

DESOLATE THEATRICALITY: STAGING FEELING AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN
THE LATE NOVELS OF HENRY JAMES

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Daining Lily Cui

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Daining Lily Cui, Ph. D.

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This dissertation argues that Henry James's late novels produce the textual effects of subjectivity (feeling, a sense of psychological depth) while dissolving the subject who ostensibly experiences them. James's incorporation of dramatic point of view into the novel is widely recognized as a foundational moment for narrative theory, but it has rarely been analyzed in conjunction with the theatrical structure of consciousness that emerges in late Jamesian characterization. James presents character through various theatrical means—for instance, by transferring the work of characterization from narration to dialogue or objectifying a character's consciousness as a building with which she interacts. In the same gesture, however, he dematerializes the subject who is thereby being made available; the proliferating dialogue only more insistently announces a character's disappearance from the diegetic space of the novel, and the building that ostensibly figures consciousness threatens to collapse amid a dizzying involution of alternative referents.

Processes of theatrical objectification and dematerialization are therefore inextricably linked in late James. In economics, dematerialization refers to a reduction in the amount of material required to serve a given function; in James, that material is most often human, whether it be a consciousness whose perspective is never actually inhabited by the narrator who seems to be dwelling in it, or a character who literally disappears from the pages of a novel in order for her "development" to be narratively

expedited. Despite James's famed prolixity in the service of elaborating consciousness, much of his late prose is dedicated to registering the effects of material that has pointedly disappeared or never existed. My dissertation approaches James's late novels as sites of persistence of feelings and textual effects that, by rights, should not have survived their unauthoring. In fact, a more intense pathos may emerge to register the affective austerity seen in James's late works.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Daining Lily Cui received her B.A. from New York University in 2006.

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Introduction: Embarrassments to Fiction

Nature itself dictated the response of that barbarian to whom were vaunted the magnificences of the circus and the games established at Rome. “Don’t the Romans,” asked this fellow, “have wives or children?” The barbarian was right. People think they come together in the theatre, and it is there that they are isolated. It is there that they go to forget their friends, neighbors, and relations in order to concern themselves with fables, in order to cry for the misfortunes of the dead, or to laugh at the expense of the living.

—JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU, *LETTER TO M. D’ALEMBERT ON THE THEATRE*

Henry James’s late style weds intensity of feeling to the elaboration of consciousness. As is often the case in his fictions, however, the marriage is a troubled one. It is difficult to say where or how the two parties make contact; that they do at all seems vouchsafed only by the unease attending the question. On a first inspection, the stylistic and the emotive aspects of late James appear at cross purposes. The numberless recursions, syntactical ambiguities, and pointed theatricality that characterize the late style are constantly in the process of dismantling the highly refined consciousnesses they simultaneously help to construct. At the same time, feeling survives these tumults—but whose feeling is it? And how does it come about? While the experience of reading James has rightly been described as wrenching, this potency of response seems to belie the late fiction’s thoroughgoing excision of subjective depth. Consciousness, rendered through free indirect discourse, shades visibly into and out of the texture of James’s language. It is a paradox of the late novels that characters like Milly Theale and Maggie Verver, evocative and “memorable” as they are as individuals, are in fact strongly deindividualized. Their voices, as is

often noted, are interchangeable with other characters', and what little we glean of their personal histories seems far less to determine their present thoughts, emotions, and actions than do the highly wrought logic of Jamesian figuration and the grammar of desire. Psychology does not pertain in the world of the late fiction. Feeling, then, attaches to something, but it is not to *character*; or rather, if characters do magnetize feeling, they are characters that emphatically can never be extrapolated or distinguished from the *process of characterization*. Insofar as "[c]haracter," for James, "is action," the action of the late fiction is what takes place within the structure of spectatorship that shapes narration; relations between people; and the self-relation that constitutes consciousness.¹ Spectatorial scenes abound, externalizing what is usually conceived as the interior Jamesian world of thought and feeling. The late style, I will argue, renders characters not as subjects of psychological depth but as explicitly theatrical subjects and objects, yet this theatrical materializing and dematerializing of the centers of consciousness intensifies rather than etiolates the feeling surrounding these characters.

Theatricality occupies an avowedly privileged place in James's narrative theory. James's failed foray into playwriting and his subsequent transmutation of dramatic form into narrative technique have become a familiar story, one that has become not only central to James scholarship but foundational to theories of the novel. In the standard account, the established novelist James is left traumatized by the disastrous London premiere of his play *Guy Domville* (1895), where an unsympathetic audience rains abuse on the humiliated author. Abandoning the stage but holding fast to drama, James imports into the form of the novel a dramatic organizing principle: "the *scenic method*...my absolute, my imperative, my *only* salvation."² Stories are to be organized around dramatic scenes, with "only relevant stage 'properties'" included in

¹ James, "Anthony Trollope," 1336.

² James, *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, 167.

descriptions of the physical environment.³ The novels produced during this fertile period, influentially deemed the “major phase” by F.O. Matthiessen, are still widely regarded as the culmination of James’s novelistic practice and theory. In lieu of recounting the action of the material world, James’s late works—*The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904)—stage the “drama of...consciousness”⁴ through a type of perspectival alchemy: the “mystic conversion” of an objectively “mild adventure” into the “stuff of drama or, even more delightful word still, of ‘story.’”⁵ The primary mechanism of this conversion is what we would call free indirect discourse. In the Prefaces to the New York Edition (1907-9) of his works, James elaborates and ultimately champions a novel form purged of the Victorian novel’s officious narration (and narrator) and consisting instead of *scenes* organized around a single point of view or “centering consciousness.” For the early- to mid-century literary critics who enshrined James’s reputation, the novel as we know it is born out of James’s abortive encounter with the stage. The Master emerges from the immolation of the failed playwright.

Pat as this teleological history may be, I am less interested in adding to the many illuminating revisions of this account that already exist than in pressing further upon the question of theatricality’s role in the late fiction—in particular, the theatricality of consciousness. James’s formal investment in dramatic method is echoed thematically by his frequent use of the *theatrum mundi* trope, the classical conceit best known in the form of Shakespeare’s “All the world’s a stage.” The distinction between types of theatrical engagement is significant. In 1915, the year before his death, James wrote to a newspaper editor: “I’m afraid you impute to me a more continued interest in the theatre than I am conscious of, or have been for long; I am only now,

³ Edel, *Henry James: A Life*, 434.

⁴ James, *The Art of the Novel*, 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

and in a deeply obscured and discouraged way, interested in the drama—which is in our conditions so very different a thing.”⁶ Versions of this sentiment can be found in his letters and notebooks of the time. What James called *drama* was an aesthetic experience of perspectival circumscription and intensification that should prevail in art as it might in much of life. An oft-cited passage in his memoir *A Small Boy and Others* (1913) places an eleven-year-old James in the role of spectator as a cousin is scolded by her father:

“Come now, my dear; don’t make a scene—I *insist* on your not making a scene!” That was all the witchcraft the occasion used, but the note was none the less epoch-making. The expression, so vivid, so portentous, was one I had never heard—it had never been addressed to us at home; and who should say now what a world one mightn’t at once read into it? It seemed freighted to sail so far; it told me so much about life. Life at these intensities clearly became “scenes”; but the great thing, the immense illumination, was that we could make them or not as we chose.⁷

Scenes and the making thereof were a totem of artistic freedom and aesthetic distinction. *Theatre*, on the other hand, referred to the contemporary theatrical culture that James perceived as having rejected him, as well as to the kind of work that did achieve popular success (for instance, Oscar Wilde’s *An Ideal Husband*, whose premiere James attended on the night of *Guy Domville*’s devastatingly poor reception). The distinction between drama and theatre as sketched by James can be usefully elaborated by examining a separate but imbricated pair of terms: theatricality and performance. These concepts, whose tense interdigitation has been the subject of much recent critical discussion, are productive to the extent that the slippery medial, modal, and disciplinary vocabularies clustering around each can be provisionally distinguished even as they tend to shade into one another. Following a brief overview of the history of this debate, I

⁶ James, *The Scenic Art*, 217-8n.

⁷ James, *Autobiography: A Small Boy and Others, Notes of a Son and Brother, The Middle Years*, 106-7.

will argue that the phenomenality of James's late style constitutes a theatre of consciousness that imports the material principles of performance into narrative theatricality.

In contemporary criticism and scholarship, *theatricality* has achieved a ubiquity resulting in, as Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis note, an "extraordinary range of meanings, making it everything from an act to an attitude, a style to a semiotic system, a medium to a message."⁸ Often deployed in the form of the *theatrum mundi* topos, theatricality as a metaphor for various social phenomena has become so common as to be "almost transparent."⁹ While this contextual flexibility has enabled the term's deployment across various disciplinary and axiological contexts, it also, as Janelle Reinelt observes, makes for a "diffuse history" that risks confounding any "prospective genealogy of this discourse."¹⁰ In particular, valuations of theatricality have been diverse and can suffer from a certain historical amnesia related, perhaps, to the term's vernacularity; theatricality's detractors,¹¹ for instance, often seem unreflectively to ventriloquize classical critiques of theatre's perceived polarities—"both its tendency to excess and its emptiness, its surplus as well as its lack."¹² Due in part to the paucity of technical delineation, the import of theatricality as both a term and a concept seemed to wane in the 1980s with the emergence of performance studies and of *performance* as a new conceptual polestar.

While itself open to varied and sometimes conflicting interpretation and usage, *performance* was from the start a more politically coherent and purposive disciplinary term. The rise of performance studies indicated a shift from the narrower literary focus of theatre studies toward a more inclusive emphasis encompassing anthropological, sociological, and cultural

⁸ Postlewait and Davis, 1.

⁹ Carlson, "The Resistance to Theatricality," 238.

¹⁰ Reinelt, 205.

¹¹ See, for instance, most famously, Fried's *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Jonah Barish's *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice* offers a cogent history of anti-theatrical attitudes in Western cultures.

¹² Postlewait and Davis, 4.

studies scholarship. Much of the subsequent theorization of theatricality arose from the ostensible opposition between the two concepts, an opposition, as Marvin Carlson writes, “usually based on some variation of theater's association with semiotics and formal structures, and that of performance with the inchoate, still uncoded material of life itself.”¹³ Generally, theatre and performance scholars who have most richly theorized the relationship between these two terms tend to draw upon their “productive dissonance”¹⁴ or interlineation rather than their mere opposition. Josette Féral’s seminal articles, “Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified” and “Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language,” formulate theatricality in ways that enfold the resistant materiality of the performative¹⁵ into the process of the theatrical. Féral remarks:

Theatricality does not exist as a pure form, nor does performativity. If ‘pure theatricality’ existed, it would be a repetitive, dead form of art, where all signs would be identifiable, decodable and meaningful—a kind of ‘museum play’ that would recreate old art forms as museum pieces, not as living art forms. . . . On the other hand, a performance based on performativity alone would be carried away by the action itself, without any possibility for the spectator to understand it as a meaningful process linked to signs, codes or references.¹⁶

Theatricality, then, emerges from a “play of ambivalence”¹⁷ between body as legible sign system and body as irreproducible, material singularity; between “meaning and its displacement”;¹⁸ and between sameness and alterity. A dialectical process of materialization and dematerialization emerges wherein, as Erika Fischer-Lichte explains, the non-fungible and uncoded live body

¹³ Carlson, 242.

¹⁴ Reinelt, 201.

¹⁵ While not synonymous with “performance,” the performative is used by Féral and her translator more or less interchangeably. For a critical history of these terms, see Reinelt.

¹⁶ Féral, “Foreword,” 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

resists total legibility, at the same time that this “human body can, indeed, be recalled by another body or even an object, and an object can be replaced by another random object or a human body because, in their capacity as theatrical signs, they can signify one another.”¹⁹ Of the many rigorous and indeed celebratory theories of theatricality, Féral’s is among the most expansive in her definitional scope. Theatricality for her is not limited to the stage or even to a more catholic catalog of theatrical practices or events, but can arise out of any “act of recognition on the part of [a] spectator”²⁰ that constitutes a “definite will to transform things.”²¹ Most usefully for an understanding of late Jamesian fiction, Féral posits theatricality not as a property, but as a certain kind of “*process*”—one inaugurated by a “‘gaze’ that postulates and creates a distinct, virtual space belonging to the other, from which fiction can emerge.”²² The spectator, crucially, is an active and indispensable participant in creating the theatrical. Here, as in the eleven-year-old James’s discovery, “scenes” and the phantasmatic frame that predicates them are things “we could make...as we choose.”

James’s late style, I would argue, stages precisely this process, whereby shifting and often nested relations of spectatorship and action continually posit and dissolve the material of the individual character. While the *theatrum mundi* topos often explicitly appears in the late fiction, the significance of the relationship between spectator and actor and of this relationship’s continual rearticulation exceeds this overt thematic concern. Theatricality lies at the heart not only of relations between people, but of the principal hallmark of late Jamesian fiction: the action of consciousness. I argue in the vein of antipsychological readings of James (which I discuss further below) that the Jamesian subject is predicated not on psychological depth, but on

¹⁹ Fischer-Lichte, 129-43.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²² Féral, “Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language,” 97.

theatrical relations with the self. Although the language of depth certainly abounds across his oeuvre, its relationship with surface is not necessarily one of opposition or even verticality, as an exchange from the early novella *Washington Square* (1880) demonstrates:

“Shall a geometrical proposition relent? I am not so superficial.”

“Doesn’t geometry treat of surfaces?” asked Mrs. Almond, who, as we know, was clever, smiling.

“Yes; but it treats of them profoundly.”²³

Slipperier still is the false symmetry of the passage in the essay “The Future of the Novel” regarding the “revolution taking place in the position and outlook of women—and taking place much more deeply in the quiet than even the noise on the surface demonstrates.”²⁴ The “surface” is a sounding-board for the din of revolution, but there is a deceptive lack of corresponding “depths” in which the real substance of women’s changed circumstances goes quietly about its business; “deeply” stands in something other than hieratic opposition to “on the surface.” Elsewhere, James describes women as “delicate and patient observers; they hold their noses close, as it were, to the texture of life. They feel and perceive the real with a kind of personal tact, and their observations are recorded in a thousand delightful volumes.”²⁵ This close-nosed observation gestures toward the penetrative, inward trajectory of olfactory acuity, only more strongly to evoke the image of the “nose in a book,” thereby coupling the richness of novelistic observation with a flat, albeit textured, surface. Most significantly, in those provinces of the novelistic enterprise that we might categorize as depth psychology, James often has recourse to the spatially oriented idiom of the theatre—hence his preferred term for the crucial narrative

²³ James, *Washington Square*, 115.

²⁴ James, “The Future of the Novel,” *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers & English Writers*, 109.

²⁵ James, “Anthony Trollope,” *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers & English Writers*, 1333.

technique that we would call *free indirect discourse*: “going behind.”²⁶ While this trope could certainly be read as interiorizing—as in going behind the veil, or standing behind the “dead wall” of the “house of fiction”²⁷—the preponderance of backs and moments when backs are scrutinized in James’s novels²⁸ suggests that his narrative goings-behind fashion themselves after a similar spatial orientation, and find obverses to be similarly perspicuous.²⁹ This formulation casts the narrative elaboration of individual consciousness not as a submersion in moral and psychological “abysses,” to use another favored Jamesian term, but rather as a furtive reconnoitering of exteriors. Indeed, when James introduces the term *going behind* in the Preface to *The Tragic Muse* (1890), he emphasizes that his *narrator* never goes behind the eponymous muse, the actress Miriam Rooth, but that his other main characters do attempt to do so—while the narrator, in turn, only goes behind *them*.³⁰ This layering of *behindness*—the narrator goes behind a character who is a spectator, who goes behind a character who is an actress—requires a mixed ontology that corresponds to a mixture of theatrical and narrative conceits. In James’s account of *The Tragic Muse*’s mode of characterization, an immaterial narrator’s going behind an embodied character operates within the same phenomenal grammar as that character’s going behind another embodied character. This admixture suggests that the generic coordinates of

²⁶ James discusses “going behind” in the Prefaces to the New York Editions of *The Tragic Muse* and *The Awkward Age*.

²⁷ James, *The Art of the Novel*, 46.

²⁸ These moments occur throughout *The Awkward Age*, as well as *The Sacred Fount*. I will make note of two especially suggestive instances in the latter. In the first, the first-person narrator notices “a gentleman whose identity was attested by his back, a back somehow replete for us, at the moment, with a guilty significance” (James, *The Sacred Fount*, 40). The second example is arguably more complex; the narrator comments on his having “‘studied’ Mrs. Brissenden’s back. Study of a profound sort would appear needed in truth to account for it. It was as handsome and affirmative that she at once met and evaded my view, but was not the affirmation (as distinguished from the handsomeness, which was a matter of stature and mass,) fairly downright and defiant? Didn’t what I saw strike me as saying straight *at* me, as far as possible, ‘I *am* young—I *am* and I *will* be; see, *see* if I’m not; there, there, there!’ – with ‘there’s’ as insistent and rhythmical as the undulations of her fleeing presence, as the bejewelled nod of her averted brow?” (137). One could read the narrator’s sense of his gaze being cannily “at once met and evaded” as an affective correlate for the ambivalence of “going behind” as a figure for the investigation of consciousness.

²⁹ Trask mines *The Awkward Age* for anal economies, and discusses moments when “backs” are brought to the fore and, catachrestically, penetrated (105-38).

³⁰ James, *The Tragic Muse*, 91.

Jamesian free indirect discourse were always unreliably located along axes of materiality, even prior to the relative outlier-case of the highly spectral *The Awkward Age* (1899).

It bears emphasizing that the first instance of the going-behind trope aligns the Jamesian narrator with embodied individuals within a fiction who attempt to observe an actress. Individual characters, by the logic of this term, possess the same givenness for the narrator that they do for each other; they are objects of sight and investigation that exist in some sense prior to the narrator's spectatorship—"interesting him and appealing to him," writes James in an approving paraphrase of Ivan Turgenev, "just as they were and by what they were."³¹ All this is to say that, even bracketing the idiosyncratic case of *The Awkward Age* in which the narrative function is explicitly delegated to a hypothetical "spectator" or "observer," it would be more accurate to describe Jamesian narratorial behindness as a spectatorial position than to speak of a plunge into hidden depths. Of course, "going behind" is exactly what a theatre-goer cannot hope to accomplish from his fixed vantage point. The term, then, proves ironically apt for the "novelist's trade": as James takes pains to note in his Preface, there is no narrator in the theatre (at least not in the late nineteenth century), and hence there can be no going behind—that is, no elaboration of consciousness. Instead, the theatre permits only the "objectivity" of "direct presentation" through dialogue (and, of course, the actor's physicality). James's metaphor presents the voyeuristic poring over of a particular surface—often a character's literal back—as the privileged practice of the novelist, a practice that is understood in terms of the physical stage, but that presumably cannot be discharged by the theatre. I would suggest, however, that the fraught phenomenality of *going behind* inherits its strangeness from the dialectical composition of theatrical performance; Jamesian narrativity, too, proceeds from the presumed starting point of the encountered, irreproducible materiality of the embodied individual, only to remind us

³¹ James, *The Art of the Novel*, 42.

constantly of this individual's implantation in and construction through a certain technology that renders their actions and self minimally legible—in theatre, a diffuse system of repeatable signs and conventions, and in James, free indirect discourse.

Feeling and theatricality have been thought to be essentially entwined since Aristotle's enjoinder that tragedy evoke pity and fear. The *Poetics* is clear about what should be prompting these feelings and where they should be directed: "the most important devices that tragedy uses to affect the emotions are parts of the story—namely, reversals and discoveries."³² Plot, Aristotle repeatedly insists, is the emotional fulcrum and hence the most important element in tragedy, with moral character coming in a distant second: "The point is action, not character."³³ Even the unperformed text should be able to produce catharsis through the strength and *consistency* of the plot.³⁴ Yet with regard to the tragic emotions, he specifies that pity "has to do with undeserved misfortune," while fear "has to do with someone who is like ourselves."³⁵ James wrote of the novel: "Character, in any sense in which we can get at it, is action, and action is plot, and any plot which hangs together, even if it pretend to interest us only in the fashion of a Chinese puzzle, plays upon our emotion, our suspense, by means of personal references. We care what happens to people only in proportion as we know what people are."³⁶ While James seems to be writing explicitly contra Aristotle, he arguably describes and prescribes a daisy-chain of Aristotelian effects that constitutes narrative: plot is an effect of character—what people do as a consequence of being themselves—and emotions are an effect of plot.

These links are rarely so tidily maintained in the late fiction, however. This dissertation is

³² Aristotle, 25.

³³ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 24, 33.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁶ James, "Anthony Trollope," *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, and English Writers*, 1336.

interested primarily in the difficulty of precisely identifying the origin or site of emotive effects, even as feeling tends to be amplified by this unlocalizability. Emotion's worrying vagrancy has been helpfully theorized by opponents of the theatre. Rousseau famously condemned theatre for, among other failings, its faulty claim that moral probity could be instilled through its passionate exhibition:

The harm for which the theatre is reproached is not precisely that of inspiring criminal passions but of disposing the soul to feelings which are too tender and which are later satisfied at the expense of virtue. The sweet emotions that are felt are not in themselves a definite object, but they produce the need for one. They do not precisely cause love, but they prepare the way for its being experienced. They do not choose the person who ought to be loved, but they force us to make this choice.³⁷

Theatrical emotions, according to Rousseau, are harmful to the extent that they act independently of the characters or dramatic situations in which they originally arise. Virtuous passion depicted onstage infects theatre-goers with a sensitivity to and desire for passion in reality, without also transmitting a propensity for virtue. Moral character may very well be represented in the theatre, but this representation only *relegates* high morality to the stage while promiscuously disseminating the emotions that accompanied it. For Rousseau, the “passions are all sisters”; theatrical emotions are dangerous even if they are not initially attached to corruptive objects, because they “make the heart more sensitive” to *all* strong feeling.³⁸ The particular intention of the original emotion—and it bears emphasizing that in Rousseau's account, theatrical representation *is* emotion's first instance—is irrelevant.

The relationship between theatricality and feeling, slippery as it has proven, is often implicitly adduced in critiques of late James. Of the many readers the late style has succeeded in

³⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 51.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

confounding, one of the more sympathetic—and by her account, more genuinely confounded—was James’s close friend Edith Wharton:

His latest novels, for all their profound moral beauty, seemed to me more and more lacking in atmosphere, more and more severed from that thick nourishing human air in which we all live and move. The characters in *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl* seem isolated in a Crookes tube for our inspection: his stage was cleared like that of the *Théâtre-Français* in the good old days when no chair or table was introduced that was not *relevant to the action* (a good rule for the stage, but an unnecessary embarrassment to fiction). Preoccupied by this, I one day said to him: “What was your idea in suspending the four principal characters in *The Golden Bowl* in the void? What sort of life did they lead when they were not watching each other, and fencing with each other? Why have you stripped them of all the *human fringes* we necessarily trail after us through life?”

He looked at me in surprise, and I saw at once that the surprise was painful, and wished I had not spoken. I had assumed that his system was a deliberate one, carefully thought out, and had been genuinely anxious to hear his reasons. But after a pause of reflection he answered in a disturbed voice: “My dear—I didn’t know I had!”³⁹

Wharton’s sentiment has been echoed by James’s detractors in the subsequent century: that the late style is cold, inhuman, devoid of life (life as signaled by those untidy lacinations that real people should be seen to “trail”). F.R. Leavis, an admirer of the earlier *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), complained of the “emptiness” of *The Wings of the Dove*’s (1902) Milly Theale—“she isn’t there”⁴⁰—and wrote of *The Golden Bowl* that James “clearly counts on our taking towards his main persons attitudes that we cannot take without forgetting our finer moral sense, our finer

³⁹ Wharton, 343.

⁴⁰ Leavis, 158.

discriminative feeling for life and personality.”⁴¹ This attitude has proved resilient enough that in 2004, the so-called “Year of Henry James,”⁴² Martin Amis could refer to the “arctic labyrinth known as Late James.”⁴³ What is seen as a failure of realism tends to be imputed to the failings of theatricality; indeed, the language of James’s critics often reproduces that of classical and Enlightenment writings against theatre. It is revealing that Wharton frames the putative poverty of the late style not only through a theatrical comparison, but as an “embarrassment,” subtly reiterating traditional critiques of theatre’s simultaneous hollowness and superfluity—as H.G. Wells famously wrote of James, an “elaborate, copious emptiness.”⁴⁴ This sense of gratuity gratuitously expressed (not just an embarrassment, but an “unnecessary embarrassment”) gives point to an essential irony in the relationship between James’s late style and his late substance: the Jamesian sentence’s apparently interminable elaboration of consciousness does little to diminish the impression of a bare stage, one “cleared” of humanity, of “life” itself. Wharton’s anecdote holds up the exact aesthetic antinomies that James’s experimental and late fiction place in complex relation: a novelistic realism that is the privileged representational form of the human subject on the one hand, and on the other, James’s formal and phenomenal innovation and the subject of this study—a bewilderingly theatrical dematerialization of the human that, as Wharton ironically demonstrates, continually fuels what Rei Terada calls the “economy of pathos,” whereby the perceived absence of emotion within the artwork or the human subject generates an intense “second-order emotion”⁴⁵ in response to this lack. Wharton’s solicitousness toward the characters in *The Golden Bowl* (1904) accomplishes what, in her estimation, James’s novel does

⁴¹ Ibid., 159.

⁴² David Lodge pronounced 2004 “The Year of Henry James” when three novels based on James’s life were published in the same year, including Tóibín’s *The Master*, Hollinghurst’s Man Booker Prize-winning *The Line of Beauty: A Novel*, and Lodge’s own *Author, Author*. This is recounted in Lodge’s *The Year of Henry James: The Story of a Novel*.

⁴³ Amis, “Capo di capi.”

⁴⁴ Wells, 100.

⁴⁵ Terada, 13-4.

not; if his characters lacked the distinction of being “human,” her assessment of their pitiable treatment at the hands of their author provides the emotion that she would prefer to see inscribed objectively within the text.

Whether a feeling is objective or subjective is a question that opens onto crucial philosophical and aesthetic discourses surrounding emotive art. Terada’s work has perhaps done the most to disaggregate emotion from the necessity of an experiencing subject, and in doing so puts paid to antinomies such as objective and subjective, rationality and feeling. “The attraction of objectivity,” Terada writes, “is the flattering mirror it offers to subjectivity”⁴⁶—that is, objectivity reinforces a notion of an interior depth that has its correlate in a delimited external reality. Sianne Ngai’s reading of minor affects like paranoia and disconcertedness shows how the content of these feelings precisely collapses the objective/subjective distinction by asking, “Is the enemy *out there* or *in me*? Confusion about feeling’s objective or subjective status becomes *inherent* to the feeling.”⁴⁷ Similarly, the unease generated by James’s late fiction registers, as Fredric Jameson writes, “how difficult it is for us to escape this fatal prejudice by which we are obliged to decide whether something is subjective or objective from the outset.”⁴⁸ When one complains of the lack of feeling in *The Golden Bowl*, but feels passionately about this lack and, in fact, aims one’s feeling more or less in the direction of the characters who are supposedly short-changed as a result of their insufficiently substantialized humanity, where does that leave the distinction between objective and subjective feeling? But for this terracing effect, the feeling in question would be nameable as pathos; yet its intensity seems to crest as its objectivity diminishes—when it is directed not at a pitiable subject but at the subject’s pitiable absence or attenuation. What this dissertation aims to show in late James is that, as Terada writes,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 96.

⁴⁷ Ngai, 19.

⁴⁸ Jameson, 38.

“theatricality is an attribute of all emotion, not pity alone.”⁴⁹

At this point, I will briefly clarify my use of the terms “feeling,” “emotion,” and “affect,” bracketing for the time being the inevitable tendency of these distinctions to blur, in late James and elsewhere. For the most part, I hold to Terada’s gloss: “by *emotion* we usually mean a psychological, at least minimally interpretive experience whose physiological aspect is *affect*. *Feeling* is a capacious term that connotes both physiological sensations (affects) and psychological states (emotions).”⁵⁰ I will use *feeling* to denote 1) the represented or reported emotional state of characters, 2) the less localized but equally objective tone or mood of a passage or work, as understood by the reader, and 3) an intensity whose site of registration productively ambiguates between an individual character and the scene or passage in which s/he appears. While I use the word *intensity*, a term most often linked with affect, I am interested primarily in how late Jamesian style transposes the type of generalized, non-intentional experience associated with affective, bodily sensation onto the dis- or under-embodied realm of feeling as such. Jameson, drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard, writes: “Affects are singularities and intensities, existences rather than essences, which usefully unsettle the more established psychological and physiological categories.”⁵¹ This work of unsettling takes place in late James at the level not of physiology but of ontology. Therefore, when an adjectival form is needed, I will generally use “emotive” rather than “affective,” as *emotion* does not insist upon an embodied subject quite as strenuously as *affect* does, and to the extent that *emotion* traditionally does invoke an experiencing subject that may not in fact be stably present in the fiction at hand, the specter thereof helpfully limns the process of dematerialization at the heart of Jamesian characterization. So while *feeling* by its very nature can migrate and point across the provisional

⁴⁹ Terada, 37.

⁵⁰ Terada, 4.

⁵¹ Jameson, 35-6.

enclosure of the subject or boundaries between text and reader, indicating both feeling *of* and feeling *about*, *emotion* might act as a productive catachresis, tracing the effects of a subject that consists entirely of the shadow it casts.

Feeling, then, is a crucial problematic in late James insofar as its site of intelligibility and effectivity becomes most richly ambiguous in its moments of greatest intensity. Even the nameable Jamesian *feelings* that sometimes give particular shape and amplitude to *feeling* as such tend, if anything, to exacerbate this muddling of where feeling lies (on the surface or within subjective depths, in oneself or in the world). Out of this catalog—whose items include irritation, embarrassment, excruciation, awkwardness, pain—I would nominate *unease* as the quintessential Jamesian feeling, the one that troublingly blends not only the sense of the self with the sense of the world, but the experience of feeling with the action of thinking, the body with the mind. According to Terada, “the first emotion *is* cognitive difficulty.”⁵² Unease, then, constitutes a structure of feeling in Raymond Williams’s strongly dialectical sense in late James—an unarticulated and unarticulable emergence of effects that have not yet retroactively resolved into originating in either subjectivity or objectivity, knowledge or emotion. Ruth Bernard Yeazell’s incidental uses of the word go a long way toward pinpointing some of the most idiosyncratic qualities and actions of the late style. She writes of F.R. Leavis’s critique of Jamesian metaphors: “Some of our unease – Leavis’s sense that the imagery is not ‘immediate and inevitable’ – stems from the fact that James’s metaphors seem almost invariably responses of the brain, not of the senses.”⁵³ She writes further of *The Golden Bowl*’s Maggie Verver and her metaphorical pagoda: “She knows only that she has begun to feel distinctly uneasy; she is as yet far from knowing why. And she is frightened – frightened both of the feeling itself and of inquiring too closely into

⁵² Terada, 31.

⁵³ Yeazell, 41.

its causes.”⁵⁴ The primacy of unease in late novels like *The Golden Bowl* and *The Wings of the Dove*, which at least maintain a pretext of phenomenal realism, becomes all the more visible in comparison with a consciously fantastical novel like *The Sense of the Past*, where the explicitly fanciful inhabitation of a man’s consciousness by that of his dead doppelgänger allows unease to emerge in its generically specific form as uncanniness and, eventually, to sharpen into overt panic. Unease, then, in its properly inchoate form in the late fiction, locates the fantastic within the realist. It registers the displacement of the subject whose coherence *should* be indexed by her self-contained consciousness, feeling, and demarcation from the world—a displacement from reassuring subjective depths into a theatrical relation of self-difference. Jamesian consciousness’s genre is non-mimetic; its mode is theatrical.

What, then, does a theatrical consciousness look like alongside theatrical forms of feeling? To give these distinctions more concrete form, let us briefly examine two moments in James’s *What Maisie Knew* (1897), a Bildungsroman centering on the burgeoning consciousness of a young girl caught in the middle of her parents’ nasty divorce. Early in the novel, this acute child is positioned as her own captive audience:

So the sharpened sense of spectatorship was the child’s main support, the long habit, from the first, of seeing herself in discussion and finding in the fury of it—she had had a glimpse of the game of football—a sort of compensation for the doom of a peculiar passivity. It gave her often an odd air of being present at her history in as separate a manner as if she could only get at experience by flattening her nose against a pane of glass. (*WM* 90)

The nose not just pressed but flattened against a glass bespeaks the guileless urgency of childhood, but also points toward the phenomenal implications of the *theatrum mundi* topos as

⁵⁴ Ibid., 42.

more generally employed by James. A lifelong theatre-goer and ardent admirer of dramatic form, James, when he does explicitly invoke the language of theatricality and spectatorship, displays none of the moral revulsion of many of his Victorian precursors, and little of the humanistic melancholy that clings to Shakespeare's mere players. Maisie's "peculiar passivity" is an atypical case of Jamesian theatricality marking an attenuation of experience rather than a vouchsafing or a heightening—though even here Maisie's spectatorship is what makes experience, albeit an etiolated version of it, possible. The "compensation" furnished to Maisie in "seeing herself in discussion" consists in the pleasure of being the occasion for an otherwise inaccessible passion, but it also points toward the thrill of specularity—of being able to see oneself *because* of one's externalization into something other, into theatre. Because she sees herself being discussed, Maisie can *see herself*. Figured as a flattening (and notably, the narrator declines to specify which side of the glass the child's nose is flattened against: does she look into or out at herself?), spectatorship is posited in a prosthetic capacity—a "main support"—as the condition and form of self-relation.

Later in the novel, the nose-against-the-glass figure returns with a new ground. Her guardians' impecunity bars Maisie from a formal education, and this state of material exclusion is figured by what appears to be a near replication of the earlier image: "She was to feel henceforth as if she were flattening her nose upon the hard window-pane of the sweet-shop of knowledge" (*WM* 113). Yet the differences are salient. For one thing, the figure now articulates a feeling—Maisie's feeling—and does so in language we can ascribe at least partially to the focalizing character who feels it. Earlier, Maisie's self-theatricalization "gave her often *an odd air*." Aside from the figure illustrating in the next instance a feeling, the actual figure changes because of the change in perspective. When it is a feeling, the nose-against-the-glass figures

Maisie's pitiable awareness of and attitude toward exclusion; when it is an air, it figures an observable attribute of detachment and distance. The image registers a third-person assessment of a character that eventually becomes that character's own feeling. One might also note the difference in tenses: Maisie's "odd air," remarked by a narrator who is distinct from Maisie, occurs in the past imperfect of observation; Maisie's *feeling* is discussed in future terms, from a temporal position that could only be occupied by a narrator with access both to her emotional experience and to the narrative future. Insofar as "access" in this instance names the imbrication of the narrator's language with the character's experience, it closely resembles free indirect discourse. If we might hesitate to call the above sentence free indirect discourse, our hesitation registers the term's inadequacy in the face of an uncomfortably strong perspectival ambiguity. At the least, we can note that the movement of the image from observable trait to experienced feeling is decidedly not a plunge *inward*, but a sidling of the narrative point of view into a discomfiting non-place, neither inside nor outside the character, neither an active participant in her experience nor solely a spectator. (Incidentally, this is akin to the phenomenal position the image describes.)⁵⁵

The realist critique of these elaborations of consciousness is helpfully summarized by one of William James's fraternal ribbings regarding the "rum way" of the late style.⁵⁶ Having read *The Golden Bowl*, William implores his younger brother to "sit down and write a new book, with no twilight or mustiness in the plot, with great vigor and decisiveness in the action, no fencing in the dialogue, no psychological commentaries, and absolute straightness in the style."⁵⁷ No such butch *cri de coeur* was in the offing, as readers of James's ever more "rum" fictional,

⁵⁵ See James Wood's *How Fiction Works* (13-8) for a rich reading of free indirect discourse in another passage in *Maisie*.

⁵⁶ William James, 416.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 463.

autobiographical, and travel writings of the early 1900s can attest. But a number of present-day James critics would aver that “psychological commentaries” are in fact expunged from his late works, indeed from *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl* most thoroughly. I loosely group these critics, among whom I include Leo Bersani, Sharon Cameron, and, more recently, Kevin Ohi and David Kurnick, as the antipsychological school of James criticism. Their work, in effect or explicitly, offers a corrective to prevailing notions of James as the preeminent writer of the “novel of psychological depth,” a form that, as Kurnick notes, has come to seem “tautologically connected with the epithet ‘Jamesian.’”⁵⁸

These critics build on ground definitively broken in Bersani’s 1976 essay “The Jamesian Lie.” Bersani begins by distinguishing James’s fiction from the nineteenth-century novel of ideas; while for George Eliot and Dostoevski moral passions and principles “have an active social life,” James remains “consistently ironic about the independent value of an idea—that is, about an idea presented apart from the desire which it both expresses and disguises.”⁵⁹ This distinction echoes T.S. Eliot’s widely quoted encomium: “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.”⁶⁰ For both Eliot and Bersani, the difference lies partly in James’s pursuit of a sustained perspective through free indirect discourse. In Eliot, the superiority of James’s mind over the sort of “brain” that “swarms with ideas” opposes the action of thinking to the coarse materiality of an infestation by thing-like “ideas.”⁶¹ Yet while Bersani tentatively describes James’s work as “notoriously dense in what I suppose we have to call psychological detail,” he emphasizes its

⁵⁸ Kurnick, “Horrible Impossible: Henry James’s Awkward Stage,” 110.

⁵⁹ Bersani, “The Jamesian Lie,” 128-9.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Holder, 494.

⁶¹ Ibid.

resistance to “an interest in psychological depth,” arguing that the “grounds for what we might think of as ‘vertical’ motive (plunging down ‘into’ personality) eventually disappear from James’s fiction.”⁶² In eliminating the psychological referent for what we think of as motive—the deep personal history that makes individual characters’ actions, speech, and emotions available to our understanding, identification, and sympathy—James produces

a language responsive almost exclusively to the inspirations of its own surfaces. The mind of the Jamesian center of consciousness is free in the sense that it invents and satisfies desires which meet only a minimal resistance from either the external world or internal depths. Language would no longer be principally a reflection or sublimation of given desires; it would promote new versions of being.⁶³

Sharon Cameron resolves Bersani’s taxonomic conflict—that psychological detail proliferates despite the absence of psychological depth—by framing her argument in terms of the late novels’ wholesale dissociation of “consciousness from psychology.”⁶⁴ Cameron finds the central problematic of James’s work to be “[mastery] by conversion, specifically the working on consciousness until it has transformative power” over objects and events in the world as well as over itself.⁶⁵ Power is thus *the* action of Jamesian consciousness, which in turn cannot be understood independently of what it *does*. For Cameron as for Bersani, consciousness in James generates desires either disproportionate to or qualitatively unaccountable by the realist contexts of situation and character in which these desires should, psychologically speaking, originate. Cameron’s claim as to the irrelevance of plot in James extends the depsychologizing move. Character *psychology* is always four-dimensional; its basic premise demands that desires in the present be predicated on an individual’s deep affective history. Dissociating *plot* from

⁶² Bersani, “The Jamesian Lie,” 130.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 146.

⁶⁴ Cameron, 1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

consciousness simply sees this logic through to its conclusion; even the relatively shallow affective history of events unfolding in the novel's present projects too far backward and inward. Yet while Cameron's reading returns again and again to the language of dissociation, it is clear that *some* relationship obtains between plot and problematic—in the case of *The Golden Bowl*, between the adultery plot and a “structural opposition between thinking and speaking.” This relationship, for which Cameron scrupulously leaves negative space in her argument, simply receives no positive definition:

This is not to suggest that the subject of adultery is insufficient to explain the passion the novel generates over it. But it is to say that power seems, in addition, “purely” vested in the novel's exchanges, in what characters speak to each other and what they think in manifest opposition to what they speak. These exchanges, while in one sense absurd without reference to the plot, are, in another sense, perfectly contained by the structural opposition of thinking and speaking which itself seems to generate them....⁶⁶

So while a relationship between plot and problematic cannot be done away with altogether, it is nonetheless true that the problematic itself offers a wholly sufficient account of the novel's real concerns. Bersani makes a similar end-run around this relationship: “It's as if the geometry of human relations *implied* what we call human feelings into existence. The feelings are real enough, but they are, so to speak, the elaborations of surfaces—they have no depth.”⁶⁷ Here I, as these critics arguably do, group together feeling, plot, and character on the one hand, and style and “problematic”—the concerns of the novel as an abstraction of the structural principles of consciousness—on the other. Other ways to formulate this opposition would be realism and modernism, or narrative world and text. Both Bersani and Cameron acknowledge, as against a zero degree of relation, *some* connection between what is traditionally considered the

⁶⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁶⁷ Bersani, “The Jamesian Lie,” 148.

psychological equipment of the realist character (feeling, situation) and the workings of a near-autonomous textuality, but this relation seems 1) *insignificant enough* that it warrants no more than a negative or trivializing acknowledgment (to imagine its absence would be “absurd,” and the feelings are “real enough”), and therefore 2) *crucial enough* to go almost without saying, a relationship of necessity that persists despite not registering any *particular* meaning. This apparent contradiction reformulates the marital crisis with which I opened: what kind of relation obtains between feeling and consciousness?

I propose that it is precisely the theatricality of relations (between characters, within the self, and between consciousness and the narrative fabric) that creates the emotive intensity of late Jamesian fiction. The quality of “excruciation” Susan Sontag attributed to *The Awkward Age* and *The Wings of the Dove*, for instance, originates in the subjective dislocation caused by these nested theatricalities. The coherent psychological subject is not so much altogether absent as it is constantly insisted upon, contested, soliciting emotional response and engendering narrative effects, and dematerializing into the texture of the narrative. Like theatre, the late fiction “deliberately provides an experience of the ‘very process of construction and the conditions underlying it.’”⁶⁸ James famously decried Trollope’s habit of dropping the “illusion” of an internal fictional reality by having his narrator announce that the story was “make-believe,” objecting that these “winks” seemed to disclose the “arbitrary” nature of the events in the novel.⁶⁹ In his own late fiction, however, James constructs a style around the perpetual dematerialization and rematerialization of his painstakingly elaborated individuals. If the Jamesian narrator does not exactly “wink” at us, his characters seem to revolve into and out of the theatrical frame of the realist novel that demands credulity for its contents. Instead of

⁶⁸ Reinelt, 208.

⁶⁹ James, “Anthony Trollope,” [find p#]

attenuating feeling, however, this dynamic heightens it, uncoupling emotional response from the individual character or plot event. Andrew Sofer's writing on theatrical "dark matter"—material that is invisible to audiences but constitutes a "felt absence" responsible for "most of the event we call theatre or performance"—pertains to late Jamesian style, insofar as the material (human and otherwise) in James is never *only* invisible; it is also tantalizingly, provisionally *there*.⁷⁰ Subjectivity in the late novels continually discloses that it is not subjectivity, all the while relying on our responding to it as such. Our response, however, is precisely to these subjectivities' transience, their dislocation, their provisionality. The dynamic recalls Bersani's claim that "Few things are more difficult than to...prevent our connection to [others] from degenerating into a relationship."⁷¹ It is this kind of tenuous (or rather, tenuously tenuous—threatening to stabilize) connection that predicates not only sociality but self-relation in late James. The so-called subject always comprises a theatrical process that struggles to refuse a final sedimentation into a subjectivity, a psychology, or a "relationship."

To see how these principles might play out in practice, let us turn our attention to a passage from *The American Scene* (1907), a collection of travel essays written in the late period, after James's visit to his country of origin. This excerpt recounts James's experience of a skyscraper-crowded Lower Manhattan:

Yet was it after all that those monsters of the mere market, as I have called them, had more to say, on the question of "effect," than I had at first allowed?—since they are the element that looms largest for me through a particular impression, with remembered parts and pieces melting together rather richly now, of "down-town" seen and felt from the inside. "Felt"—I use that word, I dare say, all presumptuously, for a relation to matters of magnitude and mystery that I could begin neither to measure nor to penetrate, hovering

⁷⁰ Sofer, 332.

⁷¹ Bersani, "Sociability and Cruising," 18.

about them only in magnanimous wonder, staring at them as at a world of immovably-closed doors behind which immense “material” lurked, material for the artist, the painter of life, as we say, who shouldn’t have begun so early and so fatally to fall away from possible initiations. This sense of a baffled curiosity, an intellectual adventure forever renounced, was surely enough a state of feeling, and indeed in presence of the different half-hours, as memory presents them, at which I gave myself up both to the thrill of Wall Street (by which I mean that of the whole wide edge of the whirlpool), and the too accepted, too irredeemable ignorance, I am at a loss to see what intensity of response was wanting. The imagination might have responded more if there had been a slightly less settled inability to understand what every one, what any one, was really doing; but the picture, as it comes back to me, is, for all this foolish subjective poverty, so crowded with its features that I rejoice, I confess, in not having more of them to handle. No open apprehension, even if it be as open as a public vehicle plying for hire, can carry more than a certain amount of life, of a kind; and there was nothing at play in the outer air, at least, of the scene, during these glimpses, that didn’t scramble for admission into mine very much as I had seen the mob seeking entrance to an up-town or a down-town electric car fight for life at one of the apertures.⁷²

In five sentences, the passage traces a gingerly route through a counterintuitive relation between feeling and consciousness. In the first sentence, James proposes to reevaluate the tall buildings of which he had originally thought so little, since they are the element that seems to “loom” through an otherwise hazy impression of “‘down-town’ seen and felt from the inside.” The focus, in the next sentence, shifts from the buildings themselves to a definitional question: does “feeling” adequately describe an experience whose predominant conscious registration is an awareness of failed comprehension? This sensation of cognitive distress is staged as a redundant simile. James

⁷² James, *The American Scene*, 422-3.

recalls staring “as at a world of immovably-closed doors behind which immense ‘material’ lurked,” creating a figural parallelism with the actually extant world of closed doors on Wall Street—a figure so close to its ground as to exacerbate all the more the stubborn gap between the two. The exclusion is three-fold: consciousness’s inability to “penetrate” or comprehend its objects; this incomprehension’s figuration through the simile of the immovable door; and the distance between figuration and the material world from which the figure borrows its imagery. James’s “baffled curiosity” here seems dire, but in the next sentence becomes itself a source of certitude: in a deft transvaluation, feeling “surely enough” is seen to have originated in James’s state of “ignorance.” The balletic rhetorical interplay of certainty and failed cognition in this long sentence is revealing. James’s ignorance is “surely enough” a state of feeling, while his having “[given] myself up” to the experience of bafflement precipitates an incalculable “intensity of response.” Self-evacuation enables emotive intensity. It is unclear here if the *particular* emotion is one of “baffled curiosity, an intellectual adventure forever renounced,” or if a more generalized “state of feeling” is *engendered* by this frustration or foreclosure of intellection. In either case, James resolves that feeling, rather than waxing and waning in tandem with the success or failure of consciousness, is amplified in the very absence of intentional cognition. Indeed, in the sentence’s subtle enactment of this equation, even distance from the original feeling seems to intensify it. James claims, for instance, that “in presence of the different half-hours, as memory presents them,” he is “at a loss to see what intensity of response was wanting.” The putative immediacy of the past’s *presence* is quickly undercut by the qualifying condition of how memory *presents* it; yet rather than diluting the intensity of James’s experience, this filtering lens ensures and possibly augments it. The fourth sentence builds on the role of “subjective poverty” in vouchsafing experience, and the final sentence inverts the direction of the

“immovably-closed doors” figure. Whereas it was James who failed to “penetrate” the metaphorical doors of comprehension, here it is the vast volume of stimuli that fails to wedge itself into James’s “public vehicle”-like consciousness. The comparison to a “mob” attempting to board an electric car adds another turn of the screw: in both similes, cognitive difficulty—the “first emotion”—is figured as a person trying to gain admission to an unavailable space. Late Jamesian feeling appears nimbus-like around such moments of failed subjectivity, registering as an intense unease or tonal ambivalence. In this light, we can afford to concur with both readers of James who deem his late work uninhabitably cold and those who find therein an excess of emotional intensity. It is, if not the death of the subject, certainly its dematerialization—its continual and theatrical emptying out and reinstatement—that generates the subject effect of feeling. This dynamic (and a quotation from James, to be discussed below) gives my dissertation its title. Jamesian theatricality, paradoxically, is desolate in the sense of de-peopled; its positing of a theatrical form of characterization that splits the self, often unneatly, into spectator and actor leaves a haunted space where that self should be found—a desolation that nonetheless draws, generates, and hosts intense feeling.

Alongside the dematerialization of the subject, some attention must be paid to the status of the object, as well as to the language of objectivity and objectification. While my use of the term *subject* is informed and more or less contained by the poststructuralist critique of the realist/Enlightenment figure of deep subjectivity, discussion of *objects* and *objectivity* in James will by necessity be less available to technical consolidation. Part of the reason for this difficulty is that, as should be evident by now, the material world can be hard to come by in James’s late fiction. Objects might appear and embody enormous significance, but, I would argue, these objects tend to be more significant in terms of the gestures enacted around them than as self-

sufficient repositories of sensate or emotional meaning. One example might be Milly Theale's iced coffee in *The Wings of the Dove*, whose importance seems to be its distillation of the elevated manners of her environment, but ultimately comes down to the ease with which "she had vaguely accepted [it] from somebody" (175). Yet these objects, often metaphorical or, as in the passage from *The American Scene*, a strange transumption of the concrete into the realm of simile or metaphor, can themselves develop the ability to choreograph the reality they metaphorize. They become, in Robin Bernstein's term, "scriptive things," things that, "like a play script, broadly [structure] a performance while simultaneously allowing for resistance and unleashing original, live variations that may not be individually predictable."⁷³ An example that I will analyze at length in a later chapter is *The Golden Bowl's* pagoda metaphor, a figure that metamorphoses not only in its relation to its ground, but in relation to the character whose figure it supposedly is, and ultimately in relation to the narrative logic of the novel. As an *object*, the pagoda becomes varyingly material and immaterial; objectively fixed and ontically unstable; determined by the diegetic reality of the text and able to determine the trajectory of these "real" events. These three uses of *object* index its main discursive axes: 1) the presence or absence of a material world, a world of substance or matter, 2) a phenomenal relation whereby something has been objectified, that is, isolated and stabilized as an *object* for a comprehending subject; this something constitutes the nodal point of a dynamic relation, and can be non-corporeal, like a consciousness, a felt absence, or a moment in time, and 3) the shaky distinction between a fixed point to or around which things happen, and the happening of those things. In each of these axes, *objectivity* stands in a tensely productive relation with theatricality. If objects pose a problem in late James, it is because these objects are always implanted within a dramatized *process* of objectification; these processes are, on the one hand, objects' condition of emergence and, on the

⁷³ Bernstein, 69.

other, inextricable from the objects they enact. While these objects are highly performative, there can be, as Judith Butler writes, “no performer prior to the performed.”⁷⁴ A theatrical process is the only means by which an object can signify, elicit feeling and action, and work for and upon subjects.

It is in light of this fundamental doubleness that my dissertation situates late James within an anti-mimetic, anti-realist aesthetic, consonant with the high modernist movements that would follow. In a letter to Hugh Walpole, James himself wrote, in what we now think of as the language of Eliotic modernism, “Make it your rule to encourage the impersonal interest as against the personal—but remember also that they are interdependent.”⁷⁵ Reading late James benefits immensely from a dual attention to 1) the sinuous, sentence-level materialization and dematerialization of individual subjects through the staging of consciousness and 2) the endurance or amplification of emotive intensity in the face of these desubjectifying theatricalizations. But while late Jamesian fiction holds up this cleft proposition—which we may safely call a form of irony—its attitude toward its own doubleness is both axiologically and philosophically quite different from that of, say, *The Waste Land*, *Ulysses*, or the much earlier *Les Fleurs du Mal* (which James reviewed). In a discussion of this last, Peter Nicholls notes of the paradigmatically modernist irony in “À une Mendiante rousse”:

It is as if there are two voices at work in the poem: one which sympathises with the girl and expresses admiration for her “natural” charms and another which simply takes her as an occasion for a poem. This second, more devious voice will force upon the reader the unsentimental and cruelly ironic recognition that in fact she is nothing without the artifice

⁷⁴ Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 315.

⁷⁵ Qtd. in Edel, 650. Pinch’s remarks on the poles of the personal and the conventional in discussions of feeling is particularly illuminating: “when we say feelings are personal, we are invoking categories—the ‘personal’ and its opposite, the ‘conventional’—that are in a shifting, dialectical relationship, that are derived from each other and often collapse into each other. Feelings can either seem conventional themselves, or be seen as that which animates, or makes meaningful, conventions” (49).

of his poem to commemorate her.⁷⁶

I tend more or less to concur with this gloss of Baudelaire (and with similar assessments of Joyce's touchstone works⁷⁷), to the extent that the poems do grant priority and authority—and expect the reader to grant these in tandem—to the voice of ironic recognition over that of sympathetic admiration, and that this prioritization is itself a fulcrum of meaning-making within *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The reader's ability, that is, to align themselves with the poems' real attitude over and against their overtly stated content is part of these poems' condition of legibility; they only make sense as literary texts if the reader can identify the correct perspective to occupy. To this extent, the modernism of Baudelaire remains a literature of *intention*—if not the psychobiographical intention of the author, certainly that of the text. In response to the adage that the modernist text teaches you how to read it, one might specify that a certain kind of modernist text teaches you first and foremost how *not* to read it. James's late style, by contrast, is effective precisely to the extent that it is impossible for the reader to ally solely with the “meta-textual” stance (from which perspective characters are readily deconstructed as character-effects) over a more realist comportment that takes the coherency and continuity of individual characters for granted. The late fiction requires both positions for its emotive effects—requires the tense simultaneity of deconstructive formal analysis and a reifying receptivity to realist conventions. If readers of late James are tempted to think, à la Wharton's anecdote, that James the author was “unaware” or naïve of this central contradiction, it may be more accurate to say that it is late Jamesian style that is *unintending*.

The following chapters examine the ways in which James theatricalizes consciousness and feeling in 1) a playscript-like novel, *The Awkward Age*, 2) a time-travel novel, *The Sense of*

⁷⁶ Nicholls, 2.

⁷⁷ See, for instance, Bersani's “Against Ulysses.”

the Past, 3) the House of Fiction metaphor and *The Golden Bowl*, and 4) the opening book of *The Wings of the Dove*. My first chapter, “Visible for Us,” argues that the experimental novel *The Awkward Age* enacts a tension between novelistic and dramatic attitudes that belies James’s prefatory claim of an achieved “marriage” of form and subject. In lieu of free indirect discourse, James writes predominantly in dialogue and deploys a raft of hypothetical spectators and observers who would, were they actually present, report the visual signs of a subjectivity to which we are otherwise denied access. Theatricalization here works through the elision of the *tools* of deep consciousness (free indirect discourse) without necessarily also relinquishing the premise that there *is* deep subjectivity. *The Awkward Age*’s direct presentation of character through dialogue stops short of eliminating the expectation of depth; it merely gives us more of the surface. We “miss” deep consciousness because we feel its uneasy usurpation by theatrical volubility and by social relations governed by the phenomenal laws of spectatorship.

In my second chapter, “Something Turned on,” I examine how James’s unfinished time-travel novel *The Sense of the Past* stages the unraveling of a fantasy of psychological coherency through this fantasy’s own internal contradictions. Ralph Pendrel, an historian obsessed with the idea of inhabiting a fetishized “dead past,” is unable either to desire the temporal present or to understand himself apart from his aspiration toward an ever more cohesive and masterful subjectivity. In the course of the novel, he travels ninety years back in time as his own long-deceased ancestor, experiencing the dead man’s consciousness through his own continuous and effortless performance of it. However, Ralph’s initial euphoria at the apparent seamless with which he performs the other man’s consciousness eventually slides into an uneasy awareness of the visible seam that this euphoria constitutes. To take pleasure in the enactment of one’s consciousness is to be aware of it as a spectacular object separate from one’s spectatorship of it.

Ralph feels himself as theatrically split at the moment—and as a result—of his keenest sense of himself as whole.

In my third chapter, “So as Not to Arrive,” I examine a late Jamesian principle I call *dramaterialization*, a complex process by which consciousness vacillates between being an object and being a scene, being materially available and dematerializing. This process lies at the center of the famous House of Fiction metaphor for authorial consciousness and two key moments in *The Golden Bowl*, the pagoda metaphor and the novel’s final scene. While these moments tend to be read in terms of their intricate elaboration of consciousness, I will show through formal analysis that the staging of consciousness at its most objectifying and figurally particularizing is always also the staging of consciousness’s dislocation and processual theatricality. The individual realist subject in these moments (the authorial voice or Maggie Verver) is not altogether dispensed with, but effectively kept in place to the extent that the intense feeling these subjective dislocations elicit still condenses around the subject’s apparent displacement, if not around a stable subject itself.

To describe the demands exacted by Jamesian characterization in this way is, to some degree, to describe textuality *tout court*. Characters in novels—even realist novels—are of course not “real people,” fringed though they may be, to varying degrees, with the conventional signs of life; they are textual effects in the same way that tone, temporality, and narrative voice are. Yet while emotion in the novel could be attributed or at least connected to any number of these effects, late Jamesian fiction makes persistent appeals to the reader’s emotive response on behalf of characters who are just as persistently showing themselves to be the fictional machinery’s moving parts. My dissertation will argue that it is only insofar as these characters are shown to be theatrical parts that they have the ability to move.

“Visibly for Us”: Theatricality and Dematerialization in *The Awkward Age*

In an 1891 letter to Robert Louis Stevenson, Henry James qualifies his praise for his friend’s South Sea writings with a plea for sight: “I missed the *visible* in them – I mean as regards people, things, objects, faces, bodies, costumes, features, gestures, manners, the introductory, the *personal* painter-touch.”⁷⁸ This keening admonition ends axiomatically: “No theory is kind to us that cheats us of *seeing*.” James would close out the decade with the novel *The Awkward Age* (1899), featuring an experimental version of the dramatic principles that came to underpin the late style. Theatricality and narrativity in this novel grip firmly at each other, a formal pressure most notable in the novel’s severe curtailment of the visible and the embodied. These, of course, were the very qualities whose distinct absence from Stevenson’s writings so aggrieved James, an absence compounding the “perpetual ache” of his South Sea-traversing friend’s own long absence from visibility.⁷⁹

Quasi-visible and under-embodied figures command a similar potency of desire in the hauntingly spectral world of *The Awkward Age*. Unique among James’s work for the prevalence of dialogue over narration, the novel largely forgoes free indirect discourse and the “centers of consciousness”⁸⁰ that would become crucial to the late-Jamesian narrative and stylistic apparatus. Arguably at the center of the plot is Mr. Longdon, the elderly gentleman whose return to London and introduction to a circle of garrulous socialites precipitate the novel’s marriage plot. Mrs. Brookenham (Mrs. Brook), the group’s linchpin, has been exposing her nineteen-year-old daughter, Nanda, to the mature “talk” bandied by the friends, rendering Nanda precocious and compromised in the eyes of the traditionalist Longdon and the marriage market. Longdon, whose

⁷⁸ James, *Selected Letters*, 242.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁸⁰ James discusses the “centre of interest” and the “drama of...consciousness” in the Preface to *Roderick Hudson* (*The Art of the Novel*, 16).

name draws a disturbingly modern “London” over the temporal axis of the *longue durée*, is shown in the novel’s first pages buttonholing his new acquaintance Vanderbank (Van), a member of Mrs. Brook’s circle and the object of both her and Nanda’s affections. Longdon years ago loved and unsuccessfully courted Nanda’s grandmother, and now makes a bid to rescue Nanda from the corrupting influence of her mother and her social circle. He attempts, with the aid of a promised bequest, to persuade Van to marry her. Van prevaricates and delays; eventually, the match is rendered impossible through the decidedly theatrical machinations of Mrs. Brook. The novel concludes with Nanda’s decision to return permanently with Longdon to his country estate.

In his remarks on *The Awkward Age*, James touted its formal experimentalism, wherein the direct volubility of the diegetic world places a limit on the free-indirect narration. As is often the case in the Prefaces written for the New York Edition of his works, however, James’s account of this novel’s genesis darts from one possible origin story to another. At first, James somewhat cheekily ascribes the formal conceit of a playscript-like novel to a desire to produce a “light and ironical” popular fiction in the style of the French humorist Gyp. Later, he discusses the appeal of a certain “guarded objectivity,” an effect endemic to the theatre’s mode of direct presentation and produced here by the “imposed absence of that ‘going behind’” (i.e., free indirect discourse) that is the novelist’s favored tool.⁸¹ Another avowed ambition—avowed only after the published work met with widespread critical bafflement—was to permit of “no *telling about* the figures save by their own appearance and action and with explanation reduced to the explanation of everything by all the other things *in* the picture.”⁸² The novel’s “scenes” aspire to the quality of dramatic enclosure James admired in the theatre: a sense that no narrative strand in

⁸¹ James, *The Awkward Age*, 12.

⁸² James, *Selected Letters*, 315.

a piece would fail to exert a visible pull on another—this in contrast to the English novel, that “perfect paradise of the loose end” (AA 14). Given this formal hybridity, James’s claim of having brokered an immaculate “marriage” of “substance and form” seems particularly suggestive, if particularly puzzling (15).⁸³ More mystifying still, “substance” in the material sense of the word tends, in this novel, to dematerialize—to become invisible, to diminish, and to disappear—through the very dramatic strategies one might think would render this substance more available to the senses. What we might hear when James exults in a “marriage” between “substance and form,” then, are the banns of a polygamous arrangement among novel, drama, and a desubstantialized fictional world.

While critics have long noted the elusive nature of materiality in *The Awkward Age*, this phenomenon is generally assumed to be a given quality like *spectrality*, rather than traced as a set of overlapping processes of dematerialization. I use *dematerialization* here to refer specifically to the staged disappearance of elaborations of the human from the surface of the novel: descriptions of bodies, verbal notations, social relations, and narrative access to consciousness. *The Awkward Age* both theatricalizes and renders immaterial some of the most salient elements of the novel as practiced and theorized by James: character, the narrative function, realist time, and the social role of theatricality. In so altering the generic composition of the “James novel,” James also transforms the instruments of that alteration. Theatricalization, the avowed method and intent of this formal experiment, ostensibly makes possible such desirable aesthetic traits as phenomenal objectivity and representational directness. Yet the

⁸³ James’s simultaneous investment in and violations of formal unity can be traced to early moments in his career. In his 1884 essay “The Art of Fiction,” James writes: “I cannot imagine composition existing in a series of blocks, nor conceive, in any novel worth discussing at all, of a passage of description that is not in its intention narrative, a passage of dialogue that is not in its intention descriptive, a touch of truth of any sort that does not partake of the nature of incident, or an incident that derives its interest from any other source than the general and only source of the success of a work of art—that of being illustrative. A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts” (*Literary Criticism—Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, 54).

correspondences in this novel between theatricalization and novelistic dematerialization belie the aesthetic orthodoxies held up by James himself—formal prescriptions linking the dramatic with the objective, the direct, and the present.

The Awkward Age's formal idiosyncrasies thus speak to a persistent counter-note in James's work that complicates prevailing perceptions of James as the preeminent novelist of psychological depth and interiority. In the dislocative effects of its explicit theatricality, *The Awkward Age* consciously enacts—and presents as a formal experiment—the externality of character. While narrativity in this novel tends to be summarily explained by way of its thoroughgoing difference from that in James's better-known late works, the theatrical paradigm at work in *The Awkward Age* is more closely related to James's theatrically inflected conception of free indirect discourse than is generally thought. The volume of critical conceptualizations of theatricality produced in recent years speaks to the multiform, multivalent nature of this term, even absent considerations of its relationship to narrative. Janelle Reinelt wisely cautions against using "'theatricality' uncritically to mark aspects of texts or performances that gesture to their own conditions of production or to metatheatrical effects."⁸⁴ While such metatheatrical effects are in abundant supply in *The Awkward Age* and across James's oeuvre, this novel's theatricality can also be particularized as a multi-tier process inextricably bound in processes of dematerialization. The central component of this theatricality is spectatorship; a spectator must be present who understands and views a circumscribed scene as theatrical, and the presence and cognitive action of this spectator can transform an otherwise unrelated set of sensory data into a theatrical scene. This transformational capacity takes on unique forms in *The Awkward Age*, in which such demands for understanding through sight and directness are entangled with various,

⁸⁴ Reinelt, 206.

novelistically specific kinds of disappearance and inaccessibility.⁸⁵ At the heart of this novel's idiosyncratic narrativity, then, lies a dialectical relationship between theatricality and dematerialization, a relation that emerges in four distinct but overlapping ways: 1) the tendency of characters to become more immaterial as they are narrativized; 2) a proliferation of hypothetical "observers" or "spectators" in lieu of focalizing narration; 3) the collapse of the progressive time of realist character development into a condensed, dramatic temporality; and 4) the collapse of theatricality as a mode of direct relation practiced by characters in the novel into a form of narrative enclosure.

Immaterial Pursuits

While the most sizable debt incurred to the theatre in *The Awkward Age* is the predominance of dialogue, much of the narration also seems beholden to the aesthetic imperatives of the playscript. Though at times the narration begins to approximate the divulgent visuality of character descriptions in the realist novel, the expectation therein generated tends to be scuttled. These passages do not necessarily withhold detail; rather, they expatiate on liminal qualities that must be directly seen in order to be grasped, yet precisely cannot be imaginatively visualized by a reader. James's opening description of Longdon, for instance, begins on solid enough ground, but quickly moves to establish the spectral terms in which the rest of the novel will traffic:

⁸⁵ In her foreword to the special issue of *SubStance* on "Theatricality," Féral argues that theatricality originates in an "act of recognition on the part of the spectator. . . . For the spectator, recognition of these procedures depends on a process of perception. In the events unfolding before him, the spectator must pick out a series of cleavages that allow him to infer theatricality in the object or event represented. In fact, theatricality is the result of a series of cleavages (inscribed by the artist and recognized by the spectator) aimed at making a disjunction in systems of signification, in order to substitute other, more fluid ones." This process is conditioned on "the duality of a gaze, a perception or a word that recognizes this gap between reality and fiction where theater takes place"; theatricality, then, proceeds from the mutual implication of intending subjects, a "definite will to transform things." Féral's foreword and her seminal 1988 article, "Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language," provide a crucial launchpad for my discussion of theatricality in *The Awkward Age*. In positing a "definite will to transform things" as an inaugural juncture for theatricality, Féral prompts me to ask: what does the enactment of this transformative will look like when transformation amounts to a process of un-making, decorporealization, or dematerialization?

Mr. Longdon was slight and neat, delicate of body and both keen and kind of face, with black brows both finely marked and thick, smooth hair, in which the silver had deep shadows. He wore neither whisker nor moustache and seemed to carry in the flicker of his quick brown eyes and the positive sun-play of his smile even more than the equivalent of what might, superficially or stupidly, elsewhere be missed in him; which was mass, substance, presence – what is vulgarly called importance. He had indeed no presence, but he had somehow an effect. He might almost have been a priest, if priests, as it occurred to Vanderbank, were ever such dandies. He had at all events conclusively doubled the Cape of the years – he would never again see fifty-five: to the warning light of that bleak headland he presented a back sufficiently conscious. Yet, though, to Vanderbank, he could not look young, he came near – strikingly and amusingly – looking new: this, after a minute, appeared mainly perhaps indeed in the perfection of his evening dress.... (20)

This portrait could itself be said to “flicker” between positive and negative attributes (that is, qualities Longdon possesses and those he lacks) while increasingly eroding our pictorial sense of the character. Even the literally desubstantializing description of his lack of “mass, substance, presence – what is vulgarly called importance” is subject to its own effacement: Longdon may lack substance, but he displays “even more than [its] equivalent,” albeit only through the “flicker” and “sun-play” that evade visualization while requiring the visual faculty in order to be duly appreciated in their subtlety. By the same token, if we understand an “effect” to be a phenomenon that should simply do its work and precisely obviate narrative insistence, the narrator’s need to insist that Longdon “had somehow an effect” bespeaks the impossibility of this effect’s being instantaneously conveyed to a reader of the novel as it is to Van. We are required to trust it will be imparted to us in cumulative fashion. Following upon the smoke curls of this description, the evocation of Longdon’s dandyism offers something comparatively concrete,

despite its syntactic subordination to an apparent non-sequitur: “He might almost have been a priest, if priests...were ever such dandies.” While minimized, the fact that Longdon is something of a dandy has a lingering resonance, providing in this passage a material and historical basis for description; Van, for instance, attributes Longdon’s seeming newness to “the perfection of his evening dress,” a stylistic quality that becomes the most forthcoming note in a passage that initially leads one to expect a more exacting account of a character’s physical profile. This sartorial counterpoint to a discomfiting immateriality appears elsewhere in James, in strikingly similar terms. In 1908’s “The Jolly Corner,” for instance, the protagonist comes upon his supernatural double—“Rigid and conscious, spectral yet human, a man of his own substance and stature”—and indulges in a prolonged, repulsed account of this double’s “queer actuality of evening-dress, of dangling double eye-glass, of gleaming silk lappet and white linen, of pearl button and gold watch-guard and polished shoe.”⁸⁶ The uncanny horror of this alternative self’s “queer actuality of evening-dress” lies in the vivid and intransigent materiality of his stylistic accents, in the incongruity between the double’s otherworldliness and his mundane accession to fashionability. In Longdon’s case, the “perfection of his evening dress” strikes a quaintly comic note for Van; the incontrovertible because quotidian reality of an adherence to the demands of fashion allows a sense of “newness,” a temporal site-specificity, to prevail over Longdon’s otherwise insubstantial and untimely attributes.⁸⁷ Lacking not only presence and mass, but the substance of which a supernatural double can boast, Longdon gets by in *The Awkward Age* alternately on the value of his effect and the effect of his value.

Like much else about Longdon, his appearance in the first few moments of the novel both sets him apart and sets a standard. While several other characters are later described in similarly

⁸⁶ James, “The Jolly Corner,” 364.

⁸⁷ Compare, also, Caspar Goodwood’s unappealing “newness” in *The Portrait of a Lady*.

effacing terms, this opening description establishes a sense of the not-quite-there soon shown to be the pervading sensibility of a social world to which Longdon is meant to provide a counterpoint. Very soon after Van “heard his name pronounced from behind and, on turning, found himself joined” by an “apparently unassertive person,” he “became conscious of having proposed his own rooms as a wind-up to their drive” (4). Van’s friendly proposition occurs in a past perfect that buries even the non-tactile materiality of the voice—a notable interment in such a vocal novel.⁸⁸ The temporal lag with which Van “became conscious of having proposed” his rooms is meant to indicate, on the surface, simply that he and Longdon are carried away by their little adventure, but the narrator accomplishes this tonal effect by coupling the temporal non-linearity of Van’s belated awareness with the linear, telic movement of a drive that now has a destination. These counterweighted temporalities are, in turn, linked to a presiding consciousness that is somehow both prioritized over its object (Van’s utterance, of which he becomes conscious) and one step behind it—a temporal version of the movement by which the Jamesian narrator “goes behind” its objects. Longdon seems thus capable of prompting “both/and” moments—moments of contradictory simultaneity in which the desire for progress toward a terminus can be voiced only in time already past, and, as it were, without voice.

Spectators and Observers

These unmoored temporalities and somatic effects are, arguably, par for the course in James’s later fiction. *The Awkward Age*, however, glides from one emphatic moment of decorporealization to the next, to the point where the high density of such moments threatens to overwhelm the narrative. Certainly the narrator appears to succumb to a form of repetition compulsion—that is, a recurrence of the gesture by which “deep consciousness,” signaled by free indirect discourse, is dematerialized from the novel. The going-behind that typically

⁸⁸ See Trask on the queerness of this passage.

distinguishes and anchors Jamesian narrative is supplanted by the frequent invocation of an imagined “observer” or “spectator,” a figure with special (but circumscribed) insight into the action:

An observer disposed to interpret the scene might have fancied him a trifle put off by the girl’s familiarity, or even, as by a singular effect of her self-possession, stricken into deeper diffidence. (87)

The ingenious observer just now suggested might even have detected in the still higher rise of this visitor’s spirits a want of mere inward ease. (88)

He again became mute, and there was a pause between them of some length, accepted by Nanda with an anxious stillness that it might have touched a spectator to observe. (140)

It is worth noting that James is rarely given to such rote troping. Those tropes that he does use with some regularity (“she held fire,” “he turned it over,” etc.) are mulched throughout the late novels, not compacted into a single work. And while the conceit of the hypothetical observer appears in other James works, it seldom does with such frequency, or with the strong sense that it is interchangeable with “spectator.”⁸⁹ The implications of this apparent interchangeability and the different valences and generic codes magnetized by each of these terms will be discussed further below. There has been no paucity of critical observations regarding this spectator/observer and the corresponding grammatical repetition of the conditional tense.⁹⁰ To nominate this serial troping as a form of dematerialization may seem counterintuitive. Access to

⁸⁹ Compare the passage early in *The Ambassadors* on “the facial furniture that an attentive observer would have seen catalogued, on the spot, in the vision of the other party to Strether’s appointment” (5). The appearances of an “observer” throughout *The Awkward Age* suggest what is elsewhere for James a mode of surficial character description elevated to an aesthetic or generic regime. James’s use of this trope is perhaps most similar to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s; compare the moments quoted above with, for instance, this invocation of an observer near the beginning of *The Scarlet Letter*, reflecting on how Hester Prynne’s “beauty shone out” amidst her “misfortune and ignominy”: “It may be true, that, to a sensitive observer, there was something exquisitely painful in it” (66). The qualifier “sensitive” contributes to setting this hypothetical *observer* apart from the unsympathetic *spectators* who make Hester into a spectacle; there is also here, already, a sense that this “sensitive observer” may not be entirely hypothetical.

⁹⁰ See, for instance, Kurnick, Poole, and Teahan.

consciousness, that which is obviated by the spectator/observer trope, is itself already one of the Jamesian novel's foremost immaterial effects, as well as its central ideologeme; and the very proliferation of *The Awkward Age's* spectral figures might be said to bespeak an additive impulse, or certainly a crowding effect, rather than contributing to an attenuation of corporeal matter. Yet in contrast to both the theatre's given quantum of materiality and the psychological novel's ideology of an interiority whose penetration by a narrator sidesteps questions of embodiment, *The Awkward Age's* tropology simultaneously conjures and vitiates the ontological status of embodied individuals. It raises the spectre of materiality through the same gesture by which it erases it; it also, by registering these bodies' *effects* in the absence of the bodies themselves, implicitly impugns the very ontological primacy of the theatrical materiality toward which this novel aspires. That the narrator so often concerns himself with what this spectator/observer "might have" seen accounts for much of this complication. The figure's hypothetical status compounds the temporal disorientation of the more oft-used Jamesian past perfect that dematerializes action and dialogue into an unavailable past (as in the scene of Van's introduction to Longdon). More distinctively, this "might have"-status also marks moments where this novel's allegiance to dramatic "objectivity" butts up against a narrative impulse to conduct us "behind" the surface of action. In the three examples given above, the figure of the spectator/observer provides a site wherein the spectatorial labor of sensory registration and the readerly labor of interpretation, detection, and affective response can be both held apart as distinct moments and significantly coupled.

These tropes and stylizations are to be found, as I have mentioned, across James's oeuvre—if never quite in this configuration, never in a paradigmatically different manner either. Compare *The Awkward Age's* use of the conditional with Lambert Strether's writerly reverie in

The Ambassadors (1903) upon catching sight of an as-yet unrecognized Madame de Vionnet in Notre Dame Cathedral:

She reminded our friend—since it was the way of nine-tenths of his current impressions to act as recalls of things imagined—of some fine firm concentrated heroine of an old story, something he had heard, read, something that, had he had a hand for drama, he might himself have written, renewing her courage, renewing her clearness, in splendidly protected meditation.⁹¹

While the sentence's hypertrophied recursivity does not quite terminate with "might himself have written," it is in this conditional phrase that the reflexive logic of Strether's thinking is consummated; his consciousness marks both the origin (something he might have written) and the endpoint (being reminded by Mme. de Vionnet) of his impression. Sharon Cameron theorizes a Jamesian form of mastery that "lies in transforming the objects of consciousness" from "what is there into what is desired."⁹² Similarly, *The Ambassadors*' free indirect invocation of "something that, had he had a hand for drama, he might himself have written" represents a particularly self-effacing use of the conditional tense. It conjures, only to nullify, the idea of Strether as a dramatist, camouflaging the extent to which the scene *is* scripted by Strether. Yet the Jamesian device of free indirect discourse does not permit of quite so closed or succinct a speculative circuit as, say, "This reminds me of something I might have written!" For the third-person perspective precludes a complete erasure of difference between narrator and focalized character; the exquisite composition of the scene is precisely *not* transparent to Strether's speech or thought—is *not* written by him (as the voice is also that of the narrator), even as it *is* written

⁹¹ James, *The Ambassadors*, 208.

⁹² Cameron, 20.

by him (since it is in his consciousness that the drama is enacted).⁹³ The complex dualities within consciousness and dramaturgy are here condensed into an exceptionally cogent “might have.” I would continue to contend, then, that even in *The Ambassadors*, James’s “going behind” does not take place far beneath interiority’s turbid waters, but rather falls on a continuum with the more starkly objectifying dramatic methods of *The Awkward Age*. Compare, on the other hand, the hypothetical status of *The Awkward Age*’s spectator/observers with an ostensibly similar construct in *What Maisie Knew* (1897): “What was clear to any spectator was that the only link binding her to either parent was this lamentable fact of her being a ready vessel for bitterness, a deep little porcelain cup in which biting acids could be mixed.”⁹⁴ Whereas this nominative invocation of an extant spectator has the Faranges’ domestic conflict ramifying onto a wider sphere of public opinion (both the diegetic world and that of James’s readership), the conditionally proposed spectator/observers in *The Awkward Age* have the reverse effect of heightening this novel’s sense of dramatic enclosure.⁹⁵ To the extent that the hypothesized spectator/observer implicates the reader, it does not inscribe *The Awkward Age*’s drama into this reader’s more spacious reality, but rather shoehorns a readerly proxy into the already airless architecture of the fiction.

Given the terms and characteristics already on the table, the form whose readership most closely approximates that desired and produced by this novel may be, as Nick Salvato has asserted, that of closet drama.⁹⁶ Referring to “what James elsewhere calls ‘the ghostly ordeal’ of reading a play,” David Kurnick argues that by “referring readers to some necessary but

⁹³ The narrator’s reference to Strether as “our friend” produces yet another visible pucker in the fabric of free indirect discourse.

⁹⁴ James, *What Maisie Knew*, 14-5.

⁹⁵ Ohi notes, in this passage, the “gap between James’s language” (that of the deep receptacle) and the dramatic “register of perception in which its insight is placed” (“Narrating the Child’s Queerness,” 93).

⁹⁶ Salvato assigns this term to *The Awkward Age* in *Uncloseting Drama: American Modernism and Queer Performance*, 23-4.

unavailable performative space, *The Awkward Age* makes us hunger for the embodied representation that its very status as a novel forswears.⁹⁷ Not properly drama but also forgoing the narrative strategies available to the realist novel, James's awkward work, according to Kurnick, "issues a challenge to imagine life beyond the constraints of both forms as given, as well as beyond the psychosexual and relational logics they enforce."⁹⁸ Kurnick's rich reparative reading is especially illuminating in its emphasis on the depsychologizing function of the novel's theatricalizations. However, Kurnick accords the novel's abjuration of depth and interiority a utopian vocation that I am hard pressed to corroborate. In place of the individual subjectivity endemic to the psychological novel we are to find, supposedly, a collective subjectivity that dissolves the bourgeois antinomies of self and other; in Kurnick's reading, the tragedy of *The Awkward Age* lies in the untenability of this group subjectivity. To the extent that this reading fastens on the instability of *The Awkward Age*'s generic admixture, I find it highly canny. James's prefatory remarks on the exhilaration to be found in an imposed difficulty such as the forfeiture of "going behind" point, on the one hand, to a piquant formal challenge and, on the other, to the aforementioned felicity between this awkward form and his subject matter. That subject matter is, of course, itself a problem of awkward forms and substance: how to maintain a high calibre of dialogue in the presence of a young woman, and how to fulfill the conventional narrative trajectory of a young woman's life—marriage—once she has been exposed to such sophisticated talk.⁹⁹ I would argue, however, that it behooves readers of *The Awkward Age* not to impose onto this novel an affirmative attitude, if not toward what a contemporary reviewer in

⁹⁷ Kurnick, "Horrible Impossible," 113, 117.

⁹⁸ Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel*, 143.

⁹⁹ Cf. Brooks's "Henry James and Dirty French Novels." James complains in "The Future of the Novel" of the exclusion of sex from the English novel for the sake of women and children's "innocence." *The Awkward Age* seems to impose this artificial novelistic prohibition on its most play-like portions by banishing the really titillating talk from its long passages of dialogue. Nanda's presence, then, introduces into her mother's social circle the problem with which the English novel has been grappling in the nineteenth century.

The Spectator called the novel's "whispering-gallery of ignoble souls," then at least toward the figure around whom its nimbus of conversational brilliance gathers: Mrs. Brook.¹⁰⁰ For if, as Kurnick argues, the novel valorizes a model of group subjectivity over and above the demands of a depth psychology with whose development James is inextricably associated and largely credited, one would surely struggle to account for the sovereign authority with which Mrs. Brook both provides the social keystone of the group and ultimately tears the entire edifice down.

The significance of *The Awkward Age*'s tendency toward depsychologization is apparent enough in the repeated narrative invocation of an observer *or* spectator. One such "observer" appears in the preface, in a passage where James muses over the origins of the novel's *donnée*: "The seed sprouted in that vast nursery of sharp appeals and concrete images which calls itself, for blest convenience, London; it fell even into the order of the minor 'social phenomena' with which, as fruit for the observer, that mightiest of the trees of suggestion bristles" (*AA* 4). Here, prior to any mention of the role of dramatic principles in this novel's construction, this "observer" is vaguely aligned with the novelist's trade. In a later discussion of the merits of the theatre, James characterizes a patron of Henrik Ibsen as a "spectator or reader" (14). One can argue, then, that the strangely spectral, hypothetical spectator/observers in *The Awkward Age* limn the dual reception modes of novel and closet drama: private, individual reading and coterie performance. This spectator/observer acts as both 1) a compensatory mechanism for the relinquishment of free indirect discourse's psychological insights and 2) a way of introducing some of the novel's representational capaciousness into the closed circuit of the playscript, that is, of "escaping poverty *even though* the references in one's action can only be, with intensity, to each other" (*Ibid.*). Far from casting his gaze upon the proceedings from behind a fourth wall, James's spectator/observer seems to inhabit the same airless space as the characters, and is often

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Kurnick, *Empty Houses*, 111.

accorded an initiated status, though it is unclear if his hypothetical initiatedness is 1) of an impersonal, patronly variety, comprising a share of knowledge limited to the events that have taken place in the story (to which any attentive audience member would have the same access), or 2) a diegetic attribute, comprising an insider's savviness about these characters' assignments and inclinations. Is the spectator/observer a member of the audience or a member of the group?

This slippage occurs at various moments:

That in itself, for an observer deeply versed in this lady, was delightful and beguiling.

(31)

The recurrence of opportunity to observe them together would have taught a spectator that—on Mrs Brook's side, doubtless, more particularly—their relation was governed by two or three remarkably established and, as might have been said, refined laws.... (188)

At other times, the slippage becomes a collapse and the theatrical mode of the characters' relationships is literalized, locating the (at times hypothetical, at times not) observer or spectator in their midst:

The smoking-room at Mertle was not unworthy of the general nobleness, and the fastidious spectator had clearly been reckoned on in the great leather-covered lounge....

(156)

An observer at all initiated would, at the juncture, fairly have hung on his lips, and there was in fact on Vanderbank's part quite the look of the man—though it lasted but just while we seize it—in suspense about himself. The most initiated observer of all would have been poor Mr Longdon.... (202)

This interchange, to which circumstances somehow gave a high effect of suddenness and strangeness, was listened to by the others in a quick silence that was like the sense of a blast of cold air, though with the difference between the spectators that Vanderbank attached his eyes.... (242)

This spectator/observer makes novelistic moments not only *scenic* in the Jamesian sense of being organized around a particular point of view, but *theatrical*—that is, organized *in response to* the reality of a certain kind of viewing. This figure, as the passages above show, presents us with a social world that is already theatrical, spectacular, and under sustained and informed scrutiny as a matter of internal law. It is a world in which the “fastidious spectator” is always already “reckoned on”—in other words, already having an *effect* whether actually present or not—a communal topography more accurately described in terms of surveillance than as modeling, even provisionally, what Kurnick ultimately characterizes as a utopian social landscape, one in which consciousness is supposedly diffused across a community rather than concentrated in focalizing individuals.¹⁰¹ Here the narrator’s vacillations between “observer” and “spectator” take on a mildly unsettling cast. Once one takes up a position of ocular advantage over a scene, one necessarily becomes not only a spectator, a game patron of the theatre, but a methodical and evaluative “observer.” Those visual signs—the expression on a character’s face, for instance—that an audience member precisely need not *read* but can simply *see* are made explicit, in this strange novel-as-closet-drama, as objects of a less than benign attention. The hypothetical observer is a quasi-physical presence in these scenes, but enacts the role of a close reader, highlighting through his readerliness—his interpretive acuity—that these sights and sounds are not *meant* to be briskly taken in by an “audience.” In lieu of either the audience member’s instantaneous registration of perceptual detail or the penetrative elaborations of free indirect discourse, James’s spectator/observer behaves like both a surrogate reader and a theatre-goer, signaling a dual investment in the insight-generating practice of the private novel-reader and the coterie-theatricality of the characters’ world. James thereby weaves narrativity out of enactments of the theatrical and the spectral. His spectator/observer’s spectrality, his status as a

¹⁰¹ Kurnick, *Empty Houses*, 109.

hypothetical figure, has ramifications for both form and subject matter: formally, it allows a novelistic function to behave like a theatrical construct; in the fiction itself, it shows a social world arranged according to the laws of theatricality, but governed on the sly by the less clement conventions of Jamesian narration. So while the individual instances of the trope invoke *either* a spectator *or* an observer with subtle differences in the disposition of the respective figure's action, the figure is best understood as a "spectator/observer"; the cumulative effect—the achieved *sense* that these two terms are interchangeable—indexes for the reader the tonal effect of uneasy sliding from spectatorship to observation that is internal to the fictional world. This effect additionally marks a unique internal limit for close reading on the part of James's reader; the primary mode of meaning-making and characterization shifts here from sinuous narrative protraction to discrete tropic repetition, and our reading practice shifts with it.

James's spectral spectator/observer brings us back to the similarly spectral Longdon, whose observational faculties are explicitly remarked upon both by the narrator and in dialogue. Mitchy, another member of Mrs. Brook's circle, happens upon the unfamiliar Longdon for the first time at Van's home (sans Van), and interrogates Longdon about his relationship with Nanda:

"Have you come up to London, wondering, as you must, about what's happening—for Vanderbank mentioned, I think, that you *have* come up—in pursuit of her?"

"Ah," laughed the subject of Vanderbank's information, "I'm afraid 'pursuit,' with me, is over."

"Why, you're at the age," Mitchy returned, "of the most exquisite form of it. Observation."

"Yet it's a form, I seem to see, that you've not waited for my age to cultivate." This was followed by a decisive headshake. "I'm not an observer. I'm a hater." (83)

Although *we* are acquainted with “the subject of Vanderbank’s information,” that is, Longdon, the scene is narrated, albeit scantily, from the less initiated Mitchy’s point of view; yet while it is Mitchy who is excluded from the information that the reader possesses, his status as outsider to this friendship ironically enables the narrator to regard Longdon as the outside element. Hence, throughout the scene, Longdon is variably called “his fellow-visitor,” “his interlocutor,” “the stranger,” “Old Van’s possible confidant,” and “the speaker”—every appellation but the one we know to be his. This is not in itself a remarkable instance of focalization or even irony, except that it gestures toward the raft of perspectival awkwardnesses that Longdon introduces into the novel and into the social set at its center. As a quasi-anachronism (a superannuated dandy who still looks “new” at the turn of the century); a former Londoner who is now a stranger to the city’s transformed social landscape; and an initiate into a social circle in which he is clearly not at home, Longdon is both an outsider and an insider in multiple registers. He even arguably falls both inside and outside of the main field of action designated by the generic conventions of nineteenth-century marriage narratives. Though Longdon is matured beyond the imperative to pursue a felicitous marriage, his attachment to Nanda’s grandmother, whom Nanda closely resembles, casts his sponsorship of the young woman in the long shadow of that first, failed pursuit. Mitchy, as a kindness to the older man, nominates observation as a form of pursuit apposite to his age, and in doing so links the spectral, closet-dramatic practice of observation with the conventional marriage plot that ostensibly drives the novel.

Given this ability on the part of Longdon and the novel to braid contradictory elements, it is worth noting here the syntactic errancy of Mitchy’s question to the older man: “Have you come up to London, wondering, as you must, about what’s happening—for Vanderbank mentioned, I think, that you *have* come up—in pursuit of her?” The sentence could be parsed in

two ways, and it is an ambiguity that turns out to be endemic to the mixed form of the closet drama/novel. On the page, the dashes are a strong enough notation that one would tend toward the reading that allows them to keep their integrity, even given the awkwardness of the exfoliated phrase, “what’s happening...in pursuit of her.” Yet Mitchy’s fellow-visitor chooses to interpret the intercluded clause, “for Vanderbank mentioned, I think, that you *have* come up,” as part of the main body of the sentence rather than as a removable conversational nicety—that is, as though he has *heard* the sentence rather than, like the reader and like characters in most novels, as though he had access to an authoritative written text.¹⁰² Longdon therefore formulates a response to “Have you come up wondering about what’s happening? You *have* come up in pursuit of her?”, rather than to “Have you come up wondering about what’s happening in pursuit of her?” The second question holds observation and pursuit apart, but Longdon’s response assumes their concentricity even before Mitchy kindly argues for it. In the wake of this legerdemain, Longdon’s claim, “I’m not an observer. I’m a hater,” can only fail to establish separate domains for dispassionate observation and the acts of repudiation or desire that might result from affectively surcharged value judgments. Near the novel’s end, Mrs. Brook, in spectacularly public fashion, routs her daughter’s marriage prospects with Van by revealing her corruption by a French novel. This dramatic collision of the scenes of public spectacle and private reading at last forces Longdon to relinquish his post as observer and become a spectator—one among many, crucially—and, as his aggrieved departure from the scene indicates, a hater.

¹⁰² James comments in the Preface on the singular Anglophone indifference to having access to the written playscript: “A comedy or a tragedy may run for a thousand nights without prompting twenty persons in London or in New York to desire that view of its text which [is] so desired in Paris, as soon as a play begins to loom at all large, that the number of copies of the printed piece in circulation far exceeds at last the number of performances.... The immense oddity resides in the almost exclusively typographic order of the offence” (9). In the ambiguous exchange between Longdon and Mitchy, then, James produces an effect that forces the reader not only to imagine the dialogue being performed and (mis)heard in order for them to make sense, but to imagine him/herself as the approved class of playgoer—that is, a French one who takes the trouble to read the playbook.

What Ever Happened to Little Aggie?

Longdon continually shows himself to be both/and—an observer and a hater; a hoary insider with deep knowledge and intuitive sympathy, and an outsider, an arriviste baffled by the new lingua franca. A measured voice amid the novel’s persistent badinage, his is nonetheless the first voice to sound—Van “heard his name pronounced from behind”—and it is then significantly a voice used in pursuit of another character, as well as a voice “heard” without having been reported as used. Adding to this thickly significant moment is the *behindness* of Longdon’s voice and self—a spatial position (and one indeed both of observation, as in James’s “going behind,” and of pursuit) that metonymizes a temporal one (an antiquated genteelness that both evaluates and desires to act upon the inhabitants of the present).

The spatio-temporal consolidation of behindness is made explicit when, later in the evening, Longdon and Van discuss another member of Mrs. Brook’s circle, the Duchess, a woman with a “Neapolitan past” and high aspirations for her young niece Aggie’s future: “she lives not in what is behind her, but in what is before—she lives in her precious little Aggie” (AA 26). As a minor character, Aggie’s attenuated treatment enables the novel to effect a dramatic collapse of the realist time of character development. Her trajectory, in brief, consists of being at first a vigilantly sheltered “innocent,” marrying, and turning instantly into a fatuous coquette. If Longdon is *behind*, that is, a revenant embodiment of what has passed, then little Aggie might be said to represent the entirely *before*—a sped-up version or parody of the teleological trajectory of the developmental narrative; she is wholly underdeveloped at first, and then wholly overdeveloped. On being shown a photograph of this physiologically mature “seventeen or eighteen”-year-old early in the novel, Longdon flatly rejects Van’s characterization of her as a “little girl”—a summary assessment whose faintly brutal directness suffuses the tone of a later

scene that takes place at a gathering in Mrs. Brook's drawing room.¹⁰³ Aggie, having just been brought in by her aunt at the exact moment that her marriage prospects are being discussed by Mrs. Brook and Mitchy, is indeed described as suddenly and spectacularly “before” the entire party. The “before” of mercantile display here becomes indissociable from the “before” of prematurity, of an innocence whose meticulous manufacture is subjected by the narrator to a decidedly camp bit of fantasizing that can only be quoted at length:

That young lady, in this relation, was certainly a figure to have offered a foundation for the highest hopes. As slight and white, as delicately lovely, as a gathered garden lily, her admirable training appeared to hold her out to them all as with precautionary finger-tips. She presumed, however, so little on any introduction that, shyly and submissively, waiting for the word of direction, she stopped short in the centre of the general friendliness till Mrs Brookenham fairly became, to meet her, also a shy little girl – put out a timid hand with wonder-struck, innocent eyes that hesitated whether a kiss of greeting might be dared. “Why, you dear, good, strange ‘ickle’ thing, you haven’t been here for ages, but it *is* a joy to see you, and I do hope you’ve brought your doll!” – such might have been the sense of our friend’s fond murmur while, looking at her up and down with pure pleasure, she drew the rare creature to a sofa. Little Aggie presented, up and down, an arrangement of dress exactly in the key of her age, her complexion, her emphasized virginity. She might have been prepared for her visit by a cluster of dotting nuns, cloistered daughters of ancient houses and educators of similar products, whose taste, hereditarily good, had grown, out of the world and most delightfully, so queer as to leave on everything they touched a particular shade of distinction. (68)

If the proliferation of the language of design—“gathered,” “training,” “direction,” “presented,”

¹⁰³ James’s canny treatments of “innocence” have been discussed with lucidity by Ohi in *Innocence and Rapture: The Erotic Child in Pater, Wilde, James, and Nabokov*, Ricks in his introduction to *What Maisie Knew*, and Hanson, who reminds us with regard to *The Turn of the Screw*: “There are no innocent readers of this text...but we are infantilized by our very belief in innocence” (369).

“arrangement,” “prepared,” “products”—did not gesture emphatically enough toward Aggie’s exquisite artificiality, Mrs. Brook’s exaggerated greeting would suffice to set this artifice “exactly in the key of” a theatrical performance. Here again, characterization occurs not through elaboration, but through a temporal collapse. Though Aggie is assigned the actorly task of “waiting for the word of direction,” it is the paradigmatically theatrical Mrs. Brook who slips into the role of the “innocent” “little girl”; for that matter, we are only indirectly (yet highly efficiently) told that Aggie is a little girl by being told that Mrs. Brook “became, to meet her, *also* a shy little girl.” What is strange about these descriptors is not only that their real object—Aggie—is only indicated through a specular sleight of hand. It is that Longdon’s derogation of the truth value of the phrase “little girl” in the novel’s opening pages is so effortlessly overcome by Mrs. Brook’s performative reflection of this truth—so effortlessly and seamlessly, in fact, that the narrator simply reports, without reference to the phrase’s history in this text, on Mrs. Brook’s becoming “*also* a shy little girl.” In short, the photographic representation in which Longdon grounds his judgment can only prompt an assessment based on generally accepted metrics of maturation and development; it takes an elaborate coterie performance to produce the communal, relational, and multiply artificial truth of this “little girl” and her so readily replicated—nigh parodied—“innocence.” The force of recognition this performance generates is such as to render Longdon’s erstwhile authoritative judgment not only irrelevant, but effectively and narratively forgotten—a collapse not only of the narrative time required to report on Aggie’s being a “little girl,” but of the narrative *history* that would undercut the truth-value of this report. James’s narrator thereby reinforces his narrative authority through this theatrical elision of a moment that simultaneously threatens it.

This collusion between theatre and novel occurs alongside another, more recognizably

Jamesian bit of narrative smoke-and-mirrors—the positing of dialogue that might not be or definitely is not spoken in the diegetic world of the novel: “‘Why, you dear, good, strange “ickle” thing, you haven’t been here for ages, but it *is* a joy to see you, and I do hope you’ve brought your doll!’—such might have been the sense of our friend’s fond murmur while, looking at her up and down with pure pleasure, she drew the rare creature to a sofa.” A device that serves varying purposes across James’s works, this positing often augments a sense of unreality or immateriality, as in *The Sacred Fount*, where the first-person narrator is conventionally read as delusionally projecting “evidence” for a conspiracy—a premise that makes available the legal sense of the word “immaterial.”¹⁰⁴ In the above passage from *The Awkward Age*, the ambiguous status of Mrs. Brook’s speech heightens the novelistic quality of a paragraph notable for its staginess. Rather than simply report that Mrs. Brook rattles off a bit of claptrap, the novel chooses this highly theatrical moment to emphasize that it can do what a theatrical performance cannot: it can not only provide a notation for dialogue or action that does not actually happen—as, of course, a novel always does—it can reliably provide the *sense* of a speech whose particulars are, for some reason, elusive.¹⁰⁵ In this passage, the coterie audience of closet drama and the novelistic narrator collide: the narrator is positioned simultaneously as 1) a quasi-embodied, initiated party *within* the scene (hence Mrs. Brook is “*our* friend”) who falls out of earshot as Mrs. Brook leads Aggie away from the “centre of the general friendliness” and can

¹⁰⁴ Bersani notes: “James’s habit of giving us the consequences and the implications of a thought or a fact before giving us the thought or the fact itself shifts the organizing principle of the text from the temporal logic of a character engaged in the story’s movement to the spatial perspective of a narrator who ignores his character’s time for the sake of his own designs. And the design has inspirations of its own: we see it spilling over the character’s consciousness in all those passages where the narrator tells us what his center ‘might have thought’” (“The Jamesian Lie,” 143).

¹⁰⁵ There may be moments in theatre that operate in something like this hypothetical mode—for instance, scenes depicting dreams or fantasies or other epistemologically compromised representations—but the intrinsic embodiedness of theatrical performance means that these scenes make demands on the audience’s imagination that are fundamentally different from moments when a narrator quotes a piece of dialogue that turns out to have been hypothetical.

thus only guess at the content of her “fond murmur,” and as 2) the sole repository of novelistic authority capable of imparting an effectively adequate account of a scene to the reader. The device of hypothetical dialogue here divests the narrator of *occasional* authority by positioning him as a spectral “observer” with physical limitations, but ultimately enhances his *intrinsic* authority as a novelistic function by permitting his approximation of Mrs. Brook’s “sense” to stand in for the version of reality the reader must accept. Embodiment, that quality by which the more familiar kind of Jamesian narrator who is free to “go behind” characters is supposedly *not* hamstrung, here proves to pose no threat to narratorial authority after all—even in a scene wherein the narrator all but confesses to the limits of his access.

In addition to this deft melding of narratorial roles, this passage effects a highly condensed and camouflaged sketch of the kind of narration the character Aggie will require. The vestal imagery at the end of the excerpt makes a gorgeous skein out of the passage’s—and many of the novel’s—thick contradictions:

She might have been prepared for her visit by a cluster of doting nuns, cloistered daughters of ancient houses and educators of similar products, whose taste, hereditarily good, had grown, out of the world and most delightfully, so queer as to leave on everything they touched a particular shade of distinction.

Not merely a self-allusive nod to the good sisters who deposit Pansy Osmond with her father in *The Portrait of a Lady* or the more forbidding Carmelites of *The American*, this imagery casts the closet drama of self-making and subjectification as cloister drama. It is a delicately counterpoised figure that allows the intense *insideness* of enclosure to mean being “*out* of the world”; allows “taste,” “distinction,” and “products” to signify the sacral, *recherché*, and “queer”; and allows the progressive narrative time of *Bildung*—of being “prepared” by “educators”—to collapse into the mysticism of a single, all-conferring touch. This final temporal

paradox proves to be the most salient one for Aggie, whose character (in both senses of the word) transforms dramatically (also in both senses of the word) upon her marriage to Mitchy, from ignorant innocent to frivolous flirt. If the narrative strategies of *The Awkward Age* go a long way toward disabling the depth psychology so often attributed to James's work, the minor character of Aggie could be said to occupy the vanishing point of this tendency's logic.

James's account of constructing the character of Isabel Archer in the Preface to *Portrait* provides a vivid counterpoint. While the obvious idiosyncrasy of *The Awkward Age* is the absence not only of a centering consciousness but of any sustained consciousness at all, James's scant words on the "contributive" role of his "heroine's satellites" in *Portrait* urge one to ask what physical laws govern the representation and trajectory of a minor character like Aggie. Aggie's "development" is not a question of a painstaking weaving of consciousness out of the linguistic fabric of the text, but of an abrupt shift in a character's behavior and a corresponding shift in James's method of representation. Earlier passages such as that of Aggie's arrival at Mrs. Brook's gathering position the "innocent" Aggie as a salable object, approached through comparatively long narrative interludes dilating upon her character. Take, for instance, a rare moment of free indirect discourse,¹⁰⁶ focalizing, significantly, Longdon:

Since to create a particular little rounded and tinted innocence had been aimed at, the fruit had been grown to the perfection of a peach on a sheltered wall, and this quality of the object resulting from a process might well make him feel himself in contact with something wholly new. Little Aggie differed from any young person he had ever met in that she had been deliberately prepared for consumption and in that furthermore the gentleness of her spirit had immensely helped the preparation. (145)

¹⁰⁶ James elliptically writes to Mrs. Humphry Ward that he uses free indirect discourse in *The Awkward Age* "consistently *never at all* (save for a false and limited *appearance*, here and there, of doing it a *little*, which I haven't time to explain)" (quoted in Miller, 131).

This paradoxical experience of “something wholly new” makes a fetish object out of what is actually the “fruit” of assiduous labor, but it also aligns Aggie’s effect on her observer with that of Longdon, whose natty attire impresses Van with a sense of his “looking new.” Longdon, however, maintains essentially the same relationship to the novel’s narrative strategies throughout, practicing observation as pursuit right up until he closes the novel by spiritedly Nanda away with him to his estate at Beccles. Aggie, once her marriage to Mitchy is consummated, is abandoned by the loving gaze of the narrator/observer/spectator and becomes solely an object—and, for the reader, an effect—of the other characters’ talk. While the earlier passages dealing with her character make her emphatically into a fetish through a theatricalized piece of narration, the later scenes reverse this approach, dematerializing Aggie by presenting her almost solely through dramatic dialogue between other characters that can only take place in her absence—that is, through gossip. In lieu of lengthy description and metaphor, we perceive Aggie through a series of alternately arch and earnest exchanges whose object is now not only off-center, but off-stage:

‘She has hidden a book, and he’s trying to find it.’

‘Hide and seek? Why, isn’t it innocent, Mitch!’ Mrs Brook exclaimed.

Mitchy, speaking for the first time, faced her with extravagant gloom. ‘Do you really think so?’

‘That’s *her* innocence!’ the Duchess laughed. (246)

‘Doesn’t he feel by this time – so awfully clever as he is – the extraordinary way she has come out?’

‘By this time?’ Harold echoed. ‘Dearest mummy, you’re too sweet. It’s only about ten weeks—isn’t it, Mitch? You don’t mind my saying that, I hope,’ he solicitously added.

(247)

Even Nanda's well-intentioned reassurances to Mitchy require the condition of his wife's conspicuous absence from a private tête-à-tête of somewhat questionable intimacy:

'I had my idea about Aggie.'

'Oh, don't I know you had? And how you were positive about the sort of person-'

'That she didn't even suspect herself,' Nanda broke in, 'to be? I'm equally positive now.

It's quite what I believed, only there's ever so much more of it. More *has* come—and more will yet. You see, when there has been nothing before, it all has to come with a rush. So that, if even I am surprised, of course *she* is.'

'You admit then,' he continued, 'that you *are* surprised?'

Nanda just hesitated. 'At the mere scale of it. I think it's splendid.' (302)

We are denied access to the process of Aggie's transformation, and while the characters in the novel are pruriently intent on fixing the exact duration of the change, the change for the reader is even more abrupt, and seems to precipitate a concomitant formal shift. If *The Portrait of a Lady* follows a gravitational model of satellite consciousnesses revolving around a sun, Aggie's trajectory across *The Awkward Age* could be said to enact this novel's aesthetics of dematerialization writ small. Aggie is initially a highly spectacularized fetish object and is recognized as such narratively; the closely choreographed loss of her closely managed "innocence" results in her becoming an invisible object of dialogue. Once again, it is worth noting that in neither of these moments is deep subjectivity the prevailing model of characterization; rather, the character's move from a vacuous innocence to an empty sexual knowingness has a parallel narrative movement, from a highly spectacularized object of narration to an immaterial projection of dramatic dialogue. The inenarrable and depth-defying suddenness of Aggie's transformation is perhaps best captured by Nanda's offhanded revision of

the “receptacle”¹⁰⁷ metaphor for Jamesian subjectivity—notably, here, shorn of the physical receptacle: “You see, when there has been nothing before, it all has to come with a rush.”

Nanda’s reparative reading, in which Aggie is “only trying to find out... what sort of person she is,” ultimately represents a failed internal attempt on the novel’s part at rendering this character intelligible through the language of continuous subjectivity and psychological realism, as Nanda herself all but admits at novel’s end (302). The failure is all the more ironic in that Nanda’s conversation with Mitchy itself demonstrates that there is no representational technique available for the dematerialized Aggie to “find out” anything of the sort about herself—instead, it is for other characters to elaborate her in her absence through conversation.

Repetition, Pursuit, & Theatrical Attention

The abruptness of this minor character’s transformation is mirrored by the similar celerity with which the novel’s marriage plot and the social circle at its center are undone. As Van puts it to Mrs. Brook, the author of the destruction, “Five minutes did it” (253). Directly after Aggie emerges from the room in which she has been engaged in an unseemly tussle with another member of the circle over a dirty French novel, Mrs. Brook publicly outs her daughter Nanda as having been corrupted by this same book and thus as unsuitable for marriage to Van.¹⁰⁸ Van’s account of Mrs. Brook’s cataclysmic act frames it specifically as a theatre piece, but one in which the spectators double as actors:

It was a wonderful performance. You pulled us down—just closing with each of the great columns in its turn—as Samson pulled down the temple. I was at the time more or less bruised and buried, and I didn’t in the agitation and confusion fully understand what had

¹⁰⁷ Compare, for instance, *What Maisie Knew*’s “deep little porcelain cup” metaphor (Oxford UP, 14-5) or the “cup brimming over with the sense that now at least she was learning” (61); Milly’s “small cup of iced coffee” in *The Wings of the Dove* (174); and even Nanda’s characterization of herself as “a sort of a little drainpipe with everything flowing through” (*The Awkward Age*, 210).

¹⁰⁸ See Brooks, 210-11.

happened. But I understand now. (Ibid.)

David Kurnick argues that “Milton’s Samson pulls down the temple in a heroic gesture of antitheatricalism, whereas the collapse of the temple in James’s novel registers as a genuine loss.”¹⁰⁹ It is undeniable that the violent collapse of Mrs. Brook’s set is described in traumatic terms by Van and, as I will discuss shortly, precipitates a scenic form of repetition compulsion at the novel’s end that parallels the narrator’s repetitious invocation of a spectator/observer throughout. However, to argue for a sense of “genuine loss” at the destruction of the “group consciousness” and of the place of theatricality in this novel necessarily assumes that this group consciousness actually existed and was positively valenced. It also assumes that theatricality does in fact exit the stage—a paradoxically theatrical metaphor that should hint at the complex irony of Van’s allusion. Because while Mrs. Brook’s violence to the integrity of the social set is indeed figured as the destruction of a theater, Kurnick skims over the theatricality of this act of antitheatricalism. In aligning Samson’s defensive assault on his Philistine audience with the “inward gaze of the psychological novel,” Kurnick overlooks the imperative every closet drama imposes on its reader—to visualize, to imagine a performance. Milton may have taken pains to screen his Samson from the “gawking crowds of Gaza” and to do so in a literary form that was patently sympathetic to “the regime that closed the theaters,” but the irony remains that his detheatricalizing play impels *readers* to adopt the inimical stance of the spectator. *Samson Agonistes* may ultimately direct its reader’s gaze inward, but even thus inverted, it alights on an image.

Mrs. Brook’s actions shine a light on a similar contradiction within the interlineation of spectatorship and theatricality. Her performance requires her social set to become a *situational* audience in order to be nullified as actors *generally*. In witnessing Mrs. Brook’s exposure of

¹⁰⁹ Kurnick, *Empty Houses*, 137.

Nanda, the friends become guarantors both of Nanda's disqualification from the marriage market and of the explosion of the structural integrity of their group; this particular act of spectatorship dissolves the social group that forms the basis for observation and, in Nanda and Van's case, for (marital) pursuit. What Van's allusion articulates, then, is not the banishment of theatricality, but a final cleaving of the Janus-faced figure at the center of James's novel-as-closet-drama—the spectator/observer. A fissure in this dual figure is visible in Van's deferred understanding of Mrs. Brook's act, a temporal lag that may be the only possible response to a scene of theatre that not only elementally affects and effects spectators, but will permit of no internal or symbolic process of sense-making observation. No susurrus of gossip or reflection attends the scene; the only reaction that registers is Longdon's departure from the theatre/stage. To call the delay of Van's understanding a "deferral" may ultimately be downright optimistic, as Van concludes his postmortem discussion with Mrs. Brook in the next chapter in a state of even greater incomprehension: "Vanderbank, who appeared to have been timing himself, put up his watch. 'I'm bound to say then that, with separations so established, I understand less than ever your unforgettable explosion'" (256). This conclusion accords purely spectatorial theatricality—theatricality unmitigated by observation—an explosive puissance, in the wake of whose demonstration we find the closet-novelistic enterprise in a state of shell shock. At the same time, a moment of theatre has effectively dissolved theatricality *qua* social norm for nearly the remainder of the novel. The performing coterie at the novel's center is disbanded; rather than governing characters' ways of relating, theatricality becomes a structural and narrative principle, relegated to organizing scenes and inflecting the narration—up until Longdon's attempt, at novel's end, to reconstitute it as a relational model for himself and Nanda.

The Awkward Age's three-part denouement consists of three consecutive conversations

taking place in Nanda's former schoolroom, now converted into an independent receiving room. Each scene emphasizes the manner in which Nanda's visitors enter and exit, as well as on the mutually unsettling transactions between these characters and the objects in the room. The opening sentence of the section contains a pronoun used often in the novel, but never before by the narrator: "Nanda Brookenham, for a fortnight after Mr Longdon's return, had found much to think of; but the bustle of business became, visibly for us, particularly great with her on a certain Friday afternoon in June" (281). The question of where the stress falls in the phrase "visibly for us" both determines and confuses much in this scene. If on *visibly*, the distinction being made is between the visual relay of information and—what other receptive mode? And why apportion space on the page to specifying a kind of experience that should literally be apparent on its face? If, on the other hand, the stress is on *us*, the narrator would seem to be expropriating the privileged first person plural from the "us" of Mrs. Brook's social circle and possibly of the spectator/observers hypothesized throughout the novel. Yet why is the "us" of the narrative voice boasting of exclusive access to the *visual* domain at the only self-conscious moment of the novelistic narrator? Kevin Ohi writes of "seemingly conventional" uses of the narrative "we" in Jamesian texts otherwise dominated by the free indirect style of narration: "just as the bond uniting characters and narrator is subject to sudden abrogation by the narrator, so, too, is that of the reader with the narrator, which threatens, in turn, not only a puncturing of intimacy but an exposure of presumption."¹¹⁰ Certainly in the case before us now, the narrator's self-constitution in terms of visual acuity and felicitous emplacement excludes the reader altogether from this narrative "us," and drives home the extent to which the surrogation of readers/spectators/observers throughout the novel has ironically enacted a mode of narrative appraisal that *always* unambiguously excludes the reader. If this moment implicates anyone in a

¹¹⁰ Ohi, *Henry James and the Queerness of Style*, 86, 89.

“presumption,” it is the narrator himself whose sudden consolidation of the novel’s narrative function in a tidy *us* must invite skepticism. The only other use of the narrative “us” in *The Awkward Age* appears later in the same paragraph, in reference to Van’s visit: “Kindness therefore becomes for us, by a quick turn of the glass that reflects the whole scene, the high pitch of the concert” (281). (One recalls here James urging Stevenson toward the “kindness” of granting his reader sight.) Our narrator is again individuated as a novelistic function, but his newly arrogated position of privilege over the “scene” is visual, mediated, and physically bounded and flattened by the reflective surface of the mirror; indeed, as an “us” rather than a “we,” the narrator is himself objectified by this particular scene’s staging and staginess.¹¹¹ The relationship between theatricality and narrativity having shifted after Mrs. Brook’s devastating performance, the narrator in these final scenes seems to resemble a more conventional Jamesian narrator—a shift that nonetheless can only be accomplished through theatrical means. Meanwhile, the narrative structure itself becomes the primary locus of theatricality after the collapse of the characters’ theatrical relations.

James’s scenic composition is rarely as baldly theatrical and spatially oriented as in the three visits to Nanda that close this novel. It is also the moment in which the immateriality of the imagined environment and the spectrality of characters become most pronounced in their difficult co-presence with theatricality. Marvin Carlson has discussed at length the theatre’s “ghostliness, its sense of return, the uncanny but inescapable impression imposed upon its spectators that ‘*we are seeing what we saw before,*’” explicitly rendering theatrical repetition in the language of spectrality: “Everything in the theatre, the bodies, the materials utilized, the

¹¹¹ The narrator does use the narrative “we” much earlier in the novel and in a slightly more conventional way: “An observer at all initiated would, at the juncture, fairly have hung on his lips, and there was in fact on Vanderbank’s part quite the look of the man—though it lasted but just while we seize it—in suspense about himself” (202). Similarly, we will see in *The Sense of the Past* that the narrator’s position as spectator becomes reinforced at moments when a spectator *within* the narrative sees the phenomenal terms of his spectatorship compromised.

language, the space itself, is now and has always been haunted.”¹¹² Van, Mitchy, and Longdon’s scenes with Nanda are spectral versions of one another—repetitions in terms of social form, spatial demarcation, and the behavior of the visitors, and unique even among James’s “scenic” novels for this structural echolalia.¹¹³ In a supreme display of awkwardness, Van, no longer among Nanda’s potential suitors, barrels his way through his visit with a torrent of talk and distracted attention to the objects decorating Nanda’s room—two strategies that are at times indistinguishable: “He continued to talk; he took things up and put them down”; “his almost aggressive friendly optimism clung so to references of short range” (283, 285). Of Mitchy’s visit, the narrator notes with a final deployment of the familiar device:

There would have been for a continuous spectator of these episodes an odd resemblance between the manner and all the movements that had followed his entrance and those that had accompanied the installation of his predecessor. He laid his hat, as Vanderbank had done, in three places in succession and appeared to have very much the same various views about the security of his stick and the retention in his hand of his gloves. He postponed the final selection of a seat and he looked at the objects about him while he spoke of other matters. Quite in the same fashion indeed at last these objects impressed him. “How charmingly you’ve made your room and what a lot of nice things you’ve got!” (294)

If the stiffness of Mitchy’s remark portends the onset of social lignification, the sudden hyper-presence of the material world does not necessarily inject a feeling of reassuring solidity into the novel. The objects matter only insofar as they themselves do not matter; it is in the empty citationality of these gestures (both as a recognizable social tic and as a dramatic repetition

¹¹² Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, 1, 15.

¹¹³ Structurally unique, that is. James, of course, wrote a number of “ghostly tales,” and many of his works that would not typically fall under this heading trafficked in the suggestion of the supernatural (e.g., *The Portrait of a Lady*). Indeed, Fleeta Vetch’s contention that “It seems to me ghosts count double—for what they were and for what they are” seems to reflect a general Jamesian belief (James, *The Spoils of Poynton*, 172).

across two consecutive scenes) that the poignancy of these moments, their ability to register loss, inheres. Were “we” in fact endowed with the visual faculty touted by the narrator, we would be a properly theatrical audience with a clear view of the objects in question, and so paradoxically hindered from receiving the full force of the *insignificance* of the physical world that is here inextricable from the affective eloquence of theatrical repetition.

It is Longdon, of course, who provides the difference: “Mr Longdon had kept his eyes on her, but at this he turned away; not, however, as an alternative, embracing her material situation with the embarrassed optimism of Vanderbank or the mitigated gloom of Mitchy” (304). Unlike the earlier scenes between Nanda and her visitors in which theatricality remains a structural or narrative principle, Longdon’s visit moves toward an ideal Jamesian “marriage” of form and substance, enabling Nanda and himself to inhabit a theatrical relation with regard to one another. Confessing to the comic protraction of his previous hour spent anxiously waiting to set out for Nanda’s, Longdon paints a picture of dilatory re-routing, loitering, and repeated returns to his club:

“I don’t want any tea, thank you. I found myself, after five, in such a fidget that I went three times in the course of the hour to my club, where I have the impression that I each time had it. I dare say it wasn’t there, though, that I did have it,” he after an instant pursued, “for I’ve somehow a confused image of a shop in Oxford Street – or was it rather in Regent? – into which I gloomily wandered to beguile the moments with a liquid that if I strike you as upset I beg you to set it all down to. Do you know in fact what I’ve been doing for the last ten minutes? Roaming hither and thither in your beautiful Crescent till I could venture to come in.” (304)

Though the point of Longdon’s story is circuitousness and suspended progress toward a destination, the narrator makes his own point of interrupting Longdon in order to report that

Longdon “after an instant *pursued*” his tale. As I have discussed above, Longdon’s trajectory across the novel is characterized by various double logics. If earlier the aggressivity of pursuit is sublimated into the comparative remove of observation, here a coil is loosened in pursuit’s purposiveness, the word now denoting (while delaying) the telling of a story about delayed purpose whose telling is in itself a discursive delay of the difficult scene that is to follow between Longdon and Nanda. Observation and observers have absconded from the novel altogether, leaving in their wake a demand for direct sight:

‘Kindly give me some light then on the condition into which he has plunged you.’

She hovered before him with her obscure smile. ‘You see it for yourself.’

He shook his head with decision. ‘I don’t see anything for myself, and I beg you to understand that it’s not what I’ve come here today to do. Anything I may yet see which I don’t already see will be only, I warn you, so far as you shall make it very clear.’ . . .

Mr Longdon, without a movement, kept his posture. ‘. . . So you may dance, if you like, on the absolutely passive thing you’ve made of me.’ (Ibid.)

The scene is punctuated by several chagrined attempts on Longdon’s part to vacate his seat like a difficult audience member and by subsequent appeals to his patience by Nanda. Longdon’s interrogative directness, contrasted with the symptomaticity of Van’s volubility and Mitchy’s stiltedness, is atypical for this novel; it permits a character openly to request a performance and to pursue a position of spectatorial receptivity rather than simply to inhabit a social structure in which constant and implied spectatorship/observation continuously generates performances that become fodder for character studies. In his prefatory remarks, James offers a highly suggestive rebuttal to a false consciousness theory of taste in which audiences can be relied upon to swallow dreck—or what James considers second-shelf Ibsen—because their palates know no better:

If *John Gabriel Borkman* is but a pennyworth of effect as to a character we can imagine

much more amply presented, and if *Hedda Gabler* makes an appeal enfeebled by remarkable vagueness, there is by the nature of the case no catching the convinced, or call him the deluded, spectator or reader in the act of a mistake. He is to be caught at the worst in the act of attention, of the very greatest attention, and that is all, as a precious preliminary at least, that the playwright asks of him, besides being all the very divinest poet can get. (14)

James casts the “convinced” “spectator or reader” as the subject of a productive *attention* that enables tolerant enjoyment. This transvaluation reveals a dimension of James’s attitude toward the satisfied theatrical audience that might surprise those familiar only with his denigrations of the theatre-going public in the wake of the disastrous première of *Guy Domville*.¹¹⁴ With regard to the world of *The Awkward Age*, this “very greatest attention” could subtend a positive type of spectatorship that is also a kind of reading, a spectatorship with the ability to build relations rather than merely monitor or destroy them.¹¹⁵ In an 1893 letter to Edward Compton, whom he had sent a draft of the first act of *Guy Domville*, James writes: “I only expected—what you have *given* me—a voice, on the question of whether or no you *liked* the act—as a spectator, an irresponsible outsider in your stall—thought it interesting as a *beginning*, the first chapter of a story etc.”¹¹⁶ Note that James refers to 1) an act as a chapter, 2) written feedback as a voice, 3) a reader as a spectator, and 4) a spectator as “an irresponsible outsider.” Spectatorship would eventually be the receptive mode of those attending a production of *Guy Domville*, but James’s

¹¹⁴ Deeply wounded by the reception of *Guy Domville* in London, James referred to the audience as “a brutal and ill-disposed gallery which had shown signs of malice prepense from the first,” and railed against “theatrical people” in general, who “don’t want plays (from variety and nimbleness of fancy) of different *kinds*, like books and stories, but only of *one* kind, which their stiff, rudimentary, clumsily-working vision recognizes as the kind they’ve had before” (*Selected Letters*, 279, 281).

¹¹⁵ Kurnick sees a longing for “collective forms of sexual dissidence” and a consequently expansionary social arena in *The Awkward Age*’s theatricality (*Empty Houses*, 109). While I remain skeptical about the utopian thrust of Kurnick’s argument, I find the broader claim about theatricality’s ability to widen social relations very fecund. So although my argument—that theatricality generates, reconstitutes, and sometimes extinguishes sociality at various points in James’s novel—differs from Kurnick’s, I owe much to his approach.

¹¹⁶ James, *Selected Letters*, 261.

friendly enjoinder to *read* from the imagined position of a spectator, to inhabit that of an irresponsible outsider, somewhat startlingly puts a premium on the facile, unpenetrating “like/dislike” response of the casual theatre-goer he elsewhere so contemns.¹¹⁷ This kind of reactivity seems similar to the mode of attention held up in James’s remarks on Ibsen—not a *close* attention, perhaps an irresponsible one, but one conducive to enjoyment and interest, and adaptable to multiple forms. In forgoing observation in the novel’s final scene in favor of an ideal of receptive attention through spectatorship, Longdon steps into the empty dramatic space left by the dissolution of Mrs. Brook’s performing coterie. He seems poised, in his request, to offer a receptive (if, given that life with him spells the foreclosure of Nanda’s marriage prospects, lovingly irresponsible) alternative to the catastrophic spectatorship devised by Mrs. Brook. Longdon may also be able to sublimate the abortive “pursuit” of a felicitous marriage (and marriage plot) into “pursuit” as a type of theatrical repetition and deferral, pursuit of the kind of “marriage” James speaks of in the Preface—one between form and substance. With regard to this last development, James’s remarks on the relative boundedness of a play’s mode of reference introduce a suggestive tension:

[The] novel, as largely practised in English, is the perfect paradise of the loose end. The play consents to the logic of but one way, mathematically right.... We are shut up wholly to cross-relations, relations all within the action itself; no part of which is related to anything but some other part – save of course by the relation of the total to life. (*AA* 14)

While “the logic of but one way” primarily means the logic of the *only* way, that is, the “mathematically right” way, the phrase also suggests the single-mindedness of a unidirectional

¹¹⁷ Mary Anderson, for instance, gives this account of attending the theatre with James: “He sat by me and whispered his criticisms. ‘You see that fat, rubicund old Colonel on the stage now; well, shortly he is bound to say ‘Damn it, sir,’ and the audience will be delighted. Oh, they loved trifles and vulgar trifles very often.’ He had hardly finished speaking when the fat old Colonel said, ‘Damn it, sir,’ and the audience laughed long and loud....” (quoted in *The Complete Plays of Henry James*, 20).

route, combined somewhat paradoxically with the gridded enclosure of auto-referential “cross-relations.” In Longdon’s speech quoted above, pursuit, severed from both observation and plot machination, is similarly folded into a staggered dramatic rhythm of action and deferral, a mixed temporality also evident in Longdon’s qualified decisiveness in taking Nanda to Beccles:

‘Come!’ he then very firmly said—quite indeed as if it were a question of their moving on the spot.

....‘Today?’ she more seriously asked.

He looked at his watch. ‘Tomorrow.’ (310)

And in his departure from the scene, the concluding lines of the novel:

They had gained the door, where Mr Longdon again met her eyes. ‘And then Mitchy—’

But she checked him with a quick gesture. ‘No—not even then!’

So again before he went they were for a minute confronted. ‘Are you anxious about Mitchy?’

She faltered, but at last brought it out. ‘Yes. Do you see? There I am.’

‘I see. There we are. Well,’ said Mr Longdon—‘tomorrow.’ (311)

Pursuit functions here as both a one-way street and a referential crosshatching. Mr. Longdon, no longer “behind,” seems to have become a revenant in reverse, unable to progress from the present into the future toward which he repeatedly gestures. He manages only a proleptic exit from the scene and from the novel, his last words a necrotic series of revisions and repetitions, including the confirmation: “I see.” The language of visual receptivity prevails, but in a phatic capacity. This final repetition of “tomorrow” (or, more precisely, “Well, tomorrow”) recasts what was initially a promissory note, even a spur to action, as exactly what *tomorrow* ought to promise a movement away from—a temporal hitch that prevents movement both forward in time

and out of the scenic enclosure of Nanda's room.¹¹⁸ Theatricality reemerges as both a mode of relation between characters *and* an aesthetic, and in both these capacities proves irresponsible, tolerant, and enclosed. What necessarily remains immaterial is no longer time already past, but a tomorrow that evades dramatic representation.

James places the ostensibly opposed generic functions of theatricality and dematerialization in dialectical relation, offering experimental versions of characterization, the narrative function, and time in the novel. *The Awkward Age's* conclusion then goes a step further in theatricalizing theatricality itself; if the spectacular scene that disperses the actor-spectators of Mrs. Brook's circle demonstrates the ability of a theatrical performance to dissolve theatricality as a *given* social norm, the novel's denouement presents the obverse—a moment in which a theatrical scene is *pursued* in the interest of producing and sustaining a theatrical social relation. Yet this pursuit remains as immaterial an enterprise as was the voiceless utterance with which Longdon pursues Van in the novel's opening scene. The "dramatic objectivity" of Longdon's voluntary spectatorship in these closing moments in fact precludes what would be the dramatic objectivity of a resolution: Longdon and Nanda's departure from the receiving room, the physical site of stasis and recurring deferrals. That the two forge *tomorrow* through theatrical means only ensures the terms of tomorrow's dematerialization. The "marriage" of form and substance pursued by James throughout *The Awkward Age* is indexed by just such uneasy generic couplings as we see in this denouement: theatrical directness with novelistic immateriality; spectatorship with antitheatricalism; the drama and spectacle of pursuit with

¹¹⁸ Féral contends that "Theatricality does not exist as a pure form, nor does performativity. If 'pure theatricality' existed, it would be a repetitive, dead form of art, where all signs would be identifiable, decodable and meaningful—a kind of 'museum play' that would recreate old art forms as museum pieces, not as living art forms" ("Foreword," 5). Though Féral's claim regards the specific and mutually enabling relationship between theatricality and performativity, an analogous trajectory can be seen at the end of *The Awkward Age*; here, theatricality is, of course, not rendered in "pure" form—this would be categorically impossible in a novel—but does, arguably, appear in a private setting and without the supporting column of readerly observation. This perhaps contributes to the "museal," following Féral's argument, quality of these final scenes.

readerly observation and delinearizing discursivity; and the protracted time of narrative and character development with a condensed dramatic temporality. These formal and generic experiments would leave their trace in James's theorization of that narrative technique to which this experimentation ostensibly provided an alternative: the *going-behind* of Jamesian free indirect discourse.

“Something ‘Turned On’”: Desiring Oneself, Being an Other

For a hundred years, (literary) madness has been thought to consist in Rimbaud’s ‘*Je est un autre*’: madness is an experience of depersonalization. For me as an amorous subject, it is quite the contrary: it is becoming a *subject*, being unable to keep myself from doing so, which drives me mad. *I am not someone else*: that is what I realize with horror. ... I am indefectibly myself, and it is in this that I am mad: I am mad because *I consist*.

— ROLAND BARTHES, *A LOVER’S DISCOURSE*

“Tomorrow” threatens to become a dead letter at the end of *The Awkward Age*; in *The Sense of the Past* (1917), the future can arouse desire only when it attains the condition of a corpse, when it is dramatized as a “stopped pulse” mirroring that of the past. Counter to the spectrality of *The Awkward Age*’s hypothetical spectator/observers—and counter to the total perspicuity of the objects of their spectatorship—James’s unfinished time-travel novel moves toward the epistemological principles of the late style by positing consciousnesses and objects of consciousness that are thickly objective, and therefore always only partially formulated or visible to spectators who are equally objectively placed. *The Sense of the Past* theatricalizes its ostensibly most internal novelistic moments—for instance, when a character is thinking his thoughts—by fixing otherwise inchoate or spectral things in time and space, transforming them into delimited objects. Not only do things like a painting, the past, a woman, or one’s own consciousness have material objectivity; they are conceived as being more available to experience the more *thing*-like they are, the more their surfaces can be rotated and displayed without subcutaneous disruptions. This phenomenality presents a problem for the novel’s

protagonist, Ralph Pendrel, who can conceive of the objects of his desire only as aesthetic objects *tout court*, but is unable to conceive of himself as anything but a subject or of his present as a *desirable* object. Even when he describes himself in aestheticizing terms—as a “beautiful bookworm,” for instance—his phrasing reflects what he imagines to be his beloved’s perception of him. His self-objectification, then, is in fact objectification of another consciousness. James’s fantastic plot device anticipates and literalizes the phenomenal work of his later stylistic intricacies by placing another man’s consciousness in the protagonist’s mind. Ralph travels back in time to *become* another man, but he never merely and finally *is* this man; rather, the narration bears witness to his experience of enacting this man’s consciousness from moment to moment. As Ralph becomes increasingly cognizant of a gap between the objective material of the past Ralph’s consciousness and his spectatorship of his own performance of it, his unease takes the form of a desire to see this gap closed through his return to the future. The novel is left unfinished at this point, with Ralph entertaining a fantasy of psychological coherence and of a return to his own heretofore unloved historical present.

It would be difficult to characterize *The Sense of the Past* without recourse to the category of fantasy. James began writing the novel in 1900, set it aside to begin writing *The Ambassadors*, took it up again on the eve of the First World War, and finally abandoned it. *The Sense of the Past* would seem to offer critics a tidy hermeneutic dovetailing, a nostalgic fantasy of restoration fulfilled both aesthetically and biographically—as a narrative representation of a twentieth-century protagonist transported to the early nineteenth century, and as an apotropaic gesture on the part of James, a steward of Old World forms devastated by the passing of his adopted social order. The conceit that James returned to *The Sense of the Past* in an attempt to escape the horrors of war and ineluctable modernization offers a parallelism seductive enough to

have spurred at least a few critics into speculative biographical readings.¹¹⁹ And not without reason; the novel often seems to reflect on its own generic or phenomenal framework and, more uniquely within James's oeuvre, traffics in moments of sly autoreferentiality (to be discussed further below). If *The Sense of the Past* offers an escapist plot, however, the escape it furnishes its protagonist necessarily fails to satisfy. The novel's problematic defines desire as the uneasy choreography surrounding the gap between spectator and object of spectatorship; consciousness, modeled on this phantasmatic relation, is constituted around a gap between the objectified self that performs and the self that bears witness.

The Sense of the Past, then, is idiosyncratic in a few ways: it is a time-travel narrative with a nested transatlantic journey, and, in an inversion of Kevin Ohi's claim that the style of the James novel "is its plot,"¹²⁰ the fantasy plot of *The Sense of the Past* seems seductively to literalize the theatrical operations of consciousness—the "happening of consciousness,"¹²¹ in David Beams's phrase—that Jamesian style more tortuously enacts. Consciousness here is not only depsychologized and flattened; its discontinuity is spectacularly staged and is experienced by the conscious individual with a giddiness that shades into intense unease. In more widely read late novels like *The Golden Bowl* and *The Wings of the Dove*, consciousness operates not as an abyssal depth but as a theatre, with the individual acting as a spectator of his or her own sensate experience, cognition, and affect. This theatrically objectified experience transpires, then, at a slender remove from the spectator who responds to it. The protagonist in *The Sense of the Past*

¹¹⁹ Griffin remarks that "*The Sense of the Past* has traditionally been seen as an escape to the past. Many critics, following Percy Lubbock's early lead, view the unfinished novel as marking James's withdrawal from contemporary life. Others have argued that, while James is not fleeing the problems of the present in the novel, his protagonist is" (48). See, for instance, Marshall's claim that "James's inability or unwillingness to complete *The Sense of the Past* can be interpreted either as a retreat from a bold, strangely literal attempt to erase the distinction between life and art, or as a renewed discovery of the uneasy truce between creator and created" (197). Waters, while dissenting from the reading of escapism, concedes that "Escape may well have been [James's] intent" (181).

¹²⁰ Ohi, *Henry James and the Queerness of Style*, 34.

¹²¹ Beams, 164.

has a problem with objects and gaps. Ralph Pendrel, a fusty American intellectual and self-described “slow-crawling library beetle” (*SP* 12), is obsessively fixated on the past—not the past as narratable history or even as an object of nostalgia, the “sense of the past” for Ralph is a phantasmatic phenomenality that transmutes inert objects into *the* form of subjective experience.¹²²

This chapter will argue that *The Sense of the Past* stages the unraveling of a fantasy of psychological coherency through this fantasy’s own internal contradictions. The novel’s protagonist, who initially aspires to an ever more fluid and masterful subjectivity, is made to endure self-objectification through an intense theatricalization of consciousness. Ralph travels back in time and incorporates the consciousness of his long-dead relative into his own consciousness, but rather than find satisfaction in his absorption into the dead past he has always desired, he becomes increasingly aware of a theatrical split within himself. Tripping continually over the gap between his performance of the dead man’s consciousness and his own spectatorship thereof, Ralph finds himself panicked at the impossibility of what he most desires: that the two Ralphs should melt into each other and form a coherent self. The unfinished novel roughly divides into four sections or books, each of which, I will show, enacts a differently articulated relation between desire and consciousness. In the first book, Ralph’s rejection by Aurora Coyne, the woman to whom he proposes marriage, introduces the phenomenal terms in which desire will be formulated. Ralph sees his objects of desire as aesthetic objects, and imagines that the woman who rejects him must also perceive him as such—but as the wrong aesthetic type, a bookworm instead of a man of action. In fact, she rejects him out of a belief that

¹²² It is worth noting that when Ralph does travel back in time, he travels less than a century. While others have noted that 1820 constitutes what James would call a “visitable past” (*The Art of the Novel*, 164), the historical difference seems to me notional rather than materially specific, it being the shortest amount of time that will indicate an experiential difference, just as England is perhaps the least “foreign” place that will still qualify as “abroad.”

his forthcoming trip to England will nullify his desire for all other objects (herself included) by suturing his subjectivity totally to his beloved “dead past.” Their conversation establishes the forthcoming time-travel plot as a fantasy, a “dream” of self-coherency that, once entered, would ostensibly never be relinquished. In the following book, Ralph’s obsession with a strange portrait in the London house he has inherited integrates these incompatible desires for a beloved and for the “sense of the past,” an inaccessible subject and a dead object. The young male subject of the painting presents his back to the viewer, combining the apparently conscious subject position (and act of rejection) of Aurora Coyne with the stately objectivity of a frozen past. When the figure in the painting comes to life, Ralph’s discovery that the man looks—in a sense, *is*—identical to himself extends the dialectic of objectivity and subjectivity to his relation with himself. The following book consists of a strange conversation between Ralph and the American Ambassador in which Ralph attempts to recount the events of the previous book. It is a scene of failed seduction (of Ralph by the Ambassador) in which Ralph shows himself unable to conceive that spectatorship (for instance, the Ambassador’s role as recruited audience to Ralph’s incredible story) could converge with participatory action (in the form of the Ambassador’s quite blatant overtures to Ralph). Ralph’s rigid conception of what an object can be precludes a self-understanding as an object of desire; because he inhabits a purely perspectival subjectivity, the only objectivity he can imagine himself attaining to is that of an *aesthetic* object for others. Once Ralph travels back to 1820 in the form of his dead other self, these distinctions begin to break apart. Ralph finds that by delighting in the sensation of self-continuity that comes with *becoming* the dead man, he has in fact become a spectator of his own consciousness. In a state of abject fear and panic over this theatrical gap, Ralph’s previous desire for and to be the other man is not fulfilled, but rather intensified by this apparent making-continuous of their consciousnesses.

Consciousness is shown to be ineluctably theatrical, and becomes all the more uncomfortably so the more one pursues a fantasy of self-coherency.

Because It's Just in Dreams—!

The Sense of the Past is, in many ways, a book about objects—about whether and when it is possible for an object to be only one thing, an isolated quantum demarcated from its others, and about what these attempts at objectification make possible. Left unfinished in 1914 and generally read alongside James's extensive notes detailing possible narrative trajectories, the incomplete *Sense* itself makes for a contested critical object, one whose paratexts bear a nearly prosthetic burden of coherency. The novel dramatizes the phenomenal question of what makes for an object in its highly abstract and abstracting opening sentence: "They occurred very much at the same hour and together, the two main things that—exclusive of the death of his mother, recently and deeply felt by him—had yet befallen Ralph Pendrel, who, at thirty, had known fewer turns of fortune than many men of his age" (1). Unity and separateness lap against each other in the first clause, threatening a collapse of what should be their own separate vocabularies. The "two main things" occur not only simultaneously, but in concert—the two things are one thing, "They," before anything else transpires. This emphatic simultaneity draws ("very much") attention to its own contrivance; we are made to attend to the correspondence between these two as-yet unnamed events because it cannot otherwise be taken for granted, particularly given the excluded and syntactically isolated third "thing": "the death of his mother." That the two syntactically privileged events are significant and significantly linked is thereby made undeniable and suspect in one move.¹²³ We can infer that their *they*-ness and their grammatical priority in the sentence—the word "main" announces how much their position in the main clause

¹²³ See also my discussion of extraposition in the opening lines of *The Wings of the Dove* in chapter three. While there the use of this grammatical idiosyncrasy produces doubleness in a subject who is ostensibly one, here it enhances the sentence's delicate shading between the language of singularity and that of plurality.

contributes to the artifice—perform a specific aesthetic function: they enable a narrative that will be *about these two things* to unfold, a narrative that, on the subject of its protagonist’s most “deeply felt” and singular loss, has time only to dispense hastily with it. These first lines force us to recognize the novel’s, narrator’s, or individual’s privileged ability to recognize and tell stories about certain objects and to decline to elaborate others, even those understood to be most “deeply felt.”

Objects multiply in this novel, then, and with them these objects’ parameters and relative significance. The unseemliness of this proliferation will eventually, as Isobel Waters remarks, “leave the reader wondering just who is/are the true object(s) of [Ralph’s] affection.”¹²⁴ In the novel’s first lines alone, we are given “two main things” that seem one thing, and that are shown to be on emotionally subordinate footing to a grammatically subordinate thing. Most subordinate of all in these lines is Ralph himself—object to the things. Things befall him; death is felt *by* him. The only action ascribed to Ralph places him under covert governance: described as having “known fewer turns of fortune than many men of his age,” Ralph is Fortuna’s manipulated object even when he is the knowing subject. A human *pendulum* notable for his movements back and forth across time, Ralph Pendrel also evokes a *spandrel*—an architectural by-product, a proper object only by dint of its visible negativity. The unusual autoreferentiality of this James novel also complicates the status of things and characters as objects in their own right. Ralph, for instance, instantly recalls Ralph Touchett of *The Portrait of a Lady*. “Jacobean,” Ralph’s notably incorrect descriptor for the house he inherits, unusually recalls James himself—“the later James,” as Ralph emends. The novel’s narration, then, gives the impression of an especial *knowingness*, and seems immediately to stage this knowingness by making a catalog of objects out of the novel’s protagonist, himself characterized by his knowledgeability as an historian and his

¹²⁴ Waters, 189.

passion for inert objects. Ralph's problem, then, is enacted in these very first lines: while he habitually understands other people as aesthetic objects, his experience of his subjectivity always seems at loggerheads with his own inevitable objectification—here by the free-indirect narration that ostensibly positions him as the subject of consciousness, and later by the objects of his own desire. The problem of understanding oneself as a subject alone is demonstrated in a passage describing Ralph's obsession with the dead past:

He was by the turn of his spirit oddly indifferent to the actual and the possible; his interest was all in the spent and the displaced, in what had been determined and composed roundabout him, what had been presented as a subject and a picture, by ceasing—so far as things ever cease—to bustle or even to be. It was when life was framed in death that the picture was really hung up. If his idea in fine was to recover the lost moment, to feel the stopped pulse, it was to do so as experience, in order to be again consciously the creature that *had* been, to breathe as he had breathed and feel the pressure that he had felt. (48)

Ralph's indifference to the temporal present belies his fetishistic investment in a fantasy of total *presence*—the past for him is a fully aestheticized object that he would nonetheless have coextensive at all points with subjectivity, experienced *as* experience. The erotic charge of this passage is polarized across these equally impossible positions: to desire something that's only an object, and to be something that's only a subject. The third-person pronoun "he" in the last sentence condenses the problem with this dual proposition: even as the object of the fantasy switches from being the object Ralph desires (the spent, the displaced) to the conscious subject that Ralph wishes to be ("he"), the grammar of the sentence insists on a gap between Ralph and this would-be "he," a particular gap in consciousness that might be glossed as desire. Like so much in James, this understanding is not explicitly proposed, but diffused across the surface of

style. As the fantastic plot of the novel proceeds, however, it begins to stage these fundamental terms of Jamesian consciousness: desire constitutes the unstable gap between oneself and an other, and when this other *is* oneself, desire names the theatrical composition of consciousness.

In the novel's first book, Ralph unsuccessfully courts the imperious widow Aurora Coyne, one of James's sphinx-like women who, as the ostensible object of Ralph's desire, poses a particular phenomenal problem to his aestheticizing impulse: he describes her as a cinquecento painting signed by Titian or Veronese, but, as her name might portend, she evades collection by continually rotating and revolving out of view—both in the conversation that takes up the first book of the novel and in her frequent sojourns “abroad.” James designates this first book in his 1914 notebook entries the “Introduction to the introduction.” Elsewhere in the notes, James confesses to having forgotten Aurora's name. These notes go a long way toward literalizing the metaphor of the “margin” that recurs in *The Wings of the Dove*: text becomes paratext, character becomes introductory material, just as, in the later novel, the vivid, initial subject-object of consciousness—Kate Croy—drops from view. Yet, in another consonance with *The Wings of the Dove*, Aurora's unplacedness as both phenomenal object and desiring subject is not only established at the moment of her introduction; it is identified as the site and source of desire:

Her departures, absence, returns, returns as for the purpose of intensifying fresh disappearances, these things were what had somehow caused her to glare at him, to dazzle and almost to blind him, as by a wider initiation. He had seen her thus only at certain points of her sustained revolution; had been ignorant of many things with which the cup of her own knowledge overflowed; had been in short indebted for the extent of his privilege to the mere drops and lapses in the general time, as he termed it, that she so insolently kept. Sharing continuously as a child, and then as a growing girl, the life led by

her parents in other countries, she had had behind her, at their first meeting, on their twentieth birthday—for in respect of age they marched well enough together—if not fifty years of Europe at least something that already caused him to view his untravelled state as a cycle of Cathay. (4)

Jamesian dramaterialization, which I will describe at greater length in my next chapter, involves the contradictory process of a responsive materiality being simultaneously staged and closeted, laid out before us and swallowed up whole. In the above passage, James hitches desire itself to the quality of dramateriality. In what may be called a narrative rendering of Walter Benjamin's dialectical image, the indefinite cyclicity of Aurora's "departures, absences, returns," and "fresh disappearances" is objectified into a focus-beam, an object of vision with its own uncanny capacity for sight; indeed, if Aurora's revolutions cause her to "glare" at Ralph, what dazzles and blinds is the glare of both an unbearable radiance and an intolerable gaze. Aurora Coyne's name itself condenses and concatenates a host of irresolvable dualities: scene and object (dawn's slow diffusions and a coin's portability); linear and recursive (the inexorable break of day and the "sustained revolution" of a spinning disk); material and figural (the sensate experience of sunrise and the mythological embodiment of Aurora, the ontic particularity of the clinking coin and the totalizing semiotics of currency).¹²⁵

The dual signification of *glare* alone limns the central anxiety of the novel: being an object for those who are your objects—more specifically, the erotic terror of being the object of desire of the object of your desire. The remainder of the passage narrativizes this problem in the concrete spatial and temporal terms of abroadness. In his notes, James reports having intended, in *The Sense of the Past*, to recreate *The Turn of the Screw* through the international theme; the

¹²⁵ Waters notes that "Aurora Coyne," "redolent of 'new money,' evokes a similarly imperious, if less forbidding, Mrs. Newsome" (192).

result could be said to be the internationalization of dramateriality. Ralph's fantastic identity swap is ballasted by the literal recontextualizations attending transatlanticism and time travel. The passage ends with a revision of the Tennyson lines, "Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay." Bookish Ralph Pendrel's reference to "Locksley Hall"—a poem remarkable for, among other things, its irruptions of libidinous bile—inflects what might otherwise pass for a rather courtly moment of self-diminishment with an idea of sexual relation as scarification.

Sexual relation, in the novel's dialogic first book, consists of the kind of disjunctions and misreadings that will become familiar in late Jamesian conversational style. Ralph assails Aurora with derisive representations of what he takes to be her desires, ostensibly in the hopes of "making her care enough to contradict him" and thereby "a little diminish his defeat" (10). Yet the rhythm of the conversation has the newly returned Aurora still revolving in and out of Ralph's presence. Her responses come only after a delay—"yet not as if to show she had taken one's words in, for his were never directly met" (11). While Aurora continues to speak "as if she had not heard him" (12), Ralph persists in excoriating her for preferring the "buccaneer," the "desperado," the "ruffian" over himself, a "beautiful worm" and "slow-crawling library beetle" (11). When the conversation turns to his scholarly book, however, the typological polarities begin to shift:

"I hope you'll write many more."

"Many more!" he laughed out. "Charming," he scoffed without seeing where he went, "charming the way you appear to imagine one throws such things off! The ideas people have of 'books'—!" He had gone too far before he saw it—had gone so far that the next instant, at the sight of something in her face, there was nothing but to pull up. She really cared, and he had been calling her "people," had been grotesquely tilting before her at a shapeless object stuck up by himself, and stuck up crooked. She really cared, yes; yet

what was it withal she cared for? (14)

Ralph opposes himself to the “men of action” to whom he imagines Aurora’s tastes run; yet this imaginative interpretation of Aurora enacts the very quixotic violence of which he believes himself constitutionally incapable. It enacts it, moreover, through a drama of misrecognition that out-Quixotes Quixote. In describing himself as “grotesquely tilting before her at a shapeless object stuck up by himself, and stuck up crooked,” Ralph casts his defense of cloistered scholasticism in terms not only spectacular, but *grotesque*—indicating a mode of spectacle that, like a glare, both draws and repels the gaze. Yet if Ralph makes a spectacle of himself, he does so precisely by mistaking his interlocutor for a spectator; more specifically, or rather more generally, he addresses her as that uncomprehending mass audience or readership whose name here metonymizes the *theatrum mundi* trope: “people.”

Yet Ralph’s recognition of his prior misrecognition only clears the way for a further contradiction. Aurora has just completed one of her “revolutions,” and tells Ralph in no uncertain terms that she will never leave America again. She frames her refusal of his marriage proposal as a kindness: he *must* go abroad to the Old World to get what he really wants and find what he really is; as she intones: “The sense of the past is *your* sense.” Aurora then leaves him with a slim hope that is also an impossibility: she will accept him if he goes to Europe, then returns to her “with desire.” This demand sounds like a banality, but Aurora sees in it a contradiction so insoluble that she can imagine it resolved only in dreams:

“What it comes to then is that you’ll never dream of me.”

“By no means; because it’s just in dreams—!” But she pulled herself up. “I mean that their strangeness is their law. They, when they’re happy, arrange everything to perfection. With you or without you at any rate,” she pursued, “mine will go on. They’ll be as fantastic as you please—that is as much about the poor product.” (27)

What Aurora implicitly predicts is merely what Ralph himself appears to want: a total collapse of object (“the past,” Europe”) and subject (Ralph), spectacle and spectator, that renders a subjectivity without fissures and without desire. Aurora’s condition is impossible not because Ralph’s encounter with the “sense of the past” would supersede his desire for her, but because it would dissolve desire as such. In aligning her condition with the logic of “dreams” and the “fantastic,” Aurora synthesizes a *donnée* of late Jamesian fiction: to narrativize the fulfillment of desire is to appeal to a non-realist style or, here, non-realist modes of characterization and world-making.

Turning and Turning On

When the plot turns explicitly to the fantastic, Ralph’s determination to fix a revolving figure in space and in relation with himself becomes literalized. As he begins to explore the London house he has inherited, he discovers among the portraiture of previous inhabitants a painting of a young man who “appeared to have sought to ignore our friend’s appeal by turning away his face” (73), presenting only his back to the viewer. What little the painting depicts is described in loving detail: the “close compact dark curls,” “long straight neck,” “the fall of his shoulder and the cut of his dark-green sleeve,” “the way his handsome left hand, folding easily over a pair of grey gloves, rested its knuckles on his hip.” The subject’s unusual pose gives him a “conscious air.... The gentleman here had turned his back, and for all the world as if he had turned it within the picture.” Ralph, believing that the figure has “repeatedly” turned its face within the painting to conceal itself from its potential audience, begins to see in these revolutions a “snub” to himself and a reflection of the undesirability of his historical present. It is worth noting at this point that James’s trope of the gracefully revolving figure tends to describe characters who not only never become centers of consciousness, but are in decidedly queer

relation to objectivity and objectification. Aside from the exquisitely revolving Aurora Coyne and the elusive young man in the painting, James once used the phrase to describe Jocelyn Persse, a young “man about town” with whom he maintained an intensely affectionate epistolary relationship. James comments in one letter on the “magnificent *ease* with which you circulate and revolve—spinning round like a brightly-painted top that emits, as it goes, only the most musical hum. You don’t *creak*.”¹²⁶ Another example is the conclusion of the early tale “Rose-Agathe” (1978), in which the first-person narrator, a hairdresser, discovers that a Parisian collector who frequently stares through his salon window does not desire, as he has thought for the duration of the story, the narrator’s own wife, but one of the wax manikins that sat in the window. This climactic discovery is narrated in language strikingly similar to that used in the letter to Persse, and seems to anticipate in literal terms the phenomenality of Aurora Coyne and the young man in the painting:

Sanguinetti led me through two or three rooms, and then stopped near a window, close to which, half hidden by the curtain, stood a lady, with her head turned away from us, looking out. In spite of our approach she stood motionless until my friend went up to her and with a gallant, affectionate movement placed his arm round her waist. Hereupon she slowly turned and gazed at me with a beautiful brilliant face and large quiet eyes.

“It is a pity she creaks,” said my companion as I was making my bow. And then, as I made it, I perceived with amazement – and amusement – the cause of her creaking. She existed only from the waist upward, and the skirt of her dress was a very near pedestal covered with red velvet. Sanguinetti gave another loving twist, and she slowly revolved again, making a little gentle squeal.¹²⁷

In the spatiality of Jamesian narration, free indirect discourse is figured as the narrator’s “going

¹²⁶ Quoted in Edel, 574.

¹²⁷ James, “Rose-Agathe,” 237.

behind” a character. The prospect of *going behind* a person who is constantly revolving poses a (perhaps amusing) challenge, though this difficulty also gives point to the Jamesian phenomenon that the narrative technique best known for conferring the illusion of intimacy with a character’s subjectivity is understood in decidedly objectifying terms. Free indirect discourse in James always involves a dialectic of objectification and subjectification, and even the foreclosed possibility of “going behind” a revolving person forces us to note the strange physicality of Jamesian free indirect discourse. When the person who revolves is revealed in fact to be a thing, as in “Rose-Agathe,” the borders between objectivity and subjectivity are drawn somewhat more starkly.¹²⁸ The later work *The Sense of the Past* threads the two terms together, leaving Aurora Coyne’s and the young man’s status as both subject and object continually under revision and a continual source of discomfort to the man who desires them both.

The erotic charge of Ralph’s encounter with the painting and the narrative impetus of Ralph’s desire are clear, but the precise object of his desire resists consolidation just as the young man’s face eludes Ralph’s gaze. Indeed, the very terms in which desire is typically understood are here proposed and negated with equal certitude. The narrator notes of the portrait with pointed confidence that “it was enough to say for these few indications that they provoked to irritation the desire for others” (77), then remarks that “It was not that there was less of him than one wanted, but rather that there was too inordinately much and that there would be more and more of the measure to come” (78). The fantastic trajectory of the living portrait plot demands increasing liveliness and more areas of contact and relation between the painted figure and the

¹²⁸ As Otten acutely remarks, “The plot of ‘Rose-Agathe’ is shaped by this equivocation between body and object as the narrator’s perception shifts from thinking that a person is being treated as a thing (both because her beauty is assessed with a connoisseur’s eye and because she is purchased) to realizing that a thing is being treated as a person (not only because the friend half-jokingly ascribes emotions and desires to her but also because his desire for her, almost frankly sexual, displaces onto a surrogate the needs and emotional investments usually reserved for persons” (4).

viewer; here, however, the desire for more “indications” is seamlessly externalized, from the internal wish of an individual character to the teleology of a fantasy plot in which there inevitably “would be more and more...to come.” The desire of the protagonist *becomes* the engine of the story in a way that erases (or subjects to a remarkable amnesia) the original desire—much in the way Aurora Coyne suggests that dreams whose “strangeness is their law” can “arrange everything to perfection.” Here we see a pointedly allegorical version of the tendency in late James for feeling and desire to migrate across the provisional lines that demarcate individual psychologies from (and embed them within) the texture of Jamesian style. Not only does desire’s site of registration change; also revised is its origin.

Here a note on allegory and the usefulness of this term for late James may be necessary. Because *The Sense of the Past* is an explicitly fantastic fiction, its tropology can seem more cohesive and more pointedly indicated at the level of plot. The condensation of symbolic import into the figure of the portrait, for instance, seems unusual not in its discrete symbology (the golden bowl and *The Wings of the Dove*’s Bronzino are obvious later examples), but in the odd multiplication of contemporary or even self-reflexive literary references around this fantastic scene. Ralph’s briefly and mistakenly guessing the London house to be Jacobean is one example. After his encounter with the materialized young man, Ralph compares his shame at having participated in the scene to that of *The Marble Faun*’s Hilda, who witnesses a murder (more on this passage below). The unusual inflection of the narrative by material details from the world outside James’s novel would appear to disrupt the allegorical mode of the fantasy; at the same time, however, the inclusion of these intertextual details extends the central metaphor of consciousness as a theatre in which the spectator’s participation crucially co-constitutes the performance. The possibility of delimiting an aesthetic, erotic, or otherwise phenomenal object

without implicating a valuing, desiring, or thinking subject is foreclosed at the level of specific symbolic objects (the painting) and of narrative texture (the historical embeddedness of the novel's referentiality). If modern fiction generally stakes out a space somewhere between allegory and realist particularity, the concrete historical or literary material in *The Sense of the Past* seems only to draw closer attention to the method by which it is interpolated, thereby rendering these apparently exogenous details *internal* to the allegory of theatrical consciousness.

Even Ralph's desire for the young man, legible as it has been to other readers, braids with the strange retroactive ability of spectatorship to transform the spectacle being witnessed:

Just so his own [world] was in his tremendous "pull" and reach, the fact of his positively living enjoyment of some relation or other, not to say some cluster of relations, that during those very minutes determined his considering air, and even, of a sudden, invested him with something of that effect which poor Ralph, wondering about great Italian church pictures and ruefully conscious of knowing them but by hearsay, imputed to the beauty and sincerity of the portrayed, the attentive donatorio in the corner of the Venetian or other masterpiece. What was the presence of the pious magnifico, say, but our very Ralph Pendrel's presence, not a little mixed, as he supposed that of the old-time devotee represented in the act to be, with the immemorial smoke of altar candles?—yet leaving the upper spaces, those where the sacred or the saintly image itself reigned, clear and sublime. The clearness, or call it even the sublimity, was here for all the world the same sort of thing: didn't it place round the handsome uplifted head, as by the patina of the years, the soft rub of the finger of time, that ring of mystic light? In the Titian, the Tintoret or the Veronese such a melting of the tone, such a magic as grew and grew for Ralph as soon as he once had caught the fancy of it, would have expressed the supernatural even as the circling nimbus expresses. (79-80)

The complexity of the Venetian painting metaphor is daunting. As a genre of painting, the

“church [picture]” depicts a scene paralleling the scene of Ralph’s spectatorship of the young man’s portrait. Yet, as Ralph has never in fact seen a piece by a Venetian master, this ekphrasis conjures a doubly absent picture (absent not only to the eye, but to memory) that is used to describe another object of compromised visibility (the oddly positioned young man in the real portrait). In a reversal similar to that which earlier rendered the portrait’s too “few indications” into “too inordinately much,” Ralph’s exclusion from the world into which the young man is looking here rotates into its obverse, as the young man’s “considering air” is seen to be not an immanent quality, but rather in the process of being imparted by Ralph’s presence as the “pious magnifico.” The passage grows stranger from there. Ralph, like the magnifico or donatorio supplicating the sacred image, mingles with the “smoke of altar candles” at the bottom of the depicted scene, leaving the “upper spaces” where the saintly visage dwells “clear and sublime.” While the young man’s “air” can be “imputed” or projected backward to Ralph, it is not Ralph’s presence alone, but his sequestration *as* a spectator within the scene, that produces the sublime effect on the depicted young man. Ralph thereby affects the painting only through his aesthetically formalized separation from it. And, as the narrator’s lapse from free indirect discourse at this moment suggests, “our very Ralph Pendrel’s presence” only has such generative power through the backward-projection of a spectator distinct from Ralph’s perspective who can bear witness to the scene of Ralph’s spectatorship. As the painting metaphor positions Ralph as a spectator depicted *within* the metaphorical painting, it requires similarly the *narrator’s* formalized separation from Ralph as spectator to Ralph’s spectatorship. The passage closes with a final reversal: the metaphorical Venetian painting that had figured the real scene containing the portrait becomes suffused in turn with this scene’s affect. The “patina of the years” that accrues to the depicted young man—a patina imparted, ironically, “of a sudden” by Ralph’s

spectatorship in the present—becomes a portable conceit, projecting back onto the abstract Venetian painting a “melting of the tone.” The migration of this trope adjusts the status of the “Titian, the Tintoret or the Veronese” from “ruefully” unseen artifact to an artwork in its own right capable of eliciting aesthetic assessment (“melting”) through comparison with a concrete, present scene. This making-intelligible through concretion is, of course, precisely what the Venetian metaphor initially did for the portrait scene itself. As the object of desire can produce the desiring subject, so a figure can *confer* meaning without or before *possessing* it. It is in this regard that the two Ralphs later in the novel can provide the sense of the past and of the future to each other without themselves having the benefit of what they give. The Venetian painting scene thereby unfolds a pronounced contradiction in Jamesian figuration that will later become merely intrinsic to the logic of Jamesian time travel.

The scene of desire, then, not only retroactively produces and revises desire’s objects; it generates a type of spectatorship in which spectators and performers are simultaneously objectified and effaced, and in which the locus of significance—the spotlight, so to speak—can shift unexpectedly to a “supporting” figure like the Venetian painting. The stage lighting metaphor might be especially apt in a novel in which the brackish “London light” makes the “objects about show for the time as in something ‘turned on’—something highly successful that he might have seen at the theatre. What was one to call the confounding impression but that of some stamp, some deposit again laid bare, of a conscious past, recognising no less than recognised?” (65).¹²⁹ The Oxford English Dictionary’s entry for “turn on” in the sense of arousal cites as its earliest example a line from James’s *The Ambassadors*, the novel he wrote after setting aside the unfinished *Sense*. Arguably, the passage from *The Sense of the Past* constitutes

¹²⁹ In the 1890s, the decade in which James was writing *The Sense of the Past*, limelights in British theatres had generally been replaced by carbon arc lamps. Arc lamps emitted a brighter but harsher light, a suggestive context for a passage describing the theatricalizing quality of the murky London light.

an earlier instance. Objects illumined by the London light become theatrically framed and heightened. Like Ralph in the role of the pious magnifico, a conscious alluvium of the “[ages], generations, inventions, corruptions” that produced the London light transforms the objects of the present while remaining temporally distinct from them. A structure of dual recognition emerges; the conscious past, in leaving its “stamp” on these objects, leaves them also conscious and “turned on”—both enhanced in dramatic significance and provoked to desire for the past that glares at them.

This structure of recognition is dramatized in the scene of Ralph’s encounter with the materialized young man. One night, “he struck himself as catching at a distance the chance reflection of his candle-flame on some polished surface” (86). Ralph quickly realizes the reflected flame is in fact a second candle:

It was like the miracle prayed for in the church—the figure in the picture had turned; but from the moment it had done so this tremendous action, this descent, this advance, an advance, and as for recognition, upon his solitary self, had almost the effect at first of crushing recognition, in other words of crushing presumption, by their immeasurable weight. The huge strangeness, that of a gentleman there, a gentleman from head to foot, to meet him and share his disconnection, stopped everything; yet it was in nothing stranger than in the association that they already, they unmistakably felt they had enjoyed. (86-7)

As might be expected, the “young man revealed, responsible, conscious, quite shining out of the darkness, presented him the face he had prayed to reward his vigil; but the face—miracle of miracles, yes—confounded him as his own” (87-8). On the one hand, this epiphanic encounter (epiphanic even in the classical sense of a manifestation of the divine, an answer to Ralph’s prayer) could be said to literalize a certain truism: the object of desire and the object of

recognition are always a projection of oneself. Yet the fantastic temporality of simultaneous advance, cessation, and shared awareness of a relation already having been established muddies this neat allegory. The face that Ralph recognizes as his own could also be said to confound him as his own *did*; the young man might offer Ralph a melodramatic objectification of himself, but this other Ralph might not necessarily provide an external means of self-relation so much as “share his disconnection.”

A Closed Back Room

The narration abruptly cuts off at Ralph’s epiphany, and picks up with a strange scene in which Ralph pays a visit to the American Ambassador and explains to him that he and his double have switched identities: “I’m somebody else,” says Ralph, to which the Ambassador replies, “And is the other person you?” “That’s what I count him.” Just as Ralph has wanted the sense of the past, his double had wanted not the sense of the present, as the Ambassador incorrectly surmises, but the sense of the future (thus confirming that the recognition that one receives from—and gives to—the conscious past is always a misrecognition.) The entire third book comprises Ralph’s visit to the Ambassador, where he recounts the extraordinary events of the previous book, using his audience, who is only ever called “the Ambassador,” as a “moral receptacle” into which he deposits his burden of experience:

He recalled the chapter in Hawthorne's fine novel in which the young woman from New England kneels, for the lightening of her woe, to the old priest at St. Peter's, and felt that he sounded as never before the depth of that passage. His case in truth was worse than Hilda's and his burden much greater, for she had been but a spectator of what weighed upon her, whereas he had been a close participant. It mattered little enough that his sense was not the sense of crime; it was the sense, in an extraordinary degree, of something done in passion, and of an experience far stranger than a mere glimpse, or than, if it came

to that, a positive perpetration, of murder. He wondered that a knowledge of anything less than murder could be able to constitute in one's soul such a closed back room; but what was of course now most present to him was that he had hitherto grasped of life a sadly insignificant shred. (89-90)

In invoking Hawthorne, the novel appears initially to hold up a distinction between spectatorship and participation, only to shift from the language of moral probity (“worse,” “burden,” “crime”) to a more nebulous, arguably queer, understanding of the experience (“done in passion,” “stranger,” “closed back room”), by which standard Ralph’s participation in the foregoing scene eclipses even the act of murder. Introduced to us as a man to whom very little has happened, Ralph appears to lack not only *experience* in the sense of the worldliness radiated by Aurora Coyne and of which he possessed a “sadly insignificant shred,” but also *experiences* as discrete objects of knowledge taking up room (even a closed back one) in the otherwise unimpeded fluidity of his intelligence.¹³⁰ Not incidentally, the emergence of his sense of mastery within the London house prior to the portrait scene stems from his unobstructed passage through the property; he displays “an excitement that marked simply his at last knowing himself, as not yet, in possession of what he had come in for,” and “revolved through the chambers above and amused himself, at successive windows, with the thought of the observation possibly incurred, out in the square”—observation that, as he happily speculates, might result in his being mistaken for a ghost (83, 85). These revolutions and the projection of an observer with a restricted perspective echo Ralph’s observation of Aurora Coyne’s spatial and discursive evasions, as well as the supernatural obduracy of the figure in the portrait. In aestheticizing both Aurora and the

¹³⁰ James’s famed account of experience in “The Art of Fiction” touches on both these senses: “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” (52). While experience is a “sensibility” and the “very atmosphere of the mind,” it is an atmosphere composed of particulate matter.

young man as Venetian paintings, Ralph tries to force aesthetic fixity onto two conscious subjects that appear to him to “recognize” and negatively evaluate him (as the wrong character type, as an embodiment of an inferior historical era). His experience with the young man, in constituting a “closed back room” in his soul, spatializes his consciousness, rendering it not merely a perspective informed by intelligence, but, like a house, both a cognitive process of engagement with the world of objects and a materially limited object in itself. The comparison with *The Marble Faun* is revealing in its anxious disavowal of a possibly simultaneous spectatorship and performance, which would position Ralph as both acting subject and his own objectifying spectator. That the young man’s face is Ralph’s own redoubles the specularity of this structure of consciousness.

The long scene that follows is an odd one in that it seems, even for James, unnecessarily to stagger the pace of the narrative and to introduce some awkward logistical problems; without this book, the novel would cut, more effectively one might say, from the moment of Ralph’s spectacular encounter with his double to the moment when he is magically transported back to 1820 as the other man. Further, Ralph’s declaration that he has become the other man makes little sense at this point, as he still appears to speak and think through his own consciousness. What work, then, does this section do? The Ambassador scene may recall moments in other James fiction from this period: a hysterical-seeming protagonist buttonholes an increasingly concerned or bewildered listener with an incredible tale, the other party humors him but is demonstrably unpersuaded, and at some point this listener’s response, whether arch or solicitous, seems to resemble desire. Similar scenarios appear in *The Sacred Fount* and to an extent in *The Turn of the Screw*, both fictions that could also be said to dramatize the problem of unobjectified subjectivity—and in those works, the problem is embodied and amplified by first-person

narration. As my epigraph from Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* might attest, these narrators so often seem insane to readers and other characters alike precisely because they are "not someone else"; they "consist." The protracted pursuit of a first-person perspective that does not harden along the somewhat more neatly allegorical tracks of the shorter tales was, according to James, "foredoomed to looseness" and to a "terrible fluidity of self-revelation" (Preface to *The Ambassadors*). These technical problems with first-person narration seem in *The Sense of the Past* to become internalized as phenomenal problems with Ralph's character. Over-identified with his own subjectivity, Ralph cannot conceive of himself as a live object of desire. Others' desire is therefore invisible to him, even in the comically salacious terms in which the Ambassador solicits Ralph's story:

The Ambassador, from his deep chair, in his "own" room on the ground floor, where books and papers were many and colours brown and sounds soft, smiled across the old Turkey rug through his beard and his fumes. "Is it very, very good?"

"For credibility no. But for everything else," said poor Ralph, "lovely."

"And very, very long?"

"Only as long—beyond the prime fact or two—as your Excellency himself may make it. It hasn't for me somehow at all that sort of dimension. I don't know at least how long it is. I wish I did!"

"Do you mean," the Ambassador asked, "that it's only broad? Why don't you, with your cleverness," he pursued before his visitor could answer, "put it on paper?"

Ralph does not put the story on paper because he does not wish to augment the gap in his consciousness by acting as a spectator of his own experience, by being the one to give it objective form. The Ambassador supplies him with one "single instance to impart his knowledge. He desired, he chose, that one other person, anxiously selected, should share his

charge of it. One person would do—in fact more than one would spoil everything.” And as Ralph’s eager audience, the Ambassador performs above and beyond the call of duty; his sly querying of the dimensions of Ralph’s experience transmutes it, even before its narrativization, into an *object* of conspicuous unwieldiness and prurient interest. If this and similar moments elsewhere in James seem to solicit readings of queer desire, it is for good reason—with the Ambassador as the spectator that Ralph refuses to be for himself, this staging of consciousness prizes open a gap that is dually articulated as spectatorship and desire. This is not to try to dispel any of the Ambassador’s undeniable sauciness or the mood of seduction that colors the scene, but to say that these elements particularize the formal and phenomenal structure of desire by providing erotic content, and that an externally theatricalized consciousness (theatricalized through the Ambassador’s spectatorship rather than within Ralph’s consciousness itself) can only materialize through external gestures of desire.

Ralph’s comic misinterpretation of the Ambassador’s solicitousness, his inability to see his desire, extends two of Ralph’s characteristics: 1) an aversion to the present—both the historical present and what is phenomenally *present* and unrevolving, and 2) a resistance to the concept of the spectator who simultaneously participates in the spectacle. As one who wants the sense of the past, Ralph pursues an impossible structure of desire: he desires the young man from the past *and* he wishes to be him, while the young man desires the sense of the future. In later sections of the novel, this disparity between the young man as object of desire and subject of a desirable perspective will reemerge when Ralph travels back in time *as* the young man—but with an ever widening gap between the *process* of cognition on the one hand, and on the other, the consciousness of the young man that Ralph is uneasily aware of as a distinct object. This discomfort at the theatrical structure of consciousness amounts, in the Ambassador scene, to an

incognizance of the Ambassador's dual role as conscripted spectator to Ralph's experience *and* participating performer in a presently unfolding drama of seduction. The Ambassador, as an unlikely *ficelle*, brings into view what is always fraught in *ficelle* characters like Maria Gostrey, Susan Stringham, and Fanny Assingham: that their libidinal investment in the lives of other characters, or in the characters themselves, exceeds their intended narratological function. Here that function is imputed by Ralph himself when he attempts to reduce the Ambassador to a trousseau containing his experience, extending his presumption of the incompatibility of spectatorship and participation into the narrative. And again, momentary lapses from free indirect discourse in this scene suggest the need for a separate spectator (the narrative voice) to a performance for which Ralph is not an adequately comprehending audience: when, for instance, the Ambassador insists on escorting Ralph out to his cab (eventually accompanying him back to Ralph's house),

Ralph offered so little objection to this...that they had within a couple of minutes more descended together to the hall; where the servant in waiting, Ralph was afterwards to reflect, must at once have attested his conviction that his master was not simply seeing to the door a visitor of no inscribed importance. His Excellency would therefore be going further—under some exceptional stress; and to this end would be placed without delay in possession of his hat, gloves and stick.... (109-10)

Both the sudden demarcation of Ralph's perspective from that of the narrator and the temporal disjunction between Ralph's reflection and the present moment ring highly ironic. Ralph sees a clairvoyant Jeeves, whereas an observer with less reflexive faith in intellection might discern a servant accustomed to expediting his master's excursions with male companions. When the Ambassador takes the step of riding home with Ralph in his cab and, on arrival, steps out with Ralph and dismisses the cab, Ralph again retrospectively hypothesizes a justification for the

Ambassador's protracted presence. When Ralph asks the Ambassador whether he will retain the cab, the Ambassador

stepped straight out by way of answer. "Oh my dear man, I'll walk," he seemed to be saying; "I don't in the least mind your knowing that you have given me the fidgets or that I shall extremely need to think you over: which indulgence the use of my legs will healthily stimulate."

Something of that sort Ralph was much later on, as I say, to recover the appearance of his having found words for; just as he was to piece together the presumption that, the cabman paid, magnificently paid, and getting again into motion, he and his protector—for hadn't they after all rather exquisitely agreed to leave it at this?—stood face to face a little, under the prolongation of a hand-clasp; followed then by the mutual release that left his Excellency standing there with the graver face of the two, *he* at least little doubted. (114)

Although hypothetical dialogue appears to odd effect throughout James's work, the ontological status of the speech loosely attributed to the Ambassador becomes only more ambiguous over the course of this passage. Initially, the dialogue appears to constitute Ralph's interpretation of the Ambassador's following him out of the cab. The reinstatement of the distinct narrative "I" and the temporal leap, however, contribute to the impression that this dialogue—or something approximating it—actually occurred and could only be reconstructed by Ralph at a "much later" date. The difference between these two contiguously posited accounts is significant. In one scenario, the Ambassador silently steps out of the cab expecting to follow Ralph into the house but, in doing so, is misconstrued by Ralph as innocuously setting off on a long walk back to his office; in the other, the Ambassador verbalizes his intent to return to his office by foot, but Ralph, distracted by his own thoughts, only later recalls some version of this speech. Both

possibilities are strange, their co-presence surpassingly so. If the earlier encounter between Ralph and the young man dramatizes a shared disconnection mediated by a felt association, this tête-à-tête seems to inverse the terms of that meeting. “[Confounded]” earlier by the duplication of his own visage, here Ralph “little [doubts]” the difference visible in the Ambassador’s face. Nothing appears to be felt in common by Ralph and the Ambassador, not even a disconnection so thoroughgoing the narration incorporates two versions of the same moment. Ralph’s certainty regarding the contours of his own person as distinct from the other man’s seems to wax as the epistemological stability of the represented scene of desire wanes. The operations of his individual consciousness appear to be withdrawing from the texture of narrative reality in this section. This impression is corroborated by Ralph’s sense, as he steps across the threshold into the house and is transported back to 1820 at the end of the above paragraph, of having finally been placed “on the right side and the whole world as he had known it on the wrong” (115).

His Fear Just *of* Theirs

Ralph’s rightness and the whole world’s wrongness are brought home by the lag in comprehension we experience in the first sentence of the following section, when Ralph arrives at the front door in 1820: “He was so far prepared as that, on the footman’s saying, after he had asked who was at home, ‘I think Miss Midmore is, sir,’ he had not been unduly agitated; though the effect was of making him at the same time wonder if he oughtn’t, more decently, to have had his approach heralded in the course of the morning by the bearer of a note” (116). Up until the semicolon, we are misdirected to believe that 1910-Ralph’s consciousness has traveled with him back to 1820, but the second half of the sentence reveals that Ralph’s consciousness has been supplanted by—or at least now incorporates—that of the other Ralph Pendrel, his 19th-century counterpart. Ralph feels himself “prepared,” then, not for the disorientations of time travel, but

for transatlantic difference—though whether one of these kinds of unease figures the other or merely is mistaken for the other by Ralph remains ambiguous. Also ambiguous initially is whether 1910-Ralph’s personality is subsumed into 1820-Ralph’s, or whether it is swapped out altogether:

The danger was flagrant and consisted of the number of things to be known and reckoned with in England as compared to the few that had so sufficiently served him at home. He but wanted to know, though he would rather have liked to learn secretly; which for that matter he *was* now, he conceived, catching a little the trick of—and this in spite of his wonted way, from far back, on receipt of a new impression or apprehension of a new fact, and under correction, in particular, of a wrong premise; which was to lose himself quite candidly and flagrantly in the world of meaning so conveyed. (117)

Ralph’s fear of a failure of manners gives social particularity to the problem that seems to undergird this passage—that of failed or inadequate psychological continuity and coherence. For James, beautiful manners indeed show as a kind of metaphysical aureole; a character in *The Awkward Age* describes the Apollonian Vandebrook as one of those who possess the “sacred terror”: “There are people like that—great cases of privilege. . . . They go through life, somehow, guaranteed. They can’t help pleasing. . . . They hold, they keep every one” (279). The language of capture is not incidental; it is only in absorbing and *becoming* the “dead past,” by having the experience of knowing without “[losing] himself” in the object of knowledge—that is, by experiencing his consciousness as integrated into the texture of this object—that Ralph feels the exhilaration of possessing what James would call the sacred terror.¹³¹ This moment in Ralph’s visit sees Aurora’s dream fulfilled; the sense of the past *is* Ralph’s sense in that his subjectivity

¹³¹ James also uses this phrase in recalling being introduced to the works of Prosper Mérimée; he found himself “fluttering deliciously—quite as if with a sacred terror—at the touch of ‘La Venus d’Ille’” (qtd. in Edel, 54). Here, as with *The Awkward Age*’s Apollo-like Vandebrook (and perhaps, too, with *Aurora* Coyne), the sacred terror has Olympian resonances.

has become coextensive with the objectivity of the past Ralph's consciousness. The contradiction in this affective circuit is that the ecstatic sense of mastery that attends Ralph's appearance of effortless knowingness necessarily also registers a gap in this knowledge—if only for himself and not yet for an audience. He can only exult in his seamless inhabitation of his consciousness if this consciousness is not in fact seamless, but rather an object that his feeling of excitement can be about—a performance that he is watching. As Ralph's experience of his consciousness becomes more fantastic and more ostensibly coherent during his visit with the Midmores, this contradiction becomes amplified and his exhilaration shifts to an intense unease.

This cognitive sequence is staged in pointedly melodramatic language in the scene of Ralph's meeting with Molly Midmore, the English cousin with whom he (the past Ralph) has been pursuing an epistolary courtship:

That light of her knowing all about him doubtless helped to flood his own mind with the assurance immediately needed: he felt at this stage, in the most wonderful way, that things came to him, everything a right carriage required for the closer personal relation, in the very nick of being wanted, and wore thus, even under the gasp of a slight danger escaped, a certain charm and cheer of suddenness. (121)

The repeated trope of a “danger” averted in the “nick” of time takes on a slightly more fantastic referent at each deployment. Whereas the earlier danger of appearing ignorant of so much of English life, while “flagrant,” is erased along with the visible process of learning, this new “slight danger escaped” seems to require actual magic, in that “things” previously out of reach now inexplicably “came to him.” These “things” are still only a matter of deportment, and Ralph attributes his sudden apprehension of them to the confidence imparted by Molly's “knowing all about him.” Her recognition seems to vouchsafe and lubricate the arrival of the right “things” in their discourse. Yet the facility of this discourse leads Ralph, ironically, to worry over the

unfamiliar cognitive and conversational rhythm: “Was it going to be enough simply to do the thing, whatever it might be, for it to ‘come’ right, as they said, and for him above all to like it, as who should also say, after the fact?” (122). Ralph says the right thing or authors a beautiful gesture with autonomic ease, then “[likes] it.” The phrase “after the fact” is particularly suggestive here, as Ralph reflects upon the novel experience of emotional assessment occurring *after* a circumscribed “thing” or “fact” enacts itself within the conversation. The stark contours of these “things” of consciousness are made possible by a legible and recursive temporality—first the enactment of the thing, then the positive emotion that registers that the thing has happened and thereby recognizes and understands it *as* an object, a fact. This temporality belies the linearity and limpidity of the fluvial subjectivity Ralph celebrates in this scene.

Eventually, factual details regarding Ralph and Molly’s shared family history begin to be deposited into Ralph’s consciousness and speech with the same hair-trigger timing: “He was in actual free use of the whole succession of events, and only wanted these pages, page after page, turned for him: much as if he had been seated at the harpsichord and following out a score while the girl beside him stirred the air to his very cheek as she guided him leaf by leaf” (126). Again, the novel’s (or Ralph’s) insistence on the possibility of a simultaneous acquisition and deployment of knowledge is undermined, in part by the deferral of meaning within the very metaphor for this simultaneity. At first apparently a metaphor of passive reception or spectatorship in which Ralph reads through the pages of his own consciousness, the figure transforms to position Ralph as the virtuoso performer of this consciousness as well. The girl “[stirring] the air to his very cheek” appears oddly superfluous to the figure, and might be another instance of a Jamesian metaphor generating extradiegetic desires and conflicts through the pursuit of its own figural logic. In her vaguely uxorial complementarity, this anonymous

helpmeet seems to invoke Molly Midmore, though the metaphor more arguably raises this possibility without finally claiming this ground for its figure. The source of Ralph's knowledge remains unnameable, but its partial personification as "the girl beside him" introduces a thin erotic current into the drama of consciousness. The delayed unfolding of the metaphor from one of reception to one that combines reception and performance makes a point of the metaphor's duality, with Ralph's earlier discomfort at the confluence of these theatrical positions sublated into the titillation of the mildly disturbed air at the player's cheek.

Ralph's delight at his own facile charm and its effect on Molly can only tip over into its negative image, a trajectory that begins with Molly's registration of Ralph's "uncanny" (in James's words) demeanor:¹³² "he had at the end of another minute so mastered it that he would have liked to catch her mistaken in order to put her right. Her face, for that matter, glowed with the pleasure, wasn't it? of his assurance thus made positive" (127). The narrative voice's ironic distance from Ralph's misinterpretation of Molly's affect here indirectly marks the start of Ralph's own burgeoning awareness, what James in his notes calls Ralph's "double consciousness":¹³³

The slow growth on the part of the others of their fear of Ralph, even in the midst of their making much of him, as abnormal, as uncanny, as not *like* those they know of their own kind etc., etc.; and his fear just *of* theirs, with his double consciousness, alas, his being *almost* as right as possible for the "period," and yet so intimately and secretly wrong;

¹³² Beams has observed that Ralph "actually *becomes* his ghost" (159).

¹³³ James almost certainly borrows this term from Du Bois, whose essay on race and double-consciousness appeared in *The Atlantic* the year before James began writing *The Sense of the Past*. While I would disagree that James's novel can be credibly read as an account of race consciousness (see, for instance, Hawkins), it seems clear that Du Bois's theorization of a racialized double-consciousness provided a cogent philosophical language for James's aesthetic and phenomenal concerns: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self" ("The Strivings of the Negro People, 1897).

with his desire to mitigate so far as he can the malaise that he feels himself, do what he will, more and more produce. (295)

Ralph's "desire to mitigate" the Midmores' unease constitutes a desire for self-coherence, for an erasure of the gap between his performance and his own spectatorship thereof. Molly's blush on Ralph's behalf betrays an embarrassment that, were Ralph capable of experiencing it for himself, might avert what ultimately irrupts into his thoroughgoing panic at the discontinuity of his self-performance. It is worth taking a moment to sort through these different emotive forms of embarrassment and fear, how they articulate or respond to an acute sense of incoherent self-performativity or "double consciousness," and why Ralph experiences one and not the other. Nick Salvato defines embarrassment as a feeling resulting from an "exposure of the performative self...in a social or relational situation...as undesirably or nonideally multiple and divided, and which is often...manifested in such paradigmatic physical or gestural signs as the blush and the cringe."¹³⁴ Ralph's gradual "exposure" to the Midmores and to himself as "so intimately and secretly wrong" shares certain structural components with embarrassment, down to the physical sign reflected in Molly's blush. Yet the emotional register of Ralph's growing unease seems quite distinct from the equally situational, performance-oriented feeling of embarrassment. Salvato, for instance, helpfully traces a potentially salutary trajectory for embarrassment's exposures, which might allow that an "individual be both of two selves or more—simultaneously."¹³⁵ This potentiality, however, seems foreclosed in *The Sense of the Past*, where even embarrassment cannot be experienced subjectively. If embarrassment says, in Salvato's cogent formulation, "I feel my self's otherness as it announces itself to others," or, more

¹³⁴ Salvato, "Cringe Criticism: On Embarrassment and Tori Amos," 685.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 693-4.

radically, ‘I feel my self’s otherness as others announce my selves to me,’”¹³⁶ *The Sense of the Past* proposes a further degree of removal in leaving it unclear who is doing the feeling. Ralph’s exposure might be embarrassing, but it is pointedly an other who wears Ralph’s embarrassment for him, just as it is not as an epiphany but only through an emotive relay among Ralph(s), the Midmores, and the narrator that the uncanniness of Ralph’s behavior begins to come home to him.¹³⁷ Emotions noted in his spectators become imperceptibly turned back on Ralph, reflected as his own. When Molly’s brother Perry, for instance, reacts to Ralph with “an extraordinary diffidence, almost a chill of fear, in the face of the unusual,” this fear provokes in Ralph a prevision of his probable failure to keep himself unperturbed, in the right proportion, by the mistrust it was open to him, on a certain side, or at least in certain quarters, to inspire. Why should he, why should he? he was able to say to himself, though indeed after much else had happened, that he had then inwardly and rather sickishly begun to inquire; for in the least degree to determined wonderments that should be beyond answering was the last thing he had dreamed of, and we may in fact all but feel his heart even now stand still for half a second under that noted first breath of a fear. That he wanted but to please and soothe and satisfy him, that he was ready to sacrifice to so doing all but the blood of his veins, this came over him to the point of bringing out sweat-drops on his brow while he met his kinsman’s bulging eyes with the grace of reassurance we have just imputed to his own. (152-3)

The “first breath of a fear” may be an explicit reference to Perry’s fearful reaction to Ralph, but

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 689.

¹³⁷ As James describes this process: “He knows his way so much and so far, knows it wonderfully, finds his identity, the one he wears for the occasion, extraordinarily easy considering the miracle of it all; but the very beauty of the subject is in the fact of his at the same time watching himself, watching his success, criticizing his failure, being both the other man and not the other man, being just sufficiently the other, his prior, his own, self, not to be able to help living in that a bit too. Isn’t it a part of what I call the beauty that this concomitant, this watchful and critical, living in his “own” self inevitably grows and grows from a certain moment on?—and isn’t it for instance quite magnificent that one sees this growth of it as inevitably promoted more and more by his sense of what I have noted as the malaise on the part of the others?” (*SP* 300)

one could just as credibly argue that it is Ralph—“[sickish],” sweat-beaded Ralph—to whom the passage’s language seems to be attributing the emotion. This queasy ambiguation between Perry’s fear of Ralph and Ralph’s fear of Perry’s fear limns precisely the interlineation of desire and identification in this section of the novel.¹³⁸ The narrator performs another moment of self-nomination in suggesting that “we may in fact all but feel his heart even now stand still for half a second”; bizarrely simultaneous here are the first-person narrator’s momentary distinction from Ralph, this narrator’s emotive collusion with the reader, and this first-person narrator’s claim to “feel,” of all things, the activities of Ralph’s heart. If the style of this sentence could be said to pose an argument, it would be that being a different person is precisely what permits one to feel another’s feeling, even at the level of affective concretion suggested by the skipped heartbeat. The theatricality of feeling here can only be described as radical. We have seen that Ralph partially *is* himself, but also both desires and desires *to be* himself; it is equally clear in this passage that Ralph’s emotions not only are intensely his own, but are his own perhaps *because* they are someone else’s. This latter version of theatricality similarly collapses desire and identification. The emotions the passage describes are clearly being theatrically transmitted, so that it is inconsequential whether the fear is objectively Perry’s or is Ralph’s subjective response to Perry; Ralph’s identification with Perry’s emotion makes the emotion both his own and not. Yet the relationship staged here is also a potently erotic one. If Ralph “[wants] but to please and soothe and satisfy him” and is “ready to sacrifice to so doing all but the blood of his veins,” this intense desire to please Perry particularizes the structure of Ralph’s desire as such; both refer to the painfully evident gap between Ralph’s performing self and his spectatorship thereof. The

¹³⁸ As Fuss writes in *Identification Papers*, “identity is continually compromised, imperiled, one might even say *embarrassed* by identification” (10). Fuss’s reading, contra Freud, of convergences of identification and desire is particularly apposite to the strange braiding of these two psychic structures in James’s novel. Desire, as Fuss argues, might be “precisely a *desire to be a subject*” (12).

diametric opposition between Perry's "bulging eyes" and the "grace of reassurance" in Ralph's own measures the same distance as is maintained between Ralph's performative "reassurance" and the tell-tale "sweat-drops on his brow." That is, the phenomenal distance between Ralph and another character is homologous to the distance between Ralph and himself.

Readers who interpret Ralph's journey as an escape from the fractured nature of James's modernity have cause to think so, as the effortless surface-presentation of the early 19th-century Midmores, their *sprezzatura*, stands in as the historically inflected form of self-coherence *tout court*. Molly's sister Nan, the only other character who seems to share Ralph's sense of double consciousness, lives in 1820 but is described in her alienation as "modern." The particular historical content does not appear to matter to Ralph so much as his phenomenal relation to it. When the gap in his consciousness becomes unbearable, Ralph's wish to see this gap closed, to inhabit his own consciousness as a continuous and unobjectified perspective, transposes the fantasy of self-coherence back onto the future world of 1910. This fantasy necessarily remains impossible since, as we see in 1820, the object of Ralph's desire—the affective experience of psychological coherence—propels coherence ineluctably to its disintegration. The impossibility of the fantasy is literal to a degree, as James abandoned the story at a point when Ralph is still trapped in the past. Arguably, the project James began after first leaving this one aside, *The Ambassadors*, could be read as a retooling of the drama of consciousness ultimately staged in *The Sense of the Past*: an American man who has missed out on life, on experience, travels to Europe and finds himself inhabiting not only the living past, but his own enhanced consciousness as such. Ultimately the protagonist recognizes that neither this richer mode of experience nor the etiolated life he left behind is permanently tenable, but the novel ends without his having left the Old World he must eventually forfeit.

Yet it is fair to say that *The Sense of the Past* has a very different emotive palette from *The Ambassadors*, that it in fact altogether lacks what the later masterpiece has in abundance: tone. This absence might be attributed to the comparatively mundane setting, but I tend to find that the activity of feeling here, like the drama of consciousness, is consolidated in and somewhat contained by this fantasy novel's subject matter—its tracing of feeling's phantasmatic trajectory between novelistic subjects. If the novel does not elicit strong feeling, it may be because it is devoted in part to staging how feeling works. And in the same way that Ralph cannot be said to *feel* embarrassed despite the text's registration of embarrassment, Ralph certainly does not inspire pity in the way that Lambert Strether so undeniably does, despite the novel's fairly hitting us over the head with the fact of Ralph's isolation. Susan M. Griffin has noted of Ralph that "Knowing the self means knowing what the self lacks: the presence of another."¹³⁹ Ralph's dilemma, however, is not that he lacks others. Stalking through the London house on nightly vigils prior to his encounter with the "other man," Ralph imagines himself either alone or permitted to feel and act as though he were by his obliging household staff: "Practically, in any case, he was beyond all observation and if self-effaced agents but worked to make him feel so, that only assured the freedom" (80). In this early section, Ralph's keenest awareness of "freedom" presupposes an expertly occluded audience. What Ralph lacks, therefore, is not others, but the ability to be an other for himself. To be an object differs crucially in this novel from being an *aesthetic* object. Because he can understand people only as aesthetic objects, Ralph cannot imagine erotic fulfillment except as acquisition or as a fantasy of *becoming* the dead artwork. In literally becoming the dead past, however, Ralph sees his initially streamlike experience of the other Ralph's consciousness instantly begin to break against his spectatorship of it. His performance of this consciousness becomes an object for him—not a

¹³⁹ Griffin, 54.

finished and framed art object, but a fixed point in time and space marking an uneasy distance to be closed by a yearning spectator; an object of desire.

Contrary, then, to the tendency in James criticism to characterize all objectification as aestheticization, *The Sense of the Past* turns on the necessity of experiencing oneself in objective and performative but non-aesthetic terms. If transforming people into artworks leaves “life...framed in death,” inhabiting one’s consciousness as an unobstructed and “terrible fluidity” poses as grave a peril. In an 1883 letter to Grace Norton, an old friend then suffering a serious depression, James urges his friend not to “melt into the universe, but [to] be as solid and dense and fixed as you can. ... You will do all sorts of things yet, and I will help you. The only thing is not to *melt* in the meanwhile. I insist upon the necessity of a sort of mechanical condensation” (SL 191-2). While Grace Norton’s self-debouching may threaten a different sort of death by water from Ralph Pendrel’s self-engulfment, the same danger ultimately looms: not to live, not to “do all sorts of things.”¹⁴⁰ Ralph’s mere *performance* in the fantastic scene with his double does not suffice as experience; he is unwilling or unable to act as spectator to his own experience, to objectify it *as* experience, and this phenomenal intransigence propels him into another scene of libidinal disjunction with the Ambassador. Far from exhibiting the dangers of fossilizing the world, *The Sense of the Past* shows that in order to be lively, one *must* first be an object. The novel opens with the avowed elision of that which is “deeply felt” from the scope of the narrative. Feeling finally emerges, albeit in the form of a foundational dread and panic, only at the point in the novel when a “mechanical condensation” of consciousness takes hold, when

¹⁴⁰ In its grammatical ambiguity, the “melting of the tone” in the Venetian painting passage in *The Sense of the Past* could be said to perform both James’s prescribed “mechanical condensation” and the perilous fluidity this condensation would militate against. The “melting of the tone” could refer to the tone itself’s succumbing to melting or, if read genitively, to a tone of meltingness. The co-presence of these two interpretive possibilities registers precisely the difficulty and danger involved in positing a solidity resistant to deliquescence, particularly when the solidity is a literary effect like tone.

Ralph's own spectatorship of his performance converges with others' and fixes him inescapably to himself.

“So as Not to Arrive”: The Object-Theatre of Late Jamesian Consciousness

A person taking up his residence in a foreign city is apt, I think, to become something of a play-goer. In the first place, he is usually more or less isolated, and in the absence of complex social ties the theatres help him to pass his evenings. But more than this, they offer him a good deal of interesting evidence upon the manners and customs of the people among whom he has come to dwell. ... If this exotic spectator to whom I allude is a person of a really attentive observation, he may extract such evidence in very large quantities. It is furnished not by the stage alone, but by the *theatre* in a larger sense of the word: by the audience, the attendants, the arrangements, the very process of getting to the playhouse.

—HENRY JAMES, “THE LONDON THEATRES” (1877)

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.

—HENRY JAMES, PREFACE TO THE NEW YORK EDITION OF *RODERICK HUDSON* (1907)

To indulge for a moment in a thought experiment, let us read this chapter’s two epigraphs contiguously—side by side rather than, more responsibly, with due attention to the gulf of thirty years and distinct critical occasions that separate them—and describe the cognitive sequence that results. Unsurprisingly, these two remarks by Henry James seem to contain incompatible impulses. The mature Master famously advocates for a narrow compass, while the fledgling novelist of 1877 defines *the theatre* with dilative zest, concluding with a potentially

endlessly widening sphere: “the very process of getting to the playhouse.”¹⁴¹ In this moment of semantic expansion, *progress* toward the theatre itself becomes theatre; one’s engagement with the ostensibly closed semiotic field of theatre-as-stage ultimately alters and enhances the terms of the original semiology to world-as-theatre. Shifting the parameters of *theatre* to include the pullulations that form theatre’s mass social context, 1877-James’s definitional move disrupts the dramatic coherence of the English stage by fixing it within and in relation to a larger, more mobile human scene. Both sets of terms are thereby altered: if the ungainly presence of a social world with its own claim to theatricality forces the theatre to relinquish the appearance of aesthetic autonomy, the rubric of theatricality imparts to the audience, the set, and the journey to the playhouse a common condition of legibility. By this light, we might revisit the oft-quoted 1907 enjoinder that would have the novelist draw a delimiting “circle” within a ponderous infinitude of relations. Taken at face value, the older James says: The art of the novel *is* circumscription. But his dictum may endorse a less austere novelistic measure than its many subsequent citations in volumes on narrative theory would suggest; after all, the younger James’s narrative “geometry” included the process of getting to the circle.

Reading back and forth between these two critical moments thereby produces a particular phenomenal pattern, a rhythm of expansion and contraction or, more precisely, of expansive dynamism and shapely fixity. James’s aestheticizing gesture opens back onto a larger human scene, only to recede again into marmoreal stillness, and so on. Herein lies the value of our

¹⁴¹ Ackerman has traced the shift in James’s attitude toward dramatic writing. In an 1875 review of Tennyson’s *Queen Mary*, James shows the influence of the neoclassical well-made play: “The five-act drama—serious or humorous, poetic or prosaic—is like a box of fixed dimensions and inelastic material, into which a mass of precious things are to be packed away. . . . The precious things in question seem out of all proportion to the compass of the receptacle; but the artist has an assurance that with patience and skill a place may be made for each, and that nothing need be clipped or crumpled, squeezed or damaged. The false dramatist either knocks out the sides of his box, or plays the deuce with its contents; the real one gets down on his knees. . . . keeps his ideal, and at last rises in triumph, having packed his coffer in one way that is mathematically right” (quoted in Ackerman, 183). Following the disastrous premiere of *Guy Domville* in 1895, Ackerman argues, James adjusts his attitude toward drama, preferring an organic to a mechanical form.

thought experiment: the pattern artificially produced by our collapsed diachrony also emerges on the level of the sentence in James's writings of the early 1900s, and becomes the script by which consciousness is constructed. Both the famed House of Fiction metaphor and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) prominently feature a process I will call *dramaterialization*, in which a character's consciousness, metaphorized by an object, eventually becomes metaphorized by the scene of the character's interaction with that object. This account, however, is deceptively linear: the process neither occurs in a two-step sequence, nor introduces a phenomenally stable *object* with which a similarly stable character engages as such. Rather, these passages tend to enact a continuous dialectical tension between object and scene, materialization and dematerialization. This chapter will focus for the most part on three moments in the late works that bear out the pattern of dramaterialization modeled in the above discussion of my epigraphs: 1) the House of Fiction metaphor, 2) the pagoda metaphor in *The Golden Bowl*, and 3) *The Golden Bowl's* concluding scene. Each of these passages posits consciousness by locating and dislocating it, generating an intense, disembodied unease out of the dialectical shifting between consciousness's objectification and its staging in a scene. The emotive intensity of these moments holds a repellant fascination in that it cannot be traced to either a psychologically or ontologically coherent character or a dramatic effect ("what is happening" in the plot, for instance). These moments in James's late works make for such discomfiting reading precisely because what is soliciting the reader's emotional "engagement" is neither character nor plot but the complex interaction between 1) the continual exposure of realist sites of readerly investment such as character *as* mere literary effects, and 2) the texts' insistence on nonetheless conferring on these effects the minimal objectivity—the quality of being a *real thing*—required to function within their own narratives. Feeling in late James thus registers the imperilment of the realist

psychological subject for whom our feeling is ostensibly reserved.

It is not incidental that James's exhortation to an aesthetic broadening should involve a broader application of theatricality in particular. Theatricality proves central to many such unexpected dynamisms in James—to moments, for instance, in which a character's *progress* toward a figure for consciousness becomes itself a figure for consciousness. This dialectical relation between staid objectivity and elusive dynamism tends to engender an unsettled aesthetic in the late novels, a contradictory sensibility to which James had elsewhere proved alert: “‘Read it,’ Mr. James advised Mrs. Hugh Bell, ‘for its strange mixture of pointless flatness and convincing *life*. Also of desolate untheatricality and dramatic ingenuity.’”¹⁴² At the time of this assessment of *Hedda Gabler*, James was still more than a decade away from writing *The Golden Bowl*; yet it is safe to say that the mixed allure he found in Ibsen would eventually characterize his own late masterpiece. Even by the standard of the late novels, *The Golden Bowl* seems static, chilly, weighted. A casual reader of *The Golden Bowl* might be forgiven a glib recollection of the novel as a series of hieratic symmetries and hard, heavy objects. Kevin Ohi, too, finds this novel to induce a kind of selective memory, which he attributes to a disjunction between the style in which it is written and the events it reports: “That we remember *The Golden Bowl* as reserved suggests not only that its volubility about the unspeakable has its effects, but also that what we remember about the novel is not its plot but its style: its reticence is a stylistic effect and not a thematic one.”¹⁴³ Ohi's remarks might help to clarify our own readerly tendency toward mnemonic condensation: the sense of a narrative landscape overrun with objects—real, figural, and otherwise—originates largely in these objects' necessariness to narrativizing the workings of consciousness. Far from suspending or merely supplementing the narrative, objects in *The*

¹⁴² Robins, 29.

¹⁴³ Ohi, *Henry James and the Queerness of Style*, 34-5.

Golden Bowl animate moments of narrative intensification, moments when consciousness is most explicitly dramatized, emplotted, and set in tense relation with the rest of the fictional world. In a similar vein, Edith Wharton's baffled interrogation of her friend, cited earlier—"What was your idea in suspending the four principal characters in *The Golden Bowl* in the void? What sort of life did they lead when they were not watching each other, and fencing with each other? Why have you stripped them of all the *human fringes* we necessarily trail after us through life?"¹⁴⁴—perceives as a kind of inhuman sterility the novel's uncoupling of feeling from realist expatiation. To invert James's description of Ibsen, a desolate *theatricality* emerges as *The Golden Bowl's* primary narrative and conceptual principle: not only do people in this novel treat and figure each other as objects, but consciousness must be externalized, thrown from the conscious subject, and dramatized as an object before it can behave *as* consciousness. Objectification predicates self-relation. Yet while it hinges on these initial objectifications, James's theatre of consciousness bears out the mobilizing, expansionary impulse in his remarks on the English stage: the objects tasked with the figural and narrative labor of enacting consciousness continually forfeit this labor to the larger scene in which they are involved, dislocating both consciousness itself and the locus of feeling within the scene.

Fictive Houses

Before moving into an analysis of consciousness's migration between object and scene in *The Golden Bowl*, I would like to examine a well-known Jamesian house that metaphorizes authorial consciousness, a house that James constructs as both object and scene. That the privileged objects figuring consciousness are often houses seems only appropriate. A play of interior and exterior, of subjective inscribability and objective materiality, attends Jamesian narrativizations of houses and human subjects alike. Critics have often noted the prevalence of

¹⁴⁴ Henry James: *The Critical Heritage*, 343.

“significant buildings” in James, in particular of Gothic structures that are “creaturely, sympathetic, and able to shape the emotions and judgments of their inhabitants.”¹⁴⁵ Compounding the number of works whose central conflicts radiate from or magnetize around their eponymous properties—such as “The Jolly Corner,” *The Other House*, *The Spoils of Poynton*, and the unfinished novel *The Ivory Tower*—are countless moments where houses stand as the significant form of crucial narrative and affective complexes: the Venetian Palazzo that vertically emplaces Milly Theale and her travel companions; the Palladian estates that would entomb Isabel Archer; and, in *The Princess Casamassima*, the monument to inscrutable, idle wealth that besots a would-be revolutionary. Comparable structures are there for the finding in James—which is not to overlook the significance of those Jamesian houses that precisely *cannot* be found, that function as settings and dramatically determinant *spaces*, but never become available to the senses as materially accoutred *places*. Nearly the entirety of *The Sacred Fount*, for instance, takes place at the country estate Newmarch—“a place of a charm so special as to create rather a bond among its guests” and of an immateriality so thoroughgoing as to suggest a rebuke to the visual faculty (indeed, the novel’s narrator-protagonist singles out for disdain the déclassé ocularity of “the detective and the keyhole”) (*SF* 17, 57). Newmarch registers almost exclusively as a spatialization of elevated tone (“charm”), to the point where the “human furniture” seems to be the only kind installed in the place (17).

More prevalent still than these radically immaterial houses are moments when materiality is revealed to have been imperiled from the moment of its positing. This slippery phenomenality animates a figure whose resistant corporeality seems unquestionable—the House of Fiction:

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

¹⁴⁵ Coulson, 171.

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.

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbours 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; there is fortunately no saying on what, for the particular pair of eyes, the window may *not* open; ‘fortunately’ by reason, precisely, of this incalculability of range. The spreading field, the human scene, is the ‘choice of subject’; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the ‘literary form’; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. Tell me what the artist is, 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.

All 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.¹⁴⁶

I excerpt here not only the proper House of Fiction metaphor, but portions of the surrounding paragraphs as well. Given the canonicity of the metaphor itself, one risks redundancy in observing that the paragraph containing it is typically quoted in isolation, plucked from its context in the Preface to the New York Edition of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1908). Ironically, this citational practice often attends formalist treatments of the metaphor in question, even as such excerpting effectively shears the opening proposition—"The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million"—of its monstrous abruptness, of the sense of an architectural enormity being conjured out of thin air and absent any preliminary groundwork (James's "in short" notwithstanding). The foregoing paragraph, in fact, offers a variegated and somewhat contradictory set of figures for the novel as a literary form, depicting at times a creature of cognition that "ranges through" human experience, at others a kind of unstable raw material that "tends to burst...its mould." These humble if odd figures are resoundingly flattened by the rhetorical force of the materialized House.

Given the extreme difficulty of trying to provide a "straight" synopsis of the House of Fiction metaphor, it is perhaps no wonder the James of the late style, as exhibited here, became a darling of the New Critics. The passage's unsettling tone and imagery scuttle efforts to read it along the grain, indeed, to discern in which direction its grain runs. If it is meant to be an ode to the diversity of authorial consciousness, it seems to consist entirely of minor notes. To offer as broad a paraphrase as I can: James argues against instituting rigid strictures for the novel, whose form necessarily will be determined by the idiosyncratic perspective inhabited by the individual novelist. With the crucial difference of the elaborately staged architectural metaphor, the central

¹⁴⁶ James, *The Art of the Novel*, 45-7.

prescription here is not too far removed from the position James stakes out in his earlier essay “The Art of Fiction” (1884), in which he proposes that the “form” of the novel “be appreciated after the fact,” not preemptively legislated.¹⁴⁷ The figure of the House itself, however, has come in for a great deal of scrutiny, its tortured visuality in particular eliciting a range of Foucauldian and historicist readings of power and spectacularity. Diana Fuss, for instance, cites the metaphor as an exemplary modern convergence of the “cultural ascendancy of interiority” and the “narrative turn toward solipsism.”¹⁴⁸ In a passage that concatenates nearly all the interiorizing readings of the House that I will aim to invert below, Fuss writes:

James’s densely populated “house of fiction,” with each interior observer peering through the window of his own consciousness, quite nearly obliterates the exterior altogether, identifying the human scene outside the domain of art “as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher.” Himself a privileged occupant of the house of fiction, James focuses self-reflexively on the human agent of perception, placing “individual vision” and “individual will” center stage in a theater of introspection where the main actor is the spectator, and the real drama takes place inside the mind of the observer.¹⁴⁹

I will argue that the House of Fiction in fact eradicates the interior; that James is positioned not as a “privileged occupant” but as an excluded reader/spectator; and that the theatrical position of the posted watcher is that of both spectator and spectacle.

To be certain, the disturbing nature of the House’s physicality merits the attention of critics, for some of whom its grotesque aspect bespeaks a panoptical instrumentality;¹⁵⁰ by these accounts, James has given us a vision of the novelist as “profoundly disengaged...from the

¹⁴⁷ James, “The Art of Fiction,” 50.

¹⁴⁸ Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior*, 11.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ For an extensive Foucauldian discussion of the novel and James, see Seltzer.

human scene itself,”¹⁵¹ a figure whose “withdrawal from experience”¹⁵² is the very condition of artistic consciousness. Victoria Coulson describes the House as a “nightmare of punitive individuation, a model of harsh polarities in which each ‘posted presence,’ separated irremediably from every other, figures both as sentinel and as victim of a solitary confinement.”¹⁵³ Yet the place of the metaphor within the critical fiction of James’s Preface has gone mostly unremarked. The tendency of James critics to elide the Preface’s progress toward and away from the House of Fiction metaphor mirrors the reifying trajectory of the passage itself; in a rhetorical move inimical to the pluralist tropology that precedes it, the House of Fiction announces itself “in short” to have always already been the master-trope that underwrites all previous figural gestures—a summation, apotheosis, and telos that undoes its own narrative history. As an instance of strategic amnesia that privileges a demarcated object-metaphor over the more unruly metaphoricity it supplants, the House of Fiction passage has proven to be a spectacularly, self-consciously *useful* moment for James studies and for theories of narrative. As in my paired epigraphs, we are given a figure that claims to name the precise contours of aesthetic experience, when in fact what makes this precision possible is the figure’s concealment of the less tidy *process of getting to it*. The paragraph that follows supports the passage’s aspirations to portability, with James’s sheepish admission that “All this is a long way round, however, for my word about my dim first move toward ‘The Portrait.’” If the House of Fiction lies along a sidetrack, it is nonetheless the only location that, as James’s segue implies, justifies a cessation of narrative progress.

As a critical artifact, then, the House of Fiction proves to be not so much an object as a process that regards and presents itself as an object. As a prose performance, the House of

¹⁵¹ Frank, 183.

¹⁵² Ohi, 56.

¹⁵³ Coulson, 176.

Fiction passage may also be more dynamic than the critical record would indicate, its model of visuality more complex, and more complexly valenced, than its apparent aesthetics of surveillance might suggest. Ellen Eve Frank describes the artist at the window as “strangely disembodied, reduced from a ‘figure’ rather abstract to begin with, to a ‘pair of eyes,’”¹⁵⁴ and Sheila Teahan has noted the “strangeness” of James’s outfitting the figure “with a pair of eyes, *or at least* with a field-glass”¹⁵⁵ (emphasis mine), as though the field-glass could prove to any advantage without a pair of eyes behind them. At the risk of appearing to wish to dispel any of this metaphor’s storied strangeness, I would suggest that the overlooked component in these readings is a specularity of vision—someone within the “human scene” the artist watches, watching in turn. Touted by James (and accepted by critics) as a static object-metaphor, the House of Fiction may be better described as a theatrical metaphor; far from being a piece of objective reportage, the passage partakes of James’s dramatic method, endowing us with the vantage point of a dematerialized spectator who figures the reader. This spectator can be spotted in the interstices of the passage, implicitly positioned to detect at the window not a fully embodied artist, but “a pair of eyes” or “at least...a field-glass.” The seemingly eccentric alternativity of this formulation can be explained, then, as the effect of an onlooker’s limited perspective; they are “eyes” or “a field glass” that are seen rather than seeing. Frank’s canny account of the house itself as a “fantastical façade with no structure behind it”¹⁵⁶ speaks to the overwhelming sense it evinces of a flat surface—a “dead wall”—rather than an inhabited space, each window “pierced” or “still pierceable” by an individual “need” that is not itself penetrated by a spectator’s gaze. Thus, Coulson’s claim that there is “literally no place for a reader” but for one that is “equally imprisoned within the disciplinary circuits of the text, oscillating between

¹⁵⁴ Frank, 183.

¹⁵⁵ Ohi, 191n31.

¹⁵⁶ Frank, 182.

agent and victim of the novel's panoptical power," is only partly accurate. The reader is indeed an implied presence, but rather than being the artist's identical counterpart, a subject-object of power "equally imprisoned" and, by "uncanny homology," inhabiting the same seat of *access* as the artist (as though peering through his eyes), this reader remains doubly dematerialized: first from the surface of the text of the Preface, as Coulson observes, then from the absent interior of the House of Fiction, whose surface machinations—the *effects* of authorial consciousness—are all the reader can hope to glean. The narrative voice inhabits the spatial perspective not of the simultaneously privileged and imprisoned authorial consciousness, but of the excluded and dematerialized readerly consciousness. The perspective of the passage itself, then, is a nearly fetishistically restricted one—a perspective that abolishes the possibility of both an interior to the House and an embodied world outside this architectural metaphor. Critical attempts to domesticate the House of Fiction—to claim, for instance, that it “emblemizes James’s access to the cultural space of women’s writing”¹⁵⁷—seem erroneous on two counts: first, the metaphor is predominantly one of the reader’s exclusion rather than of the author’s access; second, the “house” itself is not a domestic space, but strongly suggests, as I have shown, in its implied phenomenality, a theatrical one—a playhouse of fiction.¹⁵⁸ I would suggest that the intense unease with which the metaphor affects so many readers stems precisely from this impossible theatricality, which 1) forces the reader to occupy a limited spectatorial perspective, but to do so in the absence of any explicit material embodiment, and 2) in fact sees the narrative voice occupying this abjected position as well—gazing upon the spectacle of authorial consciousness along with the disembodied reader—when a more summary gloss of the passage might assume an identification between the narrative voice and the “privileged” position of the posted watcher.

¹⁵⁷ Coulson, 177. See further, Blair.

¹⁵⁸ I am grateful to Nick Salvato for urging me to think about the theatrical connotations of James’s “house.”

Feeling emerges from this critical disjunction between the position of voyeuristic empowerment that the passage seems to claim for its author and the actually enacted position of dematerialized and constricted spectatorship.

The cluster of terms at work here—reader, spectator, outsider—recurs several times in varying configurations over the course of James’s career, each instance underpinned by a poignant impossibility. James closes his introduction to a 1907 edition of *The Tempest* by bemoaning the paucity of information about the “effect on [Shakespeare] of being *able* to write *Lear* and *Othello*”¹⁵⁹—a formulation of the author’s consciousness (and the limits of a reader’s access to it) strikingly consistent with that offered in the House of Fiction metaphor: “Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has *been* conscious.” Elsewhere, James’s vision of the “great spectacle of English life” is likewise a portrait of exclusion, wherein Englishmen’s “unconsciousness” of the alienating effect their country might have on a foreigner

makes a huge blank surface, a mighty national wall, against which the perceptive, the critical effort of the presumptuous stranger wastes itself, until, after a little, he espies, in the measureless spaces, a little aperture, a window which is suddenly thrown open, and at which a friendly and intelligent face is presented, the harbinger of a voice of greeting. With this agreeable apparition he communes—the voice is delightful, it has a hundred tones and modulations; and as he stands there the great dead screen seems to vibrate and grow transparent.¹⁶⁰

That the figure metonymized by this “face”—or “voice,” or “apparition”—is Matthew Arnold is perhaps less consequential than the highly outré results of his congress with the newcomer. Mr. Arnold’s salutations do not amount to an invitation to step behind the wall, but instead cause the

¹⁵⁹ James, “William Shakespeare: Introduction to *The Tempest*,” in *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, English Writers, & American Writers*, 1217-18.

¹⁶⁰ James, “Matthew Arnold,” in *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, English Writers, & American Writers*, 721.

“great dead screen” to “vibrate and grow transparent”—no doubt a phenomenon of lively interest, but one of dubious value for the inquisitive stranger whose entrance would still be blocked. Once again, vision and access are distinctly unidentical. If the House of Fiction gives the reader no quarter, one might observe that there *are* no quarters in the house, and, for that matter, no embodied reader capable of inhabiting them. In the Matthew Arnold piece, the “spectacle of English life” that resides behind the “mighty national wall” remains impenetrable and certainly uninhabitable; the result of Mr. Arnold’s benediction is that the spectacle becomes visible, and does so through an event that itself constitutes a spectacle. In this earlier iteration of the trope, James does not even offer the pretense of interiority—the wall is only ever a wall, not, as in its later manifestation, a house whose registration in the world begins and ends, strangely, at its façade. Yet the tortuousness of the metaphor—that the wall should “vibrate and grow transparent” in defiance of, among other things, the conventions of realism—signals what will become an ever more arcane relation between reader and novel, consciousness and world, spectator and spectacle. That Matthew Arnold stands at the “national wall” of “unconsciousness” without being *of* it marks a crucial difference from the House of Fiction, whose inhabitants are wholly constituted by their architectural emplacement. Whereas Mr. Arnold’s wall corporealizes a national trait, the House of Fiction aims to function primarily as an organizing principle for the consciousnesses who peer out through its façade—a utility ultimately belied by the haunting dislocation the House metaphor performs.

The Long Way Round

As both a minutely sculpted prose performance and a widely circulated critical and theoretical artifact (whose citationality James worries and enacts within the Preface), the House of Fiction makes a dual demand on our understanding. It requires 1) an initial, provisional

account of the House figure as a static, solid, and stable object and 2) a counter-reading that sets the figure in motion, recognizing it as the nodal point of a set of perspectival, material, and narrative dynamisms. These two accounts should be seen in dialectical, not sequential, relation. Far from canceling out or correcting the first reading, the second relies for its effect on the intransigence of a felt concretion that resists the dereifying ministrations of formal analysis. The emotive intensity of this ostensibly staid object-metaphor emerges from this dialectical tension. *The Golden Bowl*, similarly, opens with a deceptively direct truth-claim whose deceptiveness is precisely its truth: “The Prince had always liked his London, when it had come to him”¹⁶¹ With all the ease and aplomb of a royal decree, this statement seems to start us off on secure enough footing: we know the Prince will be a character in the novel, someone separate from the thing he likes—a thing that is nonetheless “his,” “his London”—and we know the temporal scope and condition of his liking (he had “always” liked it, “when it had come to him”). Yet the lightly worn assumption of semantic transparency is already compromised. What does it mean for a city to “come” to one? This axiologically neutral verb—well-paired with the attenuated libidinality of “liked”—seems preemptively to distinguish itself from the more thickly charged “idea of pursuit” that, later in the same passage, is notable for *not* occurring to the Prince. London comes, but it need not pursue. Does this coming, then, describe an event in the Prince’s consciousness—for instance, it “came to him with a flash”—and thereby link knowing with having? And would it still have been “*his* London,” as James’s sentence structure allows us to suppose, even on those occasions when it did not “come to him”? What does it mean, then, for this London to be “his” if the fact of his possession precedes any meaningful interaction with what is possessed? In his reading of the famous opening clause of *The Waste Land*—“April is the cruellest month”—Christopher Ricks points to the line’s powerful merging of “unmistakable

¹⁶¹ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 3. I will subsequently use in-text citations for this novel.

directness” with “lurking possibilities of mistaking its direction.”¹⁶² Aptly for Eliot’s modernist precursor, James, too, opens his masterpiece on what appears to be a note of languid certitude with regard to time, possession, predilection, and action. What is actually on offer, however, is only the *tone* of truth-giving: certainty—as the Princess-to-be, who will have quite a bit to do with knowing and having, might say—with “a hole in it” (456).¹⁶³ The rest of the novel’s first sentence gives the game away: “he was one of the modern Romans who find by the Thames a more convincing image of the truth of the ancient state than any they have left by the Tiber” (3). The Prince’s celebration of dissemblance here adumbrates a more painful truth about his imminent marriage to which we will soon become privy. That the opening lines deceive in their directness (*and* in their direction) is their truth.

Following the Prince’s unbudging leisure in these lines is a peripatetic first paragraph, one whose outward wending inverts the trajectory and, importantly, lacks the motive force of the Princess’s deliberate centripetality in the opening of Book II. There, as we shall see, in the famous pagoda passage, Maggie closes in on the object-metaphor for her own developing consciousness at the same time that the passage’s language expands outward to incorporate her into the hypertrophying figure. Here, the novel’s first line accords Amerigo a stillness with impossible powers of magnetism, such that this high tone cannot help but be undone by the inevitable narrative (and physical) movements to follow. In the novel’s first pages, the Prince

¹⁶² Ricks, 176.

¹⁶³ Krook-Gilead brilliantly argues that the Prince is “James’s quintessential Aesthetic Man,” an embodiment of good taste so thoroughly committed to the life of manners that he manages to fashion a persuasive argument for adultery out of the aesthetic imperative: “It is precisely because the Prince is a *galantuomo*—a Gallant Man, a man of spirit, a man who guides his life by ‘the touchstone of taste,’ by the standard of ‘a higher and braver propriety’ than any that the dear, innocent, ignorant, incorrigibly incorruptible and totally unimaginative Ververs could so much as dream of; and because, being such a man, he cannot bear the sheer ignominy of going about indefinitely ‘with such a person as Mrs Verver in a state of child-like innocence, the state of our primitive parents before the Fall,’ that he becomes Charlotte’s lover. And this is how the touchstone of taste is seen not merely to sanction adultery but positively to insist on it—as the only intelligent, the only brave, the only decent thing to do in the circumstances.” (241-2, 249)

exhibits “no consistency of attention” and little more than a velleity—a “predilection... sufficiently vague” or an “undirected thought”—toward his current activity of threading through the London streets. These itineracies recall the House of Fiction passage, that “long way round” to James’s “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.” In that Preface, having traced all the inlaid and desultory movements in these lines, we bristle to find that the prized “dim first move” is, at day’s end, “not here to be retraced.” How James first “[grasped]” Isabel Archer ultimately eludes narrativization, leaving the reader of the Preface with, on the one hand, an empty space where Isabel’s origin should be, and, on the other, the resistant body of the “encountered” figure of Isabel where we expect to be treated to the denaturalizing effects of authorial historiography.¹⁶⁴ The Prince, similarly, seems continually to gravitate toward repositories of solidity that may or may not be adequate to the assuredness of the novel’s opening lines. Like James’s protracted “move” toward Isabel Archer, the Prince’s walk is punctuated by an occasional pause—before a window display of “objects massive and lumpish, in silver and gold,” or before the partially obscured faces of female passers-by. This latter item gestures obliquely at the cause for the Prince’s lassitude: he has recently finalized his engagement to Maggie Verver, daughter of American millionaire Adam Verver, and is now succumbing to the deflated momentum that follows achievement. This revelation tempts us retroactively to favor a particular fall of the accent in the novel’s opening lines: it is not necessarily the case that, on the arbitrary occasions when London had come to him, the Prince had liked it; rather, the Prince, in a state of consummated pursuit, registers a coy preference—London might do well to come to *him*.

¹⁶⁴ Hale notes that “James’s sense of his characters’ alterity is so strong that he more often than not describes the creative process as hinging on the imaginative appearance of a character whose complexities of sensibility and character ‘impose’ upon the author the rest of the story” (“Introduction: Form and Function,” 26).

Several pages into the novel, then, the tone of the opening line continues to call for recalibration. As luxuriant a pace as this already seems, another half of the novel will go by before we come upon an object that provides a sufficient counterweight to this opening. If Amerigo has tone, his wife Maggie has consciousness—and her eventual domination of her husband, father, and stepmother Charlotte through the action of this superior consciousness may in part account for its figuration through the spectacular figure of the pagoda. Maggie’s pagoda sits at the literal center of *The Golden Bowl*; the opening of the pagoda passage also opens Book II, marking the point where the narrator begins to “go behind” the Princess rather than the Prince.¹⁶⁵ It is worth noting that Maggie first becomes a focalizing consciousness at the moment when the question of her consciousness emerges as a problem within the plot: Amerigo and Charlotte’s extended stay at a country house disturbs her previous complacency about the arrangement that confers on this pair so much unseemly latitude. The first action performed by this newly accessible consciousness, then, is to make itself an object. It appears initially as a hushed internality that in no wise prepares us for the outsize spectacle of the pagoda: “It was not till many days had passed that the Princess began to accept the idea of having done, a little, something she was not always doing, or indeed that of having listened to any inward voice that spoke in a new tone” (299). The interment of voices through belated aural apprehension is a familiar Jamesian effect. When Vandenbrook of *The Awkward Age*, for instance, “[becomes] conscious of having proposed his own rooms as a wind-up to [a] drive” (4), his speech is objectified by his present consciousness without ever having materialized in its own present. In the pagoda passage, the effect seems redoubled by the inwardness of the voice to which Maggie finally realizes she has listened. Vandenbrook’s voice is dematerialized from the narrative through retroplacement, and simultaneously materialized as an object of consciousness; for

¹⁶⁵ For discussion of inappropriate Jamesian metaphors, see Leavis, Krook-Gilead, and Yeazell.

Maggie, it is consciousness that is simultaneously dematerialized and objectified through its figuration as a voice (and a voice with the specific materiality of tone).¹⁶⁶

In many ways, the “inward voice” is a fairly standard trope. As a stand-in for a burgeoning cognizance, this figure presents consciousness as a mode of self-discourse that requires the ability to register speech acts, as well as the acuity to discern “a new tone”—the speaker’s stance toward her own utterances. Given the mostly unremarkable terms of this interiorizing account of consciousness, the inversion that it shortly thereafter undergoes in the figure of the pagoda seems as formidable in its abrupt immensity as the “wonderful, beautiful, but outlandish” structure itself:

Yet these instinctive postponements of reflection were the fruit, positively, of recognitions and perceptions already active; of the sense, above all, that she had made, at a particular hour, made by the mere touch of her hand, a difference in the situation so long present to her as practically unattackable. This situation had been occupying, for months and months, the very centre of the garden of her life, but it had reared itself there like some strange, tall tower of ivory, perhaps rather some wonderful, beautiful, but outlandish pagoda, a structure plated with hard, bright porcelain, coloured and figured and adorned, at the overhanging eaves, with silver bells that tinkled, ever so charmingly, when stirred by chance airs. She had walked round and round it—that was what she felt; she had carried on her existence in the space left her for circulation, a space that sometimes seemed ample and sometimes narrow; looking up, all the while, at the fair structure that spread itself so amply and rose so high, but never quite making out, as yet, where she might have entered had she wished. She had not wished till now—such was the odd case; and what was doubtless equally odd, besides, was that, though her raised

¹⁶⁶ Bersani points to the “Jamesian tendency to extract all events, as well as all perspectives on them, from any specified time, and to transfer them to a before or an after in which they are de-realized in the form of anticipations or retrospections” (“The It in the I,” 23).

eyes seemed to distinguish places that must serve, from within, and especially far aloft, as apertures and outlooks, no door appeared to give access from her convenient garden level. The great decorated surface had remained consistently impenetrable and inscrutable. At present, however, to her considering mind, it was as if she had ceased merely to circle and to scan the elevation, ceased so vaguely, so quite helplessly to stare and wonder; she had caught herself distinctly in the act of pausing, then in that of lingering, and finally in that of stepping unprecedentedly near. The thing might have been, by the distance at which it kept her, a Mahometan mosque, with which no base heretic could take a liberty; there so hung about it the vision of one's putting off one's shoes to enter, and even, verily, of one's paying with one's life if found there as an interloper. She had not, certainly, arrived at the conception of paying with her life for anything she might do; but it was nevertheless quite as if she had sounded with a tap or two one of the rare porcelain plates. (299-300)

Let us bracket for a moment the obdurate, inexcusable length of the passage; the phallicism of Maggie's edifice of choice; the element of orientalist fantasy; the precious and apparently inconsequential details such as the "silver bells that tinkled ever so charmingly when stirred by chance airs"; and the sense, post-"inward voice," of an infelicitous fit between figure and ground—all this aside, there is the size of the thing. It may go without saying that this structure is imposing not only because of what Maggie imagines to be the probates of stern Mahometanism, but precisely because it "spread itself so amply and rose so high." The description of the image seems to impress upon us a materially resistant—and irresistible—presence: "She had knocked in short—though she could scarce have said whether for admission or for what; she had applied her hand to a cool smooth spot and had waited to see what would happen. Something *had* happened; it was as if a sound, at her touch, after a little, had come back to her from within; a sound sufficiently suggesting that her approach had been noted" (300). This moment confronts

us with the contradiction of a responsive materiality being simultaneously staged and elided, laid out before us and swallowed up whole. The quick shift from the subjunctive (“as if Maggie had sounded”) to the past perfect (“She had knocked”) consigns Maggie’s action not only to the realm of metaphor, but inaccessibly so; neither within nor between the two sentences that report her having sounded the structure is there a present moment of action in which Maggie makes contact. Unlike the straightforward suspension of temporality typically at work in a visual metaphor, the pagoda metaphor gestures toward duration and diachronic movement, only ultimately to relinquish progressive narrative time and the sensuous reality whose unfolding it accommodates. Sensate details like the “cool smooth spot” belie the process of dematerialization wrought in the grammar of the passage. The plangent affirmation that closes the pagoda passage—“Something *had* happened”—ultimately abrogates that which is necessary if anything is indeed to happen: an interval. Maggie “had waited to see what would happen,” and, in the following sentence, “Something *had*”; each of these moments occurs in the irrecoverable past perfect that undergirds the metaphor.

The slight diffidence in Maggie’s insistence that “Something *had* happened” soon gives way to a certitude to rival that of the novel’s opening. What Amerigo’s tone accomplishes there is here effected through a continual reconfiguration of 1) consciousness as inhabited position and 2) consciousness as object. We are told, prior to the lengthy description of the pagoda, that the structure that “had reared itself” in the “very centre of the garden of her life” metaphorizes the “situation so long present to her as practically unattackable.” The following paragraph then particularizes the terms of this metaphorization with an almost pedantic assuredness: “The pagoda in her blooming garden figured the arrangement—how otherwise was it to be named?—by which, so strikingly, she had been able to marry without breaking, as she liked to put it, with

her past.” Readers of *The Golden Bowl* tend to take at face value this internal foreclosure of meaning-making, giving the narrator leave to assign the pagoda a fixed signifiatory trajectory—this in contradistinction to the ever shifting sites of registration and signification of the golden bowl itself. Yet this tidy suturing of figure and ground should provoke skepticism. We might note, to begin with, that this paragraph marks an abrupt shift in narrative voice and, in a very physical sense, perspective: “If this image, however, may represent our young woman’s consciousness of a recent change in her life—a change now but a few days old—it must at the same time be observed that she both sought and found in renewed circulation, as I have called it, a measure of relief from the idea of having perhaps to answer for what she had done.” The narrator here performs a self-differentiation at once stark and muddled. Suddenly, there emerges a narrative “I” attending to “our young woman’s consciousness”—one watching at a stable remove wherein the circumnavigation of the pagoda will not engender corresponding circumruminations, an “I” immune to the sort of descriptive metastasis that characterizes Maggie’s focalizing narration. Maggie waxes on, the figure’s ground nowhere in sight, about the “structure plated with hard, bright porcelain, coloured and figured and adorned”; she claims at one point to discern “apertures and outlooks,” but subsequently finds the edifice “consistently impenetrable and inscrutable.” By the end of the passage, it has become a “Mahometan mosque, with which no base heretic could take a liberty”—tinkling bells notwithstanding. When the narrator interjects, he seems to be pulling her up short, streamlining her figural filigree by pairing the pagoda with a single referent: the “arrangement—how otherwise was it to be named?—” among Maggie, her husband, her father, and her stepmother. Yet the odd self-citation in the narrator’s remarks on Maggie’s “renewed circulation, as I have called it” forces us to recognize what this narrative “I” so labors to occlude—that the word in question, “circulation,” is initially

read, at least partially, as belonging to Maggie's consciousness. (Fittingly, "circulation" here not only names Maggie's movements around the pagoda, but also gestures toward the mobility of this word itself across distinct—if only liminally so—discursive perspectives.) This retrospective designation of a referent, then, like the sudden appearance of the House of Fiction, enacts a brief and crucial suspension of dramaterialization—a suspension both of the scenic method (free indirect discourse) through which James's fictional world is typically presented, and of the flickering of materiality that renders Maggie's pagoda elusive even as she has supposedly communed with its hard surface. During the narrativization of Maggie's somewhat shambling initial consciousness, there is no reason to feel confident of what her pagoda looks like or of her affective orientation toward it, much less what it means; the meaning assigned to it by a narrator who momentarily steps *out from behind* must, however, be taken provisionally for granted in order for the remainder of the chapter to make sense. Through its very stabilization and concretization of a figure, this narratorial intercession reads, ironically, as a moment of *discontinuity*—a rupture into the sudden certitude of a narrative voice who discusses the pagoda metaphor in the manner of a detached exegete, rather than as a subject whose consciousness is being elaborated at the same time and in the same textual fabric as the metaphor itself.

The problems with this narrative certitude extend beyond tone. When Maggie describes the pagoda, the passage that results is not only a description of an object. It is the narration of an event in consciousness, which means it also registers, however covertly, feeling—in this case, Maggie's unease about the "arrangement." It is worth noting that the pagoda metaphor actually begins as a simile, and a second-choice simile, for that matter ("This situation...had reared itself there like some strange, tall tower of ivory, or perhaps rather some wonderful, beautiful, but outlandish pagoda"). It only attains the objectivity of metaphor when it is next reported that

Maggie “had walked round and round it—that was what she felt”—at which point the predication of action seems to shift. Now, rather than responding to Maggie’s preexisting emotion with a figural approximation, the figure and Maggie’s interactions with it seem to be *causing* emotions not existing prior to their figuration. The very aesthetic of the structure seems to metamorphose from the harmlessly, even playfully, exotic to the forbidding, as the pagoda takes on distinctly House of Fiction-like qualities, including “apertures” that permit no access from without, but potentially serve as “outlooks” or machicolations for those within. This mounting unease, in keeping with the “indirect and oblique view of my presented action” for which James praises himself in the Preface to the New York Edition, registers Maggie’s growing awareness of the adultery that the “arrangement” enables and camouflages. When the passage treats the pagoda *as* a figure, it is a figure for the arrangement or “situation” in Maggie’s life; when the figure expands to include Maggie so that she *interacts* with the pagoda, its field of signification broadens so that instead of figuring the arrangement, it enacts Maggie’s consciousness. When the narrator comes out from behind Maggie to make his supercilious pronouncement—“the pagoda in her blooming garden figured the arrangement”—he seems to be modeling the dangers of attempting a detheatricalizing summary of the “action” of James’s plot or even of events in affect, cognition, or figuration without accounting for the dramatic perspective of the centering consciousness. The narrator even pointedly uses Maggie’s language at this moment (“as she liked to put it”), but in a rebuke to those who would describe free indirect discourse solely in terms of the adoption of a character’s language, here the use of the character’s language alone does not suffice to grant access to her perspective. This perspective is precisely located in the passage’s enactment of a split between consciousness and feeling.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ James Wood, in his excellent analysis of a passage in *What Maisie Knew*, frames James’s use of free indirect discourse thus: “Whose word is ‘embarrassingly?’” (16).

Something about Maggie's emotional distress is performed by the passage, something that evades narrativization but can only be substantialized through the process of narration. Maggie's focalizing narration *dramatizes* the disjunction between what she feels and what she consciously thinks; the narrator's unfocalized synopsis takes for granted the perfect correspondence between Maggie's experience and the language in which it is presented.

Maggie's friend Fanny Assingham eventually offers a more satisfying formulation for Maggie's cognitive relationship to the affair: "She irresistibly *knows* that there's something between them. But she hasn't "arrived" at it" (395). Fanny's figure operates through negation; if to "arrive" would be fully to inhabit her already extant knowledge of this reality, then "that's exactly what she hasn't done, what she so steadily and intensely refuses to do. She stands off and off, so as not to arrive." As the novel's *ficelle*, Fanny has access (or, one might say, is limited), in her oral narrativizations, to the ostensibly less ambiguous objectifications of direct speech. Yet even given the relative linearity of Fanny's figuration, what it is that Maggie has not yet "arrived at" is far from clear. The obvious slipperiness of this "it" would indicate that it is Maggie's own knowledge that remains remote to her; the "something between them" cannot be neatly separated from the *knowledge* of this "something" that Fanny imputes to Maggie. Yet, as sufficiently sinuous as this reading would already be, one might further note that it is not exactly "knowledge," in the sense of an isolable and transmissible quantum of understanding, that Maggie has not "arrived at."¹⁶⁸ Reading the moment as anacoluthon—that is, taking Fanny's breathless claim that "She irresistibly *knows*" as a grammatically infelicitous antecedent to her "it"—would allow us to see this knowledge set in motion, to posit "knowing" as a form of doing. *To know* is here an action that the actor cannot resist, but it also, by virtue of being an action,

¹⁶⁸ Cameron warns against critical suppositions that knowledge in *The Golden Bowl* is "inert," pointing to characters' strategic invocations of this kind of knowledge in attempts to "[deflect] attention from a more subversive question about the unstable placement of meaning: Who obfuscates or enforces it, and where?" (105).

seems a highly resistant location for the person performing it to be expected to “arrive at.” As in the House of Fiction and the pagoda metaphor, “it” poses a phenomenal problem and causes distress— affective and grammatical, in this case—by virtue of being both an object of consciousness and a process that consciousness undertakes.

Fanny’s remarks on Maggie’s knowing condense the peregrinations of the pagoda passage to the space of a few lines, but the movement traced is identical: a provisional objectification of consciousness (as a pagoda, as an “it”) is compromised when a character’s progress toward and interaction with her objectified consciousness is then nominated as the *actual* metaphor for consciousness. The locus of figuration shifts from an object to a scene between this object and the character whose consciousness is being figured. This process does not play out linearly in the examples offered above; we never see consciousness figured as an object that is not already in the process of being dramaterialized into a *scene* involving the subject of consciousness. Yet to characterize the sense of objectivity initially evinced by these object-metaphors as merely chimerical, as a fetish to be unfurled through close analysis, would be to fetishize the process of unfurling. Dramaterialization does not dispel or dissolve—or disabuse the reader of an illusion of—materiality. The solid object-metaphor at once produces real effects (feeling, the sense of a stable realist character) on the surface of the Jamesian text, *and* is perpetually in the process of dissolving and dislocating these effects.

Nothing But You

In the examples of the House of Fiction and the pagoda, affective intensity emerges from the dialectical relation between consciousness as a stable object that one sees and consciousness as a dynamic *scene* in which one participates. These strong feelings of unease follow from the contradictory sense, on the one hand, that consciousness is being made theatrically accessible

and circumscribed, and on the other, that it is unclear not only where this consciousness is in fact located, but whether, as a scene that is in progress, it can be located in any of the spectacular objects offered by the text at all. A foreclosure of this dual composition of consciousness as it is figured in *The Golden Bowl* accounts for the much-remarked froideur that steals through the novel's ending. Having succeeded, through the power of her consciousness to act in the world, in having her rival rusticated and thereby securing not only her husband's future fidelity but his sincere admiration and love, Maggie endures a final moment of uncertainty as to what she really possesses:

Closer than she had ever been to the measure of her course and the full face of her act, she had an instant of the terror that, when there has been suspense, always precedes, on the part of the creature to be paid, the certification of the amount. Amerigo knew it, the amount; he still held it, and the delay in his return, making her heart beat too fast to go on, was like a sudden blinding light on a wild speculation. She had thrown the dice, but his hand was over her cast. (566)

Amerigo “[knows] it, the amount,” because he *is* it. Early in the novel, the Prince bemusedly recognizes on the Ververs' part a “large, bland, blank assumption” as to his inestimable worth—“of merits almost beyond notation, of essential quality and value”; the ending brooks no such gap between the having of value and the knowing of it (18). These closing pages enact a complete identification between what Amerigo is and what he knows—between his value for Maggie as her possession and his knowing “it,” an identity neatly captured in the double resonance of “speculation” as a financial activity and a form of intellection. While the earlier “it” at which Maggie's consciousness had not yet arrived was a moving target, Amerigo's “it” represents a closed circuit. Maggie's “it” was neither an object of knowledge nor the dramatized process of knowing but the impossible coincidence of the two; Amerigo's “it” collapses a dynamic relation

between the subject and the object of knowledge into an identity. Amerigo knows the “amount” that will redound to Maggie because he *is* this amount, but he can be this amount only because he knows that he is. This collapse at last effects the “assurance” that the novel’s first lines only affect: a release from “suspense” into (not catharsis, but) “certification.” Assured of a happiness “without a hole in it”—with no room left for doubt or much else—Maggie arrives at the horizon of theatricalized consciousness, an exfoliated theatricality born out in the closing scene between her and Amerigo:

“Isn’t she [Charlotte] too splendid?” she simply said, offering it to explain and to finish.

“Oh, splendid!” With which he came over to her.

“That’s our help, you see,” she added—to point further her moral.

It kept him before her therefore, taking in—or trying to—what she so wonderfully gave.

He tried, too clearly, to please her—to meet her in her own way; but with the result only that, close to her, her face kept before him, his hands holding her shoulders, his whole act enclosing her, he presently echoed: “‘See’? I see nothing but *you*.” And the truth of it had, with this force, after a moment, so strangely lighted his eyes that, as for pity and dread of them, she buried her own in his breast. (567)

Amerigo’s seeing nothing but Maggie introduces one final *it*—“the truth of it”—whose visibility not only guarantees but constitutes its own truth-value. *The Awkward Age*, which also ends with a scene of enclosure and an echoic claim to “see,” never approaches the explicit abjection animating this moment of “pity and dread.” In an inversion of the opening lines’ languid beckoning after a London that might “come to him,” this scene outfits both desire and possession with a unidirectional automaticity: “With which he came over to her.” When Maggie expresses admiration for her routed rival, she points beyond the current scene of connubial accord toward its condition of possibility: Charlotte’s high tone and maintained pretense of *wishing* to sever

herself and her husband from the quartet. Maggie's expansionary gesture limns the process of getting to this concluding scene, a process that includes her stepmother. Yet Amerigo will have none of it; with Maggie "enclosed" in his "act," she becomes not only the sole object in his field of vision, but the object of vision that obviates all other spectatorship. And with her own eyes "buried" in horror in her husband's breast, Maggie becomes an objectified consciousness par excellence—a consciousness all seen without seeing, flush with certainty and voided of desire. What might sound, in a bad summary, like a moment of beatifying recognition in fact objects both Maggie and Amerigo. Shorn of the indefinitely expanding *scene* that allows her consciousness to act, Maggie's consciousness can only be an object, while Amerigo, able to "see nothing but *you*" and thereby incapable of recognizing the co-constitution of Maggie's consciousness and the scene surrounding it, appears to have become a kind of philosophical zombie.¹⁶⁹ The ambient unease that elsewhere characterizes the dialectical shifting of sites of consciousness heightens here into a melodramatic horror—complete with eyes buried in the (un)dead lover's breast—at consciousness become *too* objective, stable, and localized within the bodied contours of an individual character. If in the pagoda and House of Fiction metaphors, consciousness is dialectical—consisting in part in an expansionary process that continually undermines internal attempts at objectification and narrative streamlining (by the narrator, by

¹⁶⁹ The "philosophical zombie" is a thought experiment in philosophy of mind: How can we know that someone who looks and behaves like a fully conscious, sentient person is not in fact a zombie, that is, a human being who lacks consciousness? Terada's remarks on the topic are particularly relevant to my discussion of the final scene of *The Golden Bowl*: "A living system is self-differential; experience is experience of self-differentiability. The idea of emotion is as compelling as it is because in the honest moments of philosophy it has served as the name of that experience. On some level everyone knows that rationality may be where we want to be, but emotion is where we are. So when we want to get from where we are to where we want to be, emotion has got to come along. If we lose it along the way there is no continuity; self-differentiability will not have been convincingly resolved. That's why the living dead emblemize postmodern subjectivity: everyone knows that if there's one thing dead subjects don't have, it's emotion. Actually things are the other way around. Romero's living dead are notably undivided about their desires, or rather, because their desires are undivided, they are mere needs and compulsions. They waver physiologically—as though their nervous systems had trouble working—but not intentionally. They don't think twice about anything; they are pure intentionality, directional in one direction at a time. A living system is self-differential; only self-differential entities—'texts'—feel. Romero's zombies have no feelings *because they are subjects*" (156).

James himself)—these final moments of *The Golden Bowl* see all trace of process harrowingly evicted. In its place emerges a closed correspondence between spectator and object: a desolate theatricality, to be certain.

Conclusion: Siding with Kate Croy

What are James novels about? To raise the question at this juncture might seem coyly naïve. Yet if the foregoing pages have appeared more concerned with how the late style works than with what the late fiction is about, it seems equally apparent that a prominent strand of James criticism has been keen to claim an identity between *what* and *how*. The late novels' formal and stylistic behavior has, to varying degrees, been taken as one with their object-intention by critics who ask, for instance, What does Jamesian style want? and What does a James novel know?¹⁷⁰ In their sapient fetishism, such questions revisit Laurence Holland's claim that these works "do not simply unfold from given premises or simply present the certain findings of earlier experiments of the imagination which are then recorded and demonstrated in the novel; they make the original experiments themselves, undergo the task, and share at least in creating the results or hypothecating them in a world of perilous promise facing an uncertain future."¹⁷¹ This approach, in asking what the late fiction *does*, places theatricalizing action at the center of the late Jamesian project. The novels stage a desire or a knowledge without a stably desiring or knowing subject, yet a fetishized subject ("style," "the novel") is nonetheless taken to *act* and to magnetize the diegetic material of the novelistic world into a choreography of effects. Our interpellation of "the novel" as itself an actor redoubles the process by which characters *within* the novels are unavoidably fixed as loci of action, meaning, and emotive response despite the near-explicit ways in which their ontic contingency is put on display. Jamesian style, then, behaves theatrically, but so, too, do we in our dual comportment toward the novels. We register at once their emotive inspissation and their "staggering thinness of meaning."¹⁷² We feel about

¹⁷⁰ See Kurnick, "What Does Jamesian Style Want?" and Michael Wood in "What Henry Knew" ("Could it be that the novel is a moral sceptic, even if James isn't? What does this novel know?").

¹⁷¹ Holland, x-xi.

¹⁷² Bersani, "The It in the I," 25.

the novels by feeling about characters who are constantly being shown up as the effect of a stylistic performance. In this sense, the late novels are about—or, to put it another way, they compel us to experience the conundrum of—not only what it means to feel, but what it means and how it is possible to feel *about*.

If the three novels I have discussed can be said to be *about* something to the extent that they tether emotive intensity to an object, that object names the site of a certain subjective desolation theatrically rendered. This desolate theatricality prevails as the form of consciousness and of feeling in *The Awkward Age*, in which the narrative apparatus continually and diegetically undermines a social world predicated on theatrical modes of relation; in *The Sense of the Past*, where the spectatorial experience of self-discontinuity creates a knife's edge of panic along subjectivity's unbroken surface; and in *The Golden Bowl*, where consciousness slides between figuration as an object and figuration as a scene, generating an unease that clings, for us, to consciousness's content. Indeed, this final formulation of emotion as a kind of veridical hallucination—a belief whose object is both illusory and present—pertains across the late works. Throughout, I have used *feeling* in ways that selectively erode strong distinctions among tone; emotion attributed to characters; and the emotive response of the novels' readers. My purpose in so doing is not to suggest anything like a total identification between reader and character or an affective correspondence between reader and text—and not even, more to the point perhaps, an intentional correspondence between character and text. I aim, rather, to elaborate a structure I name in my introduction: a particularly Jamesian, *unintending* form of modernist irony whereby the text's generative self-difference does not compel readers to ally themselves with a properly skeptical stance toward realistically rendered novelistic effects like character and plot, but rather suggests the co-incidence of 1) the downright stagey constructedness of these effects and 2) their

absolute emotive *effectiveness*.

To note the congruity between these two perceptual registers is, to a certain extent, to advocate for a particular kind of attention. The types of reading respectively implied—essentially, close reading and lay reading—tend to be held as disparate in ways that have authorized literary disciplinarity, an attitude implicit even in those arguments that assert the legitimacy of heterogeneous readerly experiences. As a corrective to the air of rarefaction that tends to hover around the literary, Rita Felski urges us instead to celebrate the non-instrumental “usefulness” of literary experience. Felski faults modernism in particular for touting an “art of disenchantment” as distinct from the inhabited wisdom of “everyday forms of experience” and “everyday thinking.”¹⁷³ In rehearsing these well-worn indictments of modernism’s cultural mandarinism, Felski proposes to locate literature’s usefulness not in the radical alterity of high modernist experiments or in the affective immediacy sometimes attributed to popular artifacts, but in what she calls “emphatic experience”:

[By] leaving open the nature and content of that...experience, as well as the criteria used to evaluate it, [the idea of emphatic experience] grants the sheer range of aesthetic response: individuals can be moved by different texts for very different reasons. This insight has often been lost to literary studies, thanks to a single-minded fixation on the merits of irony, ambiguity, and indeterminacy that leaves it mystified by other structures of value and fumbling to make sense of alternative responses to works of art.¹⁷⁴

The final sentence in the excerpt could have been written about James. Notoriously difficult to teach and, not incidentally, a darling of the New Critics, for whom “[fungibility] and translatability were the enemy” and “an adequate paraphrase would be the sign of a bad

¹⁷³ Felski, 52-3, 6, 13.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

poem,”¹⁷⁵ James and the late fiction in particular might be accused of embodying the recalcitrance of high modernism and, by extension, the cultural-gatekeeping vocation often imputed to literary studies. Yet the self-satisfaction, not to say the ideological bluntness, of the kind of “irony, ambiguity, and indeterminacy” Felski cites seems remote from the penumbral weight of Jamesian ambiguity, whose chief undecidability, I would venture, is the rather ascetic question of where one’s pain is actually coming from.

Indeed, as I have aimed to show, the late novels invite a reading practice attuned to precisely these kinds of lived effects, effects whose indeterminacy in no wise dilutes their force. And while the particularities of the late style do not permit a simple “application” of a Jamesian readerly tack to all other literary texts and cultural objects, I maintain that the specific phenomenality of moving through late James weaves “close” reading into “lay” reading in a way that obviates the distinction. That is, to read the late novels “well” involves also reading them “poorly,” with a somewhat under-absorptive disposition. It is worth briefly noting that the late style results from James’s practice of dictation and that listening to these novels, to marshal anecdotal evidence, tends to render the Jamesian sentence shockingly comprehensible. One finds a note of advocacy for this kind of mixed reading in James’s remarks, quoted in an earlier chapter, on the surprising effectiveness of what he considers to be minor Ibsen: “there is by the nature of the case no catching the convinced, or call him the deluded, spectator or reader in the act of a mistake. He is to be caught at the worst in the act of attention, of the very greatest attention, and that is all, as a precious preliminary at least, that the playwright asks of him, besides being all the very divinest poet can get” (AA 14). This delusory form of attention is not, for James, an epiphenomenon of theatrical experience but *attention* proper, and its effect flies in the face of what we consider to be one of the windfalls of attentive reading: security from

¹⁷⁵ Gallagher, 152.

falsified experience. John Guillory has traced the ways in which the practice of close reading itself, as promulgated by I.A. Richards, originates in an institutionally inflected worry over the quality and kind of attention students were devoting to literary texts:

Richards sees his generation as already overwhelmed by a saturated media environment, buffeted by stimuli that produce conditioned responses supervening even on those modernist literary works intended to challenge the conditioned response. So he observes in *Practical Criticism* that “those who are discovering for the first time that poetry can cause them emotion do often, for this very reason, pay little attention to the poetry.”¹⁷⁶

As Guillory argues, close reading was always already a response to the deleterious habits of cognition engendered by what we would now call “new media.”¹⁷⁷ Two decades prior, we see an apologia for precisely this kind of “irresponsible” attention in James’s critical writing—a kind of attention that, while keeping the colorless “stock responses”¹⁷⁸ of Richards’s students at bay, seems by a different reflex to render loving responses in spite of the regrettable gap between the text’s intent and its achieved form.

It is just such a gap that James intently worries over in his Preface to the New York Edition of *The Wings of the Dove*, a novel that, if the prefatory remarks are to be believed, seems to consist entirely of “gaps” and “lapses,” “absent values,” “palpable voids,” “missing links,” “mocking shadows,” and “intentions that...were not to fructify.”¹⁷⁹ This rueful diction is directed specifically at Kate Croy, or, rather, at James’s failed intention for the presentation of Kate Croy. The distinction is a crucial one, as this ambiguity between a person and the idea of that person recurs throughout the Preface and, crucially, near the end of the novel when Merton Densher mourns the letter from Milly that Kate has burned:

¹⁷⁶ Guillory, 24.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 23.

¹⁷⁹ James, *The Wings of the Dove*, 10-11.

Then he took to himself at such hours, in other words, that he should never, never know what had been in Milly's letter. The intention announced in it he should but too probably know; only that would have been, but for the depths of his spirit, the least part of it. The part of it missed for ever was the turn she would have given her act. This turn had possibilities that, somehow, by wondering about them, his imagination had extraordinarily filled out and refined. It had made of them a revelation the loss of which was like the sight of a priceless pearl cast before his eyes – his pledge given not to save it – into the fathomless sea, or rather even it was like the sacrifice of something sentient and throbbing, something that, for the spiritual ear, might have been audible as a faint far wail. (527)

The “something sentient and throbbing” emitting a “faint far wail” might be the novel's most live, fleshly rendering of a character otherwise afflicted, famously, with a representational vagueness—except, of course, that it does not actually describe Milly Theale. Yet we know, too, that it does. Just as the language of ruinous impoverishment in the Preface seems irresistibly to be “about” Kate's frustrations as much as it is about her author's in constructing her, if the novel appears to reserve its release of near-bathetic emotional energy for the sacrifice of a letter, the letter's dead author does not thereby “lose out” in the novel's emotive economy. The principle by which subjective absence or contingency itself becomes saturated with feeling is here literalized through the passage's emotive reference to the absent—provisionally absent because not the ostensible object of Densher's emotion, and irrevocably absent because dead—Milly. Densher's mourning of Milly's letter yet generates an access of feeling that undeniably also nominates Milly herself as its object; it is unclear whether the novel “knows” this any better than Densher does, by which I mean it is unclear whether the novel moralizes Densher's incognizance of this emotive structure.

If *The Wings of the Dove* is, in these various registers, about sacrifice, and moreover is also about the authorial sacrifice of what it is not about, then what is the novel actually not about? We can do worse for an answer than to turn to the opening sentence, a syntactically hasty sentence about waiting that necessitates an equally hasty *volte-face*:

She waited, Kate Croy, for her father to come in, but he kept her unconscionably, and there were moments at which she showed herself, in the glass over the mantel, a face positively pale with the irritation that had brought her to the point of going away without sight of him. (23)

If Amerigo at the end of *The Golden Bowl* can know *it* before we can be sure what *it* is, *Kate Croy*'s position in the opening sentence of *The Wings of the Dove* allows Kate Croy's waiting to precede Kate Croy.¹⁸⁰ Indeed, the idiosyncratic placement of this plosive-velar spondee—was ever such an emphatic sound so de-emphasized?—gives it the appearance of an adverb modifying the action of waiting. *Catercorner* could fit in its place, and would have the benefit of being, one imagines, spatially accurate.¹⁸¹ Yet to vocalize “Kate Croy” as an adverb would be to stress the name in exactly the way its placement in the sentence prohibits: “She waited *impatiently* for her father to come in.” By contrast, “She *waited*, Kate Croy, for her father to come in,” with the proper name almost swallowed, is how James's sentence naturally leaves the mouth—as it were, against the grain of grammar. Rarely in a moment of naming is the ontic solidity of a name so efficiently macerated. One might detect in the syntactic sidling of this opening a narrative method that develops over the course of the novel: a sidestepping of

¹⁸⁰ Ohi, in *Henry James and the Queerness of Style*, covers similar terrain and with a similar eye toward *The Wings of the Dove*'s formal particularities, use of free indirect discourse, and characterization. My governing concern, however, while inclusive of the stylistic queerness to which Ohi so cogently draws our attention, is the ways in which these queernesses inform and give meaning to a process of dematerialization that is fundamental to James's fiction.

¹⁸¹ Ohi identifies this rhetorical device as “‘extraposition’ (in Otto Jespersen's term for a form of apposition that leaves a ‘word, or a group of words’ stranded ‘outside the sentence as if it had nothing to do there’)” (63).

inhabited consciousness (Kate's consciousness first and with least ceremony) in pursuit of a lateral perspective from which one must read for the effects of consciousness rather than for these effects' authors. This adjacency encourages one to approach *The Wings of the Dove* if not as a novel about Kate Croy, then perhaps as one about what is enabled by the condition of not being about Kate Croy. Such an approach would allow "siding" with Kate to mean not necessarily taking up or championing her point of view—though the novel does indeed briefly ask just this work of the reader—but seeing what comes of standing, with Kate, to the side of a novel that has much to say about margins, and ultimately standing with Kate beside herself.

The remainder of this chapter will move through the first book of *The Wings of the Dove*, showing 1) that Kate's consciousness and emotive experience are theatrically constructed, 2) that the first book's excruciating tone emerges not despite, but *because of* this theatricality, 3) that the narration's movements toward and away from Kate amplify this theatrical effect by appearing to posit both depth and externalization as modes of characterization and appropriate to Kate, 4) that not only Kate, but the external *things* through which her self is often formulated are shown to be self-differential and theatrical, 5) that Kate's theatrically externalizing self-construction is both opposed and related to her father Lionel's mercenary materiality and phenomenal *immateriality*, Kate's theatricality being a mode of characterization and subject-formation, and Lionel's theatricality being proximate to the aesthetic and moral attributes traditionally adduced to indict theatre, and 6) that the novel's sacrifice of Kate (or, to say nearly the same thing, of Kate's perspective) is essentially homologous to the authorial sacrifice held up by James as the art of the novel, and that insofar as the novel indirectly generates feeling "for" Kate or "about" its own abandonment of Kate, it is generating feeling for and about the novel as such.

James's first notebook entries on *The Wings of the Dove* enact Kate's marginalization

with a sleight-of-hand similar to that in the novel's opening lines. James first gets hold of his "heroine," the yet-to-be-named Milly Theale—"some young creature...who, at 20, on the threshold of a life that has seemed boundless," suddenly learns she is soon to die of "consumption, heart-disease, or whatever" (James ultimately settles on the last).¹⁸² Into this ready-made tragedy steps "a young man" (Merton Densher) whom Milly loves without reciprocation, but who, "in his pity, wishes he could make her taste of happiness." He, meanwhile, is "entangled with another woman, committed, pledged, 'engaged' to one—and it is in that that a little story seems to reside." The narrative possibilities in this tense triangulation take shape slowly; the penniless couple is, to whatever end,

waiting. The young man in these circumstances encounters the dying girl as a friend or relation of his fiancée. *She* has money—*she* is rich. ...He takes his betrothed, his fiancée, fully into his confidence about her and says, 'Don't be jealous if I'm kind to her—you see *why* it is.' The fiancée is generous, she also is magnanimous—she is full of pity too. She gives him rope—she says, 'Oh yes, poor thing: be kind to her.' It goes further than she quite likes; but still she holds out—she is so sure of her lover. ...But they are weary of their waiting, the two fiancés—and it is their own prospects that are of prime importance to them. It becomes very clear that the dying girl would marry the young man on the spot if she could.

Kate's notorious patience is already on display in this early formulation, albeit in the form of passivity rather than a calculating quiescence. If this inchoate Kate seems in danger of a moral failing, it most closely resembles Maggie's in the first half of *The Golden Bowl*: an uxorial laxity that "gives...rope" without duly considering the potential for hanging. The last sentence of the entry, tremulously noting Milly's willingness to marry Densher "on the spot," picks up an earlier

¹⁸² *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, 102.

thread that seemed, in its place, non sequitur if still portentous: “*She* has money—*she* is rich.” James ends by positing a clarity without specifying a perceiving subject: it is implicitly *both* Kate and Densher to whom Milly’s devotion to Densher—and, one must infer, the material benefits that might accrue from it—becomes “very clear.” The sinister sliding into place of almost geometrically aligned fortuities, left largely unspoken in the novel, is thus only darkly insinuated even in these first notes—or, to put it differently, the crucial condition of unspokenness is in place even at the moment of the story’s conception. In the next entry, however, James, ostensibly by way of synopsis, writes of these previous notes: “I had asked myself if there was anything in the idea of the man’s *agreeing with his fiancée that he shall marry the poor girl in order to come into her money and in the certitude that she will die and leave the money to him*—on which basis (his becoming a widower with property) they themselves will at last be able to marry” (104, original emphasis). With explicitness of action comes a finer differentiation of actors. The pair see and feel no longer in unison, but with gradations of temporal and intentional difference. Densher’s “agreeing with his fiancée *that he shall marry the poor girl*” may lay slightly less blame at Kate’s feet than would his agreeing with her *to marry Milly*, but the suggestiveness of their individuated agency is nonetheless sufficient to cast Densher’s fiancée in the more indictable—though grammatically less active—role. Kate becomes the novel’s villain in the space between notebook entries, the second of which manages to establish, through a synopsis that is actually a crystallization that is actually a revision, that she always had been.

This could all be chalked up to the vagaries of James’s creative practice, to the inevitable discursive lacunae and non-continuous registration of ideas endemic to writers’ notebooks—except that the strategic amnesia and retroactive typing of Kate performed in these entries are so

powerfully analogous to those performed by the novel itself. Which is not to claim any *particular* evolutionary relationship between the structure of the notes and that of the novel; rather, the analogy gives special point to the spectacular cruelty underwriting the novel's famed shifting of focalizers, from Kate to Milly to Milly's friend Susan Stringham to Densher. It would be more accurate to say un- or anti-spectacular, as the domestic melodrama that opens the novel is so effectively buried as to be forgotten even by the novel's technologies of characterization—leaving us with a Kate most memorable for her brutally efficient reticence and Cheshire-like “smile.” The flatness and concomitant impenetrability of this smiling Kate—she smiles and smiles, because she's the villain—seems diametrically opposed to the near bathos of the opening scene, much as her plot-driving patience seems to invert that scene of impotent waiting. Yet the cruelty of the novel's abandonment of her perspective is felt most keenly in the psychological agnosticism of this move. When Milly's perspective is lost, the conditions of the loss (including the biological death of the character) allow her to be mourned by the novel, whereas the novel's abandonment of Kate seems to involve a shift in modes of characterization from a mode sympathetic to a depth model of psychology (and hence to Kate herself), to one that not only takes up a non-sympathetic stance toward Kate, but relinquishes the only stance from which sympathy for her was appropriate. I use the term “psychological agnosticism” to refer to the fact that the trajectory of the novel's way of characterizing Kate seems to say, “There may be a psychology here, but it doesn't make a difference either way.” Quite uniquely in late James, the opening scene fills in a psychoaffective history that can be held to account for Kate's later actions (and, famously in Eve Sedgwick's reading, for her subject-formation). The question the novel's structure raises, then, is why go to the trouble of creating a character with such an explicitly staged history and of introducing the novel through the excruciating scene of her

rejection by her father (a scene made all the more painful by the contrast between our ostensible position of perspectival closeness to Kate and the askesis of her dialogue, a humiliated dignity formalized), only to abandon her—in much the same way, to indulge in some of the bathos, that her father does—to the unflattering reports of third-person observation?

Compared with *The Golden Bowl's* (pretense, at least, of) equal moieties of free indirect discourse, the narrative division of labor in *Wings of the Dove* produces an alienation effect that forces the loss of Kate's perspective to be felt, and felt to be strange.¹⁸³ This perspectival jockeying has its spatial and temporal correlates. The duration of Kate's waiting in the novel's opening sentence is marked only by occasional glances at the mirror that specularly redouble her sentence-level besideness; irritation here is something not felt inside you, but rather seen next to you in a reflection of your face. In Terada's succinct formulation of the theatricality of emotive experience, "Emotion demands virtual self-difference—an extra 'you.'"¹⁸⁴ Kate's name may be subject to a syntactical demotion, but her position as the focalizing and accessible center of consciousness is compromised even before the narrative properly takes up (in order later to abandon) her point of view. To refresh our memory of the opening sentence:

She waited, Kate Croy, for her father to come in, but he kept her unconscionably, and there were moments at which she showed herself, in the glass over the mantel, a face positively pale with the irritation that had brought her to the point of going away without sight of him.

James's comma placement briefly inspires the belief that Kate will *show herself*, when she is actually engaged in the mimetic act of showing a face *to* herself. (Along these lines, it might also

¹⁸³ Ohi comments on the shifts in perspective that characterize this novel: "Kate's particular plight, which is palpable in the first book, weighs less heavily in critical assessments of the end partly because the intervening perspectives of Milly, Susan, and finally, Densher make us forget, for instance, the implicit demands of the condrips, and the less implicit ones of Aunt Maud, make us almost forget, even, Kate's poverty" (61).

¹⁸⁴ Terada, 31.

be noted that there is something vastly unforthcoming about classifying a feeling that can turn one's face "positively pale" as mere "irritation"—and not only "irritation," which would at least allow this oft-invoked Jamesian feeling its due measure, but "*the irritation that—*", muffling the impact of an already pedestrian affect.) Kate's "showing" reminds us that Lionel Croy's absence is specifically an absence from sight, and that, obversely, to have "sight of him" would confer a visual fulfillment that is here supplanted, but whose absence is not compensated for, by his daughter's eyeing of her own mirror image. Kate's relationship to herself is thus immediately established as one of multiple estrangement—estrangement not only in the syntactic and phenomenal registers already discussed, but as the logic of an affective economy in which one's own visage stands in as the sign of another's absence.¹⁸⁵

These first lines introduce a clutch of the novel's most salient characteristics: a preoccupation with impatience and irritation, shifts in narrative perspective, indirectness, temporal and spatial disjunction, and, crucially for us, processes of dematerialization. The opening *cataphora*, the use of a pronoun in the absence of an antecedent subject, is suggestive in ways that Fredric Jameson's recent discussion of *cataphora* may help to underline:

For just as the ancient mariners feared the approach to an edge of the world from which they fantasized a drop into nothingness, so this peculiar beginning seems to betoken a nothingness, a void, before the opening of the text itself. The *cataphora* articulates some inaugural mystery, some absolute darkness before the voice begins, which no doubt carries intimations of all the primal fears of beginnings, creations, the waking up without a memory or an identity, birth itself. But in fact, the *cataphora*, far from being a rarity, has been elevated, in much contemporary literature, to the status of an incipit: "He was there, waiting. He was the first one, standing, lounging, trying to look occupied or at least

¹⁸⁵ Compare this moment with a similar one in *What Maisie Knew*, in which Mrs. Beale's presence reminds Maisie of Sir Claude's absence, but the obverse does not hold true.

innocent.” The cataphora, however, rarely succeeds in looking innocent; nor does it really mean to. For this kind of sentence most often announces a thriller of some kind, and the unidentified pronoun stands in fact for the unidentified serial killer of the novel in question.¹⁸⁶

Jameson takes his example from Faulkner, but the epigraph to his chapter “The Swollen Third Person” is the opening sentence of James’s “The Beast in the Jungle” (1903): “What determined the speech that startled him in the course of their encounter scarcely matters, being probably but some words spoken by himself quite without intention—spoken as they lingered and slowly moved together after their renewal of acquaintance.” James appears as something of a bugbear throughout *The Antinomies of Realism*, though Jameson never engages with his work at length. Jamesian cataphora and Jamesian point of view more broadly are positioned as the moment of *décadence* of a literary realism whose constitutive tension was between 1) the *récit*, the past-present-future system of storytelling in which narrative events are sealed in an irrevocable past (instantiated in the anecdote, which can be “expanded and contracted at will”¹⁸⁷), and 2) a narrativity that enacts an “eternal present,” characterized by “impulses of scenic elaboration, description and above all affective investment, which allow it to develop towards a scenic present which in reality, but secretly, abhors the other temporalities which constitute the force of the tale or *récit* in the first place.”¹⁸⁸ In James and later in literary modernism proper, Jameson argues, the ideology of point of view and its temporal correlate, the eternal present, overtakes the pole of the *récit*. Cataphora acts as a double-agent in this putsch; its function:

to construct a secret and a mystery which is the result only of the author’s withholding of information, rather than latent in the plot itself. ... [Faulkner’s novels] thereby bear

¹⁸⁶ Jameson, 164-5.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

witness to a modern necessity of constructing a narrative out of what were not initially narrative materials: in other words, they testify to the weakening of the pole of the *récit*, of the past-present-future system itself, by the dominance of an eternal present which seeks then to disguise itself as *récit* and narrative to be told and story or destiny to be revealed.¹⁸⁹

The question of what constitutes “narrative materials” shades into a question of what constitutes character in *The Wings of the Dove*. Kate, in the midst of her escapist absorption in her reflection, is described as “agreeable to see,” and agreeable specifically in terms of an insubstantiality that, unlike that which marks her father’s social unacceptability, conduces to social success: “She had stature without height, grace without motion, presence without mass” (24). The specific qualities of her winningness—“stature,” “grace,” and “presence”—are explicitly opposed to those of physical existence—“height,” “motion,” and “mass”—and are unfixable as either “cause” or “effect” of her general charm. Kate’s reverie, still anchored to her mirror image, appears to follow an increasingly self-effacing course in these opening pages. Initially a visual stand-in for her father, Kate’s face becomes for her a “partial escape” from a reality in which Lionel’s shame is “the great thing in one’s life”—an escape, notably, not *into* the self, but laterally to a space of social adjudication where the immateriality that is her father’s legacy becomes a boon. That Kate’s “presence” lacks “mass” does not make it identical to her father’s absence. The lines that follow continue this dematerializing trajectory:

If she saw more things than her fine face in the dull glass of her father’s lodgings she might have seen that after all she was not herself a fact in the collapse. She didn’t hold herself cheap, she didn’t make for misery. Personally, no, she wasn’t chalk-marked for auction. She hadn’t given up yet, and the broken sentence, if she was the last word, *would*

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 176.

end with a sort of meaning. There was a minute during which, though her eyes were fixed, she quite visibly lost herself in the thought of the way she might still pull things round had she only been a man. It was the name, above all, she would take in hand—the precious name she so liked and that, in spite of the harm her wretched father had done it, wasn't yet past praying for. She loved it in fact the more tenderly for that bleeding wound. But what could a penniless girl do with it but let it go? (25)

Kate's rhetorical efforts to pull herself up and apart from her familial situation are subtly derailed. Oddly for a moment of individuation, the opening note is an ambiguous one: "If she saw more things than her fine face in the dull glass of her father's lodgings she might have seen that after all she was not herself a fact in the collapse." The phrase "more things" asks not from what the self is being distinguished, but whether distinction is even the mode of self-making at work. Does "more *things*" denote the material squalor of Lionel's rooms, a riot of vulgarity of which Kate might realize she is not a part? (That *she* "wasn't chalk-marked for auction," unlike the misery earlier associated with "the table-cloth and the centre-piece and the lamp," would seem to corroborate this reading.) Or is the phrase "more things" an abstraction, a way of indicating what the remainder of the paragraph will make explicit: that Kate finds something of unsuspected value and substance behind the flat surface of her reflection—more things in heaven and earth than are shown above the mantel? Another way to put this question would be: is Kate Kate because she contains such depths, or because she is not her material environment?

If these lines hold out a pair of mutually undermining options, the associative movements that follow perform a barely perceptible substitution. Kate's resolution to be the "last word" that would restore meaning to the "broken sentence" of her family history hangs suspended between the novel's first sentence, which seems hobbled by her interpolated full name, and her words of mourning for "the name" that will have to be relinquished in a

financially expedient marriage. This makes for an inauspicious first leg in what will soon be the novel's anfractuous (and ultimately failed) marriage plot, as Kate's hypothetical union is cast not only in terms of the loss of her family name, but as the site where even this mourned and mournable *family* name stands in a position of relative privilege over the *given* name that presumably differentiates her.¹⁹⁰ It is not quite that Kate's given name *disappears* from her line of thought, but that it manages to cede its position to her family name without ever having been called to the surface of consciousness in the first place—a sacrifice humble to the point of interment.¹⁹¹ “Kate” is an unauthored effect in this passage, not manifestly present but still exerting a gravitational pull. One would be wrong, that is, to believe that Kate is thinking of her given name when she calls herself the “last word,” since this “last word” is ostensibly only a metaphor for her *self*; yet one would also be right in inevitably associating “word” with “name,” because this self-as-word metaphor so evidently launches the associative train that ultimately has Kate bemoaning the bloodied condition of her other name, “Croy.” The all too suggestive metaphor of the “last word” just quivers on the edge of becoming a metonym for “name.” It is this never-explicit invocation of Kate's given name in the guise of the salvific “last word” that allows her acknowledged loss of “Croy” to signpost the unacknowledged absence of “Kate.” In the same vein, the unwritten “Kate” has the effect of conjuring “Croy” without itself ever needing (or being permitted) to materialize in order to do this work. At this point, one might notice the preponderance of “she”s and the sustained dearth of “Kate”s in this protracted passage

¹⁹⁰ Butler's question in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, “What makes for a grievable life?”, offers another way of framing the problem of Kate's ungrieved name (20).

¹⁹¹ Miller notes the salience of the concept of sacrifice for James, both as a thematic concern and a way of understanding literary production: “The astute reader will have noted that ‘renounce’ and ‘sacrifice’ are the words James uses in the preface [to *The Awkward Age*] (p. xvii) to define his decision, in this case, not to ‘go behind.’ Novelistic form, for James, is always a matter of sacrifice, a matter of cutting out, a matter of renunciation or giving up, in order to avoid sprawl, but he is in *The Awkward Age* sacrificing a procedure especially dear to him and essential to most of his work. This sacrifice is necessary in order to conform to the law that form must match theme” (131).

of waiting, so that “She” precedes “Kate” even in the opening lines; “Kate” literally is not there until (Lionel) Croy enters the scene.¹⁹²

The novel that begins by showing the effect of Lionel Croy’s absence goes on to show the irresistible effectivity of a man who ultimately, even once he has “at last appeared” for Kate and the reader, “doesn’t exist for people” (27, 72). His first effect, for that matter, is to render Kate “instantly aware of the futility of any effort to hold him to anything,” of his inability to “touch you ever so lightly without setting up”—jarringly somatic tropes for the elusivity of a man whose entrance on the scene should have made him at least somewhat more physically available (25). If Kate’s consciousness is already theatricalized in the novel’s opening lines through a visual engagement with her mirror image, her acute sense of awareness upon her father’s arrival places her in the audience before a haunted stage.¹⁹³ The force of Kate’s painful awareness seems undampened by its familiarity and repetitiveness, by the sense that it is the “usual” and being experienced “again.” And not only is this feeling characterized by an automaticity and iterability, it is *someone else’s* repetitious feeling—“all the old ache, her poor mother’s very own.” Although Kate initially ascribes her pain to the lack of “finish” in Lionel’s pretense of illness—the “sketch of a design”—under which he summoned her, this explicitly painterly metaphor soon gives way to a tacitly theatrical attitude and mode of self-understanding. This trajectory builds on a thread from the previous paragraph, which begins with a disorienting and necrotic admixture of aesthetic signifiers: “the whole history of their house had the effect of some fine florid voluminous phrase, say even a musical, that dropped first into words and notes without sense and then, hanging unfinished, into no words or any notes at all” (24). It is unclear whether “a musical” is meant to be shorthand for “a musical phrase” or a proper noun denoting a

¹⁹² Indeed, Sedgwick has argued that the “‘unspeakable’ Lionel Croy is at the very source of the novel’s energies” (“Is the Rectum Straight?” 77).

¹⁹³ See Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, for a discussion of repetition in the theatre.

type of entertainment found at a social gathering; for either one to be “hanging unfinished” evokes an incomplete painting or, even, the “lack of finish” against which late nineteenth-century anti-Impressionists so fulminated, and to which Kate herself later takes exception.¹⁹⁴ Taken together, these semantic nictitations have the effect of an insinuation with no content, which seems nonetheless to engender a sickly porousness among at least three art forms—literature, music (whether performed at a party or not), and painting. The decay of the Croys’ fortunes is evinced by the co-morbidity of these forms within the sentence, a composition falling into first formlessness and then nothingness. Even the absence of the “moderate finish required for deception” could constitute one of two distinct but related types of transgression: a disregard for the requirements of *techne*, or an allegiance to an illegitimate aesthetic regime and its moral correlate—that which allows Lionel’s “unconscionable” lateness to signify an unconscionable disregard for the conventions of performing a successful dissimulation.

Lionel Croy, with his “perfect look,” is unambiguously an “unspeakable” aesthete, and as in *The Tragic Muse*, the dematerializing tendencies of this aesthete has a certain strange commerce with the presumed materiality of theatre. The theatricality of Kate’s affective mode in these opening passages is set in relief by Kate’s hypothetical re-staging of the scene and of its effect on her consciousness: “He *might have* awaited her on the sofa in his sitting-room, or *might have* stayed in bed and received her in that situation. She was glad to be spared the sight of such penetralia, but it *would have* reminded her a little less that there was no truth in him” (26, emphasis added). The contrast between the *might have* of alternative stagings and the *would have* of alternative consciousness has particular point—all the more so that we are not given the standard subjunctive-conditional formulation, “had he ____, she would have ____”, which would

¹⁹⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*’s entry for “musical” (n): “3a. A musical party; (also in *pl.*) musical entertainment.” 1823 example: “I. D’Israeli *Curiosities of Lit.* 2nd Ser. I. 401. ‘Such fashionable cant terms as ‘theatricals’, and ‘musicals’, invented by the flippant Topham.’”

subordinate the import of the hypothetical staging to that of the hypothetical feeling. Instead, the physical reality of the *mise-en-scène* is actively and autonomously imagined as contingent and manipulable, while the feeling or state of consciousness effected by a particular scenario is assumed to be thoroughly and “instantly” determined by the presented scene.

While Kate’s awareness of Lionel’s “impossibility” operates theatrically, this impossibility is characterized by its dissolution of the generic registers that help to render theatrical scenes intelligible:

...not only, face to face with him, vain irritation dropped, but he breathed upon the tragic consciousness in such a way that after a moment nothing of it was left. The difficulty was not less that he breathed in the same way upon the comic: she almost believed that with this latter she might still have found a foothold for clinging to him. He had ceased to be amusing—he was really too inhuman. (26)

An echo of the corporealizing language of “holding” returns us to the beginning of this passage; the *moral* impossibility underlying the “futility of any effort to hold him to anything” shades, at this later moment, into the melancholy of an impossible *filial relation*, figured as the absence of “a foothold for clinging to him.” The metaphor of the “foothold” positions dramatic conventions not only as affective indices, but as the condition of possibility, the very ground, for all feeling. With both the “tragic consciousness” and the “vain irritation” sported in the novel’s opening lines negated, feeling itself is abruptly “dropped,” giving the remainder of the paragraph over to a more thorough description of Lionel’s physical attributes. Here as throughout these opening passages, Lionel’s impossibility for his daughter—the sense that there was “no truth in him”—stems not from a manipulative or artful theatricality, but precisely from a failure to accede to the theatrical modes of feeling, relation, and perspicuity valued and inhabited by Kate. Just as the disgrace that Lionel brings on his household is evoked through the perilous indeterminacy of

aesthetic signifiers, his monstrosity is signaled by his nullification of theatrical categories. His inattention to the criterion of “finish,” then, not only indicts him as both aesthetically and otherwise “unconscionable,” but does so by revealing him to be operating in the wrong artistic form—at least, so far as the thoroughly theatrical Kate is concerned.

Having been so thoroughly and, to risk a redundancy, imperceptibly effaced at the start of the novel for which she is ostensibly being introduced as a center of consciousness, Kate represents a particular kind of limit case for the “going behind” of Jamesian free indirect discourse. How does one “go behind” a character who is alternately *beside* herself and perpetually undergoing one kind of dematerialization or another? James, in the preface to *The Awkward Age*, makes note of the English reading public’s distaste for published plays, quipping that the difference between placing “he said” after a dialogue in a novel and placing the character’s name before a dialogue in a playscript was enough to determine the public’s preference. The first line of spoken dialogue in *The Wings of the Dove* occupies something of a middle ground: “Kate’s only actual expression of impatience, however, was ‘I’m glad you’re so much better!’” (27). The closed circuit of this formulation manages to report an “expression of impatience” without attributing action to the speaker; it appears to substantialize Kate by presenting the dialogue as an “expression” of her feeling, but paradoxically only does so by displacing her as the subject of the sentence.

Early in the chapter, the phrase “more things” places an ambiguity at the center of Kate’s self-understanding. The material “more things” that comprise the “ugliness” of the “setting” press in on the immaterial “more things” of personal quality whose recognition should be safeguarded through focalization. These two meanings are mutually hostile and muddying, and converge in Lionel’s (and later her sister Marian’s) perception of Kate as being “in her way a

tangible value” (27). The allusion to Hamlet’s ghostly father, first among the “more things in heaven and earth...than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” is reiterated as Kate reflects on Lionel’s physical attractiveness as itself a “tangible value”: “if there was much she neither knew nor dreamed of it passed between them at this very moment that he was quite familiar with himself as the subject of such quandaries” (29). At the moment his son delivers the famed line, Hamlet’s father is both present and dematerialized—addressing the characters, it seems, from beneath the ground, a stage effect whose emplaced corporeality Hamlet acknowledges with some cheek: “Well said, old mole!” Lionel, paradoxically, is a man of striking physicality (with “such a face and such a manner”) who “doesn’t exist for people,” “an actual person if there ever was one” who is “really too inhuman,” and one “much more firm on [his] feet” than the daughter whose “foothold” he disintegrates (31).

A variant of Kate’s “more things” retains one of the original phrase’s functions of self-constitution through negation: ““And what in the world else *could* [Aunt Maud] possibly want [if not you]?” ‘Oh I don’t know—many things’” (31). Kate’s slack self-deprecation takes on some of the ambiguity of the earlier *more things* that could either denote or exclude her. Even as “many things” here refers explicitly to that which is not Kate, the dual nature of the *things* that come before imbues this first spoken iteration with a specific irony—an irony found in the translucency of Kate’s direct speech to the free indirect discourse that originally gave us these “things.” Shortly after this dialogue, the phrase is lobbed back to the narrator: “She rose now, as if in sight of the term of her effort, in sight of the futility and the weariness of many things, and moved back to the poor little glass with which she had communed before” (32). Certainly “many things” can be futile, but can they be weary? The theatricalizing syntax of the sentence turns the external cause of a feeling into the feeling’s subject, just as the character who is “in sight of” this

feeling—as though *she* were visible to *it*—is in the act of placing herself back in front of her mirror image.

When Lionel starts to speak of “things,” the word’s dualities becomes starker and the semiotic shifts more abrupt. His claim that ““If you had [family feeling] as *I* have it you’d see I’m still good—well, for a lot of things” (33). The drop from a moral register to an economic one, from “good” to “good for a lot of things,” is clear enough. These differences are even more boldly outlined in his exchanges with Kate:

“Oh I think [Aunt Maud’s] idea,” said Kate almost gaily now, “is that I shall get a great deal.”

He met her with his inimitable amenity. “But does she give you the items?”

The girl went through the show. “More or less, I think. But many of them are things I dare say I may take for granted—things women can do for each other and that you wouldn’t understand.”

“There’s nothing I understand so well, always, as the things I needn’t!” (33)

From Kate’s discreet “a great deal” and eventually back to “things,” this passage finds Kate going “through the show” by dissipating the mercantile concretion of Lionel’s preferred term, “items.” Once again, Kate understands materiality, perhaps especially in this crudely monetary register, to demand a theatrical mode of engagement. Yet going through the show appears to require that the word “things” shift the focus of this casual accounting to the vague perquisites of feminine homosociality. Following on this shift, Lionel’s contention that “There’s nothing I understand so well, always, as the things I needn’t” not only signals his queer comprehension of this feminine relation; it emphasizes that Aunt Maud and Kate’s relationship is accessible to Lionel’s mercenary understanding at least in part because of this relationship’s vulnerability to pecuniary calculations—because of its undeniable basis in material disparity.

Lionel's comparative formulation, "nothing...as...", is suggestively followed up later in the conversation, as Kate declares: "'I don't know what you're like.' 'No more do I, my dear. I've spent my life in trying in vain to discover. Like nothing—more's the pity'" (35). The line evokes and temporalizes Kate's earlier experience of how "vain irritation dropped" when "face to face with him," which lightly punned on *vain*'s dual meanings of futile and fixated on one's own appearance. Not only is irritation pointless, it is unclear whether its pointlessness is mitigated or amplified by Kate's "showing herself" her irritated face. When the irritation is described as having "dropped," one has the impression of the face that showed it dropping accordingly. Lionel's use of the word *vain* also denotes futility while suggesting a continuous, reconnaissant self-regard. While Kate feels and conceives herself in a theatrical register, Lionel, whom we can only approach through his dialogue, formulates himself—or attempts to do so—through simile and litotes. Rather than locating feeling or consciousness outside of himself, Lionel describes a self by way of a series of negative comparisons, or more accurately, comparisons with negativity.

Even moments in which James specifies "material things" are quickly qualified through formulations that are presumably literal, but traffic in the distinct pitch of Jamesian figuration: "She saw as she had never seen before how material things spoke to her. She saw, and she blushed to see, that if in contrast with some of its old aspects life now affected her as a dress successfully 'done up', this was exactly by reason of the trimmings and lace, was a matter of ribbons and silk and velvet" (41). In this familiar Jamesian rhetorical device, the physical object and the metaphor are identical in every regard except insofar as they occupy different semantic registers—that is, there *is* an actual cache of ribbons and lace at Lancaster Gate, but these sartorial signifiers also retain a figural function. They therefore contain a self-difference that

exists solely on a linguistic level, with no corresponding difference in the diegetic world. The only substantive difference between the metaphorical things and the material things is that the former are a metaphor. The uniqueness of this rhetorical move lies not in these objects' metaphorizing something, but in their metaphorizing themselves. It may be helpful to conceive of this self-differential loop as a prose analogue to the signifying matter of the theatre. Bodies and objects on the stage, as Josette Féral argues, "evince possible world-views whose veridical and illusory aspects are grasped simultaneously by the spectator."¹⁹⁵ As in James's conception of readerly "attention," "The spectator is never completely duped." Féral goes on to elaborate the actor's body as a

locus continually threatened by a certain inadequacy, by faults, by a certain lack. By definition, it is imperfect; as matter, it is vulnerable. Although it knows its limits, it is shocked when it surpasses them. However, this body is more than just performance.

Transformed into a system of signs, it semiotizes everything around it: space, time, story, dialogue, scenery, music, lighting, and costumes. It brings theatricality to the stage.¹⁹⁶

Even as he explicitly invokes "material things," James makes a point of designating these things as—much like the actor's body—both sign and matter, self-different precisely insofar as they refer to themselves. In that regard, they also constitute a rich analogy to Kate Croy, to whom one might accurately say, as her father does, "You can describe yourself—to yourself" (32). These "things," finally, at the highest level of abstraction, make a rhetorical *display* out of the legerdemain by which the material world of novels typically emerges. To describe the particular action of the sentence's rhetoric and of Kate's thought as homologizing the figural and material while retaining an embarrassing fissure—an embarrassment indicated in Kate's self-conscious blush at the slippage between her meaningful metaphor for a more beautiful life and the

¹⁹⁵ Féral, "Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language," 100.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. 100-01.

decidedly less meaningful “things” that make for beauty. Here Kate again gestures toward the difficulty of distinguishing oneself from the things that surround one—particularly when those things are different from themselves, that is, when they are not only things but the language through which one understands one’s own desires.

Given that *The Wings of the Dove* declines to occupy its focalizing characters’ consciousness at their moments of heightened cognitive unease—Milly as she is dying in Venice, Kate when she gives herself to Densher—there is something faintly punishing about the novel’s opening scene, its flat articulation of emotional brutality, and our subsequent, abrupt withdrawal from its governing emotive and moral perspective. The novel announces its intentions with regard to Kate Croy and immediately abandons them, with effectively no indication as to whether we should thereafter pick them up. My primary question about this novel is, in this sense, a formal one, but because of the peculiar emotive indirectness of the novel’s form, it rings oddly quaint: Do we read the rest of *The Wings of the Dove* with the weight of the first scene in the moral scales? This question is precisely one that cannot be answered, and, more to the point, is perhaps not what the novel is “about.” Yet because the novel has so thoroughly evacuated intent, it is possible to read it, without perversity, as being about what it is not about. As a structure of intention, this Jamesian about-but-not-aboutness stages how fiction works, and how we might feel about it.

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