HENRY JAMES AND ROMANTIC REVISIONISM: 
THE QUEST FOR THE MAN OF IMAGINATION 
IN THE LATE WORK

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ABSTRACT

This study situates the late work of Henry James in the tradition of Romantic revisionism. In addition, it surveys the history of James criticism alongside the academic critique of Romantic-aesthetic ideology. I read *The American Scene*, the New York Edition Prefaces, and other late writings as a single text in which we see James refashion an identity by transforming the divisions or splits in the modern subject into the enabling condition for renewed creativity. In contrast to the Modernist myth of Henry James the master reproached by recent scholarship, I offer a new critical fiction – what James calls the man of imagination – that models a form of selfhood which views our ironic and belated condition as a fecund limitation. The Jamesian man of imagination encourages the continual (but never resolvable) quest for a coherent creative identity by demonstrating how our need to sacrifice elements of life (e.g. desires and aspirations) when we confront tyrannical circumstances can become a prerequisite for pursuing an unreachable ideal. This study draws on the work of post-war Romantic revisionist scholarship (e.g. Northrop Frye, Frank Kermode, Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, and Paul de Man) as well as French theory (e.g. Maurice Blanchot, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida) and other traditions (e.g. Kenneth Burke, R.P. Blackmur, and Lionel Trilling) to challenge new instrumentalizing scholarly methodologies that aim to overcome the ironies of critical vision. I argue that James’s man of imagination not only presents a critical agency that profits from criticism’s penchant for ironic repetition but also a politics that can help us navigate the tension between artistic self-stylization and the social constraints intrinsic to the liberal rule of law.
FOR MY TEACHERS
Few critics, I suppose, no matter what their political disposition, have ever been wholly blind to James’s
greatest gifts, or even to the grandiose moral intention of these gifts … but by liberal critics James is
traditionally put the ultimate question: of what use, of what actual political use, are his gifts and their
intention? Granted that James was devoted to an extraordinary moral perceptiveness, granted, too, that
moral perceptiveness has something to do with politics and the social life; of what possible practical value
in our world of impending disaster can James’s work be? And James’s style, his characters, his subjects,
and even his own social origin and the manner of his personal life are adduced to show that his work cannot
endure the question.

- Lionel Trilling (1946)

The would-be specific literary intellectual who wants to work for social change will … have to fight off
two demons of self-doubt: one from the orthodox left, who will tell him that his work is bullshit and that
real political work lies in the organization of the workers; the other from the ultra left who will tell him that
he must connect his work on traditional texts directly to the “real” situation, our contemporary political
situation, or risk total apolitical rarefiction. My answer to these demons is that genuine political work for
the Henry James scholar, as Henry James scholar, becomes possible when contact is made with the activity
of James’s writing, with all possible emphasis on its act.

- Frank Lentricchia (1984)
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is a unique difficulty that arises from writing a study that looks backward to Henry James and forward toward the future of literary critical practice. It is the problem Northrop Frye identifies when he differentiates between intensive and extensive reading: the necessity of possessing a single author fully and demonstrating a breadth of literary context that adequately frames the critical reading. Frye believes the dissertation is the perfect forum to encourage intensive reading even though extensive reading requires time for maturation. The scenario is the reverse today. Context dominates and is prioritized: one must first find the appropriate setting – often a non-literary or historical-cultural setting – in which to read an author. I have nonetheless remained faithful to Frye. By trying to split the difference between intensive and extensive reading, I am quite sure of relative failure at each end. I desired to possess James in his entirety but the sheer size of his corpus and the professional demand of studying a specialized field (e.g. “Nineteenth-Century American Literature” or “Global Modernism”) took precedence. I wanted to go beyond the fixed limits set by the modern academy. I wanted to read James within an expansive history of literature and criticism that moves from the Romantics to our present moment yet I also felt that I occasionally lost sight of him. Luckily I follow James’s assumption that our errors are redeemable through revision.

Any of my success, however, is surely attributable to my teachers. Their influence is recognizable in my topic, its scope, and its goals: below the surface in the textual unconscious; through inflections in my style; and most visibly in the footnotes, no doubt where academic battle lines are drawn, but also where critical debts are paid in full. Historical chance has afforded me the opportunity to learn from a unique array of
thinkers. At the professional level, they have introduced me to a range of critical styles, polemical tactics, theoretical approaches, the necessity of intellectual revision, and the exigent questions that have driven me to continue learning. At the personal level, they have helped me mature. While their criticism and teaching set the highest bar, it also motivates the ephebe, demonstrating that emulation is a noble goal and not an impossible task. Like a young Henry James, aged thirty-two, encountering Flaubert and his coterie: “Tu vois que je suis dans les conseils des dieux - que je suis lancé en plein Olympe.”

With me at the base of the mountain are my peers. Friends far and near, in the academy and beyond, who continually offer me encouragement. Colleen Kropp and Vanessa Loh listened with patience to my ravings and provided the necessary compassion and censure in return. Chris Winkler’s pugnacious precision in language and intellectual rigor awakened my dormant thoughts. He has provided a lasting friendship and reminded me that attempting to scale Olympian heights is an act of heroism. Before them there was always my family – my parents, Ellen and Frank, aunt Lisa, and grandparents Hattie and Bob – whose magnanimity is unrivaled and has guided me to the place where I am now. But that is still, alas, at the bottom of the mountain. By dedicating this study to my teachers, I am acknowledging that the best of them remain, to the core, Promethean, offering a guiding light and bestowing upon their pupils the most important of gifts:

Literature is [an] imaginative giving that is also a gaining, since it produces creations that live a more intense life than we – writers and readers alike – share in common. Criticism, then, should essentially be the appreciation and general dissemination of this gift of imaginative life. Whatever else it is, or performs, criticism should begin in such appreciation and aim for such dissemination, even if it means cutting the monumental figure of the famous critic, the elite expert, down to human size.
PERMISSIONS

I kindly thank the editors of the *Henry James Review* and the *Arizona Quarterly* for permission to reprint material that has now been disseminated throughout this study.
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PREFACE

Waiting on the subway platform beneath Philadelphia’s City Hall, I noticed that Henry James capitalized the word “Absolute” (Art 336) in the Preface to The Golden Bowl. It was the summer of 2011 and I had already spent a good portion of the year slowly working my way through Hegel’s Phenomenology. Such a peculiar allusion could not be unwarranted in a passage that also mentions a “philosophic mind,” depicts James “shaking off the shackles of theory” (336), and describes his method of revision as a hunt for an ideal version of a text. I spent the following two academic semesters pursuing what I took to be a genuine discovery that might allow me to put forth an utterly original reading of a canonical novel. James and Hegel! Who had ever connected the two? The answer was no one and with good reason. I assumed that it was necessary to establish a connection between my literary odd-couple – had the novelist actually read the philosopher? – and build an argument grounded in fact or history. Yet the sole mention of Hegel in James’s corpus occurs in a letter from Henry James Sr. to James Elliot Cabot included in Notes of a Son and Brother. Nevertheless, my “research” would turn into a conference paper presented at the bi-annual meeting of the Henry James Society in London during the summer of 2012. The passage in Notes verified the relationship between James and Hegel and I argued that the novelist’s knowledge of the philosopher was second hand, from his father and brother, as well as William’s Harvard colleagues, especially Josiah Royce. Even though William James discusses Hegel in the lectures that would become A Pluralistic Universe, which he delivered in Oxford during his 1908 trip to England, the year before Henry completed his final Preface, I could not muster up a
stronger claim than to interpret the Prefaces as a quasi-\textit{Bildungsroman} and to judge Henry, following Paul de Man, an orthodox Hegelian without knowing it.\textsuperscript{1}

In those early days of my graduate education, I considered myself an “Americanist” and the only work I knew that addressed Hegel’s influence on American literature did not discuss Henry James.\textsuperscript{2} Encountering Lionel Trilling’s \textit{Sincerity and Authenticity} in the fall of 2012 presented a beacon of some sorts. The “Americanist Trilling,” I learned, was a mirage bestowed by internecine academic debate and my reading (and subsequent rereading) of his intellectual history as well as the essays included in \textit{The Opposing Self} and \textit{Beyond Culture} soon led me to other so-called monuments of Anglo-American theory: the work of Abrams, Frye, Hartman, Bloom, and de Man (who was now beginning to cohere in light of the others). As shocking as it sounds in hindsight, these names were absent from the bibliographies and footnotes of the scholarship assigned in my seminars and were equally missing or underrepresented in my theory anthologies.\textsuperscript{3} In fact, as far as I could tell, they also failed to appear with any regularity in Americanist criticism (save the hasty dismissals of Bloom’s treatment of the Emersonian tradition). At best, these critics were indices of an outdated mode of scholarship, something more sophisticated, more democratically progressive, or more

\textsuperscript{1} De Man writes: “Whether we know it, or like it, or not, most of us are Hegelians and quite orthodox ones at that” (\textit{Aesthetic} 92).

\textsuperscript{2} In 2009, Henry Sussman circled the word “dialectic” in the draft of an essay where I quoted Lionel Trilling’s description of the literary genius who is a repository of the dialectic of his times. He wrote in the margin “see Hegel” and directed my attention to the volume \textit{Theorizing American Literature: Hegel, History, and the Sign}. And so began a decade of trying to read the philosopher…

\textsuperscript{3} A quick survey of any literary theory anthology highlights the extent to which Anglo-American literary criticism is omitted or devalued. It is as if every pre-Foucauldian and Derridean theorist in the academy was a New Critic.
current work had supplanted. But encountering these writers for the first time was key to making sense of my current moment: not merely the redundant defenses of the humanities that routinely appear, or the current debates incessantly focused on discovering the next great theory – what is the best context to situate a text, or what is the most sophisticated methodology to apply – but why so many scholars, especially among my generation, were more interested in reading literature because of what it told them about nineteenth-century medical practices, the rhetoric of self-help in Modernism, newspaper circulation in the antebellum period, or the history of meteorology. The absolute fetishization of the archive frustrated me. I began reading English, philosophy, and what we think of as theory in high school and college, however poorly and immaturity, simply because the works I encountered fascinated me and I wanted to know how to make sense of them. I purchased *The Golden Bowl* in 1998 after seeing it on the Modern Library’s list of the greatest novels of the twentieth-century: my goal was to finish the list by high school graduation and the deadline was continually pushed back throughout college. Despite perpetual procrastination, I wanted to understand why this book was seemingly more difficult than the work of Joyce or Woolf. And what the hell did these writers have to do with Kant or Derrida? My immersion in the academy was not conducive to answering my questions. It told me that empirical “research” was valorized

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4 The exception to the many defenses of the humanities, one that my study hopes to corroborate, comes from Peter Brooks: “We in the humanities advocate immersion in the destructive element … The teacher of literature … is engaged in a strange experience of negativity; of not speaking quite in his or her own voice. In the classroom, we let other voices, for instance from the past, speak through us. … This experience of otherness … is characteristic of reading and interpretation in the humanities, and it leads to a certain ethics: a self-dispossession in favor of the text, another voice in the room. The object of interpretation shares the stage with the interpreter. At its best, such an attitude allows other voices to develop their full force, full articulation, without censoring it – in a kind of dualism of feeling” (“Misunderstanding”).
because it could produce “original” studies. The English departments where I went to learn to read masqueraded as history and sociology when it came to anything other than poetry. Graduate school, in turn, put forth the notion that Henry James was no longer valuable unless he was situated alongside the appropriate cultural artifact. If we could not make him conform to our professional interests or methodological practices, why write another study of a figure who already possessed a library’s worth of scholarship? Especially when so much worthy literature that had not yet been discussed existed beyond an insular canon? James had been read and reread; it was time to move on.

The James Society in London was ideal for my first academic conference. Michael Wood’s presentation on A Small Boy and Others presciently drew my attention to what James calls “particles of history” (23) at a moment when I had just discovered Wordsworth’s The Prelude. I was coincidently also reading M.H. Abrams during the trip and in him found a powerful voice that made lucid the unspoken assumptions about literature circulating in culture (even if they currently remain in academic disrepute). That I began to recognize the ocean in which I swam so late in my graduate education, let alone life, is not entirely unique. Self-consciousness, belatedness, and irony may be the three key topics that dominate modern criticism and philosophy; in literary theory, the operative word is intertextuality. An intense study of Bloom and de Man (with Derrida and Foucault always lurking in the background) offered me various ways to describe the allusion to Hegel I saw in The Golden Bowl Preface. More important, intertextuality enabled me to think of the reading experience differently. If the self is a text, as the French would have us believe, or at least a composite of literary voices, history, and tradition, following Bloom, then the Romantic revivalists articulated a defense of the
humanities that was so clear and persuasive that only willful blinding or bad faith could
ignore it. Each of the critics I studied, and the list greatly expanded, made my picaresque
literary and philosophical education cohere. Edward Said’s *Beginnings* proved crucial in
this regard. His meditation on Milton and Wordsworth made plain the obvious: “The
methods of the old Muse are insufficient, and so too is the modern writer, for he is no
Muse-inspired seer” (67). The conversion was complete by the summer of 2013 when I
discovered D.H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love*; the fruits of my reimagined critical
disposition would yield my first publication, a revised version of the conference paper on
James and Hegel, which is now the penultimate (albeit the central) chapter of this study.
Although I discovered my ending first, *The Golden Bowl* Preface, James’s *ars poetica*,
my beginning emerged when I stumbled upon Charles Feidelson’s essay on the Jamesian
man of imagination.⁵ Yoking the beginning to the end would be the difficult task that
occupied me over the next several years.

The goal of my study is to describe the value of late James. The nonfiction that
appears after *The Golden Bowl* is surely more notorious than revered. Yet I believe it
constitutes James’s notes toward a supreme fiction: *The American Scene* shows us change
and corresponds to my figure of the grasping imagination; the Prefaces are abstract and
defined by James’s penetrating imagination; and finally, the Preface to *The Golden Bowl*
derives pleasure from its enactment of the crucible of imagination. The change occurs
during James’s repatriation in 1904 and necessitates the self-reinvention that begins with
*The American Scene*. I imagine James to be the Hegelian skeptic in America who

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⁵ I envision my project as a continuation of Feidelson’s work on James. Though he never
produced a full length-study, we are left with three published essays: “Henry James,
History, and the ‘Story’”; “James and the ‘Man of Imagination’”; and “The Moment of
*The Portrait of a Lady*.”
immerses himself in the world and endlessly negates what refuses to provide the adequate self-knowledge he seeks. In the Prefaces he becomes the stoic, withdrawing from physical reality into a world composed entirely of memory, abstracting himself from his literary works, and discovering that selfhood remains fragmented even when freed from external conditions. *The Golden Bowl* Preface reveals James to be a happy consciousness coming to terms with the inevitable splits and divisions within the self. I argue that James finds pleasure in his otherwise debilitating condition: his inability to discover a coherent identity and the agon of revision provide continual inspiration that renews creativity in the face of imaginative fatigue. The final Preface offers the Jamesian guide to his version of the Emersonian “conduct of life”: a theory of revision where the need to sacrifice life – desires and aspirations – when confronted with tyrannical circumstances ironically becomes the prerequisite for continuing to live and to strive for an unreachable ideal.

My readings focus on James’s performance. The selected works I examine are masks for the Jamesian subject. In his criticism, journalism, travelogues, reviews, and autobiographical texts, James is always producing fiction. In this manner, I conceive of my study as a fiction in the Stevensian (or maybe it should really be the Jamesian) sense Frank Kermode attributes to the term. For all the talk of fragmentation, irony, and discontinuous history, the act of interpretation necessarily imposes unity on its subject. The new Jameses of today – what John Carlos Rowe calls the other Henry James – merely create unity within disunity. By calling my Jamesian man of imagination a necessary fiction, a saving lie lest we perish from the truth, I aim to push back against the

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6 William Goetz’s *Henry James and the Darkest Abyss of Romance* is the best study of how James projects himself into the text while laboring to achieve an objectivity that prevents him from succumbing to the pitfalls of Romantic irony.
academic sentiment that believes criticism can escape the wilderness by allowing itself to be colonized by instrumentalizing disciplines. There is in James, like Blake, a case against Locke. The second goal of my project is thus to clear a space for the kind of work I see missing from the contemporary critical scene. I want to use my study to recover the scholarship that has most influenced me without succumbing to nostalgia. The greater our historical distance from the monuments twentieth-century literary criticism, the more they seem to resemble each other with subsequent generations having resolved past debates and moved on to more pressing concerns.\(^7\) There is no doubt much merit to the charges leveled against critical tradition, or tradition in the broader sense, but sacrificing the great achievements of the past in the name of our progressive methodologies is self-righteousness with a vengeance.

My two epigraphs – by Lionel Trilling and Frank Lentricchia – directly address my goals. I would modify their remarks on James by asking what their value is for criticism today given that both assume the mask of the disgruntled academic? Trilling writes in the immediate post-war moment, a time of “impending disaster,” and finds his enemies to be Theodore Dreiser, V.L. Parrington, and F.O. Matthiessen. His general charge is that the liberal tradition is highly reductive in its political and aesthetic values insofar as it assumes a static relationship – that is a direct correspondence – between the mind and reality. Trilling wants to thwart liberalism’s notion of progress and argue that what we call reality can only be accessed by visionary means. As a result, our politics cannot reduce themselves to a single ideological position since we remain susceptible to

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\(^7\) For example, Mark Redfield’s *Theory at Yale* subtly devalues the work of Bloom and Hartman by bringing them into the orbit of de Man. Redfield’s focus on deconstruction as a media event prevents him from providing a sufficient defense of the critics he studies.
the ironies intrinsic to critical vision. I believe Trilling’s deepest fears are alive and well, thriving and more omnipotent than he could ever have imagined. Trump speaks as if Dr. Strangelove were an instruction manual. Whether he is more excited about preserving our precious bodily fluids or the beneficent post-apocalyptic ratio of women to men I am unsure. But Trilling’s criticism – and this may be the reason for his disreputable legacy – often takes aim at would-be allies; his polemics attack those who would otherwise be his friends. This is because liberal progressivism, as he saw it, demonstrated a proclivity to mechanize thought and offer simplified solutions to unresolvable problems. Trilling’s angle of attack is to recall Romantic irony, to remind us of our penchant for historical repetition, to curtail the overly rational drive to cure our social ills. He swings Mill’s pendulum from Bentham to Coleridge. Today, I believe, we operate at both extremes. Dickensian Gradgrinds and apocalyptic zealots dominate a political spectrum that defines its polarities by differentiating those who see nothing but the glories of history and those who see nothing but its horrors; and thus those who disavow history and those who try to ameliorate its wounds. If this division represents the current “dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet” (Moral 77), then Trilling’s solution (as is mine) is to allow James to become our guide. His “imagination of disaster” and his “imagination of love” (177) are key to recognize the limits of our highest ideal.

Criticism and Social Change, where my second epigraph appears, is not a book about James, but his invocation is not arbitrary. Lentricchia’s hero is William James who he unites with Marxist thought through the figure of Kenneth Burke. To elaborate on the

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8 Trilling’s late work reverses the formula. After perceiving the dangers of the Romantic imagination’s transgressive desires in the emergent counterculture, he calls for restraint and historical reflection in the face of the need to emancipate oneself from culture.
“activity of [Henry] James’s writing,” Lentricchia writes, “interpretation … does not passively ‘see’ … [but] constructs a point of view in its engagement with textual events, and … produces an image of history as social struggle … an image that is not ‘there’ in the simple sense but is the discovery of the active intellectual soul” (11). The “social struggle” that occupies James in my study is the pursuit of imaginative freedom when faced with the knowledge that autonomy is both impossible and not necessarily desired. We might be tempted to think that Lentricchia uses the word “social” to imply a recognized political movement: James’s views on women’s suffrage, laborers, or Jim Crow reconstruction for example. The “two demons of self-doubt” indicate that the “engagement with textual events” does not have to capitulate to how a given culture defines acceptable forms of social activism. When Lentricchia invokes the “specific literary intellectual,” he refers to a Foucauldian category which describes an individual whose political work occurs within the immediate (specific and local) field of his or her expertise. The phrase “Henry James scholar, as Henry James scholar” suggests that it is the critic’s knowledge of Henry James, literature, and the “activity of … writing, with all possible emphasis on its act” that enables him to perform his social function. The italicized word “act,” moreover, has at least two meanings. It overtly refers to the work of Burke and his unique dramatistic style of thought. But I also think “act” denotes the imaginative act, the creative process that makes James a figure worthy of study for someone trained to study literature. In either scenario, placing “all possible emphasis on its act” requires the critic to examine the symbolic action the Jamesian text performs: its representational force or attitude. Turning to Burkean idioms highlights the continuity in

9 See Foucault (Power/Knowledge 125-133).
my two epigraphs. Despite writing in very different historical moments, Lentricchia and Trilling both see reading and history as a struggle. Trilling makes the romance the paradigm for criticism and he would argue that the “image of history” the critic pursues is always beyond his grasp and always mediated by what Lentricchia calls, following Emerson, the “active intellectual soul.” Its inaccessibility is what allows Trilling to remain in the middle navigating various critical perspectives and perpetually refusing to conclude. Lentricchia, in turn, valorizes the labor of interpretation. Negotiating the perpetual conflict between the critic’s origins and aspirations through the activity of reading enables us, he argues, to attain Burkean equipment for living. It is in this context that I examine the dialectic of James’s grasping and penetrating imagination: the struggle inherent in his pursuit of the man of imagination. As Burke writes: “Irony, as approached through either drama or dialectic, moves us into the area of ‘law’ and ‘justice’ … that involves matters of art … and matters of prophecy and prediction in history” (516).
CHAPTER 1
HENRY JAMES AND THE ROMANTIC-MODERN TRADITION

Henry James is haunted by the specter of his imagination. The most famous example occurs toward the climax of A Small Boy and Others, the first volume of his memoirs, where the young James visits the Galerie d’Apollon in the Louvre and encounters a world of art with an awe that “simply overwhelmed and bewildered me” (274). Remembering his visit allows James to discover an origin for his transformation into an artist – “I felt myself most happily cross that bridge over to Style” (275) – but, in a curious move, he also links the “splendid scene of things” to a “nightmare vision” (276) that would take place a few summers later. The nightmare was “most appalling yet most admirable” and it contains within it a “dream adventure” where a “dimly-descried figure” pursues the young novelist only to eventually have “the tables turned upon him” (277). The memoirist detects “sublimity” in his recollection when he describes how, in his “appalled state,” he himself becomes the “still more appalling figure” in front of that “awful agent, creature or presence” (277). As the ghost takes flight and the hunter becomes the hunted, James sees his “visitant” as a “diminished spot” at the end of the long hallway that transforms into the grand corridor of the Louvre. With thunder and lightening magnifying the withdrawal, James witnesses the awakening of his “young imaginative life” (277). Here we see the birth of the artist in James as well as the “appalling yet most admirable” powers of imagination. The imagination can betray the artist if he is not careful. To revisit the past and discover one’s origins unexpectedly summons ghosts that must be corralled by the conjurer himself.
But who is the ghostly “awful agent, creature or presence” forced to “retrea[t] in terror” (277)? To speak of ghosts in the work of Henry James is to consider how the imagination populates the world with images and visions. Ghosts appear as an ideal self or an alternative self representative of the life not lived; they emerge from an interpretation of an event that evokes the sense of the past; they are the traces of history that menace the present and reveal themselves belatedly; ghosts materialize in the writings of Henry James as his heroes or heroines struggle to free themselves from the external conditions – historical, cultural, social, familial – that impede self-determination.

All of these ghostly scenarios are present in the scene in the Louvre. We can interpret the incident dramatized in *A Small Boy* as describing how James pursues the version of the artist he wishes to become only to have him continually elude his grasp. Similarly, the ghost may represent all the other Jameses who will never exist when the aspiring artist selects his identity and destiny. The ghost might appear in that nightmare during a “summer … many years later” (276) because James, still a young man, is already returning to his immediate past and trying to give coherence to the chaos of life; the memoirist is a historian who encounters a rift in history and the ghost reveals that the waste excluded during the act of interpretation threatens the certainty of his newfound knowledge, his self-begotten origin. Or maybe, if we use the specific artworks and historical references to Napoleonic France mentioned in the passage as contextual evidence, the ghost can be a harbinger of the dangerous links between art and power embodied in the notion of genius?¹⁰

¹⁰ Leon Edel connects the art world to Napoleon in *The Untried Years* (67-80). Lionel Trilling examines the relation between an “imperious will” and an “act of imagination” (*Moral* 168) in the dream vision by putting James in dialogue with Hazlitt.
James’s interest with ghosts is apparent in works such as *The Turn of the Screw* and “The Jolly Corner” but the interpretative possibilities that the “dream adventure” in the Louvre present – that hallmark ambiguity of his writing – reminds us that all of his writings are, to a certain degree, ghost stories. We can think of Jamesian ghosts in terms of the mental anguish that the mysterious beast exerts on John Marcher, or those Aspern papers containing the spectral presence of the dead poet, or even their owner, a literal figure from the past, the centenarian Juliana Bordereau. The novels contain ghosts as well. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, the echoes of Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle’s previous romance, actualized in the presence of Pansy, loom over Isabel Archer. Milly Theale haunts Kate Croy and Merton Densher in *The Wings of the Dove* even though it is the Croy family legacy that inspires Kate’s machinations. When the narrator evokes the “whole history of their house,” he compares it to “some fine florid voluminous phrase … hanging unfinished” (218). It is a ghost that motivates Kate’s need to secure the means with which she and Merton might marry and, moreover, that same ghost produces another ghost, Milly, who intrudes on Kate’s endeavor to finish the sentence (or narrative) of her life: “She hadn’t given up yet, and the broken sentence, if she was the last word, would end with a sort of meaning” (219). Ghosts disturb the quest for meaning which is the central subject of all of James’s writing. They are the forces inhibiting

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11 J. Hillis Miller offers a “double hypothesis about James’s ghost stories: (1) All James’s stories and novels are ghost stories; (2) The ghost stories ‘proper’ are really, obliquely, about the act of literature. They bring into the open the way all works of fiction that are ‘believed in’ by the reader work their magic by using language to ‘raise the ghosts’ of the characters. These characters then have a spectral existence in the mind, feelings, and imaginations of the reader. They go on permanently dwelling there, obscurely haunting the reader’s mind” (*Literature* 299). For readings of James’s ghostly novels and tales see Martha Banta’s *Henry James and the Occult*.
teleology or the narrative progression that would link a beginning to an end and allow James’s heroes and heroines to realize freely their desires as active, autonomous agents. In the study that follows I examine how James learns to master his overactive imagination that endlessly proliferates specters and illusions. My intent is to show how, at the end of his life, James labors to finish Kate’s sentence and come to terms with his recognition that it must always remain incomplete.

The pursuit of mastery is the dominant narrative of James’s career. It is the mode of self-understanding he desired and became the myth he established with the faithful help of his Modernist progeny. The myth of mastery would subsequently become the dominant framework for understanding his art. Though I discuss his fate in critical culture in my final chapter, we can tentatively define Henry James the master as the self-assured writer in absolute control of his medium, projecting an image of an autonomous imagination, and celebrating the perfection of his art through its formal coherence and stylistic virtuosity. But like all myths, the master conceals other representations of James: the closeted homosexual or the anxious, private writer concerned with his public image. By demonstrating how James confronts the very ghosts his tales and novels portray in his late nonfiction, I aim to supplement the myth of the master with what James calls the man of imagination. He is the figure who exposes the cracks in the idealized image of the master; the man of imagination is a figure through which James subsumes the ghosts haunting him and achieves a paradoxical identity that coheres through a conscious recognition of its unstable foundation, disunity, and susceptibility to fragmentation.

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12 Millicent Bell’s *Meaning in Henry James* argues that meaning in James’s novels and stories emerges through a struggle for self-understanding in which his characters and readers both participate.
James discovers his man of imagination in *Notes of a Son and Brother*, his second and final completed memoir, when he appears caught in the act of capturing the ghost from his “nightmare vision.” As he speculates on his process of recovering memories, James remarks that writing the memoirs satisfies an urge he felt throughout his career: “The personal history … of an imagination … had always struck me as a task that a teller of tales might rejoice in” (287). The difficulty of producing such a work results from the “endless crisis” precipitated by a writer of “strong imaginative passion” who must find the means to represent “the whole scene of life” as well as the proper ground or “pretext” for beginning a “personal history” (287). James thus declares that throughout his life his ideal literary subject, whom he names the “man of imagination,” “haunted me” (287). The hero of his history is an elusive “creature of that force” who inhabits “a hundred possible fields” and he admits his difficulty trying to “catch’ him” (287). Though James occupied himself with “other subjects” during his career, he nevertheless remains hopeful that the man of imagination “would still perhaps come,” even as he anticipates his encounter: “It happened for me that he was belatedly to come, but that he was to turn up in a shape almost too familiar at first for recognition … He had been with me all the while, and only too obscurely and intimately” (287).

If the man of imagination is the figure who frightened the young novelist after his visit to the Louvre, the ghost who evaded capture, then James conjures him up through the act of writing and recalling his “personal history.” The encounter is an epiphany in the manner depicted in James’s fiction: the moment when the unsuspecting subject awakens to find his or her uncanny desired object or piece of knowledge belatedly return or reveal itself. It resembles the grand synthesis that would allow James to give
coherence to his life and vanquish the ghosts of the unlived lives that menace him. For example, the scene appears shortly after James mentions that famous excuse for his non-participation in the Civil War – his “obscure hurt” (240) – and prior to his discussion of his cousin Minny Temple whose specter always remains with James and overtly returns late in life as Milly Theale. Once James tames the ghost of his Civil War self on the eve of the First World War and revisits the life of his most admired friend, the revelation of belated knowledge breaks through to enable closure: the memoirist can recognize the trajectory of his “personal history” and understand those “other subjects to go on with” (287) as necessary steps along the path to the full realization of his imaginative identity. It is a crude Hegelian schema. James writes from the standpoint of Absolute Knowledge: he discovers his remembered personal history and his men and women of imagination – from Christopher Newman to Maggie Verver – to be prior masks who reappear and allow him to “draw him [the man of imagination] forth from within rather than meet him in the world before me” (287). James’s literary career, in this regard, becomes a vast act of negation that tarries with “subjects” “found … in the market [or experiential world] as an exhibited or *offered* value” (287). Now that they are internalized, part of himself, the subjects reappear to disclose the overlap between his art and life allowing James to dramatize the scene of recognition: “What was I thus, within and essentially, what had I ever been and could I ever be but a man of imagination at the active pitch?” (288).

Charles Feidelson observes that the Jamesian man of imagination “is the epic hero of the Romantic poets, from Blake’s ‘Real Man, the Imagination,’ to the ‘major man,’ the ‘giant on the horizon,’ of Wallace Stevens” (“James” 336). The journey of these “epic heroes” belongs to the genre of the romance: that pursuit of an idealized version of the
self. But whereas the archetypal quest-romance often results in failed transcendence, Feidelson judges James’s outcome to be different:

For the Romantic poets some such vision of total consciousness is the most precious of hopes, but they have their own kind of truthfulness to the human condition, their own way of acknowledging “bewilderment”: for them, the longed-for state of visionary being, the completion of their anticipatory vision, is the most fleeting and fragile of achievements, if achieved at all. For James, on the other hand, the flowery plains of heaven are all-too-accessible, at least in his own experience … If we take him at his word, that is surely more than any Romantic poet ever claimed. James’s notebooks are full of passages in which he dramatizes his ascension, by the mere act of writing the passage, into a realm where his human limits are shed yet his humanity is miraculously restored in the life of imagination. (345-346)

Few critics read James within the context offered by Feidelson and almost none link the novelist to his poetic precursors beyond mere allusion.13 But the thread that aligns James with Blake and Stevens is not strictly a matter of style or influence. What Feidelson identifies, in contrast, is James fulfilling the role of the modern artist who searches for a “vision of total consciousness” that might quiet and overcome the “bewilderment” (James’s word) of our modern age; that might redeem our alienated state. Though he convincingly corroborates an overlooked context for reading the novelist, the rather brief examination of The Ambassadors, Prefaces, and Notebooks prevents Feidelson from considering what it means for James to “shed” “human limits” and find imaginative

13 For example, see Stephen L. Mooney’s “James, Keats, and the Religion of Consciousness,” Jeffrey Meyers’s “‘Daisy Miller’ and the Romantic Poets,” and Philip Horne’s “Henry James among the Poets.” The most extensive study of allusion is Adeline R. Tintner’s The Book World of Henry James. Laurens M. Dorsey also explores James’s relation to the Romantics through a close reading of the opening paragraph to The Spoils of Poynton Preface and Shelley’s “A Defence of Poetry” in “‘Something like the old dream of the secret life.’”
restoration. How exactly does James conceive of transcendence? Are we to equate it with mastery? Instead of interpreting the terms by which he achieves the “longed-for state of visionary being,” or casting a skeptical eye that does not simply take James at his “word,” Feidelson explores how the ability to derive “the main source of social meaning … [in] the Romantic life of imaginative consciousness” (339) serves to “turn the canons of social realism upside down” (343).

Examining how James struggles to discover himself as a man of imagination – how he assuages his “visionary ache” (Notes 288) – will lead me to discuss his famous distinction between the romance and the real, his conception of the limits of the imagination, autonomy, and freedom, as well as his ongoing relevance for the practice of literary criticism. Rather than achieve a clichéd form of transcendence, the mischaracterization that permits scholars to disavow their complicity with the Romantic idealist tradition, I argue that the man of imagination represents a revisionary model of selfhood that can help us reignite the flame of our Promethean search or what used to be called an aesthetic education. Whereas Feidelson sees the Jamesian imagination as “essentially the coming-into-being of the significant forms of consciousness and life, self and world – the ontological image-ination, as it were, of reality” (“James” 336), I claim

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Stephen Donadio represents a long line of critics (including Quentin Anderson who I discuss later) that see James “striving to break out of the net of human relations and … experience an existence unmediated by social forms” (10). Though he astutely compares the novelist’s perspectival method to Nietzschean self-overcoming, Donadio, and many scholars of his critical temper, ignores the irony of James’s revisionary style.

14 I purposively take the phrase “visionary ache” out of context. James uses it to describe his state of mind during “the drama of the [American Civil] War” (288) and as a transition from his musing about the man of imagination to the main narrative of his memoir. The phrase seems an attempt to justify his nonparticipation in the war on the grounds that he was preparing the way for his literary career.
that through the figure of the man of imagination James transforms his inability to resolve “self and world” into a creatively fecund ground which allows him to thrive within the ever-constricting conditions of modern life. The man of imagination, discovered in the act of revision, ultimately enables James to overcome the discrepancy between subject and object or self and other that haunts literature, philosophy, and criticism in the wake of Kant. To follow through with my Hegelian overture, the man of imagination is a happy consciousness at ease with his inability to make the leap beyond an endless state of ironic oscillation between the binaries Feidelson presents: consciousness and life, self and world, ideal and material, or imagination and reality. Though I will keep strict focus on James, studying how he uncovers his man of imagination and why it might serve as a model for assuaging our own bewilderment, we should recall that the problem in question finds its canonical formulation in the work of Kant, Wordsworth, their peers and progeny, and also underwrites a tradition of aestheticized political models, notably in Coleridge, Schiller, and Arnold, that David Kaiser calls aesthetic statism. As will become clearer much later, implicit in my study is an attempt to recover the political promise of what I will soon define as the Romantic-Modern Tradition.

16 William Goetz corroborates Feidelson’s definition of the Jamesian imagination and links it to Coleridge (59-61). In addition, Feidelson’s phrase “coming-into-being of significant forms of consciousness” exemplifies Hegel’s refusal to leave “a basic antimony between … the imaginative self and an ‘objective’ world” (336) unresolved. Daniel Mark Fogel’s Henry James and the Structure of the Romantic Imagination recognizes the novelist’s Hegelian debts but his strict reliance on M.H. Abrams’s theory of Bildung prevents him from accounting for the ghosts that disrupt teleology. His study presents an image of Romanticism that is the inverse of my own.

17 Kaiser examines how these thinkers work to reconcile the problem of individuation with their universalizing assumptions in Romanticism, Aesthetics, and Nationalism.
The Romance of Late James

I propose to read selected texts from the fourth phase – the writing that appears after *The Golden Bowl* – as a novel where James appears as the “epic hero” in search of the man of imagination. My emphasis on the late work has two motivations. Instead of abandoning the novel after *The Golden Bowl*, James recognizes how the inadvertent novelization of his authorial consciousness in his nonfiction aids his effort to combat the ghosts that appear late in life. The two unfinished novels that he worked on during this period – *The Sense of the Past* and *The Ivory Tower* – depict many of the themes under consideration: the desire to return to the past and the forces of modernization that erase history. But James encounters the man of imagination in his nonfiction because he discovers *The American Scene* (a travelogue) and the Prefaces (criticism) to be a continuous novel whose author is absent. Both texts, in other words, depict James searching for transcendental writer who authors life itself. In a work of fiction that author would be James. Yet the act of fictionalizing himself in texts that are otherwise nonfiction allows him to see his life as a work of art subject to continual revision under the guise of that elusive figure he will call the man of imagination.18 In addition, recent scholarship fails to attend to how the late work directly builds upon the artistic achievement of the major phase novels. Critics who study *The American Scene* demonstrate an incessant focus on James as a cultural critic, historian, or intellectual.

Ross Posnock’s *The Trials of Curiosity*, the best such study, situates James in the

18 James also turned an unproduced play into *The Outcry* in 1911. The novel is generally not discussed when considering his post-major phase work due to its lack of resemblance from his twentieth-century masterpieces. The best discussion of *The Ivory Tower* and *The Sense of the Past* in relation to the fourth phase is Beverly Haviland’s *Henry James’s Last Romance* (21-73, 165-211). Also see Miller’s *Literature as Conduct* (291-326).
tradition of American pragmatism and shows how he and his brother anticipate modern critical theory exemplified by the Frankfurt school. But Posnock’s endeavor to describe an “active, empirical, and pragmatic” (10) James forgets that the novelist, as Northrop Frye once described Blake, exhibits the “pragmatism of the artist” who looks to the “spiritual world … [as] a continuous source of energy … used to drive his inspiration” (Fearful 8).\(^\text{19}\) We might think of that “spiritual world” in terms of what F.O. Matthiessen dubbed “The Religion of Consciousness” or “The Religion of Doing” that Laurence Holland makes central to The Expense of Vision.\(^\text{20}\) It also appears in James’s essay on the afterlife where his “longed-for state of visionary being” assumes the appropriate title “the unlimited vision of being” (“Life” 123). James’s ghosts, of course, represent the most direct “source of energy” animating his work. They are the figures with whom the novelist engages in mental fight when he opens up the “ragbag of memory” (Small Boy 69): the ghosts inhabiting the land of his youth as well as those he encounters during the monumental effort to revise his oeuvre and produce the New York Edition. Making peace with the “bewilderment” that is a product of his encounter with America and the infinite depths of memory that resurfaces during his New York Edition revisions is the task that James, in pursuit of his man of imagination, confronts.

The narrative that constitutes James’s fourth phase is a romance.\(^\text{21}\) Whereas Feidelson’s discussion tacitly draws upon the post-war critical interest in the genre as it

\(^{19}\) Quentin Anderson’s The American Henry James explores the spiritual James by emphasizing the influence of Henry James Senior’s Swedenborgian mysticism.

\(^{20}\) See Matthiessen’s Henry James (131-151) and Holland’s Expense of Vision (117-226).

\(^{21}\) Fogel uses the romance to describe the “spiral dialectic in the career of Henry James” (Henry James 138) but concludes in 1895 as the novelist begins his major phase.
pertains to Romantic poetry, Hawthorne would seem to stand closer to James. Both contexts are too narrow. Frye makes the case for a larger perspective when he argues that “Romance is the structural core of all fiction” (Secular 15). He elsewhere defines the genre as “the search of the … desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality” (Anatomy 193). James’s search for the man of imagination takes a divisive turn when he returns to America in 1904, after a two-decade absence, and encounters new “anxieties of reality.” While the works appearing after the trip exemplify his attempt to “contain that reality,” he understands that absolute imaginative “fulfillment” is transitory at best. The development of a revisionary imaginative stance that can simultaneously recognize the impossibility of containment and discover how that failure might offer renewed motivation to fuel the “desiring self” is how I judge James’s ultimate achievement.

The famous international theme faithfully follows the pattern of the romance. But James’s trip to America reverses the formula of that canonical plot depicting the clash

22 Of the numerous studies that consider James’s role in the tradition of the American Romance, the best remains, to my estimation, Richard Brodhead’s The School of Hawthorne. For a more general discussion of James and the romance see Elsa Nettels’s James and Conrad (80-133).

23 Winfried Fluck argues for renewed critical attention to the genre. Although he works in the American context, Fluck demonstrates how, despite attempts to debunk or unmask the romance, the genre remains the overarching structure for understanding the “movement” and “clash” between an ‘other world’ of desires and imaginary self-empowerment, and the commonplace world of actuality which constantly frustrates but also refuels our longing for transgression and transcendence” (“‘The American Romance’” 422). Fluck advocates a more capacious understanding of the romance, which his use of Wolfgang Iser provides, and he persuasively shows that when criticism “‘unmasks’ the romance as complicitous [with ideology, history, power, etc.], it does so in the name of its own political romance of a society without coercion and restraints” (447). The two most important studies of the romance as the ur-genre of critical practice remain Daniel T. O’Hara’s The Romance of Interpretation and Jean-Pierre Mileur’s The Critical Romance.
between American innocence and European experience. James returns as a figure who has already conquered the social milieu of the old world and encounters an alien native land. He becomes the figure Lionel Trilling invokes to define the romance in his reading of *The Princess Casamassima*: the “Young Man from the Provinces” (*Moral* 152).

Though he is by no means young, the 61-year-old James travels from Rye in England to the metropolis of New York and discovers the relatively provincial town of his youth a lost memory. He now “stands outside life and seeks to enter” (152) just as he did when he first made his conquest of London. At the same time, the gross changes to New England and New York expose him to “some mystery about his birth” (152) and he desires “to know how the political and social world are run and enjoyed; he wants a share of power and pleasure and in consequences he takes real risks, often of his life” (153). If the novel is a genre that involves, as Trilling elsewhere puts it, “a perpetual quest for reality, the field of its research being always the social world, the material of its analysis being always manners as the indication of man’s soul” (*Moral* 110), then during his stay in America James recognizes himself as a character hungering to understand an alien world.

His repatriation seems to reenact Spencer Brydon’s pursuit of the ghost of his alternative self. In fact, Leon Edel’s *The Untried Years* describes the “nightmare vision” in the Louvre as the germ that would eventually give birth to James’s famed ghost story. But a more appropriate analogy for thinking about James’s repatriation is Lambert Strether, whom James specifically labels the “man of imagination” (*Art* 310) in the Preface to *The Ambassadors*. The original germ for Strether appears in a Notebook

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24 See Edel (75-79) and Banta’s *Henry James and the Occult* (136-142).
entry dated October 31, 1895 that powerfully anticipates James’s trip. He recounts a story
told to him by Jonathan Sturges:

It touches me – I can see him – I can hear him. Immediately, of course – as
everything, thank God does – it suggests a little situation. I seem to see
something, of a tiny kind, springing out of it … It gives me the little idea of the
figure of an elderly man who hasn’t ‘lived,’ hasn’t at all, in the sense of
sensations, passions, impulses, pleasures – and to whom, in the presence of some
great human spectacle, some great organization for the Immediate, the Agreeable,
for curiosity, and experiment and perception, for Enjoyment, in a work, becomes
sur la fin, or toward it, sorrowfully aware. (Notebooks 141)

The “little situation” resonates with James’s state of mind when he begins to see himself
as the “elderly man.” The “great human spectacle” of turn of the century America, with
its evolving social customs, alien culture, and distinctly modern technological landscape,
no doubt sparks his “curiosity” and “sensations, passions, impulses, [and] pleasures.” But
it also makes him “sorrowfully aware” of his feelings of dislocation and loss. Unlike
Strether, who leaves Woollett to enter into a conniving French society, it is America that
becomes for James, as Robin Hoople argues, “a force dividing him from himself” (132).

The germ for The Ambassadors also captures James deriving literary value from
the world – what he calls “offered value” in the passage from Notes of a Son and Bother
discussed earlier. An otherwise incidental anecdote is the stuff to be formed into
literature. The artist’s act of creating his character – “He has been a great worker, a local
him an ‘intellectual’” (Notebooks 141) – parallels the mode of self-stylization that
dominates the fourth phase. In addition to Howells, James, for me, is Strether as he
experiences radical alterity during his repatriation. The American Scene, published in full
after his return to Europe, is his initial attempt to refashion himself from the tranquil
confines of Rye. Read alongside the New York Edition Prefaces, we see late James
becomes Carlyle’s Teufelsdröckh as he works to “thatch myself anew” (45). To multiply the analogies, if Strether in 1895 anticipates James in 1904, it is because both men, like Charlotte Stant, willingly “risk the cracks” (Golden Bowl 698) by exposing themselves to a treacherous environment that threatens to destroy the illusion of selfhood. The incessant project of self-revision James undertakes from 1904 through the end of his life emerges when the “great decorated surface” (733) of his life shatters. America exposes him to the “open chasm now suddenly perceived” (864) beneath “the very centre of the garden of [his] life” (733). The fourth phase understood as a single nonfiction-romance-novel repeats The Golden Bowl. In America James is Strether, but when he returns to England he becomes Maggie Verver reassembling the pieces of his life and committing “conscious perjury” (902) or simply producing new fictions. It is Maggie, after all, who “herself was the author” (891).

The experience of alienation and exile in America engenders, for Posnock, “the necessity of revision, the pleasure and difficulty of negotiating the shifting boundaries of self and other” (Trials viii). The Jamesian subject who surfaces in the late work opens itself to the experience of shock, eludes social categories, and resists normalization into mainstream culture. However, the pragmatic “revisionary energy” (81) that Posnock discovers in James’s “utilitarian imperative” (8) draws upon the same literary strategies

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25 Sharon Cameron also observes the overlap between James and Maggie: “What Maggie does in part 2 of The Golden Bowl is like what James does when he rewrites The Golden Bowl, or like what he does when he rewrites his novels for the New York Edition” (19).

26 Studies such as Peter Collister’s Writing the Self also recognize James’s need to reconstruct an identity, but they tend to view his act of self-revision in terms of a queer or American identity. I find discussions that limit the context of Jamesian self-making to socioeconomic, national, or sexual categories too limiting.
that operate in his fiction. Whereas Posnock reveals how Strether’s curiosity anticipates James’s experience in America, my shift to *The Golden Bowl* as a point of reference implies that he transforms into the artistic intelligence of Maggie who, in Leo Bersani’s reading of the novel, “triumphs … because she has James’s faith that her work will come back to her; it *depends* on her” (155). When the “work” in question becomes the Jamesian self, the endeavor to avoid the ultimate sacrifice – the absolute loss of self that might result from what Posnock calls his “commitment to vulnerability and abjectness” (17) – requires a willingness to indulge a vision of wholeness or perfection no matter how quixotic. It is no doubt the same strategy Maggie employs as she commits herself to “the golden bowl – as it *was* to have been” (878). As we shall see, the fourth phase shows James constructing a ground – less Posnock’s “shaky ground” (95) than an ironically fertile foundation – that enables him to speak with the authority we see in his memoir’s scene of recognition and overcome the “darkest abyss of romance” (*Art* 320).

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27 Three studies resemble my own interest in the romance of James’s fourth phase. William Goetz examines the formal strategies the James employs to achieve some degree of objectivity as he “necessarily writes himself into his fictional works” (4) and nonfictional as well. Fully implicating himself in the text and succumbing to the Schlegelian Romantic irony intrinsic to “darkest abyss of romance” disturbs the fictional illusion that James everywhere strives to preserve. Donna Przybyłowicz’s *Desire and Repression* provides a psychoanalytic reading that shows how James’s fragmented subjectivity provides the catalyst for his repression of the world’s heterogeneity and desire for unity. She assimilates him into the pattern of desire and repression where the “creation of his own fictional universe allows [him] to triumph over a powerfully resistant reality and to *subjugate* the objective world through the transforming vision of art” (244). I argue, in contrast, that James tames the lure toward unity and embraces the contingencies inhibiting his idealist aspirations. Finally, Beverley Haviland directly invokes the romance in her study of the fourth phase but reads James as a cultural historian who attempts to reconcile the past and the present. Her thesis that James’s abandonment of *The Sense of the Past* spurs his interest in the past complements my approach even though her focus on “his cultural and political worlds” (212) differs from my study of his personal desire for imaginative fulfillment.
James at the Limit

Biographers of James locate several motivations for his decision to revisit America after a two-decade absence. According to Lyndall Gordon, “James was haunted by incompletion. His last three novels, great as they are, did not quiet his angst [from the 1890s]. There was the Master of the Novel, and there was the other – a man in the making, uncertain who he was in the end to be” (329). While the “Master” sought to promote his latest publication, the “other” James needed to recharge his imagination and reconnect with his past. The professional man of letters is well documented and needs little elaboration.28 As a businessman James sought to promote The Golden Bowl, yet to be released, and also, following Leon Edel, “take stock of his reputation in the United States, [and] his business connections with American publishers” (The Master 225).29 Beginning the seventh decade of his life, James understood the importance of cultivating and restoring a professional network that might help him create a future “literary monument” (320) to enshrine his mastery.30

28 See Michael Anesko’s “Friction with the Market.”

29 Edel writes: “Just before leaving [for America, James] instructed his agent to inform Charles Scribner that he thought the time had come for a definitive edition of his works. ‘Mr. James’s idea is to write for each volume a preface of a rather intimate character, and there is no doubt that such a preface would add greatly to the interest of the books’” (223). Philip Horne’s Henry James and Revision (1-19) traces the incipient negotiations for the New York Edition. He locates the edition’s origin in a telegram dated April 2, 1900.

30 James describes the New York Edition as “the bread of my vieux jours” (qtd. in Horne 3). Although we should not downplay his financial motives, the pursuit of literary immortality is equally important. Michael Anesko challenges the claim that the New York Edition was to be “a kind of monument to James’s aesthetic integrity” (143) but his argument should be read as complementing, and not strictly departing from, Edel’s belief that the New York Edition takes its inspiration from Balzac’s Comédie humaine.
But business alone did not spur James to repatriate. The man “uncertain who he
was in the end to be” appears as an aging cosmopolitan longing to return to the land of
his birth as well as an artist looking to reenergize a creative spirit. Both reasons surface in
a letter addressed to William James dated May 24, 1903. Written during the
serialization of *The Ambassadors*, James seemingly takes advice from that novel’s hero
when he remarks, “I must go [to America] before I’m too old, and, above all before I
mind being older” (*Letters* 270). Beyond the need to avoid missing his last opportunity,
he explains his “motives” (270) for crossing the Atlantic by rebutting his brother’s claims
that American culture might generate a “general fear and encouraged shockability” (271).
Unlike Strether’s sense of duty to Woollett, James saw the potential for “shockability” as
a catalyst for renewed creativity. The “general fear” of returning, he remarks, risks
“giving up, chucking away, without struggle, the only chance that remains to me in life of
anything that can be called a movement” (271). He not only anticipates, but also
embraces, the fact that America will unsettle Europe’s stultifying effects on his
imagination. The trip represents his endeavor to seek out an “experience” that he “may
convert itself, through the senses, through observation, imagination and reflection now at
their maturity, into vivid and solid material, into a general renovation of one’s too
monotonised grab-bag” (271). The “maturity” signals that James understands how
disruption can trigger a “general renovation” of the imagination. Whereas in 1895 James
“bless[es] the pangs and pains” (*Notebooks* 115) produced by the *Guy Domville* disaster,
which in turn engendered his major phase, by 1903 he believes a “possible exotic

31 Michael Anesko’s “James in America” and Wendy Graham’s “Notes on a Native Son”
examine James’s letters in more detail.
experience” (*Letters* 271) might provide him with renewed inspiration so he may once again “have my head, thank God, full of visions” (*Notebooks* 114). As he wrote to Howells before repatriating: “I should greatly like before I chuck up the game to write (another!!) American novel or two – putting the thing *in* the country; which would take, God knows, I mean would require – some impressions” (qtd. in Edel, *Master* 229). He wrote to William: “The expectation of ‘impressions’ is … strong within me. The difficulty [will be] … my plunge being likely to be virtually into a world much unknown to me. All I can say at present is that I *desire* to vibrate as intensely, as frequently and as responsively as possible – and all in the interest of vivid literature!” (qtd. in Anesko, “James in America” 6).

James’s “professional labour” (*Letters* 272) of returning to America spoke to both his business and artistic acumen. Though there is overlap between each incentive, Edel quotes James describing a third motivation: “I *want* to come back, quite pathetically and tragically – it is a passion of nostalgia” (*Master* 225). James aims to cultivate “some impressions” that might help him produce an “American novel or two,” but no novels resulted from the journey. The “passion” to reconnect with his roots, coupled with the abundance of shock worthy impressions he would experience, reveal the growing recognition of the discrepancy between these various Jameses: the professional man of letters, the artist seeking inspiration, and the expatriated American exiled from his origins. While the artist would help him transform the encountered “material” into a “vivid and solid” foundation for *The American Scene*, the cracks and fissures opened up by the writer’s nostalgia disrupt his sense of self by exposing him to an abysmal ground
out of which he would endeavor to climb. Plunging into the unknown world and vibrating intensely would provide the catastrophic experience needed for literary creation.

Posnock describes the kind of subjectivity that allows us to account for the different Jameses. In *Henry James and the Problem of Robert Browning*, he shows how the poet and the novelist are “performers on the social stage” where the construction of “social masks” enable them to “respon[d] to the pressures of social reality” (11). The artistic conception of the mask and theatricality assume a form of subjectivity that emerges in the wake of Hegel and becomes canonical in the writing of the aesthetes: Oscar Wilde famously tells us “it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can realize Hegel’s system of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks” (304). In contrast to the autonomous self-legislating Enlightenment subject, Hegel theorizes subjectivity’s contingency on otherness, a form of self-consciousness that emerges through its difference with, and negation of, its experience in the world. His *Phenomenology* provides us with the overarching formulation of the modern self: it employs the romance as the genre enabling the discovery of full self-realization and demonstrates a subject’s historical dependency whereby negation becomes the mechanism for self-knowledge. Without relying on a strict version of his philosophical schema, we might describe the subjectivity necessitating Jamesian masks as the fraught

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32 Posnock elaborates on James’s theatrical subject in *The Trials of Curiosity* (57-58, 185-186). Also see Collin Meissner’s *Henry James and the Language of Experience* which discusses the “dialectic between private and public versions of the self” (27). Finally, Daniel T. O’Hara situates the Jamesian mask in the theoretical tradition of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Foucault in *Empire Burlesque* (257-267).

33 Henry Sussman’s *The Hegelian Aftermath* demonstrates how Hegel provides us with the language and figures that define the modern experience captured in writers ranging from Goethe, Keats, Kierkegaard, Freud, Proust, and James.
relationship between personal autonomy and historical circumstance. More precisely, the
tension between individual self-creation and recognition from an other. Identity, in this
scenario, assumes that an individual carries desires, memories, beliefs, and aspirations
that confront a social world of normalization seeking to define, regulate, or make the
subject intelligible. The mask becomes a vehicle for navigating society’s treacherous
terrain and, as a consequence, Posnock argues that James’s embrace of “roles and masks
in [his] portrayal of the self” allows him to conceive of a subject that “is at once creative
and constrained, free to appropriate and imaginatively transform it into a scene, free to
fashion [it] artfully, yet reliant on the impersonal codes of social form and conventions
for representation” (10). However, the trip to America disrupts the dialectic between “the
world of subjects and the world of objects” (10). Rather than supply James with new
“codes of social form” and new methods of “representation,” his impressions magnify the
break where the stockpile of memories that link him to his native land appear lost or
adulterated. The country no longer provides a pivot allowing him to develop a European
persona in relation to an American identity kept in reserve. Put differently: James’s exile
no longer sanctions his cultivated European identity. A Notebook entry dated March 29,
1905, and written in California during his incipient work on The American Scene, shows
precisely where the dialectic of “world of subjects and the world of objects” ruptures.

Recalling his recent visit to Cambridge Massachusetts, James writes: “My subject
still awaits me, all too charged and too bristling with the most artful economy possible.
What I seem to feel is that the Cambridge tendresse stands in the path like a waiting lion
– or, more congruously, like a cooing dove that I shrink from scaring away” (Notebooks
239). The emotional turbulence of returning puts James in a peculiar relation to his
literary “subject.” No longer a story heard in conversation or an anecdote at a dinner party, the “tendresse” of the New England genius loci thwarts the search for literary germs. Edel observes how James, borrowing the novelist’s language, “found [in Cambridge] the muses of the place had fled … The old place, ‘desecrated and destroyed,’ could no longer be a place for ‘shared literary experience.’ Henry James spoke of ‘angrily missing’ among the ruins the atmosphere he had gone to recover” (Master 258-259). To recover a lost “atmosphere” from a “desecrated and destroyed” landscape necessitates a journey into the past, down a “path” where James might discover an aboriginal self, the true subject of The American Scene, or that “vision of total consciousness.” Despite the ambivalence implied by the “waiting lion” and “cooing dove,” James acknowledges that “I want a little of the tendresse” but “it trembles aware over the whole field – or would if it could” (Notebooks 239-240). The “tendresse,” like the “subject,” assumes the agency of the Siren’s song. It refuses to remove itself from the “whole field” of his experience and remains “too charged and too bristling with the most artful economy possible” because any attempt to translate it into literary form would require destroying it. To access his “subject” would ironically disconnect it from James.

The description of the “path” leading toward the “subject” discloses the challenge. James wants to possess the “cooing dove” but fears scaring it away. The “subject” also threatens him like a “waiting lion.” Both images are significant for interpreting the scene in question and the fourth phase a whole. On the one hand, the fragile “dove” suggests that capturing the literary subject requires condemning it to the cage of prose. The dove resembles the infinite potential and freedom of the literary subject prior to its linguistic imprisonment. If James were to recover a true identity it would mark the end of a life
always in a state of becoming. A harmonious notion of selfhood is, in other words, akin to a state of death that makes the individual a finished product. But on the other hand, the “waiting lion” poses an overt danger to the artist. Standing in a cemetery, James’s figure no doubt recalls the climactic moment in “The Beast in the Jungle,” yet the lion differs from the phantasmal beast John Marcher hunts. Marcher spends his life waiting for his imagined encounter with the beast and when it finally springs to life he “tries to fix it and hold it; he kept it there before him so that he might feel the pain” (Tales 339). The “pain” offers him “something of the taste of life” but he refuses to internalize “the truth, in the cruelty of his image” (339-340). The final paragraph of “The Beast in the Jungle” concludes as follows: “His eyes darkened … and, instinctively turning, in his hallucination, to avoid [the beast], he flung himself, on his face, on the tomb” (340).

Marcher cannot acknowledge the beast, the unlived life. James, in contrast, moves toward the painful knowledge contained in the “unspeakable group of graves” (Notebooks 240).

34 The passage in question may be read in terms of the Romantic surmise or the Romantic image. In particular, I am thinking of how thoughts of immortality and death arrest the poet and lead to a meditative vision, often melancholic as we see in James or Keats’s Odes, on the potentiality of life. Geoffrey Hartman finds the archetypal surmise in Wordsworth’s “The Solitary Reaper” and describes it as a moment that “revive[s] in us the capacity for the virtual, a trembling of the imagined on the brink of the real, a sustained inner freedom in the face of death, disbelief and fact” (Wordsworth 11). Another example would be the “wild surmise” (13) from Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” the poem James directly invokes in The Golden Bowl. We may also understand the Jamesian subject in terms of Frank Kermode’s The Romantic Image where he defines the image as that which unifies life and death, motion and stillness, social action and isolation. Although he does not discuss James, Jay Clayton’s Romantic Vision in the Novel offers a superb discussion of the influence of Romantic poetics on the novel from Richardson through Lawrence.

35 James also uses the beast-dove imagery in The Wings of the Dove. Milly senses herself “alone with a creature who paced like a panther” (402) just prior to Kate declaring her a “dove” (403). That Kate the lioness and Milly the dove represent the split subject of Merton Densher is an obvious reading of the novel.
James feels the exigent demand to walk down the path even though he risks imaginative death. Confronting the path is a necessity for the writer: “Yet to present these accidents is what it is to be a master; that and that only” (240). He recounts the eerie atmosphere “that evening hour … late, in November” when the “air all still (at Cambridge, in general so still)” combined with the “dusk” of the “western sky” to create an atmosphere “terrible, deadly, pure polar pink” (240). Aware of the hazards of recalling a traumatic memory, James nonetheless continues to write: “But I can’t go over this – I can only, oh, so gently, so tenderly, brush it and breathe upon it – breathe upon it and brush it” (240). The brushing and breathing is the writer’s act of conjuring. He recalls the lion and dove in his mind and repeats, through description, the turbulence of his past ordeal: “It was the moment; it was the hour, it was the blessed flood of emotion that broke out at the touch of one’s sudden vision and carried me away” (240). The vision transports him as the intensity of the scene heightens:

Everything was there, everything came; the recognition, stillness, the strangeness, the pity and the sanctity and the terror, the breath catching passion and the divine relief of tears. William’s inspired transcript, on the exquisite little Florentine urn of Alice’s ashes, William’s divine gift to us, and to her, of the Dantean lines –

_Dopo lungo exilio e martiro_

_Viene a questa pace –_

took me so at the threat by its penetrating rightness, that it was as if one sank down on one’s knees in a kind of anguish of gratitude before something for which one had waited with a long, deep ache. But why do I write of the all unutterable and the all abysmal? Why does my pen not drop from my hand on approaching the infinite pity and tragedy of all the past? It does, poor helpless pen, with what it meets of the ineffable, what it meets of the cold Medusa-face of life, of all the life lived, on every side. _Basta, basta!_ (240)

Staring at his family cemetery James gazes into the past and confronts, like so many of his characters, everything he was and everything he could have been. He imagines “all the life lived, on every side” to be the presence of infinite possibility, which is also the
void of pure absence; the life never to be lived, except imaginatively through belated repetition. The experience is excruciating. It seems as if he is willing to risk caging the dove, but discovers it transformed into the lion, or rather, the Medusa. The subject or aboriginal self that James desires becomes deadly. The vivid imagery in the passage tells the tale. James misremembers the “Dantean lines” on Alice’s tomb that should read “From Martyrdom and Exile to this Peace” (qtd. in Strouse 317). In the Paradiso, the exile and martyrdom result from a mutilated body that reflects as much Alice’s sad fate as her brother’s current condition. James fathoms what Peter Brooks describes as the “abyss of meaning” (Melodramatic 178): the absent center of his life. The “sudden vision” tears into him and exposes him to the “penetratingrightness” of his alienated existence. He finds himself an exile at home. “Aware of truth,” as Nietzsche writes, James sees “the horror and absurdity of existence” (40). Just as the pure possibility of the literary subject finds itself severed from its sanctuary in the imagination, James stares at the “cold Medusa-face of life,” feeling “terror” and “anguish” imprisoned in a world of systematic restraint, caged like the dove he would approach.

At the same time the recognition of his fragmentation brings “gratitude” as if the experience were inevitable, “something for which one had waited with a long, deep ache.” When James questions his need to recall his memory and commit it to writing, he tacitly views his “poor helpless pen” as the only instrument capable of alleviating “the infinite pity and tragedy.” The pen becomes the weapon James wields to combat the petrifying “Medusa.” While Perseus triumphs by using his mirror-shield to reflect the stony gaze back onto the Gorgon, writing, for James, creates an impersonal face that “meets . . . the ineffable.” It does not constitute a cure. Rather writing allows James to
initiate a new beginning, one that does not recover the frozen image “of all the life lived,” but, instead, gives form and meaning, through language and style, to the corpse of memory. The encounter with the abyss of the self reveals to James the truth of his belated existence both freeing him from the burden of identity and necessitating his return to the task of writing and self-creation. Brooks claims that the “abyss of meaning” is key to understanding James’s fiction and I would extend his argument to the novelist’s life: “the nearer the approach to the truth … produces a decision to mask its dark content” (Melodramatic 183) through literary creation.

The “Medusa-face of life” episode describes James’s search for the missing figure in the carpet of his life. The inability to locate it exposes him to a void that demands he begin the Sisyphean attempt to assuage what appears to be an open wound. Maurice Blanchot would describe James’s confrontation with the “Medusa” as a limit-experience: the moment when the dialectic between subject and object, self and world, ruptures or momentarily breaks down. He provides the following definition of the term:

> It must be understood that possibility is not the sole dimension of our existence, and that it is perhaps given to us to “live” each of the events that is ours by way of a double relation. We live it one time as something we comprehend, grasp, bear, and master (even if we do so painfully and with difficulty) by relating it to some good or some value, that is to say, finally, by relating it to Unity; we live it another time as something that escapes all employ and all end, and more, as that which escapes our very capacity to undergo it, but whose trial we cannot escape. Yes, as though impossibility, that by which we are no longer able to be able, were waiting for us behind all that we live, think, and say – if only we have been once at the end of this waiting, without ever falling short of what this surplus or addition, this surplus of emptiness, of “negativity,” demanded of us and that is in us the infinite heart of passion of thought. (Infinite 207)

Limit-experiences define James’s career: the most prominent being the failure of Guy Domville that inaugurates the major phase. When they occur, the first “dimension of our existence” gives way to the second as the attempt to structure a life crumbles under its
own weight. “Unity” and “negativity,” or rather wholeness and fragmentation, are the two opposing poles that define existence: the divisions within the self that represent the dove and the lion respectively. They are two sides of the same coin that James tries to reconcile throughout the fourth phase. The idea of mastery – “to present these accidents is what it is to be a master; that and that only” – is another way to understand “Unity” or Feidelson’s “vision of total consciousness.” But just as a writer strives for perfection, he routinely encounters dead-ends and blind spots which emerge from the failure to “comprehend, grasp, bear, and master” life. James’s need for revision – the self-revision in his late work, the actual revision of his corpus, and we might read his novels and tales as revisions of each other – is a response to the evacuation of subjectivity that occurs when the illusion of selfhood shatters and loses its stabilizing principle (e.g. America or his familial identity). Yet the “Medusa-face” passage ironically brings into being a new law that authorizes The American Scene. It is what Michel Foucault calls the outside or what Tzvetan Todorov describes as “the essential secret, or something which is not named” in James’s fiction, but which becomes the “overwhelming force which puts the whole present machinery of the narrative into motion” (75).36

The “narrative” in question is the fourth phase where the “infinite pity and tragedy” of James’s limit-experience forces him, once again, to “take up my own old pen again--the pen of all my old unforgettable efforts and sacred struggles” (Notebooks 109). James returns to the scene of disaster months later, in California, because he understands its liberating potential: he becomes free from the confines of determinate meaning and value; free to create what will become The American Scene. The dove escapes and the

36 See Foucault’s “The Thought from the Outside.” Also see Henry Sussman’s Idylls of the Wanderer (1-42).
lion devours the approaching artist but because the limit-experience allows James to fathom life in relation to its nothingness, it becomes what Blanchot calls “something like a new origin” (Infinite 209). As a beginning moment, an inaugural event, the “Medusa-face of life” engenders the fourth phase as a dialectical reversal of his career’s progression. Though he still pursues mastery, especially in light of his impending work on the New York Edition, the trip to America negates the “passion for nostalgia,” forcing James to navigate the two “dimensions of our existence” and experience his own life more acutely in terms of the “madness of art” (Tales 227).

**Romantic Revisionism**

The modern imagination conceived as the “madness of art” assumes its overarching canonical representation in Hamlet and Don Quixote and defines its theoretical parameters between the twin pillars of Kant and Hegel. While Shakespeare and Cervantes dramatize the lure and perils of an illusory truth, Kant defines the antinomies that Hegel subsumes in his totalizing philosophical system. These latter two thinkers articulate in their treatises the contours of modernity understood, returning to the Blanchot passage cited above, as the desire for “Unity” and the movement of “Negativity,” or the Hegelian desire for a compendious philosophical encyclopedia and its Borgesian parody. The period we call Romanticism, from roughly the French Revolution, eight years after the publication of Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, to the fall of Napoleon, eight years subsequent to the publication of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, represents an unprecedented moment of cultural, social, artistic, and philosophical consolidation and experimentation whose aftershocks we continue to feel today. The
canonical Romantic artists, critics, and philosophers consolidate the past by turning to precursors who anticipate their concerns and produce artistic experiments that crystalize “the trial we cannot escape,” the “madness of art,” or simply the self-conscious recognition of our belated existence. Romanticism’s uncontainability, to borrow Carol Jacob’s phrase, reaches back into the depths of history and demarcates the styles, modes, and forms of artistic expression available today.  

I will employ the phrase Romantic-Modern Tradition to highlight the extent to which Romanticism remains a contemporary phenomenon. Complementing Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson’s belief that the modern tradition is a body of literature exhibiting an inflexible opposition to categorization, I want to emphasize how Romanticism brings into focus the modern. More than any other critic, Paul de Man identifies the literary historian’s impossible task of isolating historical periods and outlining a narrative trajectory. His monumental essay “Literary History and Literary Modernity” defines the modern as a wish for radical historical break or liberation from a pre-modern past that only repeats its initial emancipatory desire by preserving that from which it seeks to escape. To speak of the modern is therefore to speak with irony since

37 See Jacobs’s Uncontainable Romanticism. Also see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy’s The Literary Absolute.

38 See Ellmann and Feidelson’s The Modern Tradition (v-ix).
this historical marker gains its authority by resisting its own historicity. Bringing together the terms “Romanticism” and “modern” stresses their “double-existence” or the ability to accommodate internal contradictions and paradoxes. Literary history, as I conceive of it, constitutes an ironic movement of discontinuous continuity that does not progress but merely revises its own underlying assumptions. In other words, revisionism defines the Romantic-Modern Tradition as an evolving dialectical system of restrictions and freedoms that condition modern subjectivity.

Thomas Weiskel’s conception of the humanist sublime helps to explain the antithetical impulses intrinsic to the Romantic-Modern Tradition. A humanistic conception of Romanticism links the Enlightenment’s sense of progress to individual accounts of self-making and the powers of the imagination, while the sublime, as an antihumanist topos, describes that idealism’s fallibility. “A humanist sublime,” argues Weiskel, is “an oxymoron” (3) because it locates the tension between a longing for human perfection and the unhuman nature of a perfect existence. The Enlightenment’s rationalizing (and universalizing) effort to secure a foundation that can ground the human subject engenders a contradictory relationship, one of complicity and antagonism, with Romanticism. The Coleridgean impulse toward wholeness, Schiller’s aesthetic path to

39 See Blindness and Insight (142-165). De Man provides an exacting definition of Romanticism in an early essay. If the modern looks to the future, then Romanticism peers into the past: “[The] truth of romanticism … is a matter of interpretation of a phenomenon that we can only consider from the temporal perspective of a period of time that we have ourselves experienced. The proximity of the event on the historical plane is such that we are not yet able to view it in the form of a clarified and purified memory … We carry it within ourselves as the experience of an act in which … we ourselves have participated … we are not separated from the past by that layer of forgetfulness and that temporal opacity that could awaken in us from the illusion of detachment. To interpret romanticism means quite literally to interpret the past as such, our past precisely to the extent that we are beings who want to be defined and, as such, interpreted in relation to a totality of experiences that slip into the past” (Rhetoric 49-50).
freedom, Hegel’s journey to the Absolute, Arnold’s pursuit of perfection, or what 
Feidelson describes as a “vision of total consciousness” each put the Enlightenment 
instrumentalizing project on a teleological trajectory. However, Romantic artists 
consciously recognize that such a path and the stable subjectivity it seeks can become 
overly mechanistic and normalizing. Harold Bloom describes how we can understand the 
modern artist’s dream of imaginative freedom and fear of achieving such an ideal:

The great enemy of poetry in the Romantic tradition has never been reason, but 
rather those premature modes of conceptualization that masquerade as final 
accounts of reason in every age. It is not reason that menaces the shaping spirit, 
but the high priests of rationalization, the great men with the compasses who have 
marked out circumferences, from Descartes, Bacon, Newton, and Locke down to 
subter limiter’s of the imaginative horizon in Hegel, Marx, Freud, and their 
various revisionist disciples. Romanticism is a revolt against compulsion, against 
condition, against all unnecessary limitations that presents itself as being 
necessary. As such, Romanticism is a doomed tradition, yet a perpetually self-
renewing one. All Romantics are the last Romantic, and no artistic tradition of 
such eminence has ever so consistently proclaimed its own self-immolation. 
(Ringers 323-324)

As a “doomed tradition” marked by the poet’s “self-immolation,” Romanticism describes 
the resistance to limits of any kind as well as the self-destructive tendencies that come in 
the effort to surpass them. The unprogressive and revisionary repetition or historical 
stasis allows Bloom to link his exemplary poets to single innate tendency: “self-
immolation.” None of his cherished poets oppose knowledge or reason, in fact they crave 
it, especially self-knowledge, but their desire comes from the recognition that quenching

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40 In addition to studies by Stephen Donadio and Daniel Mark Fogel, J.A. Ward’s The 
Search for Form approaches James under the auspices of a Coleridgian understanding of 
Romanticism. Critics such a Ross Posnock and Donna Przybylowicz, who write after the 
academic critique of the humanist subject, too often situate James within a false binary 
between Romantic and post-Romantic thought. For example, Posnock’s study of James 
and Browning sees each artist’s theatricality as refuting the “Romantic self’s potential for 
unconditioned subjectivity and freedom” (10). The Victorian and Modernist conceptions 
of the self should not be seen in opposition to the Romantics but, instead, alternative 
forms of subjectivity that seek out freedom through different stylistic means.
their thirst also limits their “imaginative horizon.” While the humanist project of self-making hopes to realize an ideal, original, and coherent self, which might anchor the Enlightenment’s democratic social ambitions, the literary artist understands that perfection is unfeasible and possibly undesirable since its achievement constitutes the termination of the very quest nurturing the imagination.

When Bloom argues “All Romantics are the last Romantic,” he means that the “revolt … against unnecessary limitation” is a marker of our modern condition even as the poet comes to view himself as his own obstacle. “The Internalization of the Quest Romance,” the most famous of his early essays, describes the artist’s subjective quest for increased imaginative prowess and self-knowledge free from all circumstance as a romance doomed to failure. Even before he reimagines the poet’s pursuit of a precursor in the agonistic universe of influence anxiety, Bloom argues that when the Romantic’s “humanizing hope … approaches apocalyptic intensity” (*Ringers* 15) it brings with it “the pains of psychic maturation” whereby the wish for “the imagination’s freedom [becomes] frequently purgatorial, redemptive in direction but destructive in social self” (16).

Bloom’s own version of the humanist sublime illustrates how the byproduct of the desire for transcendence is worldly death. Geoffrey Hartman modifies the predicament in two important ways. On the one hand, *The Unmediated Vision* locates the central obstacle to imaginative fulfillment as the mediating presence of language: the poet’s unfulfillable desire for “a vision of total consciousness” outside of history and time. Hartman aptly calls the poet the “New Perseus” who, like James’s encountering the “Medusa,” aims to achieve a pure presence of being. However, Hartman also calls the imaginative quester’s anxieties Romantic anti-self-consciousness. Because the poet remains secular, trapped in
history and time, he cannot rely on divine authority for imaginative growth. The modern artist discovers that the escape from historical or limiting circumstance depends on those very contexts: transcending the empirical world requires an empirical self that proves to be its own imposing obstacle.41

In a “desecrated and destroyed” Cambridge, a land void of the muse, James finds himself alone in an alien world. Bloom’s vision of the modern artist, like Hartman’s and Feidelson’s, provides an analogue, a historical poetics, for understanding the shape of James’s career and the importance of his fourth phase. Bloom divides the quest for a coherent self into three phases: first, the poet encounters political or social obstacles in his culture; second, the poet abandons his revolutionary impulse and turns toward the natural world; third the “poet-hero” becomes a “seeker not after nature but after his own mature powers, and so the Romantic poet turned away, not from society to nature, but from nature to what was more integral than nature, within himself. The widened consciousness of the poet did not give him intimations of a former union with nature of the Divine, but rather of his former selfless self” (Ringers 26). James’s career does not evade Bloom’s schema. The need to build a professional identity culminates with the highly popular “Daisy Miller,” the transatlantic success of The Portrait of a Lady, and the Victorian political novels of the 1880s – The Bostonians and The Princess Casamassima – before transforming into the heightened vision of a terrifying “nature” in the major phase novels. His experimental representation of worldly experience filtered through a perspectival consciousness brings him close to the high Modernist techniques (e.g. stream of consciousness and fragmented narratives) developed by Woolf and Joyce or Conrad

41 See Hartman’s The Unmediated Vision and “Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness” in Beyond Formalism.
and Ford. However, during and after his return to America, James abandons nature in pursuit of his “mature powers” to discover a “former selfless self.” The result, as we will see when I turn in my penultimate chapter to the Preface to *The Golden Bowl*, is similar to what Bloom calls the “overcoming of Selfhood’s temptations” and “the outward turning of the triumphant imagination” that “complete[s] a dialectic of love by uniting that Imagination with its bride, a transformed, ongoing creation of the Imagination rather than a redeemed nature” (28). The fourth phase culminates by linking the discovery of how to sustain “ongoing creation” with the newfound knowledge that absolute redemption is impossible. James learns how to transform the catastrophic encounter with the “Medusa” into sustained creative energy or what Lionel Trilling perspicaciously calls the imagination of love: “James had the imagination of disaster and that is why he is immediately relevant to us; but together with the imagination of disaster he had what the imagination of disaster often destroys and in our time is daily destroying, the imagination of love” (*Moral* 177).

Schematizing my argument in terms of Bloom’s history provides nothing more than a descriptive analogy. We can use it to ascribe value to James’s career, find a heroic model in his personal struggle, or to compare him with other writers who undergo a similar trial of artistic existence. It provides an organizing structure that can pave the way for thinking about James within a broader literary tradition. As Bloom notes, “Wordsworth is a crisis-poet, Freud a crisis-analyst” (*Ringers* 17) and James is surely a crisis-novelist. But just as we recognize James’s common inheritance with Hawthorne and Conrad, scholarship has yet to fully study his relation to Blake, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats, Crane, or Stevens. My detour into the early work of Bloom and Hartman aims to
highlight James’s place in the tradition of Romantic vision and therefore expand how we see his place in literary history. The specific focus of my study, however, is to examine the ironies that emerge from James’s unique quest-romance as it takes place in a “reductive universe of death” (Ringers 18). I find in Bloom and Hartman two critics who develop fictions to describe our desire and inability to perfect, redeem, or transcend social, cultural, political, historical, and even human limitations. Their work retains its value because both critics, as Jean-Pierre Mileur argues, demonstrate how “we continue to be Romantics not because we share their success but because we are thwarted by the same antagonists” (40). Though scholarship over the past three decades emphasizes the dangers of idealism and is quick to indict the complicity of Romantic myths with the horrors of history, would-be cultural warriors fail to articulate how their aspirations for social justice differ from the dreams and visions emerging from a tradition that now stands in disrepute. As Bloom reminds us, “what the Western tradition has termed the ‘subject’ or ‘self’ always has been a fiction, a saving lie to assuage anxieties” (Anatomy 248) and it is within this context that James pursues his man of imagination.

In addition, the heirs of Paul de Man might be skeptical toward the critical tradition I invoke. While de Man’s early work, like that of Bloom and Hartman, has helped generations understand the ironies of Romanticism, albeit through an exacting

42 Some may argue that writers such as Maurice Blanchot consciously abnegate the quest for identity. Yet their endeavor to escape normalizing constraints by embracing the “universe of death” and loss of identity is the inverse of the quest Bloom describes. Whereas some artists may pursue a harmonious self above and beyond history, that is transcendence, others refuse subjectivity and see transgression as the means to escape mediation. Whether they strive for the height of Apollonian visionary totality or the pit of the Dionysian abyss, the modern artist remains caught in a cycle of endless repetition where the failed effort to transcend or transgress necessitates perpetual self-revision.
analysis of rhetoric, his later work, which demonstrates how language produces tropes and figures that remain always in excess of their epistemological target, fails to offer an alternative "saving lie."\textsuperscript{43} James, moreover, anticipates de Man’s skepticism throughout his corpus, as we see in \textit{The American Scene} when, recognizing the ersatz ground of literary representation, he describes his "instinct not to press, not to push on, till forced, through any half-open door of the real" (404). Pressing, pushing, forcing, or cracking, in the case of \textit{The Golden Bowl}, reveals "the horror of the thing hideously behind" (Golden 892) and occasions the necessity of Maggie’s "conscious perjury." \textit{The American Scene} and Prefaces demonstrate that James aims to "cultivate the idyllic, for the social, for the pictorial illusion, by every invoking and caressing art" (American 405). "Caressing art" is his gift. Despite my invocation of different theorists and digression into critical history, the narrative that comprises my study lays no claim to truth beyond the persuasiveness and efficiency of its readings. It is merely my own modest fiction.

\par
\textbf{Toward the Fourth Phase}

James describes the task of an American writer in a letter to Charles Eliot Norton from 1871: “But it [America] will yield its secrets only to the really grazing imagination. This I think Howells lacks. (Of course I don’t!) To write well and worthily

\textsuperscript{43} Late de Man exposes the disjunction between “the prosaic materiality of the letter” (\textit{Aesthetic} 90) and the perpetual significations it produces. That is, he defines the \textit{aporia} as the condition of all language and destabilizes any ground of epistemological knowledge and aesthetic judgment: “no degree of obfuscation or ideology can transform this materiality into the phenomenal cognition of aesthetic judgment” (90). But despite his vigorous argumentation, meaning flourishes, judgments bring consequences, and the repetitious march of history continues. I thus follow Bloom when he remarks: “poems cannot get started without irony, yet cannot abide there” (\textit{Map} xiii). Bloom further elaborates on his difference from de Man in \textit{Wallace Stevens} (375-406).
of American things one need even more than elsewhere to be a master” (Theory 46). The secret yielded to James by America during his repatriation is that the self is empty and hollow. That the protective shell (or mask) Madame Merle describes is not infallible. But James’s Notebooks remained unpublished during his life and his ordeal in the Cambridge Cemetery would not obtain a public existence and show itself as the absent center of The American Scene until much later. He took pains to hide the cracks and fissures in the Jamesian mask of mastery. Nevertheless, the Notebooks reveal what lies beneath: they depict James grasping his failure to grasp the phenomenal world to which he would exhibit his austere literary persona. They depict the failure to make that world intelligible, which, it would seem, is a prerequisite for recognition. The grasping imagination, as I will employ the term, describes the struggle for intelligibility: to extract coherent meaning from a resistant alien environment. The American Scene depicts James’s “failure of opportunity and penetration” (444). In the text we see him fathom the limits of his imagination and transform the inability to penetrate beneath the representational surface of America, to access its underlying structure, into a language that accommodates itself to his aesthetic palate. His production of beautiful labyrinthine images captures the drama by drawing upon language that both thematizes and stages the sublime. Reconstructing a self requires that James contain the excess of impressions that lead to imaginative failure within the net of his prose and discover a ground for further self-revision. My second chapter argues that in The American Scene James fends off another potential encounter with the Medusa by producing a “surface, like the thick ice of the skater’s pond” that “bear[s] without cracking the strongest pressure [he] throw[s] on it” (Art 304-305).
The Prefaces, in contrast to *The American Scene*, disclose the success of “opportunity and penetration.” They display the power of James’s “penetrating imagination” (*Art* 78) or the willingness to make the plunge below the surface; to look for secrets and origins which, in the case of the Prefaces, is the ability to recall his literary germs as well as the technical difficulties he encountered while writing his tales and novels. My third chapter examines how James takes an imaginative trip into the past when creating the New York Edition. The Prefaces allow him to continue his project of self-reinvention by revising his writings, the literal artifacts of his imaginative life. In addition, they assume the shape of a *Bildungsroman* that strives to achieve a teleological understanding of his career even as James the revisionist encounters a surplus of memories that resist narration. If James encountered the inhuman sublime in his trip to America, which he sought to contain in *The American Scene*, the Prefaces try to humanize the sublime: to make the excess of memory that eludes representation and resists teleology coincide with the need to discover the growth of an artistic career. To sanction his vision of literary mastery, the Prefaces must escape the labyrinth of the past that inhibits full self-realization.

I isolate *The American Scene* and the Prefaces because of their overlapping composition. F.W. Dupee notes, “in the late summer of 1905, [James] found his impressions [of America] harder to write than he had anticipated, and his work on them was interrupted by problems connected with the New York Edition” (273). The visit to America lasted from August of 1904 through July of 1905 but *The American Scene* was not published until 1907; the same year that the first volumes of the New York Edition began to appear. Each text represents the opposing side of the hinge or break in the
Jamesian subject: “the world of subjects and the world of objects.” James, freed from the constraints of identity, recalibrates his relation to the outside world in *The American Scene*. The Prefaces, in contrast, rework an inside: the strata of memory contained in his literary oeuvre. Only through ceaseless revision can James momentarily stabilize the relation between an outside world that estranges him and the bottomless depths of memory. I call that endless process of revision the “crucible of the imagination” (*Theory* 77). My fourth chapter turns to the Preface to *The Golden Bowl* to demonstrate how revision allows James to assuage momentarily the tension between inside and outside. It is the familiar dichotomy between past and present self, or material-historical-actual self and an idealized version, which James must bind together through the force of his imagination. The man of imagination is the figure through which such revision occurs. It enables James to account for the ghosts that routinely prevent him from accessing his desired object: a coherent creative identity. What the final Preface shows us, then, is the revisionist caught in the act of theorizing a way of life where the failure of a quest for mastery becomes the enabling condition for creative intelligence and therefore renews the journey. The man of the imagination is a model of human imagination that actively

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44 For a thorough analysis of the Derridean figure of the hinge see Henry Sussman’s *Idylls of the Wanderer* (5-14).
strives for Feidelson’s “vision of total consciousness” while accounting for the innate limitations of human fallibility, secular existence, history, and culture.\textsuperscript{45}

My study revises traditional accounts of \textit{The American Scene} and the Prefaces that overdetermine their context. By fixating on his engagement with the social world, recent scholarship subtly pinpoints the contingent factors that molest James’s intentions.\textsuperscript{46} The focus on James as a figure complicit with the cultural discourses of his time reveals the obstacles inhibiting the achievement of mastery but fails to account for his struggle and desire. I aim to supplement, not supplant, recent work on James by expanding upon the complexity of his imaginative practice. The need to revisit James as a distinctly literary writer is made manifest by the work that appeared in the wake of \textit{The Trials of Curiosity}. The success of Posnock’s investigation into “the subtle power of James’s historical imagination” (vii) seems to have unintentionally cast new limits on how we read the fourth phase. \textit{The Trials of Curiosity} is no doubt a major achievement that subsequent scholarship expands upon, but it subordinates the late evolution in James’s artistic practice to the respective intellectual traditions in which he participates. Posnocksuccesfully realigns the Jamesian canon – his stated intent – by placing \textit{The American Scene} at its center. Yet that success is also a failure. James’s voluminous

\textsuperscript{45} The work of David McWhirter and Daniel T. O’Hara remains closest to my reading of the Jamesian subject. McWhirter describes the ethics that emerges in the late work from the relation between a “multiplicitous, protean, always proliferating \textit{senses} of the past … [and an] always provisional quest for new circuits of connection and continuity with a past that remains \textit{other}” (“Provision” 157). O’Hara also locates an “imaginative ethical agency” (\textit{Empire} 266) in James and links it to the Romantic tradition and a Nietzscshean vision of subjectivity. However, O’Hara anachronistically reads James’s fiction in terms of \textit{The Golden Bowl} Preface thus using a later text to make sense of particular novels. Although McWhirter and O’Hara reach similar conclusions, they overlook the struggle that allows James to come to his late discoveries.

\textsuperscript{46} I borrow the term “molestation” from Edward Said’s \textit{Beginnings} (81-85).
impressions of immigration, ethnicity, race, empire, nationality, emergent technology, and gender satiate the academy’s demand for critics to judge writers from the past in relation to contemporary ethical standards. As a result, James becomes a figure studied for his sociological sensibility (or lack thereof). The judgments critics produce regarding James’s politics are less important than the questions animating scholarly inquiries. Our fetishization of James’s “historical imagination” and the instrumental methods of scholarship used to recover it monopolize the academic marketplace and set the terms for subsequent work. Worse, such work ostracizes what might appear to be traditional modes of criticism and fuels a corporate university all too ready to embrace approaches to literature defined by disciplines that yield measurable progress or are thought to be cutting edge. Literature is fundamentally a conservative institution that refuses progress and perpetually returns us to our beginning. As Trilling famously puts it, literature is “the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty” (Moral 548). Returning to the myth of the master and offering a complementary myth represents my attempt to remind critics of the value of James’s artistry and unsettle the fixed intellectual tendencies that emerge when our aspirations for social justice or adversarial visionary impulses become institutionalized and mechanized.

My final chapter turns to the history of James criticism and traces the fate of Romanticism in the academy. Examining the careers of F.O. Matthiessen and John Carlos Rowe offers an occasion to explore the rise and fall of the myth of mastery and allows me to situate James studies within the broader critique of the theoretical assumptions underpinning the Romantic-Modern Tradition. I specifically argue that Matthiessen and Rowe’s inability to recognize the complementarity of the humanist and
anti-humanist sentiments within the Romantic-Modern Tradition leads them to lame scapegoating. Both indict James but Rowe extends his attack to the institution of literature itself. As a consequence, new efforts to situate James in alternative paradigms, versions of world literature for example, exemplify how literary criticism blinds itself to the creative potential of the “madness of art.” Criticism attempts to transcend literature by disavowing the literary. The extreme emphasis on context and paradigms guts the experiential dimension of reading and drains literature of all myth in the name of challenging hierarchies, recovering forgotten history, or escaping (that is to say unknowingly transcending or transgressing) inimical nationalist frameworks. In this environment, conjuring up Romantic visionary culture is more important than ever. It not only combats the inevitable bureaucratization of the imagination, but also provides us with a reservoir of ideals to fill the void left after critique frightens away the muses.
CHAPTER 2

THE GRASPING IMAGINATION

_The American Scene_ is the work born of James’s catastrophic encounter with America and the “Medusa-face.” It is a work of fiction or better yet what Auden calls a “prose poem of the first order” and “no more a travel guide than ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ is an ornithological essay” (314). I would go further and argue that the “scene” described in the title is a picture, an act in a drama, or simply, as James puts it in a letter to his publisher written before his trip, “I want to produce a work of art” (_Letters_ 327). The mode of presentation is that famous Jamesian baroque style which allows him to search for a language that may capture “my point of view – the current of observation, feeling, etc., that can float me further than any other” (328). In the act of floating, the hero of _The American Scene_ constantly recalibrates his identity. He cycles through over twenty personae including “the imprisoned painter” (_American_ 369); the “incurable eccentric” (424); the “revisiting spirit” (428); and the “visionary tourist” (444) in an effort to withstand the force of the radical changes he experiences: the shifting social mores, emergent technologies, and the broader “social motion” that seems to hide the lost world of an America that exists in memory.\footnote{I borrow the term “social motion” from Jonathan Arac who uses it to describe the “sheer force felt [of the] transforming … social world … not perceived as resulting from the ‘action’ of traditional humanism or from the ‘vision’ of an idealistic renovation” (_Commissioned_ 3). Posnock’s _The Trials of Curiosity_ and Haviland’s _Henry James’s Last Romance_ are the most thorough examinations of James’s experience of the “sheer force” of the “social world.” Also see Tamara Follini’s “Habitations of Modernism” and Graham’s “Notes on a Native Son.” For more on James’s masks in _The American Scene_ see Peter Buitenhuis’s _The Grasping Imagination_ (182-208).} James wants to capture impressions of the phantasmagoric landscape he witnesses yet the visionary tourist repeatedly encounters an
excessive world that undermines his ability to grasp the “scene.” The phenomenal world he observes thwarts the search for meaning and clarity and forces James to fathom the limits of his artistic prowess. In this manner, *The American Scene* depicts an experience of the sublime. Following Neil Hertz’s understanding of the term, it shows the visionary tourist “turn away from near-annihilation, from being ‘under death’ to being out from under death. This is, characteristically, the sublime turn … and it is rightly … bound up with a transfer of power … from the threatening forces to the poetic activity itself” (6).

Looking briefly at *The Portrait of a Lady* offers a context for considering how one specific “threatening force” simultaneously suffocates a creature of imagination and stimulates her back to life.

Longinus’s definition of great writing as that which “uplift[s or elevates] our soul” (11) remains a central starting place for any consideration of the sublime and it also recalls the scene from *Portrait* where Ralph and Isabel discuss her recent engagement to Osmond. “I had amused myself with planning out a high destiny for you,” Ralph explains, “You were not to come down … You seemed to me to be soaring far up in the blue – to be sailing in the bright light over the heads of men. Suddenly some one tosses up a faded rosebud – a missile that should never have reached you – and straight you drop to the ground” (291). If we understand that tragic missile as an ironic kind of uplifting, a necessary obstacle that helps Isabel drink from the “cup of experience” (134) and gain some sort of self-consciousness, we begin to see how the Longinian sublime transforms into its more modern and familiar version. Such irony is the hallmark of James’s writing as he reimagines Longinus’s classic thunderbolt – “but greatness appears suddenly; like a thunderbolt” (Longinus 4) – as the kiss of “white lightning” (Portrait
489) between Isabel and Caspar Goodwood that marks the novel’s final peripeteia. Nevertheless, Isabel’s response to Ralph’s belief in her “high destiny” subtly reveals, beyond mere allusion, both the historical and theoretical context in which the transformation of the Longinian sublime occurs. “What do you mean my soaring and sailing?” Isabel responds, “I’ve never moved on a higher plane than I’m moving now. There’s nothing higher for a girl than to marry a – a person she likes” (292). This “person,” in contrast to the unlimited potential embodied in Isabel, is, Ralph aptly remarks, “small” (291). He possesses “sinister attributes” including the kind of “taste” that “judges and measures” that which is immeasurable, someone like Isabel who is “not meant to be measured in that way” (292). In fact, Gilbert Osmond’s aesthetic apprehension is so foul that Ralph can only “describe him impersonally, scientifically,” redirecting the rational instrumentalizing form of judgment that Osmond uses to qualify Isabel back onto the “sterile dilettante” (292) himself.

The language that pervades this brief exchange exemplifies the “impersonal, scientific” element of the Enlightenment that comes under severe scrutiny during the period of high Romanticism: when the Longinian sense of elevation evolves into the Romantic ideal of transcendence. However, Isabel’s education reflects an ironized understanding of growth that comes into existence when cultivation and Bildung become

48 The clearer allusion is to Middlemarch when Ladislaw embraces Dorothea: “While he was speaking there came a vivid flash of lighting which lit each of them up for the other” (769). James and Eliot both anticipate the overlap between the sublime and the transgression inherent in limit-experience. Blanchot calls the limit-experience a “flash” (Infinite 207) while Michel Foucault describes it as “a lyrical return in one lightning instant, which matures at a stroke of the tempest of completeness, illuminating and pacifying it in a rediscovered origin” (History 518). We should also recall the lightening that James hears during his “nightmare vision” in the Louvre.

49 See Samuel Monk’s The Sublime for a history of this transformation.
overly mechanistic and corrupt the imagination. By locating that corruption in Osmond, James transfers the Romantic aesthetic categories that emerged in the wake of Kant to the sphere of social relations. If Osmond personifies modernity’s “impersonal, scientific,” instrumental ethos, then it is only appropriate that Ralph describes him as the supreme antagonist to the sublime: someone who attempts to keep “all things within limits” (331). This later post-Enlightenment context is the period that casts the longest shadow over James’s career: when the sublime moves from associations of danger, terror, and the irrational to different forms of experience that test any artificial limits engendered by the socially rigid and extreme conditions of modern life. The imagery James invokes to describe Isabel’s “meditative vigil” (Art 57) points to the shift in associations. We discover that “her soul [was] haunted with terrors which crowded to the foreground of [her] thought” (Portrait 355) and Isabel overtly enters the Gothic underworld of her epic journey – “She had suddenly found … a dark, narrow ally … [that] led downward and earthward” (356) – when she becomes aware of Osmond’s “calculated attitude” (361). But while the sublime “terrors” suggest one way of reading this chapter, the spiritual confinement that they produce also leads to Isabel’s newfound knowledge. The horrors she encounters, in other words, are precisely the conditions for imaginative creation and growth where “her mind [becomes] assailed by visions [in its] state of extraordinary activity” (364). The paradoxical state of mind Isabel experiences resembles many Romantic literary and philosophical tropes. We can think of it as Hegelian negation that yields growth via sublimation or the rhetoric of pleasure and pain that directly links this irony of Hegel to John Dennis’s disturbing description of the sublime as a “pleasing rape upon the soul” (37), the pleasurable pain of Edmund Burke’s Enquiry, Keats’s “Ode to
Psyche” – “Yes, I will by thy priest, and build a fane / In some untrodden region of mind, / Where branched thoughts new grown with pleasant pain” (51-53) – or Yeats’s reimagining of Dennis’s pronouncement in “Leda and the Swan.” Turning to an additional scene from Portrait demonstrates how James explicitly employs the modern rhetoric of sublimity where the encounter with a stifling limit, implied by pain, leads to growth and pleasure.

In Albany, Isabel paces back and forth “restless and even agitated” as her “ridiculously active” “imagination” contemplates a “desire to leave her past behind” (39). At this moment, her impending departure provides the narrator with an occasion to explore her background where we discover that “it appeared to Isabel that the unpleasant had been even too absent from her knowledge, for she had gathered from her acquaintance with literature that it was often the source of interest and even instruction” (39). Unpleasantness and pain being a prerequisite for experience and knowledge are running motifs throughout the novel and in the end Isabel receives these attributes in abundance. Not surprisingly, we also learn that the literature comprising her aesthetic education, the literature that told her “unpleasantness” is a “source of interest or instruction,” is from the “history of German Thought” (34). To drive home the context, the narrator saturates descriptions of Isabel’s “great desire for knowledge” (41) – a “desire” that cannot be achieved because she is currently “too young, too impatient, too
unacquainted with pain” (56) – with allusions to Milton and Wordsworth. Isabel and James are clearly both in the presence of the visionary company and when we reach the scene where Osmond confesses his love the narrator baldly spells out how that fated missile suffocates the spirit yearning for greatness: “What happened was something for a week past her imagination had been going forward to meet; but here, when it came, she stopped – that sublime principle somehow broke down” (266).

During Isabel’s meditative vigil she receives a heavy dose of the pain that she earlier lacked. But it is not until the conclusion when she experiences pleasure and pain simultaneously. In the climactic scene “Isabel [gives] a long murmur, like a creature in pain” and we gain insight into her mercurial state when she rebukes Caspar Goodwood’s Miltonic plea – “The world’s all before us – and the world’s very big” – by declaring “at random” that “the world’s very small” (489). The narrator quickly intervenes to inform us this is “not what she meant” (489). Instead, Isabel fully experiences the sublime’s menacing contradictions as her aesthetic education reaches its pinnacle:

The world in truth, had never seemed so large; it seemed to open out, all around her, to take the form of a mighty sea, where she floated in the fathomless waters. She wanted help, and here was help; it had come in the rushing torrent. I know not whether she believed everything he said; but she believed just then that to let him take her in his arms would be the next best thing to her dying. This belief, for a moment, was a kind of rapture, in which she felt herself sink and sink. In the movement she seemed to beat with her feet, in order to catch herself, to feel something to rest on. (489)

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50 We are told that “the world lay before her” (273) shortly after she leaves Gardencourt, which is merely the literal version of the figurative “gardens of her … remarkable soul” (56). The Miltonic allusion reverberates with Wordsworthian echoes (56) that also occur elsewhere in the discussion of her upbringing (41) before culminating in the “worlds of ruins,” reminiscent of Tintern Abbey and mirroring Isabel’s unstable subjectivity (430-431). For the Miltonic reading see Robert Weisbuch’s Atlantic Double-Cross (291-294).
For Isabel the world appears both small and large as she longs for Caspar’s arms and understands that all the life his warmth can provide would destroy the only life she knows. Such a profound tension opens up the “fathomless waters” that threaten to drown her. With the painful knowledge of her current predicament, and the glimmer of potential hope that she sees in Caspar, Isabel seems to soar, to resist Osmond’s lethal shot, or simply “float” in the treacherous and “mighty sea.” This is her feeling of “rapture,” a feeling of atemporal sublimity that forces the “movement” of her feet to keep the “beat” or figuratively ground her. But it also makes her uneasy, desperate, as if “she felt herself sink and sink.”

A vision of the sublime threatens Isabel as it did James when he glimpsed the “Medusa.” Here the movement of Isabel’s feet replaces the movement of James’s pen in an effort to restore imaginative health. For Laurence Holland, the imagery depicts “a descent into experience which momentarily obliterates her consciousness yet reawakens her to life” (51). This is the sublime at its core: what Kant describes as the failure of the imagination that reawakens the powers of reason. James’s narrator alludes to the philosopher when he remarks: “this [Isabel’s sinking] however, of course, was but a subjective fact, as the metaphysicians say; the confusion, the noise of waters, all the rest of it, were in her own swimming head. In an instant she was aware of this” (489). Though I will elaborate upon the Kantian context later, Isabel’s return to Osmond might be read as her recognition of the impossibility of absolute transgression and a recommitment to the social order that defines her identity. Isabel must abandon the world of unfettered imagination and return to the world of experience. It is the same return that James makes
in *The American Scene* and the Prefaces; the repetitious act of turning to the past and searching for an origin to ground identity.°°

My attenuated reading of *Portrait* speaks to the thematic component of the sublime: a character’s attempt to achieve transcendence or illuminate the self’s excess in relation to an instrumental ethos of containment. We could compare Isabel falling out of the sky with all of James’s characters who undertake a similar agonistic journey of self-discovery. In this manner, *Portrait* epitomizes the romance and provides an appropriate context for reading *The American Scene*.°° Isabel in *Portrait* is a precursor to Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors* or James in *The American Scene*. But if the thematic sublime refers to content, what a poem or novel represents, the more widely discussed version focuses on how representation occurs and the effects it engenders. Lionel Trilling adopts both senses of the term when he argues, speaking of Joshua Reynolds, that the sublime is “the Grand style” depicting “some instance of heroic action or heroic suffering” (*Moral* 436). James domesticates the heroism we might associate with Ulysses in Isabel’s imaginative trip to the underworld, Kate’s attempt to redeem her family name, Lambert’s ambassadorship, or Maggie’s restitution of order. *The American Scene* presents a similar adventure where we see a Dantesque “shuddering pilgrim” (434)

°° In *Acting Beautifully*, Siji Jottkandt notes how “Isabel’s ‘kaleidoscopic’ form of vision recalls … the experience of the imagination in the Kantian sublime” (39). Her reading demonstrates how Isabel’s return to Osmond actualizes her autonomy through an act of repetition that adheres to the Kantian ethical law (she repeats the original freedom of her choice to marry).

°° Richard Chase selects *Portrait* as his ur-Jamesian romance and argues that in it James transforms the American “romance into the substance of the [European] novel” (125). Most critics who study James and the romance follow Chase’s lead in selecting *Portrait* as their text. For a reading of *The Golden Bowl* as a romance see Brodhead (186-200).
assailed by the terrors of modern life in the haunted house of America. My reading of the
text follows Sharon Cameron who argues that *The American Scene* “is less the occasion
for exploring aspects of places than it is for examining aspects of consciousness” (2).\(^53\)
Though she describes the domination that Jamesian consciousness exerts over the
“scene,” no doubt his egotistical sublime, Cameron overlooks the moments where the
“pilgrim” comes dangerously close to imaginative failure. James’s trip to America, I
argue, follows Holland’s description of Isabel: we see how the pilgrim’s loss of
consciousness reawakens him to life.\(^54\) The version of life is not solely the openness to
Benjaminian shock that Posnock describes but also an awakening to the powers of the
imaginative self which enables James, when he returns to England, to produce the New
York Edition and discover himself the man of imagination.

I am not the first to argue that the genre of *The American Scene* extends to
autobiography, romance, a novel, or in the case of Auden, a prose-poem. Yet too often
the critics who make such claims fail to situate their readings within the larger context of
James’s career; especially given that *The American Scene* was published in 1907 at the

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\(^53\) Critics examining *The American Scene* in the wake of Cameron overemphasize
“aspects of places.” Examples include Sara Blair’s *Henry James and the Writing of Race
and Nation*, Kenneth Warren’s *Black and White*, and Kendall Johnson’s *Henry James
and the Visual*. Gert Buelens’s *Henry James and the “Aliens*” offers the most sustained
criticism of the historicist approaches that reductively subjugate James to the cultural
discourses of his time. His focus on style complements my own approach although his
goal is to understand James as a cultural critic.

\(^54\) As Goetz notes, following Feidelson, imagination for James is “commensurate with
consciousness itself” (60).
same moment the first few volumes of the New York Edition began to appear. Susan Griffin’s work is an important exception. She argues that *The American Scene* is “a quest for a historically integrated personal, public, and professional self” (94). Griffin believes that James locates that identity in history which forces him to become complicit with the production of an American culture he fears: “If James starts his perceptual journey as Rip Van Winkle, he ends up as Ichabod Crane: the alien figure of a traveler en route to somewhere else, visually commodifying and consuming the landscape as he goes” (139). Despite her emphasis on visual rhetoric in late James, Griffin sees *The American Scene* as a failed attempt to “avoid the chaotic abyss of twentieth-century history” and a virtual “fall into history” (149).

The history that occupies her reading is the tradition of American landscape painting as well as the myths it promotes (e.g. Arcadia). Though I differ from Griffin’s emphasis on national identity – she argues that James’s late travel writings “reconstruct the English landscape in order to reidentify himself” (151) with England – her analysis of his perceptual mode of thought supplements my emphasis on the sublime. I will argue that James labors to discover a way out of that “chaotic abyss” by adhering to his idealistic belief in a redeemed America. The pastoral landscape of

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55 See Donald Emerson’s “Henry James,” William Hall’s “The Continuing Relevance of Henry James’ ‘The American Scene,’” and Gordon Taylor’s “Chapters of Experience.” According to Taylor, *The American Scene* is “a kind of novel, in which the author-protagonist re-enacts through interlocking and accumulating ‘scenes’ the journeys of interior discovery” (94). Taylor’s presentation of the broad arc of James’s trip – from a lost Arcadian world through the modern landscape of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and eventually the renewed garden of Florida – comes closest to my own. In addition, Helen Killoran argues that *The American Scene* should be read “not [as] a ‘travelogue’ but fiction, specifically a novel of manners” (306) and provides an insightful comparison between the Jamesian protagonist and the quest-romance in the tradition of Swift.

56 Sheila Teahan’s “Engendering Culture” revises Griffin: “*The American Scene* is readable as narrating a fall out of history … and into an abyss of textuality or fallen language” (55). If history is a text, then Teahan’s analysis complements Griffin.
New England allows him to imagine the lost Edenic world of his youth. Even though he continues to desire redemption as he moves southward—“the basis of my individual hope … that of the reign of the orange grove” (604) of Florida—the bewildering world he encounters requires that he recognize his paradise as lost. Each attempt to understand an America that perpetually disrupts his ideals reacquaints James with the “chaotic abyss.” It is only his prose styling—the movement of his pen—that prevents him from drowning. *The American Scene* shows how the repeated experience of the sublime stymies James’s implied narrative progression and slowly reveals his waning hope.

An Eventual Belated Romance

The long opening chapter entitled “New England: Autumn Impressions” presents a border crossing. Instead of describing his initial impressions of the New York when he arrives, James witnesses himself caught in the “chaos of confusion and change” (357). His debarkation in Hoboken fills him with “instant vibrations” as he imagines “a past recalled from very far back” where the “train of association” leads him to the “beginning” of “dimness of extreme youth” (357). Despite the scattered references to New York in the opening pages, James refuses to provide his reader with identifiable markers. Phrases such as “the good easy Square, known in childhood” (359) or references to “Gramercy Park” or the “Jersey Shore” (360) appear within the space of a page or sentence and remain subjugated to the portrayal of the “violence” of “the phenomena” which James calls a “wave” of impressions that “floated me” and “carried me up into the subject”
The visionary tourist is no longer willfully walking down the path toward the lion or the dove as we saw in the Notebooks: “The wave … continued to float me: so abysmal are the resources of the foredoomed student of manners, or so helpless, at least, his case when once adrift in that tide” (360). He is perpetually “adrift” in search of his “subject”: a familiar beacon that might, following the repetition of Isabel’s feet, ground him and provide the “resources” necessary for cogent impressions.

The language of a vertiginous border crossing pervades The American Scene as the physical transport to America overlaps with the imaginative transport produced by James’s impressions. The experience of “violence” opens up what he calls the “margin,” a word we will return to later, and transforms him into a “victim” whose “odd consciousness of roughness” made the “matter … quite beyond calculation” (360). Everywhere in The American Scene James describes what he sees as a “picture now so violently overpainted” that it produces “a greater quantity of vision … than might fit into decent form” (359). The images of excess, feelings of chaos and change, experience of movement and transport, and the search for origins and meaning combine to produce a sensation of alterity in James (and the reader no doubt) that he locates in the familiar story of the Adamic fall. His impressions become hanging fruit that “could deliciously be left to ripen, like golden apples on the tree” and will “surely … drop into one’s hand” (361). “Heavy with fruit,” he continues, “was the whole spreading bough that resulted above me during an afternoon” (361) spent on the Jersey Shore (as the section heading would tell us). The “fruit” will soon become the key to “the very gates of Appearance”

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57 James provides page-headings in The American Scene that refer to a specific locale or topic under consideration (e.g. The Jersey Shore, Yiddish Theatricals, etc.). The obvious intent is to orient the reader. However, Michael Anesko’s “James in America” notes that the original publication omitted the headings.
(361) that our “quite heroic” “story-seeker” will enter when he confronts his “more or less adventurous fight” (366). Later during his trip to Ellis Island, James recalls having “eaten of the tree of knowledge” (426) that inaugurated his “other-world pilgrimage” (433). But prior to visiting the urban metropolis, the “story-seeker” travels north to New England observing fruit that has not yet ripened.

R. W. B Lewis offers the classic account of the Adamic myth in American literature. Yet he discusses James briefly, only noting how *The Golden Bowl* inverts the myth to show the evil that American innocence harbors.\(^{58}\) *The American Scene* would seem to corroborate the assumption that modern America, for James, transforms its feigned innocence into an imperial-capitalist machine that threatens tradition. But the story-seeker believes he can discover an Edenic America during his visit to New England. He constantly disavows his admitted “belated recognition” (367) that the pastoral landscape is a diversion from modern America. For example, the story-seeker quickly becomes an “ancient contemplative person” (366) who has entered “Arcadia” (367). New England appears as “the inlet of poetry” (371) that “ask[s] to be praised only by the cheerful shepherd and the oaten pipe” even though the observer recognizes that there are “apples … everywhere” and acknowledges he will eventually “bite into them” (370) and make “his leap into the abyss” (368). Because he reflects on his encounters from the vantage point of hindsight, James is aware the direction his journey will eventually take. *The American Scene* nevertheless labors to provide his chaotic experience of America with a narrative that coheres. James thus continues to indulge the idea of an Edenic landscape through the “trick” of imagination which, in turn, leads him

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\(^{58}\) See Lewis’s *The American Adam* (152-155).
into the “cove of romance” (371). The familiar story of the Adamic fall, in other words, provides him with a meaning making mechanism. As Robert Caserio puts it, “in the face of nonsense James must make sense” (*Plot* 229) in *The American Scene*. However, the presence of social life continually disturbs the pastoral imagery even if it cannot quite break the illusion. Yet once New York makes its presence unavoidable, it will still take James until Florida before he finally accepts the “air of reality” (700) that frustrates his hope for redemption.

Consider his reflection on Cape Cod where the “pastoral nobleness … persuade[s] him perfectly to peace” as to “what American beauty should be” (379). He writes:

> The point was that if the bewilderment I have just mentioned had dropped, most other things had dropped too: the challenge to curiosity here was in the extreme simplification of the picture, a simplification of original lines. … The simplification, for that immediate vision, was to a broad band of deep and clear blue sea, a blue of the deepest and clearest conceivable, limited in one quarter by its far and sharp horizon of sky, and in the other by its near and sharp horizon of yellow sand overfringed with a low woody shore; the whole seen through the contorted crosspieces of stunted, wind-twisted, far-spreading, quite fantastic old pines and cedars, whose bunched bristles, at the ends of long limbs, produced, against the light, the most vivid of all reminders. (384)

The Arcadian world’s beauty is what James calls the “poetry of association” (382). To assuage the “bewilderment” of the conflict between a disturbing social world and the natural landscape, James willfully strips his impressions down to size, tames his “curiosity,” and focuses his “immediate vision.” But the description of the sea anticipates the problem of “simplification.” As James notices the “whole” of the picture, his language suggests an inability to contain the image within a single impression even though his description of nature is apparently free from a disturbed human presence. What he desires is a self-contained image that will allow “rest for the mind … of the restless analyst” (384). Yet the water seen through the trees is “the most vivid of all
reminders” that each impression will remain mediated by excess. The “overfringed,” “wind-twisted,” or “far-spreading” branches obfuscate the image. James believes he can “read into [it] without straining or disturbing it,” but he is quickly reminded that accessing the natural world’s “purity of style” cannot prevent him from encountering “the human, the social question [which is] always dogging the steps of the ancient contemplative person and making him, before each scene, wish really to get into the picture, to cross, as it were, the threshold of the frame” (384).

In this “scene,” James resembles the Wordsworthian speaker of “Nutting” who will “dra[g] to earth both branch and bough, with crash / And merciless ravage” (44-45) after his presence disturbs nature. To cross “the threshold of the frame” is, for James, to re-attach himself to a lost America: to merge with the world and alleviate the otherness he experiences. The “poetry of association” facilitates his imaginative crossing and at the same time isolates him by exposing him to “the sense as of absent things” (385). The need to “get into the picture” is the result of a “haunting curiosity” that uncovering the “social mystery, the lurking human secret” (385) will disclose the Arcadia he desires. As such, James continues to believe in the possibility of discovering a redeemed America, to believe that he can locate the undisturbed world of his youth and remain “under the spell” (386). The ongoing process of disturbing and reproducing the “spell” that his restless imagination projects will entrap James in a cycle of “maddening mystifications” (383). The feeling “that something must be done for penetration, for discovery” serves as a reminder that “I had again to take it [the American scene] for a mystery” (387).

Penetration is the operative word that designates James’s need to contain his proliferating impressions, parse them apart, and attain “something like a luxury of
discrimination” (389). His ideal picture of America is when “the elements fell together,” allowing them to “bristle with truth” that may “strike inward, horribly inward, not playing up to the surface,” and also allow for the “sharpest reflection” of “an edifying ‘realism’” (394-395). To approach, in other words, the real, without succumbing to the subterfuge of romance. In New England, James more often than not finds tranquil images that delight and fascinate him; give him access to the poetry in the natural landscape. But when he visits Cambridge in the conclusion to the chapter, he begins to recognize that realism refuses to edify. It breaks the spell and forces him to acknowledge a social world that simultaneously provides the associations necessary to imagine ghosts while also inhibiting any chance at successful penetration. James writes:

> It is a convenience to be free to confess that the play of perception during those first weeks quickened, in the oddest way, by the wonderment … of my finding how many corners of the general, of the local, picture had anciently never been unveiled for me at all, and how many unveiled too briefly and too scantly, with quite insufficient bravery of gesture. That might make one ask by what strange law one had lived in the other time, with gaps, to that number, in one’s experience, in one’s consciousness, with so many muffled spots in one’s general vibration – and the answer indeed to such a question might carry with it the infinite penetration of retrospect, a penetration productive of ghostly echoes as sharp sometimes as aches or pangs. So many had been the easy things, the contiguous places, the conspicuous objects, to right or left of the path, that had been either unaccountably or all to inevitably left undiscovered, and which were to live on, to the inner vision, through the long years, as mere blank faces, round, empty, metallic, senseless disks dangling from familiar and reiterated names. Why, at the same time, one might ask, had the consciousness of irritation from these vain forms not grown greater? why had the inconvenience, or disgrace, of early privation become an accepted memory? All, doubtless, in the very interest, precisely, of this eventual belated romance, and so that adventures, even of minor type, so preposterously postponed should be able to deck themselves at last with a kind of accumulation of freshness. (398-399)

The “play of perception” entails both “wonderment” and “amusement.” Unlike the earlier apprehension of Cap Cod, which only hinted at the obfuscation of the image, James is now fully entrenched in his desire to “unveil” and recover the “gaps” that appear in his
“experience,” “consciousness,” and the picture before his eyes. The “perception” in question refuses literal penetration into the visual world which would only lead to the “infinite penetration of retrospect” and the appearance of “ghostly echoes.” Penetration outward and inward are intertwined yet retrospection in *The American Scene* does not produce the “strange law” governing his life. It reveals the very absence of that law. As a result, James’s restlessness prevents the kind of self-reflection that the Prefaces will afford. When he enters the urban environment of New York, for example, he searches for the “law” or originating structural principle that can make the disturbing scene cohere. As F.W. Dupee writes, the subject of *The American Scene* is the “search for buried clues to the secret life of the country, the human reality within the shifting and impalpable forms … [and requires the] suppress[ion] both of his memories and his more intimate revulsions … in his artist’s search for the objectively significant” (274-275). The suppression of the personal and the failure of the search are anticipated in Cambridge when the glimpse into the past reveals figurative ghosts. James does not, however, invoke his encounter with the Medusa in the cemetery and the ghosts do not appear personal but, rather, as “mere blank faces, round, empty, metallic, senseless disks dangling from familiar and reiterated names.”

It is here that James discovers that his “eventual belated romance” is to return to America in search of new experiences only to become the victim of his own “inner vision” that continually posits an idealized Edenic America in the face of a horrifying modern world. Writing *The American Scene* is his method of taming the “aches or pangs”

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59 The “Medusa-face” passage in the Notebooks reappears four paragraphs from the end of “New England.” James incorporates much from his Notebook entry, the reference to attending a football game for example, but omits any discussion of his personal experience at the cemetery. In addition, James also masks familiar names via initials “J.R.L” (412) and “W.D.H” (415). For a discussion of his revisions see Cameron (13-18).
through the “accumulation of fre[sh]” perceptions. To avoid drowning in the abyss of an illusory history, James must embrace the present and America’s “perpetual repudiation of the past” (400). He must adjust to a world where the Arcadian shepherds sound the “screeches of the pipe to which humanity is actually dancing” (400).

The Poetry of Motion

James soon discovers that his Arcadian world is “a huge Rappacini-garden, rank with each variety of the poison-plant of the money-passion” and he anticipates “sublime and exquisite heresies to come” (403). He uses the word “sublime” in a banal sense although it also suggests his figurative transport across time, via memory, and his literal transport from the New England countryside to Boston and then New York. In Cambridge he believes that “to cross the bridge that spans the gulf of time” he must obey the “instinct not to press, not to push on, till forced, through any half-open door of the real” (404). Because the real is both the lure and the enemy of the story-seeking quester, James fears that encountering it will lead to a disaster from which he may not recover. For example, visiting Harvard’s Alumni Hall he senses the “lurking ghosts” (405) and calls himself a “grim visitor” who “had to enter [the scene], to the loss of all of his identity” (406). A meditation on the walls surrounding the campus leads to the thought that preserving identity requires a “sovereign” “enclosure” and the ability to “establish value” (407). Yet America produces “overflows” (407) and “violations” (411) that would “alter the image” (411) secured by a bounded frame and lead to the “flood of the real” (412). In the face of “ruins” where “some echo of the dreams of youth” (415) remain, James asserts the need to “tighten one’s aesthetic waistband” (411). The act of tightening
demands transforming his repatriation into a grand pictorial illusion that fences in American excess.

New York testifies to the difficulty of isolating – or fencing in – an impression. In a description reminiscent of the adulterated seascape of Cape Cod, James witnesses a cityscape that forces him to keep the shutter of his mind’s eye open long enough to absorb all that it sees. But the city’s boundless energy stymies his vision hitting him “with the full force of a thousand prows of steamers” (416). He continues:

[T]he power of the most extravagant cities … impart[s] to every object and element, to motion and expression of every floating, hurrying, panting thing, to the throb of ferries and tugs, to the plash of waves and the play of winds and the glint of lights and the shrill of whistles and the quality and authority of breeze-borne cries – all, practically, a diffused, wasted clamour of detonations – something of its sharp free accent and, above all, of its sovereign sense of being “backed” and able to back. (418)

The city is a “monstrous organism” whose “vision of energy … grows and grows” producing “opening and closing jaws” (418) that fascinate the observer and also burst his aesthetic waistband. By personifying New York, making it an organism that grows, radiates energy, consumes all that is in its path, and animates the winds, sounds, and lights, James domesticates the image, gaining artistic control over the “clamour of detonations.”60 The “steam-shuttles” become “electric bobbins” (418) akin to the tall buildings which James imagines as “extravagant pins in a cushion already overplanted” (419). Each aspect of New York that he witnesses – the tall buildings and physical layout of the city, its modes of transportation, famous landmarks from his youth such as Washington Square Park, the hotels and new social institutions, as well as their effect on New York’s changing culture (e.g. immigration) – produces detonated visions. The new

60 In A Sense of Things, Bill Brown analyzes the trope of prosopopoeia as it pertains to objects in The America Scene (177-188).
world excites his curiosity, leading to a Whitmanian immersion in the crowd and the transformation into a transparent eyeball, but the resulting language depicts images of an observer victimized by the assaults on his imaginative sensibility. “The magnitude and mystery that I could begin neither to measure nor to penetrate” (422) throws James into “the whole wide edge of the whirlpool” where he confesses to his “inability to understand” (423). As a consequence, his attempt at “open apprehension” (423) leads to the seemingly endless proliferation of adjectives and verbs: “prodigious,” “multitudinous,” “swarming,” “throbbing,” and “myriad” (424) all appear within a sentence of each other. His language combats the sensory data even as James admits that his “impression[s] … kept overflowing the cup and spreading in a wide waste of speculation” (424).

While he cannot access the origin of New York’s chaos, the point beneath the surface that would ground the chaos he witnesses, the inability to penetrate becomes the “daily bread of the visionary tourist” (444). It oddly motivates his search and fuels his commitment. James’s writing assumes a sublime style that Edmund Burke associates with poetic obscurity. Burke’s description of Milton’s representation of Satan addresses James’s method as well:

Here is a very noble picture; and in what does this poetical picture consist? in images of a tower, an archangel, the sun rising through the mists, or in an eclipse, the ruin of monarchs, and the revolutions of kingdoms. The mind is hurried out of itself, by a crowd of great and confused images; which affect because they are crowded and confused. For separate them, and you lose much of the greatness, and join them, and you infallibly lose the clearness. The images raised by poetry are always of this obscure kind. (57)

Burke’s sublime is paradoxically “delightful” because it gives us “an idea of pain and danger” that “belong[s] to self-perseveration” and produces in us the “strongest of all
passions” (47). In James’s descriptions we no doubt feel the sense of pain as he struggles to describe the sovereign law animating New York’s unfathomable energy. He, like Milton, yokes together “a crowd of great and confused images” that continually “lose the[ir] clearness” and quicken the mind. His language resembles his other late works but *The American Scene* lacks the specific plot or situation that would otherwise orient the reader. James seems to want to implicate his readers in his ordeal and make them feel his confusion. Experiencing the omnipotent presence of New York, for example, he finds himself “overswept as by the colossal extended arms, waving the magical baton, of some high-stationed orchestral leader, the absolute presiding power, conscious of every note of every instrument, controlling and commanding the whole volume of sound” (444). James mimics the city he sees through his own authorial conducting. His writing orchestrates on the page the city the visionary tourist witnesses. Yet for the tourist, in the text, city plays itself. James remains the audience trying to hum his own tune as he hears a Sirens song that he cannot resist. The “arms” do not belong to the shepherds in Arcadia. Rather the “colossal” conductor produces a “vision of eternal waste” (449) that locates the restless analyst in Satan’s “pandemonium” (438).

The American “huge democratic broom” (401) is the principle that effaces the differences James tries to recover in his writing. The inability to discriminate produces the obscurity that, for Burke, is a hallmark of the sublime. But the “poetry of association” nonetheless holds out the possibility that clarity and a coherent impression is attainable. James’s trip through the Hudson Valley shows him how West Point’s “blinding radiance” (480) fuses with the scenic river to become an example of “the grand style” that he associates with the “genius of the scene” (480). The military academy nourishes his hope
that the social presence and natural world can accommodate each other and remain favorable to the artist by creating “the very conditions that most invest it with poetry” (481). The “poetry of association,” in other words, is attainable under the right circumstances. The Hudson Valley keeps alive the illusion of Arcadia and reintroduces the need to discover its “aboriginal mystery” (483). It is thus unsurprising that the beauty and pleasure of West Point contrasts with the ugliness of Tarrytown where James notices the irony of “‘modernity’” whose “terrible power” both enshrines “a temple … to the history of the hermit” (484) and eradicates the literary past Washington Irving’s tales endeavor to keep fresh in America’s collective consciousness. At such a moment the “unbroken spell” of the pastoral landscape no longer seems to tempt James as he hears “the last faint echo of a felicity forever gone” in the “summer sounds” (485). He immediately returns to New York in the chapter entitled “Social Notes” where he “strik[es] to excess the so-called pessimistic note” by associating the “vision of waste,” “the shock in question,” with the “tragic element in the French Revolution” (486). The analogy to France allows James to sympathize with New York’s attempt to create a “coherent sense of itself” (486) by endlessly building. But it also suggests that the absence of form, value, and history, the disavowal of tradition, so to say, as well as the proclivity to grow reveal that the city “beat[s] its wings in the void” (486) and “struggle[s] in the void” (489) in search of a foundation. For James, the recurrent image is of “the cup of his perception … full to overflowing” (494).

What we see in *The American Scene* is constant adjusting and readjusting: the search for a principle that will allow James to penetrate the world he encounters and navigate the void. The harmonious apprehension of “the poetry of association” and the
“overflowing” sensations that disturb him translate into the illusion of order (and hope for a redeemed America) and the pessimistic recognition that such stability is unsustainable. For example, the mid-Atlantic delights James. He seems happiest in Philadelphia because of its formal design, its history, its comparatively homogenous culture, and its resistance to the “whirligig of time” (533). But he also detects during his journey south that America seems to be “the vast vogue of some infinitely-selling novel” that “was monotonized” (605) to the point of pure repetition. Though Baltimore promises the freshness of the south and a freshness of perception, its “charm [also] … casts a shadow” (606). James anticipates future troubles by noting that “there thus immediately rises for the lone visionary, betrayed and arrested in the very act of vision, that spectre of impotence which dogs the footsteps of perception and whose presence is like some poison-drop in the silver cup” (606).

The tensions between order and disorder, structure and chaos, become inescapable in Washington. The beginning of spring “open[s] wide the gates” and allows James to “make the effort to break the spell [and see] through that voluminous veil” (627) of his bad faith illusions. Yet he finds that Washington is also a “place of enchantment,” calling it a “‘sylvan solitude’” (628) that is “screened and disguised” (629). What appears is the “full illusion” erected by “bronze generals and admirals” which he takes for “great-garden gods, mossy mythological marble” (629). The “light of nature” (628) and “the power of the scene to evoke such visions” of “some bending nymph or armless Hermes” (629) make James “patriotically pretend … that such a Washington was the ‘real’ one” (630). He luxuriates in the “masking, dissimulating summer” even though he understands that the “spell” that emerges from the “rich interference of association” contrasts with
“the hard little facts” (630). There is a determined effort to keep searching for the “poetry of association” that excites his sensibilities in Washington at the same moment that he consciously recognizes that the “‘artistic’ Federal City” is also a setting where the new “social conditions” make it “practically a new and incalculable thing” (646-647). While the artistry gestures toward the beauty America promises, the “bleeding Past” intervenes for a visionary “cursed with the historical imagination” (632) and discloses a city (and country) that is the product of a “historic void” (648). The contradictory impressions become “assaults [for] the wondering mind” (649). Presaging his movement toward Richmond and Charleston, Washington concludes with James’s impression of “a trio of Indian braves” who seemingly arise from “the bloody footsteps of time” and the “brazen face of history” (652-653). America “rakes the confinement” (652) in the endeavor to suppress its history, casts it into the “void,” only to see it reemerge through the very act of concealment. Everywhere James detects the excess that that raking cannot contain in the “vivid and painful image” (663) offered by the south. Though he once felt his movement southward to be “fairly romantic,” after consulting “the voice of divinity” and “the oracle” he realizes that America’s “romance [is in] essence enfeebled, shrunken and spent” (654). The “palpitating pilgrim” (656) becomes a “strained pilgrim” (673) who sees in Richmond another city “blank and void” (658): a place where the “trivialization of history” makes it “inaccessible to legend” (668) or the myth he saw earlier in Washington. Nevertheless, James travels further south, into the void, both caught “scratching for romance” (676) and bent on “reviving … his limp imagination” (656).

Discovering “the poetry of association” is a double-edged sword. When James invokes the phrase in his discussion of the Presidential Range in New Hampshire the
context is as follows: “The names, ‘Presidential’ and other, minister little to the poetry of association; but that, throughout the American scene, is a source of irritation with which the restless analyst has had, from far back to count” (382). The “poetry of association” refers to those moments when the natural world and the social scene – both their images and associations – harmonize or complement each other in the eyes of the restless analyst: they seem to produce the kind of play and aesthetic wonder that Kant calls beauty. Yet at the same time, the range of association is so great that there is the possibility of disassociation: the encounter with associations that make “the restless analyst … sink beyond his depth” (383). The poetry of association is counter-balanced, in other words, with what James call the “poetry of motion.” He uses the phrase in a letter to Howells as a term of enthusiasm expressing his desire that his repatriation “should represent the poetry of motion, the one big taste of travel not supremely missed” (Matthiessen, *Family 310*). The “poetry of motion” is the source of the sublime. The “shockability” that he wants to encounter in America which produces fear, irritation, anger, and “aches or pangs.” It appears, in turn, through the Burkean obscure images and scenes of excess, boundlessness, and incalculability.

The effect that the “poetry of motion” has on James is starkest after he departs the Vanderbilt estate of Biltmore in North Carolina. He greatly admires the “castle of enchantment” and finds it a “modern miracle” that exhibits “an idea, a fine cluster of ideas, a will, a purpose, a patience, an intelligence, [and] a store of knowledge” (680). In contrast to his image of America as a monotonized unending serial novel, James feels as if he has “sufficiently penetrated” Biltmore comparing it to an accessible “short story” (680) and a memorable quotation lost within the pages of a dull epic (i.e. America). But
after continuing south, he discovers himself unable to fixate on any particular object
observed in the landscape through the window of his Pullman; his surroundings glide by
and prevent his eyes from comprehending what they register. One effect of his obfuscated
view is a sense that his position “in a cushioned and kitchened Pullman … den[ies] to so
many groups of one’s fellow-creatures any claim to a ‘personality’” (681). America
undermines its own effort to achieve an identity through its proclivity to grow and move.
The pleasure of Biltmore quickly transforms into the bewilderment and abandonment that
James experiences when he becomes a “perfectly isolated traveler” (683) disconnected
from the social world and without any “claim” to “personality.” Though his journey south
constitutes the “very boon of one’s quest” (683), that “boon” only emerges belatedly:

A couple of hours later, in the right train, which had at last arrived, I had so
settled to submission to this spell that it had wrought for me, I think, all its magic
– ministered absolutely to the maximum suggestion, which became thus, for my
introduction to Charleston, the pretending influence. What had happened may
doubtless show for no great matter in a bare verbal statement; yet it was to make
all the difference, I felt, for impressions (happy and harsh alike) still to come. It
couldn’t have happened without one’s beginning to wander, but the lively interest
was that the further one wandered the more the suggestion spoke. The sense of the
size of the Margin, that was the name of it – the Margin by which the total of
American life, huge as it already appears, is still so surrounding as to represent,
for the mind’s eye on a general view, but a scant central flotilla huddled as for the
very fear of the fathomless water, the too formidable future, on the as much vaster
lake of the materially possible. (683-684)

Everything that James perceives, whether it is “groups” of people or aspects of the
“landscape,” becomes, in this passage, “the Margin.” It is the name given to the endless
association of impressions that force the mind to “wander” in search of some way to
comprehend the “total[ity] of American life.” It is what appears, in other words, when
James traces the “spreading” that he detected in Cape Cod’s obscuring trees or more

61 Posnock further discusses the margin in *Trials* (87-93, 160-162, 225-228, 274-276).
demonstrably in New York’s “spreading … waste of speculation.” Without a stabilizing anchor, James loses his ability to hone in on “any claim to ‘personality’” and form a concrete impression. The “magic” that engenders the “Margin” makes him think of the excess that emerges from his desire to represent. Because he cannot metabolize what he sees, his mind pieces together the uneven, variegated impressions appearing before him to produce the illusion of a “total” impression beyond his grasp. The “Margin” is the figure that allows James to fathom the void and illuminates the endless chain of supplements that erase any distinction between inside and outside. James crosses (or breaks) the frame to find himself in the abyss from which everything grows. The Pullman epitomizes his experience of America and obscures his vision by revealing all the traces of everything absent. The lack of any present impression should be understood as the overwhelming existential sense of loss. Unable to make sense of all that is “materially possible” and the “total of American life,” James finds himself on a “scant flotilla” upon “the fathomless depth of water.” The Heideggerian world-picture he seeks both to conceive and grasp reaches its limit and shatters.

I mention Heidegger to prevent us from thinking of the sublime purely in terms of textuality and rhetoric. John Carlos Rowe reads The American Scene along similar lines when he states “that it is precisely this recognition that impressions depend upon prior determinations of our conceptual faculties that declares the impotence of any pure perception” (Theoretical 203). However, Rowe argues that James’s “impotence” arises from “the rhetorical figure under which we would class the ‘historical imagination’ of the restless analyst, who tries to make the muteness of modern America speak” (215).

62 See Hugh Silverman and Gary Aylesworth’s volume The Textual Sublime which includes the late work of Paul de Man.
Although the Kantian context of Rowe’s account is correct, the problem in question is not solely the failure of language. Focusing strictly on the “rhetorical figure” does not help us understand James as the “agent of perception” (*American* 353) or the effect that the “margin” has on his unique “mind’s eye.” James is not trying simply to make “America speak,” rather he wants to contain the voices he hears; the screeching music that comes from the oaten pipe. We should therefore not see him as impotent. Recall that it is only the “spectre of impotence which dogs the footsteps of perception” (606). James is never impotent as long as he continues to write. In addition, we have seen that there are moments when the “poetry of association” allows him to grasp the phenomenal world. But in contrast to the tranquil experiences of pleasure that appear scattered throughout *The American Scene*, the overwhelming presence of the southern landscape exacerbates the feeling of absence. It is both the literal presence of what James sees and the felt presence of the absent impressions that engender the sublime. The figure of the flotilla captures the link between his conflicted states of mind. As the social presence suffocates James, he sinks within the depth of his own imagination:

> Once the torch is at all vividly lighted it flares, for any pair of open eyes, over every scene, and with a presence that helps to explain their owner’s inevitable failure to conclude. He feels it in all his uncertainties, and he never just escapes concluding without the sense that this so fallacious neatness would more or less absurdly have neglected or sacrificed it. Not by any means that the Margin always

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63 Jacques Derrida would describe James’s ordeal as the presence of an absence (emblematic in the figure of the hymen). Yet the presence James imagines seems to be closer to what Heidegger calls dread or angst (in contrast to anxiety): the hallmark of inauthentic existence that defines being in relation to a particular object. In his critique of Paul de Man and Derrida, Harold Bloom remarks: “A poem begins because there is an absence. An image must be given, for a beginning, and so that absence ironically is called a presence. Or, a poem begins because there is too strong a presence, which needs to be imaged as an absence, if there is be any imagining at all” (*Wallace* 375). James is caught between an overwhelming felt presence and an absence that emerges from his desire to penetrate the American façade he witnesses.
affects him as standing for the vision of a possible greater good than what he sees in the given case – any more than as standing for a possible greater evil; these differences are submerged in the immense fluidity; they lurk confused, disengaged, in the more looming mass of the more, the more and more to come. And as yet nothing makes definite the probable preponderance of particular forms of the more. The one all positive appearance is of the perpetual increase of everything, the growth of the immeasurable muchness that shall constitute the deep sea into which the seeker for conclusions casts his nets. The fact that, with so many things present, so few of them are not on the way to become quite other, and possibly together different, things, conduces to the peculiar interest and, one often feels tempted to add, to the peculiar irritation of the country. (684)

James attempts to fathom the “Margin” but his mind becomes “hurried out of itself,” as Burke would argue, when he discovers “the fact that … so many things [are] present” that they become indistinguishable, a great blur. The ethics of the “Margin,” the “possible greater good” or “possible greater evil,” which would allow James to ascribe a sense of “value” to his observations of America becomes “submerged in the immense fluidity” of his perceptions. In fact, James directly draws upon the language of obscurity that Burke uses to describe the process: “they lurk confused, disengaged, in the more looming mass of the more, the more and more to come.” The “more” that the “Margin” produces implies the explosion of referents that blend together as the mind searches for an adequate representation that is both fixed and totalized. Yet James fails to discriminate what he sees and his attempt to “cast his nets” in search of control and “conclusions” only leads him further into the “deep sea” of his mind.64 He loses himself in the “fathomless depth of water,” an image of solitary isolation, like the “mighty sea” in which Isabel sinks or “the waste of waters, the bottomless grey expanse of straightness” (680) that

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64 Rowe also emphasizes how James’s “historical imagination” attempts to give shape and order to the historical traces that unfold around him. While my reading discloses the mind’s failure to properly order that which it perceives, we should see the totality of The American Scene, and James’s artistic process in general, as attempts to ameliorate a phenomenological insufficiency. See Henry Adams and Henry James (148-165).
appears before Merton Densher at the conclusion of *The Wings of the Dove*. The effect of this process is the simultaneous “peculiar interest,” or pleasure of being an observer of life, and the “peculiar irritation,” or pain of grasping one’s failure to observe fully and adequately. Throughout *The American Scene*, James repeatedly “casts his nets” – a figure resembling his more famous “huge-spider web … suspended in the chamber of consciousness” (*Theory* 35) that orients his theory of the novel as a “direct impression of life” (33) – and often finds that they are not wide enough and unable to accommodate the proliferating impressions he encounters.

Burke’s theory of sublime points to the stylistic features of writing but lacks an adequate understanding of the mind that can disclose the threshold between obscurity and clarity. Kant’s conceptual system, in contrast, defines the mind’s limits and enables us to evaluate how much “spreading” must occur to produce the effects we associate with the sublime. When James expresses his fear of “the perpetual increase of everything, the growth,” he points to the movement toward infinity that is the hallmark of Kant’s mathematical sublime. His “impressions” are “*large beyond all comparison*” (Kant 103) or simply “unbounded” (117). Perceiving an object’s unboundedness stymies the process by which the mind creates an adequate mental concept that the imagination can relate to reason: “when apprehension has reached the point where the partial presentations of the sensible intuitions that were first apprehended are already beginning to be extinguished in the imagination, as it proceeds to apprehend further ones, the imagination then loses as much on the one side as it gains on the other” (108). As James tries to “apprehend” what he observes, his ability to comprehend reaches a tipping point and previous apprehensions become “extinguished” while the imagination searches for the appropriate
relational comparison that would allow the mind to produce a judgment. Failure results in
the breakdown of the faculties where the mind becoming “agitated” (115). The sublime,
then, emerges in the mind “if a [thing] is excessive for the imagination (and the
imagination is driven to [such excess] as it apprehends [the thing] in intuition, then [the
thing] is, as it were, an abyss in which the imagination is afraid to lose itself” (115 sic).

The Kantian sublime seems to explain what occurs when the visionary tourist
observes “a greater quantity of vision … than might fit into decent form” (American
359). However, James does not confront a specific “unbounded” object and his agitation
is the result of the more general changes occurring in America. Though there is nothing
intrinsic to the appearance of the southern landscape that should confuse him, and while
another observer, a southerner or someone accustomed to trains might not seem
“irritated,” James nonetheless remains ensconced in a language that articulates an
experience of the sublime. “The impression in question,” he writes, “fed by however brief
an experience, kept overflowing and spreading in a wide waste of speculation” (424).
James cannot “fit” the general economy of modern America into the restricted economy
of the mind’s “form” and such an attempt “overflows” as to engender “waste” or what he
calls the “Margin.” Yet what constitutes “form” for James remains a question. In The
American Scene adequate form is a rather subjective judgment concerning history, social
institutions, domestic spaces, urban layout (e.g. New York and Philadelphia’s grid),
acceptable social decorum, both public manners and customs, as well as the rules that
structure language itself. Form implies the blessed rage within James to order his
variegated impressions: to find the center that can make them cohere. Form implies
repetition of familiar patterns that ground intelligibility. In the novel, as James will
discuss in his Prefaces, form involves the development of a plot, a beginning and end, and a center that binds the narrative together. He will call it the “seam” (Art 83) anticipating a Derridean concept that implies the stitching together of structure, the creation of order, but also the marker of separation and the scar emblematic of the ghostlier demarcations that haunt an order. Although James does not always specify the forms lacking in each impression, invoking the Kantian sublime reveals that his need to reconstruct a self must negotiate the tension between the uncontainable, worldly panorama the visionary tourist experiences and the finite, restricted, limited, bounded impressions he desires. In The American Scene, James’s mind is the fixed space that cannot withstand the onslaught of impressions it receives: whether they are sociological, technological, or otherwise.

The American Scene fits Frye’s definition of a romance cited earlier: “the search of the … desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality.” The “fulfillment” would entail the harmony provided by the “poetry of association.” Instead, the visionary tourist’s movement across the American landscape entails an oscillation between an idealized Arcadia that will “deliver” him from

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65 The best discussion of form in James is R.P. Blackmur’s “The Loose and Baggy Monsters of Henry James” in Studies in Henry James. What he calls “technical or executive” (125) or “theoretic” or “classic” form (126) refers to the fusion of ethical and aesthetic problems that entails “an attempt to incorporate, to give body to, to incarnate so much as it is possible to experience, to feel it, the life of the times” (144). Dorothy Hale and more recently Caroline Levine repeat Blackmur’s argument unwittingly by assuming that James, Blackmur, and pre-war formalists disavow social experience. Hale writes: “at first glance, nothing seems less committed to the value of social interplay than these Prefaces” (15). Levine similarly proposes to “expan[d] our usual definitions of form in literary studies to include patterns of sociopolitical experience” (2). That Hale ostensibly writes about James and his critical legacy makes the omission of Blackmur (she homogenizes his work with Lubbock and others in two cursory references) inexcusable. Levine’s argument also rests on the false assumption that pre-New Historicist formalism ignores social concerns and that New Historicism ignores form.
the “anxieties” of the “poetry of motion,” and the momentary glimpses of the “poetry of association” that renew his faith in this quest. The journey becomes a repetitious cycle where the catastrophe of the sublime engenders a disintegrated subject who reconstitutes himself through the movement of his pen. Rather than ultimately frustrate his hunger for impressions, James remarks that his ordeal aboard the Pullman in the Carolinas “was to come home to me presently in Florida” (692). But in the final chapter the imagery takes up the same problem again, begins anew, by revealing how a “small sharp anguish” develops in relation to the “act of selection and the necessity of omission” when James attempts to capture “the total image” (701). Acutely aware of his predicament, he nonetheless reproduces another image, the repetitious images that sustain *The American Scene*’s narrative. In Florida he discovers himself about to “pluck but a fruit or two from any branch” (701) even as he indulges the belief that he has entered a new garden with “the exquisite sense of the dream come true” (710). Garden imagery pervades the chapter as James sees himself caught “beneath the spell … of the treasure-ship of romance” in a “fantastic Florida, with its rank vegetation and its warm, heroic, amorous air” (713). Yet the dream of “gardens and groves” (718) that occupies many of the descriptions cannot withstand “some vivid impression of the growing quantity of force available for … conquest” (719). Coupled with the images of the garden and the freshness of the Floridian air, James detects the “sublime hotel-spirit” (715) he saw in New York which has now become an ersatz Eden that he calls “Vanity Fair in full blast” (723).

*The American Scene* feigns a narrative progression that belies its repetition. The different chapters and descriptions allow James to describe his singular encounters and cast his critical judgments but his attempt to understand America is continually thwarted.
He experiences the sublime in terms of what Hertz describes as blockage: both the narrative and the endeavor to grasp America reveal a subject confronting a “dismaying plurality of objects” (53). On the one hand, the sublime’s blockage disrupts James’s narrative; it inhibits the sense of progress he would seem to make in terms of apprehending America and discovering its fecund artistic potential. On the other hand, Hertz argues that the sublime is a defensive reaction that prevents the subject from succumbing to the abyss and therefore becomes “the guarantor of the self”s own integrity as an agent” (53). If the sublime stymies James and his quest for America, it helps him secure his trust in his artistic powers. But *The American Scene* only goes so far toward self-restoration. James learns that he cannot escape the repetitious cycle and discover a stable self that is structured solely in relation to a fluctuating outside world. The last section of the final chapter, which appears under the headings “The Last Regret” and “The Last Question,” hints at his newfound knowledge.

Returning to the Pullman “haunted … [by] the thought of a lost treasure,” James “settle[s] at the eternal car window, to the mere sightless contemplation, the forlorn view, of an ugly – ah, such an ugly, wintering, waiting world” (732). He is now consciously aware that his “eye had perhaps been jaundiced by the breach of a happy spell” and the source of his regret is that “the poetic effect” he found in unique corners of America would disappear “in the vast and exquisite void” which is “inflated again with the hotel-spirit and exhaling modernity at every pore” (733). James turns to the future and describes the “boundless immensity” that will soon make its “conquest of nature and

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66 Hertz works out his characterization of the sublime through a reading of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*. The episode he analyzes is the visit to Bartholomew Fair and the encounter with a London beggar. My argument regarding James’s repatriation may be understood in similar terms since Hertz’s reading hinges on the poet’s encounter with a foreign other.
space” in a “great monotonous rumble” (734). He personifies the conversation between the American future and the restless analyst with sarcastic dialogue. The “rumble” from the future exclaims, “See what I’m making, what I’m making!” (734), while the restless analyst decries, “Oh for a split or a chasm, one groans beside your plate-glass, oh for an unbridgeable abyss or an insuperable mountain!” (736). America continues to beat its wings in the void even as it ostensibly claims to rest on a solid foundation. James therefore desires a new form of blockage, an abyss, “split or a chasm,” or the erection of an “insuperable” mountain that can thwart the expansionist ethos. But he also asks the abyss or mountain to impede his own journey. He craves the blockage because it guarantees the “self’s own integrity as an agent” even if it immerses him in pain or, like Isabel, forces him to return to the scene of the crime.

*The American Scene* concludes with a note of humor and even arrogance. James proclaims that he “could so indulge” such an image even though he remained “ignorant” of the “criminal continuity” between the American margin and “the mighty Mississippi” (734). That would be his next impression he tells us in the final sentence and the Mississippi seems to suddenly arise in the mind’s eye as that abyss or mountain that he will not be able to cross. While James traveled as far as California on his trip, his impressions of the West would never be published. He was already at work on the New York Edition by the time *The American Scene* appeared and his work would occupy him for several years after he returned to England.67 If there is satisfaction in the concluding thought about America, despite the sense of anger that pervades *The American Scene*, it

67 The sequel to *The American Scene* had the tentative title *The Sense of the West*. As Anesko observes in “James in America,” publishing complications prevented the volume’s appearance.
might be because James’s pilgrimage can be read as a relative success. Just as he expresses contempt for his native land, shifting his attention to the New York Edition offers another opportunity for penetration. Refusing the external world for the interior self is how James moves from *The American Scene* to the Prefaces. No longer a Hegelian skeptic who reduplicates his internal divisions through an immersion in history, he becomes a stoic. For James, like Isabel, it presents “a very straight path” (*Portrait* 490) that requires revising his novels and retracing the steps of his career from his early work up through the present moment.
CHAPTER 3
THE PENETRATING IMAGINATION

Work on the Prefaces was already under way when *The American Scene* appeared in February of 1907. By December of that same year, James reports having received the first two volumes of the New York Edition.68 In the same month, moreover, he describes himself in a letter to W.E. Norris “engaged … in a perpetual adventure, the most thrilling and in every way the greatest of my life” (*Letters* 483). It appears that his productivity has worked wonders: “my whole consciousness is transformed by the intense alleviation of it, and I lose much time in pinching myself to see if this be not, really, ‘none of I.’ … It may give a glimmering sense of the degree of redemption” (483). The overlapping composition of *The American Scene* and Prefaces implies the need to read them together and suggests the reciprocal role they play in James’s process of “redemption.”69 Whereas the grasping imagination allows James to fathom the limits of his artistic prowess through the slow realization that he cannot capture a totalizing picture of the phenomenal world or penetrate its surface to ascertain its meaning, it also revitalizes his sense of authorial agency and makes possible the penetration into the self that occurs in the Prefaces. The

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69 James also wrote other works during this period, most notably “The Jolly Corner,” published in 1908 but written in 1906. It is easy to read Spencer Brydon’s return to New York and the confrontation with his demonic other, the three fingered ghost, as a simple allegory of James’s repatriation. However, I follow Daniel Mark Fogel’s “A New Reading of Henry James’s ‘The Jolly Corner’” that warns against seeing a strict overlap between James and Brydon because the latter chooses to redeem his American identity in his love for Alice while James rejects his native land.
move from *The American Scene* to the Prefaces marks a shift from a historical world that erases the past to the recoverable and malleable realm of memory. Recalling the origins of his collected works is an opportunity for James to revisit the past and capture “the growth of [my] whole operative consciousness” (*Art* 4).

To read the Prefaces as a grand act of self-reinvention is unquestionably part of James’s desire. For example, R.P Blackmur justifies gathering the Prefaces into a single volume by citing a letter to Howells where James remarks, “I shall want to collect them together for that purpose [to make them a “sort of plea for Criticism”] and furnish them with a final Preface” (qtd. in Blackmur 16). Critics including Blackmur, Percy Lubbock, René Wellek, James E. Miller, and Laurence Holland take James’s “plea” quite literally and interpret the Prefaces as his attempt to theorize his own creative process or as his notes toward a theory of the novel. In this context, the Prefaces might be read as a Hegelian encyclopedia that strives for a definitive account of the novel as an art form. Such an assumption complements James’s effort to enshrine himself in the New York Edition and create the monument where he can achieve his ideal of literary mastery. My

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70 See Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction*, Wellek’s “Henry James’s Literary Theory and Criticism,” Holland’s *The Expense of Vision*, and Miller’s “Henry James and Reality.” Lubbock is the chief exemplar in a long line of critics – including Joseph Warren Beach’s *The Method of Henry James* and Ward’s *The Search for Form* – who study James’s artistic technique by reading his Prefaces. Wellek, on the other hand, judges the Prefaces a failure as criticism, calling them commentaries instead. Holland offers the best reading of James through the lens of the Prefaces. Also see Hale’s *Social Formalism*.

71 While I turn to the politics of James’s reception in my final chapter, David McWhirter’s volume *Henry James’s New York Edition* offers the best account of James’s construction of a mythology of the self. In addition, John H. Pearson’s *The Prefaces of Henry James* argues that the Prefaces aim to shape how a reader approaches the novels. This study, the only full-length monograph devoted to the Prefaces, claims that James gains control of his art, allowing for perpetual self-reinvention, by positioning himself as an authoritative reader who can enable subsequent readers to follow his tracks.
own approach contextualizes the Prefaces within the quest-romance that defines the late work and aims to discover a middle ground situated between those critics who would esteem the value of Jamesian mastery and those who would break with its aura. More specifically, reading the Prefaces as a fiction reveals James caught in the struggle for artistic control of his work at the same moment that he learns to cope with the growing realization of his inability to master the past.\textsuperscript{72}

The ordered structure made available by the New York Edition presents a clear opportunity to overcome the repetition that continually thwarts the visionary tourist’s journey in \textit{The American Scene}. A Preface per novel equates to an experiential chapter or episode from James’s life beginning with the early work and culminating with \textit{The Golden Bowl}. The structure also allows him to impose a pattern on the chaos of history by providing the formal architecture that America lacked.\textsuperscript{73} Toward the beginning of \textit{The American Scene}, James asks, “What ‘form,’ meanwhile could there be in the almost sophisticated dinginess of the present destitution?” (377). The absence of form – whether form includes the available structures that organize the “social organism” (489) or

\textsuperscript{72} Goetz argues: “If James’s fiction is already an implicit narrative of his life as an artist, then the Prefaces, which take the form of a chronological review of his fiction, compose a kind of autobiography of the literary works, rendering their referential value of James explicit” (6). For two more autobiographical readings see Mutlu Konuk Blasing’s \textit{The Art of Life} and O. Alan Weltzien’s “The Seeds of James’s Grand Monument.”

\textsuperscript{73} Hershel Parker’s “Deconstructing \textit{The Art of the Novel} and Liberating James’s Prefaces” argues against any attempt to assume an order to the Prefaces; especially the order provided by Blackmur’s edition. Though Parker’s research demonstrates that the Prefaces were not written chronologically – for example, \textit{The Wings of the Dove} is ninth in the series – his argument does not pertain to the Prefaces I choose to examine nor does it undermine the general stylistic and thematic coherence that many scholars find. In fact, Parker’s inability to distinguish the precise order of the Prefaces to \textit{Roderick Hudson} and \textit{The American} supports my argument for seeing them as interwoven.
otherwise – haunts James and prevents him from grasping the distinctions that would enable intelligibility. Drawing on his letters to Wells, Blackmur describes the importance of form for James as follows:

> Life itself – the subject of art – was formless and likely to be a waste, with its situations leading to endless bewilderment; while art, the imaginative representation of life, selected, formed, made lucid and intelligent, gave value and meaning to, the contrasts and oppositions and processions of the society that confronted the artist. (43)

Fanny Assingham corroborates Blackmur in *The Golden Bowl* when she remarks, “And the forms … are two thirds of conduct” (720). Maggie’s effort to restore “her idea of equilibrium” (798), which the “piece of waste” (719) Charlotte violates, emerges through famous images of the imbalanced carriage, the bridge game, or the isolated set pieces (conversations on the staircase for example) that pervade the novel. The Prefaces offer James the necessary form to create what Blackmur calls an “imaginative representation of [his] life” without encroaching upon “the horror of the thing hideously behind” (*Golden Bowl* 892) that James experienced during his repatriation.

But the attempt to trace the growth of an imagination within the New York Edition’s architecture presents complications. Holland describes how the Prefaces explore James’s “crisis of creation” (158) where the novelist’s discussions of the strategies employed to execute his novels and tales successfully becomes a revelation of his “religion of doing” and a “technical adventure” (157). James’s poetics of the novel give the Prefaces “their profound coherence” (158) but recognizing his “crisis of creation” as an extension of his crisis of identity puts them in a different light. The trajectory of the Prefaces clearly enables a movement from *Roderick Hudson* to *The Golden Bowl* that allows James to connect a beginning (his early work) to an end (the
major phase novels). Yet repetition persists within the ostensible teleology and belies the sense of growth James aims to depict. Of course any autobiographical act necessarily repeats the life it would represent and the Prefaces have the added effect of also repeating the novels and tales to which they are attached. However, there is a third mode of repetition that occurs within and between the Prefaces themselves. Each begins with James trying to recall the germs of his work and subsequently dramatizes the challenge of representing his idea or subject for a novel within the genre’s formal economy. While the topics shift from problems of narrative perspective, representing location, photographic front-pieces, developing characters, framing scenes, centers of consciousness, and so forth, the Prefaces, as stories about stories, repeat a basic plot: the novelist recalls the origin of a text, describes his process of writing it, and evaluates the success of his product. It is as if James reads with his mature artistic sensibility and judges all his works in relation to the degree of their fit. “Growth” therefore reveals itself insofar as it can confirm the authority of the master who looks back on his life’s achievements.

J. Hillis Miller isolates two forms of repetition in literature that can help us further make sense of the Prefaces: Platonic repetition, which posits an ideal archetype that the writer re-presents, and Nietzschean repetition, which assumes that the lack of an ideal archetype produces repetition through difference. That is, the very inability to correspond to a Platonic ideal forces the writer to repeat the failed attempt to discover an authoritative ground for the work of art. Both forms of repetition are inherent in James’s work. The Arcadian myth and the lost America of James’s youth resemble the

74 Blasing (55-76) discusses the first mode of repetition while Goetz (82-110) focuses on the second.

75 See Miller’s *Fiction and Repetition* (1-21).
idealized world that *The American Scene* aims to re-present. Yet when the visionary tourist sees America beat its wings in the void, it becomes apparent how the lack of an idealized world facilitates a repeated encounter with an abysmal sublime. The Prefaces also begin with James assuming an ideal standard for the literary work of art. But when he rereads his early novels with his “maturer mind” (*Art* 339) he notices divergence. The early work seems to have been born beating its own wings in the void: these texts came into existence without the foundation that the older James fathoms. The question now, for James, is to discover a way of making the inconsistency of his youthful novels align with the authoritative vision he possesses as the master. How can the ungrounded early work demonstrate a necessary correspondence with an older authorial self who looks back to cast his judgment? How, in other words, can James accommodate the differences entailed by Nietzschean repetition within his need to espouse a Platonic ideal that might underwrite his bid for literary mastery? While James intuits a discrepancy between his “maturer” powers and his youthful naivety, he is unable to articulate, clearly and concisely, the attributes he possesses as a so-called master. The task of making a novice writer align with the veteran becomes a process of discovering exactly what makes the elder statesman worthy of his authority.

Before James can recalibrate the relation between the variegated selves he encounters during revisions, he must overcome the repetition that reveals discrepancies and find his idealized work of literature; the text that confirms his sense of mastery. But the distance between past and present selves continually shows itself throughout his discussions of the challenge of literary representation. The conflict between the mind (that possesses the literary subject) and text (that must represent the mind) which
dominates the Prefaces overlaps with the gap between the ideal and the material or
historical self that James aims to close. In the opening paragraphs to the Preface to
*Roderick Hudson*, James uses the figure of the painter’s canvas and the geometric circle
to describe the lack of fit between a novel and the idealized picture of life it aims to
represent and contain. The first four Prefaces dramatize this seemingly unresolvable
conflict. In the subsequent pages of the *Roderick Hudson* Preface, James argues that a
center of consciousness can stabilize an insecure structure (that is, the novel as well as the
Jamesian subject). But the Preface to *The American* reverses the scenario. Returning to
the past conjures up for James all of the excess that was lost during the initial act of
creation and that a center of consciousness must exclude. He finds buried within the text
his original literary idea and fears that rescuing it will explode the novel’s form. The
Preface to *The American* reveals the unstable nature of a novel’s center: its ability to
implode the structure from within. The opening Prefaces thus depict a dialectic of
containment and liberation which continues in the Prefaces to *The Portrait of a Lady* and
*The Princess Casamassima*. Whereas Isabel Archer must be confined to the house of
fiction, Hyacinth Robinson desires to free himself from the social world he inhabits. Put
otherwise: if the Prefaces to *Roderick Hudson* and *The American* explore the act of
representing life in a novel from the author’s perspective, the Prefaces to *The Portrait of
a Lady* and *The Princess Casamassima* focus on how a character experiences the world.
Nevertheless, all four Prefaces depict the dialectic of containment and liberation which,
for James, corresponds to a tension between his desire to show the growth of the self and
the need to construct it artificially. Growth suggests natural continuity, freedom, but also
threatens to disrupt form. Containment, in contrast, implies artifice. The Preface to *The
Tragic Muse resolves the conflict. Once James theorizes what he calls the process of foreshortening, the subsequent Prefaces evaluate the effectiveness of his method. It is only when James revisits The Ambassadors that he discovers the ideal work that conforms directly to his artistic standards. The repetition that occurs throughout the Prefaces ironically produces a telos when James belatedly fathoms his artistic prowess when reading The Ambassadors. Once his “maturer” powers are firmly established, the Preface to The Golden Bowl reflects upon the entire revisionary project and enables James to theorize how to make the “deviations and differences” (Art 336) intrinsic to Nietzschean repetition conform to his idealized vision of the work of art.

The Canvas of Life

The suggestion that the Prefaces will depict the “growth of his whole operative consciousness” occurs at the end of the first paragraph of the Roderick Hudson Preface. “Renewing [his] acquaintance” with his first significant novel is akin, for James, to the “revival of an all but extinct relation” that produces “more kinds of interest and emotion than he shall find easy to express” (3). The central “interest” will turn out to be studying the “art of representation” (3). But the “emotion” that excites him, which, as he puts it, makes him “condemned forever and all anxiously to study,” is the new “light” that returning to his early work refuses to throw onto “that veiled face of his Muse” (3). James desires to discover “his Muse” and access what we might think of as the unifying imaginative force that binds the author of Roderick Hudson (the younger Henry James) to the revisionist (the older Henry James) and therefore allows him to make the two figures

76 In “The Art of Fiction,” James justifies the vocation of the novelist: “the only reason for the existence of the novel is that it does attempt to represent life” (Theory 30).
cohere. He wants knowledge of the transcendental form of creative genius that can
overcome the divisions between selves that returning to the past exposes. When James
invokes the “art of representation,” he refers to the literal art of representing the
adventures of Rowland Mallet, Roderick Hudson, and Christina Light, as well as the task
of representing that inaccessible Muse, or coming into contact with her, in order to
assuage the anxiety of revision he deems both “arduous” and a “refreshment” (3).

James quickly discovers himself within “a widening, not in a narrowing circle”
(3). The limitless potential of the work of art threatens to overwhelm the text and swallow
up the artist in an ever-expanding vista akin to the abysmal imagery depicted in his
novels and *The American Scene*. Containing “infinite … experience” requires finding a
method that might “organise … some system of observation” (3). James is in search of
the appropriate structure that would not only define the limits of the “art of
representation,” but also unify the variety of selves that the revisionist will encounter
while reading his corpus. He needs a system that can offer coherence and unity and he
therefore imagines the Prefaces as “notes” he can use “to measure, for guidance” the
“fruits” (3) of his literary output. They are an “explorer’s note-book,” a figure to which
he will return, that represents the “contributive value” (3) of the accumulating facts of
experience. The goal of the Prefaces cannot be clearer in the sentences leading up to
James’s declaration about tracing the growth of his consciousness:

This is why, as one looks back, the private history of any sincere work, however
modest in pretensions, looms with its own completeness in the rich, ambiguous
aesthetic air, and seems at once to borrow a dignity and to mark, so to say, a
station. This is why, reading over, for revision, correction and republication, the
volumes here in hand, I find myself, all attentively, in the presence of some such
recording scroll or engraved commemorative table – from which the “private”
character, moreover, quite insists on dropping out. (4)
Each novel is a “station” or a relic of the past distanced from the revisionist in its “completeness.” When revising the work, James adulterates the novel and eradicates its personal or “private” existence. Revision is his method of tampering with the historical record. It reveals, through the very need for “correction,” the discrepancies that illuminate the incompleteness of the Jamesian subject. By eliminating the “private” element from his work, James aspires to bring them into contact with autonomous writing subject who would exist above and beyond the contingencies of the written text: he seeks to close the gap between the “Medusa-face” of fragmentation and the unifying ideal of the “veiled face of his Muse.” It is in this context that he remarks, “these notes represent … the continuity of an artist’s endeavour, the growth of his whole operative consciousness and, best of all, perhaps, their own tendency to multiply, with the implication, thereby, of a memory much enriched” (4). The multiplication of selves that emerge from his now enriched memory produces hope that James can capture the “growth” of his consciousness in relation to an understanding of its totalized existence.

He assumes a “backward view” that can represent “his whole unfolding” (4) and the labor of the Prefaces will be to transform it into a forward glance that can unveil the Muse.

The explorer James mentions in the first paragraph traverses the widening circle of representation in which he finds himself with the hope of finding “so sustained a system, so prepared a surface” that it can illuminate “a visibly-appointed stopping-place” (6). But because “really, universally, relations stop nowhere,” James must devise strategies to overcome “the exquisite problem of the artist [which] is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall appear” (5). Locating the appropriate stopping place can preserve the structural integrity of the work of art or
provide an intelligible self-definition for the writer. Yet it also threatens to disconnect the writer from other potential selves and commit violence to the germ of the novel. James labels the problem the “perpetual predicament … [of] the continuity of things” (5).

Maintaining continuity (linking beginning to end) creates surplus and excess that undermines form. Conversely, breaking from continuity (representing the excess) will eliminate any sense of progression. Continuity, in other words, can become mechanical just as ungoverned or uncontrolled continuity (“relations stop nowhere”) can become chaotic. The figures that James employs in the first two Prefaces capture the conflict between the overwhelming unbounded continuity of things that exceeds the geometry of the circle and the continuity that would close the circle and enable coherence. For example, the novelist becomes a “a young embroiderer of the canvas of life” who begins his “work in terror, fairly, of the vast expanse of that surface, of the boundless number of its distinct perforations for the needle, and of the tendency inherent in his many coloured flowers and figures to cover and consume as many as possible of the little holes” (5). The “embroiderer” is a craftsman who artfully constructs the representation of life he apprehends while the figure of the “canvas” is a bouquet of flowers emblematic of the

77 J. Hillis Miller identifies the flower as a catachresis that calls attention to the contradiction between the infinite “canvas of life” and the finite embroidery necessary for literary representation. The discrepancy, for Miller, marks the unreadability of a text. See “The Figure in the Carpet.” In contrast, Michael Sprinker’s Imaginary Relations argues that by pinpointing the irreconcilable nature of formal unity and aesthetic knowledge (what I am calling coherent growth and the infinite expanse of the canvas of life), Miller “restrict[s] the movement of reading … to stabilize its signifying potential in an intuition” (57). However, Sprinker’s reading of Jamesian theory simplifies his account of revision by yielding sole authority to the revised versions of a text: “the dream of revision is to cancel without preserving the memory of the original. Revision does not generate a historical dialectic between past and present; it replaces one synchronic structure with another” (48). As I argue, revision for James necessarily implies dialectic since the revised text is never finished and always-in tension with its previous manifestations.
various ways “relations” can grow and evolve on their own. The metaphor in question specifically addresses the relationship between the artifice of a novel and its natural, organic existence. Throughout the Prefaces, James repeatedly turns to images of germs, seeds, flowers, and organic growth that prove at odds with the construction entailed by the house of fiction or the New York Edition as a monument. The same problem preoccupies Wordsworth in *The Prelude* where the task of re-constructing the poet’s life undermines his effort to remain faithful to the correspondent breeze – what James calls “wind blown germs” (*Art* 43) – and the growth of imagination. As O. Alan Weltzien argues, James’s organic and inorganic metaphors allow him to reconcile the tension between the autobiographical record of “life as both flux and span, becoming and being” (266). James strikes a balance between construction that can tame the potential tyranny of uncontrolled growth and an organic conception of form that is faithful to the chance and chaos of life. The figure of the explorer demonstrates the labor required to accommodate the challenge self-revision presents.

Writing *Roderick Hudson*, James recalls, was an experience that “put [me] quite out to sea” (4). The nautical metaphor allows him to contrast the natural obstacles – “hug[ing] the shore” and encountering “shallow waters and sandy covers” – with the need to “master as yet of no vessel constructed to carry a sail” (4). We might assume that the canvas being woven is the potential sail for James’s malformed “vessel.” In fact, prior to his invocation of the embroidery image, James links writing *Roderick Hudson* to an “employment of canvas” that will aid him on the “blue southern sea [that] seemed to spread immediately before me and the breath of the spice-islands to be already in the breeze” (4). If the Prefaces are an “explorer’s notebooks,” and James, the writer of
Roderick Hudson, is a sea captain who simultaneously requires the natural elements and an adequately built vessel to navigate, then it would seem that drawing the appropriate geometric circle, a figure akin to “casting the nets” which we saw in The American Scene, requires constant revisions and adjustments to reach a destination. In other words, for James, as in Wordsworth’s Prelude, the breeze can either direct the writer to his destination, aboard the man-made ship of imagination, or provide too much inspiration and steer him off course.

Dragging the Depths

The opening paragraphs of the Roderick Hudson Preface frame the journey that James undertakes as he searches for an adequate geometry to preserve the continuity he desires without losing his way in the thicket of excessive memories that his rediscovered “relations” illuminate. That the journey entails the production of a new fiction (both the Prefaces and the revised version of a particular text) as well as an imagined authorial self (an imagined past and future self) is evident in James’s description of revision as a “ghostly interest” (10) where he “live[s] back into a forgotten state … [that] breathes upon the dead reasons of things, buried as they are in the texture of the work” (11). A conjurer of ghosts encounters old intentions, successes, and failures in discovering the “dead reasons of things.” Revision thus enables James to return to the literal past, embodied in the work under consideration, and “revive” (11) the memory of his former self, the lost past. His “creative intimacy is reaffirmed,” he notes, when he sees himself as a “painter who passes over his old sunk canvas a wet sponge that shows him what may still come again” (11). James believes that his past writings contain “a few buried
secrets” (11) that the revisionist can emancipate in the interest of coming into contact with that veiled face of the muse. But he subordinates recovering the strata of memory or digging up the treasure to discerning how a representation of the infinite “canvas of life” can be contained. Just as we saw in the Cape Cod episode from *The American Scene*, James calls his solution the “principle of simplification” (15). This time, however, it is not the external world that needs “simplification” but James’s mind itself:

To give the image and the sense of certain things while still keeping them subordinate to his [the author’s] plan, keeping them in relation to matters more immediate and apparent, to give all the sense, in a word, without all the substance or all the surface, and so to summarise and foreshorten, so to make values both rich and sharp, that the mere procession of items and profiles is not only, for the occasion, superseded, but is, for essential quality, almost “compromised” – such a case of delicacy proposes itself at every turn to the painter of life who wishes both to treat his chosen subject and to confine his necessary picture. (14)

In one typical late Jamesian sentence we see the entire gambit of the New York Edition Prefaces laid out. Writing a novel requires foreshortening, as we will see in greater detail later, but confining the picture prevents the artist from realizing it in its totality. The “law of mere elimination,” in other words, can make canvas of life suffer from “abject omission and mutilation” (14). The dismal gloom implied by “mere” suggests that James is aware of the need to simplify but unclear as to the correct formula. What must be eliminated? Will the sacrifice of “the image and the sense of certain things” also lead to a sacrifice of the “values” that make for a “rich and sharp” representation? James must find the correct balance if he is to recover the buried treasures he sees in his texts. To borrow and mix his own metaphor, it is a matter of adjusting one’s sails so that the wind (rediscovered germs) does not blow the architect too far off course. Doing so means that James will inevitably re-encounter “horizons and abysses” since it is “into these” that he believes “we must plunge on some other occasion” (15).
The explorer may be unsure of his direction but James soon tells us that the art of confinement requires “equilibrium” and occurs when the writer finds a work’s “centre, the point of command of all the rest” (15). Recognizing that Rowland Mallet controls *Roderick Hudson* provides a ground for the novelistic system James desires. But the final sentence of the Preface notes how the “multiplication of touches had produced even more life than the subject required” (19). Even with a center anchoring the representational canvas, revisiting it as a point of origin can still produce uncontrollable growth in the guise of “even more life.” A center, that is, may expand infinitely in any direction. The Preface to *The American* isolates this problem in two ways. First, the center threatens the integrity of the form that contains it if the artist fails to properly circumscribe his depiction of the main character’s (e.g. Christopher Newman’s) experience. Second, beginning with the center can prevent the novelist from knowing the destination of his exploration and produce an unbalanced work: how far and in what direction does one travel? The circumstances of serialization clarify. Early installments of *The American* appeared before James completed the novel. He therefore felt himself transformed into an “anxious novelist condemned to the economy of serialisation” (20). To describe the difficulties facing a writer who must finish a work tethered to parts of it already in print, James returns to the sea voyage metaphor:

Recognising after I was launched the danger of an inordinate leak – since the ship has truly a hole in its side more than sufficient to have sunk it – I may not have managed … to stop my ears against the noise of the waters and pretend to myself I was afloat: being indubitably … at sea, with no harbour for refuge till the end of my serial voyage. (21)

If the Prefaces are James’s “explorer’s note-books,” his man-made vessels (his novels) require a Ulysses-like captain to withstand the “noise” of the natural world that can steer
the ship off course. The apparent aimless “serial voyage” that lacks any “refuge” recalls the infinite and endless chain of representations constantly threatening to transgress the bounds of the geometric circle. James possesses Christopher Newman as a stable reference point, a center that would otherwise orient his ship, but the possible directions to take his protagonist leaves the author in search of a “harbour” or some final destination, a last serial installment which may prevent the novel from aimlessly drifting across the canvas.

The Preface to *The American* extends and reverses the concerns of the *Roderick Hudson* Preface. How to discover the destination with a point of origin known? How to keep the center grounded so that the demarcated circle does not shift and slide over the canvas? The problem seems to be an inability to reconcile the natural growth of the center and the need to construct it willfully. James describes the germ prior to embarking on his serial voyage as follows: “I was charmed with my idea … and precisely because it had so much to give, I think, must I have dropped it for the time into the deep well of unconscious cerebration: not without the hope, doubtless, that it might eventually emerge from that reservoir” (22-23). Placing the “idea” in a “deep well” presents the “hope” that it may grow and assume a shape dictated by the “unconscious.” It is James’s attempt to allow for the natural growth of a germ without unnecessary intervention. But as the “idea” grows at the bottom of the “well,” it becomes, shifting metaphors, “the buried treasure … with a firm iridescent surface and a notable increase of weight” (23). Part of the danger of his “serial voyage” is that the “idea” guiding James remains hidden and cumbersome. He has difficulty fully accessing it and the ship must continually sacrifice elements of it before belatedly recognizing that they were needed after all. Once James
describes revising *The American*, the most heavily revised of all the novels he included in the New York Edition, he expands upon his metaphor. “It is a pleasure to perceive,” he writes, “how again and again the shrunken depths of old work yet permit themselves to be sounded or … ‘dragged’: the long pole of memory stirs and rummages the bottom, and we fish up such fragments and relics of the submerged life and the extinct consciousness as tempt us to piece them together” (26). The act of revision is nothing more than repeating the sea voyage after recognizing the initial trip’s navigational errors, where and why it sprung leaks and what cargo was lost. We see a similar desire to retrace the steps of a journey in the conclusion of *The American Scene*. James, returning to the train at the end of his visit to Florida, finds himself “haunted … as [to] the thought of a lost treasure” while he takes his last glance at the “ugly, wintering, waiting world” (732). In the Prefaces, however, James is able to recover the “lost treasure” of youth that he calls the “fragments and relics” of his initial literary adventure. The sponge retouching the canvas of life is now a rescue vessel dragging the depths of the unconscious so that James may “piece [himself] together.”

Yet James writes that he “did not in the event drag over the Channel a lengthening chain” (28). The threat of losing himself on the rescue mission seems too great and he observes that the relative success of his initial “serial voyage” is enough to grant him some satisfaction. He is willing to admit that rereading his novel allows for “the joy of living over, as a chapter of experience, the particular intellectual adventure” (29) but bringing himself to sound the depths of the water risks, it would seem, losing oneself at sea. It would expose him, in other words, to too much treasure and place him in the original predicament: navigating a ship that threatens to capsize under its own weight.
The novel, however flawed, is evidence of his “effort of labor” and “torment and expression” and a testament that “he will have lived!” (29-30). That James has already revised his text undermines the veracity of his claims. Yet despite his revisions, *The American* stands as “the sign of bondage and forfeiture” and to “expect … freedom and ease” or “free selection” (30) is to risk capsizing the boat. When he subsequently turns his attention to Christopher Newman and the romance it is precisely the sense of freedom and liberation that he fears. The “air of romance” or “experience liberated” (30) is the principal source of *The American*’s flaws. Christopher Newman, the center that would structure the novel, is the product of a beguiled novelist who floats in the “car of the imagination” attached to the “balloon of experience” (33) but does not recognize that he drifts aimlessly since the rope anchoring him to the earth has been cut without detection. A novel threatens to implode from within, if its center cannot hold, if it too hastily seeks freedom via the “panting pursuit of danger,” which “is the pursuit of life itself” where “the dream of an intenser experience becomes rather some vision of a sublime security like that enjoyed on the flowery plains of heaven, where we may conceive ourselves proceeding in ecstasy from one prodigious phase and form of it to another” (32). Fully representing the “flowery plains of heaven” is beyond the novelist’s means.

The Figured Void

The Preface to *Roderick Hudson* reveals the scope of the Prefaces by defining the gap between past and present selves in terms of the infinite canvas of life and its conflict with the strictures of textual representation. Locating a central consciousness in Rowland Mallet seems to offer a solution that can limit the excess of representation. But the
Preface to *The American* demonstrates that the structural core of a novel is unsecure: the novelist’s leaky ship searches for an unknown destination and suggests how the uncontrolled growth of a novelistic germ can disrupt form. Excess results because representing life or even part of it requires sacrifices that may mutilate the work of art. James must therefore chart out his course in advance and, in his execution, align the impossible representation of the real with the dangers inherent to the romance. In the case of *The American*, he needs “to make and keep Newman consistent,” which entails “get[ting] into the skin of the creature” and producing the “effect of a centre, which [would] most economise its value” (37-38). *The American* less successfully gets into the skin of a character than *The Portrait of a Lady*. The famous question of “Well, what will she do?” (53) requires securing a perspective outside Isabel Archer where the appropriate “set of relations” or “situations” (the real) can test and limit the strength of her active (romantic) imagination. The element of Isabel that immediately fascinates James is “the whole matter of the growth … [the] lurking forces of expansion … [and the] upspringing in the seed … to grow as tall as possible” (42). He believes, moreover, that thwarting her pursuit of autonomy through her potential “relations” is necessary to make the novel a success: “to imagine, to invent and select and piece together the situations most useful and favourable to the sense of the creatures themselves” (43). The question concerns what James calls “architecture” and he argues that “too little” is better than “too much” since the latter risks “interfering with my measure of the truth” (43).

The need for architecture that both facilitates and hinders Isabel’s growth is “the high price of the novel as a literary form” (45) and leads to James’s figure of the “house of fiction” (46). The Prefaces constitute their own house that includes “a number of
possible windows” of various dimensions and subsequently yields different angles of insight into James’s struggle to discover and “write the history of the growth of one’s imagination” (47). By containing growth within an edifice of his own creation – the New York Edition – James “detains it, preserves, protects, enjoys it” (47) or more simply entertains the voyeurism his structure affords. The house is both an asylum and a prison: a locale to place and preserve a germ but also limit its “spreading field” over the “human scene” (46). Imposing an architectural form on a creature of imagination allows her to grow while keeping the chain of relations within the artist’s control. The characters that surround Isabel as she stands “there in perfect isolation” (48) become the “mirrors of the subject” (70) or the “ficelles” (322) as James will later call them. But the windows to the house of fiction work both ways. Isabel’s inability to escape her prison contrasts with both James and Hyacinth Robinson as described in the Preface to The Princess Casamassima. Here, James describes how, like his characters, he found himself inside a similar house of fiction – London – and recalls his “interest of walking the streets” where he experienced “the assault [of impressions] directly made by the great city upon an imagination quick to react” (59). The city is a prime source of inspiration and he calls it “a garden bristling with an immense illustrative flora” (59) as well as a “thick jungle” (60) that requires protection from the various assaults. Only by constantly observing the freshly cropped flora and the overgrown jungle thicket can James discover Hyacinth Robinson who “sprang up for me out of the London pavement” (60). The germ that inaugurates The Princess Casamassima forces James to situate Hyacinth in the “same public show” (60) of England – the much more encompassing house of fiction where a
larger social panorama surrounds the hero – and the goal is to prevent him from accessing
its hidden secrets even though the atmosphere of collusion proves quite tempting.

In writing the novel, James seems to stroll through the tranquil garden as
Hyacinth navigates the dangerous jungle. The novel is free to manipulate the “public
show” while the novel’s hero remains trapped and at the mercy of the jungle’s hidden
terrors. The naturalistic metaphor reverts to architecture when James notes that Hyacinth
“should be able to revolve around them [“the swarming facts” (60) of London] but at the
most respectful distances and with every door of approach shut in his face” (61). The
Princess Casamassima is to be a claustrophobic house of fiction with Hyacinth struggling
to access the totalizing perspective only his creator possesses. James is his torturer who
makes him suffer “the total assault” (61) of London without any possible reprieve except
the suicide that ends the novel. What makes the work interesting, he notes, is the degree
to which Hyacinth is aware of his confinement. Making him “feel [his] respective
situations” (62) is the key to the novel’s success. James expresses the “danger of filling
too full any supposed and above all any obviously limited vessel of consciousness” (63)
because it is “intelligence” which “endangers” (64) the character but also that which is
required to make him interesting. The “degrees of feeling” (62) as to Hyacinth’s self-
conscious awareness of his imprisonment parallels “the painter of the human mixture [of
a creature of imagination in society], of reproducing that mixture aright” (64). It is a
question of finding the adequate “frame of the picture” (65) where any “sacrifice of
intensity” (68) allows for the achievement of form but an increased passion might
overwhelm it. The “measure of these things” (69) is the task of the novelist as it pertains
to his literary creation as well as his self-representation. James describes making
Hyacinth in love with the world, attracted to its beauty, which would also spur his interest in the social order and desire to change it. Hyacinth’s ambitions help him “find a door somehow open to him” (73) that the novelist abruptly closes. In this manner, he is a version of James himself, “a youth upon whom nothing is lost” (Princess 164) aspiring to the knowledge his creator possesses: striving to meet the face of his muse. James in fact describes writing him from “the fruit of [my] direct experience” (Art 76) and he overtly calls Hyacinth the product of “my gathered impressions and stirred perceptions, the deposit in my working imagination of all my visual and all my constructive sense of London” (76). He thus resembles James as we saw him in The American Scene, except rather than assume the status of a restless analyst able to reject the alien world and return to England, Hyacinth discovers himself in an inescapable imbroglio. He seeks autonomy like the creator of the New York Edition but knows that it requires an ability to “penetrate … imaginatively” (77) one’s own life from an outside or exterior position.

The Prefaces are James’s house of fiction: he is both the architect and the resident. Each presents a window where he reflects on his own act of producing tales and novels. They are his “meditative vigil,” which, he tells us, is in “its essence … but the vigil of searching criticism” (57). The Prefaces provide James with a “spell of recognitions” (57) enabling him to make discoveries about his difficulty writing novels, exercise his critical judgment, and, in the process, recover the literary excess lost in the depths of his imagination. If The American Scene depicts his grasping the failure of what he calls, speaking of the Boston Public Library, “penetralia” (560), then the Prefaces present its triumph. “The penetrating imagination” (78) that Hyacinth lacks but desires, James possesses and exhibits. It is the element that entices a subject to “subversively”
access what is “beneath the vast smug surface” (78) of his or her perceived reality and what we see enacted as James peruses his literary corpus. We might say that penetration in *The American Scene* is successful if we understand grasping the void beneath “the vast smug surface” to be an ironic victory. Yet penetrating the history of an imaginative life allows James to drag the depths of memory. Even if he fears that recovering the treasure will weigh the ship down again, by *The Princess Casamassima* Preface he recognizes the transformative potential of penetration: “If you haven’t, for fiction, the root of the matter in you, haven’t the sense of life and the penetrating imagination, you are a fool in the very presence of the revealed and assured; but that if you are so armed you are not really helpless, not without your resource, even before mysteries abysmal” (78).

The penetrating imagination allows an individual to engage with the “revealed and assured” world and confront “mysteries abysmal” without necessarily becoming victim to them. It is the inverse of the grasping imagination. Whereas the latter reveals James’s innate limitations, the former “arm[s]” him with a “resource” by illuminating the powers of the self. The grasping imagination produces the pain that eventually reintegrates a fragmented self. The penetrating imagination testifies to the artistic prowess that emerges from that reintegration. It sanctions Jamesian vision and prepares him to make the appropriate sacrifices that prevent him re-experiencing the trials of his overactive imagination. If Hyacinth and James are both figures who seek penetration, their different fates, the former’s suicide and the latter’s bewilderment in *The American*
Scene, are the result of the unique plots in which they find themselves.\textsuperscript{78} James sacrifices ties to his native land just as he sacrifices aspects of the canvas of life but Hyacinth only sacrifices himself. James stands closer to Isabel Archer and Maggie Verver insofar as both accept the contingencies placed on their imagination. In The Golden Bowl, for example, Maggie wants to penetrate the “impenetrable and inscrutable” (733) surface of the pagoda that stands for the “recent change in her life” (734). When she begins to understand her need “to re-establish a violated order” (881), the narrator describes a process by which she “sounded” (879) the situation, placing herself “in a position to boast of touching bottom,” and in stark contrast to her previous state of mind, which was “without penetration” (880). But after the golden bowl shatters and Maggie recognizes the serpent in her garden, the narrator describes how her penetrating imagination becomes a resource, arming her for eventual victory:

There had been, through her life, as we know, few quarters in which the Princess’s fancy could let itself loose; but it shook off restraint when it plunged into the figured void of the detail of that relation. This was the realm it could people with images – again and again with fresh ones; they swarmed there like the strange combinations that lurked in the woods at twilight; they loomed into the definite and faded into the vague, their main present sign for her being however that they were always, that they were dussily, agitated. Her earlier vision of a state of bliss made insecure by the very intensity of the bliss – this had dropped from her; she had ceased to see, as she lost herself, the pair of operatic, of high Wagnerian lovers (she found deep within her these comparisons) interlocked in their wood of enchantment, a green glade as romantic as one’s dream of an old German forest. The picture was veiled on the contrary with the dimness of trouble; behind which she felt indistinguishable the procession of forms that had lost all so pitifully their precious confidence. (921-922)

\textsuperscript{78} While I argue for the ironic triumph of James’s failure in The American Scene, Lionel Trilling claims that Hyacinth’s suicide is also a victory: “Hyacinth’s death, then is not his way of escaping from irresolution. It is truly a sacrifice, an act of heroism. He is a hero of civilization because he dares do more than civilization does: embodying two ideals [the yes and the no] at once, he takes upon himself, in full consciousness, the guilt of each. He acknowledges both his parents. By his death he instructs us in the nature of civilized life and by his consciousness he transcends it” (Moral 172).
There are many names for what James calls the “figured void” and the concept reappears throughout the Romantic-Modern Tradition. It is akin to Blanchot’s space of literature and describes how we get caught in a web of representations, images, ghosts, visions, or simply history; where we endlessly search for the origin of that proliferating chain of relations, only to be continually bombarded by them, swarmed, swamped, and overwhelmed in an experience of the sublime. In *The American Scene*, James cannot let drop his “earlier vision of a state of bliss.” The “void” does not project to him the “procession of forms” but merely their absence which, in turn, requires that he continue to indulge his nostalgia. For Maggie, like James in the Prefaces, the “earlier … state of bliss” begins to vanish because of its “intensity”; because James is able to recover the lost treasure buried deep within his memory. More specifically, Maggie’s “fancy” letting itself “loose” and shaking “off restraint” anticipates James “shaking off the shackles of theory” (*Art* 336) in the Preface to *The Golden Bowl*. Although the “relation” in question surely assumes her husband’s adultery, her act of plunging is inward, into her mind, into her complicity with the larger plot. Maggie does not gaze at some element of the world, the Boston Public Library or a skyscraper for example. She enters the void in herself; the figurative Pagoda that stands for the empty self is inaccessible like the “veiled” picture but nonetheless radiates “images” of “Wagnerian lovers.” The narrator is specific to note

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79 For further discussions of the figured void see Miller’s *Literature as Conduct* (261-281), Daniel O’Hara’s *Visions of Global America* (157-160), and Sheila Teahan’s *The Rhetorical Logic* (131-142).
that “she found deep within her” the “images” in question. The garden of her life is now a
haunted forest where Maggie fathoms “the procession of forms” she wants to resurrect.\footnote{Maggie, in other words, will conjure the ghost of the past in an effort to put the bowl back together even after she witnesses its shattering. The passage under consideration bears direct resemblance to the “Medusa-face” moment examined earlier and stages Maggie’s experience of Blanchot’s limit-experience. This is her imaginative trip to the Underworld, as we saw in Isabel’s “meditative vigil,” or to borrow Blanchot’s analogue, the fateful journey of Orpheus.}

James is in the same position when writing the Prefaces and revising his corpus. He detects the lurking forms within his novels and tales that can be recovered with his mature readings and re-writings. Every time he plunges into the void, however, he encounters a surplus of memories that inhibit his ability to develop a coherent understanding of the relation between his present self and the past selves embodied in the texts he reads. The repetition of the content in each Preface results from James continually taking the plunge: we see him search again for the “law of the situations” in \textit{The Awkward Age} Preface before he returns to the image of the circle as a way to cultivate a “freedom menaced by the inevitable irruption of the ingenuous mind” and discover “the perfect system” (101-102); \textit{The Spoils of Poynton} reexamines his idea of the germ and its growth; \textit{What Maisie Knew} searches “for a fresh system” (143) where an ironic center can ground the novel’s situation. Each Preface looks for a method to control the “sublime economy of art” (120): the tension between a general and restricted economy; the sublimity of the imagination and the constraints intrinsic to language, grammar, and form; or the desire to remain faithful to organic growth and the will to construct an edifice. James appears to resolve the conflict in the Preface to \textit{The Tragic Muse}. Discovering how to adequately cut into the imagination without sacrificing his sublime vision is a prerequisite to finding a standard for critical judgment, which, in turn,
might allow James to transform the apparent debilitating irony of re-encountering the figured void into a fecund source that redeems the waste excluded in the act of creation.

Cutting Thick

The Preface to *The Tragic Muse* elaborates upon the “principle of simplification” mentioned in the *Roderick Hudson* Preface (as well as the Cape Cod episode from *The American Scene*). James opens the Preface by discussing the difficulty of recalling his novel’s germ. He muses that his interest “must have been” (79) to write about the conflict between art and the world. A vague description of the subject – “art, that is, as a human complication and a social stumbling block” (79) – hints at the overlap between *The Tragic Muse* and *The Princess Casamassima*. But James also articulates his concern with having written another novel about “the growth of experience” without having any particular direction or path to completion; he compares such an aimless origin as “having launched it [the novel] in a great grey void” (80). Because *The Tragic Muse* seems to be the book James has the most difficult time recovering in memory, rereading presents a fresh experience, or a novel approach to the text’s formal problems. As he reads, he speculates that the source of the novel’s trouble lies in the difficulty of fusing its theatrical and political subjects. “If I had marked my political case, from so far back, for ‘a story by itself,’ and then marked my theatrical case for another,” James tells us, “the joining of these two interests, originally seen as separate, might, all disgracefully, betray the seam, show for mechanical and superficial” (83). The result is a novel lacking a center. James believes he had “seen two pictures in one” (84) which resulted in each vying for dominance and displacing the work’s structural core. *The Tragic Muse*
resembles one of those “large loose baggy monsters” (84) that are a marker of a novelist’s inability to arrive at “complete pictorial fusion” (85).

Recognizing the imbalance in his novel allows James to recall the difficulties of producing it. He returns to his figure of “some adventurer” who refuses to take risks and leans on “his inveterate habit saving in time the neck he ever undiscourageably risks” (85). Rather than situate his adventurer in the sea, the novel becomes part of the novelist’s imagined body – “saving … the neck” – that implicitly builds upon the grotesque image of the loose and baggy monster. The Tragic Muse becomes “an active figure condemned to the disgrace of legs too short, ever so much too short, for its body” and, in turn, its disproportionate size, which makes it difficult to get “the organic centre … into proper position” (85), corresponds to an image of ill-fitting clothing. “The precious waistband or girdle,” James writes, recalling the “aesthetic waistband” from The American Scene, “studded and buckled and placed for brave outward show, practically worked itself, and in spite of desperate remonstrance, or in other words essential counterplotting, to a point perilously near the knees – perilously I mean for the freedom of these parts” (85-86). If the “parts” belong to the novel, not the malformed adventurer, then their “freedom” or the infinite possibilities of the plot can produce “specious and spurious centres” (86). But the novel is also part of the novelist, his neck, and the ill-fitting “centres” suggest the lack of correspondence between the author’s vision of his product, as it exists in his mind, and its actual existence, its written form. When James describes his “art of preparations,” he tells us that a writer’s “excess of foresight” (86) encourages the “freedom of these parts.” Since a novel inhabits the mind of its creator prior to its material existence, the novelist, if he were to chart his course prior to
embarkation, already knows its climax and resolution. Writing thus entails “the challenge of economic representation” (87) or the ability to prevent the contents of the mind from betraying the novel’s structure. James must successfully represent the unbounded, excessive surplus of his mind without harming the novel’s aesthetic integrity. He describes the dilemma as follows:

To put all that is possible of one’s idea into a form and compass that will contain and express it only by delicate adjustments and an exquisite chemistry, so that there will be at the end neither a drop of one’s liquor left nor a hair’s breadth of the rim of one’s glass to spare – every artist will remember how often that sort of necessity has carried with it its particular inspiration. (87)

How, James asks, does the novelist empty the coffer of his imagination into a text without overwhelming it or stifling its formal symmetry? If “one’s idea,” as it exists in the mind, is limitless, how can the novelist “contain and express it” in the proper “form and compass”? The goal is to combat what James calls, in the Preface to The Aspern Papers, the uncontrollable “stream [of imagination that] breaks bounds and gets into [a] flood” (172). “Economic representation” becomes the need to maneuver the gap between the mind and the text; to release the flux of images the mind generates onto a page while carefully shaping them, “by delicate adjustments,” into a unified work of art. To obviate the mind’s inundation, James discovers “the secret appeal … of the successfully foreshortened thing, where representation is arrived at … not by the addition of items … but by the art of figuring synthetically, a compactness, into which the imagination may cut thick, as into the rich density of a wedding cake” (87-88). The “wedding cake” is a peculiar figure. It is a marker of unity, the joining of two families, but James turns it into

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81 Morris Roberts describes how James practices his technical maneuver in “Henry James and the Art of Foreshortening.”
a harbinger of divisions where the newly formed couple separates from their respective families. The writer, in turn, synthesizes his aesthetic vision just as he recognizes he must divorce it from the mind and subjugate it to the blank page. He must, in other words, know when to tighten the tourniquet of the imagination; know when to cut off or foreshorten the mind’s idea so as to preserve its “rich density” without impairing the novel. Once an idea enters the world of the text, the writer, “figuring synthetically,” manipulates it to create an accurate representation. Of course there is no prescription for precisely how thick the slice of cake should be or how the writer can arrive at such “exquisite chemistry.” Yet it is the exigent task of translating the mind’s contents into a textual space that permits James to “delight in [his novel’s] deep-breathing economy and organic form” (84).

The organicism James espouses is indebted to the Romantic-Modern Tradition: it refers to both an aestheticized political model as well as a theory of the creative process that responds to the inhuman mechanical world-view that arises from Enlightenment modernity. Following his Romantic precursors, James’s introduction of organicism into a theory of the novel marks a central contribution to our understanding of Modernism, especially as the New Criticism and writers such as D.H. Lawrence understand it.82 Early scholars of James, Matthiessen and Blackmur for example, specifically align him with the

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82 M.H. Abrams’s *Mirror and the Lamp* surveys the evolution of organicist theories of art beginning with Coleridge. His *Natural Supernaturalism* focuses on Hegel’s use of the organic metaphor.
organicist tradition and define its importance for his understanding of literature.\footnote{See R.P. Blackmur’s “The Critical Prefaces of Henry James” in \textit{Studies in Henry James}. I discuss Matthiessen on organic form in the final chapter. The most extensive study of James’s use of organic form is Ward’s \textit{The Search for Form}. Also see Fogel’s \textit{Henry James and the Structure of Romantic Imagination} which draws on the work of Abrams.} René Wellek argues that organicism allows James to “ask the artist to create a world which is somehow like life and to create it on the analogy of nature in order to support man in a belief in the moral and social order of the universe” (320). In this context, organic form is what James calls, in the Preface to \textit{The Tragic Muse}, “the sense of a system [that] saves the painter from the baseness of the arbitrary stroke” (89). The Prefaces turn to organic form as a way to recover from the recognizable chaos of life that threatens to disrupt order and mutilate the work of art.\footnote{Jacek Gutorow’s “Toward the Incalculable” argues that Jamesian organicism marks a transition from Victorian organic growth to modernist fragmentation. While Gutorow correctly identifies the tension within James’s organic model, he fails to provide an adequate account of \textit{The Golden Bowl} Preface that reconciles the ambivalence he and others detect in James’s figures.} As such, James’s fixation on seeds, germs, and growth corresponds to his desire to construct a teleology that avoids repetition. Specific references to the organic (beyond the myriad metaphors suggesting growth) appear sporadically throughout the Prefaces but are concentrated in the middle entries: the Prefaces to \textit{The Tragic Muse}, \textit{The Awkward Age}, \textit{The Spoils of Poynton} (where James elaborates on the germ at length), \textit{What Maisie Knew}, and \textit{The Wings of the Dove}.\footnote{Parker’s “Deconstructing \textit{The Art of the Novel}” demonstrates that \textit{The Wings of the Dove} Preface was the ninth written in the series.} That James is aware of the repetition within each Preface implies that his focus on the organic metaphor in his middle entries is an effort to facilitate the growth that seems self-
inhibiting. He wants his seeds of memory that would unify the self to blossom, but also understands the need for architecture, to fence in the garden before it turns into a jungle.

The forward momentum that allows James to approach a telos, which will manifest itself in the Prefaces to The Ambassadors and The Golden Bowl, is not the result of growth. Rather the excess that form cannot contain reveals to James his internal self-divisions and recalls the sublime not as a form of blockage but, instead, as the uncanny recognition of the sunken treasure in the novels he revisits; the “life sacrificed” (Art 84) that resulted from his cutting thick into the imagination. The uncanny, as Harold Bloom notes, is a variant of the sublime, the overwhelming experience of Paterian strangeness, which James discovers when he revisits his oeuvre. Instead of bringing him close to the void, as we saw in The American Scene, the sublime as the uncanny, according to Bloom, links “personal and literary identity” to the “imaginative power … [that] transports us beyond ourselves, provoking uncanny recognition that one is never fully the author of one’s work or one’s self” (Anatomy 20). Whereas the transport that occurred in The American Scene took James into the abyss, allowing him to fathom the emptiness of the self prior to its eventual reintegration, the Prefaces plunge James into the figured void where the prior versions of the Jamesian subject reappear. The revelation “that one is never fully the author of one’s work” unnerves James just as it motivates his struggle to make his past cohere with his present: to unite the uncanny object with its subject. The “uncanny recognition” becomes the catalyst for his search for full recognition as he attempts to “com[e] to terms with [the] overwhelming flood of images and sensations” (22) that appear during the course of his revisions. The natural and artificial metaphors that James employs to describe the conflict between versions of the self are supplemented
with descriptions of the novelist as an explorer, painter, dramatist, critic, chemist, biologist, cook, and so forth. These masks, which we saw James adopt in *The American Scene*, allow him to continually reinvent an authorial persona as he pursues a stabilizing principle that will unite them. While scholars such as Posnock argue that late James practices a “politics of nonidentity” (*Trials* 16) that abandons the notion of stability, the dissemination of masks is always in relation to some perceived unity. They disclose the interstices between Blanchot’s “double-relation” of life: the mask is the hinge between unity and fragmentation. Anita Durkin claims that Posnock’s “nonidentity” appears in the Prefaces as “metaphorical excess” or the “overflow of his [James’s] figurations” (76). This excess facilitates the movement, the uncanny transport, fueling James’s quest. The Preface to *The Ambassadors* is the penultimate step toward the self-realization James desires. When he revisits this late work, he discovers that it is, “quite the best, ‘all round,’ of all my productions” (*Art* 309). It is here, then, that James finds himself, like Strether, in the “garden of life” (312) able to luxuriate in the triumph of his successfully executed “process of vision” (308).

James attributes the success of *The Ambassadors* to the novel’s adequate balance between a malleable center and encompassing structure: its depiction of Strether’s growth within the limits of the Parisian imbroglio in which he discovers himself. In addition to limiting the perspective to Strether’s consciousness, *The Ambassadors* possesses a structural core. The scene in Gloriani’s garden enables the “obstruction of traffic” and allows James to control “the current” of the novel as it blossoms to perfection: “Never can a composition of this sort have sprung straighter from a dropped grain of suggestion, and never can that grain, developed, overgrown and smothered, have yet lurked more in
the mass as an independent particle” (307). The entirety of *The Ambassadors* emerges directly from Strether’s speech to little Bilham and it becomes the novel’s anchor, dictating its composition, and preventing the “process of vision” from creating an abundance of surplus or waste. The adequate center and architecture enables the germ to be both “overgrown and smothered.” The successful form is also a result of the enthusiasm James finds in his “opportunity to ‘do’ a man of imagination” (310) or write a mature hero. Yet like we saw with Isabel, there is difficulty situating Strether within “that wide field of the artist’s vision” (311). The question of what would she do transforms into how can I contain the clarity of vision I afford my hero? James himself “quest[s] for a subject” that can “complet[e] the strong mixture” (312) of hero and situation. His “chase” (312) and “‘hunt’” for the Strether’s proper “goal” – the language anticipates the climactic moment of *Notes of a Son and Brother* – had to “be finely calculated” (313) so that his experience of the “assaults and infusions” (314) of a foreign world would not spill over the bounds of the text. The subsequent discovery that Strether should be in a “false position” and a “belated man of the world” (315) is James’s triumph. Ironizing the novel’s center allows Strether’s call to arms to give birth to a necessary opposing center in the moment when he discovers Chad Newsome’s liaison with Madame de Vionnett. The two poles of the novel balance each other and give Strether’s growth a direct telos where the false position can undo itself before introducing a moral choice that he must face with his newfound belated knowledge. James lauds his act of “cutting thick” into Strether’s “intellectual” and “moral substance” (316) and limiting his perspective of the events that engulf him. The equilibrium established in *The Ambassadors* adheres to the
“small compositional law” of uniting the novel’s center in the mind of Strether and achieving “a splendid particular economy” (317) of form.

James believes *The Ambassadors* is his best novel because its mastery of “figuration” permits him to sacrifice a dimension of Strether to the law of composition without compromising the novel’s “positive beauty” (319). Avoiding the first person narration is key to prevent Strether from possessing too much “romantic privilege” and succumbing to the “darkest abyss of romance” (320). A third person perspective that remains limited to a central character accomplishes two goals: Strether remains “encaged and provided for as ‘The Ambassadors’ encages and provides” (321). Just as Strether’s mind dictates the terms of the novel’s architecture, the novel and its ambassadorial mission confines Strether, limits his perspective, and places him in a false position to “forbid the terrible fluidity of self-revelation” (321). What makes *The Ambassadors* such a success is not simply James having achieved the proper “angle of vision,” but rather, more aptly, “the equal play of … oppositions [that] the book gathers” (326). James can point to the various oppositional relationships between center and periphery that would include both Strether’s place within the novel (surrounded by other characters) as well as the false position driving the narrative toward its resolution. Maria Gostrey, moreover, presents Strether with an ethical dilemma that undermines the novel’s apparent late epiphany (the boat scene); she provides the ironizing element that prevents the revelation of belated knowledge from allowing for simple closure.

Similarly, the Preface to *The Ambassadors* enables James to reflect on his own position within the Prefaces: his encagement and desire to make sure the New York Edition properly encages. The opposition dictating the triumph of a narrative hinges on
the tension between the past and present self, the social world and the imagination’s apprehension of it, and the desire to discover the correct position. For James, unlike Strether, this requires stepping outside of his narrative, transcending the story that entraps him, and attaining the position of the author of *The Ambassadors* with respect to the narrative of the Prefaces. The penultimate Preface represents the opposing pole that contrasts *The American* Preface, the scene in which James overcomes his own false position and recognizes his masterpiece. While Christopher Newman exhibits the “darkest abyss of romance” during his own visit to Paris – not in terms of first person narration but the young novelist’s lack of mastery of form – *The Ambassadors* repeats the earlier novel and corrects it. Revisiting the original man of imagination, Strether, paves the way for James to recognize himself as such a figure struggling to overcome his own belatedness. *The Golden Bowl* Preface therefore balances the Preface to *Roderick Hudson*. Now that he has discovered the elegance of form in *The Ambassadors*, James no longer feels threatened by the ever-expanding canvas of life. In the final Preface he returns to the problem of saving the buried treasure lost in his novelistic explorations and theorizes how revision allows a writer to preserve the waste created during foreshortening without disturbing a work of art’s formal integrity.
Soon after the publication of *The American Scene*, and during his early work on the New York Edition, James wrote an essay on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. That James writes on the archetypal Shakespearean romance in the midst of his grand act of self-revision is no coincidence. The subject of the essay is the relation of the artist to his art. James invokes our “strained and aching wonder” (1205) for knowledge of Shakespeare the man, for an understanding of his creative process, which, for a modern artist, is akin to a desire to approach “divinity in a temple … [and] cros[s] the circle of fire … [to get] into the real and right relation to” (1206) the poet. Though it is an impossible task to get “generally near our author” (1208), James imagines himself reaching back into the depths of history in the hope that he might discover an origin or at best catch a fleeting glimpse of Shakespeare:

The man everywhere, in Shakespeare’s work, is so effectually locked up and imprisoned in the artist that we but hover at the base of thick walls for a sense of him; while, in addition, the artist is so steeped in the abysmal objectivity of his characters and situations that the great billows of the medium itself play with him, to our vision very much as, over a ship’s side, in certain waters, we catch, through the transparent tides the flash of strange sea-creatures. What we are present at in this fashion is a series of incalculable plunges – the series of those that have taken effect, I mean, after the great primary plunge, made once for all, of the man into the artist: the successive plunges of the artist himself into Romeo and into Juliet, Hamlet … [and] Hotspur; immersions during which, though he always ultimately finds his feet, the very violence of the movements involved troubles and distracts our sight. In *The Tempest*, by the supreme felicity I speak of, is no violence; he sinks as deep as we like, but what he sinks into, beyond all else, is the lucid stillness of his style. (1209)

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86 The “Introduction to *The Tempest*” appeared in the 16th volume of Sidney Lee’s *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* and was published in March of 1907.
When James discusses Shakespeare he does not refer to performances despite a long history of attending the theater and Shakespearean productions. He analyzes Shakespeare in the tradition of Charles Lamb, by reading the plays, and the passage cited above overlaps, I argue, with how James reads himself. As Sergio Perosa contends, James “wanted to pull down the thousand masks of the master and the magician [Shakespeare]; [and] in doing so, James repeatedly finds his own” (25). The sea imagery, for example, reminds us of *The Tempest* as much as the early Prefaces. James’s search for the buried treasure becomes a plunge into Shakespeare where he witnesses “strange creatures” or the artistic personae of dramatist's characters. While the tragedies and histories, from which James lists characters, depict the “violence” of the search, *The Tempest* is the pure work of art that offers the reader a clue to the artist and his creative process.

Genius is the notion that unifies the Shakespearean artist but James fears that accessing it places him “forever … [behind] a locked door flanked with a sentinel” who sentences us to “hang yearning about” (1217). But James is not Joseph K. According to Lauren Cowdery, the essay effectively exorcises Shakespeare from the text of his play through the act of reading; an act analogous to writing or what we may call James’s “imaginative participation” (COWDERY 151) in Shakespeare’s stylistic performance. James the reader thus mirrors the Shakespeare he describes as “the spirit in hungry quest of every possible experience and adventure of spirit” (1218). He assumes the quest, hungering after Shakespeare himself, and is able to “assist” (1218) the Bard in his own

87 One way James performs his exorcism is by transforming Shakespeare into a “divine musician” (1210). Cowdery offers the fullest analysis of the imagery in the essay; specifically how turning Shakespeare into a harpist recalls a trope familiar to those theorists of the Romantic imagination. In addition, Neil Chilton’s “Conceptions of a Beautiful Crisis” directly links the reading of Shakespeare to many of James’s concerns in the Prefaces.
“transcendent adventure” (1219). Through his critical act of identification, James believes he can merge with the poet and “arrest” his “divine flight” (1219). In other words, he catches the artist in the act of creation. But an absolute discovery where the “Man directly in the Artist” (1220) appears is obviously an unachievable goal. What the adventure enables is the “rebellious renewal of appreciation and yearning” from which we harvest our own creative energy and gain “the finer weapon, the sharper point, the stronger arm” while making our “more extended lunge” (1220).88

James’s “transcendent adventure” navigates the crucible of imagination. He invokes the phrase in several places, most notably in the Preface to “The Lesson of the Master,” but also in a letter to H.G. Wells, his Notebooks, and his essays on other writers.89 The phrase implies the power of the imagination to shape our reality. What makes life interesting, James reports to Wells, is when the artist’s “great stewpot or crucible of the imagination” produces a “chemical transmutation for the aesthetic, the representational” (Theory 77). The figure of the “crucible” and the “chemical transmutation” takes on greater significance in the discussion of “The Coxon Fund” that appears in the Prefaces. James writes that the main character of the story, Frank Saltram, resembles the “Coleridge type” of “genius” who “had long haunted me” (Art 229).

88 Holland sees The Tempest Introduction as exemplifying the crisis of creation that pervades the Prefaces (179-182). Similarly, the essay on The Tempest should be read in tandem with the later lecture on Browning entitled “The Novel in The Ring and the Book.” Whereas James searches for Shakespeare the artist in the text of The Tempest, the Browning essay pursues the ideal novel contained in The Ring and the Book. The Browning essay also offers one of James’s more important discussions of poetry and William E. Buckler’s “Rereading Henry James Rereading Robert Browning” argues that it may be read as a prose-poem itself (specifically a dramatic monologue).

89 See James E. Miller’s Theory of Fiction (77-85).
Instead of talking about the specific obstacles posed by incorporating Coleridge into his story, James describes what enables “such radical revision” (230). He writes:

We can surely account for nothing in the novelist’s work that hasn’t passed through the crucible of his imagination, hasn’t, in that perpetually simmering cauldron his intellectual pot-au-feu, been reduced to savoury fusion. We here figure the morsel, of course, not as broiled to nothing, but as exposed, in return for the taste it gives out, to a new and richer saturation. In this state it is in due course picked out and served, and a meager esteem will await, a poor importance attend it, if it doesn’t speak most of its late genial medium, the good, the wonderful company it has, as I hint, aesthetically kept. It has entered, in fine, into new relations, it emerges for new ones. Its final savour has been constituted but its prime identity destroyed – which is what was to be demonstrated. Thus it has become a different and, thanks to a rare alchemy, a better thing. (230)

We are in the realm of the Coleridgean secondary imagination where the novelist, here a chef, consciously selects his ingredients, meditates upon them in the “simmering cauldron” of his mind, dissolves, defuses, and dissipates only to re-create, to set the ingredients in “new relation” and enact a “fusion” whereby the world is transformed into the stuff of fiction. James’s culinary and chemical metaphors assume that the novelist’s ingredients – the material caught in the web of experience or, in the case of his knowledge of Coleridge, J. Dyke Campbell’s 1893 biography – are “exposed” for their banality and changed into “a better thing.”

The “crucible of the imagination” describes the style of reading James performs in his essay on Shakespeare. The Tempest is the particular ingredient placed in the “cauldron” and the “better thing” is not simply the reading James offers, but his vision of “Criticism of the future” (1220).90 What allows the “crucible of the imagination” to enact its revisionary powers is a “certain science of control” (Art 231). The artist must know

90 John McCombe’s “Henry James, Shakespeare’s Biography, and the Question of National Identity” describes how The Tempest essay intervenes in the English tradition of Shakespeare criticism, specifically the contemporaneous work of A.C. Bradley.
the recipe he applies. James does not describe the potential cuisines that would result from poor ingredients or what occurs if the chef is an inadequate cook. Yet he believes that “the question of how to exert this control in accepted conditions” without sacrificing “real value” (231) is of central importance. The question of sacrifice recalls the process of foreshortening and since the imaginative fusion occurs in the artist’s mind we may assume that the “conditions” are the formal requirements of the Jamesian house of fiction. In this context, the crucible of imagination is a pivot between the grasping imagination, with its emphasis on making sense of the material of the world, and the penetrating imagination, which arms the artist to see through the material and transform it. In the Preface to *The Golden Bowl*, James will try to step outside the house of fiction (his Prefaces), gain “control” over the entire revisionary project, analyze the “conditions” underwriting it, and judge whether or not re-reading his works can enable a “fusion.”

**Pursuing the Matter**

The Preface to *The Golden Bowl* only discusses James’s final completed novel for a few pages. That analysis includes remarks concerning the relative success of the division of the book into two halves and, despite his concern over whether the limited cast of six characters adequately illuminates the “affair in hand,” James remains pleased with *The Golden Bowl* because it maximizes his ability to depict the “affair” within the limits that a “coherent literary form permits” (327-330). *The Golden Bowl*, in other words, allows James “to work my system” (331) successfully and its Preface quickly turns away from any further explication of the novel’s intricacies. Instead, James reflects on the New York Edition as a whole beginning with the photographic front-pieces that
open each volume. The thread that links the novel’s formal success to photography is his effort to understand the threshold between literary and visual representation. Though James notes that “the essence of any representational work is of course to bristle with immediate images” (331), he is skeptical of the photographs. “Anything,” he remarks, “that relieves responsible prose of the duty of being … good enough and … pictorial enough … does it the worst service” (332). Images rival language. They can replicate particular objects, settings, scenes, or people and detract from the author’s imagined world. The “shop of the mind,” James refers to the curiosity shop where the Prince and Charlotte find the golden bowl, is part of “the author’s projected world” and there is a fear that providing an image is akin to “prescrib[ing] a concrete, independent, vivid instance … that should oblige us by the marvel of an accidental rightness” (334). Actualizing a novel’s images can give the false impression that a work of literature bears a direct correspondence to lived reality. The task is therefore to select the appropriate image that merely evokes the atmosphere and refuses immediate reference. Photographs should depict subjects that purposefully generalize and complement the “author’s projected world.”

The search for images is an extension of James’s pursuit of the phantasmal Shakespeare, his man of imagination, or even in the case of the written novel, the adequate figure to capture a character’s consciousness (e.g. Maggie’s pagoda). They are akin to a metaphor that strives to express what perpetually evades expression. While the image threatens to suffocate the world of imagination, misrepresent and transfigure in manner akin to words, its possible vagueness also allows James to articulate the necessary distance between the historical, concrete, and material world of London, in the
case of *The Golden Bowl*, and the visionary landscape depicted in the novel. In addition, Melanie Ross argues that the discussion of photography supplements James’s hunt for a stable form of consciousness throughout the Preface. Selecting photographs, Ross claims, is “a literalized version of reading, searching, and connecting” (251) which mimics the Jamesian romance of reading that the rest of the Preface fully theorizes.91

Walter Benn Michaels warns against extracting from *The Golden Bowl* Preface any theory of reading. He argues that the text has serious implications for understanding James’s “work as a whole, not because he was concerned with elaborating a theory of reading (he wasn’t), but because the moral and aesthetic problems which did fascinate him are very often versions of the predicament of the reader as outlined in his last Preface” (831). Even if the intent were not to provide a “theory of reading,” few would argue that that is the effect of the Preface. The following passage, which begins the paragraph where James speculates on his revision, tells the tale:

> To re-read in their order my final things … has been to become aware of my putting the process through, for the latter end of my series … quite in the same terms as the apparent and actual, the contemporary terms; to become aware in

91 J. Stephen Murphy protests that too often readings of the final Preface do not account for its context. He argues that it took James “five and a half months to send off the preface” (173) because he suffered depression after learning of the New York Edition’s poor sales. Murphy’s claims rest on both a letter to James dated October 20, 1908 which contains the news pertaining to the Edition as well as a comment from Theodora Bosanquet’s diary: “Mr. James depressed – nearly finished ‘Golden Bowl’ preface – bored by it – says he’s ‘lost his spring’ for it” (qtd. in Murphy 173). As a consequence, Murphy suggests that the discussion of revision and the photographs was added after the bout of depression and should be read as an attempt to prove to his skeptical readers that the revisions were not a mistake. While such an argument is clearly speculation, Murphy speciously asserts that “revision had been a mistake” (173) in James’s mind. He thus understands James’s definition of revision as re-seeing as his attempt to justify to his audience that his texts were not in fact rewritten. Such a reading too heavily relies on questionable context to the point of ignoring James’s actual performance in the Preface itself. If anything, the revisions to the Preface during the five months would be evidence that James overcame the depression and renewed his faith in his artistic vocation.
other words that the march of my present attention coincides sufficiently with the march of my original expression; that my apprehension fits ... without an effort or a struggle, certainly without bewilderment or anguish, into the innumerable places prepared for it. As the historian of the matter sees and speaks, so my intelligence of it, as a reader, meets him halfway, passive, receptive, appreciative, often very grateful; unconscious, quite blissfully, of any bar to intercourse, any disparity of sense between us. Into his very footsteps the responsive, the imaginative steps of the docile reader that I consentingly become for him all comfortably sink; his vision superimposed on my own as an image in cut paper is applied to a sharp shadow on a wall, matches, at every point, without excess or deficiency. This truth throws into relief for me the very different dance that the taking in hand of my earlier productions was to lead me; the quite other kind of consciousness proceeding from that return. (Art 335-336)

What strikes us immediately is that James contrasts reading his “final things” at the beginning of the passage with reading his “earlier productions” at the end. On the one hand, reading the late work engenders a harmony between the “present attention” and “original expression.” On the other hand, reading the early novels produces an “other kind of consciousness” or a “very different dance.” The difference is inherent in the status of what James calls the “matter” or the pre-textual literary idea. As J. Hillis Miller notes on two occasions, the “matter” is the imaginative substance of an “ideal novel … that exists independently of the words on the page” (Literature 157). Miller continues:

James’s various works exist not only outside the words of the novels but also outside of James’s creating or concocting consciousness. James measures the actual words on the page by their degree of fit to his present apprehension of the matter of the novel. He speaks as though the matter did not depend on his consciousness or his words for its existence. (158-159)

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92 Miller also discusses the passage in question in The Ethics of Reading (101-122). He argues that the Jamesian “matter” is the unknowable law of the text to which the reader must remain faithful to enact an ethical reading. It seems quite clear, however, that James has clear access the literary “matter” since it is a product of his own imagination. For a recent reading of The Golden Bowl that surveys the novel’s reception in moral philosophy, and differentiates Miller’s Derridean assumptions from Levinas, see Joseph Kronick’s “The Betrayal of Love.”
For James, reading his own works implies measuring the relationship between the literary idea as it exists in his mind prior to its linguistic representation and the material novel itself. In this manner, the “matter” directly depends on his “concocting consciousness.” The “matter” is the “ideal novel” that fell victim to the process of foreshortening and was confined to the prison-house of language and form. When James distinguishes between “the apparent and actual,” he refers to the difference between the “matter” and the text or the ideal and the historical (especially if we take “apparent” to mean seeming, supposed, alleged or in the act of appearing). The revisionist, James suggests, reconstructs the previously foreshortened “matter” because the original writer and current reader are versions of the same person: the creator. In other words, the “present attention” fits precisely with the “original expression” because James is both reader and writer; he already knows the contents of the literary idea as it exists beyond the text or at least can recall them. But why a discrepancy when he reads his earlier works? What allows for the apprehension to “fit” in one particular circumstance but not the other?

The distinction between the “docile reader” and “historian” offers a clue. The former is a reader who seeks to comprehend or grasp the “matter” while the “historian” is the revisionist himself. They represent a split in the Jamesian reading subject. Contrary to Miller, the “historian” is not “the narrator of this or that novel” (*Literature* 159) nor is he the original author of the text: the young James who produced *The American* in Paris for example. The “historian” is the revisionist who compares or measures the ideal reconstructed “matter” with its textual representation. The “docile reader” assumes his passivity because he reads in the more banal sense. He is a version of the historical figure who handles the “actual” text and ascertains its meaning. By struggling with the text, the
“docile reader” becomes the “historian” who can analyze the “apparent” and exercise his
critical judgment. The “historian” as revisionist possesses knowledge of the history of the
literary idea and measures the relationship between its two material versions. In other
words, the “historian” is an imagined figure that James projects, the ideal version of
himself who judges the adequacy of any potential correspondence between the present
apprehension and the past manifestation of the “matter.” He has access to what Miller
calls, in The Ethics of Reading, the law of the text that stands beyond it: the "historian” is
a figure akin to the Kantian genius who authorizes the law he would invoke or
Rousseau’s legislator from The Social Contract. Because the literary “matter” is his own
creation, he can obey its law (remain faithful to it) and revise it. Through the “historian”
James steps outside of himself to integrate the various aspects of the “matter” that appear
to the “docile reader.” In other words, the reader in the present “consentingly become[s]”
for the “historian” a “docile reader” who can be subsumed into the idealized version of
the text (or the idealized Jamesian subject). James describes himself in the very terms
with which he speaks of Shakespeare: an artist “steeped in the abysmal objectivity of his
characters.” Revision, for James, puts the dialectic of the grasping and penetrating
imagination into action. The “docile reader” grasps the meaning of the current text in his
hands as the “historian” penetrates its surface in search of the “matter” it contains.

Consider how James develops the metaphor of the “march” and the “footprints”
that separate his “present attention” from his “original expression.” The figure implies the
mutability of the self and the difference between the author of The American and the
“docile reader” seeing the text again and summoning the “historian.”

James elaborates on the disparity as the paragraph cited above continues:

Nothing in my whole renewal of attention to these things, to almost any instance of my work previous to some dozen years ago, was more evident than that no such active, appreciative process could take place on the mere palpable lines of expression – thanks to the so frequent lapse of harmony between my present mode of motion and that to which the existing footprints were due. It was, all sensibly, as if the clear matter being still there, even as a shining expanse of snow spread over a plain, my exploring tread, for application to it, had unlearned the old pace and found itself naturally falling in another, which might sometimes indeed more or less agree with the original tracks, but might most often, or very nearly, break the surface in other places. What was thus predominantly interesting to note, at all events, was the high spontaneity of these deviations and differences, which became thus things not of choice, but of immediate and perfect necessity; necessity to the end of dealing with quantities in question at all. (336)

In this remarkable passage the literary “matter” becomes a “shining expanse of snow” as the “docile reader” becomes a winter traveler. James stages the process of reconstructing the “matter” as the attempt to replicate, to the very footstep, the original journey over the expanse. While the first half of the passage notes that the “docile” reader’s footsteps “comfortably sink” into the footsteps of the original text, as the “historian” would judge, here they only “agree with the original tracks” “sometimes.” The snow imagery clarifies. If we are faithful to James’s metaphor, then the original footsteps left in the snow would slowly disappear over time. They might erode due to wind, disappear beneath a new blanket of snow, melt with the change of the season, or they might be freshly minted and clear before the traveler’s pursuing feet. Put otherwise: the ephemeral snow directly corresponds to James’s transitory self, the ghostly other that James pursues as he searches for the law of the text.

93 The heaviest revisions occurred to James’s earlier works while the major phase novels were left relatively intact. For the fullest account of how James revised his novels see Horne’s Henry James and Revision.
My reading of James’s imagery should immediately bring to mind Paul de Man’s reading of the Coleridgean symbol in “The Rhetoric of Temporality.” Switching to de Man’s metaphor, the journey across the snow is Psyche’s endless pursuit of her fleeting Eros. However, James avoids the endless allegorical repetition that de Man describes because he has access to the ideal literary “matter.” The pre-textual idea is not necessarily linguistic for James. Herein lies my difference from both Miller’s reading and de Man who both judge the self to be entirely composed of language. The possibility that James’s “apprehension fits” corroborates Harold Bloom’s suggestion that “the imagination stands above and beyond the texts that would invoke it” (Map 48). Julie Rivkin comes to a similar conclusion. She argues that James “presuppose a stable self” (145) but the snowy expanse “bears notable resemblance to the revised page it is supposed to represent” as well as a “white paper” with “those footprints the alphabetical characters” (146). The blank page is a figure used throughout James’s career. In The American Scene, for example, James confronts, in New England, the possibility that penetration will prove futile and he fixates on “the white paint [that] looks dead and dingy against the snow” (388); in New York, the harbor overshadowed by the city assumes “the semblance of the vast white page that awaits” (419); and the mythical world of Washington D.C. “becomes truly the great white, decent page on which the whole sense of the place is written” (631). Each example reminds us that James desires to recover his idealized vision of America (e.g. tranquil New England, the New York of his youth, or the Grecian aura of Washington). In the Preface to The Golden Bowl, the recognized discrepancy between versions of a text produces the same problem except James is able to envision the literary

94 See Blindness and Insight (228).
“matter” anew, to recover it, after recognizing its mutilated representation. The act of filling up the white space is how he understands his imaginative prowess. It is for this reason that scholars from Quentin Anderson to Mark Seltzer and Sharon Cameron understand him to embody an imperial subject or an externalized omnipotent consciousness. Yet as Rivkin argues, James’s imaginative “authority cannot be stabilized” (151). The snowy expanse assumes an inability to achieve a grand synthesis as we soon discover.

James nevertheless imagines (projects) an ideal “stable self.” He argues that the “march” facilitating his “infinitely interesting and amusing act of re-appropriation” enables him to “shake off all shackles of theory” and attain, “as to a philosophic mind, a sudden large apprehension of the Absolute” (336). The Hegelian allusion implies that through revision James ascends to the height of visionary totality. When James reads his work and tries to access the “matter” he discovers all of the excess and waste his texts exclude and works to incorporate it into the revised novel. Following Hegel, the ghosts of his initial idea become his “uncanny brood” and the “first-born of my progeny” who reappear “as a descent of awkward infants from the nursery to the drawing-room” (337). The literary “matter” is the equivalent of the “margin” from The American Scene except James is able to contain its endless spreading because his imagination is the source of the proliferation. To borrow metaphors from the Preface to The American, the buried treasure becomes James’s “progeny” implying that the excess of the “matter” is part of him: the imaginative waste is familial. The ghosts that resurface (to draw on the painter’s sponge

95 One possible source for James’s understanding of Hegel would be the 1908 publication of William James’s A Pluralistic Universe. Its essays (many on German Idealism) were delivered as lectures at Oxford and attended by Henry when he was revising his work.
metaphor) are a form of interruption that forces (and restores) James’s desire to re-p
represent the “matter”; to re-write his novels with the aim of incorporating the “uncanny
brood.” If the ghosts of the past reappear in Hegel’s Absolute – his “Bacchanalian revel
in which no member is not drunk” (27) – then we might assume that James understands
all of the revelers are not yet in attendance and may never appear even though he will
anxiously continue to pursue them. James thus revises Hegel. The “Bacchanalian revel”
is not a culminating telos or the end of history but a new beginning.

The “perfect necessity” of the “deviations and differences” are the source of
James’s need to revise which for him is the act of making the new text conform to the
literary “matter” conjured up by the “historian.” To know if the present “apprehension
fits” with the “original expression,” the reader must become a writer who returns the
“matter” to the house of fiction: he must foreshorten, again, the pre-textual idea that he
just rediscovered. Reading and writing are necessarily always re-reading and re-writing:

To revise is to see, or to look over, again – which means in the case of the written
thing neither more nor less than to re-read it. I had attached to it, in a brooding
spirit, the idea of re-writing – with which it was to have in the event, for my
conscious play of mind almost nothing in common. I had thought of re-writing as
so difficult, and even so absurd, as to be impossible – having also indeed, for that
matter, thought of re-reading in the same light. But the felicity under the test was
that where I had thus ruefully prefigured two efforts there proved to be but one –
and this an effort but at the first blush. (338-339)

The transformation of “two efforts” into “one” unites the “docile reader” and the original
writer (the young Henry James) through the act of revision. If the past and present
versions of James are both readers, one reading the mind prior to the text’s creation and
the other reading the published text attempting to access its pre-textual “matter,” then the
“historian” is the idealized version through which each James can cohere momentarily.
The endless act of reading, writing, and revision enables the “historian” to come into
existence. It is the magic by which he is summoned and how he exercises his powers to yoke the past to the present. As William Goetz argues, “the imagination must supply … the missing links” between the “blank spaces of the past” (100). The revisionist allows the “deviations and differences” to cohere in the production of a new text. The act is the akin to the production of a new self: the historian is therefore the man of imagination who James has yet to directly name.

When James reads, he interprets the contents of his mind or probes the mind of a prior self. In order to consummate the act of reading, however, it is not enough to parse a text in search of its “matter.” Once he moves from text to mind, that is, extracts the “matter,” he must again empty the contents onto a blank page. The “historian” does not measure two abstract ideas but their textual representations. James recognizes the temporary stability of the self because the revised version of The Golden Bowl “coincides sufficiently” with his “original expression.” The images of matching sheets of paper corroborate: “his [the historian’s] vision superimposed on my own as an image in cut paper … matches … without excess or deficiency.” We might say, following Harold Bloom’s theory of influence, James’s swerve from The Golden Bowl merely reproduces the novel verbatim. Simply put: the acts of reading and writing are “but one” because every reading necessarily implies writing and vice versa. The reviser stands at the interstices between the reader and the writer as he reflects upon the entire operation. James is caught in the act throughout the Prefaces. As he reads his work, he reconstructs

96 For James, like Bloom, reading is misreading and a relation “between texts” that “one [author] performs upon another” (Map 3). But because there is an occasional fit between readings, James does not describe his experience in terms of anxiety. The reader can successfully represent the imagination of a former self “without bewilderment or anguish” (Art 335) if only for a moment. In addition, if the harmony lapses, then the “docile reader” can consent to the “historian” allowing the truth of the present to transform the past.
the “matter” only to foreshorten it again. The Prefaces represent the “growth of his whole operative consciousness” because they reveal the slow transformation of James the “explorer” into the “historian.” Returning to the Preface to The American can demonstrate James enacting his revisionary scenario prior to his theorization of it.

Measuring the Rope

What strikes James upon returning to The American is the novel’s “air of romance” (30). Although it contains “an element of reality,” it also seems “transfigured and glorified” (30) which leads James to distinguish between two versions of experience: the real and the romance. The former category “represents … the things [that] we cannot possibly not know” (31). Romance, in contrast, corresponds to “the things that … we never can directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and desire” (31-32). This famous passage often leads to discussions of genre with the most famous example being Richard Chase’s distinction between the American romance and the English novel. But as I have already argued, the romance is a broader literary category that does not obey national boundaries. I want to broaden the discussion of the romance to the varieties of experience that James explicitly invokes; especially in terms of the relationship between the “present attention” and “original expression” described in the Preface to The Golden Bowl. The real, in this scenario, is absolute contingency: the chaos of history and the sensuous reality that surrounds what we apprehend without the distorting “subterfuge” of our imagination and desire. James’s use of the double negative – “things we cannot possibly not know” – to

97 See Chase (21-28). For a general overview see Gillian Beer’s The Romance and Northrop Frye’s The Secular Scripture.
describe the real suggests a hesitancy to articulate what kind of knowledge it presents us. He resists attempting to make the real intelligible and simply posits that it is what we confront “sooner or later, in one way or another … [by] accidents of our hampered state” (31). The real would seem to imply the knowledge that shatters the imaginative ideals we construct with our “thought and desire.” The romance, on the other hand, involves the moment the crucible of imagination begins to transform the material presented to it; the shift from the grasping imagination’s apprehension of the real to the penetrating imagination’s need to dig beneath the surface. Put otherwise: the pursuit of the literary “matter” corresponds to the romance while the real is what interrupts the quest to reveal the “deviations and differences” between the ideal text and its material form.98

The understanding of the real that James describes is not unique. It emerges from the assumption that the real disrupts the romantic, betrays the imagination, and reveals the inability to grasp a chaotic and fragmented world.99 Speaking of James in his study of the French novel, Harry Levin argues that “we may consequently begin to think of

98 Although he does not discuss the Preface to The American, James E. Miller’s “Henry James in Reality” corroborates my interpretation through a close analysis of “The Art of Fiction.” Miller believes that James’s use of the imagination entails a process of conversion that implies distortion or, as he pithily writes, “Experience, impressions, consciousness, imagination – the sequence for James is tightly, inseparably linked. One cannot comprehend experience until he has followed through the chain to the end link, imagination” (593).

99 My hasty definition obviously assumes a modern understanding of realism. As Erich Auerbach has shown, realism shifts over time. When I invoke the term “modern,” I thus assume the kinds of distinctions that George Lukács proposes: specifically, the secularization narrative put forth in Theory of the Novel or realism understood as a conquest or refutation of the romantic in The Historical Novel. Realism would be the literary style that flourishes after Nietzsche’s death of God: the heightened awareness of historical determinacy, the self-consciousness, play and inventive use of language that emerges when artists test its representational capacity, probe its limits, and recognize the linguistic sign’s fallibility. My assumptions about the “modern” go beyond the nineteenth-century to include writers such as Rabelais, Cervantes, and Sterne.
realism as a synthesis: the imposition of reality upon romance, the transposition of reality into romance” (55). The “synthesis” resembles a reciprocal relationship where reality imposes itself on the hungering imagination – this is what James means by the phrase “things we cannot possibly not know” – before the imagination takes over and projects itself into the world evacuated of meaning. Fantasy yields unbearable knowledge before the mind summons the romance to assuage the imagination. Levin follows Courbet’s definition of realism as “the negation of an ideal” (qtd. in Levin 52). By producing a lost illusion, realism ironically engenders growth, development, or gives birth to the Bildungsroman. The progression, however, is repetition: the continual loss of illusions that the individual supplements with new imagined projections. The American Scene, once again, provides evidence. In the chapter entitled “Concord and Salem,” James searches for Hawthorne’s house of seven gables. The town’s “communicated spells” evoke for him a sense of the past, “of the real or that of the romantic, and with which, again, the deep Concord rusticity … essentially consorts” (570). But James finds himself lost, confused, and in need of direction as the “particular places” he visits “resist their pressure of reference” (571). The projected images, whether they come from James’s memory, America’s national consciousness, or the evoked sense of place in the writings of Emerson and Hawthorne, refuse to attach themselves to historical actuality. When he eventually finds Hawthorne’s house, reality reveals a “shapeless object by the waterside [which] wouldn’t do at all” and serves only to highlight “the poor illusion of a necessity of relation” (577). James is not disturbed however. Instead of leading to another rebuke of American culture, the mundane material house magnifies the grandeur of Hawthorne’s art. The “necessity of relation” produces an illusion (or the ideal house) and when James
confronts the banal house he recognizes why the reader “of the admirable book so vividly forgets … any such origin or reference” (577). The “shapeless object” before his eyes reminds James of the house of Hawthorne’s imagination and, as he ends the chapter, it renews his faith in the value of literary representation.

The encounter with the house of seven gables implies that the reader is doomed forever to fall victim to his own idealism. Returning to the Preface to The American, James’s metaphor of the “balloon of experience” corroborates the endless cycle of illusion/disillusion that is also latent in the theory of revision put forth in the Preface to The Golden Bowl. James writes:

The balloon of experience is in fact of course tied to the earth, and under that necessity we swing thanks to a rope of remarkable length, in the more or less commodious car of the imagination; but it is by the rope we know where we are, and from the moment that the cable is cut we are at large and unrelated: we only swing apart from the globe – though remaining exhilarated, naturally, as we like, especially when all goes well. (33-34)

The peculiar scene sets up a contrast between the earth and the sky, corresponding to the real and the romance, with the “car of imagination” attached to the “balloon of experience” floating between. Once a writer steps into the balloon’s car, he begins to experience the real through his imagination. Though the balloon floats in the sky, the “rope of remarkable length” that anchors it to the earth suggests that the writer actually
possesses an all-encompassing birds-eye view of the real below. The writer, in other words, assumes that his imaginative experience of the real is necessarily connected to it; grounded experience but also at distance that offers a totalizing perspective. But this is the deception of the “subterfuge of our thought and desire.” The writer cannot represent things as they are from his obscured position within the car.

James’s metaphor allegorizes the distortion intrinsic to our experience of the world. As his figure of the “crucible of the imagination” and description of the novel in “The Art of Fiction” attest, the imagination refracts the reality it represents. The details of the real grow obscure as the balloon ascends into the sky. In addition, the endeavor to accurately represent an already distorted view implies that the writer’s process of foreshortening enacts a second degree of distortion. The writer already possesses a limited view of the real because the balloon remains anchored to a specific location: the rope limits the range of the balloon’s movement. Even though the perspective of the real remains distorted, the writer must also sacrifice an element of it to the necessity of literary form. The obscured vision of the real becomes even more obscured when the writer transfers the contents of his mind onto the written page. But while the writer condenses what he sees from within the balloon, making it fit into the form of the novel, the revisionist reconstructs the “matter” that was always distorted since it emerged from

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100 James employs the same figure in *The Golden Bowl* when Maggie imagines her father hypothetically saying to her, without any awareness that her newfound “social glory” (779) masks her incipient knowledge of the Prince’s adultery, “Everything’s remarkably pleasant, isn’t it? – but where for it after all are we? up in a balloon and whirling through space or down in the depths of the earth, in the glimmering passages of a gold-mine?” (781). For Maggie, of course, the distance from the surface of the earth is the primary source of her anguish. Peter Brooks (*Henry James* 53-78) traces the balloon metaphor to James’s essays on Balzac and Flaubert. The figure of the rope describes how Balzac’s characters, like Isabel Archer, are free to make their own choices while Flaubertian realism is an elaborate and beautifully styled balloon that never leaves the ground.
within the “car of imagination.” The attempt to match the original impression of the
“matter” is therefore a desire to gain the same oblique perspective that the original author
possed. In this scenario, rather than replicate the footsteps over the “expanse of snow,”
the reader must tie a rope to the ground and step into his own imaginative car to chase
after the original author. The problem remains of knowing if those two visions align. The
reader needs a ground for comparison to determine whether or not his balloon allows him
to attain the same perspective as the original author. It is at this moment that the reader
becomes a writer again and creates another text to compare with the original. The
“historian” measures the rope that ties down the original author’s balloon with the rope
anchoring the “docile reader.” If the lengths align then the visions should match. Yet the
balloon is as stable as an ephemeral footprint in the snow. Hovering in the air, it
constantly changes direction, ascending and descending, undulating with each gust of
wind so that its relation to the ground remains transitory even as the rope keeps its
movement relatively contained. The march through the snow thus becomes an aerial
chase with the “docile reader” searching for the author’s “original expression” and the
“historian” judging whether there is a match. It entails endless re-reading and re-writing,
foreshortening and reconstructing, in the realm of the romance. It not only involves
measuring a twice-distorted impression, it means representing a new impression, from a
new perspective, which may hold out the promise of a perfect fit. Nonetheless both
remain always distorted and constantly in flux caught between the realm of the romance
and the realm of the real.

The dichotomy James describes in the Preface to The American overlaps with the
two poles of experience that structure his late work. On the one hand, the real and the
romance resemble the lion and the dove in the “Medusa-face” passage from the Notebooks. James pursues the ideal version of his literary subject, the dove, which otherwise promises a unified vision (the master), but sees it transform into a lion, the threatening and interrupting real. On the other hand, the romance and the real are versions of the Hegelian stoic and skeptic: the lure of the ideal and the abstract versus the extreme negativity of immersion in the world. Unlike Hegel, however, who sees the infinite vacillation between stoic and skeptic transform into the unhappy consciousness that remains dissatisfied with his inability to realize himself in his totality, James is content oscillating between the romance and the real. For example, pure romance represents “experience liberated … disengaged, disembroyled, [and] disencumbered” (33). The task of the novelist is to control it through the crucible of imagination and make sure the novel’s subject remains in “a measurable state” (33). Nevertheless, the writer must entertain the realm of the romance; merely staying on the ground produces a novel of pure chaos. The flaw James detects in The American is the intensity of the romance: “the art of the romancer is … insidiously to cut the cable, to cut it without our detecting him” (34). Reading his novel reveals the severed cord that the revisionist can mend. Of course, revision entails a new romance and pursuit of the original literary “matter.” Both forms of experience are interdependent and necessary to realize the man of imagination. The movements toward unity and fragmentation are dead-ends. The ideal literary “matter” requires its textual representation – a necessary mutilation – to legitimize its existence. Similarly, the novel as a material product needs its idealized version to rejuvenate the imagination and motivate the artist not simply to revise, but to continue to create, to transform Christopher Newman into Lambert Strether. The man of imagination is
therefore never the ultimate character. He embodies the belief that revision is unending since “the whole of everything is never told” (*Notebooks* 15).

The Whole Conduct of Life

The man of imagination is a figure that allows James to make “deviations and differences” cohere if only momentarily. Charles Feidelson broadly captures the familiar dichotomies in need of reconciliation when he remarks:

The Jamesian ‘man of imagination’ is the denizen of “experience,” which is radically ambiguous, at once human and imaginative. Within his life and within his consciousness, two basic functions or dimensions of “experience” – life and consciousness, man and imagination, existence and vision – are always laying claim to the whole of it, pursuing one another in a circle that can be described in various parallel sets of terms: imaginative man and imaginative man; the foreknowable world and the thinkable or desirable; the way events happen and the event of their apprehension. (“Henry James” 108)

The real and the romance stand in for the forms of experience and polarities Feidelson adduces. However, he believes that James does not seek “some point of resolution” and employs these dichotomies as “correlative functions of experience-as-meaning … an ongoing process of interpretation in which the event and its comprehension, the imaginative datum and the image of it, endlessly subsume one another” (108). Yet as I have shown, the Preface to *The Golden Bowl*, which Feidelson does not examine at length in his work on James, demonstrates how the circularity requires the projection of an imagined telos (the “matter”) that may temporarily unite man and imagination and
serve as the engine motivating and renewing the “ongoing process.”

As Laurence Holland puts it: “The failure of intentions … [or] the artist’s failure to realize in execution his ‘first and most blest illusion’ … is the very basis for creation” (171). Creation, for James, “embraces a ruin within it” (172). Even though creation produces “ruinous wastage,” it “becomes of necessity a process of salvaging the vision and materials it wastes, a process of redemption” (172). Shifting the context from the task of the novelist to the crisis of identity, the man of imagination allows James to represent how the inability to achieve a coherent subject without sacrifice or ruin motivates and renews the struggle for that ungraspable sense of self. The conclusion of the Preface to The Golden Bowl highlights the stakes of his revisionary project.

The waste that James detects are the “uncanny brood” and “progeny” he lost when the “matter” was foreshortened. By the time he approaches the conclusion of the Prefaces, the history of the growth of his consciousness becomes “the history … of the growth of the immense array of terms, perceptional and expressional, that, … simply looked over the heads of the standing terms [the material text] … like alert winged creatures, perched on those diminished summits and aspired to a clearer air” (339).

Tracing the growth of the self therefore requires recovering the lost waste of the self: what James calls “the buried latent life of past composition” (339). The ghosts of the past – those “alert winged creatures” who desire “a clearer air” – demand recognition and seek liberation from the tyranny of circumstance intrinsic to both history and the novel. As

101 Feidelson deploys James’s terminology to reexamine the international theme in The Portrait of a Lady and The Ambassadors (where the American real contrasts with the European romance). Despite diagnosing the same problems, Feidelson and I reach different conclusions because he only reads the pre-The Golden Bowl work. I elaborate on the place of James’s final novel in the fourth phase in my coda.
Melanie Ross notes, the Preface to *The Golden Bowl* is “James’s enshrining of the ghostly (the trace)” (253). He not only cherishes his “alert winged creatures,” but also actively recovers them. The novel, we recall from “The Art of Fiction,” is a “living thing … like any other organism” (*Theory* 36). It expands and absorbs waste: the “looming mass of the *more*, the more and the more to come” (*American* 684) that comprises the spreading “Margin” in *The American Scene*. Revision is the renewal of life and it reanimates the ghosts by including them within the novel’s ever-expanding capacious form. James writes in Preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*: “Life … is capable … of nothing but splendid waste” (120). The “sublime economy of art” thus entails continual revision if James is to discover what “rescues, [and what] saves” (120).

To accommodate the demands of his ghosts requires plunging into the figured void, “to retrace the whole growth of one’s ‘taste,’” which James defines as follows: “the ‘taste’ of the poet is, at bottom and so far as the poet in him prevails over everything else, his active sense of life: in accordance with which truth to keep one’s hand on it is to hold the silver clue to the whole labyrinth of his consciousness” (340). The “poet” becomes the figure to whom James looks when he enters the “labyrinth” hoping to access the aworldly literary “matter.” He identifies himself as a “seer and speaker under the descent of the god … the ‘poet’” who eradicates “so minor a distinction, in the fields of light, as that between verse and poetry” (341). Conversing with the poet emancipates the “matter” from the prison of language and reveals the possible exits from the “labyrinth” or strategies for re-presenting the literary idea. The “poet” is the ideal “historian” or

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102 Jacek Gutorow argues, “James’s reformulation of the notion of organicism [is] one that admits [the] inevitable ambiguities of language” (293). He continues that accounting for the “ambiguities” reveals the movement toward modernist fragmentation. But, as I have argued, James’s faith in form prevents him from recovering excess *tout court*.
revisionist; he embodies the “strange law” with which the artist must devote himself.

Returning to the first paragraph of the Prefaces, the “poet” is simply the unveiled muse who now exposes James to the “good stuff” of his ideal literary subject “sitting up, in its myriad forms” (341). The labor of discovering the “stuff” – the excess or “uncanny brood” of the “matter” – is what James’s “numerous pages [the Prefaces] record” (341). Subsequently, his task of composition is to relieve the “shifting and uneven character of the tracks of my original passage” and negotiate with his “misfits” (341). The trials, difficulties, epiphanies, and moments of insight that comprise “the general adventure of one’s intelligence” allow him to recognize why revision reveals “a beautiful law of its own,” which, in turn, enables him to apprehend repeatedly the transcendental “matter” that keeps composition a “a living affair” (342).

The revisionist reconnects “the buried, the latent life of a past” with the lives unlived and the disfigured literary “matter.” James describes the transaction as a dream-like process that we might interpret as a reencounter with the “Medusa-face” or the creature from the Louvre who has now transformed into the poet. No longer disturbed by the would-be menacing view of the outside, James authors the law that permits him to create via the endless “play of representational values” (346). He describes how he converses with his muse:

It is scarce necessary to note that the highest test of any literary form conceived in light of “poetry” – to apply that term in its largest literary sense [thus as the divine law] – hangs back unpardonably from its office when it fails to lend itself to a vivâ-voce treatment. We talk here, naturally, not of non-poetic forms, but of those whose highest bid is addressed to the imagination, to the spiritual and aesthetic vision, the mind led captive by the charm and a spell, an incalculable art. The essential property of such a form as that is to give out its finest and most numerous secrets, and to give them out most gratefully, under the closest pressure – which is of course the pressure of the attention articulately sounded. (346-347)
The “vivâ-voce treatment,” Latin for living-voice, addresses James’s method of dictation and magnifies the Miltonic allusions (e.g. “fields of light”) that pervade the conclusion to The Golden Bowl Preface. Reading his texts aloud seems to literally mimic the act of emancipating an “incalculable art” from the calculation of “literary form.”

Emphasizing “living” or the resurrection of the “alert winged creatures” and “uncanny brood” is how James awakens the dormant “buried” life of a text and transforms it into an always-alive, inchoate, becoming, atemporal imaginative creation. Revised novels become virtual Isabel Archers as their author tries to make them “rich [so that] they’re able to meet the requirements of [his] imagination” (Portrait 160) before he must suffer to return them to their Osmondian house of fiction.

Discovering the “finest and most numerous secrets” of his art and addressing it to the imagination intensifies what James calls, following Emerson, “the whole conduct of life” (347). We should recall Fanny Assignham’s admission that to do “justice” to “forms … [is] two thirds of conduct” (Golden 720). If the “two thirds” refer to vision (seeing the “matter”) and execution (framing it), then the final third implies re-vision (the act of recovery) in the effort to achieve a justice always beyond human means (as the ending to The Golden Bowl demonstrates). In this context, the “conduct of life” encompasses James’s “religion of doing” or “putting the processes through.” The phrase appears in the final paragraph of The Golden Bowl Preface:

103 Given his emphasis on diction and discrimination in speech throughout his career, I would argue that the “vivâ-voce treatment” resembles what M.H. Abrams, in his late work, calls the fourth dimension of a poem. The poem’s visual images, sound or sonic composition, and meaning represent the first three dimensions while the fourth is the activity of enunciation. See The Fourth Dimension of a Poem (1-29).

104 I elaborate on this phrase and its relation to Emerson in “The ‘Whole’ Conduct of Life.”
As the whole conduct of life consists of things done, which do other things in their turn, just so our behaviour and its fruits are essentially one and continuous and persistent and unquenchable, so the act has its way of abiding and showing and testifying, and so, among our innumerable acts, are no arbitrary, no senseless separations. The more we are capable of acting the less gropingly we plead such differences; whereby, with any capability, we recognize betimes that to “put” things is very exactly and responsibly and interminably to do them. Our expression of them, and the terms on which we understand that, belong as nearly to our conduct and our life as every other feature of our freedom. (347)

Freedom for James does not entail liberation from form or escape from circumstance. Rather it is act of putting and doing. The flexibility or “play of representational values” that can transpire within form. Even the lives not lived, what must inevitably be excluded, have value. Revision enables life to gain meaning by imagining the self not in relation to a lost past, but rather the plurality of a future in which the ghosts would return or justice would be achieved. What James calls “our literary deeds” (347) allow us to access the law that governs the conduct of life: they “enjoy this marked advantage over many of our acts, that, though they go forth into the world and stray even in the desert, they don’t to the same extent lose themselves; their attachment and reference … need not necessarily lapse – while of the tie that binds us to them we may make almost anything we like” (347-348).

We see a glimpse of the binding in a prophetic moment from The American Scene when James looks at Independence Hall. He writes that “the human imagination,” which

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105 My reading of James brings him close to Wordsworth in The Prelude. As Paul Jay (39-91) argues, the practical activity of writing enables Wordsworth to compose the coherent identity he seeks through the writing of the poem. Yet James differs from Wordsworth in a significant way. The poet seems unable to resolve the ironies and paradoxes intrinsic to a form of self-representation caught between the material or factual circumstances of a life and the imagination’s ability to rewrite history. I would argue that because James recognizes the self to be hollow, he masks it throughout his corpus: from Christopher Newman to Isabel Archer, Maggie Verver, the restless analysis, the docile reader, the historian, and beyond (e.g. the small boy). James, as a consequence, is faithful to Wordsworth’s project even as he puts into practice Nietzschean self-invention.
is an aspect of our broader “collective consciousness … gasps for a relation, as intimate as possible, from which it may more or less have proceeded and round which its life may revolve – and its dim desire is always, I think, to do it justice, that this object or presence shall have had as much as possible an heroic or romantic association” (593). In the midst of the birth of a new world that will shortly produce the horrors of the twentieth-century, James expresses his faith in our “collective consciousness.” He admits, returning to The \textit{Golden Bowl} Preface, that the freedom is not absolute. There are aspects of ourselves and our collective past that we must “abandon and outlive, to forget and disown” (348). Any American identity is surely an example. But despite America’s penchant for willfully disowning, forgetting, and abandoning, James now recognizes that the “licence of disconnexion” cannot fully undo relations that remain “essentially traceable” (348). The “luxury of the artist,” which would include the architect of Philadelphia’s Independence Hall, the poet as our unacknowledged legislator, or more generally the makers of history, is that he can always recover the past: “if he is always doing he can scarce, by his own measure, ever have done” (348). What James learns after his repatriation, and what he transforms into his figure of the man of imagination, is the “sovereign truth” (348) of his ability to re-establish the lost connections. Writing \textit{The American Scene} and constructing the New York Edition culminate with the discovery that the penetrating imagination and the grasping imagination, the two poles that oscillate within the crucible of imagination, provide the enabling structure to attain relative or contingent freedom; freedom understood as the “play of \textit{representational} values” that comes through endless revision in relation to the law of a coherent universalized image of the self; a subject never to be realized except in the imagination, but fought for on the battlefield where “our literary
“deeds” “bin[d] us” to the forms we create and allow us to continuously expand their limits in the hope of encompassing the full potential of our vision.

The Unlimited Vision of Being

The last two volumes of the New York Edition were published on July 31, 1909. Two days before, James mailed to Elizabeth Jordan, the editor of Harper’s Bazar, an essay he completed entitled “Is There a Life after Death?” His so-called metaphysical essay has much in common with the Preface to The Golden Bowl and it should come as no surprise that James answers his titular question in the affirmative. Christopher Stuart speculates that the monetary failure of the New York Edition coupled with James’s growing health concerns prompted him to accept a commission for an essay asking him to meditate on death. As a consequence, Stuart argues, James posits an afterlife because of his growing concern over his literary reputation. Yet James’s conception of the afterlife is not theological. Whether or not the essay represents a last attempt to secure literary immortality or philosophize how it might occur, his secular afterlife sheds further light on his theory of creative revisionism as it emerges from the Prefaces: it is ultimately a testament to James’s triumph rather than an effort to cope with failure.

He divides the essay into two halves. The first presents the reasons we might doubt the existence of an afterlife. James describes how modern culture generally espouses empirical reality and that all of our sensory evidence indicates that an afterlife is

106 Stuart traces the commission to write the essay to the fall of 1908; the same moment that James began receiving news about the New York Edition’s poor sales and when he was recovering from an illness. He suggests that James wrote the essay in the summer of 1909 (July 28th) which would place it chronologically one month after he sent The Golden Bowl Preface to Scribner’s (June 22nd).
impossible. He argues that our experience reveals life’s contingency and the “absoluteness of death” (119). In addition, scientific culture persuades us to our material insignificance and “proclaim[s] in a myriad voices that I and my poor form of consciousness were a quantity it could at any moment perfectly do without” (122). But when James begins to describe his vision of the afterlife, in the second half of the essay, he expands upon his notion of “consciousness.” He refers to consciousness as personality, his word for soul, and like a speaker in a late Yeats poem, he obsesses over the disconnect between the mind and the body. If an afterlife assumes a physical afterlife, then James believes that there is none, the demise of the body is absolute. But in contrast to the finitude of the material world, consciousness is infinite and has the power to “at least contain[n] the world … [to] handle and criticise it, [to] play with it and deride it; it ha[s] that superiority” (123). An afterlife exists only through the power of the mind; its ability to transcend, through sheer exertion of will, its material limits.

James recognizes that his conception of an afterlife will seem foolish in the face of the “embarrassed … conditions of this world” (123). But he nevertheless describes how consciousness may overcome those “conditions” through a “great extension” (123) into the afterlife:

It is not that I have found in growing older any one marked or momentous line in the life of the mind or in the play and the freedom of the imagination to be stepped over; but that a process takes place which I can only describe as the accumulation of the very treasure itself of consciousness. I won’t say that “the world,” as we commonly refer to it, grows more attaching, but will say that the universe increasingly does, and that this makes us present at the enormous multiplication of our possible relations to it; relations still vague, no doubt, as undefined as they are uplifting, as they are inspiring, to think of; and on a scale beyond our actual use or application, yet filling us (through the “law” in question, the law that consciousness gives us immensities and imaginabilities wherever we direct it) with the unlimited vision of being. This mere fact that so small a part of one’s visionary and speculative and emotional activity has even a traceably
indirect bearing on one’s doings or purposes or particular desires contributes strangely to the luxury – which is magnificent waste – of thought, and strongly reminds one that even should one cease to be in love with life it would be difficult, on such terms, not to be in love with living. (123)

The literary “matter” appears here as “the unlimited vision of being.” James’s shift from the “world” to the “universe” implies an expansion – a “great extension” – of the self through the “freedom of imagination”; the ability to reshape the self radically, connect continually, and accumulate the “treasure” (reminding us of the “buried treasure” found when rereading his works) of consciousness under revision. There is always the potential for “boundlessly multiple personal relation[s]” and an “infinite numbers of modes of being” (124) that exceed the limitations of the feasible. The “luxury” and “waste” of “thought” suggests the potential to commune with the ghosts, the “uncanny brood,” which is not merely a matter of resurrecting past ideas, but literally keeping the spirit of the past alive in the present and into the future. For example, F.O. Matthiessen’s reading of the essay quotes an early letter from Henry to William discussing the death of Minny Temple. Henry writes: “The more I think of her, the more perfectly satisfied I am to have her translated from this changing realm of fact to the steady realm of thought” (qtd. in Henry James 147). Translation is a form of revision. Despite her material demise, Minny’s transport to the “realm of thought” is a form of living: it is where personality, consciousness, or soul exists after the decay of the body. Henry James writing in the twentieth-century would no doubt believe that The Wings of the Dove, as a living organism itself, discloses the “luxury” of “thought.” Through an act of imaginative recovery, as opposed to empirical, life continues and consciousness may survive.

The theory of revisionism articulates the power of the imagination to transcend its limitations. It requires, for James, the strength of “desire,” the will to erect a “splendid
illusion,” and the projection of an idea of “my own possibility, of immortality” (127). Jamesian desire is simply a form of faith that consciousness can keep our spirit alive. But he does not grant the power to everyone. Only those that possess a “creative awareness of things” and have the “privilege in itself” of an “artistic consciousness” are able to connect with “the fountain of being” (126). Nevertheless, his conception of consciousness is not an imaginative imperialism of mind over the world; rather entering into the afterlife requires a collective effort. Even though James would grant that Minny Temple possessed the “privilege” in her passion for life, it required his writing to grant her immortality. Her spirit is how the artist “communicat[es] with sources” and allows him to enact “the renewal of existence” (124) through the creation of new “forms” (125). James’s memoirs – *A Small Boy and Others, Notes of a Son and Brother*, and the posthumously published and incomplete *The Middle Years* – perform that task. They aim to do to William (and the James family) what *The Wings of the Dove* does for Milly. Writing the memoirs reignites the crucible of his imagination and allows James to produce new forms that help him make the great lunge (or extension) into the afterlife. Although Henry, not William, inevitably takes center stage in the memoirs, we see the continual interaction between a youthful self and an alien world. The memoirs, in other words, employ the Jamesian theory of revision by restaging the agon that transpired between *The American Scene* and the Prefaces.\(^{107}\) It is unsurprising to learn, in this

\(^{107}\) Goetz’s reading of the memoirs (35-81) corroborates my brief description. He argues that James mediates the relation between his younger self and the alien others who inhabit his memory. In addition, Collin Meissner’s *Henry James and the Language of Experience* interprets the memoirs as an unresolvable dialectic of “destructuring and recreat[ing]” (186) as well as “bewilderment and enlightenment” (187). His reading confirms the powers of Jamesian revisionism and emphasizes its ability – as James argues in the metaphysical essay – to inhibit definitive closure.
regard, that prior to declaring himself a man of imagination in *Notes of a Son and Brother*, James believes that living, as he describes it in his metaphysical essay, belongs to a “man of imagination” (124). It is to him that the task of “establishing sublime relations” (126) belongs: the novelist, the poet, a possessor of “artistic consciousness,” but also the critic as well. Not a publishing scoundrel who hungers after gossip and the missing figures in the carpet. Rather the critic who sees his or her work as an extension of art and works to “establish speculative and imaginative connections” (127).
CHAPTER 5
HENRY JAMES AND THE ROMANTIC-CRITICAL TRADITION

The “man of imagination” is the hero of this study: my self-conscious myth of late James. Today, however, the hero is forlorn in the academy; a figure often disparaged for fostering a dangerous form of idolatry. David Bromwich captures the spirit of our times:

But as heroes go, persons distinctive of an age and yet beyond it, their peculiar quality is to give encouragement. There is a prejudice, still common among educated people, against the very idea of personal heroes, but it seems to me fundamentally mistaken. The unmasking of great men and women, true as a tactic, is false as a discipline. By proving you are contingently superior to the most admirable examples of the past, it deprives you of a weapon of criticism and a wellspring of hope. It fosters not love of perfection but moral snobbery and self-satisfaction, and only adds to the growing excess and arrogance of realism. (117)

The legacy of the liberal humanist tradition, which I discuss throughout this chapter, rightfully makes scholars wary of Arnoldian “love of perfection.” Espousing a hero seems to necessitate a corollary theory of value that hierarchizes, privileges, and excludes. But a hero is not the same as a transcendental genius or universal figure. Heroes are made not given. To discover a hero makes a reader complicit in the act of creation. It involves a struggle to tap the reservoir of energy within a text and produce a coherent representation that addresses the needs of the present. The labor intrinsic to erecting the image of the hero can help the reader fathom the artificiality of his critical investments and position him or her to take inspiration from a model without quixotic devotion. For Bromwich, discovering a hero “give[s] encouragement” by challenging the “excess of realism” or providing temporary relief from the “voice that tells you to specialize your habits or feelings, to ride your personality in the current of things as they are, or to do anything rather than stand and think and look at the world for the sake of
looking” (98). The hero, in other words, overlaps with reading as a process of self-
creation that helps one resist that cultural “voice.”

James is an illustrative example because he cultivated an artistic persona, sought
discipleship, embraced the figure of the literary genius through the moniker of the master,
and left a fraught legacy spurring debates throughout the twentieth century. Despite his
canonization by the Modernist poets and critics, prominent attacks by Van Wyck Brooks
and V.L. Parrington in the 1920s left James’s legacy unsettled. Both saw him as an
expatriate aesthete who found the intellectual climate of America insufficient for his
literary sensibility. Because James deprived himself of his native land’s imaginative
resources, neither scholar could find a use for him in their intellectual histories that
sought to defend an American liberal tradition. Yet the post-war period of nationalist
fervor and prosperity, coming on the heels of the early work of Percy Lubbock, R.P.
Blackmur, and the dominance of Eliotic Modernism, engendered a James revival that
cemented his legacy as a canonical writer by buttressing the myth of the master. The
history of James’s canonization in the American academy moves from the 1925
appearance of Van Wyck Brooks’s *The Pilgrimage of Henry James*, a less than congenial
title, to F.O. Matthiessen’s *Henry James: The Major Phase* of 1944, F.W. Dupee’s

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108 In addition to Bromwich, Mark Edmundson’s recent *Self and Soul* chronicles the fate
of literary heroism in academic scholarship as well as the classroom and culture at large.
Also see Edward Said’s *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*.

109 See Ruth Bernard Yeazell’s “Demystifying the Master” and David McWhirter’s
*Henry James’s New York Edition*. Winfried Fluck’s “Power relations in the novels of
Henry James” (16-22) superbly documents the limitations between what he calls the
classical liberal reading of James and the ideological critique of the liberal tradition.

110 Gregory Jay examines the liberal intellectual history of Brooks and Parrington in
“Hegel and the Dialectics of American Literary Historiography.” Trilling critiqued early
progressive liberalism in “Reality in America” (*Moral* 71-86).
collection *The Question of Henry James* in 1945 as well as his accessible critical biography from 1947, the first volume of Leon Edel’s eventual five-volume Pulitzer Prize winning biography in 1953, and Quentin Anderson’s *The American Henry James* of 1957. The 1972 appearance of Edel’s *The Master*, the final installment of his biography, marks the pinnacle of the critical effort to enshrine James. During the period between James’s death and his post-war critical revival, the academy witnessed the dominance of Eliotic Modernism, which consolidated particular Romantic assumptions about art, and the institutionalization of the New Criticism. While poets such as Shelley were held in disrepute by the school of Eliot, mid-century scholars simultaneously revived Romanticism and made Modernism’s debt to it explicit. The work of Northrop Frye and Frank Kermode would undermine the New Criticism’s authority while M.H. Abrams demonstrated Romanticism as a phenomenon that continued into the present. Eventually Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, and Paul de Man would labor (with varying degrees of success) to make Romantic revisionism the dominant paradigm for literary studies. It is against this backdrop that I invoke the phrase Romantic-Critical Tradition to define criticism that sees itself as a continuation of the work of Coleridge, Hazlitt, Arnold, Pater, Eliot, and, of course, James (to mention only a few). The novelist, in fact, offered a prime inspiration for the development of the academic criticism during the first half of the twentieth-century. On the one hand, Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction* and Blackmur’s *The Art of the Novel*, which gathered the Prefaces together, established Jamesian formalism

111 Michael Ankeso’s *Monopolizing the Master* examines James’s posthumous reception. Also see Daniel Mark Fogel’s “A Partial Portrait of James Studies” for an important rejoinder to Anesko.

112 Jonathan Arac’s *Critical Genealogies* and Daniel O’Hara “Dancer and Dance” both survey the critical legacy of Romanticism and its relation to Modernism.
within the academy. On the other hand, Matthiessen and F. R. Leavis made James a central figure in their American and English literary traditions. Yet the James revival was not a streamlined effort. The Modernist poets saw him as an artistic model but some critics remained conflicted and found it difficult to reconcile James’s devotion to the palace of art with their political values.\textsuperscript{113}

The dominant narrative of James criticism tells the story of initial contradictory assessments, canonization, and more recently demystification. It follows the trajectory of academic scholarship more generally: the Modernist consolidation of Romantic artistic values and liberation from aesthetic ideology to the production of more socially conscious, non-hierarchical or exclusionary, historically informed, and culturally relevant readings of a wider canon of texts.\textsuperscript{114} Within this story, depictions of James – the so-called Jamesian subject – shift as well. The once unified, autonomous, and all-powerful novelist, codified in the image of the master is now fragmented, nothing more than a series of texts, and a historical representation without the support of any grand narratives proffered by liberal humanist tradition to give the master his authority. David McWhirter’s “Henry James, (Post)Modernist?” surveys the history under consideration by situating the effort to “restore the socially and politically engaged James obscured by earlier generations of scholars” in relation to “the commodification of Henry James in postmodernity’s globalized culture” (186). Though McWhirter embraces a plethora of

\textsuperscript{113} Blackmur is a prime example and a survey of his writings on James shows a shift in opinion that culminates with his judgment that \textit{The Golden Bowl} is inhumane. See Veronica Makowsky’s introduction to Blackmur’s \textit{Studies in Henry James}. For a discussion of James and the Modernist poet-critics see Adam Parkes’s “Collaborations: Henry James and the Poet-Critics.”

\textsuperscript{114} Paul Cantor offers a thorough survey of this shift in “Stoning the Romance.”
scholarly approaches, and by no means denigrates past critical achievements, he
underestimates the power of “globalized culture” to strip us of our critical agency. Recent
scholarship “help[s] us recover James as a subject of history, produced and shaped by”
(179) it, but we too, by overemphasizing our historical recovery mission, fall victim to
our own cultural moment (Bromwich’s “realism”). As McWhirter admits, “Postmodern
culture is … for better or worse, a post-literary culture” (183). By examining the work of
F.O. Matthiessen and John Carlos Rowe, two prominent James scholars, I want to situate
the changing shape of James criticism within the broader shift in literary studies that
devalues the literary. Doing so is necessary to clear a space where James can once again
become a “weapon of criticism and wellspring of hope.” Surveying the work of
Matthiessen and Rowe will enable me to evaluate the place of James in a “globalized
culture” epitomized in the work of Wai Chee Dimock. If more recent scholarship shows
how art is complicit with history, my argument is that the man of imagination can
challenge “globalized culture” that seems to be an extension of the more general
onslaught of modernity. The literary, in other words, is the site of resistance that allows
us to break off our Blakean “mind-forg’d manacles.” To this end, I read “The Question of
Our Speech” and “The Lesson of Balzac,” two speeches James delivered during his stay
in America. Returning to James in 1904, our original beginning, will illuminate the
lessons of James the elitist master and James the self-conscious revisionary artist.
James at War

The war that preoccupies James throughout his career is restricted to the mind: a variation of Blakean metal fight and the Stevensian war of imagination.  But three historical wars define his critical reception. The delayed entrance of the United States into the First World War played a role in James’s decision to become a British subject and the symbolic gesture surely motivated the early attacks by Brooks and Parrington. The Second World War, in turn, coincided with the James revival securing his place in the canon. After publishing *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot* and *American Renaissance* in 1935 and 1941 respectively, F.O. Matthiessen edited two volumes of James’s tales, an anthology of writings from the James family, and along with Kenneth Murdock, published James’s Notebooks. His archival work led to *Henry James: The Major Phase* which studied the development of James’s creative process and inaugurated the three completed novels as the crowning achievement of his literary career. Though Matthiessen supplied America with an intellectual heritage that could unite the country, Vietnam would present the backdrop for another reversal in the novelist’s fortunes and transform the liberal tradition into battlefield for contesting his legacy.

*Henry James: The Major Phase* overturned the Brooks-Parrington paradigm while remaining committed to their liberal values. By questioning their historical methodology that “merely allude[s] to books instead of discussing and analyzing them” (x), Matthiessen created his own cultural history that borrowed from New Critical methods of close reading to attend to matters of James’s style and imagery. His work thus

115 This is not to imply that James remained unaffected and uninterested in the two major wars that bookend his life or that he was not consistently involved in skirmishes with publishers and others. Rather we remember him, no doubt, because of his art.
offers a portrait of the artist’s “growing consciousness of hitherto unplumbed powers” and demonstrates the artistic value of James as a “master craftsman” (xiii). But despite the allure of the aesthetic, Matthiessen’s criticism bridges the gap between James’s novels and their political relevance because he believes that “aesthetic criticism, if carried far enough, inevitably becomes social criticism, since the act of perception extends beyond the work of art to its milieu” (xiv). Such an approach rests on a humanist understanding of the Romantic-Modern Tradition. For example, his reading of Emerson in American Renaissance situates the transcendentalist in relation to Kant and Coleridge to stress Romantic symbolism and organic form. If Kant and Coleridge (as well as Milton and Shakespeare) are the Europeans that legitimate the American Renaissance, Matthiessen surrounds James with a supporting cast including Keats, Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson, Whitman, and Yeats. These poets contextualize his creative process where the “art of reflection” (10) that Matthiessen discovers in the Notebooks leads to a “moment of creative inception” (13) and allows James to access the “divine principle” (14). James is a poetic seer who offers an “imaginative projection, which, by framing [his] vision, could give it permanence” (31). The Ambassadors is his masterpiece because, for Matthiessen, it provides a defense of “the imagination as a conserving force … [and] give[s] permanence to the more perishable order of society” (40).

The value placed on “permanence” seems to promote a belief in the autonomy of art whereby the “divine” James accesses a universal perspective to discover the appropriate “frame” for our malleable history. Nevertheless, Matthiessen transforms James into the central inheritor of his American Renaissance along with Eliot. But he also

116 Matthiessen posits the “symbol as a means of expression” (xiv) that unifies his championed authors in American Renaissance.
oddly issues a negative critical judgment of the novelist. For example, he argues that *The Golden Bowl* is inferior to Hawthorne’s romances because it lacks “moral perception” and fails to give us “a sense of the larger society of which his characters were part” (102). He concludes: “With all its magnificence, it is almost as hollow of real life as the châteaux that had risen along Fifth Avenue that had also crowded out the old Newport world that James remembered” (104). Viewing the French “châteaux” as a New York high-rise condescendingly suggests that James’s devotion to European culture belies his novel’s complicity with the modern world’s production of “hollow” men and women. Against the backdrop of a burgeoning modernity, James, according to Matthiessen, believed that the imagination was capable only of protecting “a sense of personal relations” and not “a sense of society” (139). Writing during the Second World War, Matthiessen felt a dismay with his subject similar to his precursors (Brooks and Parrington) but also recognized the grandeur of his art. James’s cult of the individual would ultimately prove incompatible with Matthiessen’s democratic-socialist vision: “the world portrayed in the novels is of substantial value to us in recharting our own world, if only by providing us a target to shoot against” (150).

William Cain argues that the general “weakness” of Matthiessen’s *Henry James* “lies in [its] inability or unwillingness to push his criticism even further, to spell out clearly his sense of the social and political deficiencies of James’s art” (83-84). On the one hand, Cain believes that Matthiessen identified with James because of his homosexuality and inability to enlist in the armed services. On the other hand, Matthiessen believed that the novelist’s art erected a divide between the individual and society that forced the critic to condemn him as someone “aware that he [James] fulfilled
no vital role” in the changing world and was “blindly without purpose” (149). James’s secular religion of consciousness makes him a “target to shoot against” because it prioritizes mind or intellect over spirit. Unlike his father’s ability to combine Swedenborg with Fourier, or his brother’s democratic principles, James, for Matthiessen, is a version of Eliot’s Tiresias: a visionary seer who stands before the world’s decay without the ability to act. Though he praises his “humane consciousness,” Matthiessen argues that “it is unlikely to survive in our world without a renewed synthesis of the sort that his father attempted” (151). He concludes his book as follows:

[James’s] intense spiritual awareness, drifting into the world without moorings, has told others beside Eliot that if religion is to persist, it must be based again in coherent dogma. At the opposite pole, our novelists of social protest can still learn much … from James’ scale of vision. His gradation of characters according to their degree of consciousness may be validly translated into terms of social consciousness, and thus serve as a measure in a more dynamic world than James ever conceived of. To those who believe that if both Christianity and democracy are to endure, the next synthesis must be more rigorously based in both political economy and theology, in the theology that recognizes anew man’s radical imperfection, and in the radical political economy that insists that, whether imperfect or not, men must be equal in their social opportunities, many of James’ values are, oddly enough, not at all remote. (151)

James remains a hero for Matthiessen because his “scale of vision” offers insight into human relationships and depicts individuals that allow us to “share in [their] excited consciousness of discovering, in the very nick of time, the reactions appropriate to unforeseeable situations which [they are] immersed” (136). The achievement is purely aesthetic: James combines ironic perspectivism with a divine moment of revelation that he achieves through the mastery of form and style. But access to the social world afforded by his art is unhelpful: it reveals an artist who drifted toward reactionary disillusionment. For Matthiessen, James’s knowledge of “man’s radical imperfection” requires that we continue to search for the “next synthesis” of politics and theology.
Matthiessen’s ambivalence toward James is a result of the James’s ambivalence toward himself. The novelist’s revisionism, in other words, enables him to cope with failure and Matthiessen’s political worldview, in contrast, demands a total victory or synthesized vision. While James values the Coleridgean organic principle, he finds difficulty obeying it since germ that would produce growth always contains within it “the virus of suggestion” (Art 19). As a result, his novels are paeans to form and unity but also sometimes sickly, uneven, “loose baggy monsters.” The late writings, especially the Prefaces, reveal the tensions and contradictions inherent in the work of art, as well as James’s conflicted sense of his creative identity whose recognized limitations he works to overcome. For Matthiessen, however, the late writings witness the novelist’s transformation into a cultural critic who exhibits lamentable politics. His judgment of the social cost of his “religion of consciousness” hinges on a discussion of James’s inability to finish another major novel and a social aloofness that “drifted dangerously close to the doctrine of racism” (110) in The American Scene. His two-page reading of “The Jolly Corner,” moreover, argues that the story depicts the novelist’s revulsion toward the modern world’s obliteration of the past. By positing a simplistic dichotomy between the nostalgia depicted in The American Scene and The Sense of the Past and James’s fear of the future, Matthiessen neglects the role of style and art in the fourth phase. He cannot read the late writings in relation to the major phase, let alone see James as a protagonist in search of redemption (albeit secular). Thinking of the Romantic-Modern Tradition in terms of revisionism would prove antithetical to Matthiessen’s liberal-humanist beliefs. He finds himself at Trilling’s “dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet” but must find a synthesis for the materiality of politics and the representational
ideal of literature. In his review of *Henry James*, Trilling seems to acknowledge how James’s irony threatens Matthiessen’s Christian idealism when he accuses him of being “too strict with himself in relation to the charms of the novels” and hampered by his “concluding remarks about James and the future of society [that are] not quite adequate to the subject, or, really, to what [he] has himself told us about James” (“Head and Heart” 206). It would be Trilling’s own reading of James that uses Jamesian irony to critique liberalism in the name of liberalism. Trilling remains committed to the liberal values like Matthiessen but sees James’s “imagination of disaster” as a necessary counterpoint to his “imagination of love” (*Moral* 177).

If Matthiessen condemns James, we should understand his general praise in relation to the American literary history he establishes. *Henry James*, as well as *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot*, should be read in tandem with *American Renaissance*. The authors comprising his literary pantheon – Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman – are united through their shared “devotion to the possibility of democracy” and participation in “the last struggle of the liberal spirit of the eighteenth century” (*American* ix). Though Matthiessen extends that “struggle” into his own time, the renaissance authors he enlists to supply America with a literary tradition to defend against the rise of European fascism would ultimately compromise his critical legacy. Critics coming of age during an era of emancipatory social movements and against the background of the Vietnam War saw Matthiessen’s defense of liberalism as complicit with the America’s disavowed historical violence. His espousal of a liberal reading of American cultural history masked slavery, Indian genocide, and other atrocities. The need to challenge an ________

117 The section in *American Renaissance* entitled “From Hawthorne to James and Eliot” (351-368) specifically links to the novelist and poet to their precursors.
unquestioned devotion to liberal values was made all the more exigent with the rise of the Civil Rights movement and the horrors of an imperialist war. As Donald Pease has shown, Matthiessen’s defense of American literature, coterminous with his reliance on Romantic aesthetics, subjected political problems (e.g. the fate of American democracy) to aesthetic solutions (e.g. organic form) and helped underwrite the ideological framework licensing deleterious American politics. Matthiessen and his generation unwittingly supplied the mythic framework for an emerging Cold War national consensus that legitimized the American exceptionalist state’s exclusionary violence which had, in turn, transformed the Puritan errand into the wilderness into an errand into Vietnam.

The myth of the master with its implied reactionary aestheticism is blind to pressing social concerns or unable to address them. In The Other Henry James, John Carlos Rowe assumes such a perspective as he reflects on his time as a student:

When I began writing about Henry James nearly thirty years ago, my greatest fear was that I would become a “Jamesian.” In the late 1960s, as the Vietnam War raged in Southeast Asia and at home in the United States, I imagined the Jamesian to cultivate a distinguished retirement from life and sober dedication to Art that seemed vaguely repugnant and even slightly immoral to me. Henry James was simply one literary example in my doctoral dissertation, and I was determined not to be caught in the fine silken web of his alluring prose. Like so many illusions of youth, however, the stereotype I had fabricated of the Jamesian has proven in time to be generally false. I count myself particularly fortunate in my professional career to have been for much of it a Jamesian, in part for the marvelous company I have to keep. (xiii-xiv)

The “silken web of his alluring prose” stands at odds with James’s “vaguely repugnant” aversion to the social world. As a consequence, Rowe’s goal in The Other Henry James is to make the “crossroads where arts and politics meets” less “dark and bloody.” It is a goal that appears throughout his work on James. Henry James and Henry Adams, his first

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118 See Pease’s “Melville and Cultural Persuasion.” Also see Samuel Otter’s “American Renaissance and Us” for a discussion of Matthiessen’s conflicted legacy.
book, revises Matthiessen’s conception of American literary history in manner similar to Paul de Man’s revision of the Coleridgean symbol. At the same time, Rowe argues that James and Adams build upon the deconstructive impulses latent in the renaissance authors: their acknowledged inability to “resolve the dualism of [man’s] condition” (21) makes them harbingers of Modernism. Rowe’s second book on James, *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James*, directly performs the “labor of socializing Henry James … [and] returning literary theory to its proper subject: the ways in which literature serves or subverts the culture’s complex arts of self-representation and self-presentation” (28). Rowe turns to theoretical models – feminism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis for example – to demonstrate the social relevance of James. Yet he also employs these practices of reading to expose their limits. James becomes Rowe’s “figure, the manikin, on which the drapery of contemporary theory will be modeled and where the problems of fit will be confronted by this latter-day, deconstructive tailor” (28). The strategy is twofold: use theoretical schools to disrupt the myth of James’s “sober dedication to art” and then deconstruct them to defend a particular theoretical approach as the central critical methodology. Though he anticipates the potential historicist criticisms leveled at his use of deconstruction, Rowe ignores how his appropriation of James “the manikin” undermines his own critical authority.

Having published five books on James, two of them edited collections, Rowe’s affection for his subject is unquestioned and his work consistently offers sharp analysis and keen insights into particular texts. Nevertheless, his stated “loving disloyalty” (*Theoretical* 16) of his subject anticipates his remark, offered in retrospect, that *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James* was a mere “strategic illusion” (*Other* 2). His
third book on James, *The Other Henry James*, continues the project of socializing the image of the master but does so to promote “a more inclusive representation of nationality, ethnicity, gender, and sexual preference” (198) that can make the novelist “readable once again” (197). The assumption behind Rowe’s comment on readability is that the “pompous figure of James as the master of the novel” is no longer serviceable; contemporary readers cannot relate to James unless he is shown to be “vulnerable, sexually anxious, and [a] lonely writer struggling with the new modern art and new age” (ix). The ground for Rowe’s polemic against the rarefied image of the master is the myth’s “cultural elitism” (xiii). He therefore seeks to banish it from critical memory by accusing the “ideas of ‘aesthetic education’ inherited from the romantic idealists” which underwrite “the role of literature in liberal education” and promote a vision of art as a “spiritual ‘example’” that assumes a belief in “transcendence of historical circumstance” (5-6). The description of art as a “privileged discourse” (6) directly speaks to Modernism’s appropriation of Romanticism and ignores the more nuanced version of an “aesthetic education” theorized by revisionist critics.119

The problematic view of a “liberal education” would seem to be the product of the school of Eliot, not the Romantics themselves. But Rowe only mentions the elitist and

119 Geoffrey Hartman defines an aesthetic education as follows: “Aesthetic education means, at the simplest level, that art is taken to be a serious empirical object of study and a field encouraged to reflect on itself, on its role in human relations. Learning of this kind is not satisfied by politics centered on the curriculum, if that remains content to introduce unsettling contemporary works or identifies the aesthetic dimension in older ones as a narcissistic emphasis on beauty or self deceiving idealism. There is no way to strengthen aesthetic education than to expose students to art itself and to those who have written passionately and critically about it. Theory, moreover … plays an important role in pushing the debate about art and its study beyond practical and parochial concerns. The free discussion of differences in judgments and recognition of genius as a gift that expands the sympathetic imagination or exposes mediocrity are all the more needful when the temptation is to fight only over ideological matters” (*Scars* 215-216).
disconnected formalism of Percy Lubbock while Matthiessen, Blackmur, Trilling, Edmund Wilson, Austin Warren, and the critics who challenge Eliotic Modernism go unmentioned. For Rowe, all mid-century and post-war criticism shares a naïve belief in universal values and the timelessness of literature. At best, such work is a relic from an outdated era. At worst, it is blindly detached from history and culture. Yet, as we have seen, Matthiessen is by no means disconnected and his indictment of James for his secular religion directly anticipates and thoroughly undercuts Rowe’s assumption about the “‘spiritual ‘example’” of art. Moreover, homogenizing entire generations of critics under the auspices of “cultural elitism” transforms Rowe into a redeemer who can recover for us a “more accessible, more readable, and finally joyful Henry James” (37). In this manner, his genealogy of critical history constructs a teleological narrative of emancipation. Rowe describes how literary theory enabled scholars to debunk the repressive Modernist consolidation of myth and present alternative representations of James that are morally superior and more relevant to our particular historical moment. But by positioning the other Henry James as a corrective, Rowe unknowingly repeats the crime he aims to avoid. More specifically, he fails to distinguish the Romantic idealism he attacks from his own idealist vision of a democratic Henry James and, as a result, reinstates a new hierarchy that is as exclusionary as the hierarchy he attacks. The myth of the other Henry James, in other words, supplants the myth of the master and adheres to the law of a progressive political agenda rather than mid-century liberal values. Teleological narratives are dangerous and run rampant in the history of criticism: they remain complicit with the Enlightenment myth of progress whose historical violence (as we shall see in greater detail later) much recent scholarship (including Rowe’s) aims to
Rather than see the master as an alternative myth, Rowe dresses up the “manikin” once again by assimilating him to, and thus legitimizing, “our understanding of globally diverse literatures” (198).

A closer examination of Rowe’s reading of “The Question of Our Speech,” the lecture delivered at Bryn Mawr College on June 8, 1905, illustrates his recuperative style of reading. The lecture is an ostensibly elitist condemnation of the American English dialect as spoken by young women. It would seem to epitomize the version of James that Rowe finds “vaguely repugnant and even slightly immoral.” But for all its elitism and smugness, “The Question of Our Speech” supports my reading of late James. If *The American Scene* and Prefaces represent one way of responding to the “Medusa-face,”

120 Another example would be Mark Seltzer’s Foucauldian reading of James which assimilates the novelist into the theorist’s carceral vision of social constructivism: “What I have been emphasizing here is the way in which this externality of the literary to the political functions, the ways in which the ‘oppositional’ character of literary discourse may function within a larger field of discursive and political practices” (131). Rather than see James as “oppositional,” Seltzer makes him complicit with that “larger field.” He justifies his move by viewing Foucault’s work teleologically: “Whereas Foucault in his earlier work … represented the literary as an essentially transgressive counter-discourse … he more recently has viewed the literary … as one among other disciplinary practices … [where] literature has no privileged status at all” (176). The early Foucault, however, asserts that revisionism contests teleology. By defining literature as language that rebels against its instrumental use, Foucault prepares the reader to see his career in terms of repetition, change, and experimentation.

121 As Daniel O’Hara argues, Rowe would rather “sacrifice [his] particular subject – James – to the disciplinary imperative to give the multicultural age an acceptable image of the latest proper subject” (*Empire* 253) than engage in “personal ethical struggle for meaning between author and reader” (255). In this manner, James becomes a mere “token of cultural capital” (257) who circulates in the neoliberal university operating under the guise of a progressive political agenda. Elsewhere Rowe claims that behind “the demand for ‘close’ and ‘careful’ reading there is also a profoundly conservative impulse to keep us focused on familiar texts recognized as ‘difficult’ and ‘serious.’ But too often these criteria are left unarticulated and undefended” (“Resistance” 112). O’Hara’s work, however, draws on so-called high brow authors such as Yeats and James as well as popular genres (e.g. science fiction) to explicitly theorize the task of critical reading.
where James accepts the loss of subjectivity and initiates his revisionary quest, then “The Question of Our Speech” presents another possibility, an attempt to secure a stable identity against all odds. In it, I would argue, James has not yet come to recognize the full impact of his repatriation and therefore presents a last gasp effort for order in the face of chaos (as opposed to learning to thrive within chaos). For example, the topic of James’s oration is the necessity of preserving a “common language” because the “imparting of a coherent culture is a matter of communication and response” (43). Speech is the key “medium through which we communicate” and its quality, for James, determines “our relation with each other” and the “great human and social function” (44). While he speaks of “good breeding” and “conquests of civilization” as “the very core of our social heritage” (45), his “moral” is “that the way we say a thing, or fail to say it … has importance that is impossible to overstate” (47). It is easy to condemn the espousal of civilization, the reprimanding of young women, or worse, the nativist fear of the “contingent aliens” who “while we sleep” lay claim to “just as much property in our speech as we have, and [have] just as good a right to do what they choose with it” (55).

Rowe admits that versions of critical theory such as Marxism and feminism would promptly lambast James’s lecture. But his attempt to save what “remains compelling” locates beneath the highly charged rhetoric a latent idealist vision of a “social utopia predicated on popular access to the most sophisticated modes of communication” (Other 34). To dampen James’s “bid for authority” as the potential legislator of an ideal language to which everyone would conform, Rowe transforms him into “a victim of his own contemporary and class-specification” who is immersed in “the patriarchal and bourgeois ideology of his age” (35). Discovering the utopian impulse toward an ideal
language makes James anticipatory of our own egalitarian values and allows us to interpret his pomposity as a mere mask for his true belief in “a more democratic language” (35). Rowe thus sees James as both a victim of his own age and our contemporary insofar as he discloses the emancipatory potential of “the property of language and the powers of representation” (35).

Pierre Walker’s more faithful account of the lecture recovers James’s profoundly anti-democratic vision. Rather than reveal a suppressed hidden utopian desire, Walker shows that James’s fear is that “a neglect of linguistic discrimination is the first step to a neglect of all distinctions … for it will lead to uniformity” (xxxi). The “conservative impulse” Rowe finds in James is his belief in a linguistic standard that depends upon “distinctions” between sounds. A democratic social order that elides distinctions in the name of equality is what James eventually calls, in The American Scene, the “monstrous form of Democracy” and “huge democratic broom” (401). In this context, James is valuable not because he longed to be like us, but because his reactionary position poses a significant challenge to our political values and even the aesthetic values he himself prizes: the unity of organic form within a heterogeneous text. Whereas Rowe transforms the lecture into a quest for a utopia, it seems more appropriate to interpret James as slowly becoming cognizant that democratic justice or an idealized vision of community is impractical. “The Question of Our Speech” might be read as another chapter of The American Scene where the restless analyst lashes out against the New York crowd.

122 Not every critic is able to save James from his historical victimhood. Merve Emre’s “Jamesian Institutions” examines how James’s speech participates in a discourse of self-making epitomized by female conduct books.

123 Haviland corroborates Walker’s reading by describing the necessity of hierarchical discrimination as a call for heterosocial acts that preserve social existence (173-179).
Matthiessen and Rowe exert a particular amount of influence within James studies. While I admire their devotion to their subject, Matthiessen’s portrait is ultimately more productive. His willingness to get caught in the “web of alluring prose” allows him to make the beauty of James’s art available to a wider audience. Although his political disposition forces him to condemn James’s social value, Matthiessen at least struggles to read James on his own terms. He finds the appropriate contexts for understanding his creative process and wrestles with the vision of society his texts perform. Rowe, in contrast, wants to remake James in his own image. He sees James as “manikin” rather than an interlocutor. What Rowe finds unacceptable in James is relegated to his historical moment and what is valuable is detected as the unconscious desire of his texts. Rowe’s readings make James conform and do not risk allowing texts to challenge the working assumptions and value criteria he assumes as a critic. James becomes what Trilling calls a “pitied objec[t] of our facile sociological minds” (Moral 173).

In his most recent book, the volume Henry James Today, Rowe admits, “I love Henry James” (1) and speculates why he continues to attract critical attention. He identifies the entertainment value of his melodrama and accepts that the novelist “lures us with his big ideas, metaphysical thoughts” (2). His “cultivation” or “artistic sensibility” (2) make him a writer whose “talent, sometimes genius, appeals to us, because we wish to emulate it. The lure of James’s fictions,” he continues, “is that such imaginative power can be learned as a consequence of the otherwise idle pastime of simply reading” (3). It would seem that Rowe returns to the belief in an aesthetic education that his earlier work rejected. However, A Historical Guide to Henry James, another recent volume, poses a
different response to the question “why read Henry James at all?” (4). Rowe and Eric
Haralson, his co-editor, write:

Henry James is historically important because he struggles in his fiction and
nonfiction with social, psychological, cultural, class, gender, and sexual issues
still pertinent in our contemporary world. His imaginative formulations of and
solutions to these problems are not always applicable to our current
circumstances, but they help us understand the genealogy of these issues and may
explain why so many remain unresolved today. Literature provides one means of
understanding social and psychological problems and their subsequent historical
developments. The essays in this volume . . . offer historical contextualizations
of Henry James that make his work more relevant to us today and thus more
meaningful to students and even casual readers. (4)

When literature becomes a “means” of access whereby we evaluate it based on its
applicability to “current circumstances,” the phrase “imaginative formulations” seems out
of place. Any “struggle” in James becomes subordinated to what he can tell us about the
“pertinent issues” we already value. Though the specifications of the “volume” require
the editors to stress “historical contextualizations,” they dissociate history from
experience; they assume history stands outside us, something to be recovered or accessed
rather than something lived. The gestures toward the imagination and struggle remain
empty when juxtaposed with the language of relevancy and pertinence. Rowe and his co-
editor seemingly want to merit James as an artist, but cannot quite declare the literary
imagination to be a shaping force in history that has transformative power. The evidence
becomes clearer when they address James’s “existential predicament” (8). Their
understanding of the role of art in a liberal education – a literary or aesthetic education –
is unmistakable when, after quoting Conrad’s famous passage on the destructive element,
they write: “This situation is profoundly modern, and we still inhabit it, even if James’s
answers and Conrad’s answers are no longer sufficient to keep us afloat. The essays in
this collection help us navigate the treacherous medium from James’s era to our own”
(8). But what are the “answers” that are no longer of use? Can we possibly come to a consensus about James’s expansive corpus? The assumption, for Rowe and Haralson, is yes. Their critical judgment: “no longer sufficient.”

Global James

Reading Matthiessen in relation to Rowe calls attention to a broader shift in literary studies: the critique of Romantic-Modernist-Aesthetic Ideology. At best, categories such as “genius,” “imaginative power,” or “aesthetic sensibility” are relegated to history; to the world of a specific cultural discourse: the shifting understanding of art and literature that occurred at the end of the eighteenth-century. At worst, they are ignored, seen as inimical, and denigrated in the name of novelty, disciplinary progress, and ameliorating the horrors of history. The critique of the Romantic-Modern Tradition is understandable. We cannot overestimate its notorious political legacy and the degree to which it remains complicit with the Enlightenment’s imperial pursuit of knowledge that normalizes the subject under the auspices of concepts such as reason. In this manner, Romantic aesthetics are concomitant with Enlightenment universalism; specifically, Romanticism ameliorates the growing knowledge that historical contingency impedes autonomy and therefore aims to recognize human singularity from within a universal perspective. On the political left, for example, Romanticism helps legitimize the liberal

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124 Though there is a self-proclaimed “return to the aesthetic,” it represents an espousal of affect on the one hand, and the historicization of aesthetic categories on the other. In both instances we see the conscious refusal of hierarchy or value judgments. The turn toward affect resembles the larger endeavor to justify the humanities in terms of various scientific disciplines: biology or psychology. An example of the continued emphasis on historicization would be Gustavus Stadler’s conclusion to his study of genius: “Ultimately, genius is a useful term for examining cultural politics” (168).
thought of Mill and Arnold – as Bildung transforms into cultivation – and serves the interest of the nation-state by offering a theoretical justification for imperial subject formation. On the political right, the Enlightenment drive toward progress can seize upon Romantic myth to enable particularly pernicious modes of thought. Marc Redfield forcefully articulates the central problem: “Aestheticized political models not only conceal real social injustice … they actively produce violence as a by-product of their own impossible reliance on, and production of, sociopolitical homogeneity and transparency” (Politics 22). Redfield’s work demonstrates how the post-Kantian tradition anchors itself in the historical world to ground philosophical understanding but also, at the same time, separates itself from that world in the interest of framing it and thus universalizing its knowledge claims. The result is the creation of an imagined transcendental realm of universal value at odds with a malleable cultural discourse. Experiencing the collateral damage of what Heidegger calls enframing (Gestell) makes it easy to sympathize with scholarship that unmasks ideological aberrations that authorize a universalizing aesthetic dominion over particular, differentiated populations. But as Redfield reminds us, more than any ideology or discourse, the aesthetic is the “ideology

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126 Adorno and Horkheimer’s Dialectic of Enlightenment sees the myth-making attribute of the Enlightenment, what we might think of in terms of Romanticism’s faith in the imagination, as the engine facilitating progress. Also see Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s “The Nazi Myth” and Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe’s Crimes of Art and Terror.
Critics now remain committed to discovering new methodologies that can evade the perceived errors of the past. One example would be the shift from what Clifford Siskin calls Romantic literary history to a literary history of Romanticism. Siskin invokes the latter phrase to describe a style of scholarship that recovers the historical conditions authorizing the emergence of Romanticism and “avoid[s] [the] repetitive continuity of Romantic literature and Romantic literary histories” (9) that merely “perpetuate[s] the Romantic myth of culture” (10). The same emphasis on discontinuous history remains true for scholars of Victorian and Modernist literature: the periods where Romanticism’s legacy returns as Victorian liberal humanism and Modernism’s self-made mythology. Americanists see the perpetuation of nationalist exceptionalism as the danger to be avoided. But regardless of the specific area of specialization, the goal remains the same: to gain historical distance from the “myth of culture” under scrutiny and therefore avoid blindly reproducing its values. According to Steve Cole, there is a general fear of “complicity with social and cultural structures of power” (37) including those that enable the production of criticism itself. If critical judgments lead to elitism and exclusion, and the literary itself is a category complicit with the worst of Western civilization, then...

127 Redfield’s understanding of theory, literature, and aesthetics coincides with my description of Romantic revisionism. “Precisely because it is a trope for aesthetics,” he writes, “romanticism must turn on itself. It splits into error and critique, with critique turning out to be another version of what was denounced as error” (31). The aesthetic tradition sets the terms of its own critique; the resistance to theory is as theoretical as the repudiation of Romantic ideology is ideological. No wonder Harold Bloom argues “All Romantics are the last Romantic” (Ringers 324).
literary criticism would need to evade both the literary and the critical.\textsuperscript{128} The attempt to step outside the boundaries of any particular paradigm or power structure is, for Cole, a “self-conscious refusal to all historically-determined mediation” that the critic sees as “a kind of ahistorical terror at belatedness or repetition” (37). Even if Cole generously overdetermines the degree of “self-conscious” awareness, Thomas Pfau’s more amiable rhetoric properly identifies the critical “fantasy of an objective methodological purchase on the past (and hence our own present) and our simultaneous abject awareness that such a project, far from being objective, might effectively reproduce the very terrors of history from which it purports to shelter us in the commodity form of critical knowledge” (33). Although Pfau and Cole write in the wake of the New Historicism, the “fantasy” they describe continues to flourish in the form of perpetual paradigm shifts. For example, Elizabeth Renker celebrates a new generation of Americanist critics who exemplify the diverse approaches to literature in circulation: “The post-American exceptionalism, postcanonical, transatlantic, transnational, subnational, prenational, hemispheric, global, oceanic planetary, world moment is forcefully in evidence” (248). The attempt to move beyond nationalist frameworks, toward the transnational, planetary, or global, which is virtually a move to make all of literature comparative literature, reenacts the very transcendentalizing gesture that defines aesthetic ideology. But American Studies is unexceptional. The penchant for new methodologies and new ways of reading are often made in the name of democratic inclusivity and progress. It is a grave irony that the explosion of critical methodologies would occur at the same moment the profession of

\textsuperscript{128} Emory Elliott observes that there is a general desire “to discredit [aesthetic and theoretical] systems of evaluation themselves, arguing that ideological, economic, and national prejudices underlie and inform critical distinctions” (4).
literary studies extinguishes itself.\textsuperscript{129} It is a graver irony, I would argue, that the universalization of literature – all literature as comparative literature – under the guise of a democratic vision of social justice grounds itself in a polemic against a Romantic ideology that first made such an ideal it telos.

The special issue of the \textit{Henry James Review} entitled “Global James” offers a sampling of critical uses for Henry James within this larger context. The essays collected are diverse: they run the gamut from a Deleuze and Guattari inspired meditation on methods of organizing knowledge; James’s relation (or lack of) to Estonia; the post-war modernization of Japan; Korean statistical scholarship, which includes measuring literary reputation and translation; and essays on the global cities that pervade the novels. John Carlos Rowe’s “Henry James and Globalization” serves as a prolegomenon to the issue and traces three ways of thinking about its eponymous topic: how the Jamesian response to modernity anticipates our own concerns with the current “one-way globalization” (205) of the West; the Jamesian response to turn of the century modernization; and James

\textsuperscript{129} The best example would be our now post-critical/critique moment whose inauguration coincides with a several million-dollar grant awarded to Rita Felski, its chief proponent, to explore the social uses of literature. Moreover, recent methodologies such as surface reading or speculative realism see the fallibility of subjectivity as the central danger to be avoided. The turn to social-actor network theory (as in Felski) or digital models of reading (as in Franco Moretti’s work) is another attempt to escape the ironic repetition that results from historical mediation.
as a commodity circulated around the globe. However, I want to focus specifically on Wai Chee Dimock’s contribution, which was greatly expanded into a chapter of Through Other Continents. Dimock’s vision of a planetary literature is emblematic and her use of James is instructive. The currency her work possesses, moreover, is self-evident and reflected in the honorable mentions for prizes Through Other Continents received from the American Comparative Literature Association and the Modern Language Association.

The goal of her project is to study “deep time” (3): a concept that gives the critic access to a set of “longitudinal frames” (3) which reveal the unnoticed and complex intertwining of literary texts otherwise dispersed throughout history and geography. The implicit antagonist for Dimock is “the glaring inadequacy of a nation-based model in world politics … [and] its parallel inadequacy in literary studies” (2). But despite the plethora of methodologies for thinking beyond the nation, Dimock proposes a planetary conception of literature that brings together dissimilar objects or ideas (e.g. Emerson and Islam) and temporally distant phenomena (e.g. Margaret Fuller and Ancient Egypt). She sums up her interests as follows:

The question is of scale. Gayatri Spivak speaks of ‘planetarity’ as a never-to-be-realized horizon, a ‘catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility.’ She urges us to hazard it for just that reason. This book takes that risk. It is an attempt to

130 The attempt to close the gap between James’s world and our own and show him as a historical figured focused on the politics of his time is evident in Kendall Johnson’s “Henry James and China Trade.” The essay is valuable for the biographical analysis that reconstructs James’s web of connections to individuals involved in the international exchange. But as a piece of literary criticism, the discussion of James’s style, in particular the image of the pagoda from The Golden Bowl, subordinates any understanding of the novel to the larger interest of James’s relation to China. For a different study that focuses on translation, textual dissemination, and trans-cultural exchange, what Rowe calls the global circulation of James, see Nan Z. Da’s “Lao She, James, and Reading Time.” The best essay to combine all three aspects of Rowe’s concerns is David Palumbo-Liu’s “Atlantic to Pacific: James, Todorov, Blackmur, and Intercontinental Form.”
rethink the shape of literature against the history and habitat of human species, against the ‘deep time’ of planet earth. (6)

It should be clear that we remain within the realm of Romantic aesthetics where the planet now becomes the imagined but unrealizable telos of critical activity. Implicit in the demand to “hazard” the risk of “planetarity” is the need to transcend the limits of any narrower frame of reference that inhibits our ability to “rethink the shape of literature.” Dimock, however, specifically pits planet against nation-state and views her scholarly gambit as corrective: a way of working toward “collective human responsibility” in contrast to an exclusionary literary history predicated on nationality and similar categories. Of course, as we learn from Paul de Man, it is emblematic of modernity’s irony to reify the authority of a category we invoke in order to repudiate. But the more dangerous irony lies in the idea of “deep history” itself. Dimock’s move to the planet is a form of abstraction whereby a literary text loses the singularity of its immediate context. The juxtaposition of disparate texts de-contextualizes them and erases their historical specificity. “Deep history,” in other words, flattens history, elides history, or following Bruce Robbins, amounts to a “rejection of history itself” (193). Worse, William Spanos argues that the move toward a planetary perspective disavows the localized historical struggles that occur within and between nations or communities and, as a consequence, institutes a panoptic gaze complicit with what we now call the forces of neoliberal globalization. Dimock’s planetary aspirations enact the very “transcendence of historical circumstance” that Rowe attributed to the Modernists. The result is the erection of a universe of literature not unlike Northrop Frye’s mythic framework except the

131 See Spanos’s Redeemer Nation (74-104). Also see Donald Pease’s “The Extraterritoriality of the Literature for Our Planet” which expands upon the link between Dimock’s planetary literature and the neoliberal globalization.
impulse toward systematicity fails to attend to its internal dynamics and disavows any hierarchy. Dimock refuses to make distinctions and discriminations, including the kind of schematization that Frye esteems, and resorts to descriptions of references and allusions which we will see in her reading of James.

Winfried Fluck offers a decisive critique of the multicultural vision that animates the democratization of literature. By turning to the romance, Fluck describes how scholars implicate themselves in an unending cycle of repetition that displaces the center of the discipline (e.g. the literary, Romantic myth, America, the humanist subject, etc.). The irony, however, is the unwitting reestablishment of hierarchies. Fluck argues that Dimock “emphasizes the effects of a deterritorialization that transcends national boundaries” and assumes the planet as the dominant frame but such an impossible perspective demonstrates that “choices will have to be made and hierarchies will have to be established” (“American Literary” 13). For example, Dimock claims to heed Spivak’s disclaimer that the planet is a catachresis, an unrealizable horizon. Yet her description of the nation-state as fiction is at odds with her belief that the planet offers “a platform broader and more robustly empirical” (“Planet” 5). The planet as “platform” (as opposed to a myth) privileges empirical knowledge and simply positions it as the more valuable frame of reference while subtly denigrating the nation-state or even more localized contexts. We might attribute Dimock’s unknowing repetition of the Romantic’s transcendentalizing gesture to our historical distance from the critique of aesthetic ideology. Literalizing Spivak’s catachresis, in other words, may be the result of Dimock’s working critical presuppositions. As she remarks in an interview, “I think what’s different about my approach [in contrast to the history of comparative literature] is that I theorize
about individual texts in relation to something larger, namely genres, but I don’t theorize about language in the way de Man does” (“American” 174). Such an approach makes it obvious why the critic would lose sight of the figurative dimension of the planet. In addition, the same interview reveals the assumptions about literature orienting her approach: “for me, there’s nothing technical about literature, nothing that the layman wouldn’t be able to understand” (170) and “for me, literature is both an extended record of where we’ve been collectively and also a cautionary tale from day one” (171). The literary, it would seem, is the scapegoat, something non-technical and unexceptional, merely part of the historical record like any other text. However that may be, the ultimate standard of judgment would be to examine what her methodology enables us to see: how does she read James?132

The chapter entitled “Genre as World System: Epic, Novel, Henry James” wants to discover a more capacious way to think about the relation between the novel and the epic. To this end, Dimock turns to fractal geometry as a strategy for “mapping … ‘literature’ as an analytic object” (73) and therefore accounting for aberrations within texts by putting divergent historical moments and geographical locales into dialogue. Fractals, Dimock would have it, help us “explore a broader paradigm, namely, the tangled pathways and fractional reproduction of literary forms” (80). The exploration would seem to be an entry into a Borgesian labyrinth with the hope of stumbling upon a new critical framework. Yet it is unclear if the effort to “remap the tangled borders between the ancient and the modern, between the United States and the world … [by]  

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132 Dimock’s more recent “Weak Theory” explicitly describes the intent to “focu[s] on science, rather than literature” (733) in the interest of mapping a new literary history – or what she calls a network – of genres between Tóibín, James, and Yeats.
retracting] the fractal dimensions of the epic in the novel” (80) has a specific goal in mind beyond pursuing the unachievable horizon of the planet. Nevertheless, Dimock begins with Plato and Aristotle to define the epic as “a kind of linguistic sponge” (82) and subsequently turns to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Dante, and Bakhtin as her examples of epics and epic theorists. Working outside of any context that might isolate specific features of specific epics, Dimock sees the mixture of languages as the genre’s defining attribute: “the *lexical* axis of the epic … serves also as a *temporal* axis” (84) where the “linguistic fabric” demonstrates its “rough cut” and represents how a “coil of time” (84) brings together different layers of history: “a foreign tongue once again brings into relief a roughed-up chronology, a roughness built into the epic and marking it as a genre” (85). Unlike Auerbach, who argues that the “roughness” in Dante reflects a clash between the literary styles of antiquity and Christianity, Dimock, who fails to mention her precursor in her two-page treatment of Italian poet, amalgamates Dante into a literary history so broad all distinctions vanish. For example, the ground for bringing together Dante and “*Gilgameth*” (84 sic) is that both have “a bumpy fabric, riddled with words that do not synchronize” (84). Whereas Auerbach produces an argument to account for the “fabric” of Dante, Dimock adduces a similarity that draws continuities without offering subtle differences. When she turns her attention to Henry James, Dimock ventures the “riskier claim” (86) that thinking about the novel “as a linguistic sponge” can reveal the “permeable borders between poetry and prose” (87). That she selects *The Golden Bowl* as one of her texts, the novel that demonstrably declares its ability (in the Preface) to challenge the “distinction… as that between verse and prose” should be kept in mind.
The reading of James begins with an analysis of a passage from *The Portrait of a Lady* to highlight how writing shifts scales: from an extreme close up of Isabel’s singular thoughts to a zoomed out panorama that situates her in relation to Roman history.

“Novelistic subjectivity,” for Dimock, enables “scale enlargement” that “undoes human singularity and preserves it through that undoing” (88). Isabel’s relationship to Rome accounts for the particularity of her thoughts while the narrator’s reflection on the city’s vast history both magnifies the depth of her consciousness and eradicates its singularity. Whether or not Dimock’s broad assertion about “novelistic subjectivity” is unique to James is a question left unanswered. Her otherwise perspicacious reading of a select passage from *Portrait* ignores the stakes it seems to raise. Instead, Dimock quickly turns her attention to James’s reception by Auden and Pound, with a brief excursion into Lukacs, to justify reading the novelist as an epic poet and seeing how *The Golden Bowl* extends the “coils of time” (92) into the future. When it comes to the novel itself, her method is rather simple. Beginning with the famous opening, Dimock invokes the layers of history contained in the Prince’s Roman heritage (dating back to Amerigo Vespucci) and connects the mention of a painting by Veronese mentioned in the opening chapter to James’s discussion of the artwork in an earlier travel sketch. The “coils of time” unfold through allusions: Dimock shifts from the Prince to Veronese to James and then to Ruskin’s reaction to the same painting, James’s attitude toward Ruskin, and then another allusion to Veronese. She sums up the conclusions of her analysis as follows:

*The Golden Bowl* is a historical canvas stretching thousands of years. Its horizon is not unlike the one composed by Veronese, a genre in paint that haunts its cousin in print. Citing the painting, the novel becomes momentarily and fractionally epic as it knots itself into a coil of time. … The novel [is thus] no more purely American than it is purely English or purely Italian. Any literary
history would be remiss without taking into account this citational geometry and the lively input of visual genres into the print medium. (99)

The fact that literature contains traces of the past, allusions, and is intertextual is presented here as an original claim. Rather than produce an argument as to the function of the Veronese within *The Golden Bowl* – that is, how James puts the painting to use or the role it plays in helping us interpret the novel – it is enough for Dimock to trace its “coils.” There is a devastating irony, however, in the assertion that James’s novel is “no more purely American than it is purely English or purely Italian.” His work as a whole, if not his literary career and biography, are grand attempts to achieve an identity not contingent upon nationality and produce a work that pushes a genre to its limit. James is both a breaker of form and keenly aware that form is necessary to structure our experience of reality. But Dimock ignores the cosmopolitan James to focus on the range of reference and the trail of allusions that appear in his work. Her conclusions are thus banal and her “citational geometry” confirms platitudes: that the novel is a hybrid genre, that the Jamesian novel resists national definition, that the range of reference contained in James is vast, that the visual arts are a shaping force in his literary style, that James portends to the status of an epic poet. Dimock reveals nothing about *The Golden Bowl* that readers of James have not already understood for a century. Yet because she justifies her analysis of James by espousing a new framework and methodology – a turn away

133 The same problem occurs in “Weak Theory.” To trace “alternative network[s]” (745) between Tóibín, James, and Yeats, Dimock deploys the deconstructive language of intertextuality: words such as “host environment” (738); “leakiness and contagiousness” (740); and “textual infections” (740). Yet her goal of discovering a “nonsoverign field” (745) of literary history, genre, and context merely points to banal intertextual references. Worse, her effort to imagine “cross-genre authorship” (747) erects spurious distinctions. For example, she incorrectly assumes that for James there was an “impassable gulf between theater and fiction” (746) without mentioning how theatrical techniques appear throughout his fiction; especially the scenic method of the late work!
from the nation-state and the valorization of science – Dimock undermines what might make James’s work exceptional. She devalues an aesthetic education, in other words, by subjugating the literary to the needs of her so-called critical inventiveness, which, after all, repeats the past unwittingly and produces diminishing returns.

The aspiration toward a planetary reading of James eradicates his work in two ways: first, it generalizes the categories it wishes to challenge to the point that terms such as epic or novel become empty and useless for thinking about literature (i.e. What is a pure epic? What text is not a linguistic sponge?); second, the transformation of *The Golden Bowl* into a historical record revealing the “coils of time” prevents the critic from produces a reading of the novel. Dimock writes at such a distance from the text that its words become lexical markers or indices of citation. A focused reading of *The Golden Bowl* in relation to Lukacs would begin to correct the ills of Dimock’s approach. She cites his definition of the epic’s ambition to think in terms of totality and the novel as the representation of the world relegated to fragmentation. Is Maggie’s desire to discover the golden bowl “as it was to have been” (*Golden* 878) in its ideal state not an aspiration toward epic? Is Maggie, in other words, a heroine who arduously works to recover a world that existed prior to our transcendental homelessness? Is this James’s ambition as well? Is the chain of allusions that Dimock detects the hidden cracks in the bowl inhibiting totality? Or are they markers that allow the novel’s entry into “deep time” and therefore emblematic of its inability to fulfill its totalizing aspirations? Is *The Golden Bowl* the novel to end all novels and therefore the epic resurrected?
The Lesson of James

“The Lesson of Balzac” anticipates the historical moment that finds Dimock’s non-reading of The Golden Bowl. It was originally delivered as a lecture during James’s repatriation and raises the question: why Balzac in America in 1904? Similarly, reading “The Lesson of Balzac” implies why James in 2017? The novelist begins by outlining his beliefs about activity of criticism. He calls it the “gate of appreciation” and the “gate of enjoyment” while asking where he might find a “lucid report of impressions received, of estimates formed, of intentions understood, of values attached” (115)? The fear behind James’s defense of criticism is the capitulation of the institution of literature to the “stiff breeze of the commercial” (117). He condemns the indiscriminate proliferation of texts, the failure of discerning judgment, and most prescient, the assumptions that literature improves, moves forward, progresses or develops and therefore relegates the past to the dustbin of history. “The shepherds [of literary-critical culture] have diminished,” James writes, at the same moment that “the flock has increased” (116). It is the same sentiment we might express today when professional activities (conferences, organizations, journals, and methodological variety) continually expand as jobs numbers perish. Nevertheless, James presents his lecture under the belief that art and criticism remain valuable because they shape, and often re-shape, how we view the world. Great literature, he suggests, spurs the intellect and fosters critical thought. It is the figure of Balzac, “the father of us all” (120) as James notes echoing Wilde who tells us that the Frenchman invented the nineteenth-century, who is needed to help us overcome the “bankrupt and discredited art” (119) that populates the world.
There are two overarching lessons that James extracts from his precursor. Balzac offers us the most encompassing representation of the conditions of life and how “circumstances press upon us” (135). He is also the supreme craftsman who produces “an economy of effect, [and an] economy of line and touch” (135) that fuses the disparate parts of his pictures to make his entire social panorama cohere. But these are lessons that James purposively extracts: what he wants his readers to learn from Balzac and what his own criticism promotes itself. The “Lesson of Balzac” also contains several other principles that show how James extends and transforms the Balzacian project through his own work. I isolate seven additional lessons: James praises Balzac’s objectivity and declares that his novels lack “the lyrical element” (122) as they capture disinterested images of life; Balzac’s web of experience is all encompassing. He charges with his writerly “heroic lance” (124) into every object that he finds in his path; Balzac overwhelms us with the power of his “romantic vision” (124) because he balances a powerful representation of the real from within his “garden of romance” (125); James describes how Balzac loses himself in the labyrinth of his imagination which produces images faster than he can contain them; in contrast with later French novelists, especially Zola, Balzac transforms the material he apprehends through the “crucible” (130) of his imagination; Balzac gets “into the very skin and bones” (132) of a diverse array of characters; and he shows us the cost of art and the sacrifices we must make to achieve it.

The Balzacian attributes that James isolates subtly reveal the evolution of his own art. For example, whereas Balzac omits the “lyrical element,” James incorporates it into his late work. He balances form with an intense lyrical expression that reaches its pinnacle in the meditative vignettes that pervade The Golden Bowl. If the Frenchman
thrusts his “heroic lance” into everything he encounters – that is, no object or situation is unworthy of his novelistic attention – James remains much more judicious; he selectively chooses what to include in the interest of both his moral sensibility and his need to perfect the novel’s form. While Balzac the romancer “sank in his illusion” (128), James is conscious of its perils. Similarly, James strives to master the labyrinth of his imagination and its crucible, to contain the images it produces, and find the correct temperature or “aesthetic heat” (130) to apply. Finally, Balzac’s immersion into the minds of his characters leads James to heed the lessons of his English precursors, George Eliot for example, and look at the house of fiction from a distance with an eye toward objectivity.

The ghost of Balzac pervades James’s career but there is also a manner in which the later figure transcends his precursor. His more discriminating eye acknowledges the high price of art and keeps a certain amount of imaginative energy in reserve only to see it spent after the arduous labor of producing the New York Edition. The ability to recover what was previously sacrificed, to continue revision of the past, seems a program to be followed by future generations rather than James himself. This would be the task of his Modernist progeny to whom James drifts dangerously close. For example, James departs from Balzac, especially in the late work, because he gains a heightened sense of the difficulties intrinsic to the quest for reality. In other words, there is an element of Flaubert in the late James who counteracts the lesson of Balzac. The novelist’s novelist, as James once called the author of Madame Bovary, gives his successors a lesson in the limits of fiction and the knowledge that the abyss beneath representation inevitably rears its face and inhibits any idealistic journey. The Golden Bowl and The American Scene balance themselves on the edge of that abyss, constantly peering over the edge of the cliff only to
take a step back, retreat into the more stable and controllable world of memory, history, and illusion. Balzac ironically is the force of restraint in James. The frenetic Frenchman who never imagined a novel he did not want to write renews James’s faith in fiction, whereas his successor, Flaubert, tempts him to leap into the unknown.

We might say that Balzac and Flaubert are the two poles of the Jamesian imagination: the dove and the lion that produce the madness of art. James concludes “The Lesson of Balzac” by arguing that all of us are novelists insofar as we desire to maximize our experience of life. It is in this sense that Balzac is “the master of us all” (138). Following his lesson checks the imagination when freedom risks exposing the writer to the nihilistic universe of Flaubert or the Conradian destructive element. Unlike Rowe and Haralson, who assume “James’s answers and Conrad’s answers are no longer sufficient to keep us afloat,” thinking more broadly about the madness of art, within the continuum of the Romantic-Modern Tradition, shows how James’s work demarcates the range of possible answers available to us. Whether or not we agree with his solutions, which I try to clarify in my coda, is a matter for our particular predisposition. To reimagine mastery in terms of the madness of art we might return to Blanchot who writes: “Mastery consists in the power to stop writing, to interrupt what is being written, thereby restoring to the present instant its rights, its decisive trenchancy” (Space 25).\textsuperscript{134} Mastery is the dream of

\textsuperscript{134} Shoshana Felman’s powerful account of madness in literature confirms my argument. Discussing the Cartesian debate between Derrida and Foucault, she argues, “madness is the non-mastery of its own fiction” whereas “the discourse of philosophy … is precisely distinguished by its own control, its position of mastery, of domination with respect to its own fiction” (49). If we grant her interpretation of Foucault, who espouses fiction in contrast to Derrida’s adherence to philosophy, then madness implies the willingness to lose oneself in one’s fiction. Felman comes to this precise conclusion in her tour-de-force reading of The Turn of the Screw: “James’s mastery consists in knowing that mastery as such is but a fiction” (245).
perfection: the palliative for our existential laceration or the reprieve needed to “stop writing” when we fail to capture our subject. Mastery entails finity: the end of self-making/unmaking and the discovery of our totalized vision. In the Notebooks, when James discusses his encounter with the Medusa, he notes: “To present these accidents is what it is to be a master; that and that only” (240). Such presentation is impossible. It entails the quixotic task into the space of literature; the figured void; that fathomless abyss or expanse that swallows the quester whole. Total representation is something the Romantics desired before they found themselves locked in a temporal world of belated existence. Indeed mastery is a myth, like transcendence, and all other idealistic fictions; but it is also a necessary myth, a saving lie we must create and perpetually revise as its cracks expand. Consequently, we keep reading James because he shows us the cost of struggling with the deathly and petrifying gaze of the Gorgon; that alien world that is not our own.

When James delivered “The Lesson of Balzac” he was on his native soil. As Hugh Kenner notes, his visit to New Jersey occurred while the soon-to-be poet of Rutherford was away studying medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. When he delivered “The Question of Our Speech” to the audience at Bryn Mawr, it was the year before Marianne Moore’s matriculation. His haunting trip to Harvard, moreover, prevented him from meeting the young Eliot in attendance. Kenner speculates on the missed encounters to set the stage for the more famous meeting, which begins his monumental work on Modernist poetry, between James and Ezra Pound. But James’s true heir was also in New York as a young lawyer in 1904 and 1905. The more opportune

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135 See Kenner’s *The Pound Era* (1-22).
missed encounter was between the visionary tourist and the future poet of *Harmonium.*

Decades before Wallace Stevens would appear with his Rabbi, his Fat Girl, his Connoisseur of Chaos, his Necessary Angel, and the rest of his coterie of figures, James surveyed the land, from his balloon of experience, in pursuit of the real, and on his quest for the man of imagination.
CODA

Throughout my reading of the fourth phase, I have implied that James becomes Maggie Verver as he searches for his man of imagination. I want to corroborate my equation and supplement it with the broader contexts that haunt my study. As Jonathan Arac notes, citing the young Northrop Frye, hindsight may show James to “be the Hegel of the history of the novel” (“Social Vision” 171). The assumption is that James represents the full-realization of the novel as a form. Yet James is only the Hegel of the novel in one reading. Within Hegel, as Jacques Derrida has shown, there is both the culmination of Enlightenment thought, the dream of a totalized vision of history through the eyes of the last philosopher of the book, and also the seeds of that vision’s destruction, a disseminated Hegel, the first thinker of writing, who offers a revisionary account of modernity. A more suitable analogy for understanding the James I present in this study is to compare him with Kierkegaard’s Knight of Faith: the figure who illuminates the mode of existence that the man of imagination and Maggie Verver both embody. More specifically, my dialectic of the grasping imagination and the penetrating imagination, which assumes, however reductively, analogues with the Hegelian skeptic and stoic, develops into a variation of the unhappy consciousness. What I call the crucible of imagination denotes the unending oscillation between stoicism and skepticism or the reproduction of the self-divisions within the modern artist that define him or her as emblematic of the Romantic-Modern Tradition. But unlike Hegel’s unhappy

136 Arac cites a letter from a twenty-one year old Frye: “‘It may become apparent in future [times] that the novel, as an organic art form, is a nineteenth-century phenomenon, brought to its culmination and final fruition [by James]’” (qtd. in “Social Vision” 171).
consciousness, the man of imagination is not frustrated with his inability to gain a coherent creative identity. He does not make the sacrifice necessary to actualize the universal truth of human history and he relinquishes nostalgia for a forgotten past or the redemptive hope of a totalized vision. The man of imagination is a happy consciousness content with the inability to leap into history and culture. He is a Knight of Faith whose endless repetition ironically engenders his own creative potential.

Leo Bersani implicitly describes Maggie James as Knights of Faith when he argues that she “triumphs in The Golden Bowl because she has James’s faith that her work will come back to her; it depends on her” (155). The contrast with Maggie would be Isabel Archer or Lambert Strether just as the man of imagination opposes the master. The latter myth entails Hegelian teleology: what Kierkegaard calls recollection. Mastery is a form of idealism that desires to control the past and construct order: to yoke together, however violently and at whatever cost, a beginning to an end. The master is a Knight of Infinite Resignation who defines his existence in relation to a past event. Isabel and Lambert idealize their relationships with Osmond and Woollett; their nostalgia prevents them from embracing chaos or chance. They are unable to actualize the risk entailed in turning toward Caspar Goodwood or Maria Gostrey. They are tragic heroes who sacrifice the potentiality of love, their future, for the greater good of Pansy Osmond and Chad Newsome. Henry James, the master, sacrifices all to the palace of his art.

The man of imagination does not recollect; he repeats; his glance remains forward. He suspends the ethical law of form (momentarily) and sacrifices his novel – his true “first born progeny” – because he knows that it will come back to him through revision. Repetition is ironic disruption: a kind of stasis that occupies the gap between
teleological progress and paralysis. Rather than define his existence in relation to the past, a Knight of Faith embraces the undefined future. He still projects a telos but recognizes the necessity of his acknowledged quixotic faith (his absurdity; his madness).
The literary “matter” that appears in the Preface to *The Golden Bowl* represents the idealized (infinite) subject that can never be attained for a secular writer. It is the “sovereign truth” or “strange law” operating under the sign of the “poet.” Nevertheless, James sacrifices his material novels, mutilating them through revision – his pen emblematic of Abraham’s knife – and suspending all formal requirements because he has faith in the literary “matter.” The sacrifice is not, as we see with the master, to the altar of form, or for any particular social cause such as literary reputation. The man of imagination sacrifices because he knows his novels will return; the “matter” is both apart of him and beyond him at once. The master is a figure who rests on his laurels, looks back toward his literary creations as the justification for the crown he wears. The man of imagination is the active artist, the architect, or the figure who continues to construct and revise because his ideal work of art lies beyond the horizon.

Maggie is the model of the Jamesian man of imagination and I can flesh out my comparison by turning to two dominant paradigms for thinking about her fate. To speak of Maggie’s redemption is to see her enacting a revision of the first half of *The Golden Bowl*. Just as the fourth phase revises the trajectory of James’s career in the major phase, “The Princess” revises the misaligned (though coherent) social arrangement that slowly assumes its shape in “The Prince.” Maggie is a poor artist in the first half of the novel. She wants to preserve her relationship with her father which resigns her to the past. Critics who judge Maggie’s effort to save her marriage to be unequivocally victorious
generally follow Quentin Anderson’s model of the imperial self. A distinctly American (and Emersonian) form of subjectivity that manifests itself in Whitman and James, the imperial self exemplifies an “undivided self [that] must encompass a simulacrum of the varieties of experience and give them a totally coherent form” (*Imperial* 168). It is a form of imperialism where Maggie assumes imaginative dominion over those who surround her; similarly, James the writer (like the Ververs) “conquers the great world of European culture and art and carries it home in triumph” (167). Anderson finds his symbol of the imperial self in the golden bowl as both a cultural artifact, referring to both the bowl in the novel, and the novel itself. The crack in the bowl represents “historic human consciousness in time and space” (176) and contrasts the ideal bowl “as it was have been.” Maggie decides to shatter the material bowl (if we assume that Fanny Assingham, the literal breaker, is under her control) because it symbolizes the crack in her marriage: the flaw in her design to pair the Prince with Charlotte allowing her and Adam to maintain their intimacy. Her act of “conscious perjury” is therefore a denial of “her redeemer’s passion” (180) as well as a tacit assertion of her creative power to revise her aesthetic design through continued fabrication. This is the Jamesian lie of fiction making.

What *The Golden Bowl* ultimately demonstrates, for Anderson, is the triumph of Jamesian form, underwritten by the apotheosis of the “myth of consciousness” (193), and enacted through Maggie’s possession of her Prince (just as James possesses his European world). The power of the imperial self is to actualize the ideal golden bowl through

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137 Readings that follow Anderson would include Stephen Donadio’s transcendental-Nietzschean James; Carolyn Porter’s Marxist reading of James’s Lukacsian reification in *Seeing and Being*; Mark Seltzer’s Foucauldian analysis that demonstrates the collusion of James’s art with power; or Sharon Cameron’s study of Jamesian consciousness as a force exterior to the mind that asserts its grip on the phenomenal world. The difference among these critics is how they judge the imperial self: exceptionalism or imperialism?
imaginative conquest. Yet Maggie’s triumph, which coincides with her divination, produces waste. How does James recover what must be sacrificed? How does the imperial self realize its potential in a world where foreshortening mutilates the ideal bowl that exists solely in the mind? Anderson offers the following solution:

James’s imagination lives hand to mouth, must forever ingest and render, must forever convert, must forever dabble in the filth that is the unformed in order to make the formed thing. We utterly fail to comprehend the necessities of the undivided self when we indignantly reject the possibility that Adam Verver can convert the crap which is his wealth into the guiltless possession of the forms that fill his museum, or that Maggie can convert the very fact of adultery itself, the filthiest thing of all, into the most exquisite possession of all, the final luster of her Prince, stretched out in time and space, wholly suffused by her love, “the bowl as it was to have been.” To take possession of the world as form is to take possession of the whole of the Prince, in whom the bloody, contradictory, wasteful past is summed up. Charlotte, we remember, is “the twentieth woman.” Centuries of empire and ostensible male dominion, and the Eve all the while incessantly driving us to eat, all finally forced to say to Maggie, “‘See,’ I see only you.” Of course, James was quite sane enough to know that his playful apocalypse was a myth. (194)

The final declaration of James’s sanity does not restrain Anderson’s mischaracterization of his waste conversion system. It conforms to the “necessit[y]” of the myth of American imperial dominance, and more important, fails to see the potential for tragedy in James or the contingencies that undermine Maggie’s “exquisite possession.” The problem lies with Anderson’s interpretation of Adam. He sees both Adam and Maggie as emblems of America and possessors of the imperial self. Whereas Maggie rearranges “the human furniture,” possessing her Prince, placing Charlotte in the cage, and then sending her into exile with her father, Adam converts his surplus of money into art to be housed in the literalized representation of the imperial self, his museum in America. Yet Anderson fails to see the irony in James. He believes that Adam’s imperial self is fully formed prior to the start of the novel: he a wasteful aristocrat who has transformed himself into the “spirit
of the connoisseur” (548). The novel, in turn, depicts the slow transformation of Maggie into her father. However, Adam is, I would argue, a philistine. His museum is Flaubertian: a parody of the will toward a totalizing order. He is a lampoon of the American spirit which we see in the famous comparison of Adam and Keats that Anderson misreads. He takes at face value James’s remark that Adam is “equal somehow with the great seers, the invokers and encouragers of beauty” (Golden 550). But Adam is a poor reader of the poem to which the narrator compares him. The narrator is careful to mention how Adam “devoutly fitted the poet’s grand image to a fact of experience” (549). Adam is the emblem of American delusion who mistakes “image” for “fact,” confuses an imaginative projection with reality, and falls victim to his own fiction while his daughter remains “conscious” of her “perjury.” In reading Adam as an imperial self who directly converts the waste of his endless supply of money into the coherent form of art, Anderson fails to recognize that Adam and Charlotte constitute the very waste Maggie’s design cannot contain. Anderson, in other words, does not believe that there is any sense of regret or guilt in Maggie; he cannot fully acknowledge the violence in her design and the “new horror” (981) that it engenders. The cost of possessing the Prince is the exclusion of Adam and Charlotte and they become the ghosts who will haunt the newly created structure that requires their expulsion to exist.

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138 Eugenio Donato’s The Script of Decadence distinguishes the figure of the museum as it appears in Bouvard et Pécuchet from the library and encyclopedia. He demonstrates how Flaubert uses the museum specifically to undermine the myth of a supreme fiction.
Anderson’s reading of *The Golden Bowl* concludes by discussing R.P. Blackmur’s belief that the novel is inhumane.\(^{139}\) Of all the critics who discuss James, it was only Blackmur who Anderson felt threatened his own authoritative position.\(^{140}\) Not only did he single out Blackmur in 1973, he returned to his precursor thirty years later to offer a more exhaustive analysis. To defend the imperial self embodied in Maggie, Anderson doubled-down on the sanity of James’s mythic and “playful apocalypse.” In 2001, returning to the thesis of his first book, *The American Henry James*, which linked the novelist to his spiritual father, Anderson argued that Blackmur failed to see how the “divine agency” (“Why Blackmur” 741) of the imperial self extended beyond Maggie to James the writer. The writer presents an extension of the work of art, the ultimate figure whose vision of humanity transcends fiction. Maggie’s violence is therefore redeemed by James’s humanity and his imperial self produces a fiction that “unite[s] a mortal Europe with an eternal America” (742). Anderson’s reading supports my belief that James’s art overlaps with his life but he ignores the limits placed on the imagination that appear throughout James’s personal writings and especially the work in the fourth phase. That he fails to give an account of *The American Scene* in either of his books, especially in a work entitled *The American Henry James*, is a blatant omission.

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\(^{139}\) Blackmur offers two readings of *The Golden Bowl*: the first from 1952 and the second from 1963. His drastically different judgments – moving from praise to censure – are often invoked to describe his conflicting views of James.

\(^{140}\) Donald Pease offers a powerful account of Quentin Anderson’s work in relation to the politics surrounding the Columbia student uprisings. Whereas Pease argues that Anderson recovers Trilling’s liberal imagination through his figure of the imperial self, I would suggest that Anderson fails to account for the breadth of Trilling’s work, especially the irony of his opposing self and his late emphasis on the mind. Anderson, in my account, presents the liberal imagination in its unionized destructive form: the very version Trilling would critique. See “The Cultural Office of Quentin Anderson.”
Leo Bersani’s “The Jamesian Lie” poses the most direct challenge to Anderson by showing how *The Golden Bowl* “dramatizes a rather bleak view of the autonomous intelligence” (146). While he freely admits that a desire to assert the autonomy of the self – in fact to transform society into an arena where fiction-making or composition can allow one to compose a self – is at the center of James’s work, Bersani argues that the commitment to fiction betrays the freedom it would provide. The obsession with reality is the principal source of trouble. James’s heroes and heroines are drawn to and repulsed by truth and consciously avoid it to maintain the illusion of their freedom. Avoiding the abyss that he finds everywhere, or refusing to penetrate the surface of reality, is a central attribute of James’s work: it epitomizes the Nietzschean aphorism that we make art lest we perish from the truth. As a consequence, the novelist’s commitment to form prevents his characters from actualizing the autonomy they desire. Novelistic realism, as Bersani understands it, inevitably represses desire.

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141 Bersani represents the other approach to James that contrasts Anderson. Simply calling it deconstructive would do a disservice to its sophistication as well as the theoretical stakes of Anderson’s work. But if a particular critical tradition espouses James for his “autonomous intelligence,” Bersani not only demonstrates the limitations of assertions of freedom, but also how James’s novels subvert the very forms that they instantiate. Michael Sprinker offers a reading in the tradition of Bersani that shows how Maggie’s aesthetic formalization of her social world holds out the promise of mastery but fails to have purchase in the real world. He concludes that *The Golden Bowl* deconstructs the Jamesian ideal of mastery: “nothing is less in keeping with the spirit of James’s own texts than the desire to monumentalize them for all time” (60).

142 Robert Caserio argues that Bersani’s literary history constructs “a hierarchy of artistic modes” and produces a story of “liberation” (“Leo” 209) whereby particular artistic styles emancipate desire from the constraints of nineteenth-century realism. But by failing to recognize how realism contains a mixture of various styles and modes, Bersani’s “approach to the novel stops short of deconstructing the critical reifications that misconstrue realist fiction” (209).
The Jamesian lie betrays its speaker: the freedom granted through the power of (self-)composition “re-enslaves consciousness” (146). *The Golden Bowl* thus envisions two potential outcomes: succumb to the truth of reality and lose the will to live, as we see with Isabel, or assert the power of art that “enslaves” its author in a web of illusions that they have created themselves. Maggie’s triumph is the imposition of her fiction on her social world. But for Bersani, unlike Anderson, Maggie achieves her goal at the expense of the forms she creates. Though her passive aggressive inaction enables her scheming, the intensity of her passion cannot be contained within the form of her own design. Maggie must exclude, encage, and manipulate in pursuit of the ideal bowl even though its crack is unfixable and the love she wants to preserve is ersatz. The endeavor to rearrange her social world engenders the “repudiation of the order which it appears to reinstate” since Maggie views saving her marriage as a “convenient institutional context for desires which have no place on any map of social structures” (82). Her desire “subverts the decorum of society, of fiction, and of language” (83) because she cannot actualize her love from within the design that she herself has constructed. Nevertheless, Maggie triumphs for Bersani; she remains the creator, a version of Anderson’s divinity whose flawed artwork depends on its author for its existence. The very crack in the bowl that undermines the design is also what allows Maggie to keep control of it. The subversion of fiction enables the artist to continue laboring toward the production of a supreme fiction.

Bersani’s reading would seem to align itself with mine. The self-undermining novel that James imagines presents the precondition for revising and expanding it. Yet he concludes that Maggie’s sacrifice is the “renunciation of the faculty to see … which, after all, protects us … from the tyranny of any community united in its assent to a single,
insistent passion” (155). The rejection of vision is the requirement of keeping alive the fiction. Despite Maggie’s refusal to look directly at the Prince in the novel’s final lines, it is clear that she sees all too clearly. She is consciously aware of evil, the horror, and the crack in the bowl just as the glance of her husband verifies. Her look away is surely an attempt to avoid acknowledging his acknowledgement, but it is only a momentary respite that cannot sustain itself. What Maggie sacrifices, like James, is the form required to keep her faith in the ideal bowl. The destruction of the golden bowl represents her understanding that her initial design must be destroyed so that she can actualize her desire – that is to say her love – for the Prince. In other words, she banishes Charlotte and Adam, emblematic in the smashing of the bowl, because of her faith in the ideal bowl and belief that the waste her new design excludes will return. By looking away from the Prince in the novel’s final lines, Maggie is not refusing to see, as Bersani would have it. The “pity and dread” (Golden 982) recalls the “infinite pity and tragedy” of the “Medusa-face” that Maggie, like James, starkly recognizes before her. It is akin to the fear and trembling intrinsic to her violation (or suspension) of the ethical law of form. The absurdity of the ideal bowl, the container of her love and desire, can only be realized in the creation of a new cracked bowl that she must, at least momentarily, accept.

The man of imagination is the figure through which James aligns the atemporal world of imagination (the ideal bowl or “matter) with the temporal realm of mundane existence (the cracks in the bowl or flaws in his novels): he makes them cohere despite their discrepancies through his faith in the sovereign power of his imagination. But is the Jamesian imagination and the practice of revisionism unique to him or does his thinking, to a certain degree, extend to what he calls in The American Scene our collective
consciousness? We might reimagine these opposing poles of the dialectic in starkly political terms, following Amanda Anderson, who calls for criticism that can provide “an angle of sight that makes it possible to discern the productive difficulty and the excess that attend rich literary engagement with liberal political forms such as argument, procedure and the rule of law” (258). The conflict in *The Golden Bowl* and the fourth phase, if not all of James’s work, is between the “excess” of a self and the strictures of “liberal political forms” that require intelligible identity and which cannot accommodate particular desires, aspirations, or modes of self-understanding that undermine predetermined social categories. How does an individual resist the lure of the crowd, overcome historical determinacy, or actualize their deepest desires? How can one adhere to the hierarchical demand for rational order without sacrificing the plurality of the self that defies representation? James recognizes the need for constitution but also believes that “process of putting it through” can yield justice through revision. The effort to save the “winged creatures” that sprout from a text is the duty toward those aspects of the self (or a society) that are excluded. For James, a writer whose apocalyptic imagination was at odds with his sense of decorum, the question hinges on determining what to sacrifice; what aspects of the self, of a particular literary subject, or a social vision? This is what Lionel Trilling calls, following James himself, the “imagination of disaster.” The painful knowledge of necessity. Its only reprieve comes through the “imagination of love” yet it seems as if late James, especially in *The Golden Bowl* and its Preface, teaches us that sometimes it is love itself that must be momentarily sacrificed if love is to endure.

143 My discussion of James complements Anderson’s pursuit of a greater “understandin[g] of the relation between realism and modernism” (259) by situating both terms within the broader tradition of Romantic revisionism.
The ideal bowl, for Maggie, is not what Derrida would call wholly other (*tout autre*). The bowl and the literary “matter” are accessible to Maggie and James. They produce the ideals in which they have faith. In addition, James has no binding obligation to his “uncanny brood” just as Maggie has no responsibility to her ideal bowl. Despite the economic metaphors that saturate the conclusion to *The Golden Bowl* and the Prefaces, responsibility, for James and Maggie, is not to form but their imagination. Yet the “conduct of life” is practical: it accepts the inevitability of foreshortening, of letting go, of sacrifice. As James puts in the Preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, we remain haunted “by the Angel, not to say by the Demon, of Compromise” (298). There are no doubt aspects of our lives that should be abandoned. James burns his letters toward the end of his life, erases the historical record. He does not include all of his works in New York Edition. But another New York Edition, another publishing venture, and another set of reader’s eyes may produce a different configuration of texts. And the loss of the historical record does nothing to undermine the lack of epistemological certainty such letters would afford. As much as James laments the modern capitalistic growth he witnesses in America and the disavowal of the past, he disavows his own past and celebrates the growth or expansion of his novels. The ideal bowl, for Maggie, or the ideal literary subject, for James, is always incomplete and requires the artist to accommodate necessity. This is why some novels receive little revision and some are excluded; some waste is worth saving, the rest is pure shit.


"Power relations in the novels of James: the ‘liberal’ and the ‘radical’ version.”


McCombe, John P. “Henry James, Shakespeare’s Biography, and the Question of National Identity in “The Birthplace” and “The Introduction to The Tempest.”


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