characters, but as representatives." The result is a stable, static situation, lacking in movement and life.<sup>358</sup>

Yet, that James takes from Hawthorne's characters is apparent in his treatment of women characters in Europe. As if creating an opening for his own fiction from Hawthorne's Puritanical legacy, James generates the subjects for many of his novels as a result of placing women characters similar to Hawthorne's characters (notably Hester, Pearl, Zenobia, and Miriam) in settings and scenarios that he took over from his European novelist precursors, principally Balzac and George Eliot. It is, indeed, difficult to imagine Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer, Milly Theale, or Maggie Verver without the primary example of Hester Prynne's offspring, Pearl, in The Scarlet Letter. Anticipating James's heiress characters abroad in Europe, Hawthorne closes his novel noting Pearl to have been the primary financial beneficiary of Roger Chillingsworth's inheritance,

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<sup>357</sup> Henry James, Hawthorne, 547.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, 547.

becoming “the richest heiress of her day, in the New World.”<sup>359</sup> Her departure from New England in favor of Europe likewise anticipates many of James’s scenarios for his characters, even as he departs from Hawthorne’s apparently more optimistic envisioning of the heiress’s fate “as not only alive, but married, and happy.”<sup>360</sup> James’s selective adaptation Hawthorne’s characters and scenarios in situations familiar to the European novelistic tradition reveals the worldly, secular basis of his fiction against his American predecessor’s Puritan tradition. It is this intervention in the nascent American novelistic tradition of the nineteenth century that constitutes one aspect of the modern dimensions of James’s novelistic practice.

### 5.5 F.O. MATHIESSEN’S DEMOCRATIC CRITICISM

F.O. Matthiessen’s publication of the monumental American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (1941) at once made Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman the canon of nineteenth-century American writers. The book also, as William E. Cain observes in F.O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism (1988), “established Matthiessen’s reputation as the foremost scholar/critic of American literature,” noting that without it, he would today be regarded as an “interesting minor critic.”<sup>361</sup> The book additionally contributed to the growing number of studies about American culture that initiated the field of American Studies later in the post-World War II era. Sacvan Bercovitch notes, “‘American Renaissance reset the terms for the study of American history; it gave us a new canon of classic texts; and it inspired the

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<sup>359</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter [1850], in Nathaniel Hawthorne: Collected Novels (New York: Library of America, 1983), 342.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>361</sup> William E. Cain, F.O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism, 139.

growth of American Studies in the United States and abroad. It is not too much to say that Matthiessen, American Renaissance, and the Salzburg Seminar brought American literature to postwar Europe.”<sup>362</sup>

Matthiessen’s critical standard calls for the reading and study of literature for the purposes of furthering democratic society. His democratic political commitments provides an important way to understand the trajectory of his thought, and particularly, the literary objects he chose for consideration.<sup>363</sup> He expresses this standard in prefatory comments, titled “Method and Scope,” to American Renaissance, in which he justifies his grouping of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman, noting that “the one common denominator of my five writers, uniting even Hawthorne and Whitman, was their devotion to the possibilities of democracy.”<sup>364</sup> Matthiessen describes their democratic commitments to be traceable, to some degree, to the society of the American Revolutionary War era.<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, “The Problem of Ideology in American Literary History” (1986), quoted in Cain, F.O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism, 132.

<sup>363</sup> Matthiessen’s criticism includes studies of Sarah Orne Jewett, Sarah Orne Jewett (1929), and T.S. Eliot, The Achievement of T.S. Eliot (1934), as two of his early, single-author works. After American Renaissance (1941), Matthiessen produced three books on Henry James, and one book on Theodore Dreiser, Theodore Dreiser (1951), his final posthumously-published, single-author book. In studying both James and Dreiser, Matthiessen succeeded in providing new grounds for positive evaluation of two writers who typically had been taken to be antithetical to each other. Matthiessen’s work contrasts with critics who either championed Dreiser at the expense of James, such as V.L. Parrington, or favored James to Dreiser, as Lionel Trilling had. Trilling, in the essay “Reality in America, famously formulated the James-Dreiser debate among critics to be especially fraught, “Dreiser and James: with that juxtaposition we are immediately at the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet” (The Liberal Imagination, 10). For Matthiessen, both James and Dreiser offered worthwhile fiction and criticism for reading and study of modern American culture. Additionally, F.O. Matthiessen’s other books include a study of Elizabethan drama, (193x); an homage his romantic partner for twenty years, Russell Cheney, who passed away in 1947, titled The Art of Russell Cheney (1948); and a final posthumously-published collection of essays, The Responsibilities of the Critic (1952).

<sup>364</sup> F.O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance, ix.

<sup>365</sup> Matthiessen says, “They felt that it was incumbent upon their generation to give fulfillment to the potentialities freed by the Revolution, to provide a culture commensurate with America’s political opportunity. . . . In reading the lyric, the heroic, and tragic expression of our first great age, we can feel the challenge of our still undiminished resources,” xv.

In making this claim, Matthiessen suggests critical goals differing greatly from the premises of the formalist-minded New Criticism and its critics for whom the quality of democratic commitment in literary expression is rarely, if ever, interpreted to be significant. Matthiessen, by contrast, asserts commitment to democracy to be the grounding significance of his “American renaissance” writers, and he quotes from Louis Sullivan to emphasize the lessons of their writing: “[The scholar’s] works must prove, in short (and the burden of proof is on him), that he is a citizen, not a lackey, a true exponent of democracy, not a tool of the most insidious form of anarchy. ... In a democracy there can be but one fundamental test of citizenship, namely: Are you using such gifts as you possess for or against the people?” Matthiessen describes his work’s relation to the writers of the “American renaissance,” saying that, “[t]hese standards are the inevitable and right extension of Emerson’s demands in The American Scholar. The ensuing volume has value only to the extent that it comes anywhere near measuring up to them.”<sup>366</sup>

Matthiessen notes the Civil War to mark a historical period break dividing his “American renaissance” writers from other later novelists and poets: Twain, Dickinson, James, and Dreiser. Writing in the 1930s and 1940s in the wake of the most severe collapse of the U.S. post-Civil War economy, Matthiessen recognized a paradox in taking Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman to be exemplars of democratic attitudes: namely, the social context for their writing and thinking had been superseded with the advent of the imperialistic, expansionist American capitalist enterprise that followed the Civil War. Matthiessen particularly views the changes the Civil War brought to American society to have resulted in the end of both an agrarian economy as

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<sup>366</sup> Matthiessen, American Renaissance, xv-xvi.

well as certain political and social reformist forces, both elements of society having been usurped by a spirit of capitalist “acquisitiveness”:

In dealing with their work I hope that I have not ignored the implications of such facts as that the farmer rather than the businessman was still the average American, and that the terminus to the agricultural era in our history falls somewhere between 1850 and 1865, since the railroad, the iron ship, the factory, and the national labor union all began to be dominant forces within those years, and forecast a new epoch. The forties probably gave rise to more movements of reform than any other decade in our history; they marked the last struggle of the liberal spirit of the eighteenth century in conflict with the rising forces of exploitation. The triumph of the new age was foreshadowed in the acquisitive spirit.<sup>367</sup>

Matthiessen’s historiographic sketch of the transition in U.S. society after the Civil War not only places the writers of the “American renaissance” in a definitive historical context, it also suggests a way of understanding the transition and shifts in his criticism through subsequent works, particularly his criticism on Henry James, and later, on Theodore Dreiser. Matthiessen’s studies of James develop from his concerns with, and commitments to, the possibilities of democracy that he located in the work of his five “American renaissance” writers. Importantly, though, his studies of James extend his inquiry into the possibilities of democratic literary art into the radically altered context of the United States following the Civil War, a historical event he recognized to have ushered in a new political economy superseding the social conditions experienced by the writers of the “American renaissance.”

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<sup>367</sup> Matthiessen, American Renaissance, ix.

While Matthiessen's three books on Henry James following American Renaissance indicate his sustained interest, his judgments about the democratic possibilities of Henry James's literary art are ambivalent. In these books, Henry James: The Major Phase (1944), The Notebooks of Henry James (1947), and The James Family: A Group Biography (1947), Matthiessen expresses both affirmative and negative judgments. His negative commentary extends from comments in American Renaissance, where he categorically dismisses James, saying that his fiction lacks a moral system, portrays only private relations between characters, and expresses no strong religious background.<sup>368</sup> In the later Henry James: The Major Phase, Matthiessen would also criticize James, as when he describes him to be anti-democratic in contrast to his father's and brother's "militantly democratic" views.<sup>369</sup> There is in Henry James: The Major Phase, as Cain notes, a strong negative undercurrent of criticism against James: "If you read Henry James closely, you will detect, in the midst of Matthiessen's endorsement of the 'major phase,' much that intimates his reservations about James. So abundant are these small slighting comments that they constitute a kind of second narrative which turns the book into something other than what it appears to be at first."<sup>370</sup>

However, Matthiessen in Henry James: The Major Phase also reverses to a great degree these negative judgments, and a tone of positive appraisal runs throughout the book. With the exception of The Golden Bowl (which Matthiessen ultimately dismisses as "decadent," a judgment that retains the moralistic tone he directed at James in

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<sup>368</sup> Matthiessen says in American Renaissance that in James's fiction portrayals of personal relations, as opposed to social, political or ethical relations, "composed his world." He describes the fiction to project a radically insular, asocial world devoid of spiritual grounding: "In most of his novels the characters are segregated from any but the most dimly implied connection with the social violence and chaos that the busy and the tipsy had been producing in the world of Ulysses Grant. On the other hand, in marked contrast with Hawthorne, there is not even the implication of any dependence upon a world overhead" (365).

<sup>369</sup> F.O. Matthiessen, Henry James: The Major Phase, 5.

<sup>370</sup> Cain, 78.

American Renaissance), Matthiessen identifies critical elements evident in most all of James's later works, fictional and non-fictional. He asserts in the book's preface that "[a]esthetic criticism, if carried far enough, inevitably becomes social criticism, since the act of perception extends through the work to its milieu."<sup>371</sup> Expressed as a dictum, Matthiessen's readings of James in this book stresses attention to the fiction's form, as when he says in his preface that to appreciate The Wings of the Dove, "you must be equally concerned with what is being said and with the how and why of its saying. The separation between form and content simply does not exist as the mature artist contemplates his finished work."<sup>372</sup> Particularly, he notes the narrative form of The Wings of the Dove to render subtly certain characters' critical consciousness of the conditions and workings of power in modern American society.

Matthiessen's statements on practice and interpretation in both American Renaissance and Henry James: The Major Phase contrast with other developing tendencies in American literary criticism during the 1930s-1940s, namely, the formalist-oriented New Criticism, and the political-oriented criticism he calls "sociological." His practice as a critic in differing from these other approaches provides an important example for literary critics and readers today who confront similarly polarizing modes of interpreting literary works, particularly as these modes persist in James studies (which I described in my first chapter). Firstly, Matthiessen's criticism contrasts with the developing New Criticism, whose formalist methods isolate the literary text from social context. James's critics from the early 1920s (Beach and Lubbock) and into the 1960s especially helped to advance the formalist methods of New Criticism. While in the

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<sup>371</sup> Matthiessen, Henry James: The Major Phase, xiv.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

preface to Henry James: The Major Phase, Matthiessen describes the criticism of Beach, Lubbock, and Blackmur to have been “good critical work,” he also says further reading along their lines would be unnecessary. Their work “does not need to be done again,” he says.<sup>373</sup>

Secondly, Matthiessen’s practice differs from the criticism of purportedly activist, class-conscious critics (an approach that V. L. Parrington in the 1920s and Granville Hicks in the 1930s exemplified). Notably, Matthiessen repeatedly dismisses criticism of this sort, as when he explicitly notes the limitations of Parrington’s influential book, The Main Currents of American Thought (1927), in which he declared that “aesthetic judgment” would be dismissed from consideration. By contrast, Matthiessen says in his “Method and Scope” preface to American Renaissance that his study focuses “entirely on the foreground, on the writing itself.”

Matthiessen’s work bears the traces of his efforts to develop a different kind of criticism distinct from the “sociological” model of literary criticism he acquired in studying Parrington and Van Wyck Brooks, two of the most influential literary critics of the 1920s. In “Acknowledgments” to American Renaissance, Matthiessen observes the extent to which he drew upon their examples: “All my reading of American literature has been done during the era of Van Wyck Brooks and Parrington.”<sup>374</sup> While Matthiessen in American Renaissance describes the positive influence that Brooks’s book, America’s Coming of Age (1915), had on his development as a critic, he also expresses his sense of Brooks’s limitations. By the 1930s, he says Brooks could not suffice as a model: “He was no longer concerned with ideas, or with critical discriminations, but with describing the

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<sup>373</sup> Matthiessen, Henry James: The Major Phase, xii.

<sup>374</sup> Matthiessen, American Renaissance, xvii.

surfaces of the milieu that had produced the writing, good or bad. His picture is charming but sentimental.”<sup>375</sup> Matthiessen expresses a great contrast between his criticism and Brooks’s, noting that the “writing itself” would be the principal object of his critical attention: “[I]t is well to remember that although literature reflects an age, it also illuminates it. Whatever the case may be for the historian, the quality of that illumination is the main concern for the common reader. He does not live by trends alone; he reads books, whether of the present or past, because they have an immediate life of their own.”<sup>376</sup> Examining the “immediate life” of the literary work does not preclude historical interpretation; in fact, as Matthiessen suggests, literary works will avail historical interpretations through careful attention to the writing itself.

Matthiessen’s criticisms of Parrington and Brooks in American Renaissance – and later in Henry James: The Major Phase – are doubly instructive when he notes the criticism of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and T.S. Eliot to have offered him valuable counter examples for reading and criticism on literature. More than any other source, Coleridge especially informs his methodological approach to James’s fiction, though it is only in American Renaissance where he traces this influence. Particularly, Matthiessen notes Coleridge’s theory of “organic unity” to have provided him with a way to evaluate the historical and social dimensions of literature. Significantly, he notes Coleridge’s influence for Emerson, the first major writer he discusses in American Renaissance:

The two critics who have helped me to draw a circle of definition around my subject are Coleridge and Eliot. The leading practitioners in their respective times of the type of criticism that is always fertile – the artist’s comment on the

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<sup>375</sup> Matthiessen, American Renaissance, xvii.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, ix-x.

principles of his craft – these two have had a particular value for my purposes. Coleridge was the immediate stimulus to Emerson’s organic theory of language and expression, and has given me many of the formulations for the creative aims of the whole transcendental age. Eliot, in turn, through his reaction against Emerson and his admiration for Hawthorne, has served both to put a period and to suggest an extension. He has typified the fundamental shift in our way of regarding the artist: from inspired seer to trained craftsman. He has also illuminated our deepening concern with tragedy.<sup>377</sup>

Matthiessen reads Emerson’s adaptation of Coleridge’s theory of “organic unity” to offer a particular kind of hermeneutic tool, which he describes to be especially productive for understanding the historicity of literary works. In making this opposition between Coleridgean and Emersonian critical methods and those of Brooks and Parrington, Matthiessen explicitly characterizes his own work’s adaptation of the Coleridge-Emerson line of criticism to constitute an intervention in the direction of American literary criticism as it developed from the 1920s through the 1930s.

Emerson’s “organic theory of art and language” strongly informs Matthiessen’s most evident critical assumptions in both American Renaissance and Henry James: The Major Phase. In the opening chapter of American Renaissance, Matthiessen observes Emerson’s critical conceptualization of the relationship of “word” and “thing” to be fundamentally developed from Coleridge’s thinking about language and historical reality. According to Matthiessen, Emerson takes from Coleridge the understanding that words, and language, are inseparable from material reality, and that words help to constitute the practical and actual world in which writers and readers live and think. Emerson’s

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<sup>377</sup> Matthiessen, American Renaissance, xvii-xviii.

formulations of this concept appear in a number of essays, particularly in “The Poet,” from which Matthiessen quotes, “[w]ords and deeds are quite indifferent modes of the divine energy. Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words.”<sup>378</sup> Emerson’s claims rests on a conceptualization of language as double-sided, part linguistic sign (symbol) and part material element. Matthiessen finds in Emerson’s re-working of Coleridge’s theory of organic unity an affirmation of the “wholeness” of language. From Emerson’s claim that words express both subjective and objective elements of reality, Matthiessen interprets a historicist reading practice, “As a result of realizing the physical origins of abstractions, Emerson was to declare in his essay on ‘The Poet’: ‘The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry.’ In pursuing this metaphor Emerson could also discern that language was the briefest index to history, packed to the full with the spoils of all man’s occupations, his trades and arts and games, and thus a kind of highly charged action in itself.”<sup>379</sup>

Traces of these emphases in “Method and Scope” are evident throughout Henry James: The Major Phase. Taking again Brooks’s criticism as a target, Matthiessen asserts that his own reading of James’s fiction attends to its wholeness in terms of style and content, and its relations to the actual historical and social world. Thus, in his preface, Matthiessen sets up Brooks and Parrington to be his opponents in his study of James, noting that Parrington had followed Brooks’s lead in condemning James for expatriation to England. In contrast to Parrington, who favored Sherwood Anderson to James, Matthiessen says, “Startling conclusions can be reached when, like the later Brooks, you neglect form and content alike, when you merely allude to books instead of discussing

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<sup>378</sup> Matthiessen, American Renaissance, 30.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

and analyzing them, and reduce literary history to a pastiche of paragraphs culled from memoirs. It is my conviction that The Wings of the Dove searches as deeply into the American consciousness as Winesburg, Ohio.<sup>380</sup>

James's life and his work could not but provide a valuable source for Matthiessen to study literature in the age of "acquisitiveness." James lived through the build-up of the post-Civil War American imperial economy, he died during the cataclysmic First World War, and his fiction often depicts the "smaller female fry" of characters making their way in a new world of nouveau-riche bankers, industrialists, and financiers. Nowhere is the continuity of Matthiessen's thinking about literature in social and historical contexts from American Renaissance to Henry James: The Major Phase more apparent than in his attention to the critical consciousnesses of the "smaller fry" against the background of American business capitalism.

In claiming The Wings of the Dove to be James's masterpiece, Matthiessen suggests the strongest resonances between his concerns in American Renaissance and his readings of James's "major phase" writings. His explicit contextualization of that novel with the "background" of the post-Civil War expansionist, imperial economy resonates with the historiography of American Renaissance positing a period break before and after the Civil War. Notably, Matthiessen registers the novel's critical dimensions in observing its rendering of that post-Civil War background through its style and its form, its "elegiac" tone and its skillful production of consciousness through formal narrative devices. To the degree that Matthiessen suggests the novel to avail social import, his claim that as an artwork it does so "obliquely" clearly diverges from the emphases and conclusions of "sociological" critics:

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<sup>380</sup> Matthiessen, Henry James: The Major Phase, x.

There is much more of pity than of terror in Milly's confronting of her fate. Her passive suffering is fitting for the deuteragonist rather than the protagonist of a major tragedy, for a Desdemona, not for an Othello. But if James has shown that the chords he could strike were minor, were those of renunciation, of resignation, of inner triumph in the face of outer defeat, he was not out of keeping with the spiritual history of the American epoch. Art often expresses society very obliquely, and it is notable that the most sensitive recorders of James' generation gave voice to themes akin to his. In the face of the overwhelming expansion, the local colorists felt compelled, like Sarah Orne Jewett, to commemorate the old landmarks before they should be entirely swept away and obliterated. Emily Dickinson discovered that the only way she could be a poet in such an age was by withdrawal, by depending, virtually like a Jamesian heroine, upon the richness of her own "crowded consciousness." And the least feminine, most robust talent of the age, Mark Twain, who may seem at the farthest pole from James, did not find his themes in the facile myths of manifest destiny or triumphant democracy. His masterpiece was also an elegy. It gave expression to the loss of the older America of his boyhood, which, no less than the milieu of Henry James and Minny Temple, had been destroyed by the onrush of the industrial revolution.<sup>381</sup>

In noting that Dickinson's poetry offers something like the "crowded consciousness" of James's heroines, particularly Milly Theale, Matthiessen tellingly anticipates his strongest claims for the social dimensions of James's fiction expressed in the chapter, "The Religion of Consciousness." In contrast to his judgments against James in American Renaissance, which deplore an overreliance on "personal relations," in this

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<sup>381</sup> Matthiessen, Henry James: The Major Phase, 79-80.

chapter it is precisely the inward personal domain of “consciousness” that produces a relationship to the social world. While the Matthiessen of American Renaissance would not have seized upon consciousness as an “oblique” rendering of the social and historical world, by the time he reads again James’s fictional works for Henry James: The Major Phase, he identifies in James’s skillfully-narrated renderings of consciousness new grounds for judging the social import of his work.

Strongly reversing his earlier claims about James’s fiction as wholly personal and insular, Matthiessen in the “Religion of Consciousness” chapter of Henry James: The Major Phase says that James’s “compellingly concrete” fiction offers especially productive grounds for imagining and forging new social values. He compares Henry James to both his father and his brother, Henry Sr. and William, saying that “James’ father could count himself both a Christian and a democrat. James’ brother was more of the second than the first, and all his social values were uncompromisingly equalitarian. James himself was neither the one nor the other. Yet he profited from the heritage of both ... .” Instead of providing grounds for negative critical judgment, Matthiessen observes the differences between Henry and his father and brother to rest upon the former’s literary medium to be a particular strength for forging new social values. Matthiessen especially contrasts Henry James’s fiction to the philosophical and religious writing of the father, which he describes to be “too expansive and too innocent.” The fictional writing of Henry James, Matthiessen says,

[I]s far more serviceable to us, both in its depth and its limitations. His intense spiritual awareness, drifting into a world without moorings, has told others beside Eliot that if religion is to persist, it must be based again in coherent dogma. At

the opposite pole, our novelists of social protest can still learn much, as Robert Cantwell has incisively argued, from James' scale of values. His gradation of characters according to their degree of consciousness may be validly translated into terms of social consciousness, and thus serve as a measure in a more dynamic world than James ever conceived of. To those who believe that if both Christianity and democracy are to endure, the next synthesis must be more rigorously based in both political economy and theology, in the theology that recognizes anew man's radical imperfection, and in the radical political economy that insists that, whether imperfect or not, men must be equal in their social opportunities, many of James' values are, oddly enough, not at all remote.<sup>382</sup>

In dramatic contrast to his judgments in American Renaissance, Matthiessen here casts James's fiction to be acutely perceptive in registering the spiritual inadequacy of a capitalist, class-structured society.

While Matthiessen does not articulate exactly what oppositional "social values" James's fiction expresses, he importantly identifies the location for those values in the consciousness of the heroines of his fiction who belatedly come to understand the determinations of capital and social class in everyday life. In addition to The Wings of the Dove, Matthiessen's claims for the social value of James's fiction in "The Religion of Consciousness" chapter resonates most strongly with his characterizations of The Portrait of a Lady. The "translation" he suggests between James's "gradation of characters according to their degree of consciousness" and "social consciousness" necessarily bear upon his observations about Isabel Archer, a character whom Matthiessen describes undergoing tremendous transformation in her views about her freedom and her relation to

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<sup>382</sup> Matthiessen, Henry James: The Major Phase, 151.

humanity. He notes that James leaves this heroine's future and fate undecided, an ending he says he understands to reflect James's belief "that the arbitrary circle of art should stimulate such speculations beyond its confines, and thus create the illusion of wider life."<sup>383</sup> For Matthiessen, the "wider life" that the novel suggests necessarily includes potential social life and social thought. When he then observes that the novel reveals Isabel's assumptions about her conditions of freedom in the world to have been mistaken, he indicates grounds for consideration of the novel's social values. He says that with The Portrait of a Lady:

[James] had about Isabel a tragic sense, but he did not write a tragedy, as he was to do in The Wings of the Dove, since this earlier drama was lacking in the finality of purgation and judgment. But his view of his material was not at all ambiguous. He knew how romantic Isabel was, how little experienced she was in mature social behavior. He had shown that she was completely mistaken in believing that 'the world lay before her – she could do whatever she chose.' But James knew also the meaning and value of renunciation. The American life of his day, in its reckless plunge to outer expansiveness and inner defeat, had taught him that as his leading spiritual theme. Through Isabel Archer he gave one of his fullest and freshest expressions of inner reliance in the face of adversity. It is no wonder that, after enumerating her weaknesses, he had concluded, 'she would be an easy victim of scientific criticism if she were not intended to awaken on the reader's part an impulse more tender ... .'<sup>384</sup>

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<sup>383</sup> Matthiessen, Henry James: The Major Phase, 186.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

Leaving off with these somewhat vague suggestions and claims about Isabel Archer's future in the conclusion of the novel, Matthiessen ends his book. However, his observation about Isabel Archer's character resonate strongly with his claims for the translatability of James's portrayal of consciousness into social values. Particularly, James's production of a tone of "renunciation" in this conclusion, a value evident in many other novels, including The Wings of the Dove and The Ambassadors, resonates with social values that are not affirmative of the philosophically liberal premises of expansionist capitalist "business" enterprises that constitute the historical and sociological "background" of his fiction. That Isabel Archer offers for Matthiessen a figure of "inner reliance in the face of adversity" suggests an antithesis to the principles driving the U.S. capitalist enterprise in the post-Civil war era "in its reckless plunge to outer expansiveness and inner defeat." As I describe below in greater detail in my own discussion of The Portrait of a Lady, James skillfully produces a tone and atmosphere of renunciation through his choice of setting for Isabel in the novel's concluding chapters (ancient Rome, and later, her cousin Ralph Touchett's Gardencourt manor in its gloomiest and most gothic state), through his depiction of her choice to return to Osmond and Pansy, and especially, through his portrayal of her consciousness in these settings and in these relations.

As Matthiessen indicates, Isabel in the conclusion to the novel develops a new awareness about herself in the world that is suggestive of an ethos differing from American capitalism: while retaining a highly contingent sense of her possibility and freedom, Isabel reverses her earlier beliefs in her independence and her individualism. While James depicts these change in her attitude to turn upon her awareness of how

money had determined her actions (particularly in the often-studied, chapter 42 vigil scene), he also describes the changes to produce in her an increased sense of her connections to the world through society and history. As Matthiessen rightfully notes, James accomplishes in Isabel a sense of these connections in depicting her new sense of relationship to common humanity. In gaining this sense of connection, the sense nevertheless produces in her a feeling of suffering, and ultimately, renunciation, as Matthiessen notes, “Isabel’s link with humanity, if not through sin – unless her willful spirit counts as such – is through her acceptance of suffering.”<sup>385</sup> This acceptance brings Isabel closer to humanity in its social and historical determinations; and, in accordance with Matthiessen’s concerns, it is what proves to be most translatable to new social values. As I note later, James’s portrayal of Isabel’s development in this novel dramatically and powerfully reveals the guiding ethos of the liberal subject – premised upon individualism, independence, and nonspecific freedom – to be an illusion in the service of American capitalist ideology.

## 5.6 A NEW ETHICS

James’s criticism of Hawthorne resonates with The Portrait of a Lady, which he began planning and composing shortly after publication of Hawthorne. Yet, as Peter Buitenhuis notes, James’s critical biography reveals the examples of European novelists to have taken precedence for James over Hawthorne at the time of his composition of the novel: “On the eve of writing The Portrait of a Lady, [James] thought ... that Hawthorne would no longer quite do. He was interested in more solid maitres, such as Balzac, Turgenev,

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<sup>385</sup> Matthiessen, Henry James: The Major Phase, 184.

and Eliot.”<sup>386</sup> Drawing upon the examples of European novelists, James would attempt to surpass Hawthorne and fulfill the promise for a new critical American literary art, whose principles he expressed in Hawthorne.

James’s heroine in The Portrait of a Lady, Isabel Archer, displays in her aspirations his attempt at opening a new relationship to American culture generally, and the Puritan tradition particularly, to a greater degree than any of his earlier characters. In this regard, the character of Daisy Miller serves as an important precursor for Isabel Archer, as both express a desire to exercise their sense of freedom and liberty despite the moralistic nay-saying of American matrons (Mrs. Miller and Mrs. Walker in “Daisy Miller,” and Lydia Touchett in The Portrait). James perhaps more explicitly portrays the Puritanism of the Americans in “Daisy Miller,” noting that Winterbourne, Daisy Miller’s would-be American suitor, resided in Geneva, maintaining an “old attachment for the little metropolis of Calvinism,” and that Daisy’s “grave was in the little Protestant cemetery, in an angle of the wall of imperial Rome.”<sup>387</sup>

The problem for Isabel Archer in exercising her freedom would be less the explicit moralism of the American community than it had been for Daisy Miller. Rather, Isabel’s liberal conceptions about her life, her liberty, and her freedom, and her views about the possibilities open to her in her contemporary world, produce a series of conflicts for her that ultimately reveal the limitations of a Puritan-derived, liberal capitalistic ethic of “possessive individualism.”<sup>388</sup> James’s narrator makes her liberal

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<sup>386</sup> Peter Buitenhuis, quoted in Thaddeo K. Babiha, The James-Hawthorne Relation: Bibliographic Essays (Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall and Company, 1980), 13.

<sup>387</sup> Henry James, “Daisy Miller” [1878], in Henry James: Major Stories and Essays (New York: Library of America, 1999), 4, 59.

<sup>388</sup> I utilize this term, “possessive individualism,” as described by C.B. MacPherson. See C.B. MacPherson, The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1962).

views a dominant element of her character, particularly in his characterizations of her early in the narrative, for example, noting (in chapter 6), “It was one of her theories that Isabel Archer was very fortunate in being independent, and that she ought to make some very enlightened use of that state.”<sup>389</sup> More than any other motif, James’s treatment of a liberal, individualistic conception of freedom and independence linked to the possession of money and capital marks his engagement with the Puritan legacy, which he takes over from Hawthorne.

James’s novels (especially The Portrait of a Lady) effectively transform the object of Puritanism as found in Hawthorne’s fiction from the explicitly moral concern with sin and guilt into concern with the ascetic individualism of philosophical and economic liberalism. James’s transformation of Hawthorne’s fiction may be especially apparent in his treatment of young women heiress characters, particularly Isabel, but also The Golden Bowl’s Maggie Verver.<sup>390</sup> Both characters, Isabel and Maggie, undergo transformations resulting from their confrontations with deceptive characters, whose pasts have been shaped by the historical determinations of social class. Both Isabel’s and Maggie’s recognitions that they have been manipulated by these characters undermine any sense of sovereign selfhood over and against the determinations of money and social class.

James in The Portrait of a Lady also adapts from Hawthorne his depiction of women’s experiences of limited conditions and possibilities for personal liberty and freedom. James’s characterizations of Isabel Archer emphasize her concern with both

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<sup>389</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 55.

<sup>390</sup> Oxford English Dictionary: “Margaret.” Literally, the noun *margaret* designates a daisy flower. James’s use of the name Margaret, from which Maggie derives, connects a number of James’s characters (Daisy Miller, Masie, and Maggie Verver) to Hawthorne’s Pearl, given its Latin etymology, *margarita*, meaning “pearl.” In The Portrait of a Lady, critics have often commented that Gilbert Osmond’s daughter Pansy is twice described as a “pearl.” See Holland, The Expense of Vision, quoted in Babiha, 147.

liberty and freedom as ideals she would wish to have as a basic condition for her life, but which prove to be problematically elusive. Similarly, Hawthorne's portrayal of women characters also experience unequal conditions of liberty and freedom. Hawthorne's tragic heroine of The Blithedale Romance, Zenobia, strongly identifies the increase of freedom and liberty – particularly for women – to be the concern of her actions. Early in The Blithedale Romance Hawthorne's narrator notes "the freedom of her deportment" to be an especially distinguishing trait.<sup>391</sup> Later, in one of the chapters most telling of Zenobia's character, "Eliot's Pulpit" (chapter 14), Zenobia denounces historical social inequality existing between men and women: "[Zenobia] declaimed with great earnestness and passion, nothing short of anger, on the injustice which the world did to women, and equally to itself, by not allowing them, in freedom, and honor, and with the fullest welcome, their natural utterance in public. ... "It shall not always be so!" cried she. "If I live another year, I will lift up my own voice, in behalf of woman's wider liberty."<sup>392</sup> This heroine's criticism of the restricted conditions of women's liberty expresses itself as a principal aspect of her character, and her death in the narrative drives home the criticism with tragic import. As I discuss further below, James's heroine explicitly identifies the ideals of "liberty," "freedom," and "independence" as her guiding principles for action. "I'm very fond of my liberty," Isabel tells her aunt Lydia, during their first conversation in the Archer home in Albany.<sup>393</sup> This assertion typifies the narrator's characterization of Isabel early in the novel, and Isabel re-claims these ideals at crucial moments of personal decision regarding marriage

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<sup>391</sup> Hawthorne, The Blithedale Romance, 671.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, 737.

<sup>393</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 30.

Yet, James's narrator also explicitly observes that Isabel is a character not entirely definable by one particular trait or inclination. She holds contradictory, paradoxical positions. The narrator appeals that the reader not judge her from the position of "scientific criticism." Rather, James's narrator insists upon her humanity, seeking to elicit a "tender" response to her:

Altogether, with her meager knowledge, her inflated ideals, her confidence at once innocent and dogmatic, her temper at once exacting and indulgent, her mixture of curiosity and fastidiousness, of vivacity and indifference, her desire to look very well and to be if possible even better, her determination to see, to try, to know, her combination of the delicate, desultory, flame-like spirit and the eager and personal creature of conditions: she would be an easy victim of the scientific spirit if she were not intended to awaken on the reader's part an impulse more tender and more purely expectant.<sup>394</sup>

Here, James's narrator intervenes in an address to the hypothetical reader, directing his or her attention to observe Isabel's affective, feeling responses to the world. He notes her "curiosity," her "vivacity," and her "desire," and he links her intent to "see" (with its perceptive, aesthetic connotations) with an experimental attitude "to try" and thinking "to know." While the narrator earlier has described Isabel to be a reader of George Eliot (in the 1908 edition),<sup>395</sup> here he casts his narration in a mode reminiscent of James's observations about Eliot's fiction in his 1908 preface (as I described above): that her novels primarily make as protagonists the "smaller female fry" of the world, through

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<sup>394</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 54.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

whom are “borne onward through the ages the treasure of human affection” (as opposed to classic heroic types of world-historic importance).

In emphasizing Isabel’s perceptive, feeling responses to the world, the narrator expresses a “tender” attitude (or more affectively, an “impulse”) toward the protagonist, which he also requests of the reader.<sup>396</sup> In this regard, James guides the reader to perform a kind of “criticism based upon perception” that he says in the preface is “too little of the world.” There, he guides readers to interpret the novel noting especially Isabel’s concrete perceptive responses to the “adventures” of the world, those especially that might tell something of past history, “the moving accident, of battle and murder and sudden death.” Characterizing his protagonist again to be modeled on Eliot heroines, he says, “[c]oming to Europe is even for the ‘frail vessels,’ in this wonderful age, a mild adventure; ... [But] [w]ithout her sense of them [adventures], her sense *for* them, as one may say, they are next to nothing at all.”<sup>397</sup> The aside comments made by the narrator to the reader at this early point of the novel model an ethos that implicitly guides any attentive reading of the novel. It requests readers to attend especially to Isabel Archer’s perceptive faculties in registering her experiences of the world, which form the basis of her responses to other characters in their social situations.

I will detour my reading of the novel briefly here through an explication of recent contemporary criticism from an ethical perspective: that is, criticism identifying the significance of a literary text to inhere in a work’s performative usage of words to accomplish specific effects bearing upon politics and history. As I noted in chapter one of this dissertation, J. Hillis Miller exemplifies the “ethical turn” in criticism. His

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<sup>396</sup> Henry James, The Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, 1081.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 1083.

formulations regarding the “ethics” inscribed in any literary text help to reveal The Portrait of a Lady to be a text that offers oppositional content to determinative liberal, natural law business enterprise ideology.

In The Ethics of Reading, Miller identifies James’s fiction and criticism (among the writings of others, including Kant, de Man, and George Eliot) as works to be especially available for “ethical” reading. Miller describes “ethical moments” in reading to be understood as the reader’s acceptance of the inscribed responsibilities performed in the text, in which a reader “responds” to the text, is “responsible to it, respectful of it.” There is, he says, “an imperative, some ‘I must’ or Ich kann nicht anders. I must do this. I cannot do otherwise.”<sup>398</sup> It, reading as a matter of ethics, consists of attending to how words and language – “linguistic transactions” – perform and actualize knowledge, politics, and history.<sup>399</sup>

Elsewhere in Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James (2005), Miller identifies ethics in reading with close reading practices articulated by the American New Criticism. He nevertheless broadens the scope of their practices, implicitly positing their reference to a social domain of activity. He associates close reading practices with “conduct,” whose definition in the Oxford English Dictionary he defines as “‘one’s actions, the way one acquits oneself.’” Miller says James’s writing exemplifies how literary thought functions as ethics in the sense of conduct, noting James’s stress in the Prefaces upon actively “putting” things [in words], that is, saying or writing them,” to be a kind of action, “a form of doing, and therefore of conduct, as any other act.” James’s writing practices “[emphasize] the superiority of putting things in words, as a form of

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<sup>398</sup> J. Hillis Miller, The Ethics of Reading (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), 4.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

doing, over other forms of social behavior.”<sup>400</sup> Ethical reading attends closely to the performative effects of words and phrasings; for example, as I have noted above, the direct address of the narrator of The Portrait of a Lady to the reader makes a claim upon him or her to regard Isabel’s affective apprehensions of the world. He not only displays a sympathetic attitude toward Isabel rejecting “scientific criticism,” but he requests of the reader to avail himself or herself of an “impulse more tender” in responding to the character. Other ethical moments in the novel are less explicit, but as I will show, they function similarly.

Miller’s “ethics of reading” is dismissive of “politics of interpretation” in which a critic would import various ideological and sociological premises into the experience of reading text, and thereby diminish the work’s creative potential to generate historical or socially oppositional significance. In The Ethics of Reading, Miller says that for ideological critics “[l]iterature in no sense makes history but is made by it, since the determining forces of history are material means of production, distribution, and consumption. The latter create certain class ideologies, which are in turn reflected in works of literature ... .”<sup>401</sup> In contrast to political interpretation, Miller says ethical reading occurs immanently with a text as the critic attends to its inscribed ethical commitments and demands as a matter of closely reading its language and words.

Present in any literary work are ethical relationships, expressed in language and directed in four principle directions. Miller identifies these four directions to be as follows:

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<sup>400</sup> J. Hillis Miller, Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James (New York: Fordham UP, 2005), 1.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

There is a claim made on the author writing the work, on the narrator telling the story within the fiction of the novel, on the characters within the story at decisive moments of their lives, and on the reader, teacher, or critic responding to the word. This ethical “I must” cannot, I propose to show, be accounted for by the social and historical forces that impinge upon it. In fact that ethical moment contests these forces or is subversive of them. The ethical moment, in all four of its dimensions, is genuinely productive and inaugural in its effects on history, though in ways that are by no means reassuring or predictably benign . . . .<sup>402</sup>

From the perspective of ethics, a literary work may be understood to offer a field of relationships (involving not only characters, but also the narrator, the author, and the reader) in which varying attitudes or modes of conduct are put into play. Commitments expressed in ethical relations in any four of these dimensions may express differing relations that are constructive and inaugural, precisely in the sense Derrida conceptualizes writing to be inaugural of historicity (as I discussed in chapter three of this dissertation in relation to Derrida’s essay, “Force and Signification”). Miller shows readers that identifying the kinds of commitments expressed in literary works, such as Henry James’s fiction describes, may reveal “other” attitudes or possible social arrangements that are opposable to the dominant attitudes constitutive of a society at a given moment of history.

Along these lines, James notes in the Preface to The Portrait of a Lady that it is this ethical question of “doing” that guided his composition of the novel, as he describes his apprehension of the novel’s secondary characters that “[i]t was as if they had simply, by an impulse of their own, floated into my ken, and all in response to my primary

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<sup>402</sup> Miller, The Ethics of Reading, 8-9.

question: ‘Well, what will she do?’ Their answer seemed to be that if I would trust them they would show me; on which, with an urgent appeal to them to make it at least as interesting as they could, I trusted them.”<sup>403</sup> James’s characteristic linkage of “doing” as performance of an act to “interest” underlies his critical principles of novelistic art: insofar as fiction inscribes performative “acts” of doing (in this novel, it is the character Isabel’s “doing”) it generates actual “interest” in the sense of mattering or making a difference.

Miller’s concept describing four basic ethical relations that any literary text may contain suggests a productive way to read James’s “ado” about Isabel Archer. That this “ado,” as James’s preface tells us, consists of Isabel registering in an affective consciousness the world she inhabits, the narrative produces problems compelling ethical reflection about how she will conduct herself, and with what attitudes she will act, as she experiences the actual, concrete historical world. While Isabel’s questions often drive the narrative, the novel’s ethical reflection is not for Isabel solely to contend with; the narrator also expresses ethical questions, and ultimately, he directs questions and problems toward readers of the novel.

Foremost among these concerns, the narrator observes Isabel’s perhaps strongest ethical attitude toward life to be her active, perceptive faculty directed toward the world. While the narrator also observes a strongly individualistic attitude in Isabel, usually it is subordinate to this more fundamental connective, perceptive attitude toward life. Eventually, the narrative will reveal this attitude to win out over her solipsistic, individualist side. Typifying this attitude, the narrator notes early in the novel:

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<sup>403</sup> Henry James, Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, 1081.

[S]he had an immense curiosity about life and was constantly staring and wondering. She carried within herself a great fund of life, and her deepest enjoyment was to feel the continuity between the movements of her own soul and the agitations of the world. For this reason she was fond of seeing great crowds and large sketches of country, of reading about revolutions and wars, of looking at historical pictures.<sup>404</sup>

She expresses this attitude by expressing “curiosity” toward life, which she activates in the sensory act of observing (figured here as her “staring”), which leads to imaginative “wonder.” Most significantly, this attitude leads her to “feel” a connection between herself and the world.

Two chapters later, the narrator stages some of the novel’s most apparent ethical concerns. Shortly after enlisting the reader to respond to Isabel’s feelings, he describes Isabel’s character further, emphasizing this time her individualistic attitudes. While James in his notebook entries had described this opening portion of the novel to be “too exclusively psychological,” his narrator’s characterizations of Isabel in these opening chapters clearly lay the grounds for his narration of her disillusionment in the novel’s denouement.

While describing Isabel’s character to be strongly individualistic, he also characterizes this trait to be a corollary to a dismissive attitude about the “world.” In this regard, her individualism serves as an obstacle to fulfillment of a contrary character trait that “feels” continuity and connection between herself and the world. Like the American Puritans whose intensely individualistic morality had been the paradoxical result of

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<sup>404</sup> Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 41.

attempting to efface one's sense of self as a submission to God, Isabel Archer at times exhibits a tendency toward solipsistic individualism.

The narrator conveys this attitude in near direct and literal commentary on her character, which arises out of his observations about her beliefs in women's rights to happiness without marriage to men. Not insignificantly, the narrator describes her thinking about the basis of her freedom and independence in relation to marriage in religious language evocative of what Sacvan Bercovitch has described as the Puritan auto-machia genre of spiritual biography (as I noted in chapter two of this dissertation). According to this narrator, Isabel's wish to remain independent from men and not to marry amounts to a kind of "prayer":

She held that a woman ought to be able to live to herself, in the absence of exceptional flimsiness, and that it was perfectly possible to be happy without the society of a more or less coarse-minded person of another sex. The girl's prayer was very sufficiently answered; something pure and proud there was in her – something cold and dry an unappreciated suitor with a taste for analysis might have called it – had hitherto kept her from any great vanity of conjecture on the article of possible husbands. Few of the men she saw seemed worth a ruinous expenditure, and it made her smile to think that one of them should present himself as an incentive to hope and a reward to patience.<sup>405</sup>

The narrator's previous appeal not to judge Isabel on the basis of "scientific criticism" resonates in this passage, and he seems to enlist himself on Isabel's side in her views about marriage in positing a hypothetical denied-suitor who might identify something "cold and dry" in Isabel's character by the light of "analysis." Yet, the narrator also

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<sup>405</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 56.

describes her views with language evocative of Protestant morality, as he describes Isabel imagining a would-be suitor cloaking his desire in Protestant “virtue,” who would present it as “an incentive to hope and a reward to patience.” While Isabel’s “smile” would seem to dismiss this motivation as quaint and provincial, the narrator nevertheless casts her beliefs about marriage and her independence to be determined by Protestant religious thought, particularly in its emphasis upon individualism:

Deep in her soul – it was the deepest thing there – lay a belief that if a certain light should dawn she could give herself completely; but this image, on the whole, was too formidable to be attractive. Isabel’s thoughts hovered about it, but they seldom rested on it long; after a little it ended in alarms. It often seemed to her that she thought too much about herself; you could have made her colour, any day in the year, by calling her a rank egoist. She was always planning out her development, desiring her perfection, observing her progress.<sup>406</sup>

Similar to a Puritan pattern of thinking, Isabel’s belief that she “thought too much about herself” to the point that she would consider herself an “egoist” especially serves to reinforce her solipsism.

In a strongly Hawthornian, Biblical characterization of Isabel, the narrator then describe her in terms evocative of Protestant asceticism. In the short story “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1844), Hawthorne invokes the Biblical Garden of Eden in describing the garden created by the scientist Dr. Giacomo Rappaccini to be a scene for insularity, pestilence, and evil. Notably, Hawthorne’s story posits the Italian scientist’s artificial garden to be a laboratory for his intense examinations of nature: “Nothing could exceed the intentness with which this scientific gardener examined every shrub which grew in

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<sup>406</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 56.

his path: it seemed as if he was looking into their inmost nature, making observations in regard to their creative essence ... .”<sup>407</sup> This garden is also the scene for the removal of Rappaccini’s daughter, Beatrice, from society and the world, who tells her suitor, Giovanni Guasconti, that her father’s love of science, “estranged me from all society of my kind.”<sup>408</sup> While the story’s setting is Padua, Italy, and all characters are Italian, Hawthorne’s deployment of a garden trope resonates strongly with American Puritan connotations of the “garden” deriving from the Old Testament.

These connotations are implicit in James’s descriptions of Isabel’s inwardness, which his narrator opposes to her merest apprehensions of her relation to the larger social world:

Her nature had a conceit, a certain garden-like quality, a suggestion of perfume and murmuring boughs of shady bowers and lengthening vistas, which made her feel that introspection was, after all, an exercise in the open air, and that a visit to the recesses of one’s spirit was harmless when one returned from it with a lapful of roses. But she was often reminded that there were other gardens in the world than those of her remarkable soul, and that there were moreover a great many dark places which were not gardens at all – only dusky pestiferous tracts, planted thick with ugliness and misery.<sup>409</sup>

Yet, the narrator turns from observing Isabel’s insularity toward noting her apprehension of the “other gardens in the world” precisely at the moment he “places” her in England:

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<sup>407</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” in *Hawthorne’s Short Stories*, ed. Newton Arvin (New York: Random House, 1946), 182.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>409</sup> Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 56.

In the current of that repaid curiosity on which she had been lately floating, which had conveyed her to this beautiful old England and might carry her further still, she often checked herself with the thought of the thousands of people who were less happy than herself – a thought which for the moment made her fine, full consciousness appear as a kind of immodesty.<sup>410</sup>

The narrator next poses as a question what might be the most significant “ethical moment” for reading of the novel. His question anticipates the ethical dilemmas Isabel will face as a consequence of her experience of a determinative social world. It is a question that forecasts not only her vigil meditation, but also the terms upon which she eventually grounds her conception of freedom. Posed as a question addressed to the reader, the narrator says:

What should one do with the misery of the world in a scheme of the agreeable for one’s self? It must be confessed that this question never held her long. She was too young, too impatient to live, too unacquainted with pain. She always returned to her theory that a young woman whom after all every one thought clever should begin by getting a general impression of life.<sup>411</sup>

Variations of the narrator’s question recur throughout the narrative. Significantly, James figures responses in his depiction of Isabel’s experience in Rome, a place that Hawthorne had written of in his last novel, The Marble Faun, as “the City of all time, and of all the world!”<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>410</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 56.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid.

<sup>412</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Marble Faun, in Nathaniel Hawthorne: Collected Novels, ed. Millicent Bell (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 944.

In turning from a depiction of Isabel in America to placement of her in Europe, the narrator effectively tests her Puritan, Protestant asceticism around her acute sense of independence and her desire to maintain a sense of freedom in the face of any possible coercion. In chapter two of the novel, James draws attention to her individualized conceptions of her independence and freedom in the dialogue of three principal male characters: Isabel's uncle, the American banker Daniel Touchett; his son, Ralph Touchett; and British aristocrat, Lord Warburton. As the three banter on the lawn of Daniel Touchett's English estate, Gardencourt, depicted in the first chapter as a centuries-old, red-brick mansion surrounded by a near-palatial green lawn, Warburton asks, "Is the young lady interesting?" Warburton's question precipitates discussion of a telegram sent from America by Lydia Touchett (Daniel Touchett's estranged wife), who claims that at least one of the Archer sisters appears to be "quite independent." Lydia's vaguely stated telegram prompts Ralph to question:

"Who's 'quite independent,' and in what sense is the term used? – that point's not yet settled. Does the expression apply more particularly to the young lady my mother has adopted, or does it characterize her sisters equally? – and is it used in a moral or a financial sense? Does it mean that they've been left well off, or that they wish to be under no obligations? Or does it simply mean that they're fond of their own way?"<sup>413</sup>

Ralph's question about the quality of Isabel's purported "independence" forecasts the primary complication for Isabel in understanding her relationships to other people in the world: in what ways, to what degree, and on what terms, might she be independent?

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<sup>413</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 24.

As analyzed by most twentieth-century political theorists, independence understood as the constitution of the self over and above social and historical limits functions as the sine qua non of liberal economic and philosophical thought. C.B. MacPherson, for example, notes the “possessive quality” of belief in the individual self’s inherent, intrinsic, and transcendent independence and freedom. He describes this possessive sense of individual independence and freedom as the underlying premise of “modern liberal-democratic theory”:

Its possessive quality is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself. The relationship of ownership, having become for more and more men the critically important relation determining their actual freedom and actual prospect of realizing their full potentialities, was read back into the nature of the individual. The individual, it was thought, is free inasmuch as he is proprietor of his person and capacities. The human essence is freedom from dependence on the wills of others, and freedom is a function of possession.<sup>414</sup>

MacPherson’s description of “possessive individualism,” which he notes to be rooted in a conception of the “human essence” as “freedom from dependence on the wills of others” and exercised as one’s own “possession,” not only underlies a number of core American beliefs: in fact, it is this conception that licenses the domain of the U.S. state. As I described in my second chapter, Madison’s claims in “Federalist Paper No. 10,” that the primary object of the U.S. state must be the protection of property, hinges on this liberal

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<sup>414</sup> MacPherson, 3.

conception of “possession.” Due to the “diversity in the faculties of men,” Madison says, “the possession of different degrees and kinds of properties immediately results.”<sup>415</sup> Madison “reads back” the historical condition of inequalities in wealth and property into the individual, ascribing the rights of possession to the “diverse faculties” of individual men. In effect, Madison codifies the premises of philosophical and economic liberalism as the founding right of the U.S. state.

Especially notable in light of James’s interpretation of literary motifs drawn from Hawthorne, the tenets of liberal economic theory may be traceable to the Calvinist, Puritan conception of the “calling.” Drawn, in part, from Max Weber’s landmark study, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, political philosopher John Dunn describes the thought of John Locke, the English philosopher of liberal “possessive” individualism par excellence, to have been fundamentally informed by the Calvinistic conception of the calling.<sup>416</sup> Dunn notes that a historically new articulation of the “individual,” producing a shift in social organization toward “complete individualization,” developed as a result of the Calvinist moral tradition and a subsequent reorganization of the religious community:

It was a central fact of Calvinist theology, both in its radical development among the Saints and a fortiori in its more conservative articulation in the Anglican church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that the intense religious

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<sup>415</sup> Madison, “Federalist Paper No. 10,” 124.

<sup>416</sup> John Dunn, The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the “Two Treatises of Government” (Cambridge: Cambridge, UP, 1969).

individualism of the doctrine of the calling was intimately bound to the social discipline of the religious community.<sup>417</sup>

As Dunn suggests, the Calvinist-based, Puritan expression of the “individual” informs the tenets of philosophical and economic liberalism to a high degree, especially as liberal expressions of possessive individualism require for moral support the Calvinist conception of the calling: “The secular ‘Lockean’ liberals of the contemporary United States are more intimately than they realize the heirs of the egalitarian promise of Calvinism. If the religious purpose and sanction of the calling were to be removed from Locke’s theory, the purpose of individual human life and social life would be exhaustively defined by the goal of the maximization of utility.”<sup>418</sup> Of course, Dunn observes Lockean liberalism does not analyze existing society to have developed in accordance with a strictly utilitarian viewpoint. Rather, as Dunn notes, Locke’s justification for existing capitalism draws its support from his belief in the “equality of religious opportunity.”<sup>419</sup> As Dunn suggests, Locke premises justification for existing capitalism and its attendant ideology of the supra-historical individual upon the Calvinist claim that a “calling” may be equally available to all. As I discussed in chapter two, early American Puritan culture especially promoted Calvinistic-derived, “militant” individualism as a guiding, dominant form of thought.

While James initially characterizes Isabel to express belief in the sovereignty of the individual, strongly asserting her capacity to judge and act in accordance with her

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<sup>417</sup> John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke*, 248-249. See also John Dunn, *John Locke: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003). Dunn notes that both of John Locke’s parents grew up in “Puritan trading families,” a condition that strongly contributed to the outlook evident in his major philosophical works: “The personal identity which gave his thought as a whole its integrity and human depth was that of a deeply Puritan self” (2-3).

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*

own freedom and independence, her assertion of these views in rejecting offers of marriage from two of the richest characters in the novel, Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton, also suggests her attempt to express a non-possessive attitude in relation to others. Significantly, James links each of these two characters to possession of forms of capital that have exerted tremendous force in western society; Lord Warburton, for example, is a British “territorial magnate,” while Caspar Goodwood is an heir to a number of Massachusetts cotton-mills. James directs attention to a third form of accumulated capital in his portrayal of uncle Daniel Touchett, “a shrewd American banker” whose wealth has allowed him to purchase the Gardencourt estate overlooking the Thames. While Isabel rejects these first two male suitors, in part due to their possessive attitudes corresponding to their wealth, her inheritance of Daniel Touchett’s banking wealth directs the course of her actions leading to her marriage to Gilbert Osmond. Perhaps not surprisingly, Isabel defends Osmond to Goodwood, noting that “[Osmond] is not in business. ... He’s not rich; he’s not known for anything.”<sup>420</sup>

As Isabel realizes, Warburton makes apparent his possessive attitudes during the course of his proposal to her. Warburton suggests offhandedly that if she is wrong in her assessment of his favorable personal qualities, ““Let me lose all I possess.””<sup>421</sup> Isabel considers Warburton perhaps has meant to offer a “reminder that he was rich,” though she then, “on the instant, felt that he didn’t.”<sup>422</sup> When Isabel responds less favorably than Warburton had hoped, telling him essentially, “thank you ... for your offer,” Warburton persists, apparently oblivious to anything but the assumption that great wealth would provide a young woman such as Isabel with opportunity and security. Warburton’s

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<sup>420</sup> Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 278.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*

presumptions tellingly reveal his conception of “opportunity” to mean the unrestricted possibilities for ownership premised upon the possession of wealth. Blithely, Warburton asks her whether she would prefer to live somewhere other than England, perhaps with more favorable weather: “Are you afraid – afraid of the climate? We can easily live elsewhere, you know. You can pick out your climate the whole world over.”<sup>423</sup> James registers Isabel’s skeptical response to Warburton, noting especially her sense of the offer’s potential to transform her into something trapped and caught:

These words were uttered with a breadth of candor that was like the embrace of strong arms – that was like the fragrance straight in her face ... . But though she was lost in admiration of her opportunity she managed to move back into the deepest shade of it, even as some wild, caught creature in a vast cage. The ‘splendid’ security so offered her was *not* the greatest she could conceive.<sup>424</sup>

In rejecting Warburton’s offer, Isabel demonstrates her desire for something in life other than conventional “opportunity” and “security.” In making this decision, Isabel distinguishes an attitude toward life from one that would welcome the chance to spend near-limitless amounts of money around the world for the purposes of achieving a sense of “security.” Yet, exactly what she aspires to, exactly what her attitude implies for her future possibilities, remains unarticulated. Her inability to translate into words what she desires reveals her attempt at positing a difference – simply put, she has yet to encounter anything, or any thought, that would enable her to conduct herself in a manner not requiring possession of capital as a source of authority.

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<sup>423</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 99.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

While, at times, James's narrator describes Isabel's desires in conventionally liberal rhetoric, James also reveals the narrator's difficulty in defining or articulating Isabel's thoughts and feelings in the particular moments that she rejects her suitors. James's narrator often suggests inconclusive terms to describe Isabel's attitude at these moments, as when the narrator initially asserts that Isabel refuses Warburton because it "appeared to her that there had been no choice in the question. She couldn't marry Lord Warburton; the idea failed to support any enlightened prejudice in favour of the free exploration of life that she had hitherto entertained or was now capable of entertaining." While the narrator premises her refusal upon a conventional liberal notion of "choice," affirming "the free exploration of life," James also suggests the groundlessness and vagueness of the assertion. What concretely would "free exploration of life" involve for Isabel? Neither the narrator nor Isabel seem able to articulate the grounds for such an attitude, except to note that hers was an unconventional attitude that recognized such a marriage "might contain oppressive" elements, which many others simply would have accepted in the name of "opportunity":

Lord Warburton had offered her a great opportunity; the situation might have discomforts, might contain oppressive, might contain narrowing elements, might really prove a stupefying anodyne; but she did her sex no injustice in believing that nineteen women out of twenty would have accommodated themselves to it without a pang.<sup>425</sup>

James reveals both Isabel's and his narrator's inability to articulate her thoughts and feelings in a way that would suggest a way for her to proceed. Instead, the narrator

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<sup>425</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 101.

reveals Isabel questioning her actions and her interests, asking herself what exactly her decision might signify, and what articulate “view” of life her decision implied:

Why then upon her also should it not irresistibly impose itself? Who was she, what was she, that she should hold herself superior? What view of life, what design upon fate, what conception of happiness, had she that pretended to be larger than these large, these fabulous occasions?<sup>426</sup>

Isabel produces ethical questions but no discernible answers that would indicate exactly what “view of life” she might intend. The wordless, nameless feeling she has at this moment is telling, in that she senses Warburton’s “opportunities” as traps. Yet, exactly what the “fallacy” may be in his proposal, the narrator clearly does not specify: “Something assured her there was a fallacy somewhere in the glowing logic of the proposition – as *he* saw it – even though she mightn’t put her very finest finger-point on it.”<sup>427</sup> Isabel discerns a feeling of the incompatibility of a life of “opportunity” and “security” as defined by Warburton with her attitudes and inclinations. She finally falls into a wordless meditation, though she considers that her decision may mean she is “too proud,” and possibly a “cold, hard, priggish person.”

James’s characterizations in the next two chapters directs attention to Isabel’s indefinable qualities and intentions, which especially suggests the necessity Isabel feels to generate some other attitude toward life distinct from the readily-available, dominant system of possessive individualism. These scenes include Isabel’s discussion with her uncle Daniel Touchett of Warburton’s marriage proposal; her decision to respond by letter to Warburton declining his proposal; her reflections upon a letter from Caspar

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<sup>426</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 102.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

Goodwood; her anticipation of a visit to London that stokes her “curiosity” (as discussed above); and, another scene with Warburton at Gardencourt, in which she comes to better understand her intentions.

Yet, in all these scenes, James’s narrator does not ever explicitly state Isabel’s intentions in terms of a clear reason or a ready-made purpose. In fact, when Isabel drafts her letter to Warburton declining his offer, she does so after reflecting upon the “strangeness” of her attitude toward both Warburton and Goodwood. She notes her sense of indifference to whether she considers either men to be personally “delightful” in her consideration of their proposals. Isabel’s sense of apparent inconsistency does not impede her from declining Warburton’s proposal, nor from putting off a response to Goodwood; though, as James notes, “The sense of her incoherence was not a help . . . .” Isabel, nevertheless, honors her sense over her capacity to register her wishes in “reasonable” terms, telling Warburton, “[t]hese things cannot be reasoned about.” While her words seem to allude to an inherent power imbalance, due to Warburton’s position as a wealthy male land-owner, she does not say so explicitly, and she adds simply, “[w]e see our lives from our own point of view; that is the privilege of the weakest and the humblest of us.”<sup>428</sup> Leavis writes affirmatively of James’s depiction of Isabel’s decision not to marry Warburton, describing it to be an “act of radically ethical judgment, [it] is a tribute to the reality with which James has invested her (she is *not*, we must concede, Gwendolen Harleth).”<sup>429</sup>

When Isabel meets Warburton at Gardencourt following her letter declining his proposal, the narrator articulates Isabel’s decision noting that marriage to Warburton

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<sup>428</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 107.

<sup>429</sup> F. R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (New York: NYU Press, 1964), 148.

would bring her into a “system” she observes to be “invidious” and antithetical to her interests. In Isabel’s perception of Warburton’s “invidious” system, inherently traditional and class-structured, her instinct notably is “not imperious, but persuasive.” It is this non-possessive, non-domineering, “not imperious” instinct or attitude that guides her away from Warburton. Notable as well, James describes Isabel registering Warburton’s system by means of her sensible “feeling”:

What she felt was that a territorial, a political, a social magnate had conceived the design of drawing her into the system in which he rather invidiously lived and moved. A certain instinct, not imperious, but persuasive, told her to resist – murmured to her that virtually she had a system and an orbit of her own.<sup>430</sup>

Importantly, Isabel vocalizes to Warburton her reasons for rejecting his proposal that marrying him would amount to her “giving up.”<sup>431</sup> Unable to express entirely what loss a marriage to Warburton would mean, Isabel falls silent for a moment, “looking down with a deep frown, as it were hopeless to attempt to make her meaning clear.” Translating her feeling into words that a marriage to him would draw her into an “invidious system” leads her into inexpressiveness, and she offers approximations of the feeling, telling him: “I can’t escape unhappiness. ... I can never be happy in any extraordinary way; not by turning away, by separating myself. ... From life. From the usual chances and dangers, from what most people know and suffer.”<sup>432</sup> In these responses to Warburton, another aspect of Isabel’s character expresses itself, particularly her desire not “to separate from life” or “to turn away.” In these instances and claims, Isabel expresses an attitude contrary to that of “possessive individualism.” Rather, her assertions make a claim for

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<sup>430</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 95.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

her capacity to connect with life, understood as the “usual chances and dangers ... of what most people know and suffer.” Isabel’s attitude implies an inclusive sociality, which the narrator explicitly describes to have been lacking in Warburton’s offer.

Upon Warburton’s departure from Gardencourt with his sister, Miss Molyneux, Isabel intuits especially clearly his offer would limit possibilities of sociality, inclusion, and openness to the world. Isabel observes Miss Molyneux and catching a glimpse of her eyes in her departure, she “see[s] in their grey depths the reflexion of everything she had rejected in rejecting Lord Warburton – the peace, the kindness, the honour, the possessions, a deep security and a great exclusion.”<sup>433</sup> Conveying Isabel’s response to this vision, the narrator notes, “She kissed Miss Molyneux and then she said: ‘I’m afraid I can never come again.’”<sup>434</sup> In this decisive act, Isabel affirms commitment to some other way of life that she believes will inclusively relate her to the world in a manner distinct from an objectifying, possessive attitude.

In the scene with her uncle, Daniel Touchett, James renders Isabel’s differing attitude in terms of her “curiosity,” which James alludes to again in her anticipation of a trip to London. Immediately after Warburton proposes, Touchett informs Isabel that Warburton had written to him, and Touchett offers to tell Isabel the letter’s contents, which would explain Warburton’s views. Isabel declines, saying she could have found out those views herself directly from Warburton. Touchett asks, “But you didn’t feel curious?” Isabel’s response – addressing precisely the quality of her curiosity – suggests her attempt at keeping up and maintaining an *active* sense of curiosity. She notes, “My curiosity would have been idle – once I had determined to decline his offer.” Yet, again,

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<sup>433</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 120.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid.

Isabel also expresses an inability to express in words to her banker uncle exactly what had been unsatisfactory in Warburton's proposal. She responds to Touchett's question, "You didn't find it sufficiently attractive?" by declining to offer a motive, saying simply, "I suppose it was that ... But I don't know why."<sup>435</sup> When Touchett alludes to considerations of money and the terms of agreement upon which Isabel may be forced to contend while living in Europe, the narrator notes, "[t]hat suggestion gave her something more definite to rest on than she had found in her own thoughts."<sup>436</sup> Yet, Touchett expresses an entirely sympathetic attitude toward Isabel and her wishes in rejecting Warburton. Importantly, the conversation confirms for Isabel that her motives do not signify "vague ambitions ... reaching to something indefinable and possible not commendable."<sup>437</sup> Rather, Touchett's attitude conveys to her that "her dilemma seemed to prove that she was concerned with the natural and reasonable emotions of life." Putting into action a life in accord with "natural emotions" proves to be the dilemma for her, as doing so requires her to reject both Warburton and Goodwood.

In many ways, Goodwood surpasses Warburton in expression of a possessive attitude, and it is precisely this attitude she rejects. James notes how "far removed" Isabel feels "from the disposition to let the young man from Boston take positive possession of her."<sup>438</sup> Just as Warburton had been linked to landed property, James's narrator emphasizes Goodwood's association with industrial and business capital, noting "he was the son of a proprietor of well-known cotton-mills in Massachusetts – a

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<sup>435</sup> Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 104.

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*

gentleman who had accumulated a considerable fortune in the exercise of this industry.”<sup>439</sup>

James’s characterization of Caspar Goodwood describes what later historians have noted to be a transitional phase in the organization of industry and commerce toward business and managerial capitalism. Given the timeframe for the events of the novel (from the early-1870s to the latter half of the decade), James’s portrayal of Goodwood seems well attuned to this transitional phase in capital’s organization. As I noted in chapter two, since Thorstein Veblen’s 1904 publication of The Theory of Business Enterprise, economic historians writing on the latter half of the nineteenth century have described a shift in the American organization of industry and capital from a smaller-scale, strictly industrial organization of capital toward a much larger business model requiring financiers and “finance capital,” which contributed to today’s familiar hierarchical structure of management. The 1870s had been an especially pivotal time for this transformation, as the “Panic of 1873” and the “Depression of 1877” forced owners of capital to devise new ways to maintain profitability. Veblen describes these changes resulting from capitalist economic necessity: with lagging profits, capitalists responded to the crisis by seeking new sources for raising capital, particularly through the use of “loan-credit” from banks. The introduction of loan-credit brought banks into the industrial economy, generating finance capital.<sup>440</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 105.

<sup>440</sup> Thorstein Veblen, Theory of Business Enterprise [1904] (New York, Augustus M. Kelly, 1965), 92-132. See also Rudolf Hilferding, Finance Capital: A Study in the Latest Phase of Capitalism [1910] (London: Routledge, 1981). This study, which influenced Lenin’s analysis of modern imperialism in Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism, coined the term finance capital, understanding it as the uniting of industrial capital with banking capital. That James associates two American men characters in the novel with banking and industrial capital suggests more than just passing attention to the highest levels of organization of capital in his time. That Isabel regards Goodwood and his wealth warily, while she also

Alfred Chandler's The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business describes the result of these changes to have fundamentally reorganized commerce and industry in America from small-scale, often-times family-owned forms of business, to large-scale managerial enterprise. As banks placed managers on the boards of industry, a managerial class instituted broad-based changes in the basic structure of industrial organization.<sup>441</sup> Chandler describes this new organization of “managerial capital” to have both usurped in prevalence family structures of business as well as surpassed the influence of pure “financial capitalism.”

Harry Braverman in his landmark study, Labor and Monopoly Capital, notes this developing managerial class effected a qualitative change in traditional and long-standing forms of production. With an eye toward increased profitability, capitalists produced a “wholly new art of management, which even in its early manifestations was far more complete, self-conscious, painstaking, and calculating than anything that had gone before.”<sup>442</sup> A key instrument producing these changes had been the advent of scientific management, which Braverman describes to have coalesced in the “last two decades of the nineteenth century.” Braverman also notes Marx observing in 1867 with “prophetic insight” impending changes in the organization of capital from the ““many conscious and systematic applications of natural science to the attainment of given useful effects.””<sup>443</sup>

James's portrayal of Goodwood in this novel of 1880-1881 captures this new managerial function effectively. Goodwood had been educated at Harvard College,”

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realizes too late that her banking inheritance had been a “curse,” suggests profound skepticism over this dominant organization of capital.

<sup>441</sup> Alfred Chandler, The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1977), 9.

<sup>442</sup> Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital [1974] (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998), 45.

<sup>443</sup> Karl Marx, Capital, Vol. 1, quoted in Braverman, 107.

where he succeeded as a gymnast and oarsman on the rowing team, by which he gained a sense of how he might utilize “intelligence” for a specific kind of mechanical output: “He had learned that the finer intelligence too could vault and pull and strain – might even, breaking the record, treat itself to rare exploits. He had discovered in himself a sharp eye for the mysteries of mechanics, and had invented an improvement for the cotton-spinning process which was now largely used and was known by his name.”<sup>444</sup> It was not the “more dispersed knowledge” that Goodwood appreciated, but rather knowledge that would allow a specific kind of activity most purposeful for commercial profitability. While his achievements in this sphere of knowledge produced a specific new way of processing cotton, one that presumably would more efficiently and profitably convert the raw material of cotton into a market-ready linen product, his greatest skills involved his capacity for “managing men”:

There were intricate bristling things he rejoiced in; he liked to organize, to contend, to administer; he could make people work his will, believe in him, march before him and justify him. This was the art, as they said, of managing men – which rested, in him, further, on a bold though brooding ambition.<sup>445</sup>

Goodwood typifies the capitalist reorganization of industry through managerial techniques. Isabel, in fact, does not entirely dislike Goodwood’s abilities as a “mover of men”; notably, she “liked it much better than some other points in his nature and aspect.” Yet, his scientific ability and his association with industry holds no appeal for her: “She cared nothing for his cotton mill – the Goodwood patent left her imagination cold.” Isabel identifies an attitude toward life in Goodwood with which she strongly differs.

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<sup>444</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 106.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

Again, she does not express her desires or wishes in concrete terms, but she does note an attitude contrary to her own evident in his bodily expression: “His jaw was too square and set and his figure too straight and stiff: these things suggested a want of easy consonance with the deeper rhythms of life.”<sup>446</sup> In Isabel’s rejection of Goodwood, her attitude suggests a distinction guiding her between a kind of possessive, scientific managerial ability and these “deeper rhythms of life.”

In James’s descriptions of Isabel in these scenes depicting her to desire something other than marriage to either Warburton or Goodwood, James suggests her attempts to realize more fully a sense of possibility in a differing, non-possessive ethos of freedom. James offers a glimpse of this attitude in the novel’s next episode, as Isabel joins her American journalist friend Henrietta Stackpole and Ralph Touchett in a visit to London. James had forecasted the scene noting Isabel’s anticipatory curiosity for it, and as I have suggested, the episode strongly resembles James’s own accounts of his visit to London at the age of 26.

After making her first significant decision in the narrative not to marry Warburton, Isabel and her “party of three” take a trip to take in “the sights of the metropolis.” Similar perhaps to Daisy Miller’s confrontations with her aunt, Isabel takes the trip despite disapproval of her Aunt Lydia, who had also criticized her for not marrying Warburton. In a brief exchange between the two, James again suggests Isabel’s attempts at differing from an instrumental, possessive attitude toward others. When Lydia suggests Isabel should have married Warburton because the English, even when they are “disagreeable,” provide exemplary opportunities for a person to “[make] use of

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<sup>446</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 106.

them,” Isabel responds sharply, “Is that your idea of marriage?”<sup>447</sup> This reminder of Isabel’s basic attitude toward life, differing from the logic of utility and possession, sets the tone for her trip to London.

In narrating their visit, James depicts Isabel differing from both Ralph and Henrietta in attitude toward the metropolis. Ralph passively observes with awe Isabel’s curious, active, questioning attitude, as he notes, “Isabel was full of premises, conclusions, emotions; if she had come in search of local colour she found it everywhere. She asked more questions than he could answer, and launched brave theories as to historic cause and social effect, that he was equally unable to accept or refute.”<sup>448</sup> While Ralph displays no equivalent amount of interest in the place before them, Henrietta’s responses to London verge upon the purely utilitarian, insofar as she approaches each moment anticipating how she might convert it into a subject for a magazine article.

In depicting Isabel’s attitude at the moment of her visit to London, James not only explicitly contrasts it with Ralph and Henrietta, he also casts her presence in London to reflect upon her dismissal of Warburton as offering new grounds for a sense of “freedom.” In the first direct narration of Isabel’s responses to the scene, James explicitly refers to Isabel’s decision not to marry Warburton, noting, “The incident that had preceded Isabel’s departure from Gardencourt left a painful trace in our young woman’s mind: when she felt again in her face, as from a recurrent wave, the cold breath of her last suitor’s surprise, she could only muffle her head till the air cleared. She could not have done less than what she did ... and she felt no desire to take credit for her

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<sup>447</sup> Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 123.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

conduct.”<sup>449</sup> Even in refusing an offer of marriage, Isabel denies consideration of the act as a definitive, possessive gain for herself. Noting the paradoxical quality of this attitude, James alludes to it as her “imperfect pride,” which he also distinguishes from another developing attitude in Isabel toward others.

It is an attitude of freedom that Isabel feels at this time, yet this sense of freedom differs from purely individualistic conceptions of freedom. In Isabel’s case, it compels her to attempt to connect with other people, sometimes in “odd demonstrations”:

Mixed with this imperfect pride, nevertheless, was a feeling of freedom which in itself was sweet and which, as she wandered through the great city with her ill-matched companions, occasionally throbbed into odd demonstrations. When she walked in Kensington Gardens she stopped the children (mainly of the poorer sort) whom she saw playing on the grass; she asked them their names and gave them sixpence and, when they were pretty, kissed them. Ralph noticed these quaint charities; he noticed everything she did.<sup>450</sup>

In this characterization, Isabel’s “feeling of freedom” is not an abstract quality: it is palpable, “throbbing” sense. It conducts Isabel in a manner best described as “wandering” – again contrasting with Henrietta’s terms of exploration of the city, as she purposively seeks out sights and people for the sake of their utility for her. Finally, it draws her toward people, particularly children of “the poorer sort,” with whom she expresses her sense of connection. These dimensions of Isabel’s feeling of freedom contrast greatly with the abstract conception of freedom informing liberalism, which as I noted in MacPherson, describes the “human essence” to consist of “freedom from

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<sup>449</sup> Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 126.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*

dependence on the wills of others.” In this scene, James reveals Isabel’s sense of freedom to exist without reference to concepts of “independence” and “dependence.” Rather, James suggests Isabel’s freedom consists of a non-possessive, non-exclusive attitude toward the world that would allow her to maintain connection with it.

James’s portrayal of Ralph Touchett at this point of the narrative suggests certain dangers for Isabel – and her likely sympathetic readers – in the apparent benevolence of a liberal possessive conceptualization of freedom. It is Ralph who persuades his father to bestow a large inheritance on Isabel, deriving from his own portion, with the claim that money “will make her free.”<sup>451</sup> Insofar as Ralph also wishes to marry Isabel but believes he cannot due to his illness, James appears to suggest that Ralph’s seemingly-benevolent wish that Isabel remain unmarried cloaks a will-to-power not altogether different from the power exercised by other suitors.

Jonathan Freedman observes these dangers in his analysis of the similarities between Ralph and Gilbert Osmond, as both characters (not unlike either Warburton or Goodwood) objectify Isabel in a “reifying vision.”<sup>452</sup> Whereas Osmond does so in accordance with his consummate collector’s impulse, Ralph’s vision of Isabel implies a reifying view nearly as an accident; initially, as Freedman notes, he observes Isabel “as a character of pure ‘nature’ who possesses a vital energy of her own, whose ‘play’ transcends that of any work of art.” Yet, Ralph “is not able to sustain this vision of Isabel for long,” Freedman says, and he “subtly but unmistakably metamorphoses her into that which he had previously claimed she transcended – a work of art.”<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>451</sup> Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 160.

<sup>452</sup> Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste*, 153.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

Ralph's attitude and his conversation with Isabel during their trip to London reveals this turn in his attitude toward her. Here, he tells Isabel that he watches her with "the deepest interest," provoking her to ask Ralph whether he intends to propose marriage to her.<sup>454</sup> Freedman's characterization of Ralph is apt and accurate, but his account overlooks that it is Ralph's belief in the liberal ideology of possessive individualism that underlies both his "reifying vision" as well as the disastrous fallacy in his belief that "money will make her free." Ralph fails to note that Isabel's sense of freedom does not require a substantial amount of money, as evident in her wandering through London. Rather, he seeks to improve her condition and her "freedom" by bestowing money upon her.

While Ralph's interests are largely self-serving, as many critics have noted, he is basically a devotee of American liberal ideology. Earlier, James describes Ralph affirming a strong sense of "independence" and "liberty of appreciation," attributable to his American education.<sup>455</sup> When Ralph finally exercises his will in bestowing an inheritance, it is primarily as an American banker's son that he acts. In depicting this bestowal of an inheritance upon Isabel, James primarily associates the act with Ralph's latent banking activity. Notably, James describes Daniel Touchett listening to his son's request as a business proposition: "Something of that veiled acuteness with which it had been on Daniel Touchett's part the habit of a lifetime to listen to a financial proposition still lingered in the face in which the invalid had not obliterated the man of business."<sup>456</sup> While clearly understood to be a financial proposition by the father, the act of providing

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<sup>454</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 133.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>456</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

an inheritance appears to Ralph as the occasion for fulfilling his imaginative “interest” in her.

James’s portrayal of Ralph suggests his similarity to both Warburton and Goodwood, as he shares their beliefs that freedom may be measurable in terms of money derived from accumulated capital. This is the dominant liberal view of possessive individualism, which James criticizes in depicting the outcome of Isabel’s inheritance of Touchett’s banking fortune. Isabel herself initially assents to Ralph’s views equating money with freedom, and she says sharing her fears with him after receiving the inheritance: “A large fortune means freedom, and I’m afraid of that. It’s such a fine thing, and one should make such a good use of it. If one shouldn’t one would be ashamed. And one must keep thinking; it’s a constant effort. I’m not sure it’s not a greater happiness to be powerless.”<sup>457</sup> The contrast with Isabel’s earlier “feeling of freedom” wandering in London could not be more striking; here, she articulates “freedom” in terms that would agree with Warburton, Goodwood, and Ralph Touchett’s views: money is freedom, conferring “power” on a person to make a “use” of it for a specific end or goal. It is not, however, a feeling that Isabel ultimately affirms, particularly after she discovers the contingencies her money had entailed for her.

### **5.7 FIGURES OF A WORLDLY LITERARY ART**

Writing to criticize readings of The Portrait of a Lady that emphasize its “international theme,” Louis Auchinloss says in his essay “The International Situation: The Portrait of a

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<sup>457</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 193.

Lady” (1975) that the novel is “not, properly speaking, an international novel.”<sup>458</sup> He generalizes his claim with an assertion that its main action could have occurred in New York just as well as England, France, and Italy. Affirming, at least, that Isabel’s “plight ... is American in its particular combination of romantic idealism with a willingness to suffer,” Auchinloss nevertheless asks whether the novel’s European setting is consequential:

[T]he evil that confronts her, the evil that captures her – is it European? Madame Merle wishes to convert Isabel’s fortune into a dowry for her daughter, and Osmond wishes to use this same money to build the lavish setting for his ultimate pose. But might such a pair not have operated in New York? Nineteenth-century Manhattan had more than its share of such adventurers. There is, of course, a suaveness and a style about the conspirators that seems more European than Yankee, but I suggest that Madame Merle and Osmond represent integral parts of the American psyche.<sup>459</sup>

The omission of James’s novella Washington Square, a story concerned precisely with an American marriage adventurer residing in Manhattan, from Auchinloss’s consideration notwithstanding, his rhetorical question asking whether Osmond and Madame Merle might not be more American than European misses key aspects of James’s characterizations of each. In Madame Merle’s case, as I will show below, James strongly associates her not only with New York, but also with old, ancien regime France. More importantly, in posing his rhetorical question in this way Auchinloss mistakenly shifts the grounds of the novel’s “international theme” away from its comparative and social

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<sup>458</sup> Louis Auchincloss, “The International Situation: The Portrait of a Lady,” [1975] in The Portrait of a Lady, ed. Robert Bamberg (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1995), 720 – 728.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid., 726.

dimensions, which James accomplishes by appropriating European literary sources for his “ado” about a Hawthornian heroine.

In fact, James’s reading and adaptation of European literary sources – notably, Balzac, Eliot, and Turgenev – provided him with grounds for the “international theme” in his fiction. The Portrait of a Lady incorporates aspects of Balzac and Eliot in its plotting of Isabel Archer’s experience of life while living abroad in Europe, particularly in its rendering of the determinations of capital and social class upon her experience of the world. By literally placing Isabel in a European setting, James not only contrasts her American standards of value (freedom and independence) with European society as a matter of theme and story, but he also instantiates a worldly redirection of the American literary culture he inherits from Hawthorne. While preserving certain elements of Hawthorne’s fiction from his three major American novels – The Scarlet Letter, The House of the Seven Gables, and The Blithedale Romance – as well as from his one novel set in Europe – The Marble Faun – James re-works those elements in accordance with a plot that is more identifiable with Balzac’s and Eliot’s social novels. In transplanting the character Isabel Archer from America to Europe, James figures his adaptation of Hawthornian fictional elements to European historical narrative.

In his 1875 essay on Balzac, James describes Balzac to be a social novelist, which James says consists of his rendering the concrete “actual facts” of life to be part of “an immense and complicated machinery – the machinery of government, of police, of the arts, the professions, the trades.” These facts of society, James says, “form the rough skeleton of his great edifice.”<sup>460</sup> Notably, James’s characterization of Balzac contrasts with his subsequent evaluation of Hawthorne in 1879, as he says that Hawthorne “never

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<sup>460</sup> Henry James, “Honore de Balzac,” 79.

attempted to render exactly or closely the actual facts of the society that surrounded him.”<sup>461</sup>

Balzac’s fiction provides James with a social novel literary standard that he directs not only in criticism against Hawthorne, but that he also projects into his novels. His claims for Balzac’s fictional rendering of the “actual facts” of his contemporary life to be a part of the “complicated machinery” society anticipate the Balzacian devices of The Portrait of a Lady, particularly its characterizations of Madame Merle, whose duplicitous actions derive from her deep sense of European aristocratic standards of social class and hierarchy, steering American ingénue Isabel Archer toward Gilbert Osmond.

In particular, James adapts Balzac’s depiction of money to be a source of social determination. He notes the representation of money to be intrinsic to Balzac’s fiction, observing:

Money is the most general element of Balzac’s novels; other things come and go, but money is always there. His great ambition and his great pretension as a social chronicler was to be complete, and he was more complete in this direction than in any other. He rarely introduces a person without telling us in detail how his property is invested, and the fluctuations of his rentes impartially divide the writer’s attention with the emotions of his heart. Balzac never mentions an object without telling us what it cost, and on every occasion he mentions an enormous number of objects.<sup>462</sup>

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<sup>461</sup> Henry James, Hawthorne, 555.

<sup>462</sup> Henry James, “Honore de Balzac,” 71.

James's discernment of the materiality of Balzac's fiction – money and specific objects that connote economic value – provides him with a general conception of the social novel. His projection of the Balzacian social novel in The Portrait of a Lady is never more apparent than in Isabel Archer's vigil (in chapter 42), when she discovers that her inheritance precipitated her marriage to Osmond, as the narrator comments: "But for her money, as she saw today, she would never have done it."<sup>463</sup>

James's adaptation of Balzacian devices is also apparent in his characterizations of Madame Merle. "[J]e vien de loin," Madame Merle tells Isabel Archer early in their acquaintance while both are staying at Gardencourt.<sup>464</sup> It is early in the 1870s, and Isabel Archer has been in England for no more than a few months, on the invitation of her aunt Lydia Touchett. It is the illness and impending death of this American banker uncle that brings together Isabel and Madame Merle, an old acquaintance of Lydia's, at this moment in sympathy for the Touchett family. Madame Merle expresses herself with this French expression claiming a long personal history, yet she does so with specific allusion to the historical event of the French Revolution: "I speak as if I were a hundred years old, you say? Well, I am, if you please; I was born before the French Revolution."<sup>465</sup> What this metaphorical flourish connotes is not insignificant, especially as Madame Merle identifies her personal origins with a time and place rendered to be past history by the movement of democratic masses in acts of anti-monarchical revolution. Madame Merle identifies with the past to such a degree she declares incomprehension of America particularly, and "the new" generally, saying to Isabel: "I belong to the old, old world. But it's not of that I want to talk; I want to talk about the new. You must tell me more

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<sup>463</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 358.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

about America; you never tell me enough. Here I've been since I was brought here as a helpless child, and it's ridiculous, or rather it's scandalous, how little I know about that splendid, dreadful funny country – surely the greatest and drollest of them all.”<sup>466</sup> In this particular exchange of dialogue, it is explicit that Isabel will literally speak of the “new” to Madame Merle, as well as of “America.” Yet, Isabel does not do so, as Madame Merle preempts her possible response with an embittered diatribe against Europeanized Americans, criticizing these Americans for not “making” anything of themselves:

“We're mere parasites, crawling over the surface; we haven't our feet in the soil. At least one can know it and not have illusions. A woman perhaps can get on; a woman, it seems to me, has no natural place anywhere; wherever she finds herself she has to remain on the surface and, more or less, to crawl. You protest, my dear? you're horrified? you declare you'll never crawl? ... Very good on the whole, I don't think you'll crawl. But the men, the Americans; je vous demande un peu, what do they make of it over here? I don't envy them trying to arrange themselves. Look at poor Ralph Touchett; what sort of a figure do you call that? Fortunately he has a consumption; I say fortunately, because it gives him something to do. His consumption's his carriere; it's a kind of position. You can say: 'Oh Mr. Touchett, he takes care of his lungs, he knows a great deal about climates.' But without that who would he be, what would he represent? 'Mr. Ralph Touchett: an American who lives in Europe.' That signifies absolutely nothing – it's impossible anything should signify less. ... With the poor old father

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<sup>466</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 170-171.

it's different; he has an identity, and it's rather a massive one. He represents a great financial house, and that in our day, is as good as anything else.<sup>467</sup>

While Madame Merle's criticism denies Isabel of her opportunity to tell of "the new," this deferral of response raises the possibility that Isabel may still tell of the new and of America at another moment of the narrative. Madame Merle's rhetorical question of "the new" hangs in the air at this point, as the narrative poses questions about both what Madame and Isabel Archer consider to be fulfilled lives. Madame Merle claims her present life to be devoid of hope, saying that "the best part's gone, and gone for nothing, while Isabel asks her "What would you have liked to do that you've not done?"<sup>468</sup>

Characteristic of Isabel's profound identification with her sense of her independence and freedom as her most valued ideals, her question to Madame Merle turns upon the issue of conduct and it suggests questions about one's possibilities for doing anything in one's life. The exchange raises an implied question as to what Isabel may or may not do that would distinguish her from these parasitic Americans, and it leads to perhaps the most definitive expression of Isabel's idealized view conflating her freedom with independence, in her contrast with Madame Merle's views over "things" and "clothes."

The entire exchange between Madame Merle and Isabel at Gardencourt suggests not only questions about what Isabel feels about her life abroad, it also instantiates the literary "worldliness" of James's novelistic art. Speaking in French and alluding to French history, Madame Merle's words put Isabel in mind of a society, culture, and history distinct from her actual lived American experience in Albany, NY. In addition to

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<sup>467</sup> Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 171.

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

the historical allusion to the French Revolution, Madame Merle's embittered diatribe evokes nothing James had written about in criticism at the time of his writing The Portrait of a Lady so much as Balzac's fiction, whose characters in the Comédie Humaine included innumerable cynical opportunists, most famously the thief Vautrin, who appears as Spanish priest Carlos Herrera in Illusions perdues (1843). Written between 1837 and 1843, Balzac presents French society after the Bourbon Restoration and before the 1830 July Revolution to be no more equal or fraternal than before the 1789-1799 Revolution, particularly as a result of money and capital determining its basic social relations. Both its young male characters, the friends David Séchard and Lucien Chardon (known as Lucien de Rubempré among the aristocracy), experience the determinations of capital upon their existence in their failed attempts to succeed in their respective professions, journalism and literature.

Balzac's operative "illusion" metaphor frames this narrative depicting Lucien's hopeful entrance to the Parisian literary world as he quickly experiences failures and disappointments that Balzac casts to be his "lost illusions." Lucien discovers his success as a poet will be largely dependent upon the interrelated businesses of publishing, advertisement, and journalism. His Parisian literary acquaintance, Lousteau, attempts to tell him of the his experience of Parisian literary life to be consequent upon capitalist power relations precisely in the terms of illusion and disillusion, telling Lucien:

My poor young poet, I came to Paris, like you, full of illusions, impelled by the love of art, and by an unconquerable desire for glory; I discovered the realities of the literary world, the difficulties of publication, and the hard facts of poverty. My lofty ideals – which I now have well under control – my first youthful

enthusiasm – prevented me from seeing the workings of the social machinery. ... You will have to learn that behind all those fine things we once dreamed of there are human intrigues, and passions, and necessities. You will find yourself involved, willy-nilly, in the horrible struggle of book against book, man against man, party against party, and you must fight your way systematically unless you want to find yourself deserted by your own party. These mean contests are disillusioning.<sup>469</sup>

Lousteau describes modern France to be a world in which “social machinery” determines individual existence, a trope James describes in his 1875 essay on Balzac.

Nonetheless, Lucien fails to apply Lousteau’s lessons. He instead bankrupts both himself and his friend, and he learns a more bitter lesson from Herrera whom he encounters on the road to Paris. Herrera speaks to him of lessons about the exercise of power in the world: “If you had studied history in order to discover the human causes of events,” Herrera tells Lucien, “you would have found precepts for the conduct of your life.”<sup>470</sup> Herrera expresses views promoting self-interest to be the means and ends of all conduct in modern France, views that Madame Merle implicitly affirms in both statement and action in The Portrait of a Lady. In claiming his lessons about the world to have been derived from his observation about the workings of power in post-Revolution France, his views anticipate Madame Merle’s avowal of a historical perspective linked to the French Revolution, as he tells Lucien:

The French in 1793 invented the idea of popular sovereignty, and it ended in the absolute rule of an Emperor. So much for your national history. As to private

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<sup>469</sup> Honore de Balzac, Lost Illusions, trans. Kathlenn Raine (New York: Random House), 248.

<sup>470</sup> Balzac, 657.

morals – Mme Tallien and Mme de Beauharnis both acted in the same way. Napoleon married the one and made her your Empress, but the other he would not even receive, although she was a princess. Napoleon was a sans-culotte in 1793, and donned the iron crown in 1804. The fierce fanatics of Equality or Death in 1792, in 1806 conspired with the Legitimist aristocracy for the restoration of Louis XVIII. ... There has been no logical consistency either in government or in the conduct of individual lives. In fact, you no longer have any morality. In France today success is the supreme justification of any action whatsoever. The act is nothing in itself; all that matters is what other people think about it. And that, young man, brings us to our second precept – have a fair exterior! Conceal the shady side of your life, and present a brilliant façade to the world! Discretion must be the guiding principle of any ambitious man – it is that of our Order, let it be yours!<sup>471</sup>

Herrera bases his claim that popular sovereignty exists as a mere illusion in the face of wide-spread self-interest upon this account of the historical development of France.

In Balzac and in James, characters' views are figured to be illusory to the degree that they mistake subjective aspirations and beliefs for the objective determinations of history. Madame Merle's cynical assertions that Europeanized Americans are "mere parasites crawling over the surface" of Europe invokes the discrepancy that American experience abroad in Europe substitutes bourgeois subjectivity for lived experience in society and experience. After Isabel's conversation with Madame Merle, her journalist friend Henrietta Stackpole makes a very similar claim, directed specifically at Isabel Archer's views of her sense of freedom and independence. At this moment, Isabel has

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<sup>471</sup> Balzac, 660-661.

just inherited seventy thousand pounds from her banker uncle, Daniel Touchett (at Ralph's insistence), and Stackpole correctly claims that the money will reinforce Isabel's conflation of independence and freedom in a way that will disconnect her from any sense of concrete reality:

“The peril for you is that you live too much in the world of your own dreams. You're not enough in contact with reality – with the toiling, striving, suffering, I may even say sinning world that surrounds you. You're too fastidious; you've too many graceful illusions. Your newly-acquired thousands will shut you up more and more to the society of a few selfish and heartless people who will be interested in keeping them up.”<sup>472</sup>

When Isabel responds, asking literally, “what are my illusions?”, her question not only reinforces Henrietta's claims that Isabel lacks “contact with reality.” It also posits that what Isabel has experienced thus far in her life is “not reality” – and it suggests that what she may experience later will be “reality.” Henrietta's response, in turn, opposes “reality” to Isabel's sense of romance, which Henrietta identifies to be the source of Isabel's illusions:

“Well,” said Henrietta, “you think you can lead a romantic life, that you can live by pleasing yourself and pleasing others. You'll find you're mistaken. Whatever life you lead you must put your soul in it – to make any sort of success of it; and from the moment you do that it ceases to be romance, I assure you: it becomes grim reality! And you can't always please yourself; you must sometimes please other people. That, I admit, you're very ready to do; but there's another thing that's still more important – you must often *dis*please others. You must always be

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<sup>472</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 188.

ready for that – you must never shrink from it. That doesn't suit you at all – you're too fond of admiration, you like to be thought well of. You think we can escape disagreeable duties by taking romantic views – that's your great illusion, my dear. But we can't. You must be prepared on many occasions in life to please no one at all – not even yourself.<sup>473</sup>

Stackpole's response importantly distinguishes between reality and romance, a distinction James had directed at Hawthorne in his 1879 study, by which he characterized Hawthorne's fiction and other writing similarly to be lacking in "reality." In comments on The Blithedale Romance, for example, James notes:

As the action advances, in The Blithedale Romance, we get too much out of reality, and cease to feel beneath our feet the firm ground of an appeal to our own vision of the world, our observation. I should have liked to see the story concern itself more with the little community in which its earlier scenes are laid, and avail itself of so excellent an opportunity for describing unhackneyed specimens of human nature.<sup>474</sup>

In claiming that Hawthorne's novel gets "too much out of reality," James suggests apprehension of "reality" to be a guiding principle for the more "critical" writer of the post-Civil War generation of American writers.

We note in James's appropriation of European novels – not only Balzac but especially George Eliot – his purposes in producing a more critical sense of reality. Nowhere is this more evident than in Isabel's vigil (chapter 42), which is not only reminiscent of Dorothea Brooke's vigil in Middlemarch (chapter 80), but it also suggests

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<sup>473</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 188.

<sup>474</sup> Henry James, Hawthorne, 564.

Lost Illusions in its characterization of money and capital to be the grounds of a kind of determinative history. In narrating Isabel's vigil, James adapts European figurations of history in terms of money as grounds for his character's disillusionment. While Dorothea Brooke's vigil turns upon what she will do with her inheritance from deceased husband Casaubon, Isabel's vigil retrospectively reflects upon the ways that money – the arbiter of social class – deriving from banking capital has determined her present state in marriage to Osmond. This temporal shift is not as significant as the fact that both heroines – Eliot's Dorothea Brooke and James's Isabel Archer – understand their situation to be determined by money and class relations.

Leading to the scene, Isabel has recognized, first, that Osmond had in fact married her primarily because of her wealth, and that he also detested her “free” expressions of thought; second, that he wished her to help marry off his daughter, Pansy, to her former suitor, Lord Warburton; and three, that Madame Merle had in fact not acted disinterestedly in putting Osmond and Isabel in each other's way, but that she shares an intimacy with Osmond that to her remains vague (though she will learn from Countess Gemini later the actual circumstances linking Osmond and Madame Merle). Isabel decides that the inheritance from Daniel Touchett had “burdened” her and prompted her to seek to bestow it on someone else, Gilbert Osmond:

As she looked back on the passion of those full weeks she perceived in it a kind of maternal strain – the happiness of a woman who felt that she was a contributor, that she came with charged hands. But for her money, as she saw to-day, she would never have done it. And then her mind wandered off to poor Mr. Touchett, sleeping under English turf, the beneficent author of infinite woe! For this was

the fantastic fact. At bottom her money had been a burden, had been on her mind, which was filled with the desire to transfer the weight of it to some other conscience, to some more prepared receptacle. What would lighten her own conscience more effectually than to make it over to the man with the best taste in the world? Unless she should have given it to a hospital there would have been nothing better she could do with it; and there was no charitable institution in which she had been as much interested in as Gilbert Osmond.<sup>475</sup>

Isabel here reflects upon how the possession of an inheritance paradoxically has determined her in a way that made her less “free” than ever before. In structuring the narrative in such a way that Isabel’s inheritance would prove to be her greatest “burden,” James undermines liberal “money is freedom” ideology.

In comprehending these relationship as the basis for her unhappy marriage, Isabel’s discovery prompts her to re-evaluate her beliefs: “Isabel’s cheek burned when she asked herself if she had really married on a factitious theory, in order to do something appreciable with her money.”<sup>476</sup> “Doing something” with money as an end in itself strongly suggests a possessive attitude, one that Isabel had not initially embraced. Now, though, she recognizes that this possessive, individualistic conception of freedom resulted in her being “captured.”<sup>477</sup> In the denouement to the narrative, Isabel acquires greater knowledge of the degree to which she had not acted “freely.”

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<sup>475</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 358.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid.

## 5.8 ISABEL ARCHER “EN L’AIR”

In both the 1881 novel and its revision in the 1908 “New York Edition,” Isabel leaves Caspar Goodwood on the lawn of Gardencourt, having gained a sense of purpose about what she will now do. At the moment Isabel’s kiss from Goodwood ends, she literally gains clarity, and with it, a sense of freedom; as the narrator notes, “But when darkness returned she was free.” Subsequently, her actions are decisive:

She never looked about her; she only darted from the spot. There were lights in the windows of the house; they shone far across the lawn. In an extraordinary short time – for the distance was considerable – she had moved through the darkness (for she saw nothing) and reached the door. Here only she paused. She looked all about her; she listened a little; then she put her hand on the latch. She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path.<sup>478</sup>

With this sequence of short declarative sentences concluding the novel’s penultimate scene, James concludes the story of Isabel Archer. With the exception of an alteration of “darted away” for “darted,” this passage appears exactly the same in both the 1881 and the 1908 editions of the novel.

The final paragraphs of both editions also narrate Goodwood speaking two days later with Isabel’s American journalist friend, Henrietta Stackpole, at her London residence, Pratt’s Hotel. Goodwood explains, saying, “I was in hopes I should find Mrs. Osmond,” to which Henrietta that responds Isabel had just left for Rome. She adds cheerfully, “Look here, Mr. Goodwood ... just you wait!” While the 1881 novel ends

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<sup>478</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 489-490.

with the line, “On which he looked up at her,” in the 1908 edition the narrator renders this moment more ironically:

On which he looked up at her – but only to guess from her face, with a revulsion, that she simply meant he was young. She stood shining at him with that cheap comfort, and it added, on the spot, thirty years to his life. She walked him away with her, however, as if she had given him now the key to patience.<sup>479</sup>

This final scene in which Caspar Goodwood visits Henrietta Stackpole’s lodgings, with whom he has been in correspondence for years over Isabel, registers not only his persistence in his pursuit of her. It also reinforces both of these American characters’ inability to perceive change in others or to change themselves. Even after Isabel “darts” from Goodwood one final time, he seeks Isabel at Henrietta’s residence, and Henrietta seems to encourage him still with boundlessly-optimistic final words. That James appended the final paragraph with the narrator’s ironic observation that Henrietta’s words seemed to age Goodwood “thirty years” – and only apparently provided him with “the key to patience” – heightens each characters’ adherence to past hopes and desires, and their refusal to accept what the changes in Isabel’s decisions mean for herself and for them.

J. Hillis Miller claims the novel offers no stable, univocal, reliable evidence that would definitively explain Isabel’s decision and her acts in deciding to return to Rome. Miller offers his judgment as a consequence of close reading her “moment of decision,” by which he identifies an aporia in the narration of Isabel’s decision to return to Rome. Until the final scenes of this last chapter, with her husband Gilbert Osmond in Rome and Ralph now dead, Isabel does not know exactly what she will do. Caspar Goodwood’s

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<sup>479</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 490.

arrival on the scene at Gardencourt, his imploring her to come live with him, and particularly his kiss, prompts her to act. Miller cites the final paragraph of the penultimate scene of the 1908 edition of the novel in its entirety:

He glared at her a moment through the dusk, and the next instant she felt his arms about her and his lips on her own lips. His kiss was like white lightning, a flash, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed; and it was extraordinarily as if, while she took it, she felt each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence, justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession. So had she heard of those wrecked and under water following a train of images before they sink. But when darkness returned she was free.<sup>480</sup>

Miller observes James's narrator indicating that the moment of Goodwood's kiss provides Isabel with purpose and knowledge: "she had not known where to turn; but she knew now." While the narrator says knowledge transpired for Isabel, he does not reveal exactly what kind of knowledge the kiss produces. The next paragraph shifts the scene to two days later, in narration of Goodwood and Henrietta's final conversation that consequentially provides a counterpoint to Isabel's final decision.

Miller proposes three possible explanations for Isabel's decision he says are supportable by the text, but he also concludes no one explanation excludes the others. In the first explanation, Isabel returns to Rome in order to remain consistent with her moral principles and her marriage vows; in the second, she returns as a rejection of Goodwood, whose assertions of masculine sexuality she fears; and in the third, Isabel returns to Rome as fatalistic acceptance of cultural limitations, as Miller notes, "[t]he trans-Atlantic

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<sup>480</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, 489.

society within which Isabel is embedded does not allow the freedom and openness to experience Isabel desires.”<sup>481</sup> For Miller, the aporia in narration renders final, conclusive judgment about any three explanation to be indefensible.

Miller examines this “undecidable” scene from The Portrait of a Lady in order to formulate more general lessons about close reading, criticism, and ethics in reading. On the one hand, close reading in the sense Miller ascribes to Ruben Brower potentially condemns the critic to utter silence before the text, as Miller notes, “as soon as you say anything at all about a literary text, you have gone beyond the text and have said something about it that is, strictly speaking, unwarranted.”<sup>482</sup> In the example of Isabel’s decision in response to Goodwood’s kiss the critic cannot posit with any certainty exactly what her motivation, intention, or goals may now be. In proceeding from “undecidability,” any interpretation a critic may offer about this penultimate scene abrogates the text itself, which provides only ambiguous grounds for any statement about her final act.

Although the moment is “undecidable,” its ambiguity need not render the novel unreadable; as Miller suggests, linguistic ambiguity may be highly generative and productive of reading. For Paul de Man, in fact, all interpretation proceeds from the ambiguity inherent in the discrepancy between literal and figurative characteristics of literary language, and Miller invokes his rhetorical conceptualization of reading to observe how the “undecidable” scene of Isabel’s decision actually makes the demand upon the reader to interpret it, or to act as a critic: “How Isabel got from the kiss to the knowledge remains an impenetrable. The reader must construct a bridge from the kiss to

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<sup>481</sup> Miller, Literature as Conduct, 75-76.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

the knowledge and the decision, or to the knowledge-decision. The reader is free to do that and is even enjoined to do so.”<sup>483</sup> In perfect freedom a reader may choose as his or her act not “to read closely” the novel and not to “construct a bridge” connecting the kiss to knowledge; but, this limited reading would be literally “irresponsible” to the text as it does not “respond” to the actual words or workings of language of the text. Reading that responds to a text, literally “responsible” reading, places demands upon the reader requiring commitment to read, even in the face of a literary text’s inherent “undecidability.” This kind of active commitment to the text “enjoins” the reader to examine, to engage with, and to “read” closely its actual words. This enjoinder is not primarily a political or ideological relationship, but as Miller shows, it is an ethical relationship.

Miller, whose purpose has been to evaluate “moments of decision” in the novel, notably does not consider the other significant aporias in its conclusion, notably the narrator’s silence upon Isabel’s future once she returns to Rome, nor the gap occurring in the narrator’s shift in scenes from Isabel “darting from” Goodwood after his kiss at Gardencourt to his presence “two days” later at Henrietta Stackpole’s London residence at Pratt’s Hotel. Miller does not take up, in effect, the moments of the narrative following Isabel’s departure, nor does he attempt to interpret the ways that James has left his heroine en l’air or its significance.

In my interpretation of James’s The Portrait of a Lady, this conclusion devolves the inscribed ethical relations of the novel upon the reader, who having finished the narrative arrives face-to-face with the situation of Isabel returning to Rome as an act instantiating her profound sense of freedom in contingency. As the novel expresses this

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<sup>483</sup> Miller, Literature as Conduct, 81.

figure of contingent freedom in the narrator's narration of Isabel's act, the text offers a model of the contingent freedom of the reader, the would-be interpreter who commits himself or herself to actually reading the text. Far from being an oversight on the part of James's authorship, the novel produces a figure of contingent freedom in leaving Isabel en l'air that responds to the actual world in which he places her.

As a figure, the character of Isabel Archer responds to definite historical circumstances and it instantiates a definite world situation, particularly as the narrator tells how Isabel's experience of freedom has been circumscribed by determinants of social class and capital, which importantly the narrator characterizes to instantiate an ethics – that of possessive individualism – which the final contingent figure of freedom in the novel (Isabel en l'air but en route to Rome) opposes.

If we are to actually “read closely” the novel, as Miller implores critics to do, the knowledge Goodwood's kiss imparts to Isabel may be not so much knowledge understandable in terms of reason, but rather it may be a perceptual knowledge comprehensible only in experiential terms – which importantly, at this moment, the narrator says is her experience of freedom at a moment of literal darkness. Reading again the “undecidable” scene of Goodwood's kiss and Isabel's departure, the narrator notes the kiss entails this freedom: “when darkness returned she was free.” The narrator's image of “darkness” plays off the “white lightning” metaphor describing Goodwood's kiss, and the opposition of light to dark suggests the paradox of Isabel's experience of freedom at this decisive moment in which the narrator says Isabel then acts: “She never looked about her; she only darted from the spot.”

James's leaving Isabel "in the air" in the conclusion at once fulfills the narrative in its 55-chapter development at the same time that it articulates the novel's terms of engagement with the world in a figure of contingent freedom expressive of worldly, secular modernity. The conclusion to the novel, leaving Isabel en l'air in an undetermined state of suspension as to what her course of action will be, instantiates in a single concrete figure her sense of freedom and its possibilities that she had understood primarily in abstract conceptualizations and general feelings of detachment until this moment of commitment to a course of action. It is a figure that contrasts strongly with the narrator's characterization of her concept of freedom early in the novel, which he notes to be her wish to experience the world without a feeling of fear or error. That Isabel's freedom requires connection with the world suggests the novel's criticism of an ideological figurations of freedom in liberal "natural law" thought purporting the individual and his or her "freedom" to be the material basis of society.

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