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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE IDEA OF  
AESTHETIC VALUE IN THE NOVELS  
OF HENRY JAMES

Rowland Mallet takes of Roderick Hudson. Patricia L. Conoley

June 1970



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related to himself? ABSTRACT others. The first of the two chapters on The Tragic Muse examines James's

change James's lifelong preoccupation with different forms of aesthetic experience was a powerful shaping force in his fiction, conditioning technique as well as subject matter. His intense feeling for art makes the idea of aesthetic value a pervasive element in his novels. This idea remains materially unchanged throughout his career, though its field of application is steadily extended as it finds different modes of expression in successive novels. I am concerned to trace the development of this idea and the way it is embodied in his fiction by selecting one novel for detailed examination from the beginning, the middle and the end of his career.

The study of Roderick Hudson and The Tragic Muse is designed to elicit James's basic convictions about art and the artist, and to show ways in which these ideas have influenced the form of the novels. In the earlier novel this involves detailed consideration of the view Rowland Mallet takes of Roderick Hudson, both as he

relates to himself and to others. The first of the two chapters on The Tragic Muse examines James's change of stance in relation to his subject; his presentation of the dilemma in which art places the artist, a dilemma which is seen to test most strenuously the moral qualities of his three protagonists. The second deals with the way James's ultimate concern with the meaning of art, with the implications of artistic commitment, is mediated dramatically in the novel through Gabriel Nash; it looks too at the marks which imperfect assimilation of these ideas has left on the novel.

Though The Ambassadors is not explicitly a novel about art, it exemplifies James's concern with the aesthetic adventure and offers a chance to examine closely his presentation of the response to aesthetic experience, particularly as a factor in the development of moral vision.

REFERENCES

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in the text:  
in the text is London unless otherwise stated.

AN The Art of the Novel. Critical Prefaces by Henry James, with introduction by Richard P. Blackmur (1962).

Lubbock The Letters of Henry James, ed. Percy Lubbock, 2 volumes (1920).

N The Notebooks of Henry James, ed. F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (Galaxy Books, New York, 1961).

	<u>New York edition</u>
<u>Roderick Hudson, Vol. I</u>	Vol. I
<u>The Portrait of a Lady, Vol. I</u>	Vol. III
Vol. II	Vol. IV
<u>The Tragic Muse, Vol. I</u>	Vol. VII
Vol. II	Vol. VIII

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The place of publication for all the books referred to in the text is London unless otherwise stated.

In the chapters on The Tragic Muse and The Ambassadors quotations are taken from the first English edition unless otherwise stated. In the chapter on Roderick Hudson reference is to the first American edition, since this underwent significant revision before being published in England four years later.

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Gabriel Nash and James's "vision of decency"

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Chapter Four: 175		<u>New York edition</u>
<u>Roderick Hudson</u> , Vol. I		Vol. I
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It is no exaggeration to say that art was James's ruling passion. From his earliest years it dominated his experience and compelled his consciousness. In a letter of 24th February, 1913 to Ernest Cellings, D.H. Lawrence observed: "One has to be so terribly religious, to be an artist."<sup>1</sup> James might have hesitated to see himself in this particular light, but all the same the practice of his craft was for him a quasi-religious calling to which he was entirely consecrated. Some of his entries in The Notebooks brings this out unmistakably in spite of their embarrassingly fulsome tone: "Oh art, art, what difficulties are like thine; but, INTRODUCTION like, what consolations and encouragements, also, are like thine? Without thee, for me, the world would be, indeed, a howling desert."<sup>2</sup>

In the two completed volumes of his autobiography James has left us an account of the development of his aesthetic sensibility; he records there his eager response to the experience offered by books, pictures, the theatre, and then by the rich and exciting spectacle of Europe. His feeling for the visual arts, in particular, was strong and

<sup>1</sup> The Letters of D.H. Lawrence, ed. Aldous Huxley (1934), p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> N, p. 68. See also pp. 111, 157, and 348.



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<sup>1</sup> The Letters of D.H. Lawrence, ed. Aldous Huxley (1934), p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> N, p. 68. See also pp. 111, 157, and 348.

vital. For a time in 1860 while William was working in Newport under the tutelage of William Morris Hunt James himself dabbled in painting, but finding that he had no conspicuous aptitude he directed his creative impulse into writing. His work later on as an art critic for The New York Tribune, The Atlantic Monthly, and The Nation, among other newspapers and periodicals, enabled him to -develop his taste and formulate for himself an individual aesthetic. What he learnt from the study of painting and sculpture he transported into his work as a novelist and as a literary critic. A keen concern with questions of form and technique very soon became evident: he drew on his practical experience of, and insight into, the actual processes of painting both to present his own view of life in fiction and to evaluate that offered by others. His knowledge of the plastic arts was later supplemented by his interest in and bitter though profitable experience of writing for the theatre.

- His preoccupation with aesthetic experience of all kinds of value, capable of fine distinctions, which serves throughout his fiction as a means of moral and aesthetic discrimination, of his fiction. James was himself aware of this intrinsic conditioning process. In the Preface to Lady Barberina he

It would be a mistake to think that James's concern with art in the novels is in any way narrowly professional or

maintains:

... one never really chooses one's general range of vision — the experience from which ideas and themes and suggestions spring: this proves ever what it has had to be, this is one with the very turn one's life has taken; so that whatever it 'gives', whatever it makes us feel and think of, we regard very much as imposed and inevitable. The subject thus pressed upon the artist is the necessity of his case and the fruit of his consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

— Inevitably, then, given his particular sensibility and interest, art was the source of many of his themes. He was intent on exploring the nature of art as a way of life, the plight of the artist in what is, more often than not, an unappreciative, even an obtuse, world. In a less ostensible way too art — in the broadest sense — formed an important aspect of his subject, acting as it so often does with catalytic effect on the consciousness, the outlook of his people. It is a presence in some of his novels and tales as pervasive as Egdon Heath in The Return of the Native, supplying in much the same way an important dimension of the drama. Last, but not least it furnishes him with a concrete, a vividly expressive language of value, capable of fine distinctions, which serves throughout his fiction as a means of moral and aesthetic discrimination.

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 201.

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esoteric. To some extent of course his exploration of the artist's situation was prompted by a personal even egotistic need, common to most of us, to survey his own problems in perspective, but ultimately the artist supplied him with a paradigm of the universal human condition, man in his confrontation with amorphous experience. He saw in the artist's creative response to life only an intense, a specialised, form of our constant attempt to make sense of, to compose, our experience. What he wrote of the artist in the Preface to Lady Barberina was for him an article of belief, having relevance not only for the artist but for anyone who viewed life in some sense as a quest or an adventure: "The thing of profit is to have your experience — to recognise and understand it and for this almost any will do; there being surely no absolute ideal about it beyond getting from it all it has to give."<sup>1</sup> The search for significant form in life, form which satisfies the longing for beauty, engages many of James's characters, certainly not only those who are in the usual practical sense artists. They are in this respect like Gabriel Nash, artists who work in life. There is no doubt that the art of life always

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 201.

fascinated James, but the meaning it acquires in the context of his work prohibits us from seeing him as an adherent of Aestheticism. This view of James, put forward from time to time during the last fifty years, seems now to have been finally discarded, so it would be superfluous to offer a refutation here. A letter he wrote to Charles Eliot Norton in 1899, though light in tone, supplies a clue to what James meant by the art of life: "It takes one whole life — for some persons, at least, dont je suis — to learn how to live at all; which is absurd if there is not to be another in which to apply the lesson."<sup>1</sup> For him it was, fundamentally, a moral enterprise.

Woven as they are into the very fabric of his fiction, James's aesthetic convictions offer a mode of approach to the novels which can tell us much about the picture of life he presents and the organising principles behind it. Certainly to deal with a novelist's work arbitrarily in terms of one particular thematic interest calls for some sort of justification. I propose to look at the aesthetic ideas implicit as well as explicit in James's fiction and to examine the way these ideas inform and give shape to the novels in which they

<sup>1</sup> Dated 24th November, 1899, in Lubbock, I, 345.

find expression. Twice in his career he set out to deal directly with art in a full-length novel, in Roderick Hudson in 1875 and in The Tragic Muse in 1890. As it happens, both novels mark a significant stage in James's development as a novelist. Roderick Hudson is, after all, his first notable novel and The Tragic Muse a substantial work of middle life, the last before his unsuccessful attempt to make his mark as a playwright brought about important changes in his style and technique. I want to — give detailed consideration to James's treatment of art and the artist in these two novels and to elicit the values he is concerned to establish and see them in the context of his work as a novelist. Since issues no less significant and values as imperative occur where James's subject is not the artist I shall also need to look at one of his other novels. Among those he wrote in the last period of his life, in what has come to be called "the major phase", The Ambassadors epitomises most brilliantly the fresh turn taken by James's concern with aesthetic value after he had ceased to use the artist as protagonist. Here we see most clearly his attempt to evaluate dramatically the relevance of art, its processes and values, to the actual business of living,

<sup>1</sup> Notes of a Son and Brother (1914), p. 349.

<sup>2</sup> A Small Boy and Others (1913), p. 366.

the part it plays in man's movement towards a ripe and integrated vision of life.

The novelist's concern with moral vision necessarily determines to some extent the kind of character he appoints as the chief agent in his dramas. This is as true of George Eliot, to give one other instance -- we need think only of Adam Bede, Maggie Tulliver and Gwendoline Harleth -- as it is of James. A capacity in the protagonist to see, to understand and to assimilate is absolutely essential to his purpose. It is impossible to exaggerate the value James placed on "seeing"; for him it was no less than a vindication of life. He writes in Notes of a Son and Brother with a life-time's conviction behind him: "... on the day ... when one should cease to live in large measure by one's eyes (with the imagination of course all the while waiting on this) one would have taken the longest step towards not living at all."<sup>1</sup> In the earlier volume of his autobiography as he charts the growth of the faculty in himself as a small boy he describes this complex process of apprehension as "so many explorations of the house of life, so many circlings and hoverings round the image of the world."<sup>2</sup> When, as so often in James, the

<sup>1</sup> Notes of a Son and Brother (1914), p. 349.

<sup>2</sup> A Small Boy and Others (1913), p. 366.

central character serves as sole register of consciousness in the novel his ability to see is of incalculable importance; not only must he have the potentiality for moral growth, he must also be intensely and sensitively alive to the nuances of his own experience and to some at least of its implications. In a sense his consciousness is the novel. Only by endowing his characters with such vision and intelligence could James secure the effect he was after: "... the figures in any picture, the agents in any drama are interesting only in proportion as they feel their respective situations .... Their being finely aware ...makes absolutely the intensity of their adventure...."<sup>1</sup> The power they have to "feel their respective situations," to feel and view them constructively as part of a larger pattern of experience, is an aspect of "seeing" in the full Jamesian sense and is what makes them also, in his words, "richly responsible". In the fusion of fine awareness with rich responsibility aesthetic and moral vision eventually become indistinguishable. But for all their sentience and insight, James's people are liable to bewilderment, error, disillusion; necessarily if our belief in and sympathy for them is not to be alienated. For this reason their discriminations can never be finally authoritative.

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 62.



In the way he communicates their values James contrives to adumbrate his own.

The Jamesian "perceiver" is more often than not an idealist, intent on shaping his life, his experience, in conformity with his highest idea. The resistance he meets, the disillusion he suffers, is part of the process of vision. Looking back, James saw that his own education had taken this course. Contacts, impressions, all experience in fact, had been for the James children their "soluble stuff", material for conversion. Of the final product he remarks in A Small Boy and Others: "... with only ourselves to thank should we remain unaware, by the time our perceptions were decently developed, of the substance finally projected and most desirable. That substance might be just consummately Virtue, as a social grace and value ...."<sup>1</sup> There would seem to be something essentially Platonic in James's view of life, for his people, particularly those who are not professionally artists, come close to Plato's definition of those "whose creative desire is of the soul, and who conceive spiritually, not physically, the progeny which it is the nature of the soul to conceive and bring forth. If you ask what that progeny is,

<sup>1</sup> Page 226.

it is wisdom and virtue in general."<sup>1</sup> In this creative enterprise art has a vital role. As early as Watch and Ward James had envisaged it: he says of Nora in that novel that her nature "fed by the sources of aesthetic delight, had risen calmly to its allotted level."<sup>2</sup> It is this process we see at work in ever more subtle and complex form in so many of James's later protagonists from Rowland Mallet to Lambert Strether.

#### CHAPTER ONE

#### The artist as an ideal in Roderick Hudson

<sup>1</sup> Plato, Symposium, trans. W. Hamilton (Penguin Books, 1951) p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> Watch and Ward (Boston, 1878), p. 127.

In a letter of 1887 to Robert Louis Stevenson, James refers affectionately to Roderick Hudson as the work in which his "diminutive muse first tried to elongate her little legs."<sup>1</sup> Written when he was thirty-one years old, Roderick Hudson shows James realising his powers as a novelist for the first time. It is in many ways an artistic manifesto expressing convictions he was to hold throughout his life about art and the nature of the artist. Though it is conspicuously a novel about art, James gives no attention at all to this aspect

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<sup>1</sup> Lubbock, I, p. 133.

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... had defined itself - and this in spite of the title of the book - as not directly, in the least, my young sculptor's adventure. This it had been but indirectly, being all the while in essence and in final effect another man's, his friend's and patron's, view and experience of him .... From this centre the subject has been treated, from this centre the interest has spread ...."<sup>1</sup> For the first time in a novel James surrenders to one character alone his author's privilege of ordering and projecting events. By this means he can present dramatically that view of life as an "aesthetic adventure" which pervades so much of his work and which was to be expressed most richly in The Ambassadors. Rowland's consciousness, then, provides the centre of interest throughout the novel, and the drama "is the very drama of that consciousness."<sup>2</sup> This role demands of course a character of heightened sensibility capable not only of recording but also of evaluating the myriad impressions, "the faintest hints of life," that make up experience. Rowland's own sense of his adventure matters supremely. James brings this out strongly in the Preface: "as what happened to him was above all to feel certain things happening to others ... so the beauty of the constructional game was to preserve in everything its especial value for him."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> AN, p.15.

<sup>2</sup> AN, p.16.

<sup>3</sup> AN, p.16.

As central intelligence he has to register a range of subtly differentiated values, but he rarely acts as absolute arbiter. His discriminations are not offered as ultimate sanctions. Beyond though not always effaced, the narrator presides and it is his judgement which is finally brought to bear. James was convinced that his business as an artist was with the "reflected field of life" and he saw his rendering of people's experience as "essentially [his] appreciation of it."<sup>1</sup>

While Rowland Mallet projects the complex of values in the novel, it is Roderick Hudson who is their chief focus. As an artist, he inevitably elicits a varied response to art ranging from unconcealed antagonism to something like reverence. James has endowed Roderick with that glamour which so often distinguishes the artist. He has the irresistible fascination for others that art itself had for James. In fact he represents for at least three people in the novel the embodiment of their ideal. His personality has the kind of picturesque appeal which clings to Jeffery Aspern, who by dying young also becomes something of a legend. Roderick too belongs to the Romantic tradition of artists. He is above all things an idealist, passionate in defence of his artistic ideas, eager to confute the sceptical, proof against doubt.

<sup>1</sup> AN, p.65.

Nothing short of perfect beauty will content him: to this end he directs all his artistic energies. He tells Rowland one day: "'I have only one way of expressing my deepest feelings - it's this!' And he swung his tool . . . . 'And even this half the time plays me false!'"<sup>1</sup> His keen sensitivity to all kinds of beauty reminds Rowland of the artists of the Italian Renaissance and makes a strong bond of sympathy between them. From the beginning James is concerned to stress the quality of Roderick's idealism. It comes out brilliantly in his talk, for he is articulate to the point of volubility. At Rowland's dinner party he proclaims his aesthetic ideas in grandiose terms: "I mean never to make anything ugly. The Greeks never made anything ugly, and I'm a Hellenist; I'm not a Hebraist!" He goes on to declare:

"I care only for perfect beauty. There it is, if you want to know it! That's as good a profession of faith as another. In future, so far as my things are not positively beautiful, you may set them down as failures. For me, it's either that or nothing. It's against the taste of the day, I know; we have really lost the faculty to understand beauty in the large, ideal way . . . . I mean to do things that will be simple and vast and infinite." (iii, 106-107)

His genius as a sculptor is never in question. Rowland, whose unerring taste is vouched for by James, detects it at once,

<sup>1</sup> Roderick Hudson (Boston, 1876), vi, 201. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.

and his judgement is endorsed unanimously by the artist fraternity in Rome led by Gloriani. His early works completely vindicate his aesthetic creed. His young Waterdrinker, which projects Roderick's own youthful avidity, is succeeded by the Adam and the Eve, works which express both his New World freshness and his obsession with ideal beauty.

Roderick's disintegration is implicit from the beginning, as James is concerned to show. His wholehearted pursuit of beauty and perfection nourishes his genius certainly but it also destroys it. He and Rowland have been in Rome only a month when they meet Christina Light. For Roderick she is at once "beauty itself ... a revelation" (iii,88); he feels he has had "a glimpse of ideal beauty" (iii,89). She proves for him a true "belle dame sans merci"; and his enthrallment survives even his bitter disillusionment at her marriage to Prince Casamassima. Rowland also is aware of her power to bewitch. Her beauty has for him "a robustness and tone" (iv,139) distinctively European and it seems likely that this is also the secret of her attraction for Roderick, who as an artist has what James calls "the historic consciousness. He had a relish for social subtleties and mysteries" (iii,82). Roderick, like Hyacinth Robinson later on, has been destined to fall in



love with "the beauty of the world"<sup>1</sup> and this beauty is embodied for them both in Christina Light. His relation with Christina dissipates his powers disastrously even though she does kindle the creative spark in him again for a short time. In his Preface James is highly critical of the "determinant function attributed to Christina Light, the character of well-nigh sole agent of his catastrophe that this unfortunate young woman has forced upon her."<sup>2</sup> But implausibility apart, she does symbolise effectively the double-edged power beauty has to seduce and to inspire.

Roderick himself is haunted from the start by the prospect of fizzling out, as he puts it. He proclaims to Gloriani: "If I break down ... I shall stay down. If the Muse deserts me, she shall at least have her infidelity on her conscience" (iii, 114). His pursuit of perfection makes compromise unthinkable. Genius is for him an afflatus, arbitrarily bestowed and as capriciously withdrawn. Consequently he rejects contemptuously Rowland's notion that he should disregard his mood and get on with his work whether he feels like it or not. He finds the idea all the more outrageous in that it is Gloriani's method and he despises Gloriani's work. He protests to Rowland: "Production with me must be either pleasure or nothing .... I must either

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> AN, p. 13.

stay in the saddle or not go at all. I won't do second-rate work; I can't if I would. I have no cleverness apart from inspiration" (vi, 210).

James carefully charts the stages of Roderick's decline in terms of the sculpture he produces. The figure he models after his summer in Baden symbolises in subject and technique his new sophistication; already the transcendental style seems a thing of the past. But the bust of Christina Light exemplifies once more his aesthetic ideas. James says of it: "The resemblance was deep and vivid; there was extreme fidelity of detail and yet a noble simplicity. One could say of the head that, without idealisation, it was a representation of ideal beauty" (v, 165). He reaches the point of no return when he abandons the figure of Intellectual Refinement commissioned by Mr. Leavenworth. Rowland's warning, dramatically enhanced by the anticipative image he uses, is enough to indicate that the refusal is crucial: "You are standing on the edge of a gulf. If you suffer anything that has passed to interrupt your work on that figure, you take your plunge . . . . you will do the wisest thing you ever did if you make that effort of will necessary for finishing it" (viii, 277). The statue he is engaged on at the same time is a significant

commentary on the degenerative process at work in him. It represents a lazzarone "lounging in the sun; an image of serene, irresponsible, sensuous life" (viii, 271). Roderick readily admits that the real lazzarone is a "vile fellow," but the idealism in him dies hard, and the figure has been "subtly idealised". He sees the ideal lazzarone now as "a precursor of the millennium". His last work, the bust of his mother, is described by James as "an exquisite example of a ruling sense of beauty" (x, 330). It testifies with tragic irony to the brilliance of Roderick's talent when he has himself lost all faith in his power to create.

Roderick's meteoric course beginning in a small New England town and ending in a remote gorge of the Swiss Alps makes the substance of Rowland's aesthetic adventure. In the relationship between the two men James gives us what amounts to a sustained dialectic which projects dramatically some of his ideas about art and life. As Rowland's view of Roderick is tempered by experience James's own convictions emerge, without dogmatism, part of the organic structure of the novel.

Rowland's patronage of Roderick is a product of the idealism which colours his whole view of life. His adventure is in fact an attempt of a kind "to lead the ideal life",

as James points out. For Rowland the ideal life is the life of art: "it seemed to him that the glow of happiness must be found either in action, of some immensely solid kind, on behalf of an idea, or in producing a masterpiece in one of the arts. Oftenest, perhaps, he wished he were a vigorous young man of genius, without a penny. As it was, he could only buy pictures, and not paint them" (i, 15). But the life of an artist is closed to him, as he recognises, for though he has a highly developed aesthetic sensibility, he lacks, and knows he lacks, the ability to create. He explains his deficiency one day to Cecilia: "Do you know I sometimes think that I'm a man of genius, half finished? The genius has been left out, the faculty of expression is wanting; but the need for expression remains, and I spend my days groping for the latch of a closed door" (i, 7).

But he is more than "finely aware"; he is also "richly responsible".<sup>1</sup> His capacity for discrimination is as much moral as aesthetic and this complicates his case. Though he seems well equipped for the life of a dilettante, or aesthete, like Gabriel Nash, his obtrusive moral sense makes this impossible. Rowland himself senses that he is completely

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 62.

lacking in the "prime requisite of a graceful flaneur - the simple, sensuous, confident relish of pleasure" (i, 14-15). James calls him "an awkward mixture of strong moral impulse and restless aesthetic curiosity", "forever looking in vain for the uses of the things that please and the charm of the things that sustain". His moral scrupulosity has its origin in his Puritan background. As a New Englander, Rowland is tainted by "Maule's curse".<sup>1</sup> His father, we are told, was "a chip of the primal Puritan block" (i, 9). He had brought Rowland up to think more of the duties of life than its pleasures and to have a fastidious sense of the difference between right and wrong. His sponsorship of Roderick is at first anyway a source of distinctively moral satisfaction. It fulfils, even though vicariously, his ardent desire for a mission: his life will thus acquire a "reflected usefulness" (ii, 45). There is no reason to doubt his good faith, his sincerity or even the altruism which prompts his offer of patronage, but we must recognise that it is designed at the same time to minister to profound needs of his own.

<sup>1</sup> In Maule's Curse (Norfolk, Conn., 1938) Ivor Winters deals with the effect of what he calls "Maule's curse" on a New England writer like Hawthorne. It signifies the uneasiness of conscience, the self-imposed mortification, to which those brought up in the Puritan ethos were specially prone. Though the Calvinist ideas which helped to make it had really lost religious force by the nineteenth century and become secularised they were still pervasive. This austere morality with its emphasis on the efficacy of hard work and abstinence still had a powerful hold on many minds and gave rise to the kind of dichotomy we see in Rowland's nature.

The ideal life he has in mind, then, has to appease his conscience while satisfying his craving for aesthetic experience. Before meeting Roderick he had played with the notion of establishing an art museum in an American city which he would furnish with Dutch and Italian paintings picked up on his European journeys. In conceiving such a scheme Rowland shows himself to be an archetype for Adam Verver who is possessed by much the same ambition. For him too it satisfies a deeply felt need. Romantic as well as idealistic, Rowland is attracted less by the opportunity offered for an act of philanthropy than by the fascinating prospect in which he sees himself "in some mouldy old saloon of a Florentine palace, turning toward the deep embrasure of the window some scarcely-faded Ghirlandaio or Botticelli, while a host in reduced circumstances pointed out the lovely drawing of a hand" (i, 6). The novelettish cadences and tone, together with the phrase "a host in reduced circumstances" suggests the spurious quality of Rowland's elaborate vision. Significantly he rejects the project anyway as failing to satisfy his standards of usefulness.

In his relation with Roderick, Rowland finds the aesthetic satisfaction he has been looking for. He experiences

vicariously the rewards and frustrations of the artistic life. But such participation does not preclude for him what James later defined more precisely as "the glow of an almost creative ardour"<sup>1</sup> of a different kind, an ardour derived from his enjoyment of Roderick as a spectacle of developing genius. He is aware from the start that Roderick has appropriated his sympathies and even momentarily resents it. Two years later as he keeps vigil in the mountains over his friend's body he grasps "how exclusively, for two years, Roderick had filled his life" (xiii, 481). He finds the experience exquisite; for their first three months in Europe he lives Roderick's interior life as well as his own, delighting in his quick apprehension as well as his personal charm. He remarks his look "as of a nervous nineteenth-century Apollo" (viii, 269), and we find him asking himself on one occasion: "Was it not a part of the eternal fitness of things that Roderick, while rhapsodizing about Miss Light, should have it at his command to look at you with eyes of the most guileless and unclouded blue, and to shake off your musty imputations by a toss of his picturesque brown locks?" (v, 171) He is led to reflect that youth and genius combined made the most beautiful sight in the world and he permits

<sup>1</sup> In Roderick Hudson (1907) I, 48. In the first edition (Boston, 1876) James had been much less specific: he had merely written: "the glow of his new-born sympathy" (ii, 45).

himself to enjoy Roderick's "serene efflorescence as he would have done a beautiful summer sunrise" (iii, 86). His response is, as on other subsequent occasions, distinctly aesthetic.

His capacity for converting impressions to aesthetic capital is perhaps most vividly shown on the evening of his dinner party as he pauses at his drawing-room door and looks at his friends standing together round the lamp. He views the group there as if it had been carved from a block of Carrara marble, assimilating it as a work of art. His moral sense complements the aesthetic so that the figures simultaneously take on allegorical force:

Roderick, bearing the lamp and glowing in its radiant circle, seemed the beautiful image of a genius which combined sincerity with power. Gloriani, with his head on one side, pulling his long moustache and looking keenly from half-closed eyes at the lighted marble, represented art with a worldly motive, skill unleavened by faith, the mere base maximum of cleverness. Poor little Singleton, on the other side, with his hands behind him, his head thrown back, and his eyes following devoutly the course of Roderick's elucidation, might pass for an embodiment of aspiring candor, with feeble wings to rise on. (iii, 112-113)

He finds in Roderick's "beautiful image" an implicit guarantee of the reality and power of his genius. But the terse comment which follows: "In all this, Roderick's was certainly the beau rôle" throws doubt on the validity of his vision.



Rowland's habit of imposing moral significance on aesthetic impressions can be seen again at the end of this chapter. He and Roderick separate for the summer in a small mountain village and from the coach Rowland sees this picture: "A great snow-mountain, behind Roderick, was beginning to turn pink in the sunset. The young man waved his hat, still looking grave." It prompts the reassuring reflection that "this was a salubrious beginning of independence. He was among forests and glaciers, leaning on the pure bosom of nature" (iii, 117). Rowland's Wordsworthian faith in Nature as the nurse and soul of all man's moral being might perhaps pass unchallenged, but the sentimental cliché which expresses it questions not only the faith but also the total experience of which it is a part. There is in the picture a strong element of the ludicrous which stems not from the traditional personification of nature as the elemental mother but from the juxtaposition of "forests and glaciers", aloof and inhospitable, with "the pure bosom of nature" as a source of chaste comfort for Roderick. Rowland's serenity seems facile in this context.

But he is not content merely to interpret off the peg experience, he sets about manufacturing an idyll for himself. It is suggested by the earlier abortive attempt of Roderick's in the Coliseum to clamber after an inaccessible flower. In

conscious emulation Rowland is keen to test Mary's nerve as Roderick had Christina's. He achieves what he set out for, both the flower and the sense of having Mary care for three minutes "what became of him" (xii, 427). As an episode worthy of the code of courtly love it illustrates aptly Rowland's romantic aspirations. He is indeed aware himself of the over-tones of chivalry; he registers that "Mary Garland's eyes did not perhaps display that ardent admiration which was formerly conferred by the queen of beauty at a tournament" (xii, 428). But to do him justice, this association provides him primarily with the means of gentle self-derision. His apparent success is matched significantly with the frustration of Roderick's much more foolhardy attempt; it is though, finally, an ironic comment on Rowland's idealism. Certainly he succeeds in plucking the "flower of the ideal", but it represents only the shadow of an illusion. The three minutes of Mary's solicitude he had earned by this feat make the sum total of his lot.

Rowland's idealism shows itself most characteristically in his conception of the artist. He had an unquestioned faith in the "essential salubrity of genius" (ii, 47). It is hardly surprising then to find him quite untroubled at Roderick's expressed intention to live a full free life in Rome. He is

convinced that the coarseness, the vulgarity, involved in any kind of dissipation will be an effective deterrent for Roderick. In Rowland's view the artist's instinctive feeling for beauty safeguards him automatically from the follies and vices of ordinary men. Anyway he believes implicitly in the power the artist has to convert to his creative purposes the impressions, sensations and passions which constantly assail him. Accordingly, he takes great pleasure in Roderick's impatience "to make something of all his impressions" (iii, 85). James's own belief in the artist's power to convert had been instilled in childhood. He records in A Small Boy and Others that "we were to convert and convert . . . and simply everything that should happen to us, every contact, every impression and every experience we should know, were to form our soluble stuff."<sup>1</sup> Rowland's delusion lies of course not in the belief itself, which was an article of faith for James, but in his precipitate application of it to Roderick. In the revisions he made for the New York edition James takes pains to point to the nature of Rowland's mistake here by including a qualification in what had once been plain statement. He tells us

<sup>1</sup> 1913, p. 226.

that: "Rowland took high satisfaction in this positive law, as he saw it, of his companion's spirit, the instinct of investing every gain of sense or soul in the enterprise of planned production."<sup>1</sup>

Rowland's view of art and the artist is highlighted by the very different attitude prevailing in Northampton, an attitude which must be seen as a characteristic product of the Puritan ethos which is its context. James was concerned to provide for Roderick a milieu antipathetic to art and in his Preface he criticises sharply his efforts to this end. He saw his "fable" as requiring "some more or less vivid antithesis to a state of civilisation providing for 'art'",<sup>2</sup> which he had failed to supply. He finds that his evocation of Northampton lacks intensity. However this may be, Roderick's offer to transplant him to Europe springs indeed from an assumption that the American scene is inimical to the artist, likely to stunt and even to atrophy his creative powers. This is an idea found elsewhere in James's work. Theobald, the tragically barren idealist of The Madonna of the Future, so obsessed with perfection that his powers are totally inhibited, expresses his overwhelming sense of deprivation:

<sup>1</sup> The Madonna of the Future and other Tales (1879), I, 8.

<sup>1</sup> Roderick Hudson (1907), I, v, 93. my italics.

<sup>2</sup> AN, p. 8.

"We are the disinherited of Art! ... We are condemned to be superficial! ... The soil of American perception is a poor little barren, artificial deposit .... We lack the deeper sense .... How should we have them? Our crude and garish climate, our silent past, our deafening present, the constant pressure about us of unlovely circumstance, are as void of all that nourishes and prompts and inspires the artist as my sad heart is void of bitterness in saying so!"<sup>1</sup>

James had experienced for himself what, on the other hand, the "sublime synthesis" of Europe could mean for the young artist. Roderick's thirst for "knowledge, pleasure, experience" is slaked by Rome, the right habitat, as James suggests in one of his avuncular interpositions, for "those spirits with which we just now claimed fellowship for Roderick — the spirits with a deep relish for the artificial element in life and the infinite superpositions of history" (iii, 84). Like Rowland, Roderick soon comes to realise that "Rome made him feel and understand more things than he could express: he was sure that life must have there, for all one's senses, an incomparable fineness; that more interesting things must happen to one than anywhere else" (iii, 85). Only in Rome does he find "what he had been looking for from the first — the complete antipodes of Northampton" (iii, 84).

<sup>1</sup> The Madonna of the Future and other Tales (1879), I, 8.

His rejection of America as a viable milieu for the artist is total, but Rowland on two occasions is led instinctively to question the assumption involved although in practice he acts on it readily enough. Such ambivalence is characteristic of him and springs here, as so often, from his aesthetic sense. Affected by the beauty of the view round Mount Holyoke, he finds himself regretting the impatient desire of himself and others to get out of America. Later, just before the two of them leave for Europe, as he looks along "the arch of silvered shadow and out into the lucid air of the American night . . . he felt like declaring that here was beauty too — beauty sufficient for an artist not to starve upon it" (ii, 62-63). It is again beauty with a moral tinge; it speaks of "kindness, comfort, safety, the warning voice of duty, the perfect hush of temptation" (ii, 62).

The hostility to art in Northampton is but one aspect of a deep mistrust of beauty and sensuous experience of any kind which is firmly rooted in the Puritan mind. James was to define this attitude in "The Art of Fiction" (1884): "Art', in our Protestant communities, where so many things have got so strangely twisted about, is supposed in certain circles to have some vaguely injurious effect upon those who make it an

important consideration, who let it weigh in the balance. It is assumed to be opposed in some mysterious manner to morality, to amusement, to instruction."<sup>1</sup> We see this feeling at work in Mrs. Hudson. The splendour of the moonlit Tuscan scene awakens in her only apprehension; she finds something "shameless and defiant" in the "accumulated loveliness of the night" (xi, 415). It is obvious that Roderick has imbibed the notion, without however making it his own. His first sight of Christina Light provokes the comment: "If beauty is immoral, as people think at Northampton . . . she is the incarnation of evil" (iii, 88). Even a potential defector like Strether is bedevilled by an "odious inbred suspicion" of beauty not easily dismissed.<sup>2</sup> Such mistrust is nourished by the characteristically Puritan conviction that enjoyment is sinful and abstinence therefore a positive good. Enriched by new experience, Mary Garland can tell Rowland, prompted by the beauty of the evening that Mrs. Hudson had found somehow so flagrant, that back in New England "things don't speak to us of enjoyment as they do here . . ." (xi, 416). Even Mr. Leavenworth, a hopeful patron of the arts who comes not from New England but the Middle West, prides himself on his exemplary virtue in having "travelled through Europe on cold water" (viii, 272). He proclaims to

<sup>1</sup> Partial Portraits (1888), p. 381.

<sup>2</sup> The Ambassadors (1903), p. 143.

Roderick with a magniloquence which James makes ridiculous: "The most varied and attractive lists of wines are offered me, but I brush them aside. No cork has ever been drawn at my command!" Mr. Leavenworth epitomises a kind of Philistinism different from the New England variety. He appoints himself a patron of "indigenous talent" and, as James later makes explicit, claims to believe that "the office of art is second only to that of religion."<sup>1</sup> But sculpture for Mr. Leavenworth is only another form of merchandise. He acquires a statue as he later acquires a wife, "with the sole view of picking up furniture for his 'home' " (x, 333).

Northampton permits no such compromise with art or with the complex of values for which Europe is the symbol. Mrs. Hudson's attitude is vividly sketched for Rowland by her son and even when we allow for Roderick's tendency to exaggerate, here humorously, it still betrays a thorough-going bigotry. "Rome is an evil word, in my mother's vocabulary, to be said in a whisper, as you'd say 'damnation'. Northampton is in the centre of the earth, and Rome far away in outlying dusk, into which it can do no Christian any good to penetrate" (i, 40). Her distrust of Rome and all it means is, if

<sup>1</sup> Roderick Hudson (1907), I, x, 193.



anything, only deepened<sup>e</sup> by what she later sees of the city. The belligerent pride of Mr. Striker's claim that he "didn't go off to the Old World to learn [his] business" (ii, 58) stems partly from the same ingrained suspicion of a strange and sophisticated civilisation. His uneasiness finds vent first in complacent pugnacity and finally in caricature. He defines the antique as "an image of a pagan deity, with considerable dirt sticking to it, and no arms, no nose, and no clothing" (ii, 54). Sculpture for him is a form of scarcely dissimulated idleness. Mrs. Hudson's view of art is even more extreme: according to Cecilia she has "a holy horror of a profession which consists exclusively, as she supposes, in making figures of people without their clothes on. Sculpture, to her mind, is an insidious form of immorality" (i, 27).

The comic exaggeration with which the New England attitude to art is invariably presented places it unmistakably. But this is not to say that all the views expressed in Northampton may be dismissed accordingly as bigoted and absurd. As always with James, each judgement is to be assessed separately on its merits and not lumped with others from the same source for collective approval or rejection. Cecilia and

Mary witness to distinctly positive values in the Puritan code. Each, for instance, in her own way, challenges Rowland on his lack of occupation. As a cousin, Cecilia need not mince words: "Is not a man like you doing harm when he is not doing positive good?" (i, 3). And Mary asks: "Wouldn't it be better . . . to work to get reconciled to America, than to go to Europe to get reconciled to idleness?" (ii, 68). An occupation declined has not for them the charm it has for Strether when confronted with Little Bilham's dilettante way of life.<sup>1</sup> The scepticism which greets Rowland's scheme for Roderick is based on good sense as much as on prejudice. Mr. Striker's comment on Roderick's prospects has a homely wisdom worthy of Robert Frost: "The crop we gather depends upon the seed we sow. He may be the biggest genius of the age: his potatoes won't come up without his hoeing them" (ii, 58). Cecilia has similar misgivings. She prophesies to Rowland that "transplanted to Rome," Roderick will "put forth a denser leafage", and adds: "I hope with all my heart that the fruit will be proportionate to the foliage" (ii, 46). Her use of horticultural language links her forebodings with Mr. Striker's and in this way reinforces the effect. Later when she hears of Roderick's success in Rome she is more

<sup>1</sup> The Ambassadors (1903), p. 94.

explicit: "I believed he would do fine things, but I was sure he would intersperse them with a good many follies, and that his beautiful statues would spring up out of the midst of a straggling plantation of wild oats" (iv, 119). Unlike Barnaby Striker's, Cecilia's misgiving is not born of a contempt for art — her admiration of Roderick's statuette and her understanding of the artistic temperament are proof of that. She, like Mary, has something of Rowland's open-mindedness, but not his devout confidence in the moral inviolability of the artist. Cecilia in fact distinguishes sharply between the artist's moral being and his talent. In her view Northampton has the right to ask Rowland to guarantee not only Roderick's development as an artist but also his "moral, his sentimental security" (ii, 46).

Doubts of this kind reveal Rowland's image of the artist even at this stage for the apotheosis that it is. Not for one moment are we allowed to share in the delusive hopes Rowland has for Roderick; premonitions of disaster abound from the beginning. The account of Roderick's early success has a remote and lofty irony which foreshadows failure: "Certainly, among the young men of genius who, for so many ages, have

gone up to Rome to test their powers, none ever made a fairer beginning than Roderick . . . . He was passionately interested, he was feeling his powers; now that they had thoroughly kindled in the glowing aesthetic atmosphere of Rome, the ardent young fellow should be pardoned for believing that he never was to see the end of them" (iii, 94). Even Madame Grandoni's mischievous sketch of Herr Schafgans, "the votary of spiritual art", though only a parody of Roderick's situation, sounds an ominous note (iii, 110). Because Roderick's collapse is thus elaborately anticipated we can take the measure of Rowland's delusion from the outset and trace every modulation in his move towards enlightenment. This process, gradual but none the less radical for that, is essentially a progressive disillusionment. The vision Rowland attains to is, like Strether's, a vision of things as they really are.

Like some of James's other protagonists, Rowland is quick to recognise, to assimilate and acknowledge his errors of judgement. He is honest enough to confess his mistake in a letter to Cecilia and finds relief in doing so. After the fiasco of Roderick's first summer in Europe he registers disappointment; his faith in the innate virtue of the artist gets

its first rebuff. What this means for him is brought out more precisely in the revision James made in the New York edition where "Yes, distinctly he was disappointed" (iv, 125) becomes "Yes, distinctly he had lost an illusion, an illusion that he had loved."<sup>1</sup> A few weeks later we find him wondering gloomily whether for artists like Roderick there might not be special dispensation from the moral code, and we realise that already he is on the way to abandoning his belief in the moral salubrity of genius, and is looking for other sanctions for his confidence in Roderick. A distinct ambivalence now emerges in his idea of genius: it is still "priceless, inspired, divine", but also "at its hours, capricious, sinister, cruel" (vi, 200). Even after he has begun to wonder whether perhaps Roderick lacks a conscience he clings to what is left of his faith. His peace of mind is for the time being undisturbed, though James makes a point of stressing how precarious it is (vi, 204). It is Roderick's affair with Christina Light and flight to Naples which prompts Rowland's crucial recognition that genius, far from guaranteeing a sound moral constitution, is itself utterly dependent on the vitality of the artist's moral sense.

<sup>1</sup> (1907),  
Roderick Hudson / I, vii, 137.

He first offers this view tentatively in his letter to Cecilia: "I think it is established that, in the long run, egotism makes a failure in conduct: is it also true that it makes a failure in the arts?" (viii, 268)

This faltering movement of Rowland's towards a more realistic view of Roderick brings with it a new insight into the nature of the artist as he tries to make sense of Roderick's condition. In his attempt to come to terms with the truth Rowland is favourably contrasted with Sam Singleton who, despite the excess of authorial approval lavished on him, is not at all willing to substitute the real for the ideal. Roderick has represented for him a romantic ideal to which he has responded as whole-heartedly as Rowland but with decidedly less discrimination. He tells Rowland one day: "I can't judge him rationally. He fascinates me; he's the sort of man one makes one's hero of" (xi, 379). Earlier he had declared: "I don't envy Hudson anything he possesses ... because to take anything away would spoil his beautiful completeness. 'Complete', that's what he is; while we little clevernesses are like half-ripened plums, only good eating on the side that has had a glimpse of the sun" (v, 172-173). He turns out to be extremely anxious to preserve his illusion

of Roderick, hastily preventing Rowland from revealing what is wrong with his protégé and explaining: "I want to know no evil of him, and I think I should hardly believe it. In my memories of this Roman artist-life, he will be the central figure. He will stand there in radiant relief, as beautiful and unspotted as one of his own statues!" (xi, 379) There is a telling irony in Singleton's conception of Roderick's "completeness", sharpened by the fact that Rowland too is temporarily a victim, of the same illusion. The idea of completeness is familiar to him: he had felt himself to be only half-finished and he recognises eventually the symptoms of deficiency in Roderick. Rowland sees that what Roderick in fact lacks is the capacity for moral feeling: quite simply, he has no heart (viii, 267-268). The ability to feel was always for James the supreme human quality essential if life, or art for that matter, was to have any meaning. Without it the artist's power to create must shrivel. Later in his new-found detachment Rowland comes to realise that the predominant feature of Roderick's nature is "the perfect absoluteness of his own emotions and experience. He never saw himself as part of a whole; only as the clear-cut, sharp-edged, isolated individual, rejoicing or raging, as the case might be, but

needing in any case absolutely to affirm himself" (xi, 391-392). At their last interview Rowland is sharply aware that the grounds of Roderick's self-reproach are totally amoral: "It was egotism still: aesthetic disgust at the graceless contour of his conduct, but never a hint of simple sorrow for the pain he had given" (xii, 469). This last perception, an acute discrimination between aesthetic and moral response, testifies to Rowland's new insight. His own feeling for the claims of others, conspicuously illustrated throughout his adventure, makes him in this respect as in others a revealing contrast to Roderick.

Another parallel to Rowland's case can be found in Christina's relation to Roderick. For her too he had seemed to offer the means of realising an ideal. During their meeting at the Coliseum she tells him that she had hoped to find in him the man she had dreamed of, a man of tremendous character, talent and will whom she could entirely respect and admire. Disillusion has brought insight and she does not spare Roderick her diagnosis: "You are one of the men who care only for themselves and for what they can make of themselves. That's very well when they can make something great, and I could interest myself in a man of extraordinary power who should wish to turn all his passions to account" (vii, 237). In a



more superficial way she makes much the same kind of mistake as Rowland: to satisfy a personal need she bases a moral assumption on the distinctly aesthetic appeal of Roderick's personality and talent. In the changes James made for the New York edition he is careful to stress the nature of Christina's mistake. He has her unconsciously convict herself. She tells Roderick: "I innocently imagined at first that your eyes — because they're so beautiful — declared you strong. I think they declare nothing but just their beauty."<sup>1</sup> But she is also susceptible to beauty of a different kind, to the aesthetic effect, the moral beauty it may be called, of integrity and goodness. Its appeal is so imperative that she is driven to emulation. Impressed deeply by Mary Garland's "beautiful character", (x, 346) she makes a dramatic moral gesture by rejecting Prince Casamassima. She persists in her refusal in spite of the attraction for her, frankly acknowledged, of "the world, the splendid, beautiful, powerful, interesting world" (x, 370) to which the marriage would certainly provide access. Only under crushing pressure does she sacrifice her newest ideal,

<sup>1</sup> Roderick Hudson (1907),  
I, xiii, 261.

abandon her scruples and go through with the marriage. To rehabilitate her pride she clutches at a remedy that is essentially aesthetic, "muffling her shame, with an almost sensuous relief, in a splendor that stood within her grasp" (xi, 383). The role she fills in the novel is an important one, as James points out in the Preface, but its importance consists in much more than her function as "well-nigh sole agent" of Roderick's catastrophe. Her idealism, like Singleton's, is a foil for Rowland's and provides a measure of his capacity to sustain disillusion. Neither she nor Singleton has his moral resilience: Singleton would rather cling to a false ideal while Christina sinks her thwarted idealism in the reckless pursuit of pleasure.

The new vision of the artist which Rowland develops as a result of his experience of Roderick is substantially James's own. In an article he wrote for the June issue of the Atlantic Monthly in 1872 he declared bracingly that "half the battle in art is won in the artist's conscience" and emphasized the need for effort as well as insight: the artist "must bring his grist to the mill and grind it with his own strength."<sup>1</sup> Part of Roderick's trouble is that he expects

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted in The Painter's Eye, ed. John L. Sweeney (1956), p. 65.

his grist to be delivered in ample quantities regularly. He lacks the moral energy which supplies creative power. He admits to Rowland that the will defeats his understanding and he preaches his own brand of determinism: "I believe there is a certain group of circumstances possible for every man, in which his will is destined to snap like a dry twig"(iv,128).

The nature of his failure is illuminated for us in the somewhat painstaking vignettes James furnishes of his fellow artists in Rome. In these he stresses the need for application and hard work if talent is to be properly fruitful. He says of Gloriani's art that "fifteen years of indefatigable exercise had brought it to perfection" (iii, 97). Singleton is of a different calibre, but he has the same capacity for hard work. Although he had given no promise of ability when he first arrived in Rome, James points out that "improvement had come, however, hand in hand with patient industry, and his talent, though of a slender and delicate order, was now incontestable" (iii, 99). These comments endorse implicitly what Barnaby Striker had to say earlier on the inescapable need, even for genius, of sheer toil. At one stage Rowland tries to persuade himself that steady application like Singleton's is naturally inimical to genius,

but further observation forces him to abandon the idea. He seems reasonable enough, even unchallenged, but it is comes to see Roderick's failure ultimately and essentially questioned implicitly by the context and, most seriously as a moral failure. This is made quite plain in his challenge of course, by his headlong course towards disaster. His to Roderick: "If you have the energy to desire you have also inability to feel for others makes the moral freedom he the energy to reason and to judge" (xiii, 458). He had already noted on another occasion "indications on Roderick's part of the power of resistance to disagreeable obligations: one might still have said, if one had been disposed to be didactic at any hazard, that there was a method in his madness, that his moral energy had its sleeping and its waking hours, and that, in a cause that pleased it, it was capable of rising with the dawn" (xii, 430).

Roderick himself consistently rejects any need for moral absoluteness or Roderick's sensibility does not prevent him constraint. He proclaims uncompromisingly the moral autonomy of the artist: "I think that when you expect a man to produce beautiful and wonderful works of art, you ought to allow him a certain freedom of action ... you ought to let him follow his fancy and look for his material wherever he thinks he may find it!" (vi, 201). He makes virtually the same point, again to Rowland, at their last interview: "... I resent", he insists, "the range of your vision pretending to be the limit of my action" (xiii, 460-461). Dialectically his view, which

seems reasonable enough, goes unchallenged, but it is questioned implicitly by the context and, most seriously of course, by his headlong course towards disaster. His inability to feel for others makes the moral freedom he claims a truly destructive, not a creative, force.

If Roderick's plunge into an abyss does not symbolise the extinction of his genius it only shelves the problems posed. Rowland's conception of "the essential salubrity of genius" has certainly been decisively exploded; in its place we are offered the conviction that for true fulfilment genius depends on the moral power generated by a feeling heart. However, we are bound to admit that the "perfect absoluteness" of Roderick's sensibility does not prevent him from producing some superb figures and certainly in no way jeopardizes their quality. At one point it is indeed tentatively suggested that genius may well transcend the conditions that govern ordinary people and even artists of some talent. But the fact remains that Roderick's creative powers, lacking moral drive, eventually suffer what seems to be total eclipse.

We need however to keep in mind that it is the meaning for Rowland of Roderick's disintegration which is James's

principal concern in the novel. With Roderick's fall "from a great height" Rowland's adventure abruptly ends; his occupation is gone. In the course of it he has come to reject aesthetic criteria as a touchstone of moral value, and acquires as a result not only a realistic view of the artist but also a more complex vision of life. In death, Roderick lies as beautiful as in life and what Rowland sees first as he looks at his body is only "a strangely serene expression of life" (xiii, 479). Singleton too at the same time is overcome by the sense of his beauty. But the appearance is deceptive: Rowland recognises that "an attempt to move him would show some hideous fracture, some horrible physical dishonor" (xiii, 479). With this perception, he may be seen as testifying symbolically to the change that has taken place in his view of things: he can now perceive and accept the paradoxical mixture which makes up experience. James's concern with this aspect of Rowland's adventure comes out in a revision he made for the New York edition. Earlier, standing with Mary Garland in the moonlit garden of the Villa Pandolfini, Rowland had tried to justify what they both feel as the fundamental ambivalence of life. In 1875 James

was content to write: "We are made, I suppose, both to suffer and to enjoy. As you say, it's a mixture" (xi, 416). Thirty-two years later James ascribes to Rowland a more subtle and extended analysis: "We shouldn't be able to enjoy, I suppose, unless we could suffer, and in anything that's worthy of the name of experience — that experience which is the real taste of life ... the mixture is of the finest and subtlest."<sup>1</sup>

It is "the real taste of life" which effectively ousts Rowland's sustained attempt to shape experience to an aesthetic ideal. His efforts to this end fail the test of reality: each is a sentimental indulgence, resembling an episode in a romantic novelette. His experience may be seen to have significant form, and form that is in a real sense organic, not superimposed to satisfy any aesthetic preconceptions but engendered by intense moral vitality. The new vision he has acquired culminates in no formal act of validation, like for instance Isabel Archer's return to Osmond, Strether's to Woollett, or Amerigo and Maggie's acceptance of each other.

<sup>1</sup> Roderick Hudson (1907), I, xxii, 457.

All we have is Rowland's own assertion of his patience, a quality which more than any other has made him accessible to all experience. It is a quality James valued highly. In a Notebook entry for 6th August, 1884 he wrote: "A mighty will, there is nothing but that! The integrity of one's will, purpose, faith. To wait when one must wait, and act when one can act!"<sup>1</sup> For him it is a fundamental condition of all creative activity in art as in life.

<sup>1</sup> N, p. 67.



James most probably began The Tragic Muse in the summer of 1888, thirteen years after the publication of Roderick Hudson. The Preface he wrote for the New York edition some twenty years later, as well as testifying to the perennial fascination art had for him as a subject for fiction, also throws light on the process of accretion by which the novel took shape. It gives us an invaluable insight into the nature of the theme James set out to treat in The Tragic Muse and the way in which his ideas were finally embodied. Viewed retrospectively, the invitation

#### CHAPTER TWO

he had had from Thomas Bailey Aldrich to contribute a serial to the Atlantic Monthly was a chance, promptly grasped, "to

#### The ordeal of art in The Tragic Muse

make a story about art."<sup>1</sup> This was no new idea: from early on he had had "the happy thought of some dramatic picture of the 'artist-life'."<sup>2</sup> He saw the conflict between art and 'the world' as "one of the half-dozen great primary motives." It is touched on of course in Roderick Hudson, but he had been more concerned there to present a view of the nature of the artist, of the quality of genius. As he gropes unsuccessfully for the "productive germ" of The Tragic Muse, James stresses the lengthy incubation his early idea had undergone. Looking back, he sees this pro-

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<sup>1</sup> AN, p.81.

<sup>2</sup> AN, p.79.

longed gestation as a decided advantage, yielding as it did a subject "all mature with having long waited,"<sup>1</sup> enriched by his accumulated experience of life and of his craft. He sees himself as having gained from the lapse of time "a more and more intimate view of the nature of art and the conditions therewith imposed."<sup>2</sup> The subject in fact required a certain maturity: "... this question of the essence and the reasons of the opposition had shown itself to demand the light of experience; so that to the growth of experience, truly, the treatment of the subject had yielded."<sup>3</sup>

One obvious effect of the growth of experience is the more comprehensive picture of artist life which emerges from The Tragic Muse. By dealing with two aesthetic media instead of one, media as different as the theatre and painting, James can present a much more integrated view of the nature of art: his exploration profits enormously from the contrasts and similarities implicit in the two forms. Nevertheless the idea of art developed in The Tragic Muse is essentially the same as that put forward earlier in Roderick Hudson. What has changed, with notable effect, is the point of view and the focus; this entails a change of

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> AN, p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> AN, p. 80.

perspective, an apparent transformation of the whole vista. In Roderick Hudson James projects — and uncompromisingly refutes — an idealistic view of art and the artist. Rowland Mallet has to jettison his conviction that artistic genius has a built-in moral soundness, to recognise the illusions inherent in aesthetic idealism. Although the idealistic view is rejected, the impression that remains seems distinctively romantic, perhaps because Roderick, in spite of blatant weakness, continues to be a brilliantly compelling figure. Spectacular genius tends to create myth and in his meteoric rise and fall there is something of the quality of legend. James may himself have felt something of this for he added to the New York edition of the novel a final sentence which has the authentic flavour of romance: "And then he talks to her of Roderick, of whose history she never wearies and whom he never elsewhere names."<sup>1</sup> The Tragic Muse is significantly lacking in romantic aura of any kind. This can be put down to the growth that had taken place in James's experience: Roderick Hudson is after all the work of a young novelist. But it may have more to do with his carefully documented approach. The Tragic Muse is essentially a disquisitional novel: the characters exist primarily to expound James's subject.

<sup>1</sup> Roderick Hudson (1907), I, xxvi, 527.

In Roderick Hudson James had made use of a central consciousness because of the increase thus obtained in dramatic intensity. It is all the more interesting, then, that in The Tragic Muse he dispenses with what he now calls the "usurping consciousness" on grounds, as he claims in the Preface, specifically dramatic, a reminder that in 1888 he was about to take the plunge into writing for the theatre.<sup>1</sup> He asserts that "the whole thing has visibly, from the first, to get itself done in dramatic, or at least in scenic conditions ..." and he goes in for "the consistency of the multiplication of aspects."<sup>2</sup> His concern in the novel with not just one but three major "cases" anyway made the use of a central register of consciousness impracticable. Together these three cases, which he saw as "typical examples" and "general aspects", did away with his fear that "a single illustrative case might easily be meagre fare."<sup>3</sup> The Notebooks show that this was more than a passing anxiety. He confesses there: "I was afraid of my story being too thin."<sup>4</sup> A composite subject like this involves

<sup>1</sup> In an entry in The Notebooks for 12 May 1889, p. 99, James refers to a proposal he had received some months before from Edward Compton that he should dramatise The American. By the time it was produced in 1891 he had written four other plays.

<sup>2</sup> AN, pp. 89-90.  
<sup>3</sup> AN, p. 82.  
<sup>4</sup> N, p. 92.

a complexity and breadth of reference not to be found, simply because it was not attempted, in Roderick Hudson. It offered scope to James's delight in "a deep-breathing economy and an organic form."<sup>1</sup> In the Preface he points to Peter Sherringham and Nick Dormer as his "two first notions".<sup>2</sup> To his sense of the problem thus created of two quite separate stories Tintoretto's Crucifixion provides a reassurance, and the character of Miriam Rooth both a solution and a title. She supplies the principle of unity and in her he finds his compositional centre in spite of the fact that we have no direct exhibition of her consciousness: we get at it "all inferentially and inductively, seeing it only through a more or less bewildered interpretation of it by others."<sup>3</sup> He declares triumphantly that "Miriam is central then to analysis, in spite of being objective."

Such a portrayal offers an interesting parallel with his treatment of Roderick. Our view of him, as of all the other people in that novel, is projected by Rowland. In neither book is James concerned to provide a direct exhibition of the artist's consciousness; rather he is interested in the

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 84.  
<sup>2</sup> AN, p. 85.  
<sup>3</sup> AN, p. 89.

impact made on others by the personality of the artist, "enamoured of perfection, ridden by his idea."<sup>1</sup> Through Rowland's eyes we see the impression made by Roderick on people as different as Christina Light and Barnaby Striker. In the same way, in The Tragic Muse we observe how Julia Dallow and Peter Sherringham, say, react to Miriam. Just as we look to Rowland for an insight into Roderick's character, so we have to rely on Nick Dormer and Peter Sherringham together to elucidate Miriam's. In the Preface James claims, mistakenly in fact<sup>2</sup>, that he never goes behind Miriam, "only poor Sherringham goes, a great deal, and Nick Dormer goes a little."<sup>3</sup> But as in Roderick Hudson, James himself is always there to point out delusion and to affirm values. He advertises this role in the Preface: while Nick and Peter grope to understand Miriam and thus "waste wonderment", he — and the effect is all implied — "goes behind them". But though Miriam is the indispensable centre of the subject, she reflects only one aspect of it. In this novel James's exploration of the nature of art is integrally a triptych; each facet that enervates his genius. The opposition to art depicted

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 221.  
<sup>2</sup> See below p. 87.  
<sup>3</sup> AN, p. 91.

complements the others. To this end characters are linked in a network of relationships founded on unrequited love. Miriam is in love with Nick and is loved by Peter (who is loved by Biddy). Much the same pattern can be made out in Roderick Hudson. Roderick is in love with Christina and is loved by Mary (who is loved by Rowland). But in The Tragic Muse these relations, as I shall show later, help to dramatise James's idea of art more directly and exclusively than is the case in Roderick Hudson.

When we come to consider the opposition offered to art, James's other express preoccupation in The Tragic Muse, we find that experience had made for a change of ground, an extension of field. In Roderick Hudson antagonism to art is only a subordinate consideration. Roderick, and Rowland inevitably as his patron, does clash with the world — if Northampton, Mass. may in this context be allowed to figure as "the world". But once Roderick is established in Europe he meets virtually no opposition; instead he becomes involved in a conflict which only objectifies the inner dichotomy that enervates his genius. The opposition to art depicted in Roderick Hudson is in fact strictly circumscribed. James is content to do no more than portray and evaluate it,



chiefly by means of caricature; causes and effects do not concern him here. By the time he came to write The Tragic Muse, however, he had had the chance to observe and study other manifestations of hostility to art and to ponder the reasons for it. The results can be seen in the wealth of sociological and psychological observation which has gone to make the English milieu of The Tragic Muse.

James settled in London in December 1876, just a year after the first appearance of Roderick Hudson. For the time being at least he steeped himself with pleasure in the English social scene and in this way gained an intimate knowledge and understanding of English character and the English way of life. Percy Lubbock quotes James as writing in September 1888 while working on The Tragic Muse: "I am getting to know English life better than American ...."<sup>1</sup> Only eight months after establishing himself in London he can comment: "That the people he lives among are not artistic, is, for the contemplative stranger, one of the foremost lessons of English life...."<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere in the same essay he had already had a shot at defining the idiosyncrasy of English taste: "... the taste for art in England is at bottom a fashion, a need of luxury, a tribute even ... to

<sup>1</sup> Lubbock, I. p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> "The Picture Season in London, 1877" in The Painter's Eye, ed. John L. Sweeney (1956), p. 148.

propriety . . ." <sup>1</sup> The implications of this statement are illuminated for us in his essay on George du Maurier (1883):

They (i.e. the English) have not a spontaneous artistic life; their taste is a matter of conscience, reflection, duty, and the writer who in our time has appealed to them most eloquently on behalf of art has rested his plea on moral standards — has talked exclusively of right and wrong. It is impossible to live much among them, to be a spectator of their habits, their manners, their arrangements, without perceiving that the artistic point of view is the last that they naturally take. The sense of manner is not part of their constitution. They arrive at it, as they have arrived at so many things, because they are ambitious, resolute, enlightened, fond of difficulties; but there is always a strange element either of undue apology or of exaggerated defiance in their attempts at the cultivation of beauty. They carry on their huge broad back a nameless mountain of conventions and prejudices, a dusky cloud of inaptitudes and fears, which casts a shadow upon the frank and confident practice of art. <sup>2</sup>

James was keenly conscious of, and often deprecated, the typically English craving for a moral message in art. In a review of the Royal Academy, 1878, he observes that "the plastic quality is not what English spectators look for in a picture . . . . The artist must tell a story or preach a sermon; his picture must not be an image, but, in

<sup>1</sup> The Painter's Eye, p. 136.  
<sup>2</sup> Partial Portraits, p. 370-371.

some fashion or other, a lesson...."<sup>1</sup> He found in England then a fresh variety of the moralistic attitude to art prevalent in New England. According to this view, art was acceptable only when it conformed to the moral code, when it buttressed the conventions of public propriety. As a social accomplishment it could be tolerated if not admired; but as a way of life it was decidedly invidious.

An antipathy towards art which is characteristically English is established from the beginning of The Tragic Muse in a pictorial form that is distinctively Jamesian. With this mode of presentation though, James soon found reason to be dissatisfied. In an entry in the Notebooks for 2nd February, 1889, in which he comments on the progress of the work — or rather the lack of it, he records that he has been in that chapter "too complacently descriptive and illustrative."<sup>2</sup> However, this may be, the fact is that the opening section of The Tragic Muse has certain features in common with the first few paragraphs of The American and The Portrait of a Lady, in which description and illustration (complacent or not) also predominate. In each James conveys the prevailing aesthetic climate of the

<sup>1</sup> The Painter's Eye pp. 167-168.

<sup>2</sup> N, p. 92.

novel. We are introduced to Christopher Newman in The American as he lounges in the Salon Carré at the Louvre after a lengthy stint of picture viewing. Similarly we see the Dormers for the first time at the annual exhibition of the Salon as they rest from their exertions on a bench in the garden of the Palais de l'Industrie. The same effect of stasis within a setting highly significant aesthetically is achieved at the beginning of The Portrait of a Lady. In all three the æsthetic values at issue in the novel are expressed pictorially. To focus each picture James conscripts an observer. In The American he amounts to little more than a gratuitous convention since the standpoint adopted is basically one of narrative omniscience. It is the storyteller who functions as observer in The Portrait of a Lady. Here the device is used more consistently; the view projected of Daniel Touchett and Lord Warburton is largely exterior but even so there are deviations. By contrast, in The Tragic Muse James exploits the device with calculated effect. All through this introductory section we view the Dormers scrupulously and arbitrarily from the standpoint of a "foreign observer" with whom the author, in the latter part, tends to identify himself. It is with the

peculiarly English qualities of the group that the observer can thus concern himself. In The American and The Portrait of a Lady, also, national characteristics are spotlighted. The observer's impression of the Dormers as they sit together in silence on their bench is designed to reinforce the French conviction put forward in the opening sentence. This impression is pre-eminently sculptural as befits a race "inexpressive and speechless ... perpendicular and unsociable, unaddicted to enriching any bareness of contact with verbal or other embroidery."<sup>1</sup> Deposited appropriately in the department of statuary, the Dormers also "constituted a successful plastic fact.... they were finished productions, in their way, and ranged there motionless, on their green bench, they were almost as much on exhibition as if they had been hung on the line" (I, i, 1-2). The faint suffusion of the absurd which colours this description differentiates it sharply in effect from the description of Miriam where a similar technique is used to render the impression she makes on Peter (I, vii, 119). In thus representing them as effigies James denigrates their humanity by suggesting their lack of flexibility, of warm spontaneous response to life. Significantly Nick, with Bidy beside him, breaks out of

<sup>1</sup> The Tragic Muse (1890), I, i, I. Subsequent references to this edition in this and the following chapter will appear in the text.

this rigidly composed group in search of further aesthetic experience.

The statuesque, the marmoreal, is most vividly exemplified in the observer's view of Lady Agnes Dormer, who embodies superbly the morgue anglaise. She has "a face of fine austere mould .... Cold, still and considerably worn, it was neither stupid nor hard, but it was firm, narrow and sharp. This competent matron ... had a high forehead, to which the quality of the skin gave a singular polish — it glittered even when seen at a distance; a nose which achieved a high, free curve" (I, i, 3). The visual and tactile suggestion here is of the chill smooth hardness of marble. It is against the monumental presence of his mother and her petrified expectations that Nick eventually ranges himself, a confrontation foreshadowed in this chapter by Lady Agnes's bitter attack on the art of the Salon. Nick sees it indeed as a challenge. Resentment, we notice, only heightens Lady Agnes's sculptile quality, having the effect "not so much of animating her cold face as of making it colder, less expressive, though visibly prouder" (I, i, 10). Nick's reply is a considered defence, but it makes its most vivid effect as a spirited affirmation of life in the face of a rigor mortis as much moral as aesthetic: "This place

is an immense stimulus to me; it refreshes me, excites me, it's such an exhibition of artistic life. It's full of ideas, full of refinements; it gives one such an impression of artistic experience. They try everything, they feel everything" (I, i, 11).

The impression made in this first chapter is reinforced by the uneasiness Lady Agnes obviously feels in Paris. Whereas for Nick the city has the power — and the stress is again on vitality — "of quickening sensibly the life of reflection and of observation within him" (I, ii, 19), for her it is a source only of discomfiture; she is quite simply bored. James comments that "she was far from finding everything in Paris amusing. She had no aptitude for aimlessness, and moreover she thought it vulgar" (I, v, 73). The problem of choosing a hat for Biddy that would please Peter Sherringham is seen by James sardonically as providing her with "plenty of spiritual occupation" (I, v, 71). Like Waymarsh and the Pococks among others, Lady Agnes is nicely placed by her response to Paris. For James the city is an incomparable touchstone for a range of values.

The disgust Lady Agnes feels for the Salon might seem to contradict James's account of the English attitude to art. But we need to keep in mind the generally wide

divergence between the French and English schools of the time — a staple reference, if only implicit, in much of James's art criticism. He writes for instance in his review of the Royal Academy, 1878, of "the gulf existing between French and English art."<sup>1</sup> The chances are that for a Royal Academy exhibition Lady Agnes would have shown at least a rudimentary tolerance, for she would have found there the "moral tone" so miserably lacking in the art of the Salon. She and Grace do show signs of finding "taste" acceptable as a social asset; both do their best to establish that Julia has taste. It is when art becomes a way of life that it is most deplorable, comes close in fact to depravity. Not only does it offend against social propriety but it betrays an ordained social status. For Lady Agnes and her circle art is "vulgar" — an epithet they tend to use quite often. George Dallow is termed "dreadful" no doubt, because he had made a unique collection of beautiful objects which mattered more to him than almost anything else. Biddy's dabbling in modelling is just tolerated, only because it is obviously amateur, little more than a pastime. Where art is frivolous Lady Agnes is prepared to be tolerant. Nick, part of whose function it is to

<sup>1</sup> The Painter's Eye, p. 168.



evoke the full force of this opposition to art, is in an incomparable position for distilling its character. He explains to Biddy that their mother "has inherited the queer old superstition that art is pardonable only so long as it's bad — so long as it's done at odd hours, for a little distraction, like a game of tennis or of whist. The only thing that can justify it, the effort to carry it as far as one can (which you can't do without time and singleness of purpose), she regards as just the dangerous, the criminal element. It's ... the drollest immorality" (I, ii, 16).

Nick goes so far as to dub his family Philistines. The fact that he is talking primarily about himself makes his judgement all the more forceful. He tells Gabriel Nash: "... we are all Philistines to the core, with about as much aesthetic sense as that hat" (I, ix, 171). To take up the implied reference to Arnold, he could, with as much justification, have called them Barbarians. Certainly — and this is true too of Julia Dallow, Mr. Carteret and to a certain extent of Peter Sherringham — they are activated by those strong impulses ascribed by Arnold to the aristocratic class he named Barbarians: "lured off from following light by those mighty and eternal seducers of our race which weave for this class their most irresistible charms, - by worldly splendour,

security, power and pleasure."<sup>1</sup> In this context Percy Dormer's "passion for field-sports" gains added significance; we are told that he "roamed about the world taking shots which excited the enthusiasm of society, when society heard of them, at the few legitimate creatures of the chase which the British rifle had spared" (I, v, 78). For both Lady Agnes and Julia Dallow Nick is the means — and the only available means — of procuring the "worldly splendour, security, power," and even perhaps pleasure, they claim by natural right. And art presents a substantial threat to these alluring prospects. In this way the instinctive antipathy they feel for art is given impetus by the stake each has in Nick's future. It makes, of course, for the strongest emotional involvement for both of them. This I want to examine in detail elsewhere.

In his picture of Charles Carteret and his milieu James renders most vividly, because dramatically, the ethos which generates this kind of hostility to art. As a retired Liberal member of Parliament, a life-long friend of Sir Nicholas Dormer, Charles Carteret epitomizes the character of that public life which lays hold on Nick.

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy, ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge, 1966), p. 102.

The claustrophobic traditionalism he professes is opposed to spontaneity of any kind and inimical, because inaccessible, to art. The oppression is made palpable for us in terms of Mr. Carteret's house at Beauclere: a mode of emotional and sensuous notation which James came to use more and more with increasingly subtle effect. As in other novels it serves here too as a means of easy, implicit, satirical comment. Beneath Mr. Carteret's roof Nick becomes a little boy again — "a little boy on whom it had been duly impressed that in the wide, plain, peaceful rooms he was not to 'touch'" (II,ii,21). The point is driven home in the comment that follows: "When he paid a visit to his father's old friend there were in fact many things — many topics — from which he instinctively kept his hands." In this repression there is nothing subtle; on the contrary it is massive in its obtrusion and finally stultifying: "Everything at Mr. Carteret's appeared to Nick to be on a larger scale than anywhere else — the tea-cups, the knives and forks, the door-handles, the chair-backs, the legs of mutton, the candles and the lumps of coal: they represented and apparently exhausted the master's sense of pleasing effect, for the house was not otherwise decorated" (II, ii, 24). The gentle, even mischievous satire expressed in the apparently careless agglomeration of the list is a pervasive element in James's presentation of this aspect of

the basic conflict. Our impression of obdurate orthodoxy is only the more strongly confirmed when we learn that "in the house there was a great deal of Landseer, of oil-cloth, of woodwork painted and 'grained'". The fact is — and the point is explicitly made — "Mr. Carteret's interior expressed a whole view of life," a view of life moreover that Nick himself was expected to share.<sup>1</sup> So that in his company Nick "found himself immersed in an atmosphere of tacit pledges which constituted the very medium of intercourse" (II, ii, 29).

We see Mr. Carteret, just as we see his house and whole environment, only as Nick experiences them, and Nick's view is naturally conditioned by his artist's sensibility. He tends to see Mr. Carteret always "from the pictorial point of view" (II, iii, 33). Even when he goes to Beauclere with the difficult news that he has resigned

<sup>1</sup> There is in Mr. Carteret's outlook and way of life a strong suggestion of Podsnappery. Certainly the interior of his house bears an interesting resemblance to Podsnap's: "Mr. Podsnap could tolerate taste in a mushroom man who stood in need of that sort of thing, but was far above it himself. Hideous solidity was the characteristic of the Podsnap plate. Everything was made to look as heavy as it could and to take up as much room as possible .... All the big silver spoons and forks widened the mouths of the company expressly for the purpose of thrusting the sentiment down their throats with every morsel they ate". See Charles Dickens, Our Mutual Friend (1865), I, 99. James reviewed the novel for the Nation on 21 December 1865. The review has been reprinted in The House of Fiction, ed. Leon Edel (1957), pp. 253-258.

his seat to give himself up to painting this faculty asserts itself: James tells us that Mr. Carteret "presented himself to Nick's picture-seeking vision as a figure in a clever composition or a novel" (III, i, 1). But this tendency of Nick's by no means obscures his vision; it has, if anything, the effect of sharpening it. He is acutely aware of the discrepancy between the picture he likes to make of Mr. Carteret and the man himself. He knows very well, for instance, that Mr. Carteret had never been more than a politician, though he likes to regard him as a statesman. His enjoyment of the effect produced by the old man never distorts his judgement: artistic detachment makes his portrayal at once ironic and sympathetic. For this reason James can safely leave the presentation of Mr. Carteret entirely to Nick, abstaining even from the kind of implicit criticism found elsewhere in his work which adumbrates as a corrective a different evaluation.

The clarity with which Nick sees Mr. Carteret is enhanced by his awareness that his vision is in no way reciprocated. James tells us that he "was unable to regard Mr. Carteret as an observer", even though the old man's talk was "founded on the idea of observation". He goes on to reflect: "'He doesn't observe me ... if he did he would see, he wouldn't think —' And the end of this private cogitation

was a vague impatience of all the things his venerable host took for granted. He didn't see any of the things that Nick saw" (II, iii, 34-35). This difference in outlook and sensibility comes out vividly in the next sentence where James specifies what it was that Mr. Carteret failed to see: "the light touches of the summer morning scattered through the sweet old garden". Experience of this kind does not exist for Mr. Carteret; to him life is "a purely practical function" (II, ii, 31); hence his preoccupation, like Mr. Gradgrind's, with facts and calculations. Nick realises that, despite his pictorial appeal as a kind of elder statesman, Mr. Carteret is not just a charming spectacle, a representative of a more gracious way of life, now obsolescent, though he is allowed most sympathetically to figure in this role. Ultimately he represents a whole ethos the validity of which must never be questioned. His hidebound ideology cannot comprehend Nick's intention to become a painter. It is to begin with a betrayal of rank: the pencil and the brush are definitely not "the weapons of a gentleman" (III, i, 11). But it is also nothing less than a contemptible surrender of name and country. High political office, according to

this code, offered the only chance of living the supremely noble life.

This exalted view of the world of affairs is by no means confined to Mr. Carteret and Lady Agnes; it is shared by Peter Sherringham and Julia Dallow too. Early on James hints that Peter is actuated by the same pressures that are brought to bear on Nick by his mother and Mr. Carteret. In a brief introductory sketch of Peter he comments: "it would have been impossible to be more modern than Peter Sherringham and more of one's class and one's country."<sup>1</sup> For Peter too a career in public life is the supreme fulfilment. His mind is set on getting to the top of his profession and James makes it clear that he is prepared to be ruthless to do so. In his final appeal to Miriam he offers her the chance of doing with him "great things", and this is how he defines them: "The things of my profession — of my life — the things one does for one's country, the responsibility, and the honour of great affairs"(III,xiv,163). It is only by denying the claims art makes upon him that he becomes free to realise this ambition.

We see the same incentive at work in Julia; it is this which supplies the main impetus for her antagonism to art.

<sup>1</sup> The Tragic Muse (1890), I, iii, 45-46. My italics.

Her ambition is to preside over a political salon. And she claims to be possessed by "the simple idea that one ought to do something or other for one's country"(I, vi, 102). Certainly we have no reason to doubt her sincerity. She frankly admits to being ambitious; but then unadulterated altruism is a rare quality. The frustration she had suffered in her marriage to George Dallow is generally recognised: it had brought her little other than money and the collection of precious art objects at Harsh which she is busily depleting. It is given to Nick almost exclusively to elucidate Julia's motives and he discerns the whole truth as he confronts her the day she breaks their engagement. Incoherently she voices her violent resentment of art and all it stands for: "Why should it always be put upon me, when I hate it? What have I done? I was drenched in it, before" (II, xiii, 172). In this outburst Nick detects "the uncalculated betrayal of an old irritation, an old shame almost — her late husband's flat, inglorious taste for pretty things, his indifference to every chance to play a public part". This deficiency in her life Nick was to have remedied. James himself interposes to make this clear in one of the many analytical



expositions in the novel. The cause of Julia's interest in Nick, he explains, was partly "the vision of his helping her to the particular emotion that she did desire — the emotion of great affairs and of public action" (I,viii,140). So when she is faced unexpectedly in Nick's studio with the spectacle of Miriam Rooth, a superb embodiment of artistic power, Julia is overwhelmed by her distaste for art reinforced by all the jealousy latent in her love — and it is real — for Nick. She tells him: "I hate art, as you call it. I thought I did, I know I did; but till this morning I didn't know how much" (II,xiii,171). Nick then realises that her passion for him has been quelled by her political ambition, "her determination to be associated, so far as a woman could, with great affairs" (II,xiii,173). He sees her as the incarnation of politics. It would be a mistake though to think that Julia's recoil from Nick is brought about solely by political ambition and her hatred of art. Behind these is an obscurer force; the fear which Nick senses in her, and to which she defiantly admits, the fear which protracts their engagement and keeps her aloof from him. Julia is afraid of being dispossessed of her essential self and her political interests serve to buttress her individuality against intrusion. In the power art has over Nick she sees a force which seems to threaten her with personal dissolution. To preserve her inviolability therefore she finally rejects Nick's love.

To turn from James's presentation of the opposition to art to what he calls the "question of the essence"<sup>1</sup> is to be faced with the Tragic Muse herself. As compositional centre Miriam commands the novel: not only does she polarise the various aspects of James's theme but she is the touchstone for the different values proposed. She is the supreme case in the novel of "the art-appetite raised to intensity, swollen to voracity."<sup>2</sup> She epitomises a total uncompromising commitment to art; all the more dynamic because she is rendered objectively throughout as befits the actress, who exists principally in the aesthetic being she projects. To "do the actress" was no sudden whim of James's; four years before he began The Tragic Muse he had pondered the possibilities of the idea in a Notebook entry for 19 June (1884). In this account the actress takes first place; the story would be "a study of the histrionic character". He envisages it thus: "A young actress is an object of much attention and a great deal of criticism from a man who loves the stage . . . ."<sup>3</sup> This seems indeed a more accurate representation of the focus finally achieved in

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 80.

<sup>2</sup> AN, pp. 90-91.

<sup>3</sup> N, p. 63.

the novel than that given in the Preface, where the "theatric case" is recollected as a "young man who would chuck something and somebody else, admired in their way too".<sup>1</sup>

Miriam's aesthetic significance is rendered pictorially from her earliest appearance. Our first view of her is projected by Bidy: "Her arms hung at her sides, her head was bent, her face lowered, so that she had an odd appearance of raising her eyes from under her brows; and in this attitude she was striking, though her air was unconciliatory, almost dangerous" (I, ii, 24). Momentarily Bidy is made to feel that she is playing a minor role in a performance at which Miriam is prima ballerina; she has a sense "of being a figure in a ballet, a dramatic ballet — a subordinate, motionless figure, to be dashed at, to music, or capered up to". The immobility attributed to Bidy in this image, together with the purposeful, almost flaunting vitality shown by Miriam, prefigures not only their respective roles in the sphere of art but also Bidy's relegation by Peter as a result of his relationship with Miriam. This is the only occasion in the novel when James makes use of Bidy's standpoint; here it provides him with an internal — and

<sup>1</sup>AN, p. 82.

what is most important — ingenuous and detached view of Miriam. In fact the initial impression Miriam makes on those with eyes to see — and Biddy is one of these — is distinctively "plastic". Nick tells Mrs. Rooth: "I should like to paint her portrait; she's made for that" (I, vii, 114), and his anxiety to dispel an awkwardness only partly accounts for the remark. Even for Nash, who finds her unintelligent, she is "magnificently stupid".<sup>1</sup> Peter responds to the same quality in her and it is his view that is most fully developed at her début: "She wore a black dress, which fell in straight folds; her face, under her mobile brows, was pale and regular, with a strange, strong, tragic beauty" (I, vii, 119). Moved by his sense of her as a vivid incarnation of the art she hopes to practise, he suggests to Nick that he should paint her as the Tragic Muse.

In this portrait, which aptly celebrates the emergence of Miriam's talent, Nick's unobtrusive claims to be an artist are first clearly vindicated. The picture has in fact a pivotal function in the novel. To begin with, by conflating Nick's art with an image of Miriam's it embodies the principle of aesthetic unity in the novel which is, in a sense, a facet of its theme. Nick helps to bring this

<sup>1</sup>The Tragic Muse (1890), I, iv, 54. My italics.

out in what he says to Biddy: "All art is one . . . . It's the same great, many-headed effort, and any ground that's gained by an individual, any spark that's struck in any province, is of use and of suggestion to all the others. We are all in the same boat" (I, i, 12). Nick of course is talking of the plastic arts, but in the total context of the novel his remark acquires wider reference. Biddy indeed suggests such artistic interfusion as she gazes at the portrait and experiences simultaneously "a sense of the beauty of Miriam, as well as a new comprehension of the talent of Nick" (II, xv, 211). The centrality of the portrait is sufficiently indicated by the fact that a detailed description of it is provided. There are four paintings by Nick specifically mentioned in the novel; of these, only this one, the Tragic Muse, is described as a painting; the others are left entirely to the imagination except that the pose in one — also of Miriam — is briefly suggested. In this portrait the plastic element predominates; the emphasis is all on form:

Miriam was represented in three-quarters, seated, almost down to her feet. She leaned forward, with one of her legs crossed over the other, her arms extended and foreshortened, her hands locked together round her knee. Her beautiful head was bent a little, broodingly, and her splendid face seemed to look down at life. She had a grand

appearance of being raised aloft, with a wide regard, from a height of intelligence, for the great field of the artist, all the figures and passions he may represent.  
(II, xv, 210)

In more than one respect the portrait recalls characteristics of Biddy's first impression of Miriam and also that momentary vision Peter has of her — "austere and terrible ... an incarnation" (I, vii, 119) at Madame Carré's tea. With her lofty detachment, her comprehensive view, she represents not only the Tragic Muse, but art itself, as James conceived it, in creative relation to life. The portrait generates meaning in fact from the moment it is first mooted, until Miriam, achieving sublimity in the role of Juliet, recalls Peter to reality by the very perfection of her representation. In this picture too all the disparate references to Miriam as a work of art find fullest possible meaning.<sup>1</sup> Significantly it is this portrait which is instrumental in thrusting Nick at last into artist life. Only after Julia has seen Nick and Miriam familiarly together looking at the half-finished canvas does she make up her mind to break with Nick, in the sudden clear apprehension that painting is his "innermost preference", his "secret passion" (II, xiii, 169),

<sup>1</sup>For examples see The Tragic Muse (1890), I, iv, 59; II, v, 68; II, xii, 154; III, ix, 84.

that he is essentially an artist. And it takes this act of Julia's to awaken Nick to the anomaly of his situation.

The image of art which Miriam projects is at once austere and compelling; in its ambivalence it recalls Rowland Mallet's developed view of genius as "priceless, inspired, divine", but also "capricious, sinister, cruel."<sup>1</sup> All three of James's "cases" experience art as an irresistible force; the aesthetic impulse in them is not easily denied. It is as they react to it in their various ways that James's view of art takes discernible shape in the novel. The process is, as he intended, essentially dramatic, as one attitude reinforces, modifies or demolishes another. Only in Miriam does the instinct find full play. Her ardour seems at first, if anything, rather starry-eyed. In one of her early talks with Peter she confesses that she "admired a great artist more than anything in the world; and in the presence of art, of great art, her heart beat so fast" (I, viii, 132). Even if her fright at Madame Carré's is feigned, as Peter suspects, there is no mistaking the admiration close to reverence she displays at her meeting with Mademoiselle Voisin in the Green Room of the Théâtre Français. At this point James,

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 44.

in spite of his assertion in the Preface: "I never 'go behind' Miriam,"<sup>1</sup> does just this so as to render more vividly her bedazzled response to the great actress. Impressed above all by Mademoiselle Voisin's manner — "it denoted such a training, so much taste, expressed such a ripe conception of urbanity" (II, vii, 98) — Miriam resolves to cultivate similar graces in her forthcoming career. So it is not surprising that when later we hear Miriam tell Nick: "I'm acting for you tonight" (II, xii, 154), we distinctly catch the echo of Mademoiselle Voisin's greeting to her: "I acted for you tonight — I did my best" (II, vii, 95).

As befits one who epitomises artistic power, Miriam's approach to her art is exemplary. She consistently displays that determination which James saw as an indispensable part of the artist's moral equipment. Showing like Nick little talent at first, she has more in common with Sam Singleton than Roderick Hudson whose gift from the beginning is unquestioned. The kind of tenacity she shows can all too readily be mistaken for obtuseness. She is not at all daunted by the discouragement of those seemingly well-

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 91.



qualified to judge and refuses to be intimidated by Madame Carré, who has privately pronounced her "loud and coarse" (I, vii, 125). In fact, as Peter comments on one occasion, Miriam took towards Madame Carré an attitude, a tone, of equal authority, "as if she considered that the celebrated artist had a sacred duty toward her" (I, x, 178). We can see that she regards Peter's tutelage, and later Dashwood's attendance, in much the same light. But the demands she makes on herself are as fierce as those she makes on others. She takes the knocking about Madame Carré gives her "as a bath, a baptism" (I, x, 187). She subscribes actively to the old actress's "inflamed sense that the art was everything and the individual nothing, save as he happened to serve it." Her spectacular improvement is to be attributed to strenuous work; she tells Madame Carré that she has "battered down the door" (II, v, 74). For Madame Carré, as for James, toil and drudgery are the inescapable lot of the true artist. Peter registers that the qualities which most interest Madame Carré "were not the gifts but the conquests — the effects the actor had worked hard for, had wrested by unwearying study". For her, Rachel, whom Peter had cited as a supreme case of "natural endowment" is rather an

example of a talent essentially formed by work, unremitting and ferocious work (I, vii, 124-125). In this insistence on the need for hard work and determination James's view of art in this novel echoes that put forward in Roderick Hudson, where Roderick's refusal to work when he does not feel like it is a cause of his disintegration. Enthusiastically, Miriam annexes all experience to her art. She has the capacity which Rowland had mistakenly attributed to Roderick for turning to aesthetic account all the impressions and sensations that come her way. If anything, success only confirms her in the practice: "... she was convinced more than ever that the artist ought to live, to get on with his business, gather ideas, lights from experience — ought to welcome any experience that would give him lights. But work, of course, was experience, and everything in one's life that was good was work .... if you only kept your eyes open nothing could happen to you that wouldn't be food for observation and grist to your mill" (II, xvii, 228-229). Some at least of which is implicit in what she says earlier to Peter: "I go in for the book of life" (I, viii, 151). Just what this yields for her is suggested by a stray idea she confides to him one day: "I've observed scenes, between men

and women — very quiet, terribly quiet, but tragic! Once I saw a woman do something that I'm going to do some day, when I'm great — if I can get the situation" (I, xi, 190). Total engagement like Miriam's, the appropriation of all experience to the purposes of art, was for James, as we have seen, a necessary condition of the artist's calling.

The nature of Miriam's art was an aspect of his subject that preoccupied James, the more so in that it had a vital bearing on the values finally established in the novel. He is concerned to explore the art of the stage, particularly as it compares with another less public art like painting in the necessities it imposes on the artist. In weighing the possibilities of a theatrical subject, James had seen its special interest as "a study of a certain particular nature d'actrice: a very curious sort of nature to reproduce." He envisages even at this stage "the strong nature, the personal quality, vanity, etc., of the girl: her artistic being, so vivid, yet so purely instinctive."<sup>1</sup> From the beginning he is aware that he is dealing with an artist of a special kind. In Roderick Hudson Rowland

<sup>1</sup>N, p. 63-64.

speculates whether egotism makes a failure in the arts and concludes at last that it does.<sup>1</sup> But egotism in an actress is a different matter altogether. Early in the novel James interposes to apply the epithet "egotistical" to Miriam, and adds in parenthesis "(as was necessary)" (I, viii, 149). Later he was to comment in the Preface on the "all-egotistical exhibition to which she is condemned."<sup>2</sup> He is prepared to recognise that egotism is an essential element of histrionic talent. Both Nash and Peter are aware that the artistic being in Miriam to which they respond so readily is indirectly a product of egotism. Nash puts it in this way: "Her greatest idea must always be to show herself; and fortunately she has a splendid self to show. I think of her absolutely as a real producer, but as a producer whose production is her own person" (III, iv, 36). It is of course a view characteristic of one who claims as an artist to work in life, but it would seem also to be James's, for he saw any distillation of a fine intelligence as automatically guaranteeing a "quantum of the impression of beauty".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> With the passing years James's attitude to egotism underwent a change. In the New York edition of Roderick Hudson he qualifies his original statement "egotism makes a failure in conduct" by interpolating in parenthesis after egotism "(in too big a dose)" which suggests that he had come to take a more comfortable and less pessimistic view of its effect on human nature. cf. Roderick Hudson (Boston, 1876), p.268, with Roderick Hudson (1907), I, p. 295.

<sup>2</sup> AN, p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> AN, p. 128.

When Peter is faced with Miriam's sudden access of talent he notes that she has found "the key to her box of treasures" (II, v, 71). The image is significant in that it is a variation of one which occurs in different forms four times in The Portrait of a Lady, always expressing a sense of the supreme value of any disclosure of the inward life, the essential personality.<sup>1</sup> Miriam's performance has just this value. Appropriately she seems to Peter in her new-found power "like the finished statue lifted from the ground to its pedestal" (II, v, 68). Later he views her art from a different, a disturbing, angle. He realises that "so far from there being any question of her having the histrionic nature, she simply had it in such perfection that she was always acting; that her existence was a series of parts assumed for the moment, each changed for the next, before the perpetual mirror of some curiosity or admiration or wonder — some spectatorship that she perceived or imagined in the people about her" (I, x, 178-179). Momentarily he is repelled by this view of her but already he shows signs of succumbing to Miriam's spell and soon he delights in just this infinite variety.

<sup>1</sup> The Portrait of a Lady (1881), I, 77-78; I, 242; I, 245; II, 68.

Because James provides only an oblique view of Miriam we are ourselves subjected to the effect of her incalculable incarnations, to the full impact of her self-production; she exists for us too only in the presence she offers to the world.

But Miriam exemplifies too what James saw as an essential paradox of the histrionic temperament: the co-existence of sensibility and intelligence with an exasperating vulgarity, a facet of the egotism which is so strangely part of her charm. The Notebook entry only hints at it, but Peter, in expressing his sense of it, speaks at least on this occasion for James. Ready to grant that Miriam is "no more egotistical than the histrionic conscience demanded", he goes on to wonder "if there were necessarily something vulgar in the histrionic conscience — something condemned to feel only the tricky personal question" (I, xii, 213). But such considerations are transcended for Peter in the perfection of Miriam's art; she projects then an image of beauty which is more than adequate justification. James makes it clear that Miriam herself is quite aware of the vulgarity which is a condition of her art. The day of her recitation in Peter's drawing-room we find

her assenting to his remark that she is a strange girl and then challenging him by way of a reply: "Doesn't one have to be, to want to go and exhibit one's self to a loathsome crowd, on a platform, with trumpets and a big drum, for money — to parade one's body and one's soul?" (I, viii, 153). This for Miriam is the price she pays to practise her art. She finds something grotesque in the whole process and later pours out her disgust to Nick in what amounts to an indictment of the theatre or at least of the conditions it imposes: she sees herself "pitchforked into the mêlée, and into the most improbable fame, upon the back of a solitary cheval de bataille, a poor broken-winded screw" (III, xvi, 216). She may, as Nash claims, thrive on this unattractive side of her life, but this is not to say that she does not appreciate it for what it is. In her crucial talk with Peter after her triumphant first night she asserts her own sense of the value of her art: "Surely it's vulgar to consider only the noise one's going to make; especially when one remembers how unintelligent nine-tenths of it will be. It isn't to my glories that I cling; it's simply to my idea, even if it's destined to sink me into obscurity" (III, xiv, 172). To realise her idea Miriam is prepared

to pay the price demanded. This is the test of her commitment.

The qualified response to art which James examines in his portrayal of Peter and Nick provides a rich and complex counter-point to Miriam's dedication. Superficially Peter's situation resembles Nick's: for both, the pursuit of art is an alternative to a career in public life. But the contribution they make to James's theme lies in the fundamental and conspicuous differences in their attitude towards art, an attitude which crystallises ultimately in their respective relations with Miriam. There is no question about Peter's deep interest in the theatre and its art. It is defined, authoritatively, by James as "one of those deep subjections that, in men of 'taste', the Comédie Française used in the old days to conspire for."<sup>1</sup> Early in the novel Nick teases his cousin about what he calls his "passion" for the theatre. In an uneasy attempt to justify his interest, Peter explains with some affectation why the theatre attracts him:

"I am fond of representation — the representation of life: I like it better, I think, than the real thing .... There is a fascination to me in the way

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 93.



the actor does it, when his talent (ah, he must have that!) has been highly trained (oh, it must be that!) The things he can do, in this effort at representation (with the dramatist to give him his lift) seem to me innumerable — he can carry it to a delicacy! — and I take great pleasure in observing them, in recognising them and comparing them" (I, v, 75).

James also observes that Peter's appreciation of the actor's art was "so systematic that it had an antiquarian side" (I, vii, 107). This appreciation comes out clearly in the discussions he has with Nash: we find him consistently defending the theatre against Nash's cynical assaults. It is for him the art that includes all the others (I, iv, 52). Miriam pronounces him "the best judge, the best critic, the best observer, the best believer" (III, xiv, 174) she has ever come across; and certainly his instinct with regard to her talent proves to be thoroughly sound.

All the appeal that art has for Peter is embodied consummately in Miriam. From the beginning his aesthetic sense is wholly engaged. He discerns in her at once a subject for painting as well as the dim promise of talent. She represents in fact "a kind of challenge — presented herself to him as a subject for inquiry, a problem, a piece of work,

an explorable country" (I, vii, 128). His coaching of her is something of a creative enterprise, a source of aesthetic satisfaction. It turns out to justify most satisfactorily what he had "always maintained in general, that the direction of a young person's studies for the stage may be an interest of as high an order as any other artistic consideration" (I, vii, 129). Occupied in this way, he re-enacts the experience of Pygmalion, unaware for a time at least of the peculiar risk he runs. Life takes on for him a new look. His experience has much in common with Rowland Mallet's as he participates vicariously in Roderick's aesthetic life: both share in the élan with which their protégés greet their new opportunities. Later Miriam becomes the source of sublimer satisfactions. Even before her talent reveals itself in Yolande, Peter has put in a claim for what ranks with him as the supreme value: "Be beautiful — be only that . . . . Be only what you can be so well — something that one may turn to for glimpse of perfection, to lift one out of all the vulgarities of the day" (II, v, 78). And it is not long before Miriam indeed figures for him as "a rare incarnation of beauty. Beauty was the principle of everything she did and of the way, unerringly, she did it — an exquisite harmony of line and

motion and attitude and tone". Her performance is thus "a supreme infallible felicity, a source of importance, a stamp of absolute value" (II, xvii, 236). It has power not merely to render life but to create it and reveal it so that the things of reality become only shadows — "the representation was the deep substance" (II, xvi, 215). In this respect at least Peter here betrays a latent aestheticism.<sup>1</sup> It is in this sense that he comes, as he thinks, to "see" Miriam, as he had never seen her before. Supremely as a work of art "in focus and in her frame", Miriam is for him an intimation of reality.

We watch Peter from the beginning trying vainly to assimilate this new and irresistible force into the carefully ordered pattern of his life. In his scale of values art occupies a strictly subordinate place; it is diminutive, even frivolous. Disconcerted to hear his love for the theatre referred to by Nick as a "passion", he will admit it only as a hobby — or a folly. He tells Miriam on one occasion that "the arts, the amusements, the aesthetic part of life are night-work" (I, xii, 204). He feels that he can easily keep his taste for the theatre firmly in its place; its ancillary status indeed is part of its charm. Until he

<sup>1</sup> See Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891), p. 118. The aesthete, Lord Henry Wotton, declares: "I love acting. It is so much more real than life."

discovers that he has fallen in love with Miriam he finds no difficulty in viewing his new preoccupation as a "distraction" in the French sense of the word. And even then he is still confident that his "general scheme of life" (II, xiv, 186) — as clearly conceived as Julia's — can happily subsume this potentially disturbing element. This scheme represents an absolute for Peter and Julia; it needs no justification. Both are ready to concede that it may require sacrifice. Julia indeed, as we have seen, demonstrates it by refusing Nick, and Peter acknowledges tacitly that "you had to pay to get on" (II, iv, 48). But — and this is where he differs significantly from Julia — he maintains that "at least you borrowed from others to do it. When you couldn't borrow you didn't get on: for what was the situation in life in which you met the whole requisition yourself?"

In his attempt to evade just such a situation, Peter is plunged into a process of self-deception which reveals clearly the shiftiness of his attitude to art. It is a process which James anatomises throughout by means of an explicatory irony, suave yet stringent in effect. Peter needs illusions; James makes this point explicitly. He

shows him lurching from one feat of rationalization to the next as he tries to maintain the image of himself as "a man of emotions controlled by training" (III, vi, 59). When he finds that he cannot go through with his plan for staying away from Miriam, James tells us that "he contented himself with a much cruder justification of this inconsequence than he would have thought adequate in advance. It consisted simply in the idea that to be identified with the first public steps of a young genius was a delightful experience. What was the harm of it, if the genius were real?" (II, xvii, 230-231). Later on when he has come to see Nick as a potential rival, he deludes himself into thinking that he made no claims on Miriam; indeed he congratulates himself on his exemplary behaviour in having "quenched a personal passion for the sake of the public service" (III, vi, 56). Subsequent events make it clear that his passion is by no means "quenched", but it is left to Miriam to make a true estimate of his conduct.

In her relations with Peter, particularly in their last encounter, Miriam is conspicuously the means of affirming those values which James set out in the novel to explore and

illuminate. This function of Miriam's is implied in what James says of her in the Preface. It is in asking everything of Peter, James declares, that Miriam has "most testified for art and invited him to testify".<sup>1</sup> He carefully juxtaposes the values which count most with Peter and Miriam, thus establishing their total incompatibility: "The power — and her having the sense of the power — to 'shine' in the world is his highest measure of her, the test applied by him to her beautiful human value; just as the manner in which she turns on him is the application of her own standard and touchstone".<sup>2</sup> In this respect the clash which takes place between the two of them at the house in Balaklava Place after the first night of the "cheval de bataille" is a definite one. The fact that Peter presents himself there with nothing new to offer, nothing fresh to say, might well suggest that the scene is supererogatory were it not that it gathers up the issues between them and musters them in dynamic opposition. With her remarkable insight, Miriam has already diagnosed Peter's condition for Nick's benefit. She tells him: "Mr. Sherringham, poor man, must be very uncomfortable, for

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> AN, p. 94.

one side of him is perpetually fighting against the other side. He's trying to serve God and Mammon, and I don't know how God will come off .... (He) has tremendous ambitions .... He wants to enjoy every comfort and to save every appearance, and all without making a sacrifice" (III, xii, 141). She projects the paradox of his demand with sardonic humour: "I've just shown that I'm a perfection of perfections: therefore it's just the moment to renounce, as you gracefully say?" (III, xiv, 164) The absurdity is sharpened by her substitution of "a" for "the" in Peter's extravagant phrase. The scene exposes blatantly the casuistry Peter uses as he tries to secure Miriam. He denies unhesitatingly the validity of his aesthetic experience, revealing at last just where his allegiance lies: "...I'll give you a larger life than the largest you can get in any other way. The stage is great, no doubt, but the world is greater. It's a bigger theatre than any of those places in the Strand. We'll go in for realities instead of fables...." (III, xiv, 165). In condemning his humbug Miriam puts into perspective that exalted vision of her Peter had earlier experienced as a kind of epiphany. Miriam's talent is for him the quintessence

of her being and it is this he wants to make his own. But she realises that her "magnificence" belongs exclusively to the theatre; off the stage she would lose all her advantages. Her art, her talent, she sees, has distorted his vision of things. When with conscious irony she suggests as a solution that Peter should stay on her stage and come off his own her language seems to call in question the reality of all he stands for. His reaction confirms the cumulative impression we have that he is not just reluctant to meet the demands of art but incapable of doing so. Miriam is quick to detect that the hostility he displays is assumed to disguise this weakness.

By his failure to testify, to supply the proof or sacrifice asked of him, Peter is relegated tacitly by James to the ranks of those for whom the concerns of art are not serious things but "base make-believes and trivialities — which is what in fact the homage of society to art always turns out so soon as art presumes not to be vulgar and futile". James makes his point sardonically: "It is immensely the fashion and immensely edifying to listen to, this homage, while it confines its attention to vanities and frauds; but it knows only terror, feels only horror, the moment that, instead of making all the concessions, art



proceeds to ask for a few."<sup>1</sup> "Terror" and "horror" are perhaps terms too strong to denote Peter's revulsion in the face of the claims made on him by art, but there can be no doubt that he is included in this indictment. His defection is presented throughout the novel not as inevitable exactly but certainly as characteristic in one who belongs by birth and upbringing to the "Barbarian" tradition; we are not allowed to forget James's comment that "it would have been impossible to be ... more of one's class and one's country" than Peter Sherringham. His rejection of art as a way of life is ultimately as much a product of his heritage as those beneficent influences — "part of the copious, light, unembarrassing baggage with which ... (he) began life" (I, v, 82) — that helped him to his appointment in the diplomatic service. James observes that Peter is filled with "the genuine British mistrust" of art, called also significantly "the bothersome principle" and goes on to explain that "several acquired perceptions had struck a deep root in him, but there was an immemorial compact formation which lay deeper still" (III, xiv, 180). The result is the bewildering ambivalence

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 95.

which constantly disconcerts him. He can delight unaffectedly in the superb skill shown by Madame Carré in her coaching of Miriam (I, x, 185). He has, as we have seen, an intuitive grasp of the aesthetic process, a deep appreciation of the mental poise and clarity required by any artistic performance whatever the medium, of "the application, in other words, clear and calculated, crystal-firm as it were, of the idea conceived in the glow of experience" (II, v, 71). Nevertheless he winces morally at the practical consequences of the process, at what he sees as the cruelty involved, exemplified not only by Madame Carré but also by the drama reviews of certain Paris newspapers. He is aware of the implications of his attitude, as James scrupulously shows: according to his lights criticism can only be acceptable so long as it is politely reticent, and hence inadequate. He does not try to resolve his dilemma; typically he contents himself with a moral platitude in lieu of a solution.

This distaste of Peter's for the practical processes of art which is reflected consistently throughout the novel is attributed explicitly by James to his "English sense," that sense "which can never really reconcile itself to the question

of execution and has extraneous sentiments to placate with compromises and superficialities, frivolities that have often a pleasant moral fragrance" (I, x, 185). The predilection for "a pleasant moral fragrance" was for James, as we have seen, the hallmark of the English attitude to art. In Peter's view, any application of the artist's idea necessarily involves a vulgarisation. This is yet another respect in which he differs radically from Miriam who accepts vulgarity as a condition of her art, the price she inevitably incurs. Discomfited by what appears gross in life, Peter relies on illusions to make reality palatable, and art is for him the greatest of all the sources of illusion: "It transported him from the vulgar hour and the ugly fact; drew him to something which had no reason but its sweetness, no name nor place save as the pure, the distant, the antique" (II, xvii, 237). Only at the last when he realises that he has rejected art irrevocably is illusion dissipated in what seems to be an experience of catharsis: "The great trouble of his infatuation subsided, leaving behind it something tolerably deep and pure" (III, xix, 255)

In Nick, as in Miriam, James gives us a compelling example of the truly dedicated artist, though this is by no means

apparent at first. His "art appetite" is easily as strong as Miriam's, perhaps the more so for having to be suppressed. Torn between his desire to paint and his overwhelming sense of public and family duty, he sees himself as "a freak of nature and a sport of the mocking gods" (I, ix, 171), and art, distinctly, as a predator. This is brought out even more clearly in the New York edition where James has expanded the admission Nick makes to Nash: "... it's no use — I'm stricken. It tears me to pieces, as I may say" (I, ix, 172). The revised version reads: "... it's no use — I'm stricken. C'est Vénus toute entière a sa proie attachée — putting Venus for 'art'. It tears me to pieces as I may say."<sup>1</sup>

Nick cannot see that art can have any place in his life, consecrated as it is to hereditary obligations. By detailed presentation of the moral pressures which drive him to stand as Liberal member of Parliament for Harsh, James contrives to suggest the price Nick pays when later he abandons public life for art. Only by going in for politics can he hope to marry Julia and on this marriage depends not only Mr. Carteret's settlement of £60,000, but, even more important, the social and financial comfort of his family. That this last

<sup>1</sup> The Tragic Muse (1909) I, ix, 182.

consideration weighs heavily with Nick is shown in the theatrical little scene Lady Agnes stages in the drawing-room at Harsh on the afternoon of the election. Poised gracefully with a white rose in her hand, the shade of Sir Nicholas apparently in solicitous attendance, she urges Nick to propose immediately to Julia. Just as the first scene in the novel acquired ironic resonance by rendering opposition to art in aesthetic form, so in this scene a similar effect is achieved by placing Lady Agnes in a setting expressive of aesthetic discrimination, the drawing-room George Dallow had made: "The room, rich and simple, was a place of perfection as well as of splendour in delicate tints, with precious specimens of French furniture of the last century ranged against walls of pale brocade and here and there a small, almost priceless picture" (I, xiii, 223). Against this background her figure stands out starkly. Pictorially, she provides for Nick portentous if ambiguous comment: "her tall, upright black figure seemed in possession of the fair vastness like an exclamation point at the bottom of a blank page" (I, xiii, 223). Her platitudes have the power to move Nick but only as they are translated into the terms of the

benefits accruing to the family by means of his marriage, benefits envisaged by Lady Agnes, ironically enough, "as a shining picture" (I, xiii, 235).

In the way Nick responds to her vision of things we see an essential aspect of his nature, of his artistic sensibility, which contributes significantly to his difficulty: "What was filial in him, all the piety that he owed, especially to the revived spirit of his father, more than ever present on a day of such public pledges, was capable from one moment to the other of trembling into sympathetic response" (I, xiii, 236). It amounts in effect to a virtual annihilation, if only temporary, of his own identity. James defines it in this way: "He had the gift, so embarrassing when it is a question of consistent action, of seeing in an imaginative, interesting light anything that illustrated forcibly the life of another: such things effected a union with something in his life, and the recognition of them was ready to become a form of enthusiasm in which there was no consciousness of sacrifice — none scarcely of merit" (I, xiii, 236). For James, we notice, it is a gift which exacts, as he suggests elsewhere, a severe penalty (II, xiii, 173). It would seem to be a form of that empathy that Keats saw as a

<sup>1</sup> Lord Houghton, Life and Letters of John Keats (World's Classics, 1931), p. 160.

characteristic faculty of the "cameleon poet".<sup>1</sup> The effect here is to transmute Nick's view of the future: "Julia's wide kingdom opened out around him, making the future almost a dazzle of happy power. His mother and sisters floated in the rosy element with beaming faces, in transfigured safety" (I, xiii, 236). James allows Nick's impression to go unremarked, but there is no burking the ludicrous in it which is in itself sufficient comment. The spectacle of his family all, even Lady Agnes, with "beaming" faces, floating in what is significantly a rose-coloured element, provides a weird and surely suspect guarantee of an idyllic future.

What we see here is the artist's capacity in Nick, deprived of the means of practical expression, imposing new and beguiling form on the mode of life to which he is now committed. Much the same process can be seen at work later on in Strether; though their circumstances are different both tailor experience to their emotional need. Captivated by his illusory vision, Nick augments his pleasure by the power he has to transform even his immediate surroundings. Julia's home takes on a new and entrancing beauty as "a museum of exquisite rewards" (I, xiii, 234). For the time

<sup>1</sup> Lord Houghton, Life and Letters of John Keats (World's Classics, 1951), p. 160.

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being he finds a kind of corroboration through this complex capacity of his. Politics, while he is busy securing his seat, become identified with Julia Dallow: "She had made the business infinitely prettier than it would have been without her, added music and flowers and ices, a charm, and converted it into a social game that had a strain of the heroic" (I, xiv, 247). Retrospectively, events shape themselves for him, as so often, into a picture which has Julia and her ponies for its subject. His aesthetic sensibility continues to provide consistent reinforcement as well as compensation. From the terrace at Harsh he can enjoy the prospect in more senses than one:

The summer day was splendid and the world, as he looked at it from the terrace, offered no more worrying ambiguity than a vault of airy blue arching over a lap of solid green. The wide, still trees in the park appeared to be waiting for some daily inspection, and the rich fields, with their official frill of hedges, to rejoice in the light which approved them as named and numbered acres. (I, xiv, 242).

The scene before him, the formally ordered landscape, figures quaintly for him as a bureaucratic idyll, and he assimilates it as a reassurance and a confirmation. His experience compares interestingly with the Prince's in The Golden Bowl. Amerigo relishes similarly from the terrace at Matcham the



boundless view spread out before him in the April sunlight, rejoicing in his "extraordinarily unchallenged, his absolutely appointed and enhanced possession of it."<sup>1</sup> But his appreciation is tempered, unlike Nick's, by an acute awareness of a disparity between the "given appearance" and the "taken meaning".<sup>2</sup> James points out that Nick's view of the prospect before him is something of a mirage: "There were a couple of peacocks on the terrace, and his eye was caught by the gleam of the swans on a distant lake, where there was also a little temple on an island; and these objects fell in with his humour, which at another time might have been ruffled by them as representing the Philistine in ornament" (I, xiv, 243) Nick is not always so uncritical. On his subsequent visit to Mr. Carteret he responds readily to yet another appeal. A stroll about the abbey of Beauclere as the evening mellows both sound and light communicates "the sense of England — a sort of apprehended revelation of his country. The dim annals of the place appeared to be in the air ... and these things were connected with an emotion that arose from the green country, the rich land so infinitely lived in, and laid on him a hand that was too ghostly to press and yet somehow too urgent to be light."

<sup>1</sup> The Golden Bowl (1905), p. 249.

<sup>2</sup> The Golden Bowl (1905), p. 252.

Overwhelmingly, it is an appeal to his inherited sense of duty which is also something of a consecration: "If he had a love for this particular scene of life, might it not have a love for him and expect something of him?" (II, ii, 27).

But Nick cannot be sustained indefinitely by illusory experience however seductive. In this he differs markedly from Peter for whom illusions are constantly necessary. It is more characteristic of Nick to interpose what is only a temporary illusion. He soon finds that the renunciation of art, even for selfless motives, carries a penalty; it engenders a kind of moral corruption. He expresses his sense of it to Julia: "I've imperilled my immortal soul, or at least I've bemuddled my intelligence, by all the things I don't care for that I've tried to do, and all the things I detest that I've tried to be, and all the things I never can be that I've tried to look as if I were — all the appearances and imitations, the pretensions and hypocrisies in which I've steeped myself to the eyes; and at the end of it ... my reward is simply to learn that I'm still not half humbug enough!"<sup>1</sup> (II, viii, 112). He admits to ~~Nash~~ that the life he leads is spurious but maintains that he is capable of it to please others. It takes Julia's rejection of him and Nash's insis-

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 92.

-tence on his talent finally to precipitate him into artist-life. Biddy makes this clear when she explains Nick's action to Peter: "By keeping his seat he hasn't kept Julia, and she was the thing he cared most for, in public life. When he has got out of the whole thing his attitude, as he says, will be at least clear" (II, xv, 205).

Curiously enough, in the Preface James presents a much less complex view of Nick's action. He depicts him as, like Miriam and unlike Peter, putting art first and asserts:

Nick can't on the whole see — for I have represented him as in his day quite sufficiently troubled and anxious — why he should condemn to ugly feebleness his most prized faculty (most prized, at least, by himself) even in order to keep his seat in Parliament, to inherit Mr. Carteret's blessing and money, to gratify his mother and carry out the mission of his father, to marry Julia Dallow in fine, a beautiful imperative woman with a great many thousands a year.<sup>1</sup>

In actual fact Nick is set on pursuing a career in politics, as we have seen, with the explicit intention of pleasing those to whom he feels he owes a duty. And he recognises with a lucidity typical of him that as a member for Harsh he has turned his back on serious work in art; "pottering was now all he could aspire to" (II, ix, 120). Art necessarily becomes for him then a kind of secret dissipation. Since

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 92.

James is concerned primarily in the Preface with the way in which his three cases promote his theme, he would tend to stress the positive element in Nick's attitude to art to the exclusion of the equivocal.

By abandoning his political career with all its attendant advantages, Nick pledges himself uncompromisingly to art; but the reality of his commitment is revealed most surely in the way he applies himself to his art, submits himself to the difficult terms on which it is enjoyed. Just as Miriam envisages clear-sightedly the objectionable conditions she must endure as an actress, so Nick contemplates without illusion what his new responsibility will mean, for he has no doubt that he has taken one on. He realises that an Englishman who gives up public life for art cannot claim even the consolation of seeing his sacrifice in an heroic light. He warns Biddy indeed that "his actual job was not a crusade, with bugles and banners, but a gray, sedentary grind, whose charm was all at the core" (III, iii, 27). Although for the first few weeks he is sustained by a sense of exhilaration, by what had seemed in prospect "the strong, sane joys of the artistic life" (II, x, 131), disenchantment inevitably sets in. James shows plainly what this means in terms of the

artist's experience. As his positives lose their brilliance in the harsh light of actuality, Nick's faith in his art is undermined. His two portraits of Miriam, viewed during this dark night of the soul, provoke in him only dismay and disgust. In such a mood even the prospect of exhibiting a picture is tainted with a morbid fear of a cheap and specious success.

From the outset Nick's attitude to his talent is notably diffident. He has little of that blazing confidence which fires Miriam, even before she has found her voice. Nor does his talent win the kind of recognition which Miriam's genius almost immediately attracts. Bidy, it is true, calls his talent "great" and "real", but her pronouncements are bound to have doubtful value. For more authoritative comment we have to wait for Nash's dictum: "I like it, your talent; I measure it, I appreciate it, I insist upon it" (II, ix, 129). James makes it clear that Nick has consistently shied away from any estimation of his ability; he would rather remain ignorant. Miriam, by contrast, feels no such qualms where hers is concerned. She tells Peter: "If there's any good to be got from trying, from showing one's self, how can it But these circumstances also have their price. It is Miriam,

come unless one hears the simple truth, the truth that turns one inside out? It's all for that — to know what one is, if one's a stick!" (I, viii, 149) But then Miriam is free of the hereditary obligations which encumber Nick; she can afford to be objective. Peter by no means shares Nash's view of Nick's achievement; impressed though he is with Nick's portrait of the Tragic Muse, he dismisses his cousin's earlier work as generally unpromising. But we need to remember that at this stage Peter's judgement, in spite of his developed powers of appreciation, is no longer unimpeachable when it comes to Nick.

This equivocal response to Nick's talent, the absence of acclaim, indeed his own diffidence, intensified by disillusion, is an integral aspect of James's theme. It exemplifies dramatically the bleak conditions in which artists must be prepared to work, but it does more than this: it points an important distinction between the art of the theatre and those essentially private in pursuit. Miriam deplures, as we know, the violent indiscriminating applause which is her lot and envies Nick his opportunity for unobtrusive work, what he calls "the principle of quiet growth" (III, xv, 191). But these circumstances also have their price. It is Miriam,

in fact, who, already radiating something of her future glory, awakens in Nick a vivid sense of the great differences that exist in the life of art. He contemplates by contrast the small room, "wofully cold and gray and mean" (III, xvi, 209), where his struggle with art is to be carried on. The whole speaks eloquently to him of:

... the duller conditions, the longer patiences, the less immediate and less personal joys. His late beginning was there, and his wasted youth, the mistakes that would still bring forth children after their image, the sedentary solitude, the clumsy obscurity, the poor explanations, the foolishness that he foresaw in having to ask people to wait, and wait longer, and wait again, for a fruition which, to their sense at least, would be an anti-climax. (III,xvi,209)

Bewilderment, doubt, even disillusion, are for James part of the price the artist pays to follow his craft. And he must be prepared to accommodate them to his creative experience. Dencombe expresses his sense of the artist's plight most memorably at the end of The Middle Years: "We work in the dark — we do what we can — ~~we~~ give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task."<sup>1</sup> With a pertinacity that really surpasses Miriam's

<sup>1</sup> Terminations (1895), p. 197.

Nick grimly pursues his course though he sees art only as an ignis fatuus. He tells himself that "the time far beyond others to do one's work was when it didn't seem worth doing . . . . To do the most when there would be the least to be got by it was to be most in the true spirit of production" (III, x, 99). In accordance with this policy he refuses to make things easier for himself. He resists the impulse to leave London in the first weeks after resigning his seat because he has a horror of shirking the consciousness of what he has taken on. In his dogged resolve to grapple with the difficulties of his new situation he offers a revealing contrast to Roderick Hudson whose genius fails to survive the challenge of circumstance. It is in this sense that Nick is, as James declares in the Preface: "busy with testing himself and feeling his reality".<sup>1</sup> In doing so he vindicates himself as an artist.

It is in his relations with Miriam that Nick's attitude to art is finally evaluated, just as Peter's is. She focusses sharply for us the validity of his commitment. When he begins to paint her, ten months after their first meeting, he finds her as fascinating as Peter does and anxiously registers his unwillingness to fall in love with

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 93.



her. But with Nick artistic detachment triumphantly prevails: throughout their relationship Miriam remains solely a pictorial subject. On her first appearance in his studio she constitutes a kind of afflatus, "drawing a hundred formative instincts out of their troubled sleep" (II, xi, 142). Later we find him speculating at some length on the different ways in which he responds to Miriam and to Julia: "He could paint Miriam, day after day, without any agitating blur of vision; in fact the more he saw of her the clearer grew the atmosphere through which she blazed, the more her richness became one with that of the flowering picture" (III, xv,<sup>197-</sup>198). She exists for him only aesthetically. By contrast, Julia's presence generates a personal charm which dwelt "in the very facts of her person — it was something that she happened physically to be; yet ... its envelope of associations, of memories and recurrences, had no great density" (III, xv, 197). For this reason an attempt to paint her seems to him an invitation to failure. As it happens, he proves to be wrong and succeeds later, most significantly in the context, in painting a "noble portrait" (III, xix, 257) of her. This is an achievement I shall need to consider in the next chapter.

Miriam is wistfully conscious of the essential impersonality of Nick's interest in her. She offers her view of it

as a reassurance of a kind to Peter: "... he notices me because that's his business; but he's away up in the clouds — a thousand miles over my head. He has got something 'on', as they say; he's in love with an idea .... He's quite exalté; living on nectar and ambrosia — what he has to spare for us poor crawling things on earth is only a few crumbs" (III, ix, 87). Such detachment, in James's view, testifies to Nick's integrity as an artist. Miriam's candid words to him are in this respect definitive: "You're the real thing and the rare bird. I haven't lived with you this way without seeing that: you're the sincere artist so much more than I" (III, xvi, 212). James indeed records in the Preface that he saw Miriam's relation to Nick as "a superior interest",<sup>1</sup> and he ponders sympathetically the implications of her attitude to him, the sacrifices she would readily make for his sake.<sup>2</sup> He points out that they share the same values: Miriam is attracted to Nick just because "like herself and unlike Peter, he puts 'art' first; but the most he thus does for her in the event is to let her see how she may enjoy, in intimacy the rigour it has taught him and which he cultivates at her expense."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> Miriam's readiness to sacrifice for Nick her artistic identity, her willingness to serve his art at the expense of her own, is in fact only dimly adumbrated in the novel. See, for example, III, v, 52. It is, perhaps, a disadvantage of James's choice of "the indirect vision" (II, xi, 143).

<sup>3</sup> AN, p. 95.

Such "rigour", however it shows itself, is for James a vital element in the artist's nature, an inexorable condition of creativity. He implies as much in the Preface when he points out that art's only honours are "those of contraction, concentration and a seemingly deplorable indifference to everything but itself."<sup>1</sup> In Miriam, and especially in Nick, James provides us with a vivid demonstration of this truth.

The single-mindedness shown by Nick in his relations with Miriam, and by Miriam in her dismissal of Peter, is just a particular instance of artistic rigour, a rigour prescribed by the fact that each is "in love with an idea" (III, ix, 87). In this context the idea represents nothing less than the artist's primary vision and the driving impulse he has to realise it as perfectly as he can: the ultimate source in fact of his creative power. For Miriam and Nick it is their raison d'être. Nick is aware of it in his bare studio as "the most collective dim presence" — "the sense that it was to the thing in itself he was attached" (III, xvi, 209). It is significant that at the height of her final clash with Peter Miriam relies on a similar image of adherence when she declares: "It isn't to my glories that I cling; it's simply

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 83.

to my idea, even if it's destined to sink me into obscurity" (III, xiv, 172). Nick is as responsive to this trait in Miriam as she is quick to detect it in him. At the play Nick is aware that "she went through it all for herself, for the idea that possessed her and that she rendered with extraordinary breadth" (III, xiii, 149). It is total allegiance to his idea which ultimately distinguishes the artist, which unites Nick and Miriam in a common if implicit understanding. To it, Peter's eyes are firmly closed and so he views artistic commitment with a kind of baffled incomprehension. The rigour imposed on the artist has, however, its compensation; essentially the same for Miriam and Nick as for the dying Dencombe: "It is glory -- to have been tested, to have had our little quality and cast our little spell. The thing is to have made somebody care."<sup>1</sup> Miriam is no less explicit; she explains for Peter's benefit that "the great thing, the element that makes up for everything" is "the way we simply stir people's souls" (III, xiv, 178). In the Jamesian ethic fullness of life is determined directly by the ability to feel, and art is an important means by which this capacity may be cultivated.

<sup>1</sup> "The Middle Years", Terminations (1895), p. 197.

It is impossible to deal adequately with James's view of art in The Tragic Muse without considering his portrayal of Gabriel Nash. Even a cursory reading of some of the critical comment on the novel makes it clear that he is to be seen as a crucial figure. It would be true to say in fact that an understanding of his role conditions our final impression of the novel. A brief survey is enough to show the varying interpretations provoked by Nash's character. Quentin Anderson in The American Henry James (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1957),<sup>1</sup> identifies Nash with Henry James Senior: "Gabriel Nash is b

CHAPTER THREE

James's 'tone' or style, and an implied criticism of his personal mode of advocating his system" (p. 101). For him, The Tragic Muse is "this most didactic of James's novels", which "affords the most direct presentation of the doctrine of the elder James" (pp. 348-349). Leon Edel, in his Introduction to The Complete Plays of Henry James (1949), refers to Nash as "the character in the novel who speaks for — and even resembles physically — the novelist himself", and to The Tragic Muse accordingly as James's "long novel of the stage ... which he completed just before beginning his play-writing seeking to purge himself in it of all his

<sup>1</sup> Quentin Anderson notes (p. 107) that certain details about Nash seem to be drawn from the novelist's association with Herbert Pratt in Venice in 1881, an impressionistic account of which appears in The Watchdog (p. 31) in a retrospective entry for November 25th, 1881.

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conflicts over the dramatic art" (p. 40). In "James's The Tragic Muse - Ave atque Vale", PMLA, LXXIII (1958),<sup>1</sup> Lyall H. Powers explains how he looked in The Tragic Muse for a final expression of James's ideas on art or something of an apologia for his life as a novelist, as well as an indication, since James was on the brink of his dramatic adventure, of his real attitude to this new phase of his career as an artist. In this context Nash becomes an obvious manifestation of "the eternal Being of Art", his "symbol of the spirit of art" (p. 199) whose cult, celebrated by Nick, is a reassurance to James that an ultimate inspiration would see him through (p. 202).

But there are of course interpretations which do not give the novel this strong autobiographical slant. Edwin T. Bowden in The Themes of Henry James (New Haven, 1956) sees the novel as "a myth, an allegory of the struggle of the higher values of man against his pragmatic society" (p. 72). And Nash seems to him "in so many ways a caricature of the fin de siècle esthete, whose life — or at least whose talk — is devoted only to the appreciation of the beautiful" (pp. 69-70). This view of Nash is endorsed by W.W. Robson in "Henry James's The Tragic Muse", Mandrake II (Autumn and Winter 1954-55). He sees him as "a representative of the Oscar Wilde phase of the Aesthetic movement", providing "opportunities for critical

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted in Henry James: Modern Judgements, ed. Tony Tanner (1968), p. 194.

comedy" (pp. 282-283). The novel is thus "a comedy of manners and a piece of social history" (p. 281). In his essay, "Henry James's Portrait of the Artist", Partisan Review II (1944),<sup>1</sup> F.O. Matthiessen had referred to James's portrayal of "the brilliant futility of the aesthete in the eerie figure of Gabriel Nash". Twenty years later, in a discussion of the "super-subtle fry", D.W. Jefferson in Henry James and the Modern Reader (1964) expresses perplexity at James's portrait of Gabriel Nash: "Perhaps his most notable aberration in character portrayal is Gabriel Nash, the whimsical philosopher of The Tragic Muse" (p. 122). He sees him as endowed with some of the traits of the "coxcombical, aesthetic American expatriate" (P. 123).

Opinion seems to oscillate between a view of the novel as some form of social comedy and as an allegory either of James's oppressive personal problems or of his inveterate ideas. But there is still wider divergence in the conception of Nash's role: he is seen as representing variously James himself, his father, an aesthete of some kind and the quintessence of Art itself. It is difficult to envisage any real rapprochement among these views. However they do illustrate vividly the problems posed by Nash's role in the novel

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted in Stories of Writers and Artists, ed. F.O. Matthiessen (New York, /1944/), p. 2.



and suggest something of the iridescent quality of his personality.

So when Nick gives vent to the exasperated perplexity Nash produces in him he speaks not just for himself and perhaps for Peter, but for the reader too. His outburst is really a challenge: "... do you mind mentioning to me whether you are the greatest humbug and charlatan on earth, or a genuine intelligence, one that has sifted things for itself?" (I, ix, 160) The other characters, except for Miriam who insists on treating him with an amused, even indulgent scepticism, regard him with a contempt they can scarcely be bothered to hide. Whatever our opinion of Nash and his aesthetic ideas, we must acknowledge that he represents an effective counterpoise to the world's view of things, and particularly to that antagonism felt for art by Lady Agnes and her circle. He is in fact a powerful element in the polarity on which the novel is founded. By way of an answer to Nick's question he insists on his sincerity and claims to be utterly candid. The fact remains though that throughout the novel he is distinguished by an inscrutability which James's mode of presentation is calculated to enhance. As with Miriam, but with totally different effect, James can claim "an absolutely objective"<sup>1</sup> Gabriel Nash.

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 89.

He never goes behind Nash and abstains from anything but the rarest scraps of information and comment. Nash exists for us only as a composite projection of other people's experience of him. Strangely enough too, in spite of the fact that he figures so controversially in the novel, he is not so much as mentioned in the Preface, though James is much concerned there with various aspects of his picture of artist-life. To all intents and purposes Nash exists in a vacuum, as Nick makes quite plain (III, xvii, 221). He has no home or permanent address of any kind, no family ties or duties and no apparent means of subsistence for the itinerant life he leads. On these grounds alone D.W. Jefferson questions his validity as a character:

If we consider him as a serious figure, how can we not ask certain awkward questions about him? For example, has he no sexual life, no commitments, no obligations? One does not need to be a Marxist to ask where the money comes from for a life so pure of all productiveness and social purpose. How can one avoid the feeling that he is a very deficient human being, and that the imperturbable ease is a disguise?<sup>1</sup>

All the same we do well to remember that he is friendly enough with Madame Carré to ask her as a favour to give an opinion of Miriam's talent. And it can only be friendship again — or good nature — that induces him to lend thirty

<sup>1</sup> In Henry James and the Modern Reader, pp. 123-124.

pounds to Mrs. Rooth (I, xi, 196-197). To describe — or dismiss — him as an aesthete is no solution to the difficulties he poses since even an aesthete is subject to the ordinary conditions of life.

The truth is that Nash does seem to exist in a mode different from the other people in the novel, all of whom are under various kinds of constraint. This might seem to offer some support to the view of him as a "manifestation of the eternal Being of Art", having apparitional reality only. He certainly impresses Nick with a sense of mystery almost supernatural, "the sense of the transient and occasional, the likeness to vapour or murmuring wind or shifting light" (III, xvii, 221). On his first appearance he might be said to have actually materialised in answer to Nick's unspoken need. His departure from the scene is as unobtrusive and inconsequent as his first appearance is phantasmal. This impression is strengthened by his sometimes disconcerting clairvoyance. Committed to canvas, even his image seems perceptibly to fade. However, to see Nash primarily as a manifestation of the spirit of art involves a contradiction since art exists essentially in the artefact, whatever the media. John Dewey defines art as "a quality of doing

*Art as Experience* (1934), p. 134.

and of what is done."<sup>1</sup> And to "doing" Nash is, as he claims himself, constitutionally opposed.

His presence in the novel, is limited virtually to his talk: he exists in effect as an embodied voice. We see him first through Biddy's — British — eyes in what is a characteristic pose, "engaged in imparting" to Mrs. Rooth and Miriam " ... his ideas ...." Significantly it is his speech which makes a distinctive impression on Biddy: " ... the words proceeding from his mouth reached her ear and imposed themselves as a rare variety of English .... He seemed to draw rich effects and wandering airs from it — to modulate and manipulate it as he would have done a musical instrument" (I, ii, 20-21). Later Nash himself admits, as he urges Nick to try his talent, that it is his *métier* to speak frankly to people. He goes on: "I say the things that other people don't, that they can't, that they won't" (II, ix, 128). And Nick in reply acknowledges Nash's mastery of his instrument. His talk — and through it his personality — permeates the novel. Even when he is absent from the scene he is often promptly brought to mind by an allusion made by some other character.

<sup>1</sup> Art as Experience (1934), p. 214.

<sup>2</sup> AM, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> H, p. 92.

At the height of his final debate with Miriam Peter  
 accuses her, with some justice, of talking like Nash.  
 We might well ask the question which James raises about  
 Henrietta Stackpole in the Preface to The Portrait of a  
 Lady. Why has he allowed Nash "so officiously, so strangely,  
 so almost inexplicably, to pervade"?<sup>1</sup> He cites Henrietta  
 as a case in point of his tendency to overtreat. And he  
 goes on to explain: "There was the danger of the noted  
 'thinness' — which was to be averted tooth and nail, by  
 cultivation of the lively . . . . Henrietta must have been  
 at that time a part of my wonderful notion of the lively."<sup>2</sup>  
 The same fear, that the story might be "too thin", crops  
 up in James's Notebook entry for 2nd February 1889 while  
 he was still writing The Tragic Muse.<sup>3</sup> Certainly the comedy  
 that glances through the novel is partly derived from Nash.  
 His debonair manner conceals an acute eye and a capacity  
 for ironic exposure, expressed neatly within the urbanities  
 of social intercourse, as in this exchange between Grace  
 and Nash at Peter's tea party:

"You were talking with my cousin, Mrs. Dallow."

"To her rather than with her," Nash smiled.

"Ah, she's very charming," said Grace.

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> AN, p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> N, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> AN, p. 324.

<sup>3</sup> AN, p. 322.

"She's very beautiful," Nash rejoined.  
 "And very clever," Miss Dormer continued.  
 "Very, very intelligent." His conversation  
 with the young lady went little further than  
 this . . . . (I, viii, 145)

In this fragment both Julia and Grace are nicely characterised. Nash can be seen in fact as a kind of ficelle, having much the same function as characters like Henrietta Stackpole and Maria Gostrey. Although he figures conspicuously in the artistic life of the novel he does not constitute a main facet of the subject; James admits to three cases only. But the ficelle by definition belongs less "to the subject directly" than "intimately to the treatment".<sup>1</sup> Nash serves the form more obviously than the essence. All the same he has the distinction, like Maria Gostrey, of achieving "something of the dignity of a prime idea"<sup>2</sup> in the course of his role. For James the ficelle has at least a dual function. He is, pre-eminently, the "reader's friend" — "an enrolled, a direct, aid to lucidity",<sup>3</sup> as he calls Maria. But he also enables the novelist to treat scenically matter which might otherwise prove ponderous or "lumpish". Nash in fact serves both these ends. Viewed in this way his status in the novel seems less anomalous. It has to be admitted, though, that he operates with something

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> AN, p. 324.

<sup>3</sup> AN, p. 322.

of catalytic force in the lives of Nick and Miriam. But it takes more than Nash's encouragement to propel Nick out of politics into art, more even than the satisfaction of painting — under his friend's auspices — the portrait of the Tragic Muse. It can of course be claimed that Nash is responsible for bringing Miriam to Madame Carré and thus in a way inaugurating her theatrical career. But his part in this is purely formal and mechanical: he emphatically disowns Miriam herself and the abhorrent intention of making her an actress.

It is chiefly Nash who enables James to develop in dramatic form an important aspect of his theme. Within the complex of relations posited for them, Miriam, Nick and Peter together enact James's idea of the nature of art, the conditions it imposes, the opposition it provokes; they prove indeed "thoroughly symbolic ... functional, for illustration of the idea."<sup>1</sup> But James has a further preoccupation, none the less important for not getting explicit attention in the Preface. He does no more than refer to it in passing, but with pungent irony that is in itself revealing: "Art indeed has in our day taken on so many honours and emoluments

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 91.

that the recognition of its importance is more than a custom, has become an occasion almost a fury." Then, sardonically, he makes his point: "... the line is drawn -- especially in the English world -- only at the importance of heeding what it may mean."<sup>1</sup> It is with the meaning of art that James ultimately concerns himself in The Tragic Muse. In one sense at least the whole novel is an answer to the question Peter asks himself after he has been dismissed by Miriam: "What was the meaning of this sudden offensive importunity of 'art' ...? (III, xiv, 179) But Peter does not really want an answer: safety for him lies in ignorance. All the characters in the novel contribute in some way to James's exploration of the meaning of art, but it is of course the artists themselves, notably Miriam and Nick, who by total submission to the claims made on them by art provide a dramatic demonstration of its meaning.

For James -- admittedly in an ironic mood -- the artist is "the divine explanatory genius",<sup>2</sup> the purveyor of meaning. But he must necessarily express his apprehension of meaning through the medium of his art. "The turned back" of the

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 83

<sup>2</sup> AN, p. 84



artist, a recurrent image in James as Maurice Beebe points out,<sup>1</sup> is of the essence of his theme, signifying as it does "contraction, concentration and a seemingly deplorable indifference to everything but itself."<sup>2</sup> It is Nash's function as ficelle to explicate some of the moral and aesthetic issues involved. Dubbed by Miriam "the great explainer" (II, xii, 154), he more than justifies his title. Not only does he elicit Nick's sense of his dilemma and Peter's convictions about the theatre, but he evaluates too, according to his distinctive criteria, certain principles and modes of conduct in the novel. Most notably, he furnishes in scenic form what amounts to a moral rationale of the life of art.

Nash is, of course, the supreme advocate in the novel of the aesthetic life; his talk is chiefly directed to this end. This kind of proselytizing he sees as his particular *métier* in life and he gives himself to it wholeheartedly. The view of Nash as an aesthete appears early on. It is first put forward by Bidy and occurs as a suspicion, soon formulated tentatively as an accusation. It is shared, inevitably

<sup>1</sup> In "The Turned Back of Henry James", South Atlantic Quarterly (1954), reprinted in Henry James: Modern Judgements, pp. 71 - 88.

<sup>2</sup> AN, p. 83.

by Lady Agnes and Julia Dallow, as Nick is well aware. He has no doubt that they see Nash as a member of "a dreadful coterie of uncannily clever and desperately refined people, who wear a kind of loose, faded uniform and worship only beauty ..." (III, v, 50). Dashwood too, with his usual knowingness, asserts one day that Nash knew "the aesthetic people — the worldly, semi-smart ones, not the frumpy sickly lot who wore dirty drapery" (II, xvi, 222). All the same in spite of the apprehension Nick feels from time to time about the company Nash keeps, he has to admit that he had never caught "the smallest aesthetic ululation" (III, xvii, 221) from the outback of his life. Certainly there is nothing to show that he belongs to any aesthetic clique; his brand of aestheticism is essentially autonomous.

His proclaimed doctrines bear the unmistakable imprint of aestheticism. He declares himself from the first an artist, but an artist who has chosen to work in life. An apostle of beauty, he sees it as his mission in life to cultivate his feelings and, eschewing formulas, to take the world "in the free, brave, personal way" (I, ix, 170). At his first appearance he admits to having written a novel, an achievement of which he is thoroughly ashamed. In some respects he anticipates Oscar Wilde's ideal critic-artist. His pep-

talk to Nick on his aesthetic duty involves the syllogism "being is doing, and if doing is duty, being is duty" (II, ix, 127). Taken together with the account he later gives of himself: "I shall only be, more and more, with all the accumulations of experience, the longer I live" (III, xvii, 229), it constitutes an expression of that critical spirit which Wilde saw as giving "the contemplative life, the life that has for its aim not doing but being, and not being merely but becoming."<sup>1</sup> In the terms of Nash's own life it means disclaiming his novel and adopting a pose of indulgent cynicism towards creative activity of any kind. He dismisses the collector's enthusiasm as he discounts Peter's belief in the theatre as nothing more than a phase. The crudities of practice and production offend him. He denounces as irrelevant and unworthy of "the esoteric doctrine" (I, ix, 169) the notion of having something to show for one's way of life. It seems to him a confession of failure. Miriam reports him as saying "he doesn't like the kitchen fire — he only wants the pudding!" (III, viii, 81) What Wilde wrote of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright is an uncannily apt reflection of Nash and his views: "... it is only the Philistine who seeks to estimate a personality by the vulgar

<sup>1</sup> "The Critic as Artist", Intentions (1891), p. 143.

test of production. This young dandy sought to be somebody, rather than to do something. He recognised that Life itself is an art, and has its modes of style no less than the arts that seek to express it."<sup>1</sup>

The essence of Nash's "little system — the aesthetic life" (I, ix, 168) is the pursuit of beauty, the cultivation of sensation and of the ability to appreciate. The advice offered by Lord Henry Wotton, Wilde's aesthete, might well be Nash's: "Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations."<sup>2</sup> The complex echo here from The Ambassadors and The Art of Fiction is unmistakable and suggestive. For Nash this means in practice a winter in Sicily, or even hours spent stretched out on the grass in "a delightful little spot: a place where a wild fig-tree grows in the south wall ... of an old Spanish city" (I, ix, 167). The ugly, disagreeable, of course, have no place in his "spectacle of the world"; Nash looks always in preference at what is pleasing. He refuses to make the concession, as he calls it, "that we are only here for dreariness" (I, ix, 163).

His system is buttressed by certain moral convictions brought out in his dialogues with Nick, some at least of

<sup>1</sup> "Pen, Pencil, and Poison", Intentions, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891), p. 33.

which are elicited by Nick's unconscious need of some ethical justification for abandoning politics and becoming an artist. Nash maintains that "life consists of the personal experiments of each of us, and the point of an experiment is that it shall succeed. What we contribute is our treatment of the material, our rendering of the text, our style" (I, ix, 163). It follows that "we must write our best; it's the great thing we can do in the world, on the right side." For Nash — as for Arnold whom in this respect at least he echoes — such a conviction imposes on the individual an unmistakable duty. Arnold claims that "man's business on earth" is to bring to perfection "the gifts committed to him."<sup>1</sup> Nash puts it more specifically: "... we must be as perceptive as we can. We must recognise our particular form, the instrument that each of us — each of us who carries anything — carries in his being. Mastering this instrument, learning to play it in perfection — that's what I call duty, what I call conduct, what I call success" (II, ix, 128). In accordance with this code Nash sets about making Nick "his business for a while" (II, ix, 129), an enterprise, incidentally, which he cites as proof that he

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy (Cambridge, 1966), p. 30.

subscribes to a moral law. He had in fact invoked it earlier to accuse Nick of the grossest immorality in neglecting his talent. For him the individual conscience is the ultimate authority in such matters. He insists to Nick: "One must do one's best to find out the right, and your criminality appears to be that you have not taken the common trouble" (II, ix, 127).

Nick readily acknowledges that Nash has been a help to him (III, xvi, 214-215). D.W. Jefferson remarks however that "it is difficult to see in what way" Nash helped Nick. He asks: "How could Nash's inhuman detachment from all commitment have been relevant to him?"<sup>1</sup> Nick himself practically provides the answer. In the first place, he blames Nash half-humorously for communicating the poison to him at Oxford, for awakening his aesthetic sense. He tells him: "Since then, little by little, it has been working within me; vaguely, covertly, insensibly at first, but during the last year or two with violence, pertinacity, cruelty" (I, ix, 172). Nash is thus associated in Nick's mind with the very springs of his eruptive aesthetic life. So his reappearance during the Dormers' visit to Paris just when Nick is feeling that his affairs have come to a crisis seems

<sup>1</sup> Henry James and the Modern Reader, p. 124.

not just opportune but miraculous. Nash brings him, clairvoyantly it appears, comfort and consolation, the reassurance of his "equal response" (I, ix, 166) to his own appreciation of aesthetic experience. But the practical help that he supplies is admittedly negligible. In his presence alone, an indefinable influence, Nick finds the confirmation he needs. Nash seems to exert an inexplicable authority felt not by Nick only but even by Peter in spite of his antipathy for him. As his friend studies his paintings and sketches Nick reflects that "it was the oddest thing how at present in fact he found himself attributing value to Gabriel Nash — attributing to him, among attributions more confused, the dignity of judgement, the authority of intelligence. Nash was an ambiguous being, but he was an excellent touchstone" (II, ix, 125). As for Peter, he is oppressed with the sense that Nash "had got up earlier than he . . . . Something of authority and privilege stuck to him from this" (III, iv, 33).

All the same Nash does get actively involved in his promised attempt to "save" Nick — and the verb carries here characteristic Jamesian implications. He plays, for instance, most skilfully on Julia Dallow's antagonism to art

III, iv, 39.

and indeed to himself, capitalizing on both. At his first meeting with her he implies that Nick has definite ideas of becoming a painter and urges Julia, to her evident discomfiture, to "keep him up to it" (I, viii, 144).

When they meet again at the door of Nick's studio he ignores the uneasy atmosphere and, with an irritating display of preciosity, assumes blatantly that Julia had visited Nick solely to see Miriam sitting to him. "You came for a glimpse of the great model? Doesn't she sit? That's what I wanted too, this morning — just a look, for a blessing on the day" (II, xii, 159). By exploiting Julia's dislike of art and her natural jealousy Nash hopes, no doubt, to cause an estrangement and thus achieve his aim of "saving" Nick. In the same way, having divined that Miriam is in love with Nick, he tells Peter that he would never allow Nick to be Miriam's "box-keeper": that he sees him as "beautifully arranged, in quite a different line" (III, iv, 40). He does his best too to awaken Peter's jealousy by harping on Miriam's relationship with Nick in an attempt to provoke him into entangling himself with another woman.<sup>1</sup> The object is to arouse Miriam's interest

<sup>1</sup> The Tragic Muse (1890), II, xvii, 226 and 242; III, iv, 39.



in Peter and thus ensure Nick's safety. He tells Nick frankly: "if you'll simply do your part I'll take care of the rest" (III, iii, 32).

Once Nick has made his decision and given himself up to art, he realises that Nash can no longer help him: "he seemed to himself to be altogether on his own. Gabriel was wonderful, but no Gabriel could assist him much henceforth" (III, iii, 29). He had been for Nick a "private philosopher" (III, xvii, 219), compelling his attention though not always his assent. The term "philosopher" is one that crops up from time to time in the novel with reference to Nash. In fact he combines the role of philosopher — however eccentric — with that of aesthete. In the account he gives of Nash to Miriam, Nick provides what amounts to a justification for the use of this term: "The only thing he really takes seriously is to speculate and understand, to talk about the reasons and the essence of things: the people who do that are the highest" (III, xvi, 214-215). Whether or not we agree with Nick's valuation there can be little doubt that Nash performs this function: he is after all "the great explainer". His obvious uneasiness while sitting for his portrait reinforces for Nick this view of

him and offers further elucidation: "He was so accustomed to living upon irony and the interpretation of things that it was strange to him to be himself interpreted, and ... interpreted ironically. From being outside <sup>of</sup> the universe he was suddenly brought into it, and from the position of a free commentator and critic, a sort of amateurish editor of the whole affair, reduced to that of humble ingredient and contributor" (III, xvii, 228-229). I shall want to look at this passage more closely in another context. The irony which Nick sees as characteristic of Nash's vision was for James, like his independence, an essential quality in the artist.<sup>1</sup> So it is hardly surprising then to find that Nash, as "free commentator and critic" often speaks for James: the accent is unmistakable. Just as Nash's view of the dramatist's plight is James's own (I, iv, 63), so in advocating spontaneity and independent judgement he represents the novelist. When Nash tells Nick that "we must recognise ... the instrument that each of us ... carries in his being" (II, ix, 128) and insists that learning to play it perfectly is his idea of duty, conduct, success, he

<sup>1</sup> "George Du Maurier" (1883), printed in Partial Portraits (1888), p. 349.

<sup>2</sup> "Théophile Gautier" (1873) printed in French Poets and Novelists (1884), p. 32.

not only anticipates in much the same terms Pater's interpretation of Plato's doctrine<sup>1</sup> but he voices too one of James's deepest convictions. In his essay on Théophile Gautier as early as 1873 he maintains what Nash later reaffirms for him that "a man's supreme use in the world is to master his ... instrument and play it in perfection."<sup>2</sup> The principle is exemplified for him in Gautier's life as an artist and enacted in The Tragic Muse in the careers of Miriam and Nick.

The importance of Nash's philosophy is heightened by his rhetoric which has a key function in the novel. It provides in fact a consistent means of elucidating the configurations of imagery that occur and ultimately a way of suggesting value. Some of these images are drawn, appropriately enough, from art, especially literature and music. To expound his ideas Nash takes the image of the book of life, already used twice by Miriam in what Peter judges to be a

<sup>1</sup> In dealing with what he calls "the second constituent principle of Plato's aesthetic scheme," Pater writes: "We are to become .... like performers rather, individually, it may be, of more or less importance, but each with a necessary and inalienable part, in a perfect musical exercise which is well worth while, or in some sacred liturgy .... We are to find, or be put into, and keep, everyone his natural place; to cultivate those qualities which will secure mastery over ourselves, the subordination of the parts to the whole, musical proportion." Plato and Platonism (1893) pp. 249-250.

<sup>2</sup> "Théophile Gautier" (1873) printed in French Poets and Novelists (1884), p. 32.

platitudinous way, and develops characteristically its connotations. He maintains to Nick: "... the world is full of the crudest remplissage. The book of life is padded, ah but padded — a deplorable want of editing" (II, ix, 128). He had earlier dilated on his view of man as a contributor to this vast book:

"What we contribute is our treatment of the material, our rendering of the text, our the style. A sense of the qualities of a style is so rare that many persons should doubtless be forgiven for not being able to read, or at all events to enjoy us; but is that a reason for giving it up — for not being, in this other sphere, if one possibly can, a Macaulay, a Ruskin, a Renan? Ah, we must write our best .... People may not read you at sight, may not like you, but there's a chance they'll come round". (I, ix, 163)

In this context Nick's view of him as "a free commentator and critic, a sort of amateurish editor of the whole affair"<sup>1</sup> becomes a significant judgement on Nash's self-appointed role in life, and the epithet "amateurish" a criticism of his achievement. An interesting contrast is supplied by Mr. Carteret who, we may remember, "had never proceeded in any ironic way from the particular to the general; certainly he had never made a reflection upon anything so unparliamentary as Life" (II, ii, 30-31). The

<sup>1</sup> See above p. 145.

<sup>2</sup> The Tragic Muse (1890), I, 155, 156.

<sup>3</sup> See above p. 163.

flare of humour here, combined with the comment on his lack of aptitude for irony, prepare us for the criticism implied in what follows: "Life, for him, was a purely practical function, not a question of phrasing."<sup>1</sup> If Nash's advocacy of the art of life is to be deplored, so too is an attitude that debases life to the level of reflex action. It is Nick, though, who reflects what is the focal, the received value within this complex. Contemplating the great portraits of the past, he finds in them the most consummate contribution to the "book of life": "As he stood before them sometimes the perfection of their survival struck him as the supreme eloquence, the reason that included all the others, thanks to the language of art, the richest and most universal."<sup>2</sup>

Complementing this body of metaphors is another group of images which seems almost a commonplace of aestheticism. It has its nucleus in that injunction of Nash's which I have already quoted: "We must recognise ... the instrument that each of us ... carries in his being. Mastering this instrument, learning to play it in perfection — that's what I call duty ...."<sup>3</sup> This view of humanity as a vast orchestra

<sup>1</sup> My italics.

<sup>2</sup> The Tragic Muse (1890), III, xvi, 210. My italics.

<sup>3</sup> See above p. 145.

might seem something of a philosophic platitude, but the way Nash develops it illuminates the moral and aesthetic values asserted in the novel. In Nash's terms, Nick's artistic talent, "of a wonderfully pure strain," is "a regular Stradivarius", superbly fitted for a concerto in which there are of course "pipes and pipes — little quavering flutes for the concerted movements and big cornets-à-piston for the great solos" (II, ix, 128-129). According to this interpretation Nick is grossly immoral in "neglecting his own fiddle to blunder away on that of one of his fellows". Nash's speech is an element in this orchestra and others make their contribution too: Madame Carré, whose mouth was "visibly a rare instrument" (I, vii, 110), and Mademoiselle Voisin, who seems "an instrument for producing rare sounds, to be handled, like a legendary violin, with a recognition of its value" (II, vii, 98). Then there is Miriam who, once having found her voice, becomes an "instrument, and incontestably a fine one" (I, xii, 214), and listens to herself "with an ear as vigilant as if she had been a Paganini drawing a fiddle-bow" (II, v, 68). In this context Nash's view of her as "a priestess of harmony" (II, xvii, 240) reiterates her significance in the novel both as virtuoso artist and

as the epitome of art itself. This onslaught of "melody" is heard by Peter's uninitiated ears as a "senseless mocking catch, like some irritating chorus of conspirators in a bad opera, in which Miriam's voice was so incongruously conjoined with Nick's and in which Biddy's sweet little pipe had not scrupled still more bewildering to mingle" (III, xiv, 179). The solicitations of the world have distorted for Peter the importunate appeal of art. In this way the image communicates an important moral discrimination. Nash's discourse thus helps to define and to integrate within a coherent pattern a whole range of values. It presents also a moral view of art as a way of life which serves as a hub for James's own discriminations.

The moral principles which Nash proclaims are, as we have seen, exemplified dramatically by Miriam and Nick. Both recognise their instrument and do their best "to play it in perfection"; they enact in fact what James calls in the Preface the "individual vision of decency, the critical as well as the passionate judgement of it under sharp stress."<sup>1</sup> This vision is for James quite simply a question of "seeing". The idea of seeing is deployed throughout the novel as an index to discrimination which is as much moral as aesthetic.

<sup>1</sup> AN, pp. 92-93. (1888), p. 249.

Nick says of his family: "They were all blind as bats," and tells Nash: "you opened my eyes" (I, ix, 171-172). If there is any truth in Pater's assertion that "the service of philosophy, of speculative culture, towards the human spirit is to rouse, to startle it into sharp and eager observation,"<sup>1</sup> Nick's acknowledgement must tend to confirm Nash's philosophic function. Nash himself draws on the same image to insist on Nick's potential as an artist; he says of him to Biddy: "But Miss Dormer, he had eyes. He was made to see — to see all over, to see everything. There are so few like that" (I, ii, 33). When Biddy defends her brother Nash accuses him of wearing blinkers: "He sees his side". For Nash, as for James, those who see constitute an elect; the rest are victims of "the tradition of dreariness, of stodginess, of dull, dense, literal prose" (I, ix, 161) which has sealed their eyes. Hence his injunction: "we must be as perceptive as we can" (II, ix, 128). Nick too values the ability to see, with all that this implies: a heightening of observation is one of the benefits Paris bestows. He is, as we know, sharply aware of the disparity between his vision and Mr. Carteret's. There is ironic comment on his own case in Peter's gratuitous advice to Miriam: "If you see the

<sup>1</sup> The Renaissance (1888), p. 249.



things to do, the art of doing them will come, if you hammer away. The great point is to see them" (I, viii, 148). Peter's aberration, his immorality, though, is not precisely blindness but a dependence on illusion, only dissolved finally "in the intense light of genius" (III, xix, 255) shed by Miriam's performance, the communication through art of the real. Nash, though dazzled by Miriam, is not capable of this aesthetic myopia. He describes for her in his own terms the effect she has had on him: "You have stopped acting, you have reduced it to the least that will do, you simply are — you are just the visible image, the picture on the wall. It keeps you wonderfully in focus. I have never seen you so beautiful" (II, xii, 154). In James's view, the ability to see in this sense, to see clearly without distortion, was a cardinal virtue. For Miriam and Nick — and for Nash according to his lights — the vision of decency is realised through the life of art; in their total commitment they demonstrate their morality.

But It is evident from the discussion of moral standards she has with Mrs. Rooth that Madame Carré shares the same vision. Mrs. Rooth is preoccupied with genteel values; she insists on her respectability and would have Miriam appear only in plays which present a more or less impeccable "picture of

conduct" (I, vii, 116). Social propriety is her principal concern, not morality. Accordingly she flaunts the Neville-Nugents of Castle Nugent and urges Miriam "to multiply her points of contact only with the higher orders" (II, xvii, 232). She disapproves of her friendship with Fanny Rover and works to bring about a match between Miriam and Peter. Miriam, intent on becoming the greatest actress of the age, is scornful of such considerations. The admonition which Madame Carré delivers to Mrs. Rooth is practically definitive, endorsing as it does Nash's morality: "To be too respectable to go where things are done best is, in my opinion, to be very vicious indeed; and to do them badly in order to preserve your virtue is to fall into a grossness more shocking than any other. To do them well is virtue enough, and not to make a mess of it the only respectability" (I, vii, 117).

In its reliance on the artistic conscience as a safeguard this precept would seem to have something in common with Rowland's idealistic faith in the necessary virtue of genius. But Madame Carré and Nash imply the need for unsparing effort and determination in the artist. The stress is on self-discipline and application, not inspiration. "You mix things up . . . I believe it's rather the case with you other English, and I have never been able to learn that either your morality or your talent is the gainer by it" (I, vii, 117).

Mrs. Rooth's preoccupation with social status gives a new perspective on the values held by Lady Agnes and her circle. Nash helps to make the connection explicit. He tells Julia that Mrs. Rooth is particular "about the sort of people they meet -- the tone, the standard" (I, viii, 143). He adds with malicious irony: "I'm bound to say they're like you: they don't go everywhere. That spirit is meritorious; it should be recognised and rewarded." Julia seems unconscious of his sarcasm, only replying that Miriam is "dreadfully vulgar"; a remark, though, that neatly bears Nash out. Lady Agnes, we know, is similarly occupied with social distinctions. Nick's wilful rejection of a fortune is tantamount to a crime because it involves the surrender not just of material comfort but of social standing and prestige. It is of course a crime he knowingly commits when he abandons -- in piquant contrast -- the "grossness of immorality" with which Nash charges him. The whole novel is virtually a repudiation of a morality which is nothing more than social decorum in disguise. For Madame Carré it is a typically English confusion. She tells Mrs. Rooth: "You mix things up . . . . I believe it's rather the case with you other English, and I have never been able to learn that either your morality or your talent is the gainer by it" (I, vii, 117).

It is the "individual vision of decency", by its nature defying definition, which is established as a transcendent value in this novel, realised supremely in artistic commitment. In Julia's determination to reject Nick we may see the same kind of integrity in different form. Bidly, perceptively, explains it to Peter: "It's for his happiness, Peter -- that's the way she reasons .... She does it for an idea" (II, xv, 203). There is indeed a hint of this devotion to, and sacrifice for, an idea in what Julia says to Nick on that Good Friday: "When I think I'm doing something I mustn't do just the opposite .... There are things I've thought of, the things I like best; and they are not what you mean. It would be a great deception, and it's not the way I see my life, and it would be misery if we don't understand" (II,xiii,171). Such commitment, active and sharply focussed, also has value.

As philosopher and "explainer", then, Nash projects for us in his own terms, the meaning, the moral significance, of art as a way of life. But this role by no means insulates him from derogation. While his philosophy evaluates the choice made by Miriam and Nick, they, in their turn, supply implicitly through the practice of their art an appraisal of his ideas. In the very act of engaging in creative work they refute that principle of his which exalts being over doing. Throughout

the novel Nash, his doctrine and his system, are submitted to the criticism of what F.R. Leavis calls "the whole ability creative context".<sup>1</sup> In this respect he can usefully be compared with Birkin in Lawrence's Women in Love.

Nash is himself responsible to a large extent for subverting the authority of his own personality and ideas. His claim to be natural is belied by his affected manner and style, above all by his air of languid superiority. Though Nick professes to find him simple (I, v, 77), he does react from time to time with all the reader's impatience, once accusing him point blank of affectation (I, ix, 169). Nash is quite aware of the equivocal response he arouses: he apologises to Nick for the bewilderment he causes but still insists on his sincerity and good faith. His system is perforated by inconsistencies, as Miriam is quick to detect. When Nick echoes Nash's opinion that to come down to "the simplifications of practice—is for the superior person a really fatal descent" (III, xvi, 215), she poohs Nash and comments shrewdly: "What was it but a little question of action when he preached to you... to give up your seat?" He denounces doing in any form, yet the virtue and delight of art is just that "there is always more to

<sup>1</sup> D.H. Lawrence: Novelist (Peregrine Books 1964), p.183.

learn and more to do" (I, ix, 164). He can insist that it is man's duty to develop his gifts to the best of his ability without apparently recognising that this necessarily involves action. In the same way he holds forth to Peter on the truth exemplified in Miriam's career: "You can't eat your cake and have it, and you can't make omelettes without breaking eggs .... If you do your business at all you should do it handsomely, so that the costs may run up tremendously" (III, iv, 38). Yet these are just the consequences of exertion he is quick to decry.

Nick's attitude does much to condition the view we take of Nash: inevitably, since it is he who mediates Nash to us. In spite of his sense of obligation and the deference he pays to his opinions Nick is consistently sceptical about him. He knows very well that his response is ambivalent: he has "two states of mind" in listening to him, one "in which he laughed, doubted, sometimes even reprobated, and at any rate failed to follow or to accept; the other in which this contemplative genius seemed to take the words out of his mouth, to utter for him, better and more completely, the very things he was on the point of saying" (II, xii, 152). This latter faculty is regarded by Emerson, for one, as a

<sup>1</sup> R.V. Emerson, "Self-Reliance" Essays First Series (Boston, 1883), p. 43.

mark of genius.<sup>1</sup> Nick in fact constantly subjects Nash and his ideas to energetic criticism. He does not hesitate to match Nash's parade of candour with a frankness that on one occasion really strikes home: a description of his manner as "impertinent" raises an involuntary protest and a blush (I, ix, 161). As always Nash justifies himself most plausibly: his motives are entirely benevolent. He is set on becoming "a perceptible force for good" (I, ix, 162). To his exclusive pursuit of the agreeable, the effect in practice of his refusal to accept that "we are only here for dreariness", Nick formulates the objection already raised by Biddy at their first meeting. She had drawn his attention to the suffering in the world and implied that it was the duty of everyone to try to remedy it. Nash evaded the challenge then as he evades Nick's protest which simmers in the ironic gloss he gives for "dreariness": "Many good things are dreary — virtue and decency and charity and perseverance and courage and honour" (I, ix, 163). A criticism of Nash's whole way of life is contained in the comment Nick makes later: "You're lucky to have money for your travelling-expenses" (I, ix, 168). Each time though Nash succeeds in parrying Nick's criticism but not in resolving the moral issues raised.

<sup>1</sup> R.W. Emerson, "Self Reliance," Essays: First Series (Boston, 1885), p. 43.

To this subtle derogation James himself, as narrator, also contributes, if only frugally. When he does interpose a comment the tone is equivocal, blandly ironic. A qualification apparently prompted by a scrupulous desire for accuracy conveys much else besides: "... if suffering could on any occasion be predicated of Gabriel Nash. His pretension was, in truth, that he had purged his life of such incongruities..." (I, viii, 141). It is not only Nash's capacity for feeling which is questioned here; the use of the word "incongruities" to denote "suffering" also invites criticism of his way of looking at life. The description of Nash later as "that master of every subject" (III, iv, 41) certainly reflects Peter's resentment but it mocks too Nash's preposterous omniscience. There is yet another means — essentially implicit — by which James exposes Nash to criticism, or if he does not do this, comes curiously close to fogging the view of art presented in the novel. As a philosopher, Nash is given to clairvoyant observations.<sup>1</sup> But it is only at the end of the novel that this apparent prescience of his becomes at all significant. It is clear, I think, that the value to be attached to Nick's sacrifices for art must

<sup>1</sup> For example: The Tragic Muse (1890), I, ii, 23; I, viii, 146; II, ix, 123.



depend to a large extent on whether he maintains his integrity as a painter. This, Nash seriously questions, and the doubt thus raised is by no means resolved at the end. He predicts for Nick an eventual reconciliation with Julia in which she would take the first step by sending for him to paint her portrait: "She'll put up with the palette if you'll put up with the country-house" (III, xvii, 225). He sees Nick becoming a fashionable society painter — a negation in fact of his expressed aesthetic ideal.

This forecast might seem well on the way to fulfilment when at the end of the novel Nick is recorded as spending two days at Marsh to celebrate Peter and Biddy's engagement and there arranging the conditions under which Julia should sit for him. He had already had cause to remember it with embarrassment during the three days he spends at Broadwood for Christmas when he finds himself, as Nash had foretold, sketching the company. Among such portents it is useful to recall Nick's conviction that to paint Julia is to invite aesthetic disaster. He makes the point at Miriam's last sitting. The two of them have discussed the relationship between painter and sitter and agreed that painting people is such an "absorbing, exclusive occupation" that it

effectively kills any personal interest of the artist in the sitter (III, xvi, 212). It is an honour, as Miriam observes wryly, not to be conferred on people the artist likes. To her mocking suggestion that he should therefore paint Mrs. Dalloway if he wants to kill any lingering affection for her, Nick replies that he would expect the usual law to be reversed, and the result would probably be an appalling picture.

The project of painting Julia crops up from time to time in the novel, with mystifying effect. On Miriam's first visit to Nick's studio he had told her that Julia "doesn't like me to paint her" (II, xii, 151), a statement clearly contradicted by events. On two occasions she offers to sit for Nick and on one of them receives an abrupt refusal.<sup>1</sup> Her one and only express refusal to sit — during the Easter recess — is to be attributed to her fear of being alone with Nick. He is nevertheless convinced that he has "often wanted and proposed" (III, xv, 198) to paint Julia, a conviction for which there is actually little warrant. This reluctance of Nick's, carefully dissimulated, may well spring from a fear of producing a daub as a result of his

inability to view his model with proper aesthetic detach-

<sup>1</sup> The Tragic Muse (1890), (II, i, 19); II, viii, 118.

<sup>2</sup> The Tragic Muse (1909), II, ii, 440. My italics.

ment.<sup>1</sup> It is significant, then, that the picture he eventually paints is pronounced a "noble portrait of a lady" (III, xix, 257), and attracts general attention when it is exhibited. The inference would seem to be that Nick, whatever he may feel, has acquired in his relations with Julia the artistic impersonality he displays towards Miriam. His ability to paint her successfully is in fact an affirmation not, as Nash insinuates, a negation of his artistic integrity. This view seems to be confirmed by a revision James made in the New York edition: "... Nick arranged with Julia Dallow the conditions ... under which she should sit to him ...." (III, xix, 257) becomes "... Nick arranged with the former mistress of his fate the conditions ... under which she should sit to him ...."<sup>2</sup> The change indicates that James felt the need to suggest more strongly Nick's steadfastness of purpose, in view perhaps of criticisms such as William James's, quoted by F.O. Matthiessen in his Henry James: The Major Phase (New York, 1963), p. 182: "... the final winding up is, as usual with you, rather a losing of the story in the sand, yet that is the way in which things lose themselves in real life."

<sup>1</sup> In "James's The Tragic Muse - Ave atque Vale", reprinted in Henry James: Modern Judgements p. 200, Lyall H. Powers accounts for this reluctance of Nick's by attributing to him a firm belief in the law cited by Miriam that to paint someone's portrait "is to assure the disappearance of the subject from the artist's life." Hence Nick, anxious not to lose Julia, refrains from painting her.

<sup>2</sup> The Tragic Muse (1909), II, li, 440. My italics.

Nash's gloomy predictions about Nick's future are matched by those he makes about Miriam's. He tells Peter that eventually her "divine voice" will crack and "her clever manner" lose all quality. "Then she would be at the fine climax of life and glory, still young and insatiate, but already coarse, hard and raddled, with nothing left to do and nothing left to do it with."<sup>1</sup> Her fate and Nick's exemplify vividly for Nash the eventual and inevitable state of all "wretched people who have the incurable superstition of 'doing'" — what he designates to Nick as "the ignoble collapse you prepare for yourselves when you cease to be able to do" (III, xvii, 229). He regards doing in fact as a cause of vitiation in the artist. In this context, seen as the expression of his distaste for action, his prophecies are bound to forfeit validity.

The erosion to which Nash is systematically subjected throughout the novel is epitomized by means of the portrait Nick paints of him. It is yet another instance of James's use of a work of art to communicate value. To Nick's fancy, "the picture he had begun had a singular air of gradually fading from the canvas. He couldn't catch it in the act, but he could have a suspicion, when he glanced at it, that

<sup>1</sup> The Tragic Muse (1890), III, iv, 35. My italics.

the hand of time was rubbing it away little by little ... making the surface indistinct and bare — bare of all 228). resemblance to the model" (III, xvii, 230-231). Earlier, Nick had been struck by the immutability of the great single portraits of the past, by "the perfection of their survival"; they had "known nothing of death or change, and the ages 77). had only sweetened their freshness" (III, xvi, 210). The apparent dissolution of Nash's portrait is a quaint refutation of his claim to be imperishable. He had insisted to Nick: "... I shall only be, more and more, with all the accumulations of experience, the longer I live" (III, xvii, 229). Yet, ironically, the "hand of time", powerless against the portraits of the past, is distinctly specified as being dition. responsible for effacing Nash's image. In this way James stresses the evanescence of the aesthetic impulse that fails to fulfil itself in creative activity.

Nash is thus sustained to the end. Nick's experience in painting the portrait contributes expressive comment not only on his relation to his sitter but also on Nash's final significance in the novel. He perceives Nash afresh; he feels that "he had never seen suggest his subject before, and yet somehow this revelation was not going aestheticism. Twice in the course of Nash's talk he

<sup>1</sup> The Tropic of Cancer (1909), II, xlix, 409.

produced by the sense of actually seeing it .... What he saw was the indefinite and the elusive" (III, xvii, 228). This amounts to what is a definitive evaluation of Nash for the reader as for Nick. Early in the novel when discussing Nash with Peter, Nick is told by his cousin that his "portrait of the complicated Nash is lamentably dim" (I,v,77). By way of a reply he explains: "... he's as neat as an outline cut out of paper with scissors .... in intercourse with him you know what you've got hold of". His attempt to paint Nash's portrait gives him a new understanding of his subject which makes his earlier impression seem almost a presumptuous simplification. Later James stresses the nature of this insight in a revision he made for the New York edition. He alters "what he saw was the indefinite and the elusive" to read "what he saw was not the measurable mask but the ambiguous meaning."<sup>1</sup> The tension of wisdom and fatuity in Nash is thus sustained to the end.

Among the many revisions James made for the New York edition there are several which have significant reference to his portrayal of Nash. Most notable are those which suggest that he was unwilling to have Nash convicted of a thoroughgoing aestheticism. Twice in the course of Nash's talk he

<sup>1</sup> The Tragic Muse (1909), II, xlix, 409.

substitutes "the fine" for "the beautiful",<sup>1</sup> a term comparatively untainted by jargon. He also amends a reference to him as a "properly-constituted aesthete" (II, ix, 123) to read a "thorough connoisseur, let alone a faithful friend."<sup>2</sup> In the light of these changes the substitution of "a futile aestheticism"<sup>3</sup> for "volatility" in "Peter remembered that the last impression he ought to wish to produce there was that of volatility" (I, xii, 203) introduces a distinction of special meaning in the novel. James also makes a significant interpolation in the record he provides of Nick's reflections during his "twilight of the soul" when will-power alone keeps him at work, an interpolation which strikes at the heart of Nash's philosophy: "Art was doing — it came back to that — which politics in most cases weren't."<sup>4</sup> In dissociating Nash as far as possible from orthodox aestheticism and at the same time submitting his philosophy to the fullest range of opinion in the novel, James reveals his desire that Nash should be appraised by means of criteria established in the context of the total drama and not by recourse to external sanctions.

<sup>1</sup> The Tragic Muse (1909), I, ix, 174 and 180; (1890), I, ix, 164 and 170.

<sup>2</sup> The Tragic Muse (1909), II, xxiii, 21.

<sup>3</sup> The Tragic Muse (1909), I, xii, 215.

<sup>4</sup> The Tragic Muse (1909), II, xlii, 267; cf. (1890); III, x, 99.

James's values must be elicited ultimately by a complex process of collation and cross-reference more intuitive than rational.

In an entry in his Notebooks for 22 October 1891 after he had recovered a little "from all the déboires and distresses" which accompanied the staging of The American, James wrote:

Ah, the terrible law of the artist — the law of fructification, of fertilization, the law by which everything is grist to his mill — the law, in short, of the acceptance of all experience, of all suffering, of all life, of all suggestion and sensation and illumination. To keep at it — to strive toward the perfect, the ripe, the only best; to go on, by one's own clear light, with patience, courage and continuity, to live with the high vision and effort, to justify one's self — and oh, so greatly! — all in time: this and this alone can be my only lesson from anything.<sup>1</sup>

The passage expresses in intensely personal terms the conviction at the heart of The Tragic Muse, demonstrated cogently by Miriam and Nick, a sense of the transcendent value of the artist's attempt to realise in integrity his vision, his idea. For James the attempt had all the moral and emotional compulsion of a religious quest. This kind of consummation, Nash, in spite of his insight and his

<sup>1</sup> N, p. 111.

<sup>2</sup> H, p. 111.

<sup>3</sup> N, p. 92.



ability to elucidate, decisively declines. From the sanctum of art James proclaims fervently: "I believe, I see, I do."<sup>1</sup>

James's intense personal involvement in his account of artist-life, his anxiety to expound his values, have left their mark upon the novel. It has been called his experiment in the genre of the "roman à thèse which is also something else."<sup>2</sup> Certainly the disquisitional element is one of its dominant features, in spite of the use of Nash to provide dramatic utterance. In this connection the comment from The Notebooks quoted earlier is of particular interest. James writes: "I have undertaken to tell and describe too much — given my data, such as they are...."<sup>3</sup> In the Preface, as we have seen, he makes much of the fact that the subject required dramatic, or scenic treatment. We need only recall his rejection there of the "usurping consciousness" on the grounds that it offends dramatic decorum. Yet in spite of his concern with specifically dramatic modes in The Tragic Muse James does not hesitate to obtrude himself upon the action in his function as omniscient narrator. Once again we find that avuncular tone

<sup>1</sup> N, p. 111

<sup>2</sup> W.W. Robson, "Henry James's The Tragic Muse", Mandrake II (Autumn and Winter 1954-1955), p. 295.

<sup>3</sup> N, p. 92.

remarked already in Roderick Hudson; he refers indulgently, for instance, to "the liberal intercourse of these young people" (I, xii, 205). These intrusions seem designed moreover to remind us that James has the power to manipulate the story in the interests of form. He transports his concern with composition into the novel itself. At one stage he writes: "With much of our story left to tell, it is a pity that so little of this rich colloquy may be transcribed here ..." (II, ix, 124). Later we find him justifying ostentatiously what might seem an arbitrary narrative procedure expressly on grounds of technique: "... that mystery would be cleared up only if it were open to us to regard this young lady through some other medium than the mind of her friends. We have chosen, as it happens, for some of the advantages it carries with it, the indirect vision ..." (II, xi, 143). Comments of this kind clearly are inimical to the dramatic effects he is so insistent about in the Preface.

It seems reasonable enough to conclude from all this that James was particularly anxious that the narrator as craftsman should be glimpsed behind the scenes of The Tragic Muse and was willing on this account to waive the dramatic

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 84.

<sup>2</sup> Partial Portraits, p. 71.

principle. Form and composition were for him, after all, essential constituents of artistic meaning. Significantly in the Preface he asserts: "A picture without composition slights its most precious chance for beauty" and then goes on to ask with reference to novels like The Newcomes, Les Trois Mousquetaires and War and Peace, allegedly deficient in composition, what "such large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary, artistically mean?"<sup>1</sup> In a novel designed, like The Tragic Muse, to present a view of the nature and meaning of art, an overt, an express concern with technique has a special relevance. The means by which the novel takes shape becomes in a sense an aspect of its theme.

James's concern with ideas, with communicating his sense of "the terrible law of the artist", also affects the presentation of character in the novel. In Daniel Deronda: A Conversation (1876) Pulcheria asks Theodora why Daniel is "always grasping his coat-collar, as if he wished to hang himself up?"<sup>2</sup> Similarly in The Tragic Muse we may feel inclined to ask why Mrs. Rooth is continually losing and retrieving her shawl. This is only a cavil, admittedly, but

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 84.

<sup>2</sup> Partial Portraits, p. 71.

the device it pinpoints may be seen as symptomatic of a pervasive tendency in the novel. In the same essay James distinguishes sharply between "the figures based upon observation and the figures based upon invention" and he concludes that where invention has had the upper hand only "brilliant failures" have been achieved.<sup>1</sup> It seems to me that this distinction can usefully be applied to the characters of Nick, Peter and Nash, if not to others. All three lack reverberation; they produce as James himself would say "no illusion." They exist primarily to embody an idea and there is no overflow of dynamism; each is strictly circumscribed by the necessity which produced him. Only Miriam seems abundantly realised: the friction of vigorous incompatibles which go to make up her personality has rendered the idea she embodies wholly incandescent. These characters in fact exemplify the problem which Richard Poirier deals with in The Comic Sense of Henry James (1960). He writes: "Because of this consciously felt tension between dramatic and allegorical impulses, [James's] early fiction provides a beautifully full example of a problem that has beset almost all the great American novelists. Their works

<sup>1</sup> Partial Portraits, p. 72.

offer evidence of the persistent difficulty of using characters to illustrate ideas while at the same time investing them with a dramatic and personal vitality that breaks the bounds of any assigned representational function."<sup>1</sup>

As we can see from the Preface, James found precisely this deficiency in Nick, but only in Nick apparently. He records there that Nick instead of turning out to be, as he had reckoned, "the best thing in the book", had "insisted in the event on looking as simple and flat as some mere brass check or engraved number, the symbol and guarantee of a stored treasure."<sup>2</sup> The explanation James offers for Nick's failure as a character is not, intrinsically, very different from that implied in Poirier's account. It is a failure arising from the use of characters "to illustrate ideas", to proclaim values, particularly those to which the novelist is passionately committed. In such conditions characters are much less likely to elude complete manipulation and achieve a degree of autonomy. As an embodiment of "the artist in triumph" Nick was inevitably assigned to failure. James makes the point clearly:

"Any presentation of the artist in triumph must be flat in proportion as it really sticks to its subject — it can only smuggle in relief

<sup>1</sup>Page 9

<sup>2</sup>AN, p. 97.

and variety. For, to put the matter in an image, all we then — in his triumph — see of the charm-compeller is the back he turns to us as he bends over his work. 'His' triumph, decently, is but the triumph of what he produces, and that is another affair.<sup>1</sup>

The fierce commitment with which Nick applies himself to art disqualifies him, in James's view, from operating as a dynamically interesting hero. That is to say, his efficacy as a character is inevitably impaired by those very values, moral as well as aesthetic, he is designed to embody. Ironically enough, this view of James's crops up, with rather different implications, in The Picture of Dorian Gray. Lord Henry's cynical comment that "good artists exist simply in what they make, and consequently are perfectly uninteresting in what they are."<sup>2</sup> is orthodox aestheticism and follows inevitably from the exaltation of being at the expense of doing. Miriam of course, is exempt from the conditions of this law by the very nature of her art, as Nash makes plain: "You have stopped acting ... you simply are" (II, xii, 154), he tells her on one occasion. For him she is a "real producer", but a "producer whose production is her own person" (III, iv, 36). Her fascination subsists in the personality she projects as an artist and her kaleidoscopic nature is an unfailing source of vitality

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 96

<sup>2</sup> The Picture of Dorian Gray, p. 83.

in the novel. James's refusal to "go behind" Miriam is thus completely vindicated.

In retrospect James sees that his purpose is best served by the artist "deluded, diverted, frustrated or vanquished,"<sup>1</sup> none of which terms eventually, despite the ambiguity at the end of the novel, applies to Nick.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, The Tragic Muse is James's final attempt to explore in a long novel the interaction of moral and aesthetic vision in the person of the artist. For his later protagonists he seeks "the privilege of the hero — that is of the martyr or of the interesting and appealing and comparatively floundering person," but in doing so he has to refuse on their behalf "the cake of the very rarest privilege, the most luscious baked in the oven of the gods"<sup>3</sup> — the dedicated pursuit of art. Nevertheless people like Fleda Vetch, Lambert Strether and Maggie Verver bring variously to their experience of life the eager sensibility, the creative intelligence, which distinguish Miriam and Nick.

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> They might seem to apply more aptly to Peter. And we might therefore expect him to generate the dramatic vitality that Nick lacks. But Peter embodies what is essentially a static idea — he was conceived as a non-artist — and he is therefore substantially incapable of development, as the action of the novel clearly shows. D.W. Jefferson, for instance, finds the multiplication of encounters between Peter and Miriam artistically clumsy since their relationship remains unchanged. (Henry James and the Modern Reader, p. 129).

<sup>3</sup> AN pp. 97-98.

In The Ambassadors we have James's most comprehensive record of how a sensitive nature responds to aesthetic experience. Strether conforms supremely to James's notion of a protagonist enjoying "the privilege of the hero", "the interesting and appealing and comparatively floundering person."<sup>1</sup> His attempts to see make the novel. In the Preface James declares flatly: "the business of my tale and the march of my action, not to say the precious moral of everything, is just my demonstration of this process of vision."<sup>2</sup> Almost thirty years before in Roderick Hudson

#### CHAPTER FOUR

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**The Ambassadors: the role of aesthetic experience in the development of moral to understand Roderick and the effect Europe has on him.**

#### vision

Throughout his adventure Rowland's consciousness is dominated by Roderick and his plight. In The Ambassadors Strether's reaction to the beguiling spectacle of Europe supplies the central interest. In both novels James makes use of a single register of consciousness, which provides the consistent and detailed notation of impressions essential to his purpose. In the same way as Rowland's, Strether's consciousness is designed to contain and illuminate the drama. James is out

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<sup>2</sup> AN, p. 368.



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<sup>1</sup> AN, pp. 96-97.

<sup>2</sup> AN, p. 308.

to convey the distinctive flavour of one man's apprehension of experience. He says of Strether in the Preface: "The thing was to be so much this worthy's intimate adventure that even the projection of his consciousness upon it from beginning to end without intermission or deviation would probably still leave a part of its value for him, and a fortiori for ourselves, unexpressed."<sup>1</sup> But Strether's inability to supply a complete interpretation of his adventure is no loss for James since much of the interest of his situation lies in his tentative efforts to make sense of his impressions.

The minute detail in which James demonstrates Strether's developing vision distinguishes The Ambassadors not only from Roderick Hudson but also from The Portrait of a Lady, where Isabel Archer's "'exciting' inward life"<sup>2</sup> is so much James's preoccupation. He traces the constant modulation in Strether's "seeing" as he absorbs every fresh impression. In Roderick Hudson we are made aware of each major modification in Rowland's vision only as a fait accompli, and much the same is true in The Portrait of a Lady, though here Isabel's apprehension of things as they really are is presented not at all as a process but as one climactic act of seeing.

1 AN, p. 317.

2 AN, p. 56.

James refers to the scene in question as "a representation simply of her motionlessly seeing, and an attempt withal to make the mere still lucidity of her act as 'interesting' as the surprise of a caravan or the identification of a pirate."<sup>1</sup>

As one of James's "intense perceivers," Strether has much in common with both Rowland and Isabel. They are made of basically the same stuff. Strether too has a quick sensibility, prolific imagination and an exacting moral sense. Such qualities in the Jamesian hero or heroine signal an exotic, even a wayward, idealism. Useful parallels may be drawn, particularly, between the experience of Isabel and that of Strether, in spite of the disparity in age and the difference in sex and circumstances. They share a feeling for what Christof Wegelin calls "social beauty",<sup>2</sup> a feeling which beguiles them into a labyrinth of illusion. Throughout her adventure Isabel is engaged in seeking a way of life which will realise her ideal, in conforming herself in effect to "the portrait of a lady". James defines her idea of the aristocratic life as a combination of great knowledge with great liberty. Her acquaintance with Madame Merle gives rise

<sup>1</sup> The scene occurs in The Portrait of a Lady (1881), III, iii, 29-45. For James's comment on it see AN, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> The Image of Europe in Henry James (Dallas, 1958), "The Lesson of Social Beauty," pp. 86 ff.

to the reflection: "To be so graceful, so gracious, so wise, so good, and to make so light of it all — that was really to be a great lady."<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Osmond, with his own ostensibly similar ideal of the aristocratic life, has the immediate appeal for Isabel that Madame Merle had had. His advice "to make one's life a work of art"<sup>2</sup> answers a vital instinct of Isabel's nature. Like Nash, Osmond works "in life", but he lacks even such capacity as Nash has for moral feeling, not to mention his relish for self-parody which, however irritating, is a saving grace. Osmond shares with Isabel a disposition to take himself too seriously. The timely warning that Ralph gives his cousin to take life more easily and leave her character to form itself goes unheeded. In The Portrait of a Lady, as in The Ambassadors, James is exploring different modes of life. Like Rowland, Isabel finds that overwhelming aesthetic appeal is no guarantee of the moral fulfilment she is looking for. With this truth Strether also has to come to terms. Their ethereal ideals doom them to disillusion. Artists manqué, they lack the means to express in concrete terms the requirements of their imagination. It is the constant struggle with refractory material to realise an idea which provides for Miriam and Nick, at

<sup>1</sup> The Portrait of a Lady (1881), I, 246.

<sup>2</sup> The Portrait of a Lady (1881), II, 132-133.

least, the salutary abrasion of reality.

James asserts that it is Isabel's teeming imagination that is responsible for the worst complications of her dilemma. The same may well be said of Strether who has, we are told, "and would always have felt he had, imagination galore."<sup>1</sup> On both it confers their peculiar capacity for reflection. James comments in the Preface as well as in the novel on Strether's habit of intense reflection.<sup>2</sup> Its importance for the novelist needs no stressing. It is a faculty which belongs as much to the treatment as to the subject itself. And, as we have seen, it is in The Ambassadors that James avails himself most fully of its potentialities by filtering events exclusively through his hero's consciousness. Strether's response to experience, not surprisingly, has much in common with the artist's handling of his subject as James saw it. Commenting on Sargent's gift of quick perception to which "a certain faculty of brooding reflection is added," he goes on "... I mean the quality in the light of which the artist sees deep into his subject, undergoes it, absorbs it, discovers in it new things that were not on the surface, becomes patient with it, and almost reverent ...."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 310.

<sup>2</sup> AN, p. 316 and The Ambassadors (1903), v. 67. Subsequent references to this edition of the novel will appear in the text.

<sup>3</sup> "John S. Sargent" (1893). Reprinted in The Painter's Eye, ed. John L. Sweeney (1956), p. 228.

It is this rare and subtle capacity of Strether's which makes the novel what James calls it, a "drama of discrimination".<sup>1</sup> He stresses its incalculable importance to the novelist in the Preface to The Princess Casamassima: "the person capable of feeling in the given case more than another of what is to be felt for it, and so serving in the highest degree to record it dramatically and objectively, is the only sort of person on whom we can count not to betray, to cheapen or, as we say, give away, the value and beauty of the thing."<sup>2</sup> For all this, in spite of James's delighted indulgence in this "rich rigour" of technique, Strether's discriminations, like Rowland's, have no absolute validity. As elsewhere in James we have instead a complex of values. Throughout The Ambassadors Strether's values are to be held in equilibrium with James's own, which are expressed obliquely through various modes of kinetic alienation. Simultaneously with Strether's sense of things we apprehend James's appraisal of it, rendered perhaps in a turn of phrase, a wry association or an ironic echo. In this way James's values serve as the control for Strether's and establish the dominant criteria in the novel.

Unlike Isabel and Rowland, Strether does not come to Europe bent on aesthetic adventure. He is bound on a mission

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 316.

<sup>2</sup> AN, p. 67.

of moral reclamation. In the Preface James dwells with amused irony on his hero's predicament. He tells us that Strether appears in the social jungle of Paris, "primed with a moral scheme of the most approved pattern" fresh from the heart of New England.<sup>1</sup> As Mrs. Newsome's ambassador, he is committed to a strict code of "conscious propriety" — what Henry James Senior liked to call "flagrant" morality"<sup>2</sup> — already familiar to us as the moral climate of Northampton, Mass. There is the same wary suspicion of beauty and pleasure, a suspicion Strether finds so hard to shake off. He tells Maria Gostrey that "Woollett isn't sure it ought to enjoy" (i, 13). Later he taxes himself severely with "his odious inbred suspicion of any form of beauty" (x, 143). Ironically, in view of his subsequent illusions, he assures himself that he will never get at the truth until he rids himself of this prejudice. His impulse at first to indulge in moral simplifications has the same origin. Woollett prescribes for its citizens a system of moral categories, a Procrustean bed, to which all experience must be violently conformed. Chad Newsome's prolonged stay in Paris is given this summary treatment. Strether explains the Woollett-Newsome view for Maria's benefit, undeterred by her tone of amused scepticism. There can be no

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 315.

<sup>2</sup> Henry James, A Small Boy and Others (1913), p. 72.

doubt that Chad is in the toils of a woman "base, venal — out of the streets" (iv, 41). The London theatre has already supplied a satisfying image. In the play "there was a bad woman in a yellow frock, who made a pleasant, weak, good-looking young man in perpetual evening dress do the most dreadful things" (iv, 40). It is ironic that Strether even at this stage is anxiously aware of the indulgence he feels for the victim of the yellow frock. Much is to happen before "the yellow frock" becomes the chief focus for this sympathy. A fundamental irony of the book consists in the disparity between Woollett's narrowly accurate assessment of Chad's situation and Strether's aberrant rationalisations of it, which none the less reflect much of the complex truth.

The moral totalitarianism embodied by Mrs. Newsome is a pervasive and unequivocal value throughout the novel. Although her influence has, as James puts it, "to reckon with the Atlantic Ocean, the General Post Office and the extravagant curve of the globe" (ix, 129), there is never any diminution in the "moral pressure" Strether comes to see as her essence. The rigidity characteristic of her — she didn't "admit surprises" (xxix, 392) is displayed also by her henchmen, Waymarsh and Sarah Pocock. Soon after their first meeting



Strether envisages the "posture of prolonged impermanence" in which Waymarsh was "to sit through the ordeal of Europe" (ii, 20). There is starkness in the pose Sarah adopts much later when she calls on Strether at the hotel to deliver her ultimatum: he notices "the immobility with which she held her tall parasol-stick upright and at arm's length, quite as if she had struck the place to plant her flag" (xxvii, 359). She and Waymarsh project vividly the absolutism to which Strether goes on paying tribute even after his defection. In fact he reflects its moral code all the more sharply as he diverges from it.

From the beginning we realise that Strether's view of his mission is not as simple as it seems. The ambivalence is there in the opening sentence which gives us our first hint that he is glad to have his meeting with Waymarsh put off for a time. His first hours in England give him a feeling of remarkable freedom, to be defined more precisely later on as "an extraordinary sense of escape" (v, 60). This new exhilaration is expressed in his determination as soon as he has landed to give himself up to immediate pleasures, even if this does turn out just then to be no more than a half-day spent beside the Mersey. To the exiled Waymarsh Europe appears only as his susceptibility to momentary experience. In Chester he had

"an elaborate engine for dissociating the confined American from that indispensable knowledge" (v, 59) of what was happening in the world. His wilful discomfort menaces Strether's own enjoyment, represents in fact what Strether himself with one of his humorous flashes envisages as "his doom" (i, 16). James makes great play in the novel with the moral incompatibility of the two men. Early on it provides him with a means of defining dramatically the negations of Strether's ambivalence: Waymarsh's disapproval provides a useful measure of his friend's first deviations from the Woollett norm. Its positive aspects are brought out most conspicuously by Maria Gostrey. As Strether prepares himself for their first outing together, he is acutely conscious of embarking at that moment on an entirely new way of life. He has already felt prompted to take "a sharper survey of the elements of Appearance than he had for a long time been moved to make" (i, 7). The acquaintance promotes in him an involuntary comparison with Mrs. Newsome which for a time resists formulation. He gets only as far as: "Well, she's more subtly civilised --!" (i, 8) Three days later at dinner with Maria, Strether allows the comparison its full reverberation, as perceptions crowd in. The occasion provides the fullest revelation we have had of his susceptibility to sensuous experience. In Chester he had

responded with ready senses to "the ordered English garden, in the freshness of the day"; he liked "the sound, under his feet, of the tight, fine gravel, packed with the chronic damp, and (he) had the idlest eye for the deep smoothness of turf and the clear curves of paths" (iii, 27). Now he rises easily enough to the allure of "the rose-coloured shades and the small table and the soft fragrance of the lady" (iv, 37). He notes every detail of Maria's appearance: her dress, "'cut down', as he believed the term to be, in respect to shoulders and bosom, in a manner quite other than Mrs. Newsome's"; the broad velvet band round her throat "with an antique jewel — he was rather complacently sure it was antique — attached to it in front" (iv, 38). The contrast with Mrs. Newsome is insistent: "Mrs. Newsome's dress was never in any degree 'cut down', and she never wore round her throat a broad red velvet band." He is aware with some misgivings of new complications in his vision: his observations seem disconcertingly irrelevant to the task he has in hand. The moral significance of the occasion is implicitly suggested by his analogies. He sees Maria as Mary Stuart to Mrs. Newsome's Queen Elizabeth. Elaboration is unnecessary: Mrs. Newsome, austere in her black silk dress and ruff, in her role of the

Virgin Queen acquires suddenly for Strether a vague pathos. Mary Stuart of course provides a telling contrast.

Such oscillation is only the beginning of Strether's dilemma. In Paris the tempo quickens. As a result of the impressions which assail him there he displays a startling volatility. All that has gone before he looks back on as but his "foretaste". His primary apprehension of the city may well be called sensual, as James makes clear: "the air had a taste as of something mixed with art, something that presented nature as a white-capped master-chef" (v, 59). On only his second morning while Waymarsh consolidates his refuge in the bank, Strether finds his in the Luxembourg Gardens "on a penny chair from which terraces, alleys, vistas, fountains, little trees in green tubs, little women in white caps and shrill little girls at play all sunnily 'composed' together", and he passes an hour "in which the cup of his impressions seemed truly to overflow" (v, 60). Later, back at his hotel after his first meeting with Little Bilham, the Paris evening was "in the very taste of the soup, in the goodness, as he was innocently pleased to think, of the wine, in the pleasant coarse texture of the napkin and the crunch of the thick-crust bread" (vi, 78). All is grist to Strether's aesthetic mill; and the qualification

"innocently" here indicates nicely the complacent if trifling delusion.

Paris casts its most potent spell as Strether begins to participate in the life of the city. Breakfast with Little Bilham, made possible by Chad's contrived absence, has a captivating effect, though he does wonder whether he has been lured into a trap. The importance of the occasion for him lies in the conviction that "he was in the presence of new measures, other standards, a different scale of relations" (vi, 85). The visit to Little Bilham's rooms in the artist quarter has a glamour which owes much to his acquaintance with "melancholy Murger, with Francine and Musette and Rodophe" (v, 68) in the pages of the now faded lemon-covered books which had been the booty of his visit to Paris more than twenty-five years before. He gives himself up freely to the enacted romance of Bohemian life. In such a context he can assimilate without difficulty the fact that Little Bilham's only occupation is "an occupation declined" (vii, 94). He can also enjoy Maria's humorously exalted praise of Little Bilham's idleness in a tone he comes to appreciate as that of "talk for talk's sake" (xxv, 338). It is a view worthy of Nash: "He won't do the least dreadful little thing. We

shall continue to enjoy him just as he is" (vii, 98). In Maria's entresol he extends his glimpse of the passion for spoils, so alien to the Woollett way of life. He had already experienced its appeal in Chester where the shop windows had made him sharply aware that he lacked the acquisitive instinct. All the same his delight in Maria's rooms bears the New England stamp: "the lust of the eyes and the pride of life had indeed thus their temple. It was the innermost nook of the shrine — as brown as a pirate's cave. In the brownness were glints of gold; patches of purple were in the gloom; objects, all, that caught through the muslin, with their high rarity, the light of the low windows" (vii,89).

He finds aesthetic satisfaction also in the grace of personal and social decorum; it sounds a recurrent if muted note in his experience. He recognises it first in Maria. Her "perfect plain propriety, an expansive subdued suitability" (i, 7) impresses him as something quite new. On his walk with her the first evening he becomes almost morbidly conscious of deficiencies in his own sense of what is fitting. He debates whether he should have worn gloves and then feels quite needlessly guilty of "a deviation in one of those directions he couldn't yet measure" (i, 11). He relishes the

opportunity, when it occurs, to play his own part in an act of decorum, as James almost comically reveals. The occasion is meaningful in more than one respect. It is Strether's first encounter with Chad — in a box at the Français. Because Chad makes his entrance after the curtain has risen speech is effectually quenched. In these circumstances it comes to Strether — and James interpolates suggestively "being a thing of the sort that did come to him" —

... that these were the accidents of a high civilization; the imposed tribute to propriety, the frequent exposure to conditions, usually brilliant, in which relief has to await its time. Relief was never quite near at hand for kings, queens, comedians and other such people, and though you might be yourself not exactly one of those, you could yet, in leading the life of high pressure, guess a little how they sometimes felt. It was truly the life of high pressure that Strether had seemed to feel himself leading while he sat there .... (vii, 101).

Strether's conclusions are of course perfectly sound; it is the disparity between them and the comparatively trivial incident which provokes them that is so revealing. The romantic pitch at which Strether is living transfigures the mundane.

Chad's superb aplomb, his easy manner and general air of knowing how to live make the strongest impact on Strether.

His first startled recognition remains a cherished sensation. In London he had dismissed Maria's suggestion that Paris might have refined Chad, but he is now quite ready to own that this has indeed been the case, to be enjoyed for its rarity. His transformation into a poised, urbane man of the world proves a rich source of aesthetic pleasure to Strether who is by now already qualified to appreciate the finer shades of social behaviour. The trace of shyness he detects in Chad is to be attributed to "mere good taste" (viii, 112). It is a judgement reminiscent of one of Isabel's, for whom Osmond's shyness, "the shyness of ticklish nerves and fine perceptions — was perfectly consistent with the best breeding. Indeed, it was almost a proof of superior qualities."<sup>1</sup> Isabel only anticipates Strether in the portentous inference she draws. They both find in social manner of this kind an element of their ideal. Strether's anxiety to conform to the approved style comes out with some absurdity as he looks forward to meeting Madame de Vionnet and her daughter. Prepared by his talk with Maria to consider them ladies, he solemnly resolves that "they themselves should be, to the extent of his responsibility, in the presence of a gentleman."<sup>2</sup> By the time Chad

<sup>1</sup> The Portrait of a Lady (1881), II, 73. forced to

<sup>2</sup> The Ambassadors (1903), x, 144. My italics.



is ready to introduce him to the de Vionnets, Strether has confidently accepted Little Bilham's assurance that the attachment is a virtuous one. On the strength of Chad's metamorphosis, in spite of the warnings of Maria and Little Bilham, he is now convinced that "Chad was ... as good as he thought. It seemed somehow as if he couldn't but be as good from the moment he wasn't as bad" (ix, 127).

Before Strether's adventure is fairly under way Paris has become for him a positive entity, a palpable presence to be reckoned with. It is represented pervasively in terms of light, an image that recurs constantly through the novel. To Strether the city seems a "vast bright Babylon, like some huge iridescent object, a jewel brilliant and hard, in which parts were not to be discriminated nor differences comfortably marked. It twinkled and trembled and melted together; and what seemed all surface one moment seemed all depth the next" (v, 67). By the time the new ambassadors have arrived he is even more keenly aware of the property of such light, "a cool, full studio-light, becoming, yet treacherous" (xx, 268). He had registered fearfully from the start, with his commission in mind that to give himself up to the spell of Paris would be to undermine his authority, and he is soon forced to

recognise that his imagination has slipped its leash. His misgivings at the sorcery of Paris are amply reinforced by his friends' warnings, but he is heedless of his condition. At Gloriani's reception he can impute to Parisians an excess of the visual sense without apparently suspecting that he is similarly affected. Yet Miss Barrace even analyses the state for him: "We're all looking at each other — and in the light of Paris one sees what things resemble. That's what the light of Paris seems always to show. It's the fault of the light of Paris — dear old light!" (x, 153).

The effect of the seductive light of Paris on Strether's already beguiled senses is displayed most brilliantly at Gloriani's garden party. His experience there affects him as a revelation, the impetus of which is felt in everything that comes after. It also provokes the outburst which James tells us was the *donnée* of the tale. Even beforehand Strether is prepared for something special and gives himself up to pleasurable expectations. From the beginning his fellow guests, "their liberty, their intensity, their variety, their conditions at large, were in fusion in the admirable medium of the scene" (x, 144). The ancient hotel in the Faubourg Saint Germain with its secluded garden provides a rare setting.

appearing to talk nonsense" (x, 146).

The consummation comes for him in the few moments he spends with the sculptor, as all his recent feelings and impressions merge in a flash. He has "a general sense of glory," precipitated by his awareness of Gloriani's distinction which crowns him "with the light, with the romance of glory" (x, 145). He makes the most of the experience, "opening to it ... all the windows of his mind ... letting this rather gray interior drink in for once the sun of a clime not marked in his old geography" (x, 145-146). The pretentious language James uses here subtly questions the truth of Strether's impression. For him the confrontation with Gloriani is "the deepest intellectual sounding to which he had ever been exposed", and he is by no means sure that he has not been found wanting. But it is not the first time that Strether has felt himself the object of such scrutiny. One of his earliest impressions of Maria is of her eyes which "had taken hold of him straightway, measuring him up and down, as if they knew how; as if he were human material they had already in some sort handled" (i, 8). James hints at the exorbitant in Strether's view of the encounter when he tells us that "he was in fact quite to cherish his vision of it, to play with it in idle hours; only speaking of it to no one and quite aware he couldn't have spoken without appearing to talk nonsense" (x, 146).

In spite of the scepticism which riddles this episode, its meaning for Strether is powerfully and sympathetically conveyed. This may perhaps be put down to James's recollection of a boyhood experience of his own, something like Strether's, later described in A Small Boy and Others. He tells us there that in the Galerie d'Apollon he had "inhaled ... a general sense of glory. The glory meant ever so many things at once, not only beauty and art and supreme design, but history and fame and power, the world in fine raised to the richest and noblest expression."<sup>1</sup> Though Gloriani's garden provides a very different setting, it does impress Strether as "a chamber of state" (x, 145). For him and the young James "the rest of monumental Paris" frames the scene "as a told story ... a vast bright gage, even at moments a felt adventure, of experience."<sup>2</sup> Both are aware of an onslaught of images "too thick for prompt discrimination" (x, 146). The effect of the occasion for James had been to fix for the senses "their supreme symbol of the fair or the strange". And the gallery became for years what he terms "a splendid scene of things, even of the quite irrelevant, or, as might be, almost unworthy."<sup>3</sup> For Strether too the scene is symbolic, but he

<sup>1</sup> Page 361.

<sup>2</sup> A Small Boy and Others, pp. 360-361.

<sup>3</sup> A Small Boy and Others, p. 362.

is incapable at this stage of dismissing its components as either "quite irrelevant" or "almost unworthy". James claimed that his early experience of the Galerie d'Apollon initiated him into an awareness of "Style". In the same way the afternoon Strether spends at Gloriani's is for him the revelation of a style of life which seems to answer his ideal.

The repercussion of the experience does not come until later the same afternoon when he finds himself alone. The effect is then tumultuous. Unceremoniously separated from Madame de Vionnet minutes after they have been introduced, Strether is left reflecting on the discourtesy with which he has been treated. Characteristically he is conscious of it as "a trick played with a social art of which he ... felt himself no master" (xi, 159). But he does not register its bearing on his evolving values. He is overwhelmed instead by a sense of inadequacy and of irreparable deprivation. This finds immediate expression in his urgent though obviously unnecessary charge to Little Bilham: "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to" (xi, 161). It is worth noting that James sees this as delivered "officiously."<sup>1</sup> Little Bilham, by Strether's current criteria, obviously has no need of such advice. It can be

<sup>1</sup> AN, p. 307.

justified only by the issue it gives to Strether's mingled pain and frustration at missed opportunity and wasted youth. The sophisticated social exchanges he has witnessed at Gloriani's represent for him a richer and more stimulating life than he has led in Woollett. But the discovery has come too late. He recognises that he lacks irremediably the poise and urbanity needed to compete in such a milieu. This is brought home to him as he sees the Duchess, in spite of her superbly insolent manner, meet her match in Gloriani. The deft appropriation of Madame de Vionnet, her own failure to introduce him to her companions, supply him with ready evidence of his social and sexual shortcomings. Gloriani's way with the Duchess in its assertive masculinity comes to him as a hint of the jungle; he finds himself envying "the glossy male tiger, magnificently marked" (xi, 162). Suddenly he can formulate the desire that had stirred obscurely in him while he was with the sculptor. Chad had figured then as "a kind of link for hopeless fancy, an implication of possibilities — oh, if everything had been different!" (x, 146) Now he provides the focus for Strether's ideal. <sup>¶ Para</sup> Once acknowledged, his sense of deprivation adds poignancy to his experience of Paris. The city, like Chad, projects brilliantly what he has missed. The peculiar power Paris has to confront him with his lost youth is brought out

plainly by James towards the end of the novel when Strether spends an hour in Chad's room late one night after Waymarsh and the Pococks have left. As the life of the city vibrates around him, he realises for himself that

... the main truth of the actual appeal of everything was none the less that everything represented the substance of his loss, put it within reach, within touch, made it, to a degree it had never been, an affair of the senses. That was what it became for him at this singular time, the youth he had long ago missed — a queer, concrete presence, full of mystery, yet full of reality, which he could handle, taste, smell, the deep breathing of which he could positively hear. (xxviii, 368)

But Strether is not one to wallow in nostalgia; compensation takes a different form for him. Europe offers him the chance to be young as he never had been before, or at least to enjoy some of the benefits of youth, and he is determined to make the most of the opportunity. He tells Maria: " ... it's my surrender, it's my tribute, to youth. One puts that in where one can — it has to come in somewhere, if only out of the lives, the conditions, the feelings of other persons" (xviii, 251). In Chad and Madame de Vionnet he finds the youth he had failed to grasp so long ago.

(The life which he enjoys vicariously in Chad and Madame de Vionnet is rich in the satisfactions he desires. His

relationship with Madame de Vionnet in fact provides the most strenuous exercise yet for his aesthetic sense. Prompted by Maria, he is already prepared to encounter an admirable woman; Chad is enough evidence for that. Certainly the impression Madame de Vionnet makes at their first meeting is entirely reassuring — and from the moral point of view. Strether feels her "common humanity" (xi, 158): she seems to differ scarcely at all from Mrs. Newsome or even from Mrs. Pocock. This opinion soon changes though: only next day he is struck by her rarity. It is not long before he begins to discern in her the variety which provokes the comparison with Cleopatra. But he seems oblivious to its implications. Her allure for Strether stems partly from her genius for dress. He is always vividly aware of her appearance. He notices, for instance, "her discreet and delicate dress" (xxi, 280) for the morning call on Mrs. Pocock; she impresses him then as she had at their meeting in Notre Dame as dressed with unerring taste. Her costumes are highly evocative. His last view of her in a white dress set off by a black fichu elicits, as so often, a romantic analogy. This time he notes that "Madame Roland, on the scaffold, must have worn something like it" (xxxii, 421). In Notre Dame the effect had been of "some



fine, firm, concentrated heroine of an old story ... renewing her courage, renewing her clearness, in splendidly protected meditation" (xvi, 217-218). Here James interposes to point out that "it was the way of nine-tenths of Strether's current impressions to act as recalls of things imagined". We see this same process at work in his response to Jeanne de Vionnet. His admiration for her is from the beginning tinged with deference for her breeding. She figures for him as "a small old-time princess of whom nothing was known but that she had died young" (xiv, 191). In this way his relation with Madame de Vionnet is consolidated, nourished by things which are, strictly speaking, irrelevant.

Ultimately, as James outlines in his "Scenario" for the novel, Madame de Vionnet comes to represent for Strether "most of the things that make the charm of civilisation as he now revises and imaginatively reconstructs, morally reconsiders, so to speak, civilisation."<sup>1</sup> His captivation is complete by the time the POCOcks loom. He now claims that a relation with such a woman can be neither vulgar nor coarse. He sees Madame de Vionnet as Chad's saviour and mentor with respect to "his manners and morals, his character and life" (xv, 209). He is thus led to make what amounts to a moral

<sup>1</sup> N, p. 396.

affirmation, tempered only by a wry sense of inconsistency. He asserts that if Chad gives up Madame de Vionnet "he ought to be ashamed of himself" (xv, 212). This declaration marks a revolution in his consciousness. Aesthetic values have come to represent for him under the spell of Paris a sublime moral reality. And there can be no doubt that Madame de Vionnet is, as James suggests, the main cause of this volte-face.<sup>1</sup>

The effect she has on Strether, though perhaps rare, is by no means unique. In a passage in Beauchamp's Career George Meredith gives what is a pertinent account of "the ideal woman, the woman of art, whose beauty, grace, and wit offer her to our contemplation in an atmosphere above the ordinary conditions of the world." His analysis provides an illuminating commentary on Strether's relationship with Madame de Vionnet. According to Meredith, only France and Greece have produced "the perfect woman, the woman who conquers time, as she conquers men, by virtue of the divinity of her blood; and she, as little as illustrious heroes, is to be judged by the laws and standards of lesser creatures. In fashioning her, nature and art have worked together: in her, poetry walks the earth. The question of good or bad is entirely to be put aside: it is a

<sup>1</sup> N, p. 396.

rustic's impertinence — a bourgeois' vulgarity. She is pre-eminent, voilà tout. Has she grace and beauty? Then you are answered: such possessions are an assurance that her influence in the aggregate must be for good."<sup>1</sup> The passage has a further interest in that it also represents the point of view of Monsieur Livret, a man of Strether's generation, "a scholarly little French gentleman, going down the grey slopes of sixty to second childishness" and occurs in the context of the trip Nevil makes along the river in the rowing boat with Renée, whose beauty has the same kind of power to enchant. Though there is no close analogy between this and the river scene at the end of The Ambassadors, both incidents are fraught with similar implications for the bystander involved.

The change that has taken place in Strether can best be measured in the contrast he presents not only to Waymarsh but also to the Pococks in their total experience of Paris. Waymarsh, after preliminary shudders on the brink, Sarah, and particularly Jim, immerse themselves freely in the instant delights of the city. Morally and aesthetically, though, they remain untouched — or unpolluted, as they might be more inclined to put it. The unconscious travesty that Jim provides of Strether's dramatic

<sup>1</sup> George Meredith, Beauchamp's Career (1876), II, 104.

charge to Little Bilham: "... I want to live while I am here too" (xx, 274), not only questions the values expressed in Strether's outburst but also helps to define the difference in sensibility between the two men. Although unable to formulate to himself "his being changed and queer", Strether is all the same acutely aware of the transformation: "it had taken place — the process — somewhere deep down" (xx, 267). His sense of the difference comes out in his attitude to his friends. He feels towards someone as inhibited as Waymarsh in the light of his own freedom "full of allowances and charities in respect to those cabined and confined" (xix, 254). He compares himself happily with Jim: "he was different from Pocock; he had affirmed himself differently; and he was held, after all, in higher esteem" (xx, 272-273). The smack of priggishness and complacency in these discriminations is perhaps inevitable; to be explained as a consequence of his own recent conversion. They may well provide an emotional compensation for those other self-appraisals as a result of which he feels diminished. Even with Little Bilham he is humiliated by his discovery that he can learn moral poise from someone so much his junior. There is no doubt that Strether does need to view himself with approval. His criteria, though, are exacting and owe little to the Woollett code.

through a series of adjustments, triumphantly discarding  
 one only to restore the process  
 The contrast between Strether and the New England  
 contingent is most marked, of course, in their reactions to  
 Chad. Waymarsh and Jim seem unaware of the aesthetic meta-  
 morphosis which has charmed Strether; while Sarah, far from  
 appreciating the change in Chad, pronounces it with belli-  
 gerent emphasis "hideous" (xxvii, 365). Strether's attempt  
 to explain their mistake only aggravates her antagonism:  
 "Our general state of mind had proceeded, on its side, from  
 our funny ignorance, our funny misconceptions and confusions --  
 from which, since then, an inexorable tide of light seems to  
 have floated us into our perhaps still funnier knowledge"  
 (xxvii, 362). He views his new insight as nothing less than  
 a revelation; this at least is how he describes for Sarah the  
 impression made on him by Madame de Vionnet. He becomes  
 irritatingly precious as he tries to get through to her: "I  
 mean ... that she might have affected you by her exquisite  
 amiability -- a real revelation, it has seemed to myself; her  
 high rarity, her distinction of every sort (xxvii, 363). But  
 Sarah clings tenaciously to their first raw assumption, flaunts  
 it in fact as a challenge: "Do you consider her even an apology  
 for a decent woman? (xxvii, 363)

(ix, 10) Sarah's immovability highlights Strether's remarkable  
 power of adjusting to fresh experience. He moves towards vision

through a series of misapprehensions, triumphantly discarding one only to replace it with another. He explains the process for Maria: "I came out to find myself in presence of new facts — facts that have kept striking me as less and less met by our old reasons" (xviii, 246). It is as he vainly attempts to accommodate the "new facts" to the "old reasons" that misconceptions proliferate. His grasp of the facts takes many forms: he frequently feels aware of "truth spreading like a flood" (xii, 166), and James spares the reader none of the ironic effect. Chad's "virtuous attachment" has successively for Strether two objects, first Jeanne de Vionnet and then her mother. The grounds for his assumptions are unmistakably aesthetic. The sight of Chad escorting "a young girl in a white dress and a softly plumed white hat" (xi, 163) at Gloriani's party banishes all doubt. The spectacle of Madame de Vionnet at prayer in Notre Dame bolsters admirably his most recent conclusion about her connection with Chad: it can only be innocent. But he is unconsciously selective in his quest for truth. His aesthetic bias combined with his "too interpretative innocence" (xxxii, 418) blind him effectively. He fails to assimilate what Maria and Little Bilham give him of the truth, as for instance that Chad "isn't used . . . to being so good" (ix, 132). And he fails to seize on the trivial but none the less definitive clues that belie the appearances thrust on him. Madame de Vionnet's betrayal on her part of

"a domesticated state" (xv, 201) at Chad's dinner party makes Strether start but does not give rise to reflection. In the same way when Chad displays towards her "a kind of unconscious insolence of proprietorship" (xix, 262) the tell-tale glimpse does not lead to speculation. But Strether's readiness to reject discredited views, to substitute one interpretation of the facts for another, however mistaken, reveals a capacity for vision. It is an aspect of that moral spontaneity which James prized so highly. Strether acknowledges frankly to others as well as to himself the collapse of each flimsy theory, becoming in the process ever more adept in discrimination. His talk with Mamie at the hotel, though only superficial, makes him realise that she had observed and pondered the change in Chad and that she wants him no more than he wants her (xxv, 338). Later this needs revision in the light of what Chad says of Mamie: "Well, I'd like her if she'd like me" (xxviii, 377). With this admission Chad's "knowing how to live" begins to acquire for Strether other, more dubious, connotations.

It is paradoxically, as he indulges that practice of his which does most to foster illusion, to sustain the "lie in the charming affair" (xxxii, 411), that Strether develops the power to see. I mean of course his habit of appropriating

experience in aesthetic form. James's use in this novel of language and imagery drawn from art has been the subject of a number of studies which make detailed treatment here superfluous.<sup>1</sup> But it is necessary to note the particular use he makes of these devices to suggest the quality of Strether's vision and its significance in his total evaluation of experience. James gives us simultaneously what Strether sees and what he makes of what he sees, the disparity between the two supplying his appreciation as storyteller of this process. Strether's bent for shaping experience into pictures can be seen in Rowland and also in Isabel, whose thoughts, James tells us, could evoke "a multitude of interesting pictures . . . . both landscapes and figure pieces."<sup>2</sup> In all of them it is an expression of the artist's impulse to create form from the farrago of life. Denied an objective medium, each is led to work in life. Again and again people and things fuse in Strether's imagination to make a picture: a portrait, a landscape, an interior, a still life or a combination of these. It is a strictly selective process and his New

<sup>1</sup> See especially Edwin T. Bowden, The Themes of Henry James (Yale, 1956); Viola Hopkins, "Visual Art Devices and Parallels in the Fiction of Henry James", and William M. Gibson, "Metaphor in the Plot of The Ambassadors", both printed in Modern Judgements: Henry James, ed. Tony Tanner (1968).

<sup>2</sup> The Portrait of a Lady (1881), II, 148.



England friends scarcely ever figure as subjects: they offer no cue to his imagination. However there is the view, recalled from his Woollett days, of Mrs. Newsome in the guise of Queen Elizabeth. Whatever this impression had once meant for Strether, in its recollected form it is felt only as a nudge from his conscience. It is like his other pictures in that it communicates a truth, but it is not a source of aesthetic satisfaction: he is not inclined to savour it.

The pictorial potentiality of the de Vionnets is suggested at their first appearance. Strether anticipates that at Gloriani's party Madame de Vionnet and her daughter will probably be "on view" (x, 143) to him, but he is not made uneasy by the element of showmanship thus imputed to Chad. He gazes at Jeanne "as at a picture" (xi, 164) and on another occasion envisages her as "a faint pastel in an oval frame" (xiv, 191). The romantic aura with which he invests her inhibits direct dealing and he recoils from the notion of her having "a young man": "one didn't treat such a person as a maidservant suspected of a 'follower'" (xiv, 192). It is on Jeanne's account in fact that Strether, instead of detaching himself from the de Vionnet cause, contrives only to connect himself more closely. The impression made by Madame de Vionnet

Henry James, "The Impressionists, 1876," reprinted in *The Painter's Eye*, p. 114.

on the same occasion exists as a portrait in its own right — a portrait rich in subtle colours and textures. It represents Strether's idea of her as the femme du monde: he sees her head as "a notion of the antique, on an old, precious medal, some silver coin of the Renaissance" (xv, 200). Such an image, aloof from flesh and blood implications, enables him to see her as Cleopatra without so much as a qualm.

His most fervent moments of experience have this intense pictorial quality. There is his déjeuner with Madame de Vionnet with its touches of colour lambent in the clear air, reminiscent of a Renoir.<sup>1</sup> He no longer feels the need to justify what he is doing: he "saw reasons enough in the mere way the bright, clean, ordered water-side life came in at the open window" (xvi, 222). For an hour at least Strether's "proper field", like an Impressionist painter's, has become "simply the actual".<sup>2</sup> There is too his vigil in Chad's rooms with "the great flare of the lighted city, rising high, spending itself afar", as a back-drop for "the mellowest lamplight and the easiest chair ... placed at his disposal by Baptiste — subtlest of servants; the novel half uncut, the novel

<sup>1</sup> F.O. Matthiessen makes this point in Henry James: The Major Phase (Galaxy Books, 1963), p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Henry James, "The Impressionists, 1876," reprinted in The Painter's Eye, p. 114.

lemon-coloured and tender, with the ivory knife athwart it like a dagger in a contadina's hair ..." (xxviii, 367). The superlatives "mellowest", "easiest", "subtlest", and the incongruity of the epithet "tender" and of the final simile furnish a critical counterpoint to a richly evocative composition. Such a scene, pleasant and homely, almost rustic, of a place and a clatter of sabots from some coach-house on the other side of the court. (xiii, 182)

The settings in which his subjects move are an integral part of Strether's pictures and contribute significantly to the total effect. This is especially, but not exclusively, true of Madame de Vionnet. "He liked the place she lived in, the picture that, each time, squared itself, large and high and clear around her: every occasion of seeing it was a pleasure of a different shade" (xxxii, 418-419). His first visit in the rue de Bellechasse speaks to him of an ancient tradition of cherished values, of beautiful passivity "under the spell of transmission" (xiii, 180). He notes signs of a fine discrimination at work. These impressions have for him a moral meaning, an air of "supreme respectability, the consciousness, small, still, reserved, but none the less distinct and diffused, of private honour" (xiii, 181). They fuse to make a picture eloquent at its centre with an intense stillness, felt more sharply by contrast with the hint of homely activity beyond: She was seated, near the fire, on a small stuffed

and fringed chair, one of the few modern articles in the room; and she leaned back in it with her hands clasped in her lap and no movement, in all her person, but the fine, prompt play of her deep young face. The fire, under the low white marble, undraped and academic, had burnt down to the silver ashes of light wood; one of the windows, at a distance, stood open to the mildness and stillness, out of which, in the short pauses, came the faint sound, pleasant and homely, almost rustic, of a plash and a clatter of sabots from some coach-house on the other side of the court. (xiii, 182)

Such immobility is not to be mistaken for the fixity which characterises Mrs. Newsome and Mrs. Pocock. There is nothing in it of the defensive or hostile. Madame de Vionnet's stillness is the relaxed and receptive stillness which belongs to contemplation. Because it is readily responsive it can communicate immediately. Strether knows at once that she is one of those rare women "whose very presence, look, voice, the mere contemporaneous fact of whom ... made a relation of mere recognition" (xiii, 185). Her stillness moreover suggests the means by which perpetual values are preserved and handed down from one generation to the next. It has in fact the stasis of art.

Strether's first sight of Chad's house is similarly expressive. It embarrasses him by its elegance, compelling his admiration. He soon makes out that its peculiar quality, a quality "produced by measure and balance, the fine relation

of part to part and space to space, was probably — aided by the presence of ornament as positive as it was discreet, and by the complexion of the stone, a cold, fair gray, warmed and polished a little by life — neither more nor less than a case of distinction, such a case as he could only feel, unexpectedly, as a sort of delivered challenge" (v, 72-73). This anticipates vividly the impression that Chad himself is to make on Strether, an impression later to be analysed in sensuous and aesthetic terms. There is an obvious correspondence of qualities, particularly of form and texture:

... that he was smooth was as marked as in the taste of a sauce or in the rub of a hand. The effect of it was general — it had retouched his features, drawn them with a cleaner line. It had cleared his eyes and settled his colour and polished his fine square teeth — the main ornament of his face; and at the same time that it had given him a form and a surface, almost a design, it had toned his voice, established his accent, encouraged his smile to more play and his other motions to less." (viii, 112-113)

It is hardly surprising then that Chad's way with his sister and her family should later affect Strether "as he might have been affected by some light, pleasant, perfect work of art" (xx, 270). The fact that it is the exterior of the house and not the interior which furnishes Strether with

this impression of Chad underlines his susceptibility to appearances and also supplies useful comment on Chad's nature. The concentration on symmetry, ornament and polish is more than enough to alert the reader at once to something specious in such an appeal.

The day Strether spends in the country is a superlative demonstration of his bent for experiencing things pictorially. On this occasion he sets out deliberately to recapture the glamour of a small Lambinet that had made a deep impression on him years before at a Boston art dealer's. The process he engages in is made quite explicit: the artefact he aims to create is to be the picture he had yearned to buy. He sees himself beforehand assisting at "the restoration to nature" not just of the picture but of the total experience. He is well aware that he would not wish to see the original again: that might invite disillusion. The remembered charm now lies more in the romance of the occasion — "the only adventure of his life in connection with the purchase of a work of art" (xxx, 397). All through the day he is keenly alive to the frame which must contain the experience and he remains — at least until evening — "sufficiently" in command of the scene. Things go well: not once does he overstep the

<sup>1</sup> Lubbock, II, 303.

enclosing lines of the gilt frame: "the poplars and willows, the reeds and river ... fell into a composition, full of felicity, within them; the sky was silver and turquoise and varnish; the village on the left was white and the church on the right was gray; it was all there, in short -- it was what he wanted: it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet. Moreover he was freely walking about in it" (xxx, 398). In a much quoted passage from a letter to H.G. Wells James was to write: "It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process."<sup>1</sup> In this episode we watch Strether savouring this "force and beauty" to the full.

But his artefact is not just a picture; it becomes before the day is out more truly a mise en scène, vivid with his own drama. Part of its charm after all is that "he was freely walking about in it." He makes out for himself that "it was essentially, more than anything else, a scene and a stage, that the very air of the play was in the rustle of the willows and the tone of the sky" (xxx, 403). This latent sense of drama enhances for Strether the luxury of the experience; it

<sup>1</sup> Lubbock, II, 508.

is in fact part of its spell. This is by no means the first time that he has the sense of participating in a drama. Right at the beginning of his adventure he had seen the affair he had come to look into as "Chad's own private stage" (v, 66). Within a few weeks he finds himself with his own role to play in a piece which has Chad and Madame de Vionnet for its chief characters. The scene enacted before Waymarsh and Mrs. Pocock when Madame de Vionnet pays her morning call shows Strether fully involved in the drama. He feels then "as if they were arranged, gathered for a performance, the performance of 'Europe' by his confederate and himself. Well, the performance could only go on" (xxi, 289). Though he has a part in the drama, his role is essentially a passive one; he never feels he has the power to manipulate and control the action as, for instance, Maggie does in The Golden Bowl. As she gazes at the group in the drawing-room from the terrace at Fawns she is acutely aware of "all the possibilities she controlled"; she has the sense that "they might have been figures rehearsing some play of which she herself was the author."<sup>1</sup> Though initiative of this kind does not rest with Strether he does combine the job of actor with that of critic,

<sup>1</sup> The Golden Bowl (1905), p. 454.



scrutinising the performance put up both by himself and others. He tells Chad on one occasion: "it's doubtless my performance that's absurd" (xxviii, 374). The illusions of the drama have of course for Strether an immediate reality. At the London theatre he had instantly seen a world in which "the figures and faces in the stalls were interchangeable with those on the stage" (iv, 40); he is unable to decide which are most real, actors or audience. For Strether as for the young James "the house of life and the palace of art [become] ... mixed and interchangeable."<sup>1</sup> What he has come to think of as "the play and the characters" (xxx, 403) seem to belong in his Lumbinet landscape: they offer themselves almost inevitably. Madame de Vionnet figures early in the scene. Strether's complacency at having arrived at a new footing with her irradiates his afternoon. As the day comes to its climax in the court of the Cheval Blanc scene and drama fuse with the effect of revelation. The properties of the inn suddenly become almost symbolic; in them he sees the quintessence of his European experience. Triumphantly he makes out that "in these places such things were, and that if it was in them one elected to move about, one had to make one's account with what one lighted on" (xxx, 403).

<sup>1</sup> A Small Boy and Others (1913), p. 366.

Such an inference seems to crown not only the day but his whole adventure. As once before at Gloriani's party Strether is not content to enjoy the appearance for itself in Little Bilham's wise spirit of agnosticism. He grasps at it as an intimation of the real. James's irony indicates the frailty of Strether's confidence here, based as it is on nothing more considerable after all than the menu for dinner; "the picture and the play seemed supremely to melt together in the good woman's broad sketch of what she could do for her visitor's appetite" (xxx, 403-404). Only minutes later we see him grappling with the disconcerting implications of his "text" as "the right thing" drifts into his ken. With characteristic readiness he recomposes his picture to assimilate it, only to see life at last explode his idyll. He confronts for the first time the beguiling lie and begins to sound the "deep, deep truth of the intimacy revealed" (xxxi, 413).

Throughout the novel we see Strether moving, as he envisages for himself, "as in a gallery, from clever canvas to clever canvas" (xxxii, 420), obscurely confident that "the spell of his luxury wouldn't be broken." Each canvas is Strether's own artefact, a unique configuration of experience. John Dewey maintains that "to perceive, a beholder must

<sup>2</sup> *The Cosmic Unity of James* (1960), p. 234.

create his own experience."<sup>1</sup> This is just what Strether does, selecting and arranging as fastidiously as any artist. With him though the process is largely unconscious, serving not to communicate an idea but to satisfy a deep personal need. His gallery of pictures is the youth, the life that he has missed. The creative impulse he brings to experience has all the intensity of Isabel's and Maggie Verver's. Isabel sets out to make herself in her image of a great lady, Maggie to make her marriage with Amerigo. Richard Poirier sees Isabel's attempt at self-creation as "the impulse which makes her into a kind of novelist of her own experience."<sup>2</sup> To some extent all James's sensitive characters who are not overtly artists may be called novelists in this sense. This is particularly true of those who because they have a "certain high lucidity" reflect for us the drama in which they figure. It is precisely because they are not productive artists like Nick and Miriam, intent on their work, that they are free to express James's sense of life as a creative adventure, what David Galloway calls "a quest for meaning through form." Galloway finds a likeness between Isabel's quest and James's development as an artist — his search for a form that would "most accurately embody

<sup>1</sup> Art as Experience (1934), p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> The Comic Sense of Henry James (1960), p. 224.

the ethical considerations which were the substance of all his best fiction."<sup>1</sup> Strether who has also been viewed by readers as a persona for James himself is equally engrossed in the pursuit of meaning through form. In trying to shape life aesthetically he is concerned like the artist to refine and express his perception of what F.R. Leavis calls "relative importances."<sup>2</sup>

Strether's compositions, illusions though they may be, yet express dimly something of the truth. The two images of Madame de Vionnet that I quoted above are good examples.<sup>3</sup> In Notre Dame Strether had seen her as the heroine of a story "renewing her courage, renewing her clearness." He enjoys his impression without pondering the implications even after he has identified her. But the reader becomes increasingly aware of Madame de Vionnet's need for courage and clearness as Chad's wish to be rid of her gradually emerges. Strether's last view of her as Madame Roland is, when all is said and done, a true evocation of her tragic plight as a kind of discarded Egeria. Even the "text" which comes as the climax of his lived-out Lambinet is valid enough. The delusion lies in his premature application of it. When he came to revise

<sup>1</sup> Henry James: The Portrait of a Lady (1967), p. 60

<sup>2</sup> In his essay, "James as Critic", in Henry James: Selected Literary Criticism, ed. Morris Shapira (Peregrine Books, 1968) p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> See above pp. 199-200.

The Portrait of a Lady for the New York edition James was at pains to show in Isabel the same intuitive grasp of the truth and her failure too to make it meaningful. Impressed by Madame Merle's classically arranged hair, she compares her to a Bust, "a Juno or a Niobe".<sup>1</sup> Understandably perhaps, the implications escape her. As well as being a model of perfect womanhood and the guardian spirit of women Juno figures also, in The Tempest at least, as the patroness of marriage. This is a role that Madame Merle certainly fills in Isabel's life. Niobe as the epitome of the bereft mother is a similarly loaded image.

The light which breaks on Strether at the Cheval Blanc revealing the liaison for what it is dissipates illusion at last. His ability to assimilate the lie, to come to terms with the deception involved, bears witness to the vision he has developed. He now recognises that "he had really been trying, all along, to suppose nothing" (xxxi, 413). He almost blushes for the way "he had dressed the possibility in vagueness, as a prattling little girl might have dressed her doll." This image with its suggestion of ingenuousness and make-believe is a pointed comment on the nature of Strether's illusion. It is endorsed by Maria who tells him: "What I see, what I saw ... is that you dressed up even the virtue" (xxxiv, 439). With his new insight Strether can accept "their

<sup>1</sup> The Portrait of a Lady (1908), I, 249.

eminent lie, Chad's and hers," as "such an inevitable tribute to good taste as he couldn't have wished them not to render" (xxxii, 423). He confronts and identifies the ugliness but does not allow it to rule his judgement. He is intensely alive now to Madame de Vionnet's powers of transmutation. He notes that "as she presented things the ugliness — goodness knew why — went out of them; none the less too that she could present them, with an art of her own, by not so much as touching them." He sees that the basis of what he calls his "flights" was not just Madame de Vionnet's personal beauty but "her beauty of everything" (xxxiv, 439). That her grace might be accomplished artistry is really irrelevant.

New recognitions crowd in on him during his last visit to her. There is no diminution at all in her aesthetic appeal; she is still "as much as ever the finest and subtlest creature, the happiest apparition, it had been given him, in all his years, to meet" (xxxiii, 429). Yet he can now co-ordinate with this evaluation the reality that faces him: the sight of Madame de Vionnet "as vulgarly troubled, in very truth, as a maidservant crying for her young man." The insight he has gained is implicitly measured by this comparison. Earlier he had balked at the notion of associating Jeanne with the ways of a maidservant. What James specifically calls Strether's

"sharpest perception yet" amounts to a modulation of those values embodied for him by Madame de Vionnet. It is "almost appalling, that a creature so fine could be, by mysterious forces, a creature so exploited" (xxxiii, 428). His sense of this tragic incongruity issues in a new understanding of life. He becomes conscious of "some vague inward irony in the presence of such a fine, free range of bliss and bale" (xxxiii, 429). Lionel Trilling's comment on Hyacinth Robinson is apposite here. He says of him: "never ... is he so sensitive to the sordid life of the mass of mankind as after he has had the revelation of art."<sup>1</sup> Strether's enjoyment of the luxury of art, and the illusion involved works in the same way. James was certainly disposed to see illusions as sometimes necessary and even lucrative.<sup>2</sup> He shares, in fact, John Dewey's view that "the moral function of art itself is to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive."<sup>3</sup> Strether now takes a new view of Chad. The "famous knowing how to live" (xxxi, 412) has a different meaning. At the Cheval

<sup>1</sup> The Liberal Imagination (1951), p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> See the essay, "Merimée's Letters" in French Poets and Novelists (1884), p. 314.

<sup>3</sup> Art as Experience, p. 325.

Blanc Strether had noted his habit of leaving things to others and had seen it ironically as an illustration of his savoir vivre. The splendid facade -- until now a focus for Strether's ideals -- dissolves at last before Madame de Vionnet's fear. He sees Chad for what he "really" is; "she had made him better, she had made him best, she had made him anything one would; but ... he was none the less only Chad .... The work, however admirable, was nevertheless of the strict human order" (xxxiii, 428).

Strether has come to realise that the values which most count for him are not after all exclusively aesthetic. He sees that the criteria on which he had relied in his "belated, uncanny clutches at the unusual, the ideal" (xxii, 301) are finally inadequate. There is a moral good, a "spiritual decency", he prizes which transcends appearances. Yet it has aesthetic as well as moral value. Sir Claude, for all his weakness, spies it in Maisie. He tells Mrs. Wix, who has accused him of having killed Maisie's moral sense: "... on the contrary I think I've produced life. I don't know what to call it -- I haven't even known how decently to deal with it, to approach it; but whatever it is, it's the most beautiful thing I've ever met -- it's exquisite, it's sacred."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> What Maisie Knew (1897), p. 296.



Significantly James describes him as speaking with a relish as intense "as if some lovely work of art or of nature had suddenly been set down among them."<sup>1</sup> It is by establishing an equilibrium between moral and aesthetic claims that Strether achieves mature vision.

Among these recognitions not the least important is the view Strether takes of his own part in the affair. In this his moral sense is as active as ever. During his first few weeks in Paris he had been much concerned with placating an obviously fractious conscience. To this end he observes a strict moral punctilio. Before agreeing to pay his first call on Madame de Vionnet he asks for Chad's assurance that her life is blameless. He scrupulously refuses to dine with her though he is content to meet her at a dinner party at Chad's. Until Sarah's imminent approach releases him, as he feels, from his commitment to the Newsome cause he consistently refuses to visit her on his own account. The same kind of scruple is evident in his attitude to his correspondence with Mrs. Newsome. In trying to persuade himself that there is nothing he has not told her, he gropes round dutifully for things he may not have mentioned. When

<sup>1</sup> What Maisie Knew (1897), p. 298.

he occasionally comes across one he is usually able to dismiss it happily on closer scrutiny as being "not quite truly of the essence" (xiv, 190). He omits, though, to report to Mrs. Newsome — presumably as being "not quite truly of the essence" — his promise to Madame de Vionnet to "save" her if he could. Shifts like these keep us mindful of Strether's dilemma. He is unmistakably what James called "a son of the Puritans the most intellectually transmuted, the most liberally emancipated and initiated possible," trying "to lose himself in the labyrinth of delight while keeping tight hold of the clue of duty, tangled even a little at his feet".<sup>1</sup> Faced with the truth of the affair at last, he is not at all disposed to indulge in censure. There is no reversion to the Woollett code, an outcome which Maria had seen as at least possible. But he does now convict himself. He feels himself to be "mixed up with the typical tale of Paris" (xxxii, 418), embroiled in a community of guilt. The feeling is genuine enough for all its romantic trappings. He recognises that "his intervention had absolutely aided and intensified" the intimacy between Chad and Madame de Vionnet: "he had absolutely become, himself, with his perceptions

<sup>1</sup> In "Charles Eliot Norton" (1908), reprinted in Notes on Novelists (1914), p. 335.

and his mistakes ... almost an added link and certainly a common, priceless ground for them to meet upon" (xxxii, 423-424). Then there is his sense that he had helped Madame de Vionnet to "make" Chad: "his high appreciation had, as it were, consecrated her work" (xxxiii, 428). He does not shirk these facts, nor does he excuse them. He knows that the hardest part of the reckoning to be faced will be his own final estimate of what he had done.

The notion of a reckoning, of a price to be paid, is ingrained in Strether. For all his emancipation he longs to feel "that somebody was paying something somewhere and somehow, that they were at least not all floating together on the silver stream of impunity" (xxxii, 419). Paying is a function for which he has already felt himself to be peculiarly fitted, if not actually predestined: "it was he, somehow, who finally paid, and it was others who mainly partook" (xxvi, 351). Accordingly he tells Chad that he is ready to take the onus; to pay the utmost. There is in Strether a deterministic streak which reveals itself from time to time in a certain deference to fate. At the beginning of his adventure we find him wondering whether his destiny were not perhaps "only to be kept. Kept for something, in that event, that he didn't

<sup>1</sup> "The Beast in the Jungle" in The Better Sort (1903), p. 145.

<sup>2</sup> The Better Sort, p. 178.

pretend, didn't possibly dare, as yet, to divine" (v, 64).

This speculation is like the sense which haunts John Marcher

"of being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible."<sup>1</sup> In him it inhibits action and

he becomes "the man of his time ... to whom nothing on earth was to have happened."<sup>2</sup> But Strether freely submits himself

to what immediately offers, trying in this way to realise his idea, aware that it must be paid for somehow.

The price he pays calls for nothing less than the rejection of those aesthetic values he had come to appreciate. In

Maria's entresol for the last time, he is poignantly aware

of its appeal: "... the place had never before struck him as so sacred to pleasant knowledge, to intimate charm, to

antique order, to a neatness that was almost august. To sit there ... to see life reflected for the time in ideally

kept pewter; which was somehow becoming, improving to life, so that one's eyes were held and comforted" (xxxvi, 452).

But he knows what must be done. The future that Maria offers

him "of exquisite service, of lightened care" can tempt him only for a moment. Yet he understands fully just what he

refuses: "It built him softly round, it roofed him warmly over, it rested, all so firm, on selection. And what ruled

<sup>1</sup> "The Beast in the Jungle" in The Better Sort (1903), p. 145.

<sup>2</sup> The Better Sort, p. 178.

selection was beauty and knowledge. It was awkward, it was almost stupid, not to seem to prize such things" (xxxvi, 457). Only a few weeks before Strether had been gratified to have Madame de Vionnet take for granted in him "a sense of beautiful things" (xvi, 219). But he is now ready to appear both graceless and unintelligent in ignoring those values which make the essence of the offer. Such a repudiation is for Strether the expression of a strong inner compulsion, the fruit of his desire, as Chad shrewdly sees it, "to have been put through the whole thing" (xxxv, 447). He declares that he must go "to be right," and adds "that, you see, is my only logic. Not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself" (xxxvi, 457). His moral odyssey ends in this affirmation, endorsed by Maria's rueful but genuine tribute to "his horrible sharp eye" (xxxvi, 458).

It would be a mistake, as some readers have pointed out, to see Strether's refusal of Maria's tacit proposal as a renunciation. He is no more in love with Maria than he had been with Mrs. Newsome. To accept Maria's offer would be to grasp at a chance of comfort and security different only in kind from that once dangled by Mrs. Newsome. Strether's new vision prohibits this and he turns his face towards the

1 N. p. 414.

2 N. p. 415.

great difference that awaits him in Woollett. His sense of it is brought out in what he says of Mrs. Newsome to Maria: " ... I do what I didn't before — I see her" (xxxvi, 455). In the "Scenario", it is true, James defines Strether's attitude to Maria's offer as "half a kindness and half a renouncement".<sup>1</sup> But there is nothing to suggest that he wishes it to be seen in any real sense as a sacrifice. In fact only a few lines later he implies that for Strether to accept the proposal is quite out of the question: "He has come so far through his total little experience that he has come out on the other side — on the other side, even, of a union with Miss Gostrey." And, he adds, to marry her "would be almost of the old order."<sup>2</sup> It is not surprising that this rejection of Strether's has provoked much dissatisfied comment. Readers detect self-righteousness in his desire to be right, and more than a streak of callousness in his treatment of Maria. Maggie Verver's attitude to Charlotte Stant comes in for much the same kind of criticism. Some critics blame James's overriding preoccupation with form for what must be seen as a failure of feeling. Richard Poirier, for instance, comments: "To find James's conclusion to The Ambassadors adequate ... is to be willing to accept schematic

<sup>1</sup> N, p. 414.

<sup>2</sup> N, p. 415.

rather than dramatic resolutions."<sup>1</sup> A concern for form of course distinguishes James's major characters as well as James himself. As artists who work in life, Strether, Maggie and Isabel inevitably exercise a critical and aesthetic detachment in ordering their experience which may well look like complacent superiority. Just because they are "finely aware" they seem to make in a particular way the denouement of the drama in which they figure and are permitted to justify it in their own terms. Each of them is in a sense author and critic as well as protagonist of the novel, and as such tends to usurp James's own function. For the Jamesian artist, of course, the rendering of his idea has absolute precedence.

The rigour Strether practises can usefully be compared with the ruthless dedication shown by James's professing artists, Miriam, Nick, Paul Overt and others. David Galloway quotes some words of Henry St. George which he thinks suggests the supreme goal of James's artist heroes. What he says recalls the lecture Nash gives Nick. For James's artists, as for James himself, what matters more than anything is "the sense of having done the best — the sense which is the real life of the artist and the absence of which is his death, of having drawn from his intellectual instrument the

<sup>1</sup> The Comic Sense of Henry James, p. 254.

finest music that nature had hidden in it . . . ." <sup>1</sup> This sense operates with all the force of a moral sanction. Galloway is concerned to relate what he calls Isabel's "struggle towards consciousness and conscience" to this impetus. As he suggests, though, this sense is not the monopoly of the artist heroes; it is felt just as intensely by those who are artists of another kind, by Strether and Maggie as well as Isabel. Strether's return to Woollett, like Isabel's to Osmond, though different in kind, is the result of this incentive. Strether and Isabel share a pre-occupation with what is right that goes far beyond a mere fussy concern with appearances. <sup>2</sup> When James represents Emerson as insisting upon "sincerity and independence and spontaneity, upon acting in harmony with one's nature, and not conforming and compromising for the sake of being more comfortable," <sup>3</sup> he provides a revealing gloss on the decision Strether and Isabel make. In the Preface to The Tragic Muse James says that art teaches Nick a rigour and he cultivates it at Miriam's expense. <sup>4</sup> Much the same is true of Strether.

<sup>1</sup> Henry James: The Portrait of a Lady, p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> Strether's "to be right" echoes Isabel's "as seems right" (The Portrait of a Lady, III, 230). Christof Wegelin makes the same point in his The Image of Europe in Henry James, p.102.

<sup>3</sup> Hawthorne (1879), p. 85.

<sup>4</sup> AN, p. 95.



His determination to be right — "I can't do anything else" (xxxvi, 457) — means pain too for Maria. In the final scene we watch him and Maria practising the same sort of evasion as Nick and Miriam in somewhat similar circumstances. They dissimulate their feelings in the tone of "talk for talk's sake" (xxv, 338),<sup>1</sup> the art of which Strether has picked up in Paris. It is by this means that they manage the pain.

The course Strether follows, the moral choice he and others like him finally make, is felt by them all as an aesthetic necessity in the creative enterprise which is life. Though for him and Isabel at least it seems to be nothing more than a conscious submission to the status quo it is undertaken, for better or worse, as the upshot of a deeply felt and sharply focussed vision of the way things are. No longer insulated from reality by immersion in the ideal, Strether is brought face to face with the complexity of life, and experiences what made for James the most human of all themes, "the close connexion of bliss and bale, of the things that help with the things that hurt, so dangling before us for ever that bright hard medal, of so strange an alloy, one face of which is somebody's right and ease and the other somebody's pain and wrong."<sup>2</sup> In this tragic duality he finds himself personally, culpably implicated.

<sup>1</sup> E.E. Owen puts forward a different view in her thesis, "Wit as an instrument of moral discrimination in the later novels of Henry James" (London, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> AN, p. 143.

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Full details of James's writings appear in Leon Edel and Dan H. Laurence, A Bibliography of Henry James, revised edition 1961, to which I am indebted in making this list.

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