

Henry James and the Work of Responsibility

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Declaration

I, Adelais Mills, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

This is a study of responsibility, its meaning and implications, in the criticism and fiction of Henry James. Grounded in close reading, but situating itself at the intersection of philosophy and literature, the thesis begins by exploring how one type of responsibility, defined by the accountability of the free agent, has overly informed critical interpretations of the author's novels. The project probes the limitations of these readings by remarking upon the idiosyncratic connotations of the word in James's lexicon and the unusual experiential contours of the concept in the novels and non-fiction. Engaging with the crucial role that response plays in James's consideration of responsibility, initial chapters propose to catalyse a re-examination of this subject by placing it in proximity to the work of philosophers for whom responsiveness is comparably central to their mapping of responsibility. In subsequent chapters, the thesis turns to investigate the ways in which James's work is marked by misgivings regarding the relocation of the concept on to grounds far more ambiguous than those provided for it by a metaphysics of sovereignty and self-rule. This project addresses itself to a pivotal and omnipresent subject in James; accordingly, it considers an extensive range of texts, but with particular attention given to the essays on Honoré de Balzac (1875–1913), the Prefaces to the New York Edition (1907–1909), *Roderick Hudson* (1875), *The Bostonians* (1886), and *The Awkward Age* (1899). These texts, their aesthetics and the dramas they delineate, are shaped, I argue, in hitherto uncharted ways by the possibilities and discontents inherent to a responsibility signaling a relational process of receiving and answering another.

Impact Statement

The concern of this thesis is with the concept of responsibility as it takes shape in the writings of Henry James. It begins with an exploration of the philosophical genealogy of responsibility; an intellectual heritage which continues to influence the way in which we understand the significance of what it means to be responsible today. The project proposes that the works of literature discussed herein challenge the adequacy of a particular model of responsibility while proposing an alternative: we are encouraged to scrutinise an idea of responsibility that stresses the individual's power and obligation to choose for herself in order to explore the potential benefits (and complexities) of a concept which focuses on our connection to others. The value of this study might then be considered three-fold. Most readily, it provides a series of new critical readings of an internationally-esteemed author, addressed to a topic that is at once under-explored and of great importance to the study of Henry James. Secondly, it aims to further the productive interdisciplinary relationship between literature and philosophy by indicating how the two modes of thought might inform one another with regard to the idea of responsibility. Finally, the academic salience of this thesis coexists alongside its potential value to a general audience. "Responsibility" is an ever-popular watchword in many areas of public policy and discourse (education, health, justice, welfare). Its meaning to these fields is, however, arguably thinner than one would wish. Intended to enrich our definitions and descriptions of responsibility in the context of engaging artworks, the material presented in this thesis might be made of interest and of use to a variety of audiences—in the form of podcasts, a radio documentary series, journalistic essays, or a trade publication.

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Note on Texts

In what follows I quote for the most part from first editions of novels and stories or from a modern edition which prints that text. In chapter three, to which questions of revision are relevant, I reference the 1879 English edition and the 1907 New York Edition of *Roderick Hudson*. In chapter four, I move between the 1885–1886 serial text and the 1886 English edition of *The Bostonians* (the last text of the novel James revised) to examine issues of reception. I base my reading of *The Awkward Age* upon the 1899 American edition, in which the ten-book arrangement first appeared. For the publishing history of James's works, I have followed *A Bibliography of Henry James*, edited by Leon Edel and Dan H. Laurence, third edition, revised with the assistance of James Rambeau (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

I quote passages from James's literary criticism and Prefaces to the New York Edition from the two-volume collection *Henry James: Literary Criticism* (New York: Library of America, 1984), edited by Leon Edel and Mark Wilson. Regarding James's essays on Balzac, Edel and Wilson's edition prints the last texts over which the author had editorial control. A list of the textual variants in these essays compiled by myself found James's revisory attentions to be comparatively minor; nevertheless, I remark on changes salient to my argument in footnotes.

Preface

These things, all the while, the privilege, the duty, the opportunity, had been the substance of his own vision; they formed the note he had been keeping back to show her that he was not, in their so special situation, without a responsible view.

The Golden Bowl (1904)¹

To read of Amerigo's "responsible view," or elsewhere in James's work of a "responsible engagement," a "responsible fancy," or a "responsible answer" is to encounter formulations in which "responsibility" consorts unusually not with persons or their actions but with states of perception, kinds of sociability, and forms of exchange.² As speakers, writers, and readers of English, many of us will be well-acquainted with expressions in which "responsible" figures as if naming a state of being—as in, for instance, "Amerigo is responsible." In this case, "responsible" hews closely to its lexicological ideal, meaning "the state or fact" of an individual's "being accountable."³ But does "responsible" continue or continue *only* to signal this definition when it comports itself as though it were a characteristic, more or less fine, of how one perceives? Does parsing Amerigo's "responsible view" as an "accountable view" capture or accommodate the significance James intends?

There are many privileged words in the author's lexicon—"interest," "tact," "charm"—which, within the context of a single sentence, appear to offer themselves to the straightest of interpretations. That is, as a reader, one often finds the everyday senses

¹ Henry James, *The Golden Bowl*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1904), 1:314.

² James, *Golden Bowl*, 1:164; Henry James, *Italian Hours* (London: Heinemann, 1909), 263; Henry James, *The Awkward Age* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1987), 210.

³ The *OED* gives as its first two definitions of "responsible" and "responsibility" "capable of fulfilling an obligation or duty" and "the state or fact of being accountable." See "responsible, adj. and n.". *OED Online*. March 2019. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/163863?redirectedFrom=responsible> (accessed April 27, 2019) and "responsibility, n.". *OED Online*. March 2019. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/163862?redirectedFrom=responsibility> (accessed April 27, 2019).

(meanings) of these words sufficient to grasp what it is, in James's world, for someone or something to be charming, interesting, or tactful, even if one suspects that some dimension of significance playing out between word, tone, and context has been left untouched. It is not, however, an uncommon experience to reach the end of a James sentence, having read a particular word in a glancing manner, only to find the word's ordinary import inadequate to the capaciousness with which he has imbued it. As Adrian Poole clarifies, the trouble with "charm"—for instance—is that it is one of those words "so common [in James] that they can easily slide under the radar."⁴ But to fail to note the unusual articulations worked on the epithet "charming" in *Hawthorne* (1879) is to be misled by the innocence of what Jane Austen might have called a "nothing-meaning" term.⁵ Glossing "charm" as the "nothing-meaning" encomium it appears can leave us placed to construe *Hawthorne* as a lacklustre panegyric and thus to neglect its more antagonistic tones. This study intends to pay similar attention to the semantic largesse of James's "responsibility," but its weightier aim is to suggest that this largesse is an effect of the author's appreciation for the insufficiency of a specific *concept* of responsibility. In other words, asking what responsibility means in James occasions a more radical question: what does it mean to be responsible?

In what follows, I aim to correct an over-reliance, in the existing critical literature, on a concept of responsibility that describes the autonomous individual's accountability for her actions. This book makes the case that responsibility in James, more pressingly and more intriguingly, registers a capacity, perhaps even a felt imperative, to respond to the particularity of others, to unique situations, to aesthetic subjects. This involves replacing an Aristotelian-Kantian paradigm with one that takes Levinas and Derrida as its philosophical sponsors. My motivations for doing so are two-fold: in the first place, a discontent with the versions of

⁴ Adrian Poole, "Henry James and Charm," *Essays in Criticism* 61, no. 2 (April 2011): 115–136 (116, 118).

⁵ Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2005), 291.

James's novels that emerge from identifying the type of responsibility found therein with the free actions of the individual. I propose that James subjects this version of the concept to a greater degree of critique than has hitherto been acknowledged. Secondly, I have long been struck by the fact that certain kinds of being and doing (artistic, social, relational) that James's *oeuvre* invites us to imagine as ethically responsible (if only provisionally) are distinctly "irresponsible," at least from a traditional perspective. In light of these readerly impressions, I have found it critically valuable to map the nuances of James's responsibility with reference to the writings of Levinas, primarily, and, latterly, Derrida. I propose that each accentuates, in his own way, the connection between responsibility and responsiveness to another. This project does not, however, argue that these several conceptions of responsibility are equivalent to one another; instead, I aim to demonstrate that there is a degree of productive interplay between each writer's effort to accord responsibility a profoundly relational significance. It is as a catalyst for a foray into a new dimension of James's responsibility that I juxtapose the writings of all three, and, to this end, I largely confine comparative analysis to the first chapter of this project.

I would also note that while my practice is often to structure readings around occurrences of the word "response" or "responsibility" (and their derivatives), I am primarily interested in James's *idea* (or ideas) of response and responsibility. My aim is to describe the personal, affective, and aesthetic life with which James imbues one kind of responsibility, that of "responsibility-as-response"—to note its workings, to discover its enchantments, to engage with its discontents. I therefore assume that one might recognise the presence of "responsibility-as-response" by means other than James's naming it. I mean to see it in certain structures of relationality through his work, particularly in those involvements which negotiate a dialectic of subjection and mastery, of passivity and activity; I suggest that one can find it in the resonance that is generated when words like "appeal," "demand," "solicitation," "susceptibility," "reception," "impression," and "expression," as well as their cognates, form

a cluster or a constellation; and that it leaps out at one with the appearance of certain motifs: the desire for an escape from the horizon of the self, the ethical labour or toil that is answering another, the limitlessness of the other, and thus the limitlessness of one's work. Further, I have gravitated to the novels that feature in this project (*Roderick Hudson*, *The Bostonians*, *The Awkward Age*) as a result of my sense that the responsibility explored herein is suffused with a certain kind of feeling for James—namely, ambivalence. These texts are compelling because it seems to me that they contain and generate opposing feelings, perspectives, and trajectories that one has somehow to hold in tandem; they appear to have a constitutive tension at their core, a “both/and” feeling that will not be resolved. I propose that the “both/and” condition of these texts is, in part, a sympathetic response to the kind of responsibility they engage with—a responsibility at once doable and impracticable, ideal and pernicious, real and illusory.

This thesis has two movements. The first begins with an introduction consisting in part of an investigation into the existing construals of James's responsibility. It argues that a paradigmatic responsibility, derived first from Aristotle and later elaborated by Immanuel Kant, has been lent upon too heavily when interpreting novels like *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). I contend that “the state or fact of being accountable” is not only an insufficient definition of responsibility with which to approach these novels but that across James's writings the phenomenon actively and frequently resists such a designation. In its latter stages, the introduction attends to James's concatenation of responsibility with responding and being responsive to others, thereby beginning the work of realising, to quote from *The Europeans* (1878), a “readjustment of that sense of responsibility” that has comprised the “principle furniture” of our criticism.⁶

⁶ Henry James, *The Europeans*, ed. Susan Griffin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 137. The narrator, in this instance, is commenting upon the Wentworths' *inability* to effect such an “adjustment” in response to the arrival of the “brilliant strangers,” the Baroness Münster and her brother Felix: “The sudden irruption into the well-ordered consciousness of the Wentworths of an element not allowed for in its usual scheme of obligations, required a readjustment of that sense of responsibility which constituted its principle furniture.”

Chapter one begins by noting that Emmanuel Levinas regards the paradigms which traditionally organise responsibility as critically as James appears to do. This chapter introduces the significant features of Levinas's understanding of responsibility and delineates the resemblances between the efforts of Levinas and James to reanimate the dimension of responsivity in the concept. These parallels are illumined in the first half of this chapter by way of a focus upon James's autobiographical writings; latterly, the distinctiveness of Jamesian responsibility is brought out by way of a reading of his late short story, "A Round of Visits" (1910). It is in the context of this tale that I observe James's concern to examine not only the felicities of locating the meaning of responsibility in responsiveness, but also the perils of estranging responsibility from self-determined action. The second movement of this thesis begins here: chapter one closes by proposing to begin a fine-grained study of the expansive and the expensive possibilities with which James entails responsibility-as-responsiveness.

The first part of chapter two engages with the five critical essays James published on the novelist Honoré de Balzac between 1875–1913. I treat these essays as a series in which James appreciates and refines, through the life and work of Balzac, his sense of the contradictions and impossibilities, practical and ethical, that are inherent in a literary practice of responsibility understood as unlimited responsiveness to the particular case. The second part of this chapter, centred on the Prefaces to the New York Edition (1907–1909), surveys the resemblances between the stories James tells in the Prefaces regarding the trials of achieving artistic responsibility and those told in the essays on Balzac. I therefore further my contention that the kind of responsibility James imagines motivating Balzac's labour is simultaneously his own equivocally-held ideal—upon which he looks with a characteristic compound of enchantment and misgiving.

Chapter three marks an intersection between the aesthetic dramas James unfolds from his distinctive conception of responsibility and those it catalyses in the novels. It is the first of three chapters in which I aim to bring to the fore a particular disquiet related to responsibility's

ever-amplifying circles of sociality. The interpersonal represents the circle of this chapter's concern. Returning to the early years of James's career, I look to *Roderick Hudson* (1875) to examine its insightful, uncertain meditation upon the cultural concatenation of responsibility with activity, and of the value which may inhere in more passive, "susceptible" modes of being in relation to another. The chapter also serves as a bridge between an aesthetics of responsibility and its thematisation in the fiction: it unfolds the way in which the complexities of responsibility on the textual plane appear to regenerate themselves in the *fabula* of novel.

Chapter four, on *The Bostonians* (1886), moves outward from the interpersonal to the social or political. Although the novel considered in this chapter was eventually excluded from James's New York Edition, a vexed sense of its merit preponderates through the author's letters. I relate James's ambivalence towards *The Bostonians* to the accusations of irresponsibility levelled at him by contemporary readers during the book's serialisation. This chapter seeks to clarify the ways in which *The Bostonians* did challenge expectations for "responsible" works of fiction in the context of America's post-Civil War landscape, while contending that the novel's provocations may be reconceptualised, under the auspices of responsiveness, as profoundly solicitous to the needs of the moment.

Chapter five views as arresting such novels as *The Other House* (1896), *What Maisie Knew* (1897), and *The Awkward Age* (1899) for the scepticism with which they appear to look upon the idea of the responsive self. Thus initially I reconceive of James's fictional project from a point of view wherein responsiveness is a highly ambiguous quality, as easily associated with malice as it is with solicitousness towards the other. Subsequently, I propose that it is in *The Awkward Age* that James's doubts about the value of response are acute, possibly insuperable. On the one hand, the second half of the chapter moves outward a final time to examine James's rendering of collective responsibility in *The Awkward Age*; on the other, it closes in on a vital question: can or should responsiveness continue to be the privileged term by which to understand responsibility as we move into the major phase of the fiction?

Not wanting to close without returning, however briefly, to a consideration of James's last novels, I take up, in the afterword, one of the looser threads strung over the course of this project: the correspondence, alluded to in the essays on Balzac, in the Prefaces, and in the novels discussed, between the experiences of absorption, involvement, or saturation in the "appeal" of a human or an aesthetic instance of otherness and the idea of being duped, hoodwinked, or (more menacingly) deceived. I return to this connection in order to set out a tentative suggestion regarding the workings of responsibility in *The Wings of the Dove* (1903).

Introduction

Isabel herself was nervous, but she was not affected as she would have imagined. What she felt was not a great responsibility, a great difficulty of choice; for it appeared to her that there was no choice in the question. She could not marry Lord Warburton; the idea failed to correspond to any vision of happiness that she had hitherto entertained, or was now capable of entertaining.

The Portrait of a Lady (1881)¹

The State of Being Accountable

In the quotation from *The Portrait of a Lady* with which this introduction begins one finds Isabel Archer associating responsibility with actions she freely chooses: Isabel feels Lord Warburton's proposal to want the weightiness of "a great responsibility"—to lack, that is, "a great difficulty of choice." The suggestion is that a serious proposal ought, to Isabel's mind, to entail a dilemma; it should feel as painful to accept Warburton as it would to refuse him, and since it is easy for Isabel to say no, there can be no question of her saying yes. Some chapters later, in a scene omitted from the novel itself, Osmond makes his own proposal to Isabel. Left to imagine the interaction as it may have unfolded, one can guess that Osmond's offer did, unlike Warburton's, present itself to Isabel as a great responsibility—a difficult choice: on the one hand, her fortune and independence, and on the other, Osmond and the "future of beautiful hours" he seems to auger (341). Isabel makes her choice and if responsibility is equivalent to actions voluntarily and consciously authored, she is responsible

¹ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Michael Anesko (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 105–6. References hereafter are given in the text. In the New York Edition text, James sharpens the association, for Isabel, of responsibility with free agency—an Enlightenment ("enlightened") version of the concept. The final sentence of the quotation reads, "the idea failed to support any enlightened prejudice in favour of the free exploration of life that she had hitherto entertained or was now capable of entertaining" (*The Portrait of a Lady*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1908), 1:155).

for it. But James unavoidably complicates this interpretation of responsibility, most strikingly by withholding the moment of decision itself.

According to the formal logic of the text, which places both Osmond's proposal and Isabel's acceptance under erasure, no choice is made; there is only a lacuna into which we may reach such a choice. Thematically, James also muddies the water of Isabel's sovereignty. Given her nervous apprehensions, in addition to Ralph Touchett's "superlatively gentle" counsel regarding Osmond's more "sinister attributes," how voluntary can Isabel's decision be? (333–343) In his recent introduction to the Cambridge Edition of *Portrait*, Michael Anesko describes what Isabel calls her "free act" as an extrusion of "unacknowledged pathology."² Yet perhaps the paramount blow to the conflation of responsibility and accountability is that Isabel's faith in her free agency readily cooperates with the ability and willingness of Madame Merle and Osmond to manipulate such a belief until it seems that this belief is itself largely responsible for Isabel's loss of the freedom she did possess. One question *The Portrait of a Lady* thus poses for this project concerns the degree to which Isabel finds herself having chosen Osmond because, in part, of a too uncritical relationship to one type of responsibility. Isabel's identification of the concept with a self-begotten, undetermined act—the liberty to "choose [one's] fate" (154)—blinds her to the inevitable imbrication of her decisions in a mesh of alien desires and interests.

Although this is the first full-length study of responsibility in James, it is not unusual to find the concept harnessed by scholars of his work.³ Almost exclusively, however, these considerations of responsibility imply a concept stressing voluntary action. In Sigi Jötkandt's

² Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Michael Anesko (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), lii.

³ Granville H. Jones's *Henry James and the Psychology of Experience* (Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 1975) is, to my knowledge, the closest James studies has come to a work on responsibility. Jones's book is a very thorough examination of the way in which a conceptual triumvirate of innocence, responsibility, and renunciation structure James's short stories, novels, and novellas. Jones does not, however, interrogate the definition of responsibility upon which he relies. For Jones, responsibility in James signifies "the acceptance of free will" and accountability for the consequences of one's "actions and even thoughts" (287).

and J. Hillis Miller's respective readings of *Portrait*, the critical focus falls upon reuniting Isabel with a responsibility premised upon autonomy, despite the ruthlessness with which *Portrait* goes about disenchanting this Enlightenment shibboleth.⁴ Their arguments have the effect of occluding the degree to which so many of the novel's interpretative possibilities depend upon one's appreciating the fragility of the free self, particularly when this ideal is forced to bear the weight of experience. It is ever more delicate when one takes into account the almost invariably interrelational context in which responsibility arises: given the multiplicity, in James's fiction, of parents, guardians, and patrons, on the one hand, and of children, wards, and protégés, on the other, it is the significance of being responsibly involved with another that would seem to solicit the careful consideration of readers. The question is not only, or even most crucially, "am I responsible?," but consistently, "to who am I responsible? and how do I express it?"

The difficulty of imagining or comprehending how one is best responsible to and for another constitutes, in large part, Ralph Touchett's drama. As a benefactor who conflates, to a degree, the intrinsic value of his *protégé* with her aesthetic worth or speculative interest, Ralph descends from Rowland Mallet of *Roderick Hudson* (1875), or Roger Lambert of *Watch and Ward* (1871). He indirectly endows Isabel with a fortune because of his sympathetic response to her

⁴ Jötkandt and Miller centre their readings on Isabel's return to Rome at the end of the novel. (Both critics assume that this is, at the same time, a choice to return to Osmond; the novel does not draw this conclusion.) Jötkandt evokes Kant to argue that Isabel's return is the process through which she transforms herself from a "causal, determined subject into her own free or 'intelligible' cause" (*Acting Beautifully* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 26). For Kant, any action performed by the subject takes place according to the laws of causality which stipulate that all events are the necessary effects of those which preceded them in time. As Kant writes, "since time past is no longer within my control, every action that I perform must be necessary by determining grounds that are not within my control, that is, I am never free at the point of time in which I act" (*Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5:49). Kant copes with the possibility that the subject is "never free" by positing a moment of transcendental freedom outside of time in which the subject makes itself its own spontaneous cause. Jötkandt argues that Isabel's return has the effect of transforming her initial (unfree) choice to marry Osmond into a free act. Her return is "the phenomenal expression of the original [transcendental] free choice by which she first chose her determination" (31). J. Hillis Miller also argues that in choosing to return to Osmond, Isabel affirms the freedom of her initial choice and thus "retains her integrity, and in a paradoxical sense she retains her freedom" (*Literature as Conduct* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 78).

as a specific other, but also so that she might live boldly for him. Early forced by illness to retire from the “show” of his own “game of life,” Ralph describes himself as a spectator at Isabel’s (141). Imaginably, though, finer reflection on the significance of his doing something for Isabel, may have seen Ralph give her “wings” less treacherous (less Icarian) than seventy thousand pounds precipitously inherited (214). Isabel alludes to this possibility in an poignant conversation with Ralph in which she describes herself as “troubled” by the question as to whether it is “good for [her] suddenly to be made so rich” (212). Ralph is adamant that it is, to which Isabel replies with “serious eyes”: “I wonder whether you know what is good for me. Or whether you care” (213).

It is the contention of this study that to think responsibility in James is to recognise that its conceptual and semantic life as a designator of liability is analogous to Isabel’s life with Osmond: “a dark, narrow alley, with a dead wall at the end.” This introduction prepares the ground for restoring the “infinite vista of a multiplied life” to James’s responsibility—a life better suited to the sociable textures of his canon (410). I propose that the author’s writings retrieve and amplify the etymological origins of “responsibility” in the Latin verb “respondeō” or “respondēre,” meaning “to respond.” These words often appear in James as though kin to one another.⁵ In *The Awkward Age* (1899), for example, he retains the word “responsible” to describe the quality of one character’s answer to another. When Mitchy asks Nanda whether she “positively *like[s]* to love in vain,” Nanda is described as turning to face Mitchy in such a

⁵ At first glance, David McWhirter’s essay “‘The Whole Chain of Responsibility’: Henry James and the New York Edition,” in *Henry James’s New York Edition: The Construction of Authorship*, ed. David McWhirter, 1–21 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) is interested in opening out a similar possibility for James’s responsibility. McWhirter proposes that the concept be read in light of Paul Ricoeur’s idea that identity is constituted in the process of “keeping one’s word in faithfulness to the word that has been given” (15). But McWhirter comes to define this responsibility in terms of accountability for actions. It describes “one’s agency...for one’s deeds and words”; it is practiced by acknowledging this agency and choosing to remain faithful to the deed performed or the word given (16). See also McWhirter, “‘A provision full of responsibilities’: Senses of the Past in Henry James’s Fourth Phase,” in *Enacting History in Henry James: Narrative, Power, and Ethics*, ed. Gert Buelens, 148–165 (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1997).

way as to convey that “[i]t was a question, the way she turned back to him seemed to say, that deserved a responsible answer.”⁶ In this context, Nanda’s “responsible answer” denotes something like a sincere, unguarded reply to Mitchy’s question. At the same time, for James to lay stress upon the archaic etymological derivations of responsibility is also for him to transform it conceptually. “[R]esponsible” no longer primarily describes the act of answering, an act for which Nanda is accountable as a free agent; rather, it would seem to designate the quality of her response to the tacit and explicit request of Mitchy.

In recent years, appreciation, in critical circles, for the way in which responsibility and response intersect has greatly increased due to Jacques Derrida’s engagement with the philosophy Emmanuel Levinas. I propose, in the first chapter, to catalyse a comprehensive examination of James’s responsibility by locating his work in an intertextual dialogue vis-à-vis these thinkers. Before turning to this task, it is important that I establish in finer detail the reasons why foregrounding the role of response in James’s responsibility is a critically desirable and rewarding undertaking. Although in the following sections, I aim to indicate how subtly responsibility in James can glide between accountability and responsivity (and by implication, how tricky it is to judge where on the spectrum any specific instance of the word in his work falls), in the main, I demonstrate the need to give greater standing to responsiveness by tracing the limitations of two readings that establish responsibility on the grounds of accountability. I turn to the criticism of Martha Nussbaum and J. Hillis Miller in large part because both scholars write on the significance of responsibility to *The Golden Bowl* (1904). Their respective attentions to the same text will permit me to piece out the difficulties I perceive their arguments and, at the same time, to offer an interpretation of *The Golden Bowl* with an alternative sense of responsibility in mind. Nussbaum and Miller are further germane to this project for the reason that their accounts of responsibility are derived from the theories of Aristotle and Kant—two thinkers who deliver us straight to responsibility’s longstanding

⁶ Henry James, *The Awkward Age* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1987), 210.

association, if not relation of identity, with the accountability of the free agent. In the interest of illuminating the intellectual foundations of Nussbaum's and Miller's arguments, I begin with a brief description of the paradigms within which they are working.

Aristotle's Responsibility, Kant's Imputability

In the context of ordinary language use, the fact that "responsibility" habitually denotes "accountability" is perhaps unsurprising given the profound impression left upon most English-speaking cultures by Aristotle and Kant. For both philosophers, the concept is at one with a moral and causal answerability that is founded upon the free will of the subject as *subjectum* (the grammatical recipient of an action, or the syntactical subject to which an action can be ascribed). In Book III of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (c. 350 BCE), the phenomenon describes an agent who acts voluntarily to exert his or her influence upon the material world. To find a person morally and causally responsible for a specific action is to be able to locate that same person as the act's free or "voluntary" cause. For this reason, Aristotle's discussion of responsibility is centred on locating the principle of agency "behind" a particular action: who or what has produced the act? Aristotle responds by arguing that if the principle of agency is found to reside "in" a particular person, then in most cases the action is a voluntary one for which he or she is accountable. As Susan Sauvé Meyer writes,

voluntary actions are the ones of which the agent is the cause. He [Aristotle] furthermore insists that the causal relation between agent and voluntary action is one in which the "origin" (*archē*) of the action is in the agent (or the agent *is* its origin), the action is "up to" the agent (*ep' autō(i)*) to do and not to do, and the agent is in control (*kurios*) of whether the action occurs.⁷

On the other hand, Aristotle goes on to reason, if the "origin" of the action is *not* with the agent—that is, if the agent is *not* in control of whether or not it occurs—then the action may

⁷ Susan Sauvé Meyer, *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility: Character and Cause* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

be considered “involuntary.” In cases of involuntary action, the agent is deemed neither causally nor morally responsible.

Aristotle theorises two classes of involuntary action: the first is of an action that has been compelled by a power outside of a person. A strong wind, for example, can oblige someone to move against his or her will. The second kind of involuntary action entails acting in ignorance of the particulars: speaking of something not known to be secret, mistaking one’s son for the enemy, or a sharp spear for a blunt one. Aristotle contends that if it has been established that the action was committed in ignorance then it ought not to be considered voluntary, nor its agent responsible. As his argument proceeds, however, actions that would, on the face of it, seem to belong to the category of the involuntary are relocated by the philosopher to that of the voluntary. As the list of actions for which Aristotle finds humans responsible mounts, so the terrain covered by human free will commensurately expands; the greater the degree of accountability for which a person is liable, the greater their degree of freedom from external forces. The concept of responsibility thus forms a part of the philosopher’s efforts to carve out the individual out as a locus of almost limitless causal efficacy. One might hear James sounding this particular sense of responsibility when he has Basil Ransom of *The Bostonians* (1886) address Verena Tarrant (who wishes to walk home alone) as if he were speaking to an indeterminately sentient piece of furniture: “I have brought you this immense distance, I am responsible for you, and I must place you where I found you.”⁸ This instance, and others in James with which it resonates, projects the possibility that responsibility as indicative of one’s capacity to exert agency in or over the world could encompass, and thereby legitimate, the exercise of one’s agency in such a way as to arrogate another’s. Like Ransom’s “responsible,” Aristotle’s responsibility, François Raffoul argues, belongs “to a semantics of power,” it is intended to establish for the individual “an area of

⁸ Henry James, *The Bostonians*, ed. Daniel Karlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 297.

mastery and control.”⁹

Kant is Aristotle’s inheritor in two ways: he continues to define responsibility in terms of accountability (or what he calls “imputability”), while defining personhood as the capacity to be found “imputable.” In *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), Kant explains that “a *person* is a subject whose actions can be *imputed* to him.”¹⁰ As Roger J. Sullivan clarifies, Kant’s idea of a person or agent “is simply that of a subject whose actions...are ‘voluntary’ in the sense of not determined.”¹¹ But can one truly be responsible if freedom might be, in Lambert Strether’s words, little more than an “illusion” or “the memory of that illusion”? “One lives, in fine,” not as one chooses, but “as one can.”¹² An Enlightenment thinker, Kant recognises that if he is to posit humans as voluntary actors, he must first prove that humans possess a free will and are not determined. So contra the empiricists, Kant posits that the laws of nature are not the sole forms of causality operative in the world. In fact, in order for there to be natural causality, Kant argues, there must have been an initiating cause (a “prime mover”), insubordinate to no other, that itself caused natural law; there must be a form of causality “through which something happens without its cause being further determined by another previous cause, i.e., an absolute causal spontaneity beginning from itself.”¹³ Kant names this second form of causality “transcendental freedom,” transcendental insofar as it exceeds the course of nature. Transcendental freedom is defined by the capacity of a cause to produce a state spontaneously “from itself.” Kant proceeds to posit that if transcendental freedom must exist *beyond* the world

⁹ François Raffoul, *The Origins of Responsibility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 11.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor, intro. Roger J. Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 50.

¹¹ Kant, *Metaphysics*, 30.

¹² Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, ed. Nicola Bradbury (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 135. Strether nonetheless advocates a disenchanted transcendentalism, an elegiac determinism: one is a free subject only to the extent that one retains the “illusion” of being free, but “don’t,” Strether urges Little Bilham, “be like me, without the memory of that illusion.”

¹³ Jill Vance Buroker, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 244.

in order for it to have come into existence, this type of causality may also *inhabit* the world. Kant thus allows for an analogy between humans and a “prime mover” by virtue of a shared capacity to be the free cause of action.

Both Aristotle and Kant go on to found their respective ethical systems on the responsibility they theorise. In Aristotle’s case, the individual is responsible for noticing, expecting, valuing, desiring, choosing actions that contribute to or are constitutive of one’s *eudaimonia*, often translated as “happiness,” “flourishing,” or “well-being.” For Kant, the imputable person is answerable for actions which are or are not commensurate with the Categorical Imperative—an objective, rationally necessary, and unconditional principle that one must always follow despite any natural desires or inclinations one may have to the contrary. The identification of responsibility with accountability is often, then, the basis for a consideration of how the individual ought to use her freedom to act, for if the individual is free it follows that she can be expected to act or not act in certain ways. Defining responsibility as accountability makes way for descriptive or proscriptive accounts of what responsible conduct involves. By way of contrast, sounding the inescapable, the beguiling, the maddening particularity of situations and, especially, of others is at the heart of James’s literary project. The following section of this introduction will amplify this point in the context of outlining the problematic effects of Kantian and Aristotelian responsibility in relation to *The Golden Bowl*.

Flourishing in *The Golden Bowl*

As distinctive as the approaches of Miller and Nussbaum are their arguments can be thought to begin with a shared question: should readers of *The Golden Bowl* consider Maggie Verver to be an ethically responsible or “richly responsible” agent?¹⁴ Nussbaum’s construal of

¹⁴ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 135. References hereafter are given in the text. Nussbaum takes the phrase “richly responsible” from the Preface to *The Princess Casamassima* (1908). James is discussing the different degrees of sensitivity with which an author can imbue his central perceiver. He states his preference for those with the most “acute” or “intense” “degree of feeling.” The quotation in full reads: “This in fact I have ever found rather terribly the point—

responsibility is Aristotelian in nature. The emphasis of her argument falls upon the degree to which Maggie harnesses her voluntary power to move herself closer to a mode of life that conveys flourishing. For Miller, responsibility denotes something more akin to Kantian imputability; his argument turns on Maggie's success in transforming herself into a self-legislating agent. But given the undeniable augmentation of Maggie's determining influence in the latter volume of *The Golden Bowl*, privileging any kind of responsibility that is founded on the causal power of the agent presages the likely discovery that Maggie is, indeed, "richly responsible." A comparably influence-orientated idea of responsibility may be in the mind of Maggie when she is described, towards the beginning of volume two, as "in the grasp of her conceived responsibility" (2:56). The phrase arises in the context of Maggie's new cognisance of Charlotte and Amerigo's having placed her and Adam together in order to find intimacy with one another. Aiming to reconfigure the family's relations, Maggie suggests to Amerigo that they amend their initial arrangement to travel together to Spain: instead, Adam and Amerigo should go abroad, while she and Charlotte remain in England. Amerigo is hesitant and—hoping to forestall the conversation—embraces Maggie. In his arms, Maggie knows herself to be,

as she could but too intimately feel, exquisitely solicited [...] she was in his exerted grasp, and she knew what that was; but she was at the same time in the grasp of her conceived responsibility, and the extraordinary thing was that, of the two intensities, the second was presently to become the sharper. [...] Strange enough was this sense for her, and altogether new, the sense of possessing, by miraculous help, some advantage that, absolutely then and there, in the carriage, as they rolled, she might either give up or keep. (2:58–9)

that the figures in any picture, the agents in any drama, are interesting only in proportion as they feel their respective situations; since the consciousness, on their part, of the complication exhibited forms for us their link of connexion with it. But there are degrees of feeling—the muffled, the faint, the just sufficient, the barely intelligent, as we may say; and the acute, the intense, the complete, in a word—the power to be finely aware and richly responsible." It seems to me that James is using "richly responsible" here to describe a type of responsiveness to "situations," a way of registering the world, rather than a causal power to effect it. See Henry James, *Literary Criticism, Vol. 2: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 2:1088.

Noteworthy of this moment is that it appears to imagine responsibility bifurcating or multiplying into two kinds, “two intensities”: on the one hand, a kind of responsibility comprised of what the novel elsewhere calls “the matter of appeal and response” (2:38), wherein Maggie’s sense of being “exquisitely solicited” by Amerigo would see her respond by resigning the “advantage” she now possesses; and, on the other, a notion of responsibility that appears to involve a private appreciation of one’s duty or obligation (“her conceived responsibility”) not only to “keep” but eventually to prosecute one’s “advantage.” *The Golden Bowl* sets these ideas of responsibility in play with and against one another; Miller and Nussbaum, on the other hand, permit Maggie’s “conceived responsibility” to rule over the hermeneutic domain of the concept.

Nussbaum’s interpretation of *The Golden Bowl* portrays Maggie as one who is, at the beginning of the novel, faced with contradictory commitments: the intensity of her attachment to her father and the vow she has made to share her life with Amerigo. Rather than acknowledging the incommensurability of these obligations, Maggie chooses to avert her eyes from their antipathy. Maggie is devoted, writes Nussbaum, to the principle of “never hurting.” Accordingly, she resolves the “conflict of marital love with filial duty by ‘cutting back’ the claims of marriage.” “It is far from obvious,” Nussbaum contends, “that this refusal to move from father to husband is a perfect way of living for an adult woman” (126). In the time it takes for Maggie to recognise the inadequacies of the life she has chosen, her dilemma has become all the more intricate: to reclaim her husband, Maggie has now not only to separate herself from Adam but also Amerigo from Charlotte. As this recapitulation of Nussbaum’s reading is intended to indicate, at several points in her analysis, Nussbaum moves towards conceiving of responsibility in terms similar to those I will describe more fully in the following chapter. Briefly, Nussbaum’s description of Maggie’s predicament would initially seem to invoke a type of responsibility which does not name the accountable agent but that designates one’s involvement with, and negotiation of, the claims of others—in this case, those of Adam,

Amerigo, Charlotte. Nussbaum's argument also implies that any *a priori* system of values by which respective claims are compared can only function to attenuate the singularity of each: the needs of Adam, Amerigo, and Charlotte are at once equal and discontinuous, so that for Maggie to privilege any one set of needs is to betray the others. Her responsibility to Adam, as Nussbaum suggests, is already her irresponsibility to Amerigo; her responsibility to Amerigo, her disloyalty to Charlotte. But it is not in light of the problems of this type of unstructured, unregulated responsibility that Nussbaum is inclined to examine Maggie's ethical standing in the novel. For the greater part of her chapter, Maggie figures not as one upon whom multiple, unprioritizable claims are brought to bear, but as a free agent increasingly conscious of a discrepancy between her family's mode of flourishing together and the transparent order of values by which "responsible" flourishing is constituted.

Nussbaum's representation of the novel as a moral *bildungsroman* wherein Maggie grows up to correct her family's moral failures can be traced back to the point I earlier made regarding the tendency of individual accountability to sustain normative systems by which one understands the difference between virtuous and vicious conduct. The free, accountable agent may be a locus of power; but it is also, perhaps more importantly, a locus of culpability. Kant, for instance, is explicit regarding the importance of accountability to the functioning of a moral law. In *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), Kant writes that accountability, along with free will, "lie[s] at the foundation of all moral laws."¹⁵ In the wake of Kant, in the late nineteenth century, Nietzsche argued that this neo-Aristotelian, now Enlightenment conception of responsibility was ultimately motivated by the need to identify (and to punish) those whose actions contravened a society's prevailing system of goods. In *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) Nietzsche writes that before "the philosophers' invention so bold and so fateful" of "free will and responsibility," one could not say, "The criminal deserves punishment because he could

¹⁵ Quoted in *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 202–3.

have acted otherwise.”¹⁶

Responsibility does appear to take a definite turn towards a semantics of punishment in the second volume of *The Golden Bowl*. It is a revolution felt most palpably by Fanny Assingham. Following Maggie’s designation of her “conceived responsibility” as the “sharper” of the “intensities” with which she is confronted, Fanny’s knowledge of Amerigo’s past with Charlotte, and her own role in orchestrating the marriage of Maggie and Amerigo, become blameworthy acts of commission and omission. Fanny gains her own “advantage,” however, when Maggie tacitly agrees, in exchange for Fanny’s loyalty, not to speak to Adam of her “crimes.” By this advantage, Fanny escapes a responsibility now wholly identified with “penalty.” In conversation with husband Bob, Fanny gratefully notes her reprieve:

‘So it is, therefore, that I shall probably, by the closest possible shave, escape the penalty of my crimes.’
‘You mean being held responsible.’
‘I mean being held responsible. My advantage will be that Maggie’s such a trump.’
(2:135–6)

Fanny’s experience of seeing her contributions to the relationships of the Ververs take on the guise of “crimes” indexes the shift in the significance of responsibility, for her arrangement of the couple’s marriage is initially portrayed as having stemmed from her *response* to the particularity of others’ needs: Amerigo’s for a wealthy spouse; the Ververs’ for fine old things. Over the course of the novel, Fanny’s responsive acts change into ones for which she is accountable. It is as though responsibility’s coming to “grasp” Maggie, (or Maggie’s coming to grasp it) presides over a profound shift in its communal significance—a shift which sees Fanny, Amerigo, and Charlotte exchange their roles as participants in a unique dynamic of request and response for the status of liable agents. But ought they, in Nietzsche’s words, to have acted otherwise in order to avoid the consequences of their accountability? It is possible to imagine that Charlotte and Amerigo’s affair, while transgressive under the auspices of an

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter J. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1989), 69, 58, 63.

orthodox conception of responsibility, was once responsive to the desire of Maggie and Adam to sustain the intensity of their bond; it is perhaps a richer, though more perilous, understanding of responsibility that risks liability for another's sake. In fact, Maggie appears to accept that Amerigo and Charlotte sought to be responsive and not offensive when she assures Amerigo "[o]h, the thing I've known best of all is that you've never wanted, together, to offend us [herself and Adam]. You've wanted quite intensely not to..." (2:207). (Although it bears noting that Maggie isn't conceding to excuse the two of an "offence" ("a transgression, sin, wrong, misdemeanour, or misdeed"¹⁷), even if she will acknowledge that the couple have not sought to "offend" her ("to be displeasing or disagreeable"¹⁸).) In contradistinction, organising one's conception of responsibility around those actions which generally carry punishment and those which routinely carry praise would seem to presage the dissociation of one's *practise* of responsibility from the needs, however idiosyncratic, of another person.

While Aristotle is not in any straightforward sense a moralist, his writings, nevertheless, uphold a framework for ethical decision-making germane to all, and an order of goods regarded as commonly desirable. Comparably, when Nussbaum construes Maggie as placed in a position to act on her own behalf, her argument implicitly calls for some means by which to evaluate how the character negotiates this freedom of action. In response to this covert requirement, Nussbaum intimates that imprinted upon the novel's ethical horizon are certain priorities by which Maggie must orientate herself—notably, the primacy of one's romantic obligations. Nussbaum writes of Maggie as having begun her married life by

¹⁷ "offend, v.". OED Online. March 2019. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/130604?redirectedFrom=offend> (accessed May 08, 2019). "offence | offense, n.". OED Online. March 2019. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/130599?rskey=RhuCzT&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed May 08, 2019).

¹⁸ "offend, v.". OED Online. March 2019. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/130604?redirectedFrom=offend> (accessed May 08, 2019). "offence | offense, n.". OED Online. March 2019. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/130599?rskey=RhuCzT&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed May 08, 2019).

subverting this order: she has put Adam before Amerigo, thus “her marriage to the Prince, which, far from effecting the usual reordering of commitments and obligations of childhood, has permitted her to gratify, to an extraordinary degree, her wish to [remain her father’s daughter]” (126). It follows that when Maggie begins to orchestrate a realignment of intimacies such that she draws herself closer to Amerigo, her actions are increasingly exemplary, for Nussbaum, of ethically responsible conduct, even if such conduct has its victims: enjoining the reader to take up the character’s subject position, Nussbaum writes that if “love of your husband requires hurting and lying to Charlotte, then do these cruel things, making the better choice. But never cease, all the while, to be richly conscious of Charlotte’s pain and to bear...the full burden of your guilt as the cause of that pain” (134–5).¹⁹

Nussbaum’s claim for the ethical uprightness of Maggie’s actions is partially-sighted at best; there is a critical imprimatur as old as the novel itself on R. P. Blackmur’s contention that all Maggie does “in the name of love” is to impose upon the couples a “superficial order” condemning all to unhappiness.”²⁰ The discordant readerly judgements provoked by the novel’s final portraits of spousal re-attachment—Charlotte on her gilded leash, Maggie folded in Amerigo’s arms—imply a thorough-going “blank[ness]” of “values” when it comes to the novel’s relational sensibilities; a “blankness” that could be said, moreover, to characterise James’s *oeuvre* more broadly.²¹ What forms of closeness does the idea of responsibility embrace or abjure in James? The question seems almost unanswerable unless posed in the context of

¹⁹ For other particularly incisive critiques of Nussbaum’s argument see Jane Adamson’s “Against Tidiness: Literature and/versus Moral Philosophy,” in *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, ed. Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman, and David Parker, 84–110 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Robert Eaglestone’s “Flaws: James, Nussbaum, Miller, Levinas,” in *Critical Ethics: Text, Theory, and Responsibility*, ed. Dominic Rainsford and Tim Woods, 77–87 (New York: St. Martin’s, 1999); and W. A. Hart’s “Martha Nussbaum and *The Golden Bowl*,” *Essays in Criticism* 57, no. 3 (July 2007): 195–216.

²⁰ R. P. Blackmur, *Studies in Henry James*, ed. Veronica Makowsky (New York: New Directions, 1983), 224.

²¹ In his Preface to “The Turn of the Screw” (1908), James teasingly invites readers to project their own values onto his work for they will not find his there: “My values are positively all blanks...” (2:1188).

specific texts and particular involvements. In fact, it is for the reason that Jamesian intimacy appears to reject nothing out of hand that contemporary scholarship has been able so fruitfully to consider it in terms of sexual, affective, and social possibilities only recently redeemed from the category of the “irresponsible.”²²

Maggie’s Law

J. Hillis Miller is more wary than Nussbaum of ascribing general values to *The Golden Bowl*. His reading is an attempt to convey the ambiguity of Maggie’s conduct in light of the novel’s ethical anti-foundationalism. At the same time, Miller’s interpretation of responsibility clearly has its origins in Kantian imputability: it signals the capacity of the individual to self-legislate—that is, to realise her freedom in the act of giving to herself a law which obligates only through respect for her autonomous will. For Miller, though, the dangers Kant foresaw in the idea of self-referential legislation are no longer tempered by the imperative Kant formulated whereby one is to live according to those laws by which *all* could conceivably live: “act only according to that maxim through which you can, at the same time, will that it become a universal law.”²³ Miller retains Kant’s account of responsibility as the capacity for self-governance, but he supplements this paradigm with a tenet of post-structural thought: there are no ethical maxims that can be justifiably universalised.²⁴ This awkward collision of subjective autonomy, on the one hand, and ethical lawlessness, on the other, sets the scene for his appraisal of Maggie’s duplicity in chapter thirty-six of volume two, when, in the garden at Fawns, she lies to Charlotte.

In response to Charlotte’s request that Maggie tell her if she (Charlotte) has done any

²² Wendy Graham fulsomely highlights the resistance of James’s work to the disciplinary structures which regulate non-heterosexual desire under the aegis of “sexual responsibility.” See *Henry James’s Thwarted Love* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

²³ Immanuel Kant, *Immanuel Kant: Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: A German–English Edition*, ed. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 71.

²⁴ J. Hillis Miller, “How to Be ‘in Tune with the Right’ in *The Golden Bowl*,” in *Mapping the Ethical Turn*, eds. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, 271–285 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 271. References hereafter are given in the text.

“wrong,” if she is “guilty of some fault,” Maggie insists, “I’ve *not* felt at any time that you’ve wronged me,” “I accuse you— I accuse you of nothing” (2:254–255, 2:256–257). Her reply is later described by the narrator as forming a part of “the coldness of their [Charlotte’s and Maggie’s] conscious perjury” (2:258). By perjuring herself, Maggie, Miller points out, has contravened the Kantian imperative against lying: “[a] lie...endanger[s] the community, as Kant presumed when he asserted that lying is never justified, not even to save someone’s life” (273). Nevertheless, Maggie believes that she has, as the novel puts it, “kept in tune with the right... The right, the right—yes, it took this extraordinary form of her humbugging” (2:257). But can it, Miller asks, “ever be just, justified, or right to lie and perjure oneself in this humbugging way?” (277). That is, even once one has acknowledged that Kantian deontology does not permeate the worldview of the novel, can one, as a reader, go so far as to join Maggie in the transvaluation of humbuggery into a form of the “right”? Miller begins to answer his question by pointing out that Maggie, as a self-governing agent, is responsible for her lie. However, in the absence of any form of arbitration external to her will, the character is accountable to no one but herself for what Miller calls her “private unsponsored, unauthorized decision” to name “falsehood” an upright means to an end (279). (“[S]omething, certainly, something that might be like a rare flower snatched from an impossible ledge, would, and possibly soon, come of it for her” (2:257).)²⁵ But if Maggie’s decision is initially “unauthorized,” Miller argues that it is subsequently ratified by the submission of others. Unwilling or unable to contest Maggie’s unsponsored decision to make duplicity meritorious, Adam, Charlotte, and Amerigo become de facto sponsors to Maggie’s law. Miller, nevertheless, argues that whether or not Maggie’s lie truly is “in tune with the right” is left enduringly in question; as a reader, one can neither justify it nor condemn it without reference to the kind

²⁵ An intra-allusion to Roderick’s (thwarted) and Rowland’s (successful) attempt to snatch rare flowers from dangerous promontories for their respective lovers in *Roderick Hudson* (1875).

of ethical north star that the novel lacks.²⁶ Hence Miller concludes that *The Golden Bowl* impresses upon its readers “the triumph of the American ethical sense”: its “assumption that each ethical act is autonomous, inaugural, an act of unjustified power, like the American Revolution, over the morality or immorality of old Europe. In acting as she does, Maggie is acting in the spirit of the Declaration of Independence” (283).

Miller’s emphasis on the ambiguous light in which the novel illumines Maggie’s triumph is an important corrective to Nussbaum’s proposal that the book directs us simply to affirm it. On the other hand, the accent Miller wishes to place on interpretative indeterminacy is undermined by the collapse, over the course of his argument, of “autonomous, inaugural” self-rule into an unambiguous good. When he writes, for instance, that “each ethical act is autonomous, inaugural, an act of unjustified power,” he implies that *The Golden Bowl* presents the sheer fact of “autonomous, inaugural” power as not only the definition of *causal responsibility* (the fact of having the power to act), but also the content of *ethical responsibility* (the “right” of that power). So although he may want to propose that the ethical salience of Maggie’s “unauthorized” lie is uncertain, if a demonstration of autonomy is in and of itself a good then her unsponsored falsehood is, in fact, “in tune with the right... The right, the right—yes, it took this extraordinary form of her humbugging.”

One consequence of Miller’s argument is that it suggests that the novel comes to think of “responsible” praxis as being, like history, written or legislated by the victor. As Joseph Kronick observes, if one yokes responsibility to the self-authorised act, while erasing any notion of obligation to a power beyond the agent, then the “Kantian element of autonomy” will grow inordinately pronounced.²⁷ At this point, one is only using the word “ethical” in

²⁶ Robert B. Pippin argues that this “collapse of reliable forms of [ethical] sense-making” (58) is a distinctive feature of James’s entire fictional project. See *Henry James and the Modern Moral Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

²⁷ Joseph Kronick, “The Betrayal of Love: *The Golden Bowl* and Levinasian Ethics,” *The Henry James Review* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 1–19 (5). Kronick harnesses a dimension of Levinasian ethics (his concepts of the “saying” and the “said”) to read the novel but does not touch upon the topic of responsibility.

front of “responsibility” as a kind of euphemism for power.²⁸ Framed in this way, one can imagine suiting the lineaments of Miller’s argument to the case of Amerigo and Charlotte and the “immorality of old Europe.” Their affair is also the expression of a “private unsponsored, unauthorized decision”; and they, too, find themselves, at least for a time, “in tune with the right,” at least in the sense that Adam and Maggie act as tacit sponsors to their law. But perhaps the novel *is* insinuating an equivalence between the content of ethical concepts like the “right” and the “responsible” and the requirements and interests of the dominant party? Sharon Cameron, in a different context, supports this conclusion, as does Mark Seltzer.²⁹ However, in order to persist in this judgment, one would need to find some means of explaining away the alternative and competing idea of responsibility which circulates in the novel and that designates the receptive subject, the response, and one’s accountability not to one’s self but to another. It is important to note that, in *Literature as Conduct* (2005), in an extended version of his original article, Miller does briefly attend to this alternative sense, thereby troubling the trajectory of his earlier argument. He gestures to an other-orientated sense of responsibility when he observes that “[e]ach of the characters in *The Golden Bowl* has, a priori, a similarly absolute and unique obligation to each of the others.”³⁰ Nevertheless, his observation does not alter the overall shape of his reading, even as it makes framing Maggie’s “Declaration of

²⁸ Craig Gordon makes an analogous point when he suggests that Miller’s reading makes ethicality synonymous with power (“The Possibilities of Faces: Figuring Ethics and History in Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl*,” *English Studies in Canada* 24, no. 1 (1998): 25–46 (27).

²⁹ Sharon Cameron reads the novel as one in which embattled consciousnesses struggle for power; Maggie triumphs by annihilating the very otherness of other minds. See *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), Ch. 3. For Mark Seltzer, the “care” that each member of the family educes for one another is, in reality, a particularly pernicious form of love inseparable from violence. The novel ends with Maggie having imposed a regime of “domestic colonialism” on Adam, Charlotte, and Amerigo (*Henry James and the Art of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 71). Other analyses of the determining value of power in this novel focus on the Ververs as arch-capitalists. See for example, Jean-Christophe Agnew “The Consuming Vision of Henry James,” in *The Culture of Consumption*, ed. Richard Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, 65–100 (New York: Pantheon, 1983). A thoroughgoing economic reading of ethics in the novel is accomplished by Carolyn Porter in *Seeing and Being: The Plight of the Participant Observer* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), Ch. 5.

³⁰ Miller, *Literature as Conduct*, 252.

Independence” as a possibly responsible deed less convincing; for in this case, the character is asserting her self-referential power in a community premised on an “absolute and unique obligation to each of the others,” rather than in the absence of any common goods whatsoever.

Of Appeal and Response

In the first volume of the novel, responsibility rarely manifests in terms of a character’s capacity to act for him or herself. More often, it is associated with the “the matter of appeal and response.” For instance, in the wake of Amerigo and Maggie’s marriage, Fanny’s commitment to remain by Amerigo’s side is described as “a responsible engagement; to be within call, as it were, for all those appeals that sprang out of talk” (1:314). Here the concept of responsibility describes a type of relationship between two characters, one of whom is subject (as in under the dominion of; exposed to) to the other’s need of her. Fanny is responsibly occupied on behalf of Amerigo for the reason that she is elected the party responsive to “all those appeals,” tacit and explicit, which will spring from Amerigo’s “talk” as he performs in his new role as husband and son-in-law.³¹ The novel’s entire cast is imbricated in, their “relation, all around” consisting of, a labyrinthine tangle of these “responsible engagements” (1:89).

If Fanny is subject to Amerigo’s “call,” Amerigo’s need of her is a consequence of his exposure to the demands of Maggie and Adam: to retain the “quantity of confidence reposed in him” by the Ververs, it is vital that he is always meticulously attuned to their needs (1:23). “You know,” he tells Fanny, soliciting her commitment to him on the eve of his marriage, “with what care I desire to proceed, taking everything into account and making no mistake that may possibly injure *her*,” and then, “[h]er and him” (1:38). Between “[h]er and him,”

³¹ One can also frame Fanny’s “responsible engagement” within a discourse of liability. Once Fanny has orchestrated the couple’s engagement, her initial impulse is to disengage from Amerigo. Amerigo insists that Fanny remain within call in order to guide him but also—the implication is—so that, once married, if he fails in his responsibility (responsivity) to the Ververs, Fanny will bear some part of the responsibility (liability). The idea of one party sharing liability for another’s doings is significant to my discussion of *Roderick Hudson* in chapter four.

meanwhile, exists a related yet discrete dynamic of appeal and response. It is one which sees Adam “solicited” by Maggie to redeem the “brave and bright” Charlotte from her genteel destitution (1:188, 1:184); his doing so will release Maggie—and this, still more than Charlotte’s need, is the matter of Maggie’s entreaty—from her guilt at having left Adam to “feel a want,” namely, the want of her (1:177). Charlotte, lastly, feels able to respond to Adam’s proposal (“I’ll give you...what you ask”) only once her own appeal (in the form of a letter) to Maggie and Amerigo has been satisfied. For the greater part of the novel, then, this seems the primary significance of responsibility: not the exercise of one’s free agency, but one’s response to the other’s claim upon this agency. As Adam muses aloud to his daughter, they are, as a family,

‘selfish together, we move as a selfish mass. You see we want always the same thing,’ he had gone on—‘and that holds us, that binds us, together. We want each other,’ he had further explained; ‘only wanting it, each time, *for* each other.’ (2:95)

In this esoteric image of egotism incorporated, “want[ing] each other,” the magnetic force that keeps the “selfish mass” composed, is self-interested only insofar as this “want” (need, desire, lack) is always already invested in sustaining the other’s “wanting.” The individual possessed of his or her own “want” is, as Adam presents it, endlessly displaced by the collectivised subject (a “we”) who wants (and thus is a vessel) “*for*” another member of the circle. So although J. Hillis Miller rightly indicates that none of the characters can be said to feel answerable to anything so transparent as a deontological imperative, each does present themselves, from the beginning, as accountable to something other than their own authority—namely, to one another’s limitless “wanting.”

It is likely due, however, to the obscure, fugitive, capricious nature of the other’s demands and desire (what does Charlotte “*want* to have said” to Amerigo?; what has she “*wanted* [him] to understand”? what has she “*wanted* [him] to hear”? (1:100–101; my emphasis)) that being responsible to (that is answering) another can so readily appear as though it were “an autonomous, inaugural” act. Amerigo and Charlotte appreciate that their relationship to

Maggie and Adam is one of “taking care of *them*” (1:314), but the nature of this “care” is severely underdetermined. It appears to hinge upon the requirements of the occasion and upon the unique persons involved, but given the indeterminacy of “care,” given that Maggie and Adam appear to want nothing so much as one another, the scope for Amerigo and Charlotte to justify their relationship in the name of “care” is (perilously) sizable. I will come full-circle, at the end of the project, in order more fully to investigate this controversial possibility; for now it is enough to say that Fanny’s diagnosis of the situation at the close of the first volume seems far from asinine, even if it is overly-exculpating of all. Clarifying for the Colonel the many revolutions of the family’s “vicious circle,” Fanny remarks that “[i]t’s their mutual consideration, all round, that has made it the bottomless gulf; and they’re really embroiled but because, *in their way*, they’ve been so improbably *good*” (1:403). Fanny locates the origins of the abyssal situation in a solicitousness that is, in spite of appearances to the contrary, actually a singular (“*in their way*”) and “improbabl[e]” (surprising but also impossible, dubious) manner of being “*good*.”

Where might this leave Maggie’s “conceived responsibility”? Can we conclude that such a conception deserts the foregoing praxis of responsibility in favour of retaining and perhaps prosecuting one’s “advantage” over others? To settle upon this conclusion would be to negate the extent to which we can read Maggie’s “conscious perjury” as yet a further instance of responding to another’s appeal. When Charlotte asks if she has injured Maggie, is she asking Maggie for the truth or for a generous lie? To denounce Charlotte would be for Maggie to expose her father’s humiliation; it would also entail destroying the thought of Charlotte as “beautiful, wonderful and good” (“I’ve never thought of you but as beautiful, wonderful and good,” Maggie professes (2:251)).³² Perhaps more radically, can Maggie give

³² David Brudney has argued that by lying Maggie chooses to protect and care for Charlotte: “[i]t is precisely her ‘mastery of the greater style,’ her ability always to present a splendid surface, that makes Charlotte *Charlotte*. Other people could survive exposure and defeat. Charlotte would be destroyed... In the end Maggie knows Charlotte well enough to help. She knows what Charlotte, specifically, needs.” “Knowledge and Silence: *The Golden Bowl* and

any answer to Charlotte's question that would not be, at least partially, a lie? If Maggie were to accuse Charlotte of mistreating her, this might misconstrue the reality of her evolving feelings; it may be that she does feel that Charlotte has acted responsively towards her, even if Maggie is now redefining, or defining for the first time, her needs. Met with Charlotte's question, Maggie is faced with choosing to hold Charlotte accountable or to answer her appeal; faced ourselves, as readers, with Maggie's reply, we cannot say for certain which she chooses. While Miller would focus on the ethical indeterminacy of Maggie's self-authorised decision, one could argue that the novel situates the ambiguity here: in spite of the intensity of her "conceived responsibility," perhaps Maggie remains, nonetheless, "embroiled" in "mutual consideration"?

James and the Metaphysics of Responsibility

I have sought to indicate the ways in which James's work calls for an engagement with responsibility beyond its identification with the free agent and its actions. The first chapter of this study proposes that the type of responsibility I have begun to unfold in this introduction is suggestively congruent with that which is delineated in the writings of Levinas. But is there not a contemporary idea of responsibility—other than the agent-centred paradigms hitherto discussed—better suited to an author living, thinking, writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century? This project is sensitive throughout to the complexly imbricated social and historical contexts in which responsibility operates for James, and I am aware that the theoretical coupling I propose may at first strike the reader as wanting in a certain degree of temporal tact. With regard to James's intimacy with the first generation of pragmatist philosophers, for instance, studies which afford to the writer a pragmatist's sense for the import of ethical-philosophical concepts have been both persuasive and influential.³³ The last

Moral Philosophy," *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 2 (Winter 1990): 397–437 (409–10).

³³ Richard A. Hocks's explores James's work as a literary rejoinder to the philosophy of his brother, asserting that "William's pragmatist thought is literally *actualized* as the literary art and idiom of his brother Henry James" (4). Recently, Gregory Phipps has related James's characters to the "pragmatic protagonists" which figure in the writings of Charles Peirce,

sections of this introduction propose that James's responsibility is ill-suited to this school of thought for the same reason that it is an infelicitous fit for the neo-Kantian or neo-Aristotelian ones: his writings do not lend themselves readily to a consideration of the "subject," "self," or "person" as autonomous or freely willing. In comparison, scholars of philosophy point to pragmatism's profound debts to Kantian metaphysics and nineteenth century idealism; the most salient of these debts, for the purposes of this study, is the value pragmatists like William James afford to the thought of the subject as at once ontologically integral and freely willing.³⁴

Of the pragmatists, James was most familiar with the work of his brother William. William's books present pragmatism as a "mediating philosophy"—a mode of thought designed to resolve the antagonism between empirical arguments against the cogency of a sovereign subject and the folk belief or "old confidence" in its reality.³⁵ Pragmatism attempts to side-step this conflict by shifting the focus onto the "practical consequences" of living as though one or other side of the argument were true. The idea of "practical consequences" denotes something different to each of the original pragmatists, but often William writes as though "practical consequences" are the effects of any particular belief upon the individual believer. That is, if my belief in a self-governing "I" allows me to think of my life as meaningfully self-directed, then this contributes to the pragmatic clarification of the hypothesis "free will exists." This was, in fact, William's own approach to what he termed "the dilemma of determinism." Troubled by the inordinate influence that time, the world, and the other appeared to have on the constitution and the actions of the individual, William resolved,

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and William James. See Richard A. Hocks, *Henry James and Pragmatic Thought: A Study in the Relationship Between the Philosophy of William James and the Literary Art of Henry James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974); and Gregory Phipps, *Henry James and the Philosophy of Literary Pragmatism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

³⁴ See Karl-Otto Apel, "From Kant to Peirce: The Semiotical Transformation of Transcendental Logic," in *Kant's Theory of Knowledge*, ed. L.W. Beck, 23–37 (Dordrecht: Springer, 1974); and Robert Stern, *Hegelian Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Ch. 7–11.

³⁵ William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 28.

proleptically echoing the counsel of Strether to Little Bilham, not to live without “the illusion of freedom.” He wrote in 1870 of choosing to

believe in free will... [for] when I have felt like taking a free initiative, like daring to act originally, without carefully waiting for contemplation of the external world to determine all for me suicide seemed the most manly form to put my daring into; now, I will go a step further with my will, not only act with it, but believe as well; believe in my individual reality and creative power. My belief, to be sure, can't be optimistic—but I will posit life (the real, the good) in the self-governing resistance of the ego to the world.³⁶

Undertaking to believe in the “free initiative” of the subject to act “originally” from himself and upon his own behalf, responsibility thus continued to designate for William the idea of being accountable to one’s “inner ideal ends”: it indicated “the self-governing resistance of the ego to the world.”³⁷ And until a few years ago, it was relatively common in James studies to outline Henry’s conception of self in terms similar to those used by William. Jamesian subjectivity was often characterised as liberated from history, milieu, the material field, and other minds.³⁸ In the last few decades, however, a number of critics have offered an alternative and fuller sense of James as a writer for whom neither self nor art are autotelic phenomena, but formed and prompted through encounters with other selves, other artworks.³⁹ This study

³⁶ Quoted in Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1936), 1:147–8. For William James’s public statements on his pragmatic approach to metaphysical beliefs see *The Will to Believe and Other Popular Essays in Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

³⁷ Ross Posnock has persuasively argued that although William’s and Henry’s histories may have been “interlocked,” their notions of the self were, nonetheless, “decisively different”: “William James’s individualism posits that each ‘I’ and each ‘you’ keeps its own thoughts to itself: we speak not of this or that thought but ‘*my thought*, every thought being owned.’ Henry James’s memoirs dramatize an alternative to an atomized self” (*The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 6).

³⁸ For an overview of this approach to James, often loosely termed high-modernist or New Critical, see David McWhirter’s “Henry James, (post)modernist?,” *The Henry James Review* 25, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 168–194; and Linda Simon, *The Critical Reception of Henry James: Creating a Master* (Rochester: Camden House, 2007), 42–74.

³⁹ A few of the key critical studies in this vein include Paul Armstrong, *The Phenomenology of Henry James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1983); John Carlos Rowe, *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity* (1991); Merle A. Williams, *Henry James and the Philosophical Novel* (Cambridge:

situates itself in the theoretical vein of these scholars; it aims to bring their valuable suggestions to bear upon our understanding of responsibility in James's work. Initial chapters are therefore structured, in large part, around an exploration of the degree to which James portrays being and doing (aesthetic and worldly) as always already responsive to others, thus distancing his implicit understanding of selfhood from the kind that is called for by historically contemporaneous accounts of responsibility.

Within the realm of philosophy, a comparable engagement with the experiential adequacy of claims for the self-adequacy of the "I" have cast serious doubts upon the self-evident veracity of Aristotle's and Kant's notions of responsibility. As I earlier observed, Friedrich Nietzsche got in early with a series of seminal refutations, from a phenomenological perspective, of free will, free causality, and the "I" as quintessence; concepts which indispensably ballast accountability. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Nietzsche assails Kant's hypothesis that a transcendently free instance of subjecthood is the cause of thought and action. It is, he writes,

a falsification of the facts of the case to say that the subject "I" is the condition of the predicate "to think." *It* thinks; but that this "it" is precisely the famous old "ego" is, to put it mildly, only a supposition, an assertion, and assuredly not an "immediate certainty."

According to Nietzsche, one's intuition that an entity called "I" performs the activity of thought is the consequence of a "grammatical habit": each of us instinctively converts the linguistic principle of providing an activity with a subject to a metaphysical one. "I think" becomes *I* think.⁴⁰ As is oft-noted, James's syntax challenges one's ability to rest assured in

Cambridge University Press, 1993); Julie Rivkin, *False Positions: The Representational Logics of Henry James's Fictions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); David McWhirter, "A provision full of responsibilities?: Senses of the Past in Henry James's Fourth Phase," in *Enacting History in Henry James: Narrative, Power, and Ethics*, ed. Gert Buelens, 148–165 (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1997); Oliver Herford, *Henry James's Style of Retrospect: Late Personal Writings, 1890–1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁴⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), 18.

this grammatical habit. His writings habitually delay, dislocate, or simply absent ascriptions of agency to various types of movement, cerebral and physical. Yet this, I want to suggest, is a stylistic aspect of the case to be made for James having traversed a path whereby his provocations to the notion of the self as “ipseity” look forward to a different architecture for responsibility: one which holds space for a self not sovereign, but solicitous; for a focus not on acting according to one’s determinations, but upon a relational process of sensing, receiving, recognising, and responding to another’s appeal; not for a theory of responsibility, but for a singular relationship of responsiveness by virtue of its singular participants. If it is François Raffoul’s contention that Nietzsche’s critiques are decisive to the inventive re-articulations of responsibility set out in the twentieth century writings of Heidegger, Sartre, Levinas, and Derrida, this book proposes that James’s *oeuvre* comprehends this philosophical trajectory.⁴¹ To draw upon Oliver Herford’s formulation regarding the resemblance between ideas implicit in James and those described by modern and contemporary philosophers, it may be that James (or his work)⁴² “knows” of which these philosophers speak “and knows them in more flexible and nuanced ways.”⁴³ This project aims to unfold something of this knowledge in relation to responsibility. Chapter one submits that we are better placed to sound this knowledge by introducing substantively different theoretical intertexts to those that have hitherto been harnessed. It will begin therefore with a brief introduction to the idea of responsibility in the work of Levinas.

⁴¹ See Raffoul, *Origins of Responsibility*, 80–121 for a full account of Nietzsche’s critique and its influence upon twentieth-century philosophies of responsibility.

⁴² I allude here to Michael Wood’s valuable suggestion in *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Ch. 1.

⁴³ Herford, *Henry James’s Style of Retrospect*, 7.

Chapter One
Responsibility Otherwise

“You’ve extraordinary notions of responsibility.”

The Sacred Fount (1901)¹

Levinas and Responsibility

In *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas* (1999), Derrida writes of Levinas’s philosophical project as an invitation for readers to sound certain words and concepts “otherwise.” We might, he observes, conceive of Levinas’s work as an ever-amplifying series of essays on the traditional significance of words like “straightforwardness” or “uprightness.”² Perhaps more than any other, however, it is “responsibility” that Levinas asks readers to hear with an unfamiliar resonance. Levinas seeks theoretically to achieve that which certain phrases of James’s (a “responsible answer,”³ a “responsible engagement”⁴) quietly perform: forestalling the conceptual chain that takes one from responsibility to a self-sufficient subject, to its liability for its actions. “Usually,” Levinas observes, “one is responsible for what one does oneself.”⁵ Yet when looked at from the standpoint of experience, it is not the case that one feels responsibility most acutely as a consequence of being the incontestable author of an action. In major works like *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise Than Being* (1971), Levinas points out the irrevocability of one’s feeling responsible regardless of the actions one may or may not

¹ Henry James, *The Sacred Fount* (London: Methuen, 1901), 209.

² Jacques Derrida, *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 2. In French, someone who is *droit*, “straightforward,” or “upright,” is someone who is direct or honest. For Levinas, straightforwardness and frankness are also the naked exposure of a vulnerability, an exposure without defence: “there is first the very uprightness of [the other], its upright exposure, without defense” (*Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 86).

³ Henry James, *The Awkward Age* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1987), 210.

⁴ Henry James, *The Golden Bowl*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner’s, 1904), 1:164.

⁵ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 96.

have performed. I am, he argues, always already responsible because I am inevitably in some sort of relationship to others and to their unique needs. Levinas proposes to view responsibility as, primarily, catalysed in the event of one human being's encounter with another, and not in the wake of an individual's free act.⁶ Thus Levinasian responsibility presumes heteronomy rather than autonomy; it presumes a connection with—as opposed to freedom from—the other; it posits what he calls the “face-to-face.” It is due to the central role that interrelationality has in his theory of responsibility that responsibility and response are, across his *oeuvre*, synonymous.⁷ While dislocating responsibility from its traditional place with the free subject, Levinas simultaneously shifts the locus of accountability—the entity to whom the individual is responsible. Denying that the subject is firstly responsible to its own free will, or to its gods, or to its community's sense of the good, Levinas claims that he or she is, instead, primarily answerable *to* the other *for* whom he or she is also responsible. Before autonomy, prior to the codification of responsibility in the obligations or duties which fall to us as citizens of a state, or as adherents to a religion or an ideology, Levinas contends that each of us is in a relation of unregulated and unregulatable responsiveness to another (to innumerable others) as wholly other.

There is already a difference here between the experience of responsibility as it is often figured by James and Levinas's theorisation of the same. Whereas Levinas emphasises the temporal and ethical pre-eminence of responsibility to another, its priority in relation to the systems of custom, law, and theodicy that ordinarily hypostasise responsibilities, James is acutely aware of the concurrence of these modalities of responsibility—attuned to the infinitely dramatic way in which responsibility is already the particularity of another's claim upon me *and* my duties according to more general orders of value. In “The Siege of London” (1883), for instance, it threatens to represent a “great responsibility” (a great liability, in this

⁶ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 96.

⁷ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 96.

case) if George Littlemore, a man of reputation in the expatriate social circles of Europe, does not observe the social mores of his milieu by confirming the disreputability of the adventuress now known as Mrs Headway.⁸ For Littlemore to shirk his obligation in this regard would be tantamount to assisting a fallen woman to “rise again.”⁹ “[F]ace to face” with Mrs Headway, however, Littlemore is met with her direct request that he not reveal what he knows of her past, and thereby give her the opportunity “to be classified afresh” through marriage to Sir Arthur Demesne.¹⁰

Waterville, Littlemore’s friend, initially encourages him to confirm the Demesnes’ suspicions regarding Mrs Headway’s reputation, but eventually even Waterville balks before Lady Demesne’s demand that he “explain” Mrs Headway. He confesses to Sir Arthur’s mother that the “responsibility is,” once again, “too great,” although in this instance, Waterville appears to mean that the burden of refusing Mrs Headway’s entreaty would be too heavy a one for him to bear. Still, Waterville perceives that his responsibility to Mrs Headway is not undivided; it is challenged by another no less compelling kind of responsibility:

He was unprepared to blight the reputation of Mrs. Headway to accommodate Lady Demesne; and yet, with his active little imagination, he could enter perfectly into the feeling of this tender, formal, serious woman, who—it was easy to see—had looked for her own happiness in the cultivation of duty...¹¹

The point to dwell upon is that in James’s story the primacy that Levinas would lay upon Littlemore’s and Waterville’s responsiveness to the particularity of Mrs Headway’s appeal is dreadfully contemporaneous with the more general “duty” to which Lady Demesne’s “formal, serious” person calls their attention: “the justice to be meted out to unscrupulous women who attempt to thrust themselves into honorable families.”¹²

⁸ Henry James, “The Siege of London” in *The Siege of London, The Pension Beaurepas, and The Point of View* (Boston: James R. Osgood & Co., 1883), 70.

⁹ James, “The Siege of London,” 35–36.

¹⁰ James, “The Siege of London,” 35

¹¹ James, “The Siege of London,” 100.

¹² James, “The Siege of London,” 2.

This one instance of a distinction between James's treatment of the nuances of responsibility and Levinas's thinking might be listed among many more. This is to say that I am aware that the distinctiveness of these two authors means that attempting to facilitate a dialogue between their respective ideas entails a risk that the differences will weigh more heavily in the balance than the similarities. However, I think the risk worthwhile insofar as the intellectual clarity of Levinas's responsibility can assist to map the less demonstrative nuances of James's. In the next several sections, I delineate the intellectual background from which Levinas emerged to reconceive responsibility away from the paradigms of individual accountability, paradigms which he regarded as critically as James seems to have done. I subsequently introduce the significant features of Levinas's responsibility (putting to one side a great many of his attendant ideas), before turning to James's personal writings to note the resonances between their thought. In brief, the rest of the chapter concentrates upon the degree to which James's writings conceive of the self as in large part a response to its encounters with otherness—both human and aesthetic. This study is founded upon what I consider to be the broad agreement between James and Levinas on this point; the accord makes possible the exploration of James's responsibility through the paradigm of responsiveness. The present chapter will also trace a dominant motif in James whereby responsiveness to another is privileged as a means of escape from self-concern and the monotony of one's own subjective horizon—a means into interest, difference, and sociality. I will suggest, therefore, that responsibility often registers not only desire for something other than freedom but disappointment with the very same.

At a certain point, the eloquence with which James's works self-theorise becomes more satisfying to pursue than the confluences between his ideas and those of Levinas. It is this which has informed my decision to set the two writers at a tactful distance from one another by concentrating upon the proximity of Jamesian and Levinasian responsibility in this first chapter alone. With intermittent exceptions to this rule, subsequent chapters will

concentrate, without reference to other theorists of responsibility, on tracing the threads of interest that diverge whenever one gives one's full attention to any concept in James. The present chapter ends by proposing, for the rest of the book, to make a close study of the expansive, if expensive, possibilities that are occasioned by responsibility in James, responsibility understood as the continual negotiation of the appeals that fall to one to answer.

The Origins of Levinasian Responsibility

Levinas launched his career in France as a student and translator of the philosophies of Husserl and Heidegger. Heidegger's philosophy presented one of the first rebuttals to the Kantian paradigms of subjectivity, whereby the human being is defined in and through the separation of self-reflexive interiority from the exteriority of the objective world. Heidegger, in contrast, refuted this primordial division, arguing that the subject is constituted in the event of its embodied, temporal emergence in the world. Put simply, for Heidegger, there is no transcendental essence called consciousness or subjectivity antecedent to its existence in space and time. As he writes in *Being and Time* (1927), the "essence of *Dasein* [being] lies in its existence."¹³ Advancing the "essenceless" nature of being, Heidegger points to the origins of responsibility in his supposition that each of us is, from the beginning and unceasingly, accountable to ourselves for choosing our own existence. Given that nothing precedes or underwrites being-in-the-world, the individual is continuously accountable for producing her or his own being; Heidegger's existentialist analysis of being affords, John Haugeland argues, a definition of "people" as "loci of accountability."¹⁴ According to Heidegger's critics, though, and these include Levinas, his intimation that each of us is most naturally and properly concerned with realising an authentic "being-in-the-world" finally accords slight value to the

¹³ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 246.

¹⁴ John Haugeland, *Dasein Disclosed*, ed. Joseph Rouse (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 15.

other beings among whom we live. To Levinas's mind, the priority that Heidegger gives to the individual's self-concern threatens to instrumentalise all other beings in the world, reducing them to obstacles, or to tools. For the Heideggerian "I," there is nothing that it owes or is capable of receiving from another; rather, the "I's" relationship to otherness consists of abolishing its difference, reducing otherness to sameness by appropriating the other to its needs.¹⁵ Levinas terms this process "the exercise of the same," an impulse which he characterises as the "I"'s desire "to receive nothing of the [other person] but what is in me, as though from all eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside—to receive nothing... to be free."¹⁶ To experience oneself as free is, in this context, to encounter nothing in the world that resists one's ability to possess it cognitively and to make it a part of oneself. Freedom, for Levinas, denotes this "mode of remaining the same in the midst of the other." It entails erasing "the strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions."¹⁷ Thus "[t]he Heideggerian ontology," he concludes, "affirms the primacy of freedom."¹⁸

Putting to one side the question of whether this is an entirely just reading of Heidegger's philosophy, Levinas saw in the work of his predecessor an aspiration to erase all alterity: a desire for "a totality wherein consciousness embraces the world, leaves nothing other outside itself, and thus becomes absolute thought."¹⁹ On Levinas's view, Heideggerian thought is incapable of appreciating phenomena that, in Donald R. Wehrs's phrasing, "introduce a 'difference' into our horizon of consciousness."²⁰ Accordingly, Levinas sought to elaborate a

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 37.

¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague & Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 43.

¹⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45, 43.

¹⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45. For nuanced accounts of the accuracies and elisions in Levinas's reading of Heidegger see *Between Levinas and Heidegger*, eds. John E. Drabinski and Eric S. Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014).

¹⁹ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 75.

²⁰ *Levinas and Nineteenth-Century Literature: Ethics and Otherness from Romanticism through Realism*, eds. Donald R. Wehrs and David P. Haney (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009), 16.

theory that would build upon Heidegger's revolutionary insight into the world-dependent nature of subjectivity, while also affirming the centrality of others to its founding, thus challenging the adequacy of any ontology wherein being precedes intersubjective being.

For Levinas, it is the encounter with another that is constitutive of selfhood, for the face-to-face makes possible the very self-reflexivity capable of internalising the world appearing to it.²¹ "The face [of the other]," writes Levinas in *Entre Nous* (1991), "is the beginning of intelligibility."²² In an interview from 1982, Levinas sketches the content of this face-to-face encounter, proposing that subjectivity is inaugurated when the other "looks at me and calls to me. It lays claim to me. What does it ask? Not to leave it alone. An answer: Here I am."²³ Individuation, identity, consciousness turn upon an act of self-identification ("Here I am") that is, at the same time, a response to difference, an answer to what is not "at one" with the self. The "I" arises, therefore, from a dynamic of petition and response; it is, from the beginning and inevitably, situated in a position of responsibility (of responsiveness) vis-à-vis the other. Hence Levinas will go on to write of responsibility as the "primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity": "the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility."²⁴ It is for this reason that Levinas calls his work an "ethics first" philosophy, for if one's being-

²¹ We may wish to note here the congruence of Levinas's position with that of twentieth-century psychoanalytic thought, in particular the "object relations" strand of psychoanalytic theory developed by D.W. Winnicott and Melanie Klein. Psychoanalytic approaches to James's work are popular and productive, in large part due to the central role "the other" is seen to play in the formation of identity, desire, sexuality, and subjectivity in his work. Selected key studies in this field include: Wendy Graham, *Henry James's Thwarted Love* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Michael Moon, *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1998); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1990); Shoshana Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," in *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Shoshana Felman, 94–207 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982). An excellent overview of James and psychoanalytic criticism is provided by Julie Rivkin in *Palgrave Advances in Henry James Studies*, ed. Peter Rawlings, 59–79 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

²² Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 103.

²³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous To Be?: Interviews With Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 127. Levinas is probably deriving the phrase "Here I am" from the Biblical "Hineni," which indicates above all a willingness to serve (God, the Other).

²⁴ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 95.

in-the-world is constituted in relation to another then there is necessarily an ethical significance to one's existence. Unlike in the philosophy of Heidegger or Kant, or in any conceptual structure which places self-grounded being at the beginning of contemplation, for Levinas, ethicality is not an afterthought, a supplementary system of rules devised to constrain the independent nature of being; rather, it is the ground of all human life.

Responsive Selves in James's Life Writing

The organisation of the self is a magnetic concern for James; in the famous conversation between Isabel and Madame Merle in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), he captures with great economy the very knotty, "very metaphysical," disputes it occasions in philosophy. Isabel, "fond of metaphysics," takes Kant's stance, advocating for a transcendental self, the existence of which exceeds anything material that might incidentally belong to it. "Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me," is Isabel's riposte to Madame Merle's "bold analysis" that, au contraire, there is only an "envelope of circumstances," a halo of relations into which the self "overflows," from which the self "flows back again." Subjectivity, Madame Merle suggests, is not so much an entity as a dialectic, requiring clothing, houses, "*things*," others to sustain its movements.²⁵ The elder woman is certainly the subtler and the wittier debater in this episode; additional clues, moreover, as to James's take on the structure of the self, scattered across the novels and tales, can be pieced together to form an impression harmonising with her evocative depiction. But a yet fuller picture can be gleaned from James's varied array of non-fictional or personal writings.

Oliver Herford reminds us that James's experiments in various forms of life writing began in the early 1890s. It was in this period that he first "began to receive commissions to produce commemorative essays and obituary tributes on the deaths of a departing generation of writers

²⁵ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Michael Anesko (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 193–194. The reference refers to all quotations.

and artists, many of whom had been his friends or acquaintances.”²⁶ But the author’s turn to retrospective non-fiction, a turn which began the fourth and final “phase” of his career, commenced in earnest with a book on the life of William Wetmore Story, the Americo-Roman sculptor and consummate host, through whose opulent apartments at the Palazzo Barberini the great names of the nineteenth-century had passed. Almost a decade in the making, the book was published in the same year as *The Ambassadors* (1903), under the title *William Wetmore Story and His Friends* (1903).²⁷

In critical circles, particularly among those who study life writing as a genre, James’s book on Story has drawn censure. Well-known to James scholars is Michael Millgate’s argument that the biographer’s obligation faithfully to attend to the life of the person under consideration is badly mishandled by James, who seems to have found the people among whom Story circulated infinitely more interesting than Story himself.²⁸ Millgate charges James with infidelity to his biographical subject, characterising his tale of émigré sociability as the “imposit[ion] [of] a narrative of general interest and implication upon a particular instance [Story himself].”²⁹ More recently, Willie Tolliver has offered a comparably critical, if more even-handed, evaluation of the book, describing it as “at best an unusual account of the [biographical] genre and at worst a qualified failure.”³⁰ Rather than a biography, however, it would be fairer to describe *William Wetmore Story* as a profoundly subjective form of cultural history, the theme

²⁶ Oliver Herford, *Henry James’s Style of Retrospect: Late Personal Writings, 1890–1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5.

²⁷ James was approached by Story’s children to write the biography in 1895. He accepted the commission with much ambivalence in 1897. It was not until 1902, however, that James took a serious look at Story’s archive. Nonetheless, by September of that same year, he had begun work and had finished the book by year’s end.

²⁸ For a fine, sensitive rebuttal to criticisms regarding the fidelity of James’s biography see Oliver Herford’s *Henry James’s Style of Retrospect*, Ch. 3, in which Herford contends that “James does not so much deny the principle of biographical narrative, the life-story, as refract and multiply it, to show passages of many lives—his own included—all being lived through their own times” (119).

²⁹ Michael Millgate, *Testamentary Acts: Browning, Tennyson, James, Hardy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 78.

³⁰ Willie Tolliver, *Henry James as Biographer: A Self Among Others* (New York & London: Garland, 2000), 105.

of which is artistic expatriation. More to the point, though, Tolliver and Millgate's criticism of James for being too little concerned with Story and too greatly taken by his "implications" belies an adherence to an idea of the self closely aligned to Isabel's "isolated man or woman." But it is likely that James would rebuff the suggestion that he could have written of Story without simultaneously writing of his "envelope"—or, in the words of the Preface to *Roderick Hudson* (1907), that he could have represented his subject without "exhibit[ing]" its "relations."³¹

Much of the scholarship directed to *WWS* is informed by the various letters James wrote to friends in which he complained that Story was too meagre a literary subject to be worked up into a biography. In 1902, for instance, to William Dean Howells, James despaired at his having

no *subject*—there is nothing in the man himself to write about. There is nothing for me to do but to do a *tour de force* or try to—leave poor dear W.W.S. *out*, practically, and make a little volume on the old Roman, Americo-Roman, Hawthornesque, and other bygone days.³²

One can read the book through the lens of these comments, averring that James substitutes the richness of Story's social connections and historical associations for the scantiness of Story as an artist and man.³³ But there is ample evidence in the text to make the argument that James's difficulties locating Story as a discrete subject gave way to his discovering that the heuristic he would later describe as essential "to the novelist's process" was just as germane to

³¹ Henry James, *Literary Criticism, Vol. 2: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, eds. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 2:1040.

³² Henry James, *The Letters of Henry James*, 4 vols., ed. Leon Edel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 4:224.

³³ Millgate's proposal that James's acts of biography submerge the identity of the subject in extraneous concerns receives perceptive rebuttal from Tamara Follini, who observes that James's approach to life-writing consciously challenges our generic and ethical sensibilities with regard to the form, "organiz[ing] questions for his readers regarding our own susceptibilities and resistances, and the capaciousness or narrowness of our own critical and ethical understandings" ("A geometry of his own: Temporality, Referentiality, and Ethics in the Autobiographies," in *Palgrave Advances in Henry James Studies*, 232).

the task of the retrospective writer: that it is by the aid of its “related state” that a subject “takes form and lives.”³⁴

As if rehearsing this line of argument himself, in 1903, following the publication of *WWS*, James wrote to Henry Adams of the “art of the biographer” as “somehow practically thinning” of its subject. He laments the degree to which the biographer’s process is comprised largely of shearing his or her subject of its atmospheric areole of “figures and things,”³⁵ its “golden glow,” in order to concentrate upon the “small mapped-out facts.”³⁶ As James observes in *William Wetmore Story*, a biographer, a “mere enumerator,” must confine himself to relating only the facts that pertain to his subject, yet could not a greater “justice” be done for this subject by an artist, a “prose-painter of life, character, manners,” who is “licensed” to render his subject with sympathy for its “golden air”? (2:196–7). By “licensed,” James ostensibly means “permitted”: the artist is permitted to do more than simply “enumerat[e]” the facts by virtue of his being an artist rather than a biographer. But James seems also to be flirting with the idea that the biographer might *take license* with his subject, become more “prose-painter” than “enumerator,” and thereby achieve for his subject a better “justice.” He appears to imagine for the artist-biographer a type of provisionally irresponsible aesthetic conduct that is, in fact, on its way to uprightness; and that would, in the final assessment, be superlatively responsible.

It is then, I argue, with a great degree of self-consciousness regarding his departure from the conventions of biographical form, and with a keen appreciation for the inordinately gregarious man at the centre of the book’s ever-amplifying circles of sociability (a “subject” that “didn’t lend itself it to that [“a Biography pure and simple”], in the strict sense of the

³⁴ James, *Literary Criticism*, 2:1040.

³⁵ James, *Literary Criticism*, 2:1040.

³⁶ *The Correspondence of Henry James and Henry Adams, 1877–1914*, ed. George Monteiro (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 63

word”³⁷), that James begins *William Wetmore Story* advising readers that Story will not consent to be “transpos[ed]” to art independently of his fellow “ghosts” (2:196). Having initially recognised that the historical shades—Story, his family, his illustrious friends—“compose[d]” or “h[u]ng together” in an aesthetic sense, James indicates that the association quickly revealed itself to be not merely seemly but fundamental. These ghosts cannot be “reproduce[d]” without each other; each “join[s] hands” with its fellow, as though demanding corporate evocation or none at all: they “confess, in fact, to a mutual dependence. If it is a question of living again, they can live but by each other’s help, so that they close in, join hands, press together for warmth.”³⁸

James’s sense for the intrinsically sociable nature of his ghosts runs through the book, but in no one is this constitutive relationality more concentrated than in Story, who is turned, at points, into pure relatedness, an effect solely of the weave and weft of solicitation and response. Acknowledging the lack of “incidents” in Story’s life, James writes early on that “[n]othing really happened to him but to be his remarkably animated and various, his exuberant, sympathetic, intensely natural self” (1:34). But if this constellation of qualities (“exuberant, sympathetic, intensely natural”) is first presented as though it were proper, integral to Story’s identity, it is a mode of being latterly perceived as the contingent answer to an intricate texture of “circumstances,” the “personal names, the personal presences, the personal interests, beliefs” of a “vanished society”: drawing his sentence to a close, James concludes by subtly defining Story as a “quantity of lively response.” Whomever Story may have been, he would not have been (and thus cannot be reproduced by the biographer), without “the circumstances themselves (almost always, as we eternally say, picturesque) that kept producing the quantity of lively response” (1:35). One effect of this sentence is to evoke

³⁷ Quoted from a letter of 1903 from James to Story’s daughter-in-law, Mrs Waldo Story. See *The Letters of Henry James*, 2 vols., ed. Percy Lubbock (New York: Scribner’s, 1920), 2:412-413.

³⁸ Henry James, *William Wetmore Story and His Friends: From Letters, Diaries, and Recollections*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), 1:16. References are hereafter given in the text.

Levinas's claim that self begins where the other "lays claim to me," but it also looks forward to the organisation of *WWS* around the sculptor's letters to family and friends (most notably, Robert Browning, James Russel Lowell, Charles Sumner, and Charles Eliot Norton) and theirs to him. There is an isomorphism between James's sense for the thoroughly performative composition of *Story* (a "wonderful all-round sociability" (1:84)) and the letter, a form which implicates the subject as an address and a response to a particular other. (A response involves the idea of an address; an address, the idea of a response.)³⁹ Letters may be the perfect material sign of the self as a type of postal effect, forever returning and going out, "overflow[ing]" and "flow[ing] back again."⁴⁰

Having read *William Wetmore Story*, Henry Adams was quick to appreciate its intimation of a mutual dependency between the "I" and its others. For Adams, the book's titular figure was so intensely the product of its milieu that any person who shared *Story*'s orientation as a "[t]ype bourgeois-bostonien," an "improvised European," could have been, in effect, the book's biographical centre of gravity.⁴¹ This at least is the implication of Adams's remark in a strange letter to James of 1903 that he had read in *WWS* "not *Story*'s life, but your own and mine,—pure autobiography." Adams seems also to have experienced the aesthetics of the text as a manifestation of its interpersonal worldview, for he describes finding there not only his own "life" but his own voice: "it all spreads itself out as though I had written it, and I feel where you are on firm ground, and where you are walking on thin ice, as though I were in your place. Verily," Adams continues, "I believe I wrote it. Except your specialty of style, it is me." His comment suggests that, to his ear, the narrating voice (or the implied author) of *WWS* speaks as though at home among the circumstances described—not, that is, like a foreigner to the

³⁹ See Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁴⁰ James, *Portrait*, 193.

⁴¹ *The Correspondence of Henry James and Henry Adams*, 60. In the context of the letter as a whole, Adams's comments manage to be both self-disparaging and faintly mocking of James, who, has managed, Adams indicates, admirably to redeem *Story*'s, his own, and James's "essential superficiality."

world it articulates, but like an autobiographer (“pure autobiography”)—canny to it. Adams, therefore, himself no alien to the scene, hears the voice as his own. He does not name the aspects of the book’s poetics that he finds so hospitable, but he does note that it is only the “specialty of [James’s] style” which presents an impediment to his fully inhabiting the “place” of the author. However, if James’s style is too expert for Adams to believe altogether that “it is me,” it is not altogether James’s either. As Oliver Herford has finely demonstrated, James’s retrospective style is itself a sociable grain of allusion, inter-allusion, and echo—literary forms gesturing to a writerly self that is itself, in part, a response to otherness. “James,” Herford writes, “invites his readers to hear that a certain form of words is not his own, although the use he has made of it *is*.”⁴²

Herford’s claim for the receptivity of James’s retrospective writings (these include his commemorative essays and autobiographical texts, as well as *William Wetmore Story*) may be related to a further element of their poetics. The author-narrator James fashions in his retrospective works often presents itself as though arising in the event of an appeal for artistic revival on the part of a time, a place, a person, or persons.⁴³ *A Small Boy and Others* (1913), for instance, begins by accounting for the life of the authorial voice speaking, and by turns the literary work itself, with regard to the solicitations of the spectral men and women met with in the lines of William James’s letters and diaries. In the opening chapter, James remarks that the book has come about as a “consequence” of looking over his brother’s papers; engaged in this act of remembrance, James continues, he found himself hailed by other members of the “blest group” with which he and his brother were once, as children, “fused and united and interlocked.” He had opened the door to a past richly peopled, each of whom began to “plead

⁴² Herford, *Henry James’s Style of Retrospect*, 12.

⁴³ David McWhirter makes a similar proposal in his suggestion that James’s retrospective works are motivated by his “never final, always provisional quest for new circuits of connection and continuity with a past” and with those “who inhabit that past and constitute the self which apprehends it” (“‘A provision full of responsibilities’: Senses of the Past in Henry James’s Fourth Phase,” in *Enacting History in Henry James: Narrative, Power, and Ethics*, ed. Gert Buelens, 148–165 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 157).

for preservation,” for artistic redemption. It is these supplicants that represent, James writes, articulating the connection between the encounter and the literary form presently in the reader’s hand, “the circle of my commemoration,” “these free and copious notes a labour of love and loyalty.”⁴⁴ Thus James justifies his literary “labour” as an offering in response to the demands of his eponymous “others,” a materialisation of “love and loyalty,” while achieving the larger implication that the origins of the author lie in responsiveness. He re-inscribes this suggestion later in *A Small Boy* when he writes that

To look back [on the past] at all is to meet the apparitional and to find in its ghostly face the silent stare of an appeal. When I fix it, the hovering shade, whether of person or of place, it fixes me back and seems the less lost...⁴⁵

The passage sketches a “look” without agential subject in its “meeting” a shade, the “appeal” (a word suggesting at once a plea and aesthetic attractiveness) of which detains the deindividuated gaze. It is in the event of these lines of sight grazing against one another that the eye is transformed into the personalised “I” of the next sentence. The newly Jamesian “I” suggests that his response to the “appeal” of “the hovering shade, whether of person or of place” is to “fix it,” perhaps granting it form with an “I-thou”⁴⁶ look of recognition, possibly attaching it to or placing it within the literary form. By whatever means the fixing takes place, the effect is that the “I” secures the shade against displacement, preventing it from being “lost.” Having fixed “the apparitional,” the authorial “I” is reciprocally located and situated: the shade, James writes, “fixes me back.” As at the beginning of the volume, James creates for himself a textual subjectivity from a dynamic of plea and demand.

Levinas might have termed the experiences narrated in *A Small Boy* as ones of “election,” for while in his philosophy, the other’s claim upon the subject necessarily compromises its

⁴⁴ Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others* (New York: Scribners, 1913), 2.

⁴⁵ James, *A Small Boy*, 92.

⁴⁶ I am evoking Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner’s, 1937), in which he suggests that every pronouncement of the “I” entails an “I-Thou” relation. If “I” is said the “Thou” is said; if “*Thou*” is said, the “I” of the combination “*I-Thou*” is said along with it.

freedom to be in and for itself, it is also an event that offers to imbue its expressive life (the means by which it mobilises its talents and resources) with profound purpose and significance. Describing what he calls the “engagement” of responsibility, Levinas writes that “[r]esponsibility confirms the I...such an engagement is happy; it is the austere and noncomplacent happiness that lies in the nobility of an election.”⁴⁷ His claim is that the responsibility which falls to the subject from the other may be a burden, but that it is, more to the point, a type of investiture—the privilege of which accords the subject weight and dignity, “confirms” it, ennobles its activities, literary or otherwise. It is this kind of ambiguous “engagement,” burdensome but profound, demanding but uplifting, that James describes when, at the beginning of *William Wetmore Story*, he dramatises his investiture as recorder of Story’s “vanished society.” “A boxful of old papers, personal records and relics all, has been placed in my hands,” James begins, presenting himself as passive in the event his being deputised the keeper of “papers, personal records and relics,” subject to the responsibility of interpreting the “ghosts and echoes,” the “swarm of apparitions and reverberations” “set free by the lifted lid” of the box (a lid “lifted” by a further source of alien agency).⁴⁸ It is a scene in which the writer’s textual subjectivity is activated, his labour inspired, even as (or indeed because) his freedom to devote himself to his own projects and concerns is arrogated.⁴⁹ This episode, in its turn, looks back on ones of analogous shape in James’s Prefaces to the New York Edition.

⁴⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 18.

⁴⁸ James, *William Wetmore Story* 1:7, 1:14.

⁴⁹ The scene seems to record but also to sublimate the resentment James had come to feel towards his responsibility to complete the Story book. In January 1902, he complained to William Dean Howells: “[I] suffered to be gouged out of me long ago by the Waldo Storys—a history in itself—a promise first to ‘look at’ the late W. W.’s papers and then to write a memorial volume of some sort about him. I’ve delayed quite desperately, and at last, quite *must*...” See *The Letters of Henry James*, 4:224–225.

The Prefaces open the borders of the foreign “other” by whose appeal the writer is summoned to aesthetic phenomena—characters, subjects, and forms whose “impos[ition]s,” “solicitations,” “urgent,” “sharp,” or “restless” “appeals” punctuate a great many of the Prefaces.⁵⁰ James’s bearing, in these recounted meetings, is that of an author receptive to the phantasmagoria of the imagination breaking in upon him. Implicit in his emphasis upon the writer’s “recognitions” of his subjects, and distinctive of the way in which James speaks of his aesthetic phenomena more generally, is the transposition of a dynamic characteristic of human interactions to the writer and his literary figures. James speaks of his “care” for these subjects, of his “commitments,” “pledge[s],” “loyalty,” and “infatuation.”⁵¹ By lending the Prefaces their strange, compelling register of relationality, James evokes a novelist just as profoundly subject to the pull of others as the memoirist of *A Small Boy*, or the narrator of *William Wetmore Story*: a “subject-victim,” “morally affiliated, tied as by knotted fibres” to those he encounters, both real and fancied.⁵²

The basis of the affiliation I have proposed between James (thus far late James) and Levinas is a shared attraction to the idea of the self’s dependent origination; to a shared perception of being and doing as, in large part, instigated by the summons of otherness. It is when the self and its creative agency is imagined as a “debt” owed another (“a debt of the I, older than any loan”⁵³) that responsibility may be perceived arising not, or not only, for the self’s sake, but for the sake of the other upon whom it is reliant, and thus to whom it “owe[s],” in Strether’s words to Chad concerning Madame de Vionnet, “everything.”⁵⁴ It is, however,

⁵⁰ For “imposition” see James, *Literary Criticism*, 2:1040, for “solicitations” 2:1086, 2:1174, 2:1250, 2:1255, and for various kinds of “appeal” 2:1086, 2:1121, 2:1070, 2:1091.

⁵¹ James, *Literary Criticism*, 2:1056, 2:1256, 2:1334, 2:746, 2:762, 2:143, 2:297, 2:344, 2:144, 2:145, 2:532. References are hereafter given in the text.

⁵² James, *A Small Boy*, 105.

⁵³ Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 227.

⁵⁴ Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, ed. Nicola Bradbury (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 387. When Chad is said to describe himself as “tired” of his lover, Strether presses upon him his prima facie responsibility to Madame de Vionnet, stressing that he “owe[s] her everything—very much more than she can ever owe you. You’ve in other words

judicious to examine the value that inheres, for James and Levinas respectively, in locating subjectivity and responsibility in heteronomy, for although the structures of their thought seem to overlap on this matter, their motivations for such imaginings do not necessarily intersect.

Levinas promotes a conception of identity as derived from a “position of responsibility before the other” for the reason that he would like each of us think of ourselves as existing not in freedom from our neighbours but in an attitude of care and concern towards them.⁵⁵ In part due to the rhetorical amplification that is distinctive of Levinas’s style,⁵⁶ it is often mistakenly argued that his reorientation of the individual away from freedom towards subjection or heteronomy promotes the suspension or the dissolution of the self in the post-humanist tradition.⁵⁷ Far from promoting subjectivity’s dissolution, though, Levinas maintains as irreducible the place of selfhood but gives it a new foundation. Distinguishing his own understanding of the “I” from that of Kant and his transcendental subject, or from that of Heidegger and his self-claiming *Dasein*, Levinas speaks of an “I” that is “neither the substantial identity of a subject nor...the ‘mineness’ of being,” but “the *I* of the one who is chosen to answer for his fellow man and is *thus* identical to itself, and *thus* the self.”⁵⁸ The value for Levinas of describing the individual as a primordially responsive and responsible subject is then relatively straightforward: to preclude relationships from being seen as supplementary or additional to ontology by making ethicality the basis of being itself.

duties to her of the most positive sort; and I don’t see what other duties—as the others are presented to you—can be held to go before them.”

⁵⁵ “I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible,” he writes. “Such is my inalienable identity [as] subject” (Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 101).

⁵⁶ Levinas writes of the subject’s “radical passivity,” of its “pre-originary openness,” or of its status as a “hostage” to the other in responsibility (Levinas quoted in Benda Hofmeyr, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot, Agamben* (Albany: State University of New York, 1999), 143).

⁵⁷ For a fuller account of these criticisms and the demonstrative humanism of Levinas’s philosophy see Claire Elise Katz, *Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

⁵⁸ Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 217.

It may be that presenting the writerly and worldly self as a kind of “lively response” to its milieu is similarly the means by which James figures the sociable quality of all being and doing, including that of artistic making. On the other hand, however, Dorothy J. Hale has described James’s attraction to articulating the responsive composition of subjectivity, particularly that of the writer or writer-persona, as a modern example of a “defence of poesie.” In relation to the Prefaces, Hale contends that James’s expressions of ostensible care for “the lives bound up in his fictions,” the anxieties to which he confesses regarding his possible “exploitation” of fictional subjects, are designed to redeem his formalist aesthetic (indifferent to actual socio-political concerns) by ascribing to it make-believe “ethicopolitical values.” James’s “social formalism,” Hale offers, deflects charges of aestheticism or of Flaubertian “form-for-form’s sake,” by presenting form as troubled by its own ethical dilemmas.⁵⁹

Hale’s demystifying approach is one direction in which this project could have taken James’s interest in portraying artists, characters, and persons as subjects by virtue of others and thus as subject to others (aesthetic and otherwise). One might argue, for instance, that James’s intimation, in *A Small Boy and Others* or in *William Wetmore Story*, that he has been solicited (rather than actively having chosen) to depict the real persons who figure in these books alleviates, to a degree, his qualms regarding the use and misuse of other people in art—a peril which invariably attends genres like creative nonfiction, memoir, or (auto)biography, and one upon which James sagaciously touches in stories like “The Aspern Papers” (1888). Nonetheless, Hale’s approach to this topic leads to something of a critical impasse; not least in that it seems to discount as naïve or inane the project of asking what merit other than the obfuscating James might find in the idea of the responsive-responsible self—on both the plane of making and on the story-plane. The next sections do pose this question. However,

⁵⁹ Dorothy J. Hale, “Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century,” in *American Literature’s Aesthetic Dimensions*, eds. Cindy Weinstein and Christopher Looby, 313–327 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 324. For a fuller version of Hale’s argument see Hale, *Social Formalism: The Novel in Theory from Henry James to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

successive chapters, particularly Chapters Four and Five, indicate that James is as distrustful as any paranoid⁶⁰ critic could wish of the deceptive uses to which the “ethical” value of responsiveness might be put.

A Responsive Recipient

The desolation of a world in which each is riveted to himself, enclosed within the tight circle of self-concern, is perhaps nowhere better portrayed than in James’s last published short story, “A Round of Visits” (1910). The tale tells of the return to America of Mark Monteith, a young man in a state of mourning and disbelief at having been robbed of his life’s savings by his “abjectly trusted” friend, Phil Bloodgood.⁶¹ The narrative, told almost entirely from the perspective of Monteith, consists of a series of visits made by the protagonist to several New York acquaintances. The majority of critical summaries of the story indicate that Monteith is looking for someone to listen to him; but the character’s need is more nuanced than this. Monteith is in search of someone who will act not merely as an insensible auditor to his woes, but of someone who will forget themselves and their “egotistical little chatter” long enough to aid him in redeeming his injury and the “poor shamed...doom-ridden figure” of his erstwhile friend from the “mere ugliness of the main facts” (400, 399). As James puts it in the Preface to *The Spoils of Poynton* (1908), Monteith is anxious to find another with whom he can “transplan[t] to richer soil” the “fatal futility of Fact” (2:1140).

For the majority of the story, Monteith searches in vain for one who will locate themselves in a position of imaginative responsiveness to him. The hotel doctor, who treats Monteith for his melancholic flu, is cheerfully perfunctory, all too well accustomed to his patients’ sorrows

⁶⁰ I refer to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s broad-strokes division of literary criticism into the schools of paranoid and of reparative reading. See “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You,” in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings of Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1–37 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

⁶¹ Henry James, “A Round of Visits,” in *The Jolly Corner and Other Tales*, ed. N. H. Reeve (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 396. References are hereafter given in the text.

to appreciate the singularity of Monteith's. One of Monteith's friends and another of Bloodgood's victims, Mrs Folliot, proves incapable of receiving from Monteith any more than can fit "her own small faculty"; she can "*take* nothing" he would give out (400). A second friend, Mrs Ash, is likewise disclosed as someone who, in Levinas's words, can "receive nothing of the [other person] but what is [always already in the self]." Monteith accordingly refrains from making any "personal claim" upon her (405).

The story is one of James's more distressing, for it seems to tell of a man who wanders in despair through New York's hotels, restaurants, and drawing rooms, in search of a person who might leave the place of self-concern long enough to "*take*" something from him. (As a story of a hostile city in which a traveler fails to find welcome, "A Round of Visits" beautifully partners with James's very early story "A Passionate Pilgrim" (1871) to book-end his career.) The tale evokes comparison to Jacques Derrida's recapitulation of Levinasian responsibility in terms of an ethics of hospitality. In *Adieu*, Derrida singles out one of the more salient aspects of Levinas's thinking: subjectivity as a pre-originary welcome of the other, in order to envision the subject as, principally, a locus of hospitality. Derrida writes of the always already responsive subject as akin to the master or mistress of a home (a symbol for the abode of selfhood), who, in response to the arrival of a guest, finds her place in that home contingent upon the guest's welcome of her. Playing upon the double valence of the French word "*bôte*," which may denote both "host" and "guest," Derrida writes of the host who "receives the hospitality that he offers in his own home": "the welcoming [host] who considers himself the owner of the place, is in truth a [guest] received in his own home. He receives the hospitality that he offers in his own home; he receives it from his own home—which, in the end, does not belong to him."⁶² Or, "[t]he host, as '*bôte*', is a *guest*."⁶³ I will return to Derrida's elaboration of Levinas's responsibility-responsivity into a philosophy of hospitality in a later chapter. For now, I make

⁶² Derrida, *Adieu*, 41–2.

⁶³ Derrida, *Adieu*, 79.

reference to it in order to bring out the stark absence of such hospitality in “A Round of Visits.” Monteith is received by his friends only (at least from Monteith’s perspective) to serve as a featureless, unacknowledged sounding-post. Until, that is, Monteith makes his final visit to former classmate Newton Winch.

James had been meditating upon this story for some sixteen years before it was published. In 1894, the author described it for himself in his notebook as the tale of a “young man...who has something to *tell* and can’t find the *recipient*.” The young man would wander “with his burden only growing heavier—looking vainly for the ideal sympathy, the waiting, expectant, responsive recipient.”⁶⁴ It is at this point that James’s blueprint for the story diverges from the tale he eventually published. In the initial design, the protagonist of “A Round of Visits” was never to find what he sought but was, in the author’s words, to

encounter instead a sudden appeal, an appeal more violent, as it were, more pitiful even than his own has had it in it to be. He meets in a word a *demand* where he had at last been looking for a supply—a demand which embodies the revelation of a trouble which he immediately feels to be greater than his own. In the presence of this communication which he has to receive instead of giving it he forgets his own, ceases to need to make a requisition for it.⁶⁵

James’s early intention was, it seems, to rescue the possibility of the “responsive recipient” by having his protagonist succeed in the role others had failed even to attempt. The hero, consumed with his “own ache,” was to have encountered the “sudden appeal” of another, a “demand” more urgent, more “pitiful” than his own; he was to register or intuit (“to feel”) the severity of his interlocutor’s need and the “presence of this communication” was to enact a kind of affective interruption in him. It was to have made him self-forgetful. He was to have forgotten “his own,” and to have seen his need to deliver himself to another dissolve in the

⁶⁴ Henry James, “34 De Vere Gardens, Sunday, February 17th 1894,” “Casa Biondetti, April 21st 1894,” in *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 88, 94.

⁶⁵ James, “Casa Biondetti, April 21st 1894,” *Notebooks*, 94.

face of another's solicitation. Rather than requisitioning someone in responsiveness to him, this version of the Monteith character was to "receive" the other.

In the published story, the dénouement of Monteith's final visit to Newton Winch touches upon James's original plot before dealing it a death blow. Appearing to find his responsive recipient in Newton Winch, Monteith and his interlocutor converse at such a height of understanding as to appear almost without the need for language. In the midst of their conversation, however, Winch urges his guest to sit down, hoping to conceal from Monteith a pistol poorly hidden beneath a chair. Monteith remarks with surprise "his entertainer's slightly marked appeal to him" (to sit down), sensing in this "appeal" something of great import (418). "[G]uessing" at the presence of the gun, Monteith is quick to ask Winch's "pardon for being so taken up with [his] own sorry business"; he begs his host to change places with him as the one whose "deep sore inward ache" is sounded and it is revealed that Winch has also in some way swindled or cheated his loved ones (419, 394). The salience, therefore, of Monteith's original confidence has not been lost on Winch, but the significance Winch has taken from Monteith's tale is deeply ambiguous; nonetheless, its result is Winch's suicide by gunshot.

James's preliminary sketch for the story dissolves the tragic cast of his hero's wanderings in a solution bespeaking the immense value of responsibility as "responding to" or answering a call that is not chosen. If the story had been written as the author had initially planned, it presumably would not have ended with a suicide. Furthermore, the protagonist was, in forgetting his own concern, apparently to have found himself "healed." James's notebook entry continues, "[h]is [the Monteith-character's] own ache, in a word, passes from him... he is healed by doing himself what he wanted to have done *for* him."⁶⁶ James intimates that by Monteith's substituting himself for another ("doing himself what he wanted to have done *for* him"), he would have returned to himself *as* another—that is, as one whose "ache" had passed

⁶⁶ James, "Casa Biondetti, April 21st 1894," *Notebooks*, 94

from him. This un-lived story continues to haunt the extant version but the text bears the marks of an author who, in the intervening sixteen years, has been taken with the subject of belatedness. In the published story, Monteith still brushes against the violence presaged by Winch's "appeal," but it is as though he has recognised too late what has been all along obscured by "the dazzling glitter of intelligence to which the poor man had up until now been treating him" (419). Monteith finds that, as he told his story of betrayal, he may have been helping Winch to torment himself—possibly by intensifying Winch's shame, perhaps by taking advantage (to some degree) of Winch, as Winch has taken advantage of others. This latter reading is suggested by Winch's "fresh appeal" to Monteith as he sees his visitor begin to recognise his pain: "Aren't you going to take advantage of me, man—aren't you going to *take* it?" (419). This reiterated use of an emphatic "*take*," previously employed by Monteith in the context of Mrs Folliot's incapacity to "*take*" anything of him, suggests that to "take" another in responsiveness to oneself can also indicate a kind of violence. Monteith may feel momentarily better for being heard by Winch (although there is now no mention of Monteith being "healed"), but his encounter with Winch carries the intimation that Monteith's burden may have been lifted only to be replaced with a different one—a tortuous complicity with his previous interlocutors.⁶⁷ As in James's outline, the protagonist still substitutes himself for Winch but not by "doing himself what he wanted to have done *for* him"; instead, Monteith seems to believe he has done *to* Winch what was done *to* him—that is, been fatally unresponsive. "I really think I must practically have caused it," says Monteith of Winch's suicide in the very last line of the tale (422). Here Monteith identifies himself as one who is, in the absence of having been responsive to Winch, "practically"—in all but deed—become responsible (accountable, liable) for his death.

⁶⁷ In her Lacanian reading of the story, Donna Przybylowicz interprets both Monteith and Winch as having been healed by their meeting, noting that the "relationship of self and other between Mark Monteith and Newton Winch is therapeutic for the former and expiatory for the latter" (*Desire and Repression: The Dialectic of Self and Other in the Late Works of Henry James* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 135.)

Set alongside the germ of the story James sketched, one can see that the story he publishes foregoes articulating the restorative value prophesied in Monteith's movement from intentionality to passivity, from the ego to the other, from self-concern to responsiveness. In a later notebook entry of 1899, James wrote of this projected conclusion as aesthetically anaemic, or too "goody" and calculable beforehand."⁶⁸ But the worth the story sets upon responsiveness is perhaps all the more powerfully isolated in light of the violence produced in the event of, firstly, its negation and, subsequently, its unpunctuality. This violence does not bear solely on Winch but also upon Monteith, who is prevented from achieving that which recurs frequently enough across James's *oeuvre* to be spoken of as a type of (not unmitigated) Jamesian good: release or escape, through responsibility to and for another, from the suffocating horizon of ipseity or self-ness.

Even while Monteith is displacing onto Winch the fate of being unable to find a "recipient," one could as well say that Winch is arrogating from Monteith the discovery of self-forgetfulness in the process of becoming another's "responsive recipient"; for not only does Winch's palpable desire *not* to speak of his own affairs to Monteith tell of a resistance to being pitched back into the depths of himself, but Monteith, too, perceives that as thrilled as he may be to find in Winch a welcoming host, his pain is a "convenience" to Winch. By providing Winch an "interest" outside of his own "deep trouble," Monteith's appeal has acted to convey or transport Winch, however momentarily, from himself (180–81). In what could be read as Winch's final act of pilfering (a repetition of Bloodgood's sin; Monteith's repetition compulsion—to be fleeced—?), Monteith is cheated of an experience which punctuates James's work—one whereby, in responding to another, the individual absconds from herself.

To Be Other Almost Anyhow

⁶⁸ James, "February 16th 1899," *Notebooks*, 179.

Associating first and last texts, fictional writings and personal ones, is the intimation that in becoming responsible to and for another we come closer to a version of the “impossible” “vision” that James ascribes to his childish self in *A Small Boy*: to get out of oneself, “to *be* other, other almost anyhow.”⁶⁹ Recollecting his visit to Sing-Sing prison in the company of his cousin, Gus Barker, James investigates the nature of his jealousy for his “kinsman,” recalling that “I seem to have been constantly eager to exchange my lot for that of somebody else, on the assumed certainty of gaining in the bargain.” This desire to accomplish a “spiritual snatching” of another’s subjective “horizon” stemmed, James explains, from “an acuity of perception of alternatives,” a cognisance of alternative “horizons” with “further range” and “finer shade.”⁷⁰ In the Preface to “The Point of View” (1908), James confesses, once more, to his “perverse and incurable disposition to interest himself less in his own (always so quickly stale) experience, under certain sorts of pressure, than in that of conceivable fellow mortals, which might be mysteriously and refreshingly different” (2:1222). It is not, then, precisely the other’s experience that James desires but an experience *other* to his own. In “A Round of Visits,” and in many a short story or novel, it is involvement with another, specifically the enduring engagement or occupation of responsibility to and for them, that promises the fulfilment of this desire.

It could be called a leitmotif of James’s canon: a protagonist, weary of him- or herself, imagines that richer subjective experience lies in exiting ipseity, in answering another’s appeal.⁷¹ So Olive Chancellor, of *The Bostonians* (1886), speaks of her desire to meet with some “lonely,” “piteous” woman, someone to whom she can “give [herself] up,” into whose life she

⁶⁹ James, *A Small Boy*, 175.

⁷⁰ James, *A Small Boy*, 175–6.

⁷¹ As Andrew Taylor notes, experiences “customarily held to compromise the integrity of the self are deliberately (even perversely) celebrated by James” (*Henry James and the Father Question* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 37). For instance, recalling in *The Middle Years* (New York: Scribner’s, 1917) his first long stay in London, James writes of his sheer enjoyment at being “in the midst of...perversities, idiosyncrasies, incalculabilities, delightful all as densities at first insoluble, delightful even, indeed, as so much mere bewilderment and shock” (27).

can “enter.”⁷² The pattern likewise suits Isabel Archer, disenchanted with freedom, contemplating marriage to Osmond: “[t]he desire for unlimited expansion had been succeeded in her mind by the sense that life was vacant without some private duty which gathered one’s energies to a point.”⁷³ In a position to be “of use to [Osmond]” Isabel imagines, giving away herself and her fortune, simultaneous release from the monotony of the free self. Lastly, from a very early point in James’s career, at the beginning of *Roderick Hudson* (1875), one finds Rowland Mallet experiencing a comparable existential nausea. To his cousin Celia, Rowland confesses to being “tired of myself, my own thoughts, my own affairs, my own eternal company.”⁷⁴ His next thought is of “getting out” of himself; as a locus of escape, Rowland fixes on a concern foreign to the “‘mineness’ of being”: “I want to care for something or for somebody,” he tells Celia, “I want to care with a certain ardour” (53). In the New York Edition of the text, Rowland declares that he is “holding” himself “ready for inspiration.”⁷⁵ When “unimpeachable inspiration”⁷⁶ strikes Rowland, it takes the form of Roderick Hudson, the making of whom promises to transform Rowland from an “idle useless creature” into an active, benevolent force (52).

These intricate situations share an author keenly aware that giving oneself to another may be a means by which “to *be* other”—to mitigate solipsism, alleviate ennui, imbue experience with “further range” and “finer shade”⁷⁷—but that the act can also catalyse the possibility of

⁷² Henry James, *The Bostonians*, ed. Daniel Karlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 33.

⁷³ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Michael Anesko (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 341.

⁷⁴ Henry James, *Roderick Hudson* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 53. References are hereafter given in the text.

⁷⁵ Henry James, *Roderick Hudson* (New York: Scribner’s, 1907), 7. Contesting the idea that responsibility for another is servitude or bondage, Levinas also describes its arrival as “inspiration.” Responsibility is “through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation: inspired” (*Otherwise Than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 114).

⁷⁶ James, *Roderick*, 6. References are hereafter given in the text.

⁷⁷ In an early essay called *On Escape*, Levinas writes of the same’s desire for the other as a desire “orientated toward...escape” from the ego (*On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 69). For Levinas, however, the idea of escape from the self

exploitation, manipulation, conflict, even death. Positioning his protagonists, Isabel, Rowland, and Olive, in a responsive relation to another's appeals, James's impulse as a storyteller is to relate the inevitability of their misperceiving, overimagining, or disregarding these demands. Even in those texts where responsive and responsible involvements appear at their most felicitous, James's inclination is, it appears, to leave the reader with a sense for the capacity of otherness to perplex and exhaust the resources of every separate and finite subject, no matter how sympathetic or generous. The letter and the essay are, I will propose in a later chapter, the open-ended forms by which James explores the limitless demand responsibility contracts; for now, a further short story will serve to illustrate how an inevitable element of incommunicability in the appeal itself obscures from Jamesian agents precise knowledge of what is asked of them, and in such a way as to cast a shadow over acts of responsiveness which are, on their face, readily interpretable as just, tactful answers to another. Appeals, pleas, and solicitations are ubiquitous in James, but for all their abundance, they are elusive phenomena, resistant to being given intelligible form in language, expressible only in the most circumlocutory manner.

In "Madame de Mauves," Longmore, an American in France, meets through a mutual friend the tale's eponymous heroine, Euphemia, the wife of the callous Comte de Mauve, whom she married in the misguided belief that birth guaranteed "an ideal delicacy of feeling."⁷⁸ Longmore is encouraged by a mutual friend of his and Euphemia's to help salve the sadness of her marriage. He swiftly becomes a great "resource" for her, sharing his own thoughts as a means of permitting her to "escape from her own" (398). In this first stage of their relationship, Longmore's "fine senses and active imagination" appear, therefore, to grasp the essence of Euphemia's need of him, in spite of its remaining unspoken (399). Later, however, Longmore's faculties are not so unerring. For instance, when he admits to Euphemia that he

does not see a return to it; one could approach Levinas's thought as the effort to go beyond the same, toward the other, but in a way whereby one does not come back.

⁷⁸ Henry James, *A Passionate Pilgrim, and Other Tales* (Boston: J. R. Osgood & Co., 1875), 375.

knows something of her sorrows, hoping to share his admiration for her courage, he mistakes her feeling; Euphemia firmly rebuffs his gesture and its implication that she has appealed to him for admiration or consolation. Misapprehensions such as these, involving for Longmore a gathering sense of Euphemia's opacity, look forward to the story's dénouement.⁷⁹

Longmore's exposure, in quick succession, to the Comte's infidelity and the sinuous oratory of Madame Clairin (who advises Longmore that affairs are the polite course of action for disheartened spouses in the de Mauves clan) persuades him that the best response he can make to Euphemia in her situation is to propose himself as her lover. But before he can act, Euphemia forestalls him with a request:

'I know your feeling... You needn't try to express it. It's enough that it gives me the right to ask a favour of you – to make an urgent, a solemn request.'

'Make it; I listen.'

'*Don't disappoint me.* If you don't understand me now, you will to-morrow, or very soon. When I said just now that I had a very high opinion of you, I meant it very seriously. It was not a vain compliment. I believe that there is no appeal one may make to your generosity that can remain long unanswered. If this were to happen,—if I were to find you selfish where I thought you generous, narrow where I thought you large'—and she spoke slowly, her voice lingering with emphasis on each of these words,—'vulgar where I thought you rare,—I should think worse of human nature. I should suffer,—I should suffer keenly.' (474-5)

Given Euphemia's earlier admission to Longmore that she has a "dread of moral suffering" and desires to avoid all violent emotion, his answer to this plea would seem, on the face of it, entirely the looked-for response (412): he does not take Madame Clairin's advice (which is, after all, a general axiom to which the particular runs the risk of being "fatally sacrificed" (366)), but instead leaves Auvergne. He and Euphemia never meet again. But Longmore's interpretation of Euphemia's demand is, at best, only a partially apposite one (in terms of its percipience, its tact, its imagination), and not least for the reason that her "request," in spite

⁷⁹ At one point, he feels he is yet to make her "real acquaintance" in spite of their friendship (425); at another, he poses desperate questions of the obscure look in her eyes: "Did they warn him, did they plead or did they confess to a sense of provocation?" (472).

of (or due to) its gravity, remains inchoate. One can only guess at the substance of Euphemia's "urgent" request; Longmore turns over her words for several days before hesitantly deciding on their import. Moreover, while the tone in which Euphemia delivers her request communicates "dismissal" to Longmore, her body, on the other hand, "so close, so urgent, so personal, seemed a distracting contradiction" of the insinuation of her tone (475). To a greater or lesser degree, therefore—with Monteith's profound sense of culpability at one end of the spectrum (alongside other lethally unresponsive or mis-responsive figures like Winterbourne, Pemberton of "The Pupil" (1891), or the young governess of "The Turn of the Screw" (1898)) and, at the other end, ambiguous acts of responsiveness such as that of Longmore's—failure to answer the needs of those to whom one is bound haunts the give and take of relationality in James.

Impression, Expression

In the same year as the publication of "Madame de Mauves," James wondered in a letter to his great friend Grace Norton,

But do we, in talk or in writing, ever really answer each other? Each of us says his limited personal say out of the midst of his circumstances, and the other one clips what satisfaction he can from it.⁸⁰

His letter consists in part of an apologia for having taken so long to answer the two Norton had sent James, one of "long ago" and "one of the other day." Norton was herself a punctual correspondent. In 1908, she told Lucy Allen Paton that "[t]here is nothing I like better than to answer a letter the moment I receive it—that seems really like talking."⁸¹ A prompt letter may grow closer to the immediacy of talk but do either "talk" or "writing"—it crosses James's mind to ask—constitute "an answer" to another? Is the present letter an "answer" to Norton's,

⁸⁰ Henry James to Grace Norton, January 14th 1874, in *Henry James: Letters*, 4 vols. ed Leon Edel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974–1984), 1:427–428.

⁸¹ Grace Norton to Lucy Allen Paton, November 22nd 1908, MS Am 1967, Houghton Library.

the “humour” of which had seemed to James “rather sad than joyous.” His letter will be a response to Norton’s in that it reciprocates a letter for a letter, but it may not necessarily afford “answer” or “satisfaction” to all that Norton has implicitly or overtly asked of James. His concern regarding a specific failure to return a letter thus shifts into existential doubt as to what it means “really” to “answer each other”; regardless of how prompt or full one’s reply, no matter how sensitive one’s ear to tones of sadness or joy, perhaps one’s “other” will “clip” (glean, gain) only the smallest of satisfactions from an answer always inadequate to the task of answering.

In part, James’s letter corroborates the sense one gains from his writings that responsivity or responsibility, imagined as an enduring obligation to and envelopment in the demands of others, is inevitably beyond one’s powers fully and conclusively to justify. But this letter also yields several insights into what it would take, to James’s mind, ideally to “answer” another. The first is that such a reply would have both a passive and an active dimension: James suggests that a just response to Norton’s missive would involve his being at once *receptive* to her tone—sensitive to the request it contained (for compassion to meet her sadness; for encouragement to strengthen her serenity)—as well as *expressive* of an answer to this request. As is likewise entailed in the phrase “a responsive recipient,” here “answer” implies both an impressive “recipient” and an expressive “responder.” In “A Round of Visits,” Monteith yearns not simply for a recipient to “take” his tale, but for a responder to join him in reconfiguring the “mere ugliness of the main facts,” according to the greater felicities of art. Responsiveness, on these occasions, is not only a contemplative or passive modality; it is also one’s engagement in the “labour” of a response, a “labour,” as James calls it in *A Small Boy*, “of love and loyalty.” Responsibility in James might, therefore, be imagined to partake of a continuous spectrum between reception and response, impression and expression

James’s criticism often describes writerly or aesthetic responsiveness, the type delineated in the Prefaces, as possessed of a similarly bifold nature. His essays on the books

of other writers not infrequently aver reservations regarding literature that omits one or other side of the receptive-responsive continuum. The literary impressionists, for instance—writers like Pierre Loti, Alphonse Daudet, de Maupassant, and Octave Feuillet, whom James describes, in his 1898 introduction to an English translation of Pierre Lotte’s *Impressions*, as having the “remarkable art of expressing the life, of picturing the multitudinous, adventurous experience, of the senses” (2:483)—may be exquisitely receptive to the appearance of their subjects, yet they often fall short of producing work responsive to the profundities of these phenomena (to their “deeper, stranger, subtler inward life” (2:483)). James finds in the books of these writers an abundance of “perception” turned with “immense vigour” into literary “expression” (2:485), but such expression omits a responsive interest in “the life of the spirit” (2:485), or what James elsewhere calls the “ideas and moral states” that are intrinsic to the “picture” (2:487). He acknowledges that this turn in French literature towards an extraordinary “visual passion” (2:487) may be, in part, an attempt to correct for the “sort of irresponsibility” practiced by George Sand—a writer with a flair for “looking within” but none for plastic surfaces (2:485)—nonetheless, in both cases, “[w]e end,” James writes, “with an impression of want of equilibrium and proportion” (2:483).

Of Gustave Flaubert, James makes a fellow of the impressionists in their joint penchant for “aspects and sensations” (2:487). However, in his introduction to *Impressions* and in the essays he devotes to the author, James distinguishes Flaubert for the singular lack of rapport he senses between the author and his subjects. James’s sense of his work (although *Madame Bovary* is the exception to many a criticism he levels at Flaubert) is of a writer who cannot truly be said to receive his creations in the sense of his feeling subject to their appeal, but who instead appears to select these phenomena at random, as opportunities for stylistic exercise. In his 1893 review of Flaubert’s correspondence, James observes that “[t]here are moments when his restless passion for form strikes us as leaving the subject out of account altogether, as if he had taken it up arbitrarily, blindly, preparing himself the years of misery in

which he is to denounce the grotesqueness, the insanity of his choice” (2:310). And prefacing a 1902 translation of *Madame Bovary*, James laments the regularity with which Flaubert is to be found (in this same correspondence) “cursing his subjects themselves, wishing he had not chosen them, holding himself up to derision for having done so, and hating them in the very act of sitting down to them” (2:315–16). The absence, from Flaubert’s art, of a relational motive leaves this work, James intimates, “singularly miss[ing] the consecration supposedly given to a work of art by its having been conceived in joy” (2:315).

Between James’s essays on the literary impressionists and those on formal virtuosos like Flaubert, it is tempting to suggest that superlative literary responsiveness lies at the intersection of a writer’s capacity for reception and his powers of response. But if these texts have in mind the possibility of ideal literary responsibility, they disclose it, like their fictional counterparts, by way of their interest in the hazards and contradictions that impede its realisation. To begin with, one might consider the degree to which reception and response, on the plane of aesthetic making, disclose countervailing logics: to receive a “picture” or an impression is an experience implying passivity or susceptibility, but to practice the work of responding, to furnish a form for the other imaginatively conceived, is a process which demands agency, even if such agency does not arise with an originary freedom. (“Agency” does, after all, admit of more positions than “autonomous agency,” as the necessary modifier suggests.) When does aesthetic receptivity give way to writerly agency? At what point does that agency become a restless passion for form that leaves the subject out of account? There are questions that I will take up in the next chapter of this book, in the context of two of the most curious and rewarding series of critical texts that James produced—his essays on the novelist Honoré de Balzac (1875–1914) and his Prefaces to the New York Edition (1907–1909).

Postscript

I have indicated that the contours of one kind of interpersonal and aesthetic responsibility that figures largely in James’s work may be lent a certain theoretical clarity when

set alongside Levinas's philosophical project. The comparison will give way in the next chapters to a fine-grained study of the process of questioning to which James submits the relocation of responsibility onto grounds far more ambiguous than those provided for it by traditional conceptions of accountability. These implications arise from imagining a kind of responsibility which describes the responsive reception of one to the communication of others, in all their peculiarity. I cannot proceed, though, without acknowledging that, in recent years, there has been a concerted attempt to elaborate on the complications inherent to Levinas's idea of responsibility. Most notably, several of Derrida's later books represent efforts to articulate the *aporias* or the "impossibilities" of understanding responsibility as Levinas does, in terms of responsiveness to another. Readers may feel that a number of these *aporias* are relevant to this study of responsiveness and responsibility in James. For instance, Chapter Four considers the degree to which the attentiveness of *The Bostonians* (1886) to the particularities of the post-Civil War American scene positions the novel antagonistically in relation to contemporary ideas on the social value of fiction. This conflict—wherein expressing a kind of responsibility defined by a responsiveness to specificities (rather than to general goods) can be provocatively defiant of the pre-arranged rule—is termed by Derrida an "*épokhē*" or suspension of the rule.⁸² Derrida's argument takes the following shape: because responsibility is brought about in relation to another who is wholly other (unique, or singular), the response is also un-predefined. "[T]he activating of responsibility (decision, act, *praxis*)," Derrida writes, "will always take place before and beyond any theoretical determination."⁸³ One's response may or may not then correspond to what is usually termed responsible.

I observed at the beginning of this chapter, in relation to "The Siege of London," that a consideration for the conflictual demands of ordinary responsibilities and the response

⁸² François Raffoul, *The Origins of Responsibility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 294.

⁸³ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 26.

requested by another is already present to the imaginary of James's work. Besides "The Siege," the substance of "The Art of Fiction" (1884), James's famous polemic from the same period as this story and *The Bostonians*, hinges upon the standoff its author holds to exist between the writer's "activa[ti]on" of aesthetic responsiveness and any *a priori* "theoretical determination" aspiring to mandate the composition of novels. In a riposte to Walter Besant's contention that the novel "is governed and directed by general laws; and that these laws may be laid down and taught with as much precision and exactness as the laws of harmony, perspective, and proportion,"⁸⁴ James remarks that

A novel is in its broadest definition a personal impression of life; that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say. The tracing of a line to be followed, of a tone to be taken, of a form to be filled out, is a limitation of that freedom and a suppression of the very thing that we are most curious about. The form, it seems to me, is to be appreciated after the fact...⁸⁵

The passage asserts that a *valuable* work of art is possible only on the condition that the quality or the "intensity" of the way in which the novelist gives form to his "impression of life"—the means by which he responds to what has been received—is no longer prejudged according to orthodoxies but evaluated *après coup*, "after the fact"; and only then, James continues, on the basis of the felicity with which the writer has formed his impression and not according to whether the representation is of a so-called moral or immoral nature.⁸⁶ Thus in recognition of the fact that James educes a cognisance of the many challenging implications inherent to the highly experimental and particularistic form of responsibility that I have argued is present in

⁸⁴ Walter Besant, *The Art of Fiction* (Boston: Cupples, Upham, 1885), 3.

⁸⁵ Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," *Longman's Magazine* 23, no. 4 (September 1884): 502–521 (507).

⁸⁶ Derrida expresses this thought in *The Gift of Death*, in which he contends that evaluations of responsibility are possible on the condition "that the Good no longer be a transcendental objective, a relation between objective things, but [rather] the relation to the other, a response to the other" (50).

his work, my method in subsequent chapters will be to incorporate other theoretical voices when their formulations appear not only desirable but pressing.

Chapter Two

The Work of Responsibility

The advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility of the novelist, is that there is no limit to what he may attempt as an executant—no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes.

“The Art of Fiction” (1884)¹

Part One

Balzac’s Labyrinth

A Man of Business

An early short story of James’s, “The Pension Beaurepas” (1879), is candid regarding its antecedents in French literature. Told in the past tense by a nameless narrator, the tale records an earlier time when, as a young man, the narrator—an admirer of Stendhal’s *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1839)—aspired to a literary vocation. Following the advice of a friend, he set out for Europe, intending to “pick up material” in the manner of his Continental forebears: by making a study of human nature from the *pensions* of the old world.² Uppermost in the young man’s mind is the boarding house of Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot* (1835), the “‘pension bourgeoise des deux sexes et autres,’ kept by Madame Vauquer” (2:92); but if the story’s narrator remembers, with light irony, his erstwhile efforts to follow in the steps of Stendhal, the story’s author continues to remain sincerely and playfully in touch with those of Balzac. It is not only that the Pension Beaurepas of James’s story, its shrewd Madame, and its heterogeneous collection of boarders are self-conscious reworkings of Balzacian antecedents;

¹ Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” *Longman’s Magazine* 23, no. 4 (September 1884): 502–521 (507).

² Henry James, “The Pension Beaurepas,” in *Washington Square, The Pension Beaurepas, A Bundle of Letters*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1881), 2:91. References are hereafter given in the text.

so, too, is the first thread of the plot, in which the protagonist, an American Rastignac, witnesses a Goriot-like character called Mr Ruck mercilessly drained of his resources.

Mr Ruck is another of the Pension Beaurepas's boarders, a man who has been, in his own words, "transported" from the new world to the old on the orders of his doctors (2:104). Broken in spirit after "paying strict attention to business for twenty-three years," Ruck is enduring a rest in the company of his profligate wife and daughter, who are either unaware of or willfully blind to the fact that the family is bankrupt (2:105). While Mrs Ruck and Sophy shop, Ruck spends anxious days in the picturesque town receiving their bills, visiting his bank, and buttonholing the narrator-protagonist to treat him to a "melancholy dirge over the financial prostration of our common country" (2:117). Having lost any sense of himself apart from as the "man of business," Ruck can enjoy none of life's extra-economic pleasures; as the narrator-protagonist observes to another boarder, "[h]e has spent his whole life in buying and selling; he knows how to do nothing else" (2:177). It appears, then, that the artistic tête-à-tête between "The Pension Beaurepas" and *Le Père Goriot* discloses yet a further conversation; this time between James and the legend of Balzac, for the Goriot of his tale—this "jaded, faded man of business"—strikingly resembles the novelist of which James will write in the first of his critical essays on Balzac (2:101).³

The first of these essays, "Honoré de Balzac," was published in 1875 by *The Galaxy*, while "Balzac's Letters," a review of an abridged edition of Balzac's correspondence, appeared in the same publication just two years later. The chronological nearness of these pieces to "The Pension Beaurepas" suggest that James's cogitations on all three coincided with and informed one another, but before turning to note the salient points of comparison between Ruck and the version of Balzac that figures in the essays, it may help the reader to be reminded of certain

³ James's New York Edition adds greater emphasis to Ruck's parlous state—in this text, Ruck is a "jaded, faded absolutely voided man of business" (*Lady Barbarina, The Siege of London, An International Episode and Other Tales* (New York: Scribner's, 1908), 400).

aspects of the novelist's biography—most crucially, that the passion with which he pursued the completion of his fictional opus, *La Comédie Humaine* (in which he proposed to treat all of French life during the Bourbon Restoration and July Monarchy), seems to have been inextricable from his hunger for wealth and esteem. Hoping to obtain these accoutrements more swiftly than could be expected by way of writing alone, Balzac concurrently tried his hand at becoming a publisher, printer, businessman, critic, and politician; he failed at each of these entrepreneurial efforts, but not before suffering acute financial losses. All the while, he continued to write, revise, and publish at a rate that was, by all accounts, inordinate, and eventually ruinous to his health.⁴

James was conversant, from Hippolyte Taine's 1865 critical study of the author, with the unrelenting rhythm of Balzac's labour, his appetite for speculation, and his colossal debts.⁵ Accordingly, he introduces Balzac to readers of the *Galaxy* as a "man of business," a sobriquet he quickly amends to "a man of business in debt." Yet Balzac was not, James submits, business-like only because "circumstances" (first poverty and then debt) necessitated that he consider all he did in a commercial light; rather, he was a "man of business" by "inclination." He "liked, for itself, the process of manufacture and sale," and so much so, James imagines, that even had all his debts "been paid he would have continued to keep his shop."⁶ James's metaphor casts Balzac in the role of a literary César Birotteau, the eponymous shopkeeper of his 1837 novel. Unlike Birotteau, however, who sells his perfumery and resigns from business

⁴ Graham Robb gives a full and energetic account of Balzac's life, including the enterprises into which he plunged to save his foundering finances. See *Balzac: A Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994).

⁵ See Hippolyte Taine, *Balzac: A Critical Study*, trans. Lorenzo O'Rourke (New York: Haskell House, 1973). Sarah B. Daugherty argues that Taine's book was vital to James's recognition of Balzac as "a source of inspiration" in "Taine, James, and Balzac: Toward an Aesthetic of Romantic Realism," *The Henry James Review* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1980): 12–24 (12).

⁶ Henry James, *Literary Criticism, Vol. 2: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, eds. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 2: 32. References are hereafter given in the text. James's revisions to the five Balzac essays are confined to words and phrases; those that are relevant to the following argument will be footnoted.

to pay his debts, James implies that Balzac would have never contemplated submitting to such a fate. Instead, he staved off his creditors by brokering new debts: proposing novels for which he received advances from publishers, Balzac mortgaged the future to appease past creditors, thereby ramifying obligations of already spectacular complexity. Like Ruck, Balzac was declared bankrupt; like Ruck, Balzac eventually became so ill from overwork that “the doctors had absolutely forbidden him to work” (2:86), but “[t]o be ill and kept from work,” James writes in his 1877 essay, “was, for Balzac, to be a chained Prometheus,” for he, too, had “almost wholly resolved himself into the worker” (2:86, 2:77).

This chapter is centred on James’s exploration of a kind of writerly responsibility that largely suspends the idea of mastery over (literary) deeds, registering instead a process of responding to (or withholding from) the demands of one’s imaginative others—subjects, creatures, forms. Why then begin with “The Pension Beaurepas” and with Balzac? It is in his Preface to “The Pupil” (1908) that James describes himself as “[a]ddicted to seeing ‘through’—one thing through another, accordingly, and still other things through *that*” (2:1168). In the passage from which the quotation comes, James discussing his proclivity for focalising a fictional set of circumstances by way of the impression these make upon “a consciousness,” like little Morgan’s, “highly susceptible of registration” (2:1323). But his admission has a far wider resonance. This chapter thinks of the essays on Balzac, and of James’s essays on writers generally, as opportunities for him to see “through”—that is, for him to appreciate and critique aspects of his own aesthetic theory and praxis by way of another writer’s work. I propose that it is “through” Balzac’s life and work that James meditates on the promises and perils involved in an unregulated, boundless responsibility to one’s art. Latterly, I argue that the responsibility James imagines for Balzac—its form, its affective and experiential content—he takes as his own in the Prefaces; that is to say, I suggest that, by the time of the Prefaces, Balzac no longer plays a mediating role between James and his equivocally-held ideal of artistic commitment; or more precisely, and to quote David Gervais’s insightful remark, that it is no

longer possible, by the time of the Prefaces, to distinguish between James writing about Balzac's imagination "as if he were writing about himself, his own imagination" and his *actually* writing about his own imagination.⁷ As James remarks, reflecting in 1902 on the changed nature of his engagement with the novelist, those writers who have "done something for us" may become less prominent in our psychic geography if only because they been absorbed into its very foundations:

These particular agents exist for us, with the lapse of time, as the substance itself of knowledge... we take their general use and suggestion for granted, cease to be aware of them because they have passed out of sight. But they have passed out of sight simply by having passed into our lives. They have become a part of our personal history, a part of ourselves, very often, so far as we may have succeeded in best expressing ourselves. (2:90)⁸

It is a wonderful sentiment: "expressing ourselves" involves a speaking of and through one's formative "agents," as though self-expression is, at its "best," the expression of the "part[s]" of self that are not self but other. The halves of this chapter are unified by the proposition that Balzac exists to James, the essays on Balzac to the Prefaces, "as the substance itself of knowledge." However, a reader of James's earliest essays on the novelist—those of 1875 and

⁷ David Gervais, "The Master's Lesson: Balzac and Henry James," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (December 2004): 315–330 (316).

⁸ This presents one way of understanding the way in which Balzac's import for James's fictional project changes over the decades. Although Harry Levin called James "probably the least Balzacian of novelists" (*The Gates of Horne: A Study of Five French Realists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 166), this judgement needs to be balanced by the recognition of Adeline R. Tintner in *The Book World of Henry James* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987) that Balzac was for James the "greatest multiple source for literary models" (245); a contention substantiated by Peter Brooks and William Stowe in their respective analyses of Balzacian realism and melodrama in James. See William W. Stowe, *Balzac, James, and the Realistic Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) and Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). Particularly for the early fiction, Balzac's *Comédie humaine* is a vital resource, an immense archive of untouched or underdeveloped possibilities awaiting further cultivation. Over time, however, the overt debts to Balzac that James contracts take finer, subtler form: from the borrowed plots and character types of "The Pension Beaurepas," *The American* (1877), or *Washington Square* (1880), to the Balzacian investments (the shades, tones, and preoccupations), now inseparable from James's own artistic capital, of late novels like *The Ambassadors* (1903).

1877—would be hard pressed to catch “yearning and shining” through these pieces, “like a motive in a musical mixture or a thread of gold in a piece of close weaving,” that which he describes, in his 1913 essay, as the “all but overriding sympathy of novelist with novelist” (2:140). It is not until the long essay of 1902 that James appears thoroughly to be writing from a position of identification with Balzac, his tone fully inflected with the forbearing love that one associates with his meditations on this most weighty and immovable of precursors. The first half of this chapter, then, describes the trajectory of James’s affinity to Balzac and the impediments he negotiates in order to transform his Balzac from a “man of business in debt” to tutelary “master” of the novel art.

The Spirit of Amateurism

James’s critical gaze, in the early essays, is often focused upon what one might call Balzac’s “work ethic.” As Marcus Waithe and Claire White note, the phrase “work ethic” enters ordinary English usage after Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* arrived on the British literary scene in 1905.⁹ It denotes, in this context, the rituals, beliefs, attitudes, and neuroses bound up for individuals and for cultures in the activities determined to constitute “work.” At the turn of the last century, Weber argued that the Protestant emphasis on worldly activity as a signifier of one’s salvation escaped its religious niche, evolving, through a process of rationalisation, into what he termed the “spirit of capitalism,” or a belief that working for the ends of private profit was a moral good. James begins his critical involvement with Balzac declaring the author’s work ethic to have been moved by a similar spirit. He deems the “great money-question” not only the primary subject of Balzac’s novels but his great motivation for writing them; it is at once “the supreme inspiration and the aesthetic alloy of his life” (2:32). The breath suffusing his efforts, James intimates, was capital;

⁹ “Introduction,” in *The Labour of Literature in Britain and France, 1830–1910: Authorial Work Ethics*, ed. Marcus Waithe and Claire White (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 14.

the implicitly baser metals with which Balzac fired his precious aesthetic elements gold and silver.

In the earliest of the essays, the texture of Balzac's work thus invites consideration through a pecuniary optic: the accumulative nature of his style recalling the professional writer's payment by the word; his habit of recycling journalistic material registering a thought for economies of production. Signs of the "grossly, inveterately professional character of all his activity," of "consuming money-hunger," in Balzac's prose and his correspondence evoke expressions of reproach and regret from James in the first of his essays (2:69). Using "taste" to indicate a type of perception or discrimination one gains by first taking up a disinterested position vis-à-vis the world of getting and having, he writes that in "every great artist who possesses taste there is a little—a very little—of the amateur; but in Balzac there is absolutely nothing of the amateur, and nothing is less to be depended upon than Balzac's taste" (2:34). Amateur and professional; the gentleman of "leisure" and the man of business (2:69). These approaches to artistic production, these different work ethics, are not necessarily irreconcilable, James proposes, for although the "great artist" will presumably have won his acclaim due, in part, to the dexterity with which he negotiates the marketplace, he nonetheless retains "a little," a "very little" of the spirit of the amateur. But James seldom writes favourably of amateurism. The occurrence of the term in his work habitually associates with superfluity, insincerity, or lack of talent, as when Goodwood thinks of Gilbert Osmond as a "rather brilliant personage of the amateurish kind, afflicted with a redundancy of leisure which it amused him to work off in little refinements of conversation"¹⁰; or when Merton Densher self-deprecatingly distinguishes Kate's "pure talent for life" from his "own, a poor weak thing of the occasion, amateurishly patched up."¹¹ Yet in the context of the first Balzac essay, the

¹⁰ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Michael Anesko (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 487.

¹¹ Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1902), 2:193.

word seems to carry the full force of its origins in the Latin *amā-re*, or “to love.”¹² The great artist cultivates his art “a little” as though it were loved, as distinguished from prosecuting it entirely professionally, as a source of revenue.

Whereas in this early piece, James’s finds “absolutely nothing of the amateur” at work in Balzac, it is worth leaping momentarily ahead to note how substantially his opinion on this point changes. Over the course of his five essays, James substantially tempers his claim for the “grossly, inveterately professional” nature of Balzac’s literary labour; more and more, he paints the author as an enthusiast or devotee of his art, in spite of the exorbitant price it exacts—a writer whose naïve “saturation” with the “whole thing,” his “loving” his characters for their own sakes, is the very source of the *Comédie*’s power (2:110, 2:132). This later impression of Balzac as the fond “dupe” of his own creation chimes with James’s focus, in the Prefaces, on the artistic value that lies for the writer in experiences of felt subjection to his creations (2:47). For instance, James’s celebration of Balzac’s ability to take “joy” in (rather than to resent or to fear) the seeming autonomy of his characters (“their standing on their feet and going of themselves and acting out their characters” (2:131–2)), despite its leaving him vulnerable to his characters’ duplicitous “intentions,” forms a part of the intra-textual memory of the 1908 Preface to *The Wings of the Dove*. Writing of the excessive “terms” that “the presentation of Kate Croy” exacted from him, James phrases with a delicate litotes an admission that he had, in advance, “far from overrated” these terms: the “building-up of Kate Croy’s consciousness” put paid to his estimates of the character’s requirements. To this end, James marvels at “[h]ow much and how often, and in what connexions and with what almost infinite variety, must he [the writer] be a dupe, that of his prime object, to be at all measurably a master” (2:1295). Expert mastery of one’s craft, a professional adeptness with which James is oft-identified, comes only by way of first having been duped by one’s “prime object,” as though the identity

¹² “amateur, n.”. OED Online. June 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/6041?redirectedFrom=amateur> (accessed June 08, 2019).

of “master” were gained through first being subject to the deceptions practiced by the “object” of one’s love.

In certain ways, James’s early essays on Balzac do in fact anticipate his later, revised impressions of the author, for these initial pieces are conscious of the difficulties faced by the critic who wishes to paint a full picture of the legendary novelist in. In 1875, James observes that Balzac has so far wanted for the “liberal tribute of criticism, commentary, annotation, biographical analysis” that the French are otherwise famous for rendering their great writers (2:31). Twice James alludes to awaiting eagerly a volume of correspondence rumoured to be in preparation; for now, his views of Balzac are largely influenced by the author’s “*légende*”—the myths and commonplaces that stand in lieu of his complex actuality (2:32). Nonetheless, James is a close observer, in the 1875 essay, of hints in Balzac’s work that some inspiration over and above the “money-question” moved his pen. Were profit Balzac’s sole motivation, the prodigious quantity of his product would not have come hand in hand with its manifest “quality,” for instance. Yet the texture of Balzac’s work suggests to James that it has been carefully “worked over”:

The tissue of his tales is always extraordinarily firm and hard; it may not at every point be cloth of gold, but it has always a metallic rigidity. It has been worked over a dozen times, and the work can never be said to belong to light literature. (2:37–38)

It appears there is something other than money alloyed with Balzac’s aesthetic, for although his work may not be entirely artistic “gold,” it is not, James implies, the dross often exchanged for actual coin. His prose has a weight and a resistance to critical pressure suggestive of fine craftsmanship, pointing, thereby, to the sacrifice of more time and energy than would be economically prudent for a man of business. Of greater significance, perhaps, the closely-worked quality of his prose obliges a greater sum of “attention” from the reader than might be imagined judicious in an author aspiring to make a primarily commercial appeal. Balzac’s

style demands a reciprocal sacrifice of its readers' resources: it levies, James goes on to write, "taxes," it "taxes the attention more than is thought becoming in a novel," particularly in "light" or popular novels (2:38).

In 1877, the publication of a selection of Balzac's correspondence answered, in part, to James's appeal for greater insight into his working life. These volumes are the occasion for James's second essay. The letters, however, seem only to confirm the inveterately professional nature of Balzac's interest in his work. Yet whereas in the first of his essays, James assented to view Balzac as a "man of business" by proclivity, in the second, he foregrounds the circumstances which may have catalysed this fiscal fixation. That Balzac was obliged to speculate, to solicit advances "for works not begun, or barely begun," was a consequence, James implies, of familial displeasure at his choice of vocation (2:73). Unlike James, whose relatively supportive parents were, in the early years of his career, a source of financial security as well as personal reassurance, Balzac had neither his parent's good will nor their material aid. The essay moves from quoting letters which evince this precarity to describing Balzac's voracious literary conduct—a structure implying that the desperation of the former may justify the vulgarity of the latter. At the same time, it is in this piece that James begins to put thoroughly into question the preeminence of "money-hunger" in the order of Balzac's motivations.

In his review of the correspondence, James imagines Balzac facing the relentless rhythm of exigency: he had been paid for works "not begun or barely begun," "[m]eanwhile more money was needed, and new novels were laid out to obtain it; but prior promises had first to be kept." His books, James writes, alluding to the Carlylean "doctrine of work," to Christ's warning in the gospel of John ("work, for the night is coming"), were composed "by a man who saw night coming on." Yet these circumstances are not borne out in the care with which Balzac seems to have attended to his productions. Referencing their shared penchant for revision, James remarks on the odd tempo at which Balzac worked: for a man who "could

only hurry. Balzac's way of hurrying was all his own; it was a sternly methodical haste and might have been mistaken, in a more lightly-weighted genius, for elaborate trifling." Far from heedlessly dashed off, the matter of his work "never relaxed; he went on doggedly and insistently, pressing it down and packing it together, multiplying erasures, alterations, repetitions, transforming proof-sheets, quarrelling with editors, enclosing subject within subject, accumulating notes upon notes." So in spite of the fact that Balzac's letters yield little sense that their writer was in thrall to an artistic "ideal"—preoccupied as they are with calculating daily work against debts owed—to come to this conclusion, James counters, is to negate "the close texture" of Balzac's prose (2:73; all quotations). Revision hints at the presence of just such an ideal; the striving toward which caused Balzac to temper the forward momentum of his haste with an intentional meticulousness that can be mistaken from afar for "trifling," a gratuitous "finger[ing] of style."¹³

In fact, in both the early essays, James suggests that there are reasons to suspect Balzac of magnifying his debts—revisory conscientiousness being one such reason. In 1875, he observes that although "[t]o the end of his life he was haunted with undischarged obligations," it is "true, we believe, that he amused himself with representing this pecuniary incubus as far more mysteriously and heroically huge than it was" (2:34); and again, in the 1877 review, James admits to bewilderment as to why Balzac's debts should "bloom so perennially" given his "meagre" existence and his "heroic" rate of production (2:73). Notwithstanding the tone Balzac uses to describe for his correspondents his "monetary entanglements" ("always profoundly sombre and bitter"), James's impression is not one of genuine persecution but of "lugubrious egotism"—of a writer absorbed in the business of writing, to the exclusion of all other concerns (2:81). The performance of work as compulsory may then be the means by which Balzac justified having "wholly resolved himself into the worker" (2:77). ("A man could not be such a worker as Balzac and be much else besides" (2:81)). Hence in the letters that

¹³ Henry James, "The Middle Years," in *Terminations* (London: Heinemann, 1895), 180.

James selects for quotation, the apparently enforced nature of Balzac's labour serves as justification for abdicating from "the life of his time," "the world he lived in" (2:81). In answer to a letter from his mother, in which she complains of his long epistolary silence, Balzac asks that she do him the "charity" of forgiving his neglect of filial duties in light of how badly he requires—in the service of other debts—the resources it would cost him to oblige her: "My good mother, do me the charity to let me carry my burden without suspecting my heart. A letter, for me, you see, is not only money, but an hour of sleep and a drop of blood" (2:79).

Were Balzac to have amplified his "pecuniary incubus" it would have accorded with the novelist's tendency to introduce a significant permeability into whatever border exists between art and reality. As James notes, Balzac was famed for deeming his creations—his Bianchon, his Valérie—livelier than life itself, so it would not be out of character, as it were, for Balzac to have painted his economic circumstances with an aesthetic intensity. But James's essays put in to play a far more complex idea regarding the significance of debt in Balzac's symbolic economy. It may be that this measureless, inescapable web of monetary obligations with which Balzac is so preoccupied figuratively maps an obligation far less worldly or demonstrable; that it registers, in fact, the writer's overwhelming debt of work owing to the *Comédie humaine* itself, the immense dimensions of which required of Balzac every "hour of sleep" and "drop of blood" he called his own.

James is acutely conscious of Balzac's tendency to use the material to sound the absent presence of metaphysical phenomena; he recognises in Balzac's obsessive attraction to money, property, and furnishings not (or not only) a symptom of the burgeoning capitalist order but a profound type of percipience—an awareness that such "things" disclose, in Bill Brown's words, "biographical, existential, and ontological" truths. Balzac's "things" are, at one and the same time, themselves and more than themselves: "congealed actions, passionate acts of

seeking, selecting, and situating.”¹⁴ So James writes: “this palpable world of houses and clothes, of seven per cents,” “real enough to most of us,” was for Balzac “ideally real—charmingly, absorbingly, absolutely real” (2:48). On the one hand, one can interpret this as suggesting that Balzac was insensible to anything he could not wrap his hands about; James may be implying that the world for Balzac was incontestably “real” because there was no other more refined, more Platonic, of which he could conceive. On the other hand, however, the phrase “ideally real” presents the tangible as a locus for, or dwelling place of, the ephemeral concerns a different author might situate in a spiritual realm.¹⁵ One can trace this latter interpretation back to James’s jest, in the 1875 essay, that the “great general protagonist” of the *Comédie humaine* is the “twenty-franc piece” (2:35). It does not seem that he is saying simply that the work’s supreme interest is capital; rather, capital is analogous to an agent or character whose omnipresence across all volumes allows one to map the complex affective attachments between characters in any “particular episode” (2:35). The multi-volume story of the relationship between the de Nucingen family and Eugène de Rastignac may serve as an example of Balzac’s ability to make the “twenty-franc piece” a kind of cartographer of intimacy, a material thing “through” which one can sound the imperceptible.

Rastignac first enters the ambit of the de Nuncigens by way of his affair with the Baron’s wife, Delphine. Analogous to Chad’s betterment at the hands of Madame de Vionnet in *The Ambassadors* (1903), Rastignac thrives in his relationship with Delphine—this is registered primarily in the improving effects his access to the de Nuncigen fortune has on his

¹⁴ Bill Brown, “A Thing about Things: The Art of Decoration in the Work of Henry James,” *The Henry James Review* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 222–232 (225, 229).

¹⁵ Although Eric Savoy reads *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897) as James’s response to Balzac’s tendency to permit the spiritual significance of the material to be eclipsed by its grosser value over the course of a novel. Savoy argues that this is why James initially forgoes the depiction of any particular *spoil* for the under-determined but “spiritually luminous” *spoils*: “Ultimately, what James’s method succeeds in ‘opening wide’ is not Poynton but *Poynton*: precisely as the accumulation of synecdoche recedes toward an undisclosed point of spiritual illumination, the thingness of objects withdraws into the recesses of the text, the site of the Thing that lies beyond discourse” (“The Jamesian Thing,” *The Henry James Review* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 268–277 (274, 275)).

appearance and his social possibilities. As Rastignac matures, his connection to Delphine withers, but he and the Baron grow increasingly close. The fellowship between the two men is told through the growing dependence of the Baron's fortune on Rastignac's connections. Finally, the younger man's marriage to the Baron's daughter—an event which yokes together a fortune and a noble title—reifies the otherwise indefinable intimacy between these characters.¹⁶ In his early essays, James presses at the threshold of Balzac's symbolic materialism. That is to say, his effort to "loo[k] through" at "what is beneath or behind" the novelist's undertaking, to infer from the "close" weave of his prose his work ethic or *ethos*, limns the Balzac's own object-orientated method of perceiving "one thing through another" (2:107). It is likely symptomatic of this bid to study his precursor's work as though watching from the same "aperture" or "window" as Balzac, that James's organising metaphors in these essays borrow from Balzac's standing fund ("cloth of gold," "taxes the attention," "lightly-weighted genius") (2:1075). In the later three essays, however, one seems to witness James pass over the threshold and thus to put behind him the mediating scaffold by which the amateur is perceptible only *through* the activities of the commercial producer.

By the time of his 1905 lecture-come-essay, "The Lesson of Balzac," James is engrossed in the idea of Balzac as an artisan, whose only "enterprise" was the *Comédie*, whose only "business" was that of the "imagination" (2:107). "Business," moreover, has undergone subtle redefinition since its first usage in 1875 when it denoted Balzac's penchant for commerce. By 1902, James is using "business" in a far less pejorative sense; to indicate a great task or endeavor.¹⁷ Referring to the colossal nature of the subject Balzac undertook to instantiate, the vastness of which did not inhibit him from minutely painting his scenery, James

¹⁶ Volumes of the *Comédie humaine* here referred to include *Le Père Goriot*, *L'Interdiction* (1836), *Une Fille d'Eve* (1835), *La Maison Nucingen* (1838), *Le Député d'Arcis* (1847, unfinished).

¹⁷ Moreover, in the 1902 critical introduction, James explicitly ascribes the phrase "man of business" to Hippolyte Taine, from whom he first borrowed it in 1875. He calls the judgement "simplifying" in the process: "M. Taine's simplifying word about his being an artist doubled with a man of business" (2:96).

writes, “we can think, frankly, of no one else with an equal amount of business on his hands who would either have so put himself out for aspects or made them almost by themselves a living subject.”¹⁸ Notwithstanding, the “amount” of work Balzac faces, his impulse is to “do high justice” to each of its “aspects” (2:98). Accordingly, in the same 1905 piece, alluding to the philosophy of the Arts and Craft movement, James identifies Balzac’s *oeuvre* as one of the last “belonging to the class of the hand-made,” entirely distinct from the “bankrupt” modern novel, “an object of easy manufacture, showing on every side the stamp of the machine; it has become the article of commerce, produced in quantity” (2:134).

By 1905 (and still to this day), the label “hand-made” carries a set of ideological assumptions regarding the relationship between the artefact, its mode of production, its maker, and its quality. Whereas mechanised labour is typically thought to be organised on the basis of the profit motive, the objects it occasions fungible and shoddy, craft labour is presented (over-simplistically perhaps) as the mode of production wherein the worker places the quality of the object at the heart of his or her operation, often to the detriment of profit. James evokes this paradigm when he asserts that Balzac was “the last of the novelists to do the thing handsomely” (133). The prodigious time and energy Balzac lavished on his *Comédie humaine* made it far from profitable—indeed, if there is a “lesson” for James in Balzac’s example it is, he writes, “that there is no convincing art that is not ruinously expensive” (2:133).¹⁹ Gone is

¹⁸ Kathleen Lawrence also observes the changing significance of “business” in this essay. See “Balzacian Intertextuality and Jamesian Autobiography in *The Ambassadors*,” in *Henry James’s Europe: Transfer and Heritage*, ed. Dennis Tredy, Annick Duperray, and Adrian Harding, 132–133 (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2011).

¹⁹ James’s choice to emphasise Balzac’s rejection of commercial values in this particular piece of writing takes on a compensatory complexity in light of his feelings that the lecture marked a nadir in the life of his own artistic high-mindedness. In 1904, anxious to recapture the interest of his diminished U.S. readership, James reluctantly agreed to a lecture tour of America. It was for this that he penned “The Lesson of Balzac,” encouraged by William Dean Howells. James described his motivations as “absolutely economic” (*The Correspondence of William James, Vol. 3: William and Henry, 1897–1909*, ed. Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth Berkeley (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 238), and for years afterwards the lecture was deleteriously associated in his mind with the “mercenary” conditions of its production. As Heather O’Donnell writes, “In his private correspondence, James relentlessly belittled “The Lesson of Balzac” and the “funny little lecture boom” it sustained (JP1). He dismissed it as a “horrid

the thought of Balzac's "consuming money-hunger"; rather, in "The Lesson," James names as the motive (possibly audacious, possibly guileless) "beneath and behind" Balzac's labour a whole-hearted commitment to give form to "*all* the connections of every part of his matter and the full total of the parts" (2:107). It is the "ruinously expensive" nature of this commitment, of this writerly responsibility, that James is concerned with in these post-1900 essays; Balzac's "mysteriously and heroically huge" debts, his eternally "undischarged obligations," comes chiefly to signify the exorbitant demands of the subject he laboured to answer.

The Appeal of Everything

At the start of his engagement with the author, James writes that "Balzac, as the showman of the human comedy, had measured his responsibilities unerringly"; he found they were owed to no less than "everything" that would play a part in the "complete portrait of the civilization of his time":

Balzac proposed to himself to illustrate by a tale or a group of tales every phase of French life and manners during the first half of the nineteenth century. To be colossally and exhaustively complete—complete not only in the generals but in the particulars—to touch upon every salient point, to illuminate every typical feature, to reproduce every sentiment, every idea, every person, every place, every object, that has played a part, however minute, however obscure, in the life of the French people—nothing less than this was his programme. (2:39–40)

Variations upon this thought appear not only across the five essays but often in multiple places within individual pieces. Its recurrence has the effect of suggesting that the scale upon which Balzac conceived of his responsibility is a thought that overwhelms James's capacity to absorb it. His repetitious "every" strikes the note of what he will call the "sublimity" of Balzac's

little mercenary lecture"... "humbuggery"... "une petite cochonnerie"... "the horrid act"... "my little mauvais quart d'heure"... and "my (now loathly) lecture" ("My own funny little lecture boom": Henry James's American Performance," *The Henry James Review* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 133–45 (138)).

“undertaking”—it renders an imaginative blenching at the sheer magnitude of Balzac’s task.²⁰ In “The Lesson,” James confirms the tendency of this idea to confound the mind and thus always to compel restatement: “[t]he whole thing, it is impossible not to keep repeating, was what he deemed treatable. One really knows in all imaginative literature no undertaking to compare it with for courage, good faith and sublimity” (2:107). But why is the idea of Balzac responding, in a literary sense, to the “whole thing” so incomprehensible? For James to describe this projected subject as a “whole” would seem to accord the phenomenon spatial limits; and if an entity takes bounded form, this would also imply that it can be encompassed, both by the mind and within an exhaustive literary form. The same logic applies, to a degree, to James’s suggestion that Balzac’s responsibilities were to “everything,” or that it was his proposition was to be “complete.” The word “everything” can denote an observable quantity, a countable number of “things,” which together add up to “*everything*”; just so, the word “complete” can designate a certain number of details or parts without which an entity is not entire or full. But “whole,” “everything,” “complete” are paradoxical words. Either may gesture to the fact of something having a border but each can also signal infinitude. As the *OED* notes of “everything”: in “modern use the distributive sense of *everything* is generally absent, and the sense is simply collective, equivalent to (and now much more common than) *all* and *all things*.”²¹ And of “complete”: “perfect in nature or quality.”²² Both can stand either for imminence or immanence, attainability or transcendence.

²⁰ In revision, James will go on to add further instances of “every” and “everything” to his essays on Balzac; this appears to be one of James’s keywords in relation to the author. For instance, in the original publication of James’s critical introduction to *The Two Young Brides* (London: Heinemann, 1902), the sentence “Balzac’s plan was simply to do all” (viii) changes, in the text published in *Notes on Novelists, With Some Other Notes* (New York: Scribners, 1914), to “Balzac’s plan was simply to do everything” (112).

²¹ “everything, pron., and n., and adj.”. *OED Online*. June 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/65347?redirectedFrom=everything> (accessed June 08, 2019).

²² “complete, adj.”. *OED Online*. June 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/37656?rskey=veSVHF&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed June 08, 2019).

In the quotation above, the ambiguity of “complete” hangs momentarily in the balance before falling to the side of an unattainable perfection. The notion of “exhaustively complete” is swiftly broken down by James into a seemingly inexhaustible list of requisite items: “every salient point...every typical feature, every sentiment, every idea, every person, every place, every object.” Balzac’s subject becomes wildly expansive, endless; at the same time, the measure of his responsibility is no less than infinite, to nothing less than “everything.” And if one can ramify the infinite further, James does by intimating that Balzac’s aspiration to all-embracing illustration was engaged along both the vertical and the horizontal axes” “complete,” for Balzac, meant “complete not only in the generals but in the particulars.” James subsequently sketches an extensive plane, composed of “salient point[s]” and “typical features,” traversed by “sentiment[s]” and “idea[s],” and an intensive depth, made of “every person, every place, every object.” Such a subject might take the form, on a sublime scale, of *Illusions perdues* (1837–43), in which the history of paper production, the mores of the new journalism, and the recondite procedures of civil law vie with the dramas of an Angoulême pulping house, and the unpredictable fortunes of Lucien Chardon, for the readers’ taxed concentration.

In each essay, James marvels at the adroitness with which Balzac kept pace with the spreading surface of his subject, even while continuing to sound its profundities: of the meticulousness with which he rendered the *mise en scène* of each of his tales and novels, he notes, in 1875, that “place,” for Balzac, “was not a thing to take or to leave, or to be vaguely and gracefully indicated; it imposed itself; it had a part to play; it needed to be made as definite as anything else” (2:50). But as if to counterweight every interior he penetrated, Balzac appears to James to have appended an “encyclopedia” foray into some facet of civilization’s “immense and complicated machinery—the machinery of government, of police, of the arts, the professions, the trades” (2:40); or else “a philosophy—a system of opinions”; or an axiom “moral, political, ethical, aesthetical”; or a digression “metaphysical and scientific” (2:42).

“Quantity and intensity,” James writes in 1905, “are at once and together his sign” (2:124). These remarks on the concurrent extensiveness and intensiveness of the *Comédie humaine* pick out what Thomas Pavel calls the “referential density” of Balzac’s fictional world—its effort to reproduce the dimensions, the completeness, the consistency of the world of early and mid-nineteenth-century France, and thus to swallow its reader whole.²³

It was Balzac whom James primarily thought of as having been consumed by the “whole” of his work. Referring to the extraordinary richness of the author’s proposed subject, James writes of the “envy”—presumably his own—coterminous with the thought of all the possible “human cases” and “personal predicaments” available to Balzac. His was an enviable position, James writes, for the reason that each “case” offered the opportunity to “get into [it], up to one’s chin,” and hence to “get out” beyond one’s own subjective horizon, to “get out of one’s own box” (2:128). Balzac took his opportunity. “It was,” James continues, “up to his chin, constantly, that he sank in his illusion—not as the weak and timid in this line do, only up to his ankles or his knees” (2:128); Balzac “g[a]ve himself up in fullest measure to his apprehension of the dense wholeness of reality” (2:146). But in light of the immense nature of this “wholeness,” and how painstaking Balzac’s sense for what would constitute its responsible representation, the hazards of full immersion are undoubtedly acute. As James writes in his 1902 introduction to the translation of *The Two Young Brides*, if you wish to look at “your matter as a whole...you must be careful to take some quantity that will not hug you to death”—that is, if one proposes to do the “whole thing,” it is best to select a whole that one can encircle rather than a whole that is all-encompassing (2:103). Accordingly, his evocation of a great body of water into which Balzac “sank” further than any other carries the tremor of risk: once he had sunk, could he ever hope to break the surface again? It is, I think, partly for this reason that James writes, in 1905, that it is not only with “envy” but with “terror” that he thinks “of the nature and the effort of the Novelist”—a nature and an effort that

²³ Thomas Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 102.

reached its “highest expression” in Balzac (2:122). For if one conceives of Balzac’s monstrous obligation as the debt of completion, the debt of wholeness that he owed to his subject, owed to *every* one of its facets, then the aesthetic achievements he won in subjecting himself to the weight of this onus (and that occasion some of the most admiring, enchanted musings that James directs at any of his precursors) may hardly be outweighed by the risks to health, happiness, and aesthetic closure boundless responsibility to a boundless subject poses.²⁴

The Art of Complete Representation

It is often with regard to character that the essays are at their most charmed by Balzac’s limitless aesthetic responsivity. In “The Lesson,” James explains that Balzac “clearly held pretended portrayal [of character] as nothing, as less than nothing, as a most vain thing, unless it should be, in spirit and intention, the art of complete representation” (2:134). Reprising his 1875 ascription to the novelist of a commitment to be “colossally and exhaustively complete,” in 1905, James indicates that Balzac no less appreciated the vast debt of labour that his responsibility to the “complete representation” of a single character entailed. In the spirit of sympathy, James attempts to particularise all that a character’s “complete representation” would require in order to avoid the charge of a worthless endeavor, a “vain thing.” In the event, his sentence seems to journey towards an ever-receding horizon:

Every mark and sign, outward and inward that they possess; every virtue and every vice, every strength and every weakness, every passion and every habit, the sound of their voices, the expression of their eyes, the tricks of feature and limb, the buttons on their clothes, the food on their plates, the money in their pockets, the furniture in their houses, the secrets in their breasts... (2:128)

The difficulty of arriving at such a completion is compounded when one recalls James’s comment, in his 1875 essay, that the *Comédie humaine* reads as though Balzac were given to

²⁴ James cannot publish an essay on Balzac without reference to the close connection he perceives between the way Balzac approached his craft and the circumstances of his death. In 1902, James writes, “[h]e died, as we sufficiently remember, at fifty—worn out with work and thought and passion” (2:122).

regard *all* characters—however fleeting their appearance—as owed this type of costly treatment. (At the same time, James intimates that Balzac had as many characters as could possibly proceed from a “creative infinite” (2:53).) He imagines Balzac as having labored under the compulsion to “honour” each and every character that had but three words to say with a “complete portrait”; these portraits “shaped themselves under his pen as if in obedience to an irresistible force” (2:53). In 1905, James reprises his sense of the “force” with which innumerable figures impressed themselves on Balzac when he compares the author’s recognition of these subjects to an “assault”; “any figure could *be* a figure but by showing for endlessly entangled” in the “great compound of the total” (2:144).

Notwithstanding the impossibility of a “complete portrait,” it is Balzac’s perceived submission to the “force” or “assault” of this imperative, that James identifies, in his 1902 and 1905 essays, as a source of the liveliness of Balzac’s creations. Most famously, in the severe comparison he draws between Thackeray’s imperious, retributive attitude to Becky Sharp of *Vanity Fair* (1847) (his will to “expose,” to “desecrate,” to “catch,” to “shame” her (2:132)) and Balzac’s passive and permissive stance vis-à-vis Valérie Marneffe of *La Cousine Bette* (1846), it is the latter’s readiness to “saturate” himself in Valérie’s “identity” and “reality” (his love for another’s “explored, assumed, assimilated identity”), so that it seems the “long rope” on which he once held her has fallen to the ground and she is “acting herself out,” that James celebrates as “*the* great sign of the painter of the first order” (2:131–3). The aesthetic felicity that Balzac is felt to achieve in his willingness to submit to the force of his imagination is also the basis of James’s 1902 arresting remarks on the novelist’s portrayal of Mme de l’Estorade in *The Two Young Brides*:

He gets, for further intensity, into the very skin of his *jeunes mariées*... He bears children with Madame de l’Estorade, knows intimately how she suffers for them... Big as he is he makes himself small to be handled by her with young maternal passion and positively to handle her in turn with infantile innocence. (2:114)

The passive mood in which Balzac is said to be “handled” by Mme de l’Estorade is critical to his ability, aesthetically, “to handle her in turn” with a superlative verisimilitude. Surrendering to his character’s experience—growing “[b]ig” (pregnant) “with” Mme de l’Estorade, then diminishing to the degree that he becomes, in essence, the “infantile” subject of her “young maternal passion”—Balzac is, accordingly, able to treat his character both from within and without: he knows what it is for her to mother (“knows intimately how she suffers”) and what it is to be mothered by her. To James’s mind, the alacrity with which Balzac makes himself receptive to the particular identity of each and every fragment of his whole has the effect of leaving these, like Mme de l’Estorade, “positively so charged with distilled life, that we find ourselves dropping it, in certain states of sensibility, as we drop an object unguardedly touched that startles us by becoming animate” (2:104). The image manages to leave one with the impression that it, too, has received its own charge of *energia* from Balzac, as though the novelist’s powers of animation could leap from the pages of his work to effect that of his critic’s.

An Expensive Business

If it is more often than not the case that James’s critical gaze is trained on the aesthetic achievements Balzac wins from generous self-committal to an endless subject—his pledge to disburse a perpetual debt of work—the consequences of such a responsibility do not escape James’s peripheral vision. What might be the more troubling implications of submitting to the demands of a whole “so multitudinous, so complex, so far-spreading, so suggestive, so portentous—it has such misty edges and far reverberations—that the imagination, oppressed and overwhelmed, shrinks from any attempt to grasp it whole” (2:41–42)? In this context, Balzac’s letters are telling, for they seem to tell of a type of poverty more grave, to James’s mind, than mere financial ruin. They indicate the experiential destitution indicative of a life spent “fastened to the writing desk” (2:74). “Hardly an echo of the life of his time, of the world he lived in,” James observes, in his 1877 review of the correspondence, “finds its way

into his letters; there are no anecdotes, no impressions, no opinions, no descriptions, no allusions to things heard, people seen, emotions felt—other emotions, at least, than those of the exhausted or the exultant worker” (2:81). And a bare life devolves quickly into no life at all: the essays, early and late, ascribe the untimely exhaustion of Balzac’s existence to the life-denying enormity of his task. The imaginative succumbing for which James celebrates Balzac at certain points, he transforms, at the end of his 1877 essay, into a euphemism for the novelist’s death, as though the one kind of succumbing entailed the other. Balzac and Charles Dickens shared similar ends: “[t]hey succumbed to the task that they had laid upon themselves” (2:89). In 1902, James describes Balzac as the “victim” (though, “it is doubtless his own fault”) of the “intensity with which he saw his general matter as a whole.” Seeing it whole inspired Balzac’s dedication to *make* it a whole, but once he had wholly sunk himself, he had no means of “retreat”: he was “shut up with his fate,” he had “lock[ed] himself in,” and eventually the sky of his great world “came down on him,” for he could not hold up what had taken hold of him (2:103).

Death—first virtual, then actual—is the extreme consequence James associates with the type of aesthetic responsibility he envisions Balzac to have assumed. Yet this threat is dramatically equal, in the imaginary of these essays, to another that is the opposite of definitive but, in a sense, no less deathly for the novelist: the threat of there being no end whatsoever to literary labour. An unrestrained approach to response, on the plane of aesthetic making, may be a crucial source of the value of one’s art (there is no “convincing art that is not ruinously expensive”), but it is also a critical problem if the subject matter to which one’s artfulness is directed is correspondingly infinite. Form, shapeliness, resolution, and closure are the high principles of the novelist’s art, but how does one draw a circle about material (with such “misty edges and far reverberations”) inimitable to any kind of bounded arrangement or configuration? If the writer’s subject is ever-expanding, ever-solicitous, and the writer’s

responsibility unrestricted, is he not then confronted with a compositional labyrinth from which exit is impossible?

“Balzac’s luxury,” James writes in 1905, describing the richness of the novelist’s subject, “was in the extraordinary number and length of his radiating and ramifying corridors.” In the next moment, he has transformed Balzac’s bountiful house of fiction into the “labyrinth in which he finally lost himself” (2:127). (Daedalus and Balzac often coincide for James. In his 1903 essay “Émile Zola,” he imagines the novelist first “struggling and all but submerged” at the heart of his matter, then “beating over the scene such a pair of wings as were not soon again to be wielded by any visitor of his general air” (2:895–6).) In his other pieces, he transforms Balzac’s matter into a “cage,” while likening the novelist to “some rare animal in captivity” (2:99). In 1902, Balzac is the victim of the serpent that he “with magnificent courage invited to wind itself round him” (2:102).²⁵ Each of these metaphors points to what James elsewhere calls the “bravery” of Balzac’s “self-committal”: he sets out to trace his corridors “further and further and further” (2:99); he is “solicited” by his world from “all quarters once” (2:127); he “invite[s]” the serpent to wind itself about his neck. These are images of a mythic heroism, but they are also figures for entrapment and paralysis, for the “denial of escape” (2:99).

When debt comes to be understood, in highly organised societies, in terms of some material thing owed—money for instance—it is newly possible for any one of us to “square” our debts, to “settle” them, even if we still tacitly know that our debts, in a psychic, a metaphysical sense, always exceed whatever sum of money we may owe. In contrast, when debt gets loose of money, as it does for James’s Balzac, and comes simply to refer to the truth of the matter—one’s infinite obligation in many, many directions—one also confronts ruin.

²⁵ In October 1908, James figured, in a sinuous sentence, the interminable work that the New York Edition presented in the guise of a deadly snake: “like the convolutions of a vast smothering boa-constrictor, such voluminosities of Proof—of the Edition—to be carefully read—still keep rolling in” (*The Letters of Henry James*, 2 vols., ed. Percy Lubbock (New York: Scribner’s, 1920), 2:107).

There is no way to discharge such a debt and what is “that for the spirit but a denial of escape?” (2:99). Balzac’s dilemma becomes, in itself, a tremendous subject for a tale (as it has already in “The Pension Beaurepas”) when James describes seeing the situation, the “whole thing” thus:

It was the having wanted to do so much that was the trap, whatever possibilities of glory might accompany the good faith with which he fell into it. What accompanies *us* as we frequent him is a sense of the deepening ache of that good faith with the increase of his working consciousness, the merciless development of his huge subject and of the rigour of all the conditions. We see the whole thing quite as if Destiny had said to him: “You want to ‘do’ France, presumptuous, magnificent, miserable man—the France of revolutions, revivals, restorations, of Bonapartes, Bourbons, republics, of war and peace, of blood and romanticism, of violent change and intimate continuity, the France of the first half of your century? Very well; you most distinctly *shall*, and you shall particularly let me hear, even if the great groan of your labour do fill at moments the temple of letters, how you like the job. (2:100)

James positions the courage with which Balzac demands his burden against the threat to which it exposes the novelist. As Balzac’s “working consciousness” grows increasingly sensitised to its task, as his “huge subject” continues mercilessly to develop, and as the “rigour” to which Balzac will be held becomes ever more apparent, so the novelist’s “good faith”—his intention to respond justly, fairly, fully to his obligations—comes to look more like foolishness than heroism. As when James provides these kind of lists elsewhere in the essays, the flood of events, movements, and moments demanding literary treatment is enough to make the limits of language and form tremble. Alliterative series rise to crescendos only to dissipate (“revolutions, revivals, restorations, of Bonapartes, Bourbons, republics”), while oxymoronic pairings hold in uneasy accord form-shattering simultaneities (“of war and peace, of blood and romanticism, of violent change and intimate continuity”). In the imagined scene, it is as if Balzac has confronted “Destiny” only to have it turn upon him and reprove the “presumptuous, magnificent, miserable man” for the kernel of egotism in his good faith. Balzac’s debt always already vastly overwhelms his capacity to disburse it, though try he does, his “groan” sounding like the cry of a sacrificial victim at the altar of the “temple of letters.” The scene is evocative of Derrida’s description of the impossible demands involved in a

responsibility that is with condition or limit. It “swoops down upon and seizes me *here and now*... It comes upon me from on high, in the form of an injunction that does not simply wait on the horizon, that I do not see coming, that never leaves me in peace and never lets me put it off until later.”²⁶ Derrida will go on to write that this responsibility demands an impossible *all*. In this way, it is at once an opportunity and a demand, a chance and a risk. One chances the almost certain prospect that such responsibility will be impossible to fulfill—that form will unravel, language collapse, health fail, life wither. At the same time, to take the risk is to make possible—to catalyse as a potential—the realisation of the impossible: really answering another, doing the “whole thing.” As Derrida conjectures, “[t]he condition of possibility of this thing called responsibility is a certain *experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible*.”²⁷

James is not unsympathetic to the terrible costs of such an “experience” or “experiment” but his sympathy does not, for the time being, temper his profoundly critical attitude towards Balzac when he is felt, to James’s mind, to give up the impossible as an *impossible*. He rarely fails in the essays to note a “perpetual conflict” (2:94) or “monstrous duality” (2:96) in Balzac’s work. In 1902, James describes an author with “two faces”: one characterised by “free imagination” (2:95) (a “responding imagination”)²⁸, the other, by the “appetite of an ogre, for *all* the kinds of facts”:

Of imagination on one side all compact, he was on the other an insatiable reporter of the immediate, the material, the current combination, and perpetually moved by the historian’s impulse to fix, preserve and explain. (2:93)

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Rouges: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 84.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 41.

²⁸ In the Preface to *The American* (1907), James names Balzac, among Walter Scott and Émile Zola, as “the men of largest responding imagination before the human scene” (2:1062).

The consequence of this bipolarity in Balzac is the emergence of two separate and irreconcilable methods for treating a subject (or “composing” an “effect”)²⁹: the means of the “reporter” and those of the “originator” (2:94). James nuances his experience of these antagonistic “laws” through a reading of *Le Curé de village* (1839)—a book he describes as “so nearly a masterpiece yet so ultimately not one” (2:94, 2:95).

Le Curé de village is the story of Veronique Graslin, a provincial young woman, married at the novel’s opening to a wealthy financier. At the mid-point of the narrative, Graslin’s husband dies, and tormented by an undisclosed secret, the widow relocates to her estate at Montegnac to begin a life of charity and repentance. Structurally, the novel falls in two halves, and so, too, for James, is the novel almost perfectly divided in terms of its quality. In the first movement, he experiences Balzac’s matchless intensity of “immersion” in the particulars of his subject (2:96). This aspect of Balzac gives himself away—his power of governance, his compositional resources—“handsomely,” and as such (and paradoxically) the first half is “governed by his unequalled power of putting people on their feet”—that is, his “people” seem to enact themselves, as though they lived separately from their originator, as though they were “as living as facts.” Anticipating his 1905 comments regarding Valérie’s narrative agency, James writes of experiencing the unfolding plot of *Le Curé de village* as if Mme Graslin “herself, her nature, her behaviour, her personal history and the relations in which they place her, control the picture.” Midway through, however, in a move he describes as characteristic, James feels Balzac’s “attention ruthlessly transfer itself from inside to outside, from the centre of his subject to its circumference” (2:95). “This,” he writes, “is Balzac caught in the very fact of his monstrous duality” (2:96). James seems to describe a kind of abrupt retrieval or relocation, on Balzac’s part, of authorial identity and control from its investment in the animation of a

²⁹ James’s original introduction to *The Two Young Brides* has “two different ways of composing one’s work” (xii), while *Notes on Novelists* has “two different ways of composing one’s effect” (114). The first suggests that Balzac approaches his work in one of two different ways; the second registers his treatment of the subject to different “effect[s].” Both versions, however, suggest a different spirit or intention.

particular literary figure or subject. The novelist regains his power to circumscribe or delimit characterological developments and narrative possibilities but at the expense of “the spell” of a character’s animacy (2:96). The “inward,” psychologically-driven, centrifugal drama that Balzac has been writing is precipitously abandoned in favour of an object-orientated, centripetal account of “his heroine’s management of her property, her tenantry, her economic opportunities and visions” (2:95, 2:96). One is “witness,” in *Le Curé de village*, to a “perfect illustration,” James writes, of the “fatal break of ‘tone’” that occurs when the reporter usurps the originator, when Balzac’s passion for the infinite *everything* of his subject gives way to his concern for *everything* (2:95).

What could be the reason for this duality in Balzac? The 1902 essay continues with James wondering why a novelist with such potential for “infinite reach” should have so pressing a need for “‘things.’” If one has imagination in abundance, why concern oneself to such a degree with “the machinery of life”? Why assail one’s reader “almost to suffocation, under the general rubric of *things*” (2:97)? On the face of it, James declares the conundrum insoluble: he “gives up as inscrutable, unfathomable, the nature, the peculiar avidity of [Balzac’s] interest in [things]” and his inclination to judge the novelist for his hunger loses “itself unexpectedly in a particular shade of pity” (2:98–99).³⁰ But by contextualising the problem in the way that he does—the mode of “infinite reach” against that of the “rubric of *things*” vis-à-vis Mme Graslin—James might be thought to point the way towards understanding the competing value of these modalities for Balzac. For can one not think of these two methods of composition as united by the fact that they represent distinct responses to the same phenomenon—namely, a boundless literary subject? That is to say, Balzac may have “infinite reach” but perhaps Mme Graslin, as a subject, will prove, once the novelist is

³⁰ James lends his pity for Balzac to Fleda Vetch, whose own judgement of Mrs Gereth would seem to dissolve in favour of sympathy for “the poor lady’s strange, almost mechanical disposition to thrust in everywhere the question of ‘things,’ to read all behaviour in the light of some fancied relation to them” (*The Spoils of Poynton* (London: Heinemann, 1897), 25.

absorbed in her “inward drama,” commensurately endless. In this scenario, a difficulty of form threatens. On the other hand, if the subject is viewed from the circumference, with the eye of the reporter, Mme Graslin is constituted of a certain number of “things” and encompassing every one of these things within sensible limits is eminently possible; there is, after all, only so much property and economic dicta a provincial bourgeois can entail. Confronting the possibility of ceaseless labour, perhaps a “ruthless” shift in his mode of approach—from “inside to outside”—is the means by which Balzac breaks away from hazarding the impossible: an obligation to the *everything* of his subject becomes a commitment to render *everything* about it. The novelist with “infinite reach” yields to the novelist who instead concerns himself with what James arrestingly terms, in 1875, a “conventional infinite”³¹ or a “sufficient infinite”³² (2:41, 2:68). It is this circumscribed or attenuated mode of response, whereby the exorbitance of Balzac’s responsibility as a writer seemingly prompts a kind of counterphobic preoccupation in him with “things and things,” that James consistently labels one of the great shortcomings of the *Comédie humaine* (2:147).

Last Words

Across his lifetime, James wrote at greater length on Balzac than on any other French writer. Conscious of having returned to him so often, he testified in 1902, with a further nod to Balzac’s fiscal sensibility, to his sense of having “so large a debt to repay that it has had positively to be discharged in instalments, as if one could never have at once all the required cash in hand” (2:121). James thus intimates that one might view his essays on the author not

³¹ In the first of his essays, he makes of Balzac an exemplar of the “French imagination” when he observes that, when face-to-face with sublime phenomena, the “French mind likes better to squeeze things into a formula that mutilates them”; would prefer to reduce such awe-inspiring wholes to a “conventional infinite” rather than leave their furthest reaches out in the “frigid vague” (2:41).

³² Comparing Balzac’s characters to Shakespeare’s in terms of the dense materiality of the environs in which they move, James writes “Shakespeare’s characters stand out in the open air of the universe, while Balzac’s are enclosed in a peculiar artificial atmosphere, musty in quality and limited in amount, which persuades itself with a sublime sincerity that it is a very sufficient infinite” (2:68).

as discrete pieces but as parts of a serial form, “instalments” in a series attempting to disburse some part of his enduring responsibility to and for Balzac as a reader, an “emulous fellow-worker,” and a keeper of his precursor’s “lessons” (2:121) . The thoughts and sentiments that James articulates in these essays do indeed often echo, revise, and extend one another, while the essay itself, by nature an open-ended form, allows for the extent of James’s “debt” to exceed any single attempt to settle or to square it, notwithstanding the infinite multiplication of essays. The idea of unremitting, unremittable obligation returns, as Brad Evan notes, in the form of an object correlative in “The Lesson,” when James imagines himself, alongside all practitioners in the art of fiction, endlessly revolving, “circulating without motion,” around the statuesque form of Balzac: “[s]o far as we do move, we move round him; every road comes back to him; he sits there, in spite of us, so massively, for orientation” (2:139).³³

As moving as this image is for the sense of paternal constancy and filial obeisance it conveys, might there not be, nonetheless, a hint of frustration in James’s suggestion that Balzac is *still* there “in spite of” one’s efforts to, as it were, pay him off? If there is, it would evoke the possibility that there may be a kind of ambiguous relief to be done, finally, with one’s responsibility (to a subject, to an artistic predecessor). In fact, many of the same difficulties with which James perceives the novelist to grapple as a consequence of the exorbitance of his “self-committal”—those of making a formal end to the labour of response given the subject’s lawless expansion, and of the costs incurred by a limitless responsibility—will become a signal feature of his recounted experiences of composition in the Prefaces; a series begun after the publication of his penultimate Balzac essay. It is perhaps, then, James’s own sense for the

³³ Brad Evans, “Relating in Henry James (the Artwork of Networks),” *The Henry James Review* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 1–23 (5). It could be that James is playing here with the idea of Auguste Rodin’s sculpture of Balzac, *Monument to Balzac*. It is not clear how he would have seen the sculpture, which may explain why his imaginary statue features Balzac seated while Rodin’s has the author standing. Rodin’s sculpture was commissioned in 1891 by the Société des Gens de Lettres and a full-size plaster model was displayed in 1898 at a Salon in the Champ de Mars. After coming under criticism, however, the model was rejected by the Société and Rodin moved it to his home in Meudon.

desirability of an end to the work of responding, and the troubles of attaining such endings well, that persuades him, in his last published word on the novelist, to alleviate the sharpness of his criticisms of Balzac in his less appealing mode as an enumerator of things.

The last essay on Balzac takes its occasion from the publication of Émile Faguet's *Balzac* (1913), a book of literary criticism, written, to James's mind, with too little "appreciation" for its subject. (The "tribute of criticism" (2:31) that he notes is missing from Balzac's *dais* in 1875 has, by 1914, arrived but in the meantime, James's "tribute" has become "tribute" (2:140), as though it has accrued its forty-years' worth of interest in the form of scare quotes.) Ever so tactfully, he hints that an "ideally authoritative portrait" of Balzac could come only from the pen of a novelist, able to "measure the great man's bequest a little more from within or by a coincidence of special faculty," of "fellow feeling," of "overriding sympathy" (2:140). In the absence of such "coincidence," James cautions, it is all too easy to overlook the connection between Balzac of *La Cousine Bette*, "exercising his genius," and the author in his altogether less charming mode, exhibiting his "systematic confidence" (2:140–1). The two aspects of Balzac are, James concludes, profoundly interrelated, the latter, "so characteristic and significant, so suggestive even of his special force, though in a manner indirect" (2:141). It is on the ground of the novelist's irreproachable *ethos* that James yokes Balzac's formerly dual, dueling facets: the novelist's hunger for the substantial and the solid, for "information" and for "facts," stemmed, at least in part, James writes, from a desire to respond in full justice to his subjects, from

his having felt his fellow-creatures (almost altogether for him his contemporaries) as quite failing of reality, as swimming in the vague and the void and the abstract, unless their social conditions, to the last particular, their generative and contributive circumstances, of every discernible sort, enter[ed] for all these are 'worth' into his representative attempt. (2:144)

James has circled round Balzac to see that two faces are but one; in doing so, he circles round himself. What has seemed, in 1875, Balzac's preference for "mutilat[ing]" his subjects, for

parceling his phenomena into things, rather than permitting them to strand him in the “frigid vague” of the sublime, is re-imagined in this piece: the source of Balzac’s “unfathomable” avidity for things lies, to a great degree, with the novelist’s sincere feeling that there was no centre without circumference, no everything without all the things, “to the last particular.”

There is a whole substrate of the Prefaces to the New York Edition of James’s novels and tales which calls for excavating in relation to the essays on Balzac. Most readily of note is James’s invocation of his precursor as a totemic figure of mastery presiding over various aspects of novelistic craft.³⁴ The next part of this chapter will be primarily focused upon the resemblances between the experience of aesthetic responsibility and the trials of literary responsiveness James perceives “through” Balzac and those he describes in the Prefaces. The setting to the second half of this chapter, therefore, consists of the proposition that the type of responsibility which James imagines motivating Balzac’s labour, and upon which he looks with a typical compound of enchantment and misgiving, is simultaneously the writer’s own equivocally-held paradigm. Concomitantly, in the foreground of Part Two, I continue to explore the challenges James discerns in aligning responsibility to the idea of a dialogic involvement between singularities. In particular, this section will turn its attention more fully to the place of agency in the work of responding.

³⁴ In the Prefaces, James invokes the “vast example” of Balzac in the case of reviving of characters (2:1099–100); with regard to the art of conveying the reality of provincial towns (2:1043–44); of compressing novelistic time (2:1048); painting “things” (2:1142); writing a *nouvelle* (2:1227); and revision (2:1335–36).

Part Two

A Form of Response

Approaching the Prefaces

To whom are James's Prefaces addressed? To whom or what are they answering or answerable? A common critical approach to these texts has been to regard them as subtle (or not so subtle) forms of instruction—a series of beguiling attempts to impart to readers and critics a certain method of reading the novels and stories the Prefaces “pre-speak” or “say beforehand” (*prae-fari*).³⁵ Yet to accentuate the outward-facing dimension of the Prefaces is to obscure how close these texts feel to James's personal writings in the sense of their being forms of self-communing, or self-responsiveness; they not infrequently read as though addressed to past versions of the writer, to friends, acquaintances, and other authors who dwell in James's memory, and whose words and voices are dramatised throughout.³⁶ Ballasting their stylistic and thematic leanings towards autobiography, the Prefaces are also profoundly aestheticised, wildly metaphoric, kaleidoscopically figurative, allusive, and theatrical. The

³⁵ Vivienne Rundle, for instance, compares James's Prefaces unfavorably to those of Conrad, describing them as “authoritarian” structures which attempt to close down a novel's potential interpretative unruliness. Rundle argues that in some cases the Prefaces “substitut[e] James's version of the novel for the text itself” (“Defining Frames: The Prefaces of Henry James and Joseph Conrad,” *The Henry James Review* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 66–92 (72). Paul B. Armstrong is in partial agreement with Rundle, but adds that “James asserts his own authority over works whose history he alone is privileged to know, even as the inconclusiveness of his private associations tells the reader that, for us as for the author, the responsibility for discovering and creating meaning is one's own” (“Reading James's Prefaces and Reading James,” in *Henry James's New York Edition: The Construction of Authorship*, ed. David McWhirter, 125–137 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 136–7).

³⁶ Sara Blair, Melanie Ross, Philip Horne, and Oliver Herford write perceptively on the autobiographical dimensions of James's Prefaces. See Oliver Herford, *Henry James's Style of Retrospect: Late Personal Writings, 1890–1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), Ch. 6; Melanie H. Ross, “‘The Mirror with a Memory’: Tracking Consciousness in the Preface to *The Golden Bowl*,” *The Henry James Review* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 246–55; Philip Horne, “Henry James at Work: The Question of Our Texts,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry James*, ed. Jonathan Freedman, 63–78 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Sara Blair, “In the House of Fiction: Henry James and the Engendering of Literary Mastery,” in *Henry James's New York Edition*, 58–73.

generic mélange of the Prefaces is undoubtedly responsible, in part, for the dilemma as to how seriously a critic should take the assertions they contain: while autobiography implies truthfulness, artistic impulses hint at confabulation.

The issue of reliability has, as Linda Simon observes, drawn dramatically divergent responses ever since the publication of the Prefaces.³⁷ For an earlier generation of literary critics, these texts were largely a source of veracious testimony, but scholars since the late twentieth century have tended to treat the Prefaces more circumspectly.³⁸ Aiming to interrogate the innocence of their representations, modern and contemporary critics have offered readings of the Prefaces that can be broadly characterised as post-structural, historical, biographical, and queer, to name but a few of the methodological approaches.³⁹ My own reading is cognisant of this more guarded manner of approaching the Prefaces: the series undoubtedly presents a compelling narrative as to how James *believed*, or *wished to believe*, or *wished readers to believe* he practiced his craft. Rather than attempting to dismantle this belief, or will to believe, or will to have others believe, however, I propose to engage with these works as sincere fictions—that is, as though even if they cannot be considered strictly factual, their author’s good faith is not at issue. This chapter intends to read the Prefaces—in the light of their experimental fusion of the autobiographical and fictional modes—as something close to what is now called “autofiction.”⁴⁰ This involves regarding the Prefaces less as testimonies

³⁷ See Linda Simon, *The Critical Reception of Henry James: Creating a Master* (Rochester: Camden House, 2007), 30.

³⁸ Hershel Parker was one of the first to argue that the testimonies of the Prefaces had not been sufficiently interrogated by proponents of the New Criticism. See *Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons: Literary Authority in American Fiction* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1984).

³⁹ For seminal examples see Dorothy Hale, *Social Formalism: The Novel in Theory from Henry James to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Mark McGurl, *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Shame, Theatricality and Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of Novel*,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 35–66.

⁴⁰ “Autofiction” is a term first used by the French writer Serge Doubrovsky in his novel 1977 *Fils* to distinguish his work from other forms of “pure” fiction, on the one hand, and from straightforward forms of autobiography on the other. The term is used loosely to refer to texts which utilise the empirical experience of the author but which also actively fabulate, while mobilising literary techniques such as dialogue, stream of consciousness, shifts in narrative

than as forms of creative non-fiction, permitting a high degree of interpenetration between the empirical, the experiential, and the fictional modes: what is not factually true may be experientially real; what is fiction may be recorded as though it were fact; fact narrativised so that it becomes a story. The reading that follows attends in a sympathetic spirit to one particular story the Prefaces appear to tell; it puts largely to one side questions regarding the (finally unknowable) motivations or incentives which may or may not have inspired the telling.

Writing as a Labour of Response

James's Prefaces share an important characteristic with his essays on Balzac: both bodies of work portray writing as a labour of response, while at times conceiving of the literary artwork as an expression or materialisation of the writer's responsibility to and for a creative subject or idea. The Prefaces home in upon what the essays on Balzac, however, cannot (to the same degree): they attend to the choices, judgements, and dilemmas involved in the practice of making an artwork. They may therefore be regarded as elaborations upon the process glimpsed in a letter of 1899 that James addressed to his friend and fellow writer Mary (Mrs Humphrey) Ward. Although Ward's original letter (to which James's is a response) is not known to survive, it seems that it referred to a (false) difference of opinion between Ward and James regarding whether or not there was one general "rule of presentation" which applied "hard & fast" to all literary "subjects"—that is, whether there was one way to compose a novel, regardless of the characters or the actions it depicted. Ward appears to have thought James believed in the reality of such a rule, a misapprehension he was keen to correct. Restating the position he takes in the "The Art of Fiction" (1884), James writes:

I don't myself, for that matter, recognise what you mean by any 'old difference' between us on any score—& least of all when you appear to glance at it as an opinion of mine (if I understood you, that is,) as to there being but one general 'hard & fast rule of presentation.'... I hold that there are five million such 'rules' (or as many as

perspective, and non-linear time schemes. Since the techniques of fiction not normally found in genres like (auto)biography, they have the effect of transforming a factual narrative into a hybrid form of fiction through aesthetic and stylistic means.

there [are] subjects in all the world—I fear the subjects are not 5000000!) only each of them imposed, artistically, by the particular case;—involved in the writer’s responsibility to it.⁴¹

James’s “responsibility” here names a relationship between the writer and the “subject” or “the particular case,” while the uniqueness of this connection would appear to make responsibility itself an irreducibly particularistic concept. The writer advises that each literary subject entails its own “rules” (James’s use of scare quotes around this term likely indicates his desire to distance himself from a word that may originally have been Ward’s) for its aesthetic treatment or “presentation,” so that if there are “five million” subjects there are also “five million” ways of handling its interest. The specific “rules” by which the artist composes his subject are understood to be “imposed” (presumably on the writer) by “the particular case”—thus the relationship between writer and creation is considered to activate the rules of their engagement but no such guidelines exist prior to this rapport. James’s depiction of the writer’s responsibility in this letter anticipates his praise for Balzac who, at his best, is perceived to extend himself into, to live as, and thereby to compose his work according to the requirements of, “the particular necessary, the particular intended connection,”⁴² but one might look to the Prefaces to gain a sense for how James considers such a “connection” is made, sustained, and worked out—or, indeed, broken.

Amplifying the relational resonance of James’s suggestion to Ward that the writer is bound in responsibility to his creative subjects, the Prefaces often understand the affiliation between the versions of the writer that inhabit the Prefaces and the literary phenomena of his novels and tales as one of reception, request, and response. Moments of meeting between the

⁴¹ *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Philip Horne (London: Viking, 1999), 319.

⁴² “He [Balzac] could so extend his existence partly because he vibrated to so many kinds of contact and curiosity. To vibrate intellectually was his motive, but it magnified, all the while, it multiplied his existence. He could live at large, in short, because he was always living in the particular necessary, the particular intended connection” (Henry James, *Literary Criticism, Vol. 2: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, eds. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 2:123). References are hereafter given in the text.

writerly “I” and a compelling subject, whether “some conceived or encountered individual,” “some brace or group of individuals,” “the incessant appeal of the great city,”⁴³ the “ponderable germ” of a situation, a “concrete image,” or a “splendid case” punctuate these texts (2:1073, 2:1152, 2:1121, 1252). In the Preface to *The Princess Casamassima* (1908), James tells of the advent of Hyacinth Robinson, the novel’s protagonist, who is described as having “spr[un]g up” before the rambling writer “out of the London pavement”—one more encounter in a city busy with promising “[s]ubjects’ and situations,” “possible stories, presentable figures.” As he will do so in relation to Balzac, James characterises his imagination, in these first years of his metropolitan life, as prone to the “assault”⁴⁴ of *everything* as a possible subject:

One walked of course with one’s eyes greatly open, and I hasten to declare that such a practice, carried on for a long time and over a considerable space, positively provokes, all round, a mystic solicitation, the urgent appeal, on the part of everything, to be interpreted and, so far as may be, reproduced. (2:1086)

The impression left by this Preface is that of a writer continually receptive to the phantasmagoria of artistic life breaking in upon him—a “consciousness,” as James writes in another Preface, “highly susceptible” to the impositions of creations that are imagined as “other” to the writer (2:1323). This Balzacian “everything,” indexing for James the sublimity of London as a possible subject (presumably analogous, in his mind, to the Paris of *La Comédie humaine*), presses upon the writer its “urgent appeal.” In this Preface, as in others wherein the “imaged appeal” (2:1246) is variously “restless” (2:1070), “penetrating” (2:1262), “acute” (2:1267), “pressing” (2:1325), or “sharp” (2:1337), the claim is a request for an “imaginative

⁴³ In his Preface to *A London Life* (1908), James describes himself as being, during his first years in London, “infinitely interested in almost any demonstration of the effect of London.” To offer representations of this effect was, he continues, “a form of response to the incessant appeal of the great city, one’s grateful, one’s devoted recognition of which fairly broke out from day to day” (2:1152).

⁴⁴ In the 1913 review of Faguet’s *Balzac*, James observes that it was Balzac’s “huge felicity” to exist in a “state” “where recognitions and identifications didn’t so much await as rejoicingly assault him” (2:144).

response” (2:1262), and thence for the writer’s expressive labour; it is a demand, on the part of the subject, “to be interpreted” and “reproduced.”

James’s letter to Ward might be said to intimate that such a process of interpretation and reproduction, the means by which “the writer’s responsibility” is put to work, employs a relatively passive form of agency: if the subject imposes its own means for artistic treatment upon the writer, perhaps he has only to execute this arrangement in order for its presentation to be accomplished and his responsibility fulfilled. In the essays on Balzac, such a proposition can sometimes appear as though it might ideally describe literary responsiveness; the more critical of James’s sentiments for the author’s work often coincide with those moments in which Balzac is perceived to exert a greater degree of control over “the liberty of the subject” than it would solicit (2:133). On the other hand, the same “rules” James initially describes as “imposed” upon the writer are subsequently softened into demands to a greater or lesser degree “involved” in the writer’s “responsibility.” The implication is that rubrics visited upon the writer by his “particular case” are subject to negotiation, their determining force in some way met by the writer’s own, until finally the subject’s demands are implicated or “involved” in the writer’s responsibility yet not solely defining of its shape.

In large part, the Prefaces accord with this idea of authority as dispersed between writer and creative other: the work of responsibility is often presented as a complex “labor” (toil, trouble) on the part of the writer—a labour of guessing, venturing, and experimenting. If there are rules to guide the writer’s literary labour, the Prefaces point first to the difficulty of determining these, and, secondly, to their intensely narrow relevance. In the Preface to *The Spoils of Poynton* (1908), of the writer’s treatment of his germinal subject, James asks, “what are the signs for our guidance, what the primary laws for a saving selection, how do we know when and where to intervene, where do we place the beginnings of the wrong or the right deviation?” Yet such “general considerations,” if answered, would, James continues, surely “fail and mislead” in relation to “the logic of the particular case”; for each case is unto itself a

world, “or in other words his [the writer’s] relation to a given subject, once the relation is established, forms in itself a little world of exercise and agitation” (2:1139). “Exercise” here denotes an uncommon meaning of the term: suffering, or a painful struggle, but part of this kind of “exercise” is caused by the difficulties and indeterminacies of another kind of “exercise”—the “exercise” or activity of responding, a process which appears to occasion more questions than it comes provisioned with answers: is the subject best presented directly or indirectly? At what point does the writer cut off the subject’s development? Which of the “figures and things” (2:1040) related to it should the writer leave out? Is there just one subject or are there many *subjects*? The *Spoils* Preface continues: “Let him [the writer] hold himself perhaps supremely fortunate if he can meet half the questions with which that air alone may swarm” (2:1139). It may be said, therefore, that if the Prefaces understand the writer as one who is originally the passive recipient of an artistic figura—the subject of its “solicitation[s]”—this idea is swiftly entwined with another: one which projects the writer as a site of agency. This chapter submits that the degree to which the writer’s determining power over the shape, direction, and limits of the creation is, nevertheless, a topic of some ambivalence in the Prefaces. At times these texts do appear to wonder if the most felicitous use of authorial agency is not a submission to the impetus of a subject.

In a passage proleptically recalling one from the Preface to *The Golden Bowl* (1909), in which James imagines himself falling into the “footprints” of an earlier instance of identity (“Into his very footprints the responsive, the imaginative steps of the docile reader that I consentingly become for him all comfortably sink” (2:1329)), he writes of *The Ambassadors* that

the *steps*, for my fable, placed themselves with a prompt and, as it were, functional assurance—an air quite as of readiness to have dispensed with logic had I been in fact too stupid for my clue... These things continued to fall together, as by the neat action of their own weight and form, even while their commentator scratched his head about them; he easily sees now that they were always well in advance of him. As the case completed itself he had in fact, from a good way behind, to catch up with them, breathless and a little flurried, as he best could. (2:1311)

In this instance, we are far removed from the “exercise and agitation” caused by the writer’s relation to his “given subject.” The writer of *The Ambassadors* may omit altogether the hazardous ordeal of reckoning the fable’s “logic”; drawn on by an agency independent of his own—the “fable” is imbued with its own powers of motion by James’s reflexive verb form (“placed themselves”)—he assents simply to trace its unmistakable “steps.” It is a strange evocation of writing: the one who writes the story appears to receive *from* the story his own writing, so that if he is inscribing it, it has already “completed itself.” James describes the writer as a “commentator,” one who remarks upon a text already formed.

Daniel Wright has argued that the Preface to *The Ambassadors* is one of a very few in which the writer’s approach to a literary subject is celebrated for the degree of its passivity. Wright remarks on how “content” James appears, in this instance, to “allow [the logic of the subject] to proceed unimpeded.”⁴⁵ It is true to say that James does not often portray the novelist of the texts spoken of in the Prefaces as one who is “content” with the idea of permitting “the case [to] complet[e] itself.” Such a prospect is often attended by misgivings comparable to those James sounds in relation to the infinitude of Balzac’s labour by virtue of the limitlessness of his subject: allowing the case to unfold itself unchecked is often seen in the Prefaces as the advent of a subject’s lawless claim for ever *more* writing. Yet the type of passive following which James writes of at the beginning of *The Ambassadors* Preface is a greater part of the register of the series than Wright suggests. James recounts a further instance of the felicities of acquiescence in the Preface to *The Princess Casamassima* when he relates having been, while composing the novel, arrested by Christina Light. Christina, apparently in flight from the pages of *Roderick Hudson* (1875), is described as “not consenting to be laid away with folded hands in the pasteboard tomb, the doll’s box, to which we usually relegate the spent puppet” (2:1098). The phrases “doll’s box” and “spent puppet”—allusions to the marionette

⁴⁵ Daniel Wright, *Bad Logic: Reasoning about Desire in the Victorian Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 146.

performance with which Thackeray frames his *Vanity Fair* (1847)—obliquely portray James as a clever manipulator of ultimately insensible figures. But the image stands uneasily beside the inherent, irrepressible liveliness implied in the word “consenting,” stressed in his earlier comment that “certain of a novelist’s characters, more or less honourably buried, revive for him by a whim or a force of their own and ‘walk’ around his house of art like haunting ghosts” (2:1098).

Having escaped the diegetic purview of *Roderick Hudson*, James describes the sight of Christina, “chilled and patient,” waiting at the door of his “house of art,” as having constituted a “claim” upon him: her “claim to have travelled far,” “that she had not been—for what she was—completely recorded” (2:1098–9). Christina’s reappearance is interpreted by James as a plea for literary employment, for a home and a role: “She had for so long, in the vague limbo of those ghosts we have conjured but not exorcised, been looking for a situation, awaiting a niche and a function” (2:1098). The claim would seem to throw up a choice. James may decide to keep the door of *The Princess Casamassima* closed to the shade of Christina; alternatively, he could invite her over the threshold. Either choice could take the active mood, but as James presents it no active agency of his is involved in Christina’s admittance to the novel. Although he recalls his perplexity at Christina’s return in the context of *this* book, Christina’s “pressure,” James remembers, simply “was not to be resisted—sharply as the question might come up of why she should pretend to strike, just *there*” (2:1099). The writer submits to the impress of Christina as if—to return to the essays on Balzac—“in obedience to an irresistible force.”⁴⁶ Here James appears to submit to the perfidy of his “prime object,” conscious as to “[h]ow

⁴⁶ This way of viewing the process whereby ideas of free agency are obviated and the “necessity” of the writer’s task is to produce “the subject thus pressed upon the artist” is echoed in the Preface to *Lady Barbarina*. The quotation in full is as follows: “The great truth in the whole connexion, however, is, I think, that 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” (2:1210–11).

much and how often, and in what connexions and with what almost infinite variety, must he [the writer] be a dupe, that of his prime object, to be at all measurably a master, that of his actual substitute for it" (2:1295). (It is worth underscoring here that James imagines the writer's a master only over his "actual substitute" for the "prime object" and not over the "prime object" itself, thereby arguably attenuating the mastery invoked.) Rather than his taking the decision, the decision seems to take him; it is, as Derrida might put it, "a decision of the other."⁴⁷ Yet as may be anticipated from James's attention in the essays on Balzac to the labyrinthine risks of giving oneself "up in fullest measure"⁴⁸ to a subject, the value ascribed to a minimal degree of writerly "exercise" stands in a relation of tension with the importance of a more influential practice. This is to suggest that the Prefaces appear to weigh the respective values and hazards involved in the writer's adopting what one might call a "passive activity" towards the work of responsiveness and those that are implicated in asserting a greater degree of agency.

The Perils of Passivity, or The Hazards of Agency

One finds, throughout the Prefaces, illustrations of the work of writing which speak to both the active and the passive modalities: to responses which *take* the writer (as in the case of *The Ambassadors* and *The Princess Casamassima*) and to responses that are *taken* by the writer

⁴⁷ In a work called *The Politics of Friendship*, a book relevant to this point, Derrida's ambition is to conceive of a "passive" decision, i.e. one that does not presuppose a sovereign, voluntary subject. A passive decision, as Derrida explores it, is one that is not taken by the subject, but one that, as it were, *takes* the subject. Whereas Levinas might conceive of this decision as imposed upon me by another person whose need comes before my autonomy, Derrida conceives of the passive decision as taken by the other *within* me. This idea may be understood in terms of a Freudian model: the unconscious working without the sanction of the conscious mind; the id without the sanction of the ego. Derrida describes the "passive decision" as "always in me, structurally, an other decision, a rending decision as the decision of the other. Of the absolutely other in me, of the other as the absolute who decides in me of me" (*The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London & New York: Verso, 1997), 87). One could read James's portrayal of his passive decision in relation to Christina Light in either a Derridean sense as a "decision of the other" (in James) or in a Levinasian sense as a "decision of the Other" (Christina).

⁴⁸ In his 1913 essay on Balzac, James comments on the "enviability, so again to call it (and by which we mean the matchless play of freedom), of his harvesting sense when he gave himself up in fullest measure to his apprehension of the dense wholeness of reality" (2:146).

on the subject's behalf. In the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* (1908), James gives prominence to the active process of selection and discrimination by which literary responsiveness to an imaginative creation is undertaken. Recalling a conversation with Turgenev, in which the writer described a compositional process to which James, as a young novelist, felt himself allied (he describes it as "just that blest habit of one's own imagination" (2:1073)), the prefatorial author writes that

[i]t began for him almost always with the vision of some person or persons, who hovered before him, soliciting him, as the active or passive figure, interesting him and appealing to him just as they were and by what they were. He saw them, in that fashion, as *disponibles*, saw them subject to the chances, the complications of existence, and saw them vividly, but then had to find for them the right relations, those that would most bring them out; to imagine, to invent and select and piece together the situations most useful and favourable to the sense of the creatures themselves, the complications they would be most likely to produce and to feel. (2:1072)

Following the imposition of a "vision," the receipt of a "solicit[ation]," a flow of conscious activity begins: the writer must select which of the abundant relations that attend upon a subject is "right," i.e. those that will "most bring [the subject] out." He is answerable for fabricating ("invent[ing]"), assembling ("piec[ing]"), and discriminating ("select[ing]") among the copious "situations" within which his "creatures" might be embedded; the writer must determine which will be "most useful and favourable to the sense of the creatures themselves." Selecting the "right" relation and deciding on the most "favourable" situation appears to remain, in accord with James's letter to Ward, a choice made in lieu of prearranged, "hard & fast rules," but the picture here is not of a decision that *takes* the author; instead, James places the decision in the orbit of the writer's mindful powers, simultaneously intimating that he is *best placed* to take such decisions. It is as though the writer perceives all the subjects' possible "relations" and "situations," and thus knows which will be "right," "useful," and "favourable" to it.

The passage accords with several instances in the Prefaces in which James conceives of the writer as a figure of knowingness. In the Preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, he indicates that

the writer—imagined here in the guise of a “master-builder,” or a “modern alchemist”—a figure with a certain sense of ““authority”” (a concept, however, from which James distances himself even as he lights upon it, placing it in ironical scare quotes), “alone has the *secret* of the particular case, he alone can measure the truth of the direction to be taken by his developed data” (2:1141). But if from this we might imagine that the writer’s choices regarding a subject’s “right” relations and situations neatly accords with the measure of its “truth,” James repeatedly upsets such anticipations by almost invariably following up expressions of self-satisfaction with his coincident sense for all the further relations and situations, *equally* “right” and “favourable,” that have found themselves un-“done”—a term that is favoured by James in several of the Prefaces to describe representational possibilities achieved or otherwise sacrificed in the process of composition.⁴⁹ The secret, it appears, has escaped, or the writer’s pursuit of it abandoned in light of the risks further search would pose to the writer’s equally pressing responsibility to the shapeliness of his work. The deviating claims of these two commitments—one summoning the writer’s full regard for a subject’s “measure,” the other calling for limits—takes centre stage in the first of James’s Prefaces.

Conceiving of the literary subject as a canvas, the type on which needlepoint is worked, he imagines the writer, in the Preface to *Roderick Hudson* (1907), as the elected embroiderer of the canvas’s “vast expanse” (2:1041; reference refers to all quotations in this passage). The writer is a fascinated follower of the fabric’s power “to invite, to solicit, to persuade” him to give free rein to “the tendency inherent in his many-coloured flowers and figures to cover and consume as many as possible of the little holes [in the canvas].” He is seen in thrall both to the extensive potential of the idea and to the intensive possibilities of

⁴⁹ A sample of “the dones”: “Such appreciation takes account, primarily, of the thing, in the case, to have *been* done” (2:1044); “The thing done and dismissed” (2:1120); “The thing ‘done’ artistically, is a fusion, or it has not *been* done” (2:1135); “before the dreadful *done*” (2:1144); “I don’t pretend really to have ‘done’ them” (2:1167); “each is too ready to say ‘I can take the thing for ‘done’ only when done in *my* way.” (2:1296); “the whole conduct of life consists of things done” (2:1340); “our really ‘done’ things of this superior and more appreciable order” (2:1340).

the incidents and characters with which it might be elaborated. But unless he would permit himself to be “le[d] on and on,” the writer, James contends, has to embrace his active agency by making a circular figure in the “boundless” canvas, “draw[ing], by a geometry of his own” a limit to—and again one hears echoes of the Balzac essays—the “continuity of things”. The act is crucial to fashioning an equanimous form for the novel, but the transition in the mode of approach from surrender to the siren-song of “developments” to the “invent[ion]” and “establish[ment]” of “simplifications” is evocative of Balzac’s withdrawal from the centre of his subject to its circumference. In this instance, though, and perhaps presaging his 1913 reappraisal of Balzac’s thingly preoccupation, James is more forgiving of the author’s efforts to “brace” himself against the impossible demands of his imaginative other. Finding the “courage” to face such a “crisis” is, he decides, the “very meaning of expertness.” It is probably the tactfulness with which the writer accomplishes his withdrawal that decides the question, for James, as to whether recovering one’s self from immersion in the subject’s logic is considered expert or fatal, but the consequences are, in this Preface, similar to those James contemplates in the earlier of the Balzac essays: the “dire process of selection and comparison” involved in the effort to institute limits is equated to “surrender and sacrifice.” The writer’s shift into an active mode of agency here flirts with the commission of violence.

The first of the Prefaces, therefore, places under erasure the clear-eyed and confident power of the writer to appreciate “the situations most useful and favourable to the sense of the creatures themselves.” The “dire” nature of selecting and comparing implies a partially-sighted writer at best, and one inexorably beset with doubts regarding his decisions. It is a suggestion ballasted by the Preface to *The Awkward Age* (1908), at the beginning of which James describes the “quite incalculable tendency of a mere grain of subject-matter to expand and develop,” to the end of its invariably baffling the writer’s “careful measure” (taken “in perfect”—Balzacian?—“good faith”) (2:1120). Reflecting on the unexpected forms taken by his novels and tales, James writes in the third person singular of the “false measurements”

with which he has begun many a work. In a tone of disconsolation—tinged with a certain theatricality—he sighs:

I find the whole case, I profess, a theme for the philosopher. The little ideas one wouldn't have treated save for the design of keeping them small, the developed situations that one would never with malice prepense have undertaken, the long stories that had thoroughly meant to be short, the short subjects that had underhandedly plotted to be long, the hypocrisy of modest beginnings, the audacity of misplaced middles, the triumph of intentions never entertained—with these patches, as I look about, I see my experience paved (2:1122)

Executing the experience James describes, the sentence works to commandeer the writer's control. The impersonal "one" drops away and the language of intentionality begins to belong to the subjects and forms evoked: while the writer may have "thoroughly meant" his long stories to be short, "short subjects" "plot" (conspire but also emplot themselves) to grow "long"; "modest beginnings" dishonestly conceal their depths; "middles" have the nerve to "misplac[e]" themselves. One witnesses, in miniature, the "triumph of intentions never entertained." In all this, a "final lesson" is wanting, and thus we miss "some law for the recognition, the determination in advance, of the just limits and the just extent of the situation, *any* situation, that appeals" (2:1122). (As in much of James's non-fictional work, "appeal," throughout the Prefaces, often captures the (active) appeal of the subject and the subject's (semi-passive) appeal or attraction *to* the author.) In pursuit of a "just"—fair, evenhanded, conscientious—form for his case, James seems inevitably to find his power contested. Perhaps such struggle is even necessary to the possibility of justice. But whether it is or is not indispensable to the writer's art, this usurpation of his agency threatens, at the same time, to leave him subject to the task of endless doing.

In the Preface to *The Ambassadors*, James explains that, in his case at least, "the happy luck of mere finding," the "finding" of one's subject, is quickly overshadowed by the great process of "expression" that looms up. The "subject is found," but "the problem is then transferred to the ground of what to do with it..." Instantly, this "ground" is infinite: "the

field opens out for any amount of doing” (2:1308). In the *Daisy Miller* Preface (1909), James shifts into a comprehensive register, ascribing this “problem” to any subject the writer locates, no matter how unassuming it may, on its face, appear. It is, he writes, “a point so interesting that it can scarce be made too often”:

that the simplest truth about a human entity, a situation, a relation, an aspect of life, however small, on behalf of which the claim to charmed attention is made, strains ever, under one’s hand, more intensely, *most* intensely, to justify that claim; strains ever, as it were, toward the uttermost end or aim of one’s meaning or of its own numerous connexions; struggles at each step, and in defiance of one’s raised admonitory finger, fully and completely to express itself. (2:1278)

A complex struggle regarding who or what should be in the position of authority is invoked by this passage—complex in large part because the subject is imbued with good intentions. Its noncompliance “under” the pressure of the writer’s hand isn’t, or isn’t only, a malevolent mutiny but a response to the writer’s “charmed attention”: it seeks to “justify” or vindicate its claim to that attention by striving to take the writer to the “end or aim” of *his* meaning, as well as to the ends of its own literary fullness, “its own numerous connexions.” If the writer’s engagement with his subject becomes too “admonitory,” James suggests, then its bi-valent “claim” (its claim *on* the writer’s attention; its claim *to* his attentions) may fail of “justif[ication].” It will not have been warranted in making so intense a claim upon the writer, but in part because the writer will not adequately have substantiated its claim to his resources. James concludes that the art of the novel lies therefore in the writer’s “controlled and guarded acceptance” of the conflict between the force of the subject and the force of the writer’s hand. “[A]cceptance,” a choice of word which would suggest that such conflict is impossible to resolve, is, however, swiftly amended to a “perfect economic mastery” (2:1278).

Recalling his separate criticisms of Flaubert and Loti, as well as his essays on Balzac, this last phrase of James’s would seem indicate a perfect point of balance between the writer’s being “charmed,” or hoodwinked, by his creative other into acceding to its “complet[e]”

expression and his holding himself in reserve from this experience. The vision of “perfect economic mastery” over potentially irreconcilable modes of being towards a creation—the duality that manifests itself in Balzac in terms of an “infinite reach” and an avidity for “*things*” (2:97)—points to the possibility that the advantages of active control and those of a reflexive submission to a subject’s inexorable “strain[ing]” “under one’s hand” might be harnessed in such a way as minimally to incur the costs of either; such equipoise between these modalities of responding would see, James continues, “the general sense of the expansive, the explosive principle in one’s material thoroughly noted, adroitly allowed to flush and colour and animate the disputed value, but with its other appetites and treacheries, its characteristic space-hunger and space-cunning, kept down” (2:1278). Readers acquainted with the Prefaces—with their tales of the “triumph of intentions never entertained,” or of “surrender and sacrifice”—may be moved to reflect upon the multitude of contingencies which assail the prospect of attaining this balance whereby the writer’s status as “a dupe” of his “prime object” is held alongside his role as “a master” of the form by which its appeal is contained. The first part of the ensuing section suggests that aspects of the Preface to *The Ambassadors* can be read as a testament to the ambiguous pleasures of finding oneself “let off” this difficulty.

The Dreadful Done

For the greater part of his career, James made his living by initially publishing his works in magazines on both sides of the Atlantic. Ensuring that his novels and tales were first published serially before coming out in volume form may have been the most lucrative means of arranging his career, but seriality was often a fraught mode of production for James. In many a Preface to a short story or novel, he rails against serial form, particularly what he feels to be its tendency to induce a creation “to struggle, in one’s hands, under the rude prescription of brevity at any cost” (2:1227). In the Preface to “The Lesson of the Master,” by way of comparison, James describes his delight at being asked to write for the influential periodical *The Yellow Book*. His pleasure was occasioned by an initial promise he received from the

periodical's literary editor, Henry Harland, that any story he wrote "might absolutely assume, might shamelessly parade in, its own organic form"⁵⁰ (2:1227), might "conform" not to prescriptions "spring[ing] from a soil often wholly alien to the ground of the work itself" (2:1293), but to its "true intelligible nature" (2:1227). In the Preface to *The Ambassadors*, however, his surprisingly affirming remarks on the effects of serialisation on the novel imply that, at least temporarily, the "alien" strictures of seriality—a "hard & fast rule," one could say—might provide respite for an author faced with an inordinately strong-willed subject.⁵¹

James writes of the novel's form as having been rewardingly determined, in part, by the "pleasant provocation for ingenuity" that resided in "one's actively adopting—so as to make it, in its way, a small compositional law—recurrent breaks and resumptions" (2:1313). By which James means, the serial form necessitated by the publication of *The Ambassadors*, over twelve months, in *The North American Review* (2:1310). Critics have noted that the novel appears to adapt the suspenseful periodic pauses evoked by the gaps between its successive parts to a reflexive serial aesthetic: not only do consecutive chapters revise preceding events, but James duplicates the periodical's logic of delay in the deferral of knowledge intrinsic to Strether's "more or less groping" cognitive adventure, as well as in the suspension of semantic meaning at the level of the sentence (2:1313). In multiple places, Millicent Bell argues, the novel is organised by a method "which builds up occasions each corrective of the last...aborting

⁵⁰ Coleridge's distinction between "mechanic" and "organic form" gives a succinct precis of what James may mean by "organic form." Coleridge writes: "The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a predetermined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material—as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form" ("Shakespeare's Judgment Equal to His Genius," in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 462).

⁵¹ For discussions of James's earlier resistance to and adaptation of serial conventions see Rachel Ihara, "Rather Rude Jolts": Henry James, Serial Novels, and the Art of Fiction," *The Henry James Review* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 188–206; Adrian Poole, "Dying before the End: The Reader in *The Portrait of a Lady*," *Yearbook of English Studies* 26 (1996): 143–53; and Amy Tucker, *The Illustration of the Master: Henry James and the Magazine Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

expectations while preserving possibilities.”⁵² The rich textual history of *The Ambassadors* may signal to a further respect in which the “alien” laws of serial form may have been a welcome imposition on the novel’s author.

James’s delight at the alacrity with which the “fable” of *The Ambassadors* laid itself at his feet is only one dimension of the novel’s genesis. Just prior to this, he describes the pure “Story” aspect of his subject as having the intensity of “force,” the kind of “headlong energy,” to bely any general notion that the writer is in a position to “negotiate with it [the story] by treaty” (2:1310). In the event, he chooses to marvel rather than to despair when he recalls chasing, “breathless and a little flurried,” the swift “*steps*” of his case as it “completed itself” (2:1311). It is, however, downright rare in the Prefaces for James to speak of a case “complet[ing]” itself; more often than not, the writer effects, more or less felicitously, its completion—“draw[s], by a geometry of his own” the limits within which it “shall happily appear” complete (2:1047). Perhaps, then, between the “headlong energy” of the story and the suspicious ease with which it plays itself out lies that “small compositional law” James so unexpectedly describes as his “pleasant provocation”? For if the writer’s ability to ballast himself against the “force and logic” (2:1310) of his subject is jeopardised (and we might think here of the writhing serpent Balzac “invited to wind itself round him” (2:102)), then a “law” that effectively mandates “breaks” in a story’s “complications” may represent a fortuitous intervention (2:1309); such a “law” would not only check the writer’s susceptibility to the compelling logic of his fable, but it would also, by virtue of this law being imposed from outside, absolve the writer of his accountability for having denied his creation’s reaching for “the uttermost end or aim of one’s meaning or of its own numerous connexions.” He is not (altogether) culpable for the “simplification” or the “sacrifices” inflicted in the process of shunning (James prefers the image of kicking these away, presumably to accord with the

⁵² Millicent Bell, *Meaning in Henry James* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1991), 324

pedestrian conceit of this Preface)—in the name of form, in pursuit of the “positive beauty” of “composition”—the “wayside traps set [by the story element?] in the interest of muddlement and pleading but the cause of the moment, of the particular bit in itself” (2:1315).

Serial form may be imagined as having permitted James, in the case of *The Ambassadors*, to stop his ears to the claims of “the Story” (“the spoiled child of art”), and thereby largely to devote himself to those of form or “the whole” (not coincidentally, perhaps, he names this book the “best ‘all round’” of his productions (2:1306)) (2:1311). However, it is worth noting the incommensurability of the claims under which the writer works in this Preface: on the one hand, the “*possibly* absolute” “merit and dignity” of the literary subject, demanding always a “due decency” of rendering, and on the other, a “small” edict, a provisional condition of the text’s initial mode of publication (2:1306). It may be expected that for James, who will write in the Preface to *The Golden Bowl*, vis-à-vis the redendering “due” one’s subjects, that the writer “can never be responsible *enough*,” a minor, temporary restriction on the degree of unfolding permitted the story will not permanently absolve the writer from once again heeding its “force.” Perhaps it is with regard to this likelihood that James ends the Preface to *The Ambassadors* raising the specter of what the novel’s “grace of intensity” may have cost by way of “suffered treacheries” (2:1313, 2:1320). It is with his sense for the “diminished and compromised” presentation of “Chad’s whole figure and presence” that James leaves the reader, suggestively concluding that “the whole economy of the author’s relation to him [Chad] has at important points to be redetermined” (2:1320). Significantly, the textual history of the novel indicates that, when the law of serial form no longer pertained, it was to the appeal of Chad that James gravitated. There are at least five discrete editions of *The Ambassadors*; the book text that is least like the serial is the New York Edition.⁵³ (Leaving to

⁵³ The serial, published by *The North American Review*; the first British edition, published by Methuen in September 1903; the first American edition, published by Harper’s in November 1903; the carefully revised New York Edition text, published by Scribner in 1909; and the reformatted 1921/1922 text, which incorporates the Methuen sequencing of chapters twenty-

one side the structural complication of the interchanged (interchangeable)⁵⁴ sequencing of chapters twenty-eight and twenty-nine.) Almost without exception, the differences between these texts relate to the presentation of Chad Newsome and his “so interesting complexity of relations” (2:1312).⁵⁵

As in the Preface to *The Ambassadors*, James’s post hoc appreciation for the way in which he has handled a “particular case” more often than not gives way to an intense consciousness of the many signs of his mishandling: the text’s *un*-“disguised,” *un*-“repaired losses” (2:1320). I have suggested that one can think of James’s final amalgam of disappointment with and compunction for the “thing ‘done,’” in *The Ambassadors* Preface, as having been stirred in the event of his reengaging with—after the reprieve of seriality—the fullness of his responsibility (2:1120). In other Prefaces, similar feelings are occasioned by the all-too-manifest “treacheries” the literary subject appears to have suffered as a result of James’s original aesthetic choices. In still others, he indicates that the work of responding, however felicitous its productions, inevitably occasions a certain degree of sorrow in the writer. When one looks for why this might be, it seems that in the same way answering a letter may make for a rejoinder which itself solicits a reply, so the work of writerly responsibility might be said to have an analogously self-engendering effect: a response to a subject’s appeal yields further claims that in turn demand an answer. This logic is particularly noticeable in those Prefaces wherein James discusses the significance to his fictions of “minor identities” or “*ficelles*”—second order or “supporting” characters (2:1296, 2:1317). Could not the “string,” if its appeal

eight and twenty-nine, while sustaining all other textual decisions made by James for the Edition.

⁵⁴ Jerome McGann argues that chapters twenty-eight and twenty-nine are intrinsically transposable in “Revision, Rewriting, Rereading; Or, ‘An Error [Not] in The Ambassadors,” *American Literature* 64, no. 1 (March 1992): 95–110.

⁵⁵ For full discussions of the textual history of this novel see Michael Anesko, *Generous Mistakes: Incidents of Error in Henry James* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), Ch. 3, and Nicola Bradbury, “Introduction,” in *The Ambassadors* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), xxxviii–lvi.

were explored, not cut its tie to the creator and central creation it serves, becoming a figure in its own right?

In the Prefaces to *The Princess Casamassima*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, and *The Wings of the Dove* (1909), James suggests that for the writer to do justice to the “appeal” of his central consciousnesses, “satellite” figures are required to minister to their interest; minor players or “*ficelles*” serve to unfold, or to throw into relief, the nuances of a protagonist’s thought and feeling—in lieu, that is, of an all-seeing (potentially over-bearing) chronicler (2:1078–9). But in the Preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, James calls the reader’s attention to the potential of many a satellite to burgeon into a planet. He does so by indicating the degree of the disparity, to his mind, between the virtual possibility of Lionel Croy (Kate Croy’s father) and the character whose role in the novel is so meagre. While Croy, Kate’s “so compromised and compromising father,” was “all effectively to have pervaded her life, was in a certain peculiar way to have tampered with her spring,” James has presented the reader with just enough of Croy to “spring” Kate’s crooked course of action (2:1295). Thus the opening sentence of *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) reads, “She waited, Kate Croy, for her father to come in, but he kept her unconscionably...”⁵⁶ One way in which one might read this famous opening sentence, and particularly its syntactical suspension of “Kate Croy,” is to note that character and action await, in a structural sense, the arrival of the father who keeps both “unconscionably” subject to his arrival. When Croy does appear, his tacit request to be permitted to revoke his paternal responsibility for Kate (a replication of Beale Farange’s similarly unvoiced appeal to Masie to “let him off”)⁵⁷ will “spring” what follows: a homeless, “penniless girl,” obliged to live with

⁵⁶ Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner’s, 1902), 1:3.

⁵⁷ Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (London: Heinemann, 1897), 156. Maisie is described as understanding what it is her father is asking “as well as if he had spoken it.” Beale’s request is then voiced in free indirect style: “what he wanted, hang it, was that she should let him off with all the honours—with all the appearance of virtue and sacrifice on his side. It was exactly as if he had broken out to her: ‘I say, you little donkey, help me to be irreproachable, to be noble, and yet to have none of the beastly bore of it...’”

her harrying aunt, conspires with her lover to find a way to marry with money.⁵⁸ Croy is artfully used by his author, but in the Preface, James encompasses Croy in his portrayal of *The Wings* as a stage crowded with figures who were to have been “stars”—in this case celebrities—instead of mere “satellites”: “Every one, in short, was to have enjoyed so much better a chance that, like stars of the theatre condescending to oblige, they have had to take small parts, to content themselves with minor identities, in order to come on at all” (2:1295–6). Brought on to fulfil the requirements of some other “particular intended connection,” James instills his minor figures with an embryonic set of demands regretfully “kept down.”⁵⁹

In a melodramatic conclusion to this topic, James writes of *The Wings of the Dove*, the “whole thing,” as appearing to his eyes little more than the record of his miserliness as a responder: “One’s main anxiety, for each one’s agents, is that the air of each shall be *given*; but what does the whole thing become, after all, as one goes, but a series of sad places at which the hand of generosity has been cautioned and stayed?” (2:1296). James’s late-career fascination with the idea of what Philip Roth calls “counterlife”—the unlive lives shadowing those that are lived, a prospect put to rich effect in “The Jolly Corner” (1908) and *The Sense of the Past* (1917)—might then be said to find its way into the Prefaces; the implication of the *Wings* Preface being that the achieved configuration of any particular story or novel around certain centres of gravity and their orbiting moons is haunted by what he calls, in another context, the “possible other case”—a shadowy reversal of the given planetary system (2:1229). It is perhaps a vision of this parallel universe which inspires the “revivalist impulse” in James and the liberation of Christina Light from “the vague limbo of those ghosts we have conjured

⁵⁸ James, *The Wings of the Dove*, 1:6.

⁵⁹ James’s attention to the uneven distribution of the writer’s resources between characters bears relating to Levinas’s idea of the “Third.” Levinas acknowledges that my relation of responsibility to one other is impacted by the simple fact that there can never be an encounter between two people that does not bring with it the spectre of many others. Responding involves prioritising all these others who face me but how can I compare singularities, and so determine to whom my response is “properly” owed? As Levinas asks, “Who passes before the other in my responsibility?” (Peace and Proximity,” in *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone Press, 1999), 142).

but not exorcised,” from “the doll’s box, to which we usually relegate the spent puppet” (2:1099, 2:1098).

The multiplication of further demands in the event of responding to any one set of claims would seem to render the impasse regarding the mode of agency involved in responding secondary to a greater predicament. For when we use responsibility in an idiomatic way to mean one’s duty or obligation, it more often than not refers to a specific action or set of actions which, once accomplished, signal that one’s responsibility has been “done.” If responsibility names an involvement, though, a dialogic give and take between singularities (“there are five million such “rules”...only each of them imposed, artistically, by the particular case; – *involved* in the writer’s responsibility to it”), when is responsibility ever done? It is this thought which seems behind the habitual transformation of James’s pleasure in the attainments of a particular work into statements of despair. To draw upon Julie Rivkin’s observation, his appreciation for what *is* to be found in any one of his compositions is often attended by a coincident consciousness of “what was to have been there.”⁶⁰ Thus in the Preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, James confesses that

the profession of delight has always struck me as the last to consort, for the artist, with any candid account of his troubled effort—ever the sum, for the most part, of so many lapses and compromises, simplifications and surrenders. Which is the work in which he hasn’t surrendered, under dire difficulty, the best thing he meant to have kept? In which indeed, before the dreadful *done*, doesn’t he ask himself what has become of the thing all for the sweet sake of which it was to proceed to that extremity? (2:1144)

Now face-to-face with the “dreadful *done*”—the manifest form that has been fashioned upon the abyssal ground of “doing” which spread before the writer on finding a subject (“the thing for the sweet sake of which it was to proceed to that extremity [“lapses and compromises, simplifications and surrenders]”) — the labour of response has been no response at all; while

⁶⁰ Julie Rivkin, *False Positions: The Representational Logics of Henry James’s Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 60–61.

the reader meets with what James has “*done*,” James encounters the dreadful photographic negative: the undone. “I meet them all, as I renew acquaintance [with a text], I mourn for them all as I remount the stream, the absent values, the palpable voids, the missing links, the mocking shadows” (2:1294). The dismay with which he imbues this vision of the work seen through a glass darkly is perhaps best understood in the context of that which remains to be discussed: the importance he attaches, in the Prefaces, to his ability to recover from the text a felicitous response to the subject that originally impressed its claim on his imagination.

Strange Charms

In the Preface to *The Tragic Muse* (1908), James writes of the value he accords to his ability to recover in a book, “to recognise in it [“the form”]—as I like to do in general—the effect of some particular sharp impression or concussion.” These “remembered glimmers are always precious,” he affirms, for without the memory of this initial “impression,” “comes no clear vision of what one may have intended, and without that vision no straight measure of what one may have succeeded in doing” (2:1103). James re-articulates this thought in his Preface to *A London Life* (1908), in which he writes that “[w]hat matters, for one’s appreciation of a work of art, however modest, is that the prime intention shall have been justified—for any judgment of which we must be clear as to what it was” (2:1151). With these lines, James sketches a trajectory that begins with the writer as subject to a “sharp impression,” an event that is subsequently transformed into the locus of the artist’s “prime intention,” imaginably, to interpret, unfold, express that impressive force in the form of an artwork. In the Preface to *Roderick*, he enlarges the circle of responders and recipients so as to form a connection between the contemporary “I” of the Prefaces, a text, and its historical writer: if a tale or novel is intended as a material expression of the impression, James indicates that his ability to discern or appreciate that such an intention has been “justified” or vindicated in that work occasions a renewed connection between present and past. It is worth tracing this complex process in greater depth before closing with a consideration of the last Preface.

James began writing *Roderick Hudson* in 1874 while living in Florence.⁶¹ One “sharp impression” described in the Preface to novel is that of “loved Italy,” “so much more loved than one has ever been able, even after fifty efforts, to say!” James indicates that his younger self nevertheless ventured to say the unsayable: the young writer had hoped that *Roderick* would form, in part, an amorous testament to Italy; it was, therefore, a labour impelled by his “earnest, baffled intention of making it [the “golden air” of Italy] felt.” For the contemporary author, regarding the novel he wrote thirty years earlier, its representation of Italy possesses both magic and melancholy. In a first appearance for “the dreadful *done*,” it is the dim negativity of the writer’s efforts with which James initially meets. “Little enough,” he writes, “of that medium [“golden air”] may the novel, read over today, seem to supply.” Yet that “[l]ittle,” perhaps given the extent of the writer’s love, turns out still to be “enough.” It would seem that the ““evocation”” of Italy has attained the status of a kind of testament to his feeling, for a “whole side of the old consciousness, under this mild pressure, flushes up and prevails again” (2:1042; all quotations). The novel, in part, achieves the accord James seeks between the “sharp impression” made on the writer by his subject and form he fashions for its expression. These agreements between “subject and treatment” are happy in and of themselves, but they also catalyse, James later writes, a “strange charm.” The harmony between subject and handling is a “stage” in a process of “connexion”: first form and subject are responsive to one another, then the contemporary writer may greet again the “old consciousness,” and finally, “actual appearances” reacquaint themselves with “old motives”:

if subject and treatment, working together, have had their felicity, the artist, the prime creator, may find a strange charm in this stage of the connexion. It helps him live back into a forgotten state, into convictions, credulities too early spent perhaps, it breathes upon the dead reasons of things, buried as they are in the texture of the work, and makes them revive (2:1045)

⁶¹ 1873–4 marked James’s third stay in Italy; he arrived in Florence in October, travelled to Rome with brother William the following month but returned to Florence quickly thereafter when William contracted malaria and was forced to leave Rome for the sake of his health. James began work on the serial text of *Roderick Hu* in March 1874.

These connections form a “chain,” James imagines in the Preface to *The Golden Bowl*, premised upon “relation and responsibility” (2:1340).

The Preface to *Roderick* helps to clarify why “absent values,” “palpable voids,” “missing links,” all of which are figures for interruption and lacunae, may be dreadful prospects for the contemporary author. The implication of this first Preface is of an intricate whole of relationality staked upon there being *no* failure in any of the discrete series of connections that the whole entails. The “dreadful *done*,” on the other hand, appears to threaten nothing but lapses in the “chain.” The series could therefore be said to incorporate into James’s aesthetics a further element of his thinking about Balzac, whereby the prospect of what has not been done in the way of answering the demands of the literary subject comes hand in hand with the prospect of loss. In the case of Balzac, James envisions the writer lost in the labyrinth of his task; in the Prefaces, he imagines losing the thread of his connection to the “old consciousness” and the “prime intention,” such that “dead reasons” remain, while “actual appearances” and “old motives” fall apart.⁶² And yet, as in the Balzac essays, such a loss seems inevitable given James’s perception of the tendency in every subject to drive

⁶² John Carlos Rowe argues that the Prefaces are preoccupied with the “threat of ontological dislocation”—a threat particularly pronounced in those Prefaces in which James admits to not being able to recall the “sharp impression or concussion” around which a novel or story is formed. Such occasions, Rowe argues, lead James to “offer instead certain ‘dramatizations’ of what must be termed his imaginary ‘scenes of writing,’ extemporized versions of that origin now lost” (*Theoretical Dimensions*, 237). In reality, the Prefaces are far more extemporised even than this. James’s “unremembering” or “misremembering” extends beyond the instances to which he admits: Sister Stephanie Vincec has noted numerous discrepancies between James’s prefatorial accounts of the writer’s meeting with an impressive subject and those recorded in his notebooks and letters. Vincec’s article indicates that James was not inclined to check the historical record when writing his Prefaces, and that his interest is probably not, therefore, for the most part, in factual accuracy so much as in the artistic or imaginative truth of the experiences and processes he sets down. It is for this reason I have suggested the usefulness of reading the Prefaces as forms of autofiction. See Vincec, “‘Poor Flopping *Wings*’: The Making of Henry James’s *The Wings of the Dove*,” *Harvard Library Bulletin*, vol. 24 (January 1976): 60–93.

inexorably towards the fullness of its *measureless* measure and so to solicit such doing that the writer “can scarce, by his own measure, ever have done” (2:1341).

This idea of endless doing is at the heart of James’s final Preface. Positioning himself both as judge and defendant in a case of aesthetic injuring, he describes, in the Preface to *The Golden Bowl* (in relation to novels like *The American*, and “scarce less” to *The Portrait of a Lady* or *The Princess Casamassima*) hearing the “subject” sound its “plaint”: “the long-stored grievance of the subject bristling with a sense of over-prolonged exposure in a garment misfitted, a garment cheaply embroidered and unworthy of it” (2:1337). Although the “old” intentions, sedimented in the grain of these texts, may still present themselves to be “re-accepted, re-tasted, exquisitely re-assimilated—believed in, to be brief, with the same old grateful faith,” the forms of expression characteristic of the “old” (or young) writer are foreign to James and, more importantly, ill-suited to the aggrieved subject who solicits a newly “responsible glance” (2:1333, 2:1331). The cumulative effect of this last Preface is subtly to shift the nature of James’s relationship to his published books, so that if the Preface to *Roderick Hudson* values these texts for the experience of subjective integration they may foster, the Preface to *The Golden Bowl* appears to reimagine them as catalysts for the writer’s “getting out” of himself once more in order that the creative figure may receive an answer to its (present tense) claim for “better justice,” “for exemplary damages, or at least for poetic justice”—in other words, a “due decency of ‘rendering’” (2:1337, 2:1335). The last in the series sets store on the “developed difference” of the contemporary writer, if only because such difference may allow for a response “*more* right and *more* related” to the subject newly handled (2:1335).⁶³ At the same time, James presents his efforts at revisory care as no more guaranteed to preserve him from future recriminations or demands: he writes only of “hop[ing]” that he has not “breathed upon the old catastrophes and accidents, the old wounds and mutilations and disfigurements, wholly in vain” (2:1337), acknowledging thereby that the “better form,” the new “terms”

⁶³ Henry James, *The Ivory Tower* (London: Collins, 1917), 341.

through which the subject is expressed may yet fall short of justifying its “finer appeal” (2:1332, 2:1337, 2:1334). There is, of course, by no means consensus on the greater aesthetic, narrative, or characterological “decency” that James’s revisions do achieve; the criteria for these kinds of judgements are challengingly relative.⁶⁴ Towards the end of the third chapter of this book, I will dwell at greater length upon the question of “poetic justice” in relation to *Roderick Hudson*. Accordingly, chapter three marks the point of intersection between what I have hoped to show is James’s personal and aesthetic interest in conceiving of responsibility on lines which diverge from the commonplace and the questions that are occasioned by this unorthodox conception of responsibility in the novels. I propose that imagining for responsibility a greater proximity to responsiveness than to free acting—with all the intricacies this entails—opens the way for James to create fictions which formally and thematically imagine how one might be responsible otherwise but that do not simply affirm this as a better responsibility.

⁶⁴ See Philip Horne, “Henry James at Work: The Question of Our Texts.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Henry James*, ed. Jonathan Freedman, 63–78 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). See also Horne, *Henry James and Revision* for a full and nuanced discussion of the scope and effects of James’s revisions.

Chapter Three

Roderick Hudson: Tragic Responsibility

‘You shall do something. I am responsible for your doing something.’¹

Roderick Hudson (1875)

The Vita Activa, the Vita Contemplativa

“Men must work and women must weep!” Cecilia concludes, resigned to Roderick Hudson’s departure for Rome, where he is to begin his career as a sculptor.² Her stoicism here succeeds her irritation at the man, Rowland Mallet, who has taken it upon himself to “carry off” her young friend (79). Cecilia’s axiom positions the genders in separate heuristic categories: men act, women dissolve. Rowland, said to have a “sovereign dread” of “women’s weeping in general,” will later supplement the idea of the sentimental liquidity of women with that of their rhetorical fluidity, making a mental distinction between the “masculine eloquence” of the act and the “sinister *persiflage*” of women like Christina Light (341, 218). The effect of these truisms is not only to gender acting and working as male, but simultaneously to masculinise a host of other concepts to which the latter are allied in the first chapters of *Roderick Hudson* (1875). Between the consciousness of Rowland, through whom the novel is focalised, and his dialogue with Cecilia, “activity” unfolds into the idea of “positive good” (50); an equation that is the antithesis of the “idle,” “useless,” “passive” leisure that afflicts Mallet (52). It is according to this semantic pattern that Mallet, a man without occupation, without discernible work, configures himself: he confesses to being an “idle useless creature” while

¹ Henry James, *Roderick Hudson* (London: Penguin, 1987), 343.

² James, *Roderick Hudson*, 79. *Roderick Hudson* first appeared as a serial in the *Atlantic Monthly* (January to December 1875), this version being printed in book form in November of the same year. Penguin publishes the text James revised in 1879 for the English edition. In the first place, I quote from the English edition; latterly, I consider James’s revisions for the New York Edition text of *Roderick*. References are hereafter given in the text.

Cecilia warns him that if he has produced no “positive good,” he ought to think that he has, in every practical sense, been “doing harm” (52, 50). Her adage thus becomes, in the context of her relationship to Rowland, pointedly ironic; for it is she who appears a model of practicality. Having lost both her husband and her fortune (presumably in connection with the Civil War, an event by which the novel’s historical consciousness is patently impressed³), Cecilia “cut out her own dresses,” while giving “her little girl the education of a princess” (50). A “skilful counter-plotter to adversity,” Cecilia is one of several “very clever”⁴ women (“clever” meaning cunning, ingenious) in this book who would rather work than weep (49).⁵

There is a *frisson* of shame in the persistence with which Mallet notes his cousin’s occupied state. But if his own want of activity is a vital sign of deficiency, a quality Mallet does possess equally appears something of an embarrassment. James amplifies his focaliser’s heightened aesthetic receptivity in the opening scenes: Rowland is appreciative of the artfulness with which Cecilia obscures her “economies,” and of the “sweet-smelling starlight” of Northampton (49, 52). His original plan—so the voice designated to paraphrase the character’s consciousness notes—had been to make this susceptibility “useful”: his intention to sail for Europe accompanied by the thought that “it would be the work of a good citizen to go abroad...purchase certain valuable specimens of the Dutch and Italian schools,” and

³ We are told that Rowland obtained a commission in 1861 and served “for three long years as a citizen soldier,” performing his “duty” on a number of occasions “with something of an ideal precision” (58). It is perhaps this experience which has given him a taste for the self-affirming rewards of the active life. Although the Hudson family have come from Virginia (and once owned “lands and slaves” (67)), Roderick’s brother Stephen is also described as having fought and died for the Union. Elizabeth Duquette notes that the impact of the Civil War on the novel is not confined to these biographical details. Duquette argues that the novel’s concern with “usefulness” participates in a contemporary cultural discourse: “the ‘usefulness’ of the individual was a regular feature of discussions of what constituted a meaningful life in the years following the Civil War” (“‘Reflected Usefulness’: Exemplifying Conduct in *Roderick Hudson*,” *The Henry James Review* 23, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 57–75 (75)).

⁴ Christina is “extremely clever” (296); Madame Grandoni is “wonderfully clever” (286).

⁵ The pressure upon Rowland’s self-esteem is later exacerbated by Mary Garland, an assiduous needle-worker and homesteader, who tells him that he is a “curiosity” to her: “you are the first unoccupied man I ever saw.” Rowland, half joking, responds that he may “sink into the earth” from the effects of her comment (97).

“present his treasures out of hand to an American city” (52). Such a vision of “good” “work” will be left for Adam Verver to practise upon his American City, for in the course of Rowland’s first interview with Cecilia, he privately dismisses his plan as an exaggeration of the condition with which he is already afflicted: an “idealised form of loafing” (52).⁶ The spectre of the over-refined, Paterian aesthete suddenly looms large as he despairingly confesses to Cecilia that his impending life in Rome will take largely the same shape as his life in America: it will be “a passive life,” which—due to the rich texture of the Roman scene, the “number and quality” of “impressions” offered—will seem to mock or mimic “a likeness to activity”; “[i]t is still lotus-eating only you sit down at table and the lotuses are served up on rococo china” (52–53).⁷ (Roderick will later sing Tennyson’s *The Princess* (1847) (72); here Rowland conjures *The Lotus-eaters* (1833)—a poem to which Adam Verver also alludes.)⁸ While Cecilia is figured as a woman of Ulyssean cunning, Rowland is Ulysses as one of the lotophagi.

The developing polarity culminates in Rowland conceiving of himself as trapped in “an irresponsibly contemplative nature,” all the while desiring “a sturdily practical one” (58).

⁶ In *Notes of a Son and Brother* (New York: Scribner’s, 1914), discussing brother William’s desire to become a painter, James remarks upon a past and present social regard for aesthetic pursuits as illegitimate forms of work: “[t]he ‘career of art’ has again and again been deprecated and denounced, on the lips of anxiety or authority, as a departure from the career of business, of industry and respectability” (51). From this point of view, “respectability” and “responsibility” are practically fused.

⁷ Pater’s emphasis—most conspicuously in *The Renaissance* (1873)—on the appreciation of experience was an implicit challenge to the practical ethos of nineteenth-century Anglo-American culture; here it appears defanged of its subversive potential—a pale imitator of the very “activity” it would repudiate. Jonathan Freedman notes that *Roderick Hudson* represents James’s first sustained engagement with British aestheticism. Its portrayal in the novel, as it is throughout his career, is equivocal: “Aestheticism is for James always tainted by excessive indulgence, creative insufficiency....on the other hand, his condemnations always carry with them faint signs of affirmation, often concealed within qualifications” (*Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 135).

⁸ Adam will wonder whether his and Maggie’s life is not “[a] kind of wicked selfish prosperity perhaps, as if we had grabbed everything, fixed everything, down to the last lovely object for the last glass case of the last corner... it has made us perhaps lazy, a wee bit languid—lying like gods together, all careless of mankind” (*The Golden Bowl*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner’s, 1904), 2:94). Tennyson has, “Let us swear an oath, and keep it with an equal mind,/ In the hollow Lotos-land to live and lie reclined/ On the hills like Gods together, careless of mankind” (*Tennyson: Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 41).

James has his character array his terms and concepts so as to find all that is associated with the *vita contemplativa*, including ideas of receptivity and modes of being not typically considered “active,” in the realm of the “irresponsibl[e]” and ethically transgressive. Does this suggest that contemplation’s antithesis, the “sturdily practical,” possesses, to Mallet’s mind, all the goodness the former lacks? The novel points to this arrangement when Rowland is led by his cousin to view a small sculpture belonging to the hand of Roderick Hudson. The sculpture, *Thirst*—the subject of which one might think of as reception itself—is set by Cecilia in the context of Hudson’s muscular movement: it is he who “modelled it in clay,” “had it cast at the foundry,” and “arrived” at her door to present it as a gift (60). Belying or complicating the passive attitude it would seem to represent, the formal dynamism that Rowland perceives in *Thirst* is complemented by the active mood in which Cecilia rhetorically models its artist. Sensitive to the inferences of her depiction, Mallet is quick to marry his idea of the sculptor to the “vigorous young man of genius” he regrets he is not and to associate Hudson with the moral virtue he misses (58). In his imaginary, Hudson is one who does things “handsomely,” who has found it “so easy to produce a lovely work” (60–61).

This project begins its exploration of the fiction with *Roderick Hudson* for reasons I hope have begun to become apparent. An early novel, the first James was to acknowledge in the New York Edition, *Roderick* is yet acutely engaged with many of the ideas hitherto discussed in relation to the later writings. Yet whereas James’s later works have been thought to disclose a continuum whereby receptivity, and the inactive mode it would denote, is vital (if disconcertingly so) to the salience of responsibility, *Roderick* stands out for the reason that, under the influence of the novel’s “lucid” “reflector,” susceptibility and inactivity signal responsibility’s negation.⁹ Rowland’s extrication of receptivity from ideas of ethicality bears comparison to the received wisdom of the East coast milieu his author described in *A Small*

⁹ Henry James, *Literary Criticism, Vol. 2: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 2:1302. References are hereafter given in the text.

Boy and Others (1913). Reflecting upon the “old New York” of his childhood, James recalls as a “special shade” of its character its limited consciousness of and provision for diverse modes of being. In this “unformed, unseasoned society,” there were those who were occupied, engaged in business, political or commercial, and those who were “dissipated’.” What it was to be dissipated was not obvious, James continues, but “they [this milieu] would have held, under pressure, that it consisted more than anything else in getting tipsy.” In such a world, the prevailing “generalization” was that if one was not busy, one was susceptible or “exposed” to dissipation, to tipsiness:

Not to have been immediately launched in business of a rigorous sort was to *be* exposed—in the absence I mean of some fairly abnormal predisposition to virtue; since it was a world so simply constituted that whatever wasn’t business, or exactly an office or a “store,” places in which people sat close and made money, was just simply pleasure, sought, and sought only, in places in which people got tipsy.¹⁰

Although he is describing an environment which predates that dramatised in the novel by a few years, the cultural logic James reproduces is analogous to that which is at work upon Rowland’s “sensitive conscience”: the want of a “rigorous” activity or occupation is tantamount to finding oneself “exposed”: in this state of vulnerability, exposure quickly devolves (the self dissolving) into mere “pleasure,” into intemperance, into irresponsibility. This chapter proposes that *Roderick* is an observant, uncertain, doubtful meditation upon this logic: does activity alone rule the hermeneutic domain of responsibility? May exposure, susceptibility play no part in the concept? Is the “exposed” subject inevitably the dissipated, irresponsible subject?

This chapter pursues its claims along three distinctive, interacting lines. In the first instance, the argument will consider the dynamic between the novel’s two central characters. Taking responsibility for Roderick’s actions, Rowland’s dread for his unoccupied, “exposed” person is temporarily allayed, but the perils of inactivity come swiftly to be replaced by other

¹⁰ Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others* (New York: Scribner’s, 1913), 45–49.

kinds of vulnerability: liability for Roderick's doings, both the good and the "disorderly" (136). *Roderick*, I will argue, questions the orthodox connection between activity and responsibility, while assaying the potential significance of "susceptibility" (as the novel terms it; what I have elsewhere called receptiveness, or receptivity) to the concept. The second part reconnects to themes sounded in the previous chapter: it will look to James's Preface to suggest that Rowland's structural role as the novel's "centre, the point of command of all the rest," "and this in spite of the title of the book," informs the kind of involvement with Roderick that Mallet initiates and retains throughout the novel (2:1049–50). I suggest that the critique the novel appears to mount in relation to Mallet's accountability is, to a certain extent, belied by indications that the character's tenacious association of responsibility with answering for (Roderick's) doings may itself answer to the author's trepidations regarding the liabilities of Roderick as a character. James's responses to the novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne and of George Sand will briefly be touched upon at this stage. The final part will trace the complexities of critical feeling surrounding the author's revisions for the New York Edition. In particular, I will consider the degree to which Rowland is the recipient of "exemplary damages, or at least...poetic justice" (2:1337).

Enacting Oneself

Why does Rowland's relationship to Roderick take the form it does? Or, to ask a more primary and not unrelated question, why is Rowland's structural relation to *Roderick* the way it is? Is it possible to reimagine the novel so that Rowland is more observer of Hudson's narrative than participant in it? The narratological coincidence within a single character of both the participatory and observatory roles is a thought-provoking one, for it would seem to oblige the figure to inhabit two not easily reconcilable postures: the passive, peripheral stance of "a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass," and, at the same time, the active

involvement of a player on the inside of the represented milieu (2:1075).¹¹ But had Rowland been confined by his author to a more passive position vis-à-vis the plot, if Rowland had not found himself actively responsible for “ma[king]” “something considerable” of Hudson (80)—given his warrant for shaping the sculptor, reining him in, bringing him back into focus—it is conceivable that this hypothetical novel would either have featured its *titular* character (given to long, aimless rambles, to spontaneous jaunts, to vanishing without notice) less than the actual text, or had a far more episodic, irregular structure, as Rowland rambled, detoured, and took off alongside Roderick. Either way, one might imagine this alternative version of the novel as a far looser affair: an impressionist account of an American whose days were sporadically interrupted by Hudson’s energising presence, but were otherwise made up of “a dozen conscious devices for disposing of the hours, and intermingled with sighs, half suppressed, some of them, for conscience’ sake, over what he failed of in action and missed in possession” (112). Can there be such a central character—a character without, as it were, an action? In 1882, after the publication of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), William Dean Howells celebrated James for achieving just such a feat. Howells remarked that the novelist was “shaping and directing” a “new school” of fiction, innovative for its attention to “character-painting” rather than to “story.”¹² “Evidently,” Howells observed of James, “it is the character, not the fate, of his people which occupies him”; “[t]he moving accident is certainly not” the “trade” of his fiction.¹³ In *Roderick*, however, lingering doubts regarding the importance of “moving accident” to character play out not only in the means by which the novel’s focaliser

¹¹ For a fuller discussion of this issue in James’s work see Carolyn Porter, *Seeing and Being: The Plight of the Participant Observer* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), Ch. 5.

¹² William Dean Howells, “Henry James, Jr.,” *Century Magazine* 25, no. 1 (November 1882): 24–29 (28).

¹³ Howells, “James,” 26, 28. Howells’s “moving accident” alludes to *Othello* (“Of moving accidents by flood and field,/ Of hair-breadth ‘scapes i’ th’ imminent deadly breach”)—a play which dwells in the imaginary of *Roderick*, too. In “The Art of Fiction” (1884), James will submerge “accident” into “character-painting” itself: “[w]hat is incident but the illustration of character? What is either a picture or a novel that is *not* of character?” (James, *Literary Criticism, Vol. 1: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1:55).

is introjected into the plot, but also in the character's care for the consequences of having no "practical occupation"—a state Mallet associates with fragility, as though to be unoccupied is to be ever on the brink of lapsing into non-being (274).

Rowland's initial conversations with Cecilia can sound, to the ear of a reader initiated into the plot, like tacit entreaties to be saved from his fate. Reflecting on the absurdity of his leaving for Rome, he confesses to her that "it seems to me a rash thing for a sensitive soul deliberately to cultivate its sensibilities by rambling too often among the ruins of the Palatine or riding too often in the shadow of the crumbling aqueducts" (53).¹⁴ As in Rowland's thought for the uselessness of his dream of connoisseurship, "deliberately to cultivate" one's receptive capacities is "rash": for the "sensitive soul" who communes with "ruins" and "crumbling" structures, lacking means by which to impress himself against what is received, is exposed to communicable dissolution. Rowland goes on to compare "the chords of [his] feeling" to the eggs Goethe's Mignon arranges in a pattern upon the carpet before performing, blindfolded, an intricate dance in the interstices (53). The allusion here is to *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–6)—a novel in which a young man attempts to escape the life of a bourgeois businessman by choosing that of the actor; he is repeatedly seduced by temptations, set to weeping from the unhappy consequences of his receptivity. Rome, in Rowland's image, must play the role of tactful Mignon in order not to shatter him. Perhaps not trusting to the delicacy of Rome's handling of "tender" young men, Rowland bursts out into yearning for a vocation to shore him up against the perils of his susceptibility (49). He despairs of himself as a man "half finished": all impressionability, while "the faculty of expression is wanting" (53).¹⁵

¹⁴ When Rowland does visit the ruins of the Palatine he is in the company of Mary Garland; the conversation between the two reprises Rowland's idea that if one is not to be brought "low" by Rome a "practical occupation" is necessary (273–4).

¹⁵ There is a further allusion here—to Emerson's essay "The Poet," in which he writes that "The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression" (*Essays: Second Series* (Boston & New York: James Munroe, 1844), 6). By "expression," Emerson is referring to the various forms of work—creative, practical, professional—by which men and women channel the primordial, amoral, and self-regenerating forces of life into self-expression. Interestingly, James seems to have felt that Emerson overemphasised the degree to which we should be

Finding “a faculty of expression,” the logic might be imagined to proceed, will see Rowland channel his capacity to receive into a facility to form, thereby exerting himself against the experiential flow which continually threatens to dissolve him into its undifferentiated being. It is a concern which returns us to the emphasis James places in his literary criticism upon the balancing of the impressive with the expressive: to lack the means by which to work one’s impressions is to deliver a literary work (or subjecthood in Rowland’s case) to a terrible looseness of form. To convert this point back to the level of narratological concerns, one might think of Rowland as not yet a character so much as a way of seeing, a point of view; the medium upon which experience might be impressed but one which lacks the capacity to shape such experience.

We may be recalled at this point to Aristotle’s argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that personhood entails relationship to action: it is the fact of being responsible for an action which engenders the person. Aristotle’s argument regarding ontology is also central to his aesthetic theory: just as action discloses the causally and morally responsible person, so, too, in the *Poetics*, dramatic agents are the effects of the actions they imitate.¹⁶ There is an intensely Aristotelian quality to Rowland’s identification of activity with substantive personhood; just

concerned with working the forces which flow through humans and the world into forms. In an essay on Emerson, James alludes to the philosopher’s doctrine that “everything is worked up, and comes in use” (*The Conduct of Life* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1860), 230) as having been so assiduously put into practice by Emerson that his own “chords” of feeling were insensible to vibrations, as if nothing had been “left over” that could be susceptible to aesthetic experiences: so “sparely constructed as he was and formed not wastefully, not with material left over, as it were, for a special function” (*Partial Portraits* (London: Macmillan, 1888), 29–30).

¹⁶ In the chapter of the *Poetics* entitled “Tragedy: Definition and Analysis,” Aristotle theorises: “Tragedy is not an imitation of persons, but of actions and of life. Well-being and ill-being reside in action, and the goal of life is an activity, not a quality; people possess certain qualities in accordance with their character, but they achieve well-being or its opposite on the basis of how they fare. So the imitation of character is not the purpose of what the agents do; character is included along with and on account of the actions. So the events, i.e. the plot, are what tragedy is there for, and that is the most important thing of all” (*Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), 11). Aristotle’s most insistent thesis in regard to character, in drama as in life, is that it is subordinate to action. A tragedy is essentially the acting out of a story; character is thus brought into being through the acting out of plot or *muthos* and is sustained in practical activity.

as there is something strikingly Aristotelian, yet quintessentially Jamesian, about the means by which the author's focaliser becomes a participant: Rowland goes from being an observer, a point of view, to an agent by way of acting *upon another*: by paying Roderick to work for him. "How should you like," Rowland is said "suddenly" to "deman[d]" of Roderick in the course of their first private meeting, "to go to Rome?" (70). His speech act is indeed sudden and the reasons he gives for his offer at odds with his earlier impression that Hudson has not needed "aid or encouragement," "models or examples" to make his art (61). Rowland now tells him that "if you are to be a sculptor you ought to go to Rome and study the antique... To help you I pay you in advance [for a dozen sculptures]" (71). (For future consideration: one might say that this pre-payment pre-empts—frees Roderick (the recipient) of—responsibility; he owes a debt to Rowland but no ethical obligation.) Mallet is not simply enabling Hudson to go to Rome where he may do as he wishes; he is saying, Come to Rome as bound to me: I pay you now, you will pay me back.

Readers can imagine that Rowland is trying to work off the guilt of his passive inheritance, the guilt of its having enabled his passivity, by declaring it at the service of his "vigorous" sculptor. But it may also be that certain aesthetic apprehensions, on the part of James, regarding the formal looseness of a novel that dealt with the impressions of an unoccupied man—impressions of Rome, of fitful Roderick—are allayed by having the reflector gain a "practical occupation": Rowland has a task (to see that Hudson pays off), he has a justification for expecting Hudson to remain on task and in his purview. At the same time, Rowland's subjective angst regarding his (and Roderick's) exposure to dissipation is relieved, for he intends to "start" the young man "on the path of glory" (80).¹⁷ Mallet is temporarily remitted from the charge of being "idle, useless" by having acted as something

¹⁷ Roderick's liability to dissolution is introduced early in the narrative by way of Cecilia's reference to his father: "a dreadful rake" who made "great havoc in their fortune. Everything, or almost everything, melted away, including Mr Hudson himself. This is literally true, for he drank himself to death" (67). Roderick, according to his mother, "is the very copy of his poor father" (90).

akin to a prime mover: the first cause setting in motion the unfolding of Roderick's great promise into a great career. This succor is perhaps why James describes Rowland's suggestion to Roderick not as a proposal or as a question but rather as a "deman[d]"—it is as though Rowland's "offer" were also a kind of appeal that Roderick allow Rowland to "start" him (80). Yet the relationship between the two men becomes all the more compelling as Rowland's precipitation of another's activity shifts into his continuous responsibility for that activity.

(Not) Held to a Strict Account

Rowland's Roderick, the young man of whom Rowland is conscious as distinct from the man "himself," is an incongruous composite of action and unintentionality. On the one hand, Hudson is initially embedded by Rowland in what he will call the "language of decision," the grammar of energy and the syntax of declaratives (219). Mallet is alert to Roderick's agility, his tendency to make pronouncements standing, pacing, leaping to his feet; his relish for appropriating various props; the ready signs upon him of "a fund of nervous force" (64). Hudson would seem to be a figure for kinesis, but Rowland is, at the same time, invested in inferring that such instinctive "force" lacks conscious will. Early on, Rowland has intimated that Hudson is unintentional in relation to his artistic activity: he considers it "[v]ery likely" that the artist cannot know how "good" his sculptures are for he has read that "great talent in action...is a kind of somnambulism. The artist performs great feats in a dream" (66). At a later point, Rowland excuses Roderick's uncouth tendency to preempt his interlocutors by imagining that "[i]f Roderick took the words out of your mouth when you were just prepared to deliver them...[it was] simply because he was full to overflowing of his own momentary thought and it sprang from his lips without asking leave" (113). His thought and speech are like water unto water, the former flowing unconsciously into the latter, "asking leave" neither of speaker nor of auditor. Neil Harris has observed that Roderick's surname recalls America's first school of art, the landscape-oriented Hudson River School, but the Hudson is also, firstly,

a river, a great fund of unwilled “force.”¹⁸ The figure of liquidity is profoundly double-edged in the context of Rowland’s consciousness: on the one hand, it seems to capture the perfect ease with which he imagines Hudson receiving what is other to him only to see it once again flow out in expressive forms: language, action, art. At the same time, it is with watery formlessness that he aligns moral, ontological dissipation, and the “dread[ful]” sentimentality of women, the “sinister” loquacity of Christina Light. The duality of the metaphor captures the interdependence of receptivity and expressiveness, intimating the contiguity between all Rowland would have and all he would repel.

There is undoubtedly a certain veracity in Mallet’s impressions of Roderick but the degree to which he concentrates upon the absence of mind in the artist’s expressivity is too telling of Mallet to be recognised as simply the case. For if Roderick is perceived as activity without mindfulness, it is a notion which reverses Rowland’s view of himself as one who is intensely conscientious but who lacks the “faculty of expression” with which to implement the mind’s designs. It is, I want to suggest, in the context of this belief in Roderick as an unconscious force that Rowland moves towards considering the artist as essentially irresponsible—that is, not responsible, causally or morally, for his “doings.” Hudson, he concludes, *apropos* of the sculptor’s character, “belong[s] to the race of mortals...who are not held to a strict account for their aggressions” (69). Although the phrase “strict account” implies a specific form of responsibility to which this chapter will later attend, Rowland goes on to imagine for Roderick a radical unaccountability: he conceives of him as a “bright-eyed animal” whose “motions” require no “warrant” because they are spontaneous, unwilled instances of “tremulous delicacy” (69). (Rowland’s perception of Roderick as animal-like sees James evoke for Roderick a source in Hawthorne’s Donatello, a character James describes as “not so much a man as a child, and not so much a child as a charming, innocent animal”

¹⁸ Neil Harris, *The Artist in American Society: The Formative Years 1790–1860* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), 285.

(1:445). In a later section of this chapter, I will discuss the relation of James's Roderick to Hawthorne's Donatello at greater length.) James will have Mitchy in *The Awkward Age* (1899) phrase a similar thought with regard to Vanderbank.¹⁹ The inference of these related judgements is that some people are not persons in the Aristotelian (or indeed Kantian) sense, for one finds it impossible to hold them to account for the consequences of their acting. While Mitchy will suggest that it offers an experience of the "sacred"²⁰ in the other—Van is divine, untouched by human morality—Rowland connects the unaccountability of Roderick to non-human "animal[ity]." And while Mitchy will simply marvel at the temerity of divinity, Rowland might be said to imagine that if Hudson is not responsible for his linguistic, artistic, physical doings, there may then be a kind of vacancy to be occupied—a full-time occupation to be had in being accountable on Roderick's behalf. Beyond merely precipitating the artist, the artist's doings might continuously redound to Mallet, who would thereby always be active, always useful, always vigorous, manly. The novel would appear quickly to affirm the attractions of this almost Balzacian metaphysical arrangement for both men.

At the moment when Roderick smashes to pieces the bust he has made of the lawyer Mr Striker, Mary Garland appears for the first time. James traces her line of sight from the "heap of shattered clay" to "the hammer in Roderick's hand," to Rowland. Perplexed as to the meaning of Hudson's "lawless" act, Mary is said to nonetheless "perceive that Rowland was in some way accountable for it" (73). Decisive as this moment is for the way in which it contours a bond between Roderick's deeds and Rowland's causal, moral responsibility, Mallet's reaction to the look Mary bestows upon him is also revealing. Encountering himself thus as the responsible party, the agent of the deed in all but deed, is powerfully charged for Rowland. Mary's ascription of causal power and moral personhood to Rowland catalyses his

¹⁹ Speaking to Longdon of the alacrity with which Vanderbank is "let...off" the pain he causes others, Mitchy describes his friend as one of the "great cases of privilege... They go through life, somehow, guaranteed. They can't help pleasing" (*The Awkward Age* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 278, 279).

²⁰ *Awkward Age*, 183.

attraction to her (“Rowland looked after her with quickened interest” (74)). On Hudson’s part, though, the unaccountability of an animal is not as innate as Mallet imagines. The distress his decision to leave Northampton for an artist’s life in Rome causes Mrs Hudson seems initially to weigh upon Hudson’s conscience; it is, at least, a decision for which he feels responsible—he undertakes to justify it to his mother. But when Roderick reports the interview, Mallet’s response works to minimise the sculptor’s agency. In a somewhat disingenuous answer to the substance of the account, Mallet submits that the *properly* responsible agent has yet to face Mrs Hudson. “I am extremely sorry to have made such a rumpus,” he tells Roderick. “I owe your mother some amends” (77). In light of Mallet’s admission of culpability, Hudson subsequently fashions himself as passively affected by Rowland’s decision. Mallet has upended a peaceable little world of “young law-students” and “desolate doting mothers.” Yes, Roderick replies, jestingly but truthfully to his intention to see Mrs Hudson, “I leave it to you personally to answer these charges” (77). Rowland’s accountability for Roderick’s actions has become his obligation to “answer” the “charges” which would otherwise be levelled at Roderick.

Whether Roderick’s rejoinder registers his suggestibility or whether it indexes his capacity to carve an advantageous path from the substance of Rowland’s complex motivations is a puzzle. For if Rowland is taking responsibility for Roderick’s “doings,” is he not also—to invoke the reasoning of *The Sacred Fount* (1901)—delegating or offering unaccountability? While Rowland is to obtain access to the identity of vigorous, occupied man, Roderick would seem to be enabled simply to “do,” artistically, personally, without any of the answerability. But if the price, for Roderick, of the compact is less immediately apparent, the costs for Mallet are quickly pointed out when Cecilia informs him that he is to be held by herself, by Mrs Hudson, by Mary “to a strict account” for Roderick. Strictly accountable, that is, not only for the realisation or failure of the sculptor’s artistic promise, but also for Roderick’s “moral, his sentimental security” upon his leaving “the centre of Christendom” for the “outlying dusk” of Rome (81, 77). The phrase “a strict account” alludes to a concept with which James could

have come into contact during the brief period he spent as a student at Harvard's Law School: that of "strict liability." Strict liability is a type of responsibility whereby a person is held accountable for any and all consequences which flow from an action even in the absence of fault or malicious intention.²¹ It is, the moral philosopher Bernard Williams argues, the most tragic of responsibilities because in cases "of strict liability, which require neither intention nor any other culpable state of mind," societies demonstrate an interest in sanctioning persons for "things that they did unintentionally."²² Accountable in Roderick's stead, Rowland may receive the riches of his activity: access to a responsible, "positive" identity (Roderick is, after all, "made to do the things that we are the better for having" (80)); held, however, to "a strict account," Rowland is also liable, regardless of the "purity of his intentions," for all doings deemed blameworthy, for all deemed to throw in doubt Hudson's "moral, sentimental security" (81). It is little wonder that after his investiture there stirs in Rowland "an odd feeling of annoyance with Roderick for having so peremptorily taken possession of his mind" (92). In this instant, Rowland wants to think himself as passive before the other's authority—as if he were not altogether accountable for having made himself accountable.

It is worth underscoring the impossibility of the relationship tacitly orchestrated between Roderick and Rowland. If one considers oneself not to have taken responsibility for another, but to have taken on the other's responsibility, what type of relationship to this person can or will be required to avoid the pitfalls of one's liability for their actions? It is a question with a relation to a point considered in the introduction to this project, wherein the tying of

²¹ A close friend of James and a fellow student at the Harvard Law School, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. wrote a seminal study of negligence, fault, and liability called *The Common Law* (1881). In his book, Holmes describes the concept of strict liability as acting "at one's peril." The basis of strict liability, Holmes argues, is that someone has chosen to act and damage ensues. "If the act was voluntary, it is totally immaterial that the detriment which followed from it was neither intended nor due to the negligence of the actor" (*The Common Law* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1881), 82).

²² Bernard Williams, "Recognising Responsibility," in *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 63, 64. For Williams, this is an interest synonymous with tragedy in the classical sense because in dramas like *Oedipus Rex* the hero is viewed to rightly deserve punishment for transgressions committed in the absence of knowledge.

responsibility to liability for actions—whether one’s own or another’s—seems to travel inexorably towards ideas of preemptive regulative standards. Sensing the intensity of Mallet’s investment in his conduct (social, ethical, artistic), Roderick describes a “perpetual feeling” that “you are expecting something of me, that you are measuring my doings by a terrifically high standard. You are watching me; I don’t want to be watched!” (130). If Hudson’s “doings” must be of a certain order for Mallet not to suffer the punitive consequences of his accountability to the Hudson clan, the circumstances can only produce a highly vigilant protector, preoccupied with “measuring,” with “watching,” and an increasingly disaffected protégé (unless that protégé is a rare Nora Lambert, Pansy Osmond, or Little Aggie).

Roderick’s accusation suggests a dynamic between himself and Rowland which echoes that of Mrs Light and Christina. Mallet will compare this mother-daughter relationship, in one memorable moment, to that of an “old slave-merchant” and his “Circassian beauty” (163). If Roderick senses that he is, in one sense, a form of “distributed subjecthood” for Rowland, so Mrs Light may be said to look upon Christina in a similar light.²³ Her self-regarding investment in the superlative quality of Christina’s doings requires a watchfulness as oppressive as Roderick feels Rowland’s to be: “I watched her...” Mrs Light tells Rowland, describing the vigilance of her care, “She never was out of my sight” (209). When Levinas says, “I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed,” he is attempting deliberately to break the hold of activity upon responsibility: one is responsible because of the other and not because of actions (salient only in coordination with responsiveness); thus it is responsibility “for what is not my deed.”²⁴ Between the rapport of Roderick and Rowland and that of Christina and Mrs Light, the novel

²³ I borrow the term “distributed subjecthood” from Alfred Gell’s *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) in which the author describes the potential for objects to be understood as “a congealed residue of performance and agency in object-form, through which access to other persons can be attained, and via which their agency can be communicated” (68).

²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 95.

would appear to lay bare what Mallet calls the “dangerous game” of deriving responsibility from the other’s actions, rather than centering responsibility in the other (211). For even as both Christina and Roderick feel the attention they are under, they are also troubled by, resentful of, the degree to which such attention could not truly be called attentiveness to them.

In a series of confrontations between the two men on this subject, Hudson unambiguously questions the sustenance their relationship provides for either of them: it is constricting for Hudson, “nervous”-making for Rowland (189). Responding to Hudson’s objection to the “minuteness” with which Rowland measures his “liberty,” however, Rowland’s reply figuratively looks over the head of Roderick:

“I am the cause of your separation from Miss Garland, the cause of your being exposed to temptations she hardly even suspects. How could I ever meet her again,” Rowland demanded with much warmth of tone, “if at the end of it all she should be unhappy?”
[...]
“If anything happens to you I am accountable. You must understand that.” (189)

The syntax of Rowland’s explanation recreates the exchange of looks over the shattered image of Striker in reverse: from Rowland’s “I,” through Roderick, to Mary’s gaze. Rowland is the “cause” of the affected object’s “separate[ed],” “exposed” condition, he is thus “accountable” for what becomes of the vulnerable Roderick. Mary stands as the judge, the one who “suspects”; it is she who will assess the condition of Roderick and arraign Rowland accordingly. Hudson’s “liberty” must remain the subject of careful “measure,” for in the chain of relation and responsibility, he is not the subject of responsiveness, but the medium that has catalysed Rowland’s sentiment that it is “I” who “am accountable.” And yet it is not entirely fair to suggest that Mallet is unreceptive to Roderick’s appeal—that he newly be considered the agential source of his actions (“But I am not a small boy nor an amiable simpleton any longer... When I do well the merit’s my own; if I do ill the fault’s my own” (189))—wholly for reasons of the subjective investment he has in Roderick’s remaining *un*accountable. Although Hudson demands to be reinvested with agency, his “persistent irresponsibility”

would seem to render it impossible for Mallet to consent (377). Perhaps Rowland cannot give back what Roderick will not take, or take in the way Rowland expects him to—not merely ownership of one’s doings but answerability to others for those doings.

In spite of Mallet’s early view of Roderick as an unintentional force, unfit for the ascription of accountability, it is perhaps more accurate to say—as Mallet will begin to suspect—that Roderick both acts and knows, yet would answer to no one. As Christina tells Roderick, he has persuaded himself that there would be “some way after all of doing what you liked and yet escaping trouble” (216). For James, this un-answering relation to others and otherness seems particularly significant in the realm of Hudson’s aesthetic responsibility. While Hudson is extravagantly receptive to the stuff of which art is made, his failure to enter into a communicative relationship to his impressions, his subjects, his imagination is early on lent a worrisome valence. There is carelessness in the way the sculptor is seen to handle the subjects of his impressions: he pre-empts their meaning, “guess[es] the secret,” and robs them of their vital force, “pluck[ing] out the heart of the mystery” (here James evokes *Hamlet*); his “insatiable” “appetite” for new impressions is matched only by the speed with which he appropriates “whatever might serve his purpose,” discarding the remainder (106). Apprehended through Rowland’s eyes, Roderick’s conduct is imbued with the glow of youthful eagerness, the *carte blanche* of genius, but the semantics of consumption is disconcerting; the absence of interchange and reciprocity between Hudson and aesthetic life portentous. If Roderick makes his subjects serve without giving of himself, then the way in which he articulates his experience of artistic failure is forceful. Hudson describes being able to “think of subjects,” but self-generated thought will provide him only with concepts, with “mere lifeless names,” “mere words” (143). It is as though subjects refuse any longer to give themselves to the artist; he is, he tells Rowland, “face to face” not with lively aesthetic

phenomena but “with the dead blank of my mind” (194).²⁵ Hudson’s irresponsible handling of his faculties, his indifference to the claims of others upon him, appears to disable Rowland’s desire or capacity to receive Hudson’s appeal. To do so, we might imagine, is for Rowland to leave Hudson in the grip of his extravagant receptiveness, “standing passive in the clutch of his temperament,” a force of sheer irresponsibility (191). Yet without wanting to diminish the complications that Hudson’s disregard (for Mallet, for his family, for his gifts) poses to an argument which would overvalue his claims for “unlimited susceptibility,” is it evenhanded to conclude, along with Rowland, that susceptibility in and of itself is void of answerability (139)? Might not receiving have itself a value which Mallet’s association of susceptibility with exposure, dissipation, and irresponsibility occludes?

Answering Fancy

At the beginning of this chapter I proposed to view sensibility, exposure, and vulnerability as states looked upon with profound wariness by the novel’s focaliser—unless and until, that is, the experiences these states enable are turned over to action, to expression. When Roderick loses the capacity to encounter subjects, Rowland’s counsel is to work the faculty of production in lieu of such recognitions. By contrast, hoping to reanimate the process within him whereby “the imagination recognises a subject and the subject reacts on the imagination,” Hudson would put his faith in vulnerability (195). By exposing himself to the “strange fascination” of Christina, he imagines fancy once again receiving, recognising, reacting (168). It is on behalf of this experiment that he asks Rowland to reimagine responsibility such that alongside answerability to others—to the subjects of one’s filial, professional, romantic, aesthetic commitments—one was responsible to one’s susceptibilities,

²⁵ James again uses the phrase “dead blank” to describe Theobald’s canvas in “The Madonna of the Future” (1873): “a canvas that was a mere dead blank, cracked and discoloured by time. This was his immortal work” (*A Passionate Pilgrim and Other Tales* (Boston: James R. Osgood & Co., 1875), 317).

one's capacity to be affected, as a subject of commitment in itself. Appealing for Mallet no longer to stand between his exposure and the experiences that might move his imagination again, Roderick tries to win him over to a Romantic conception of creative labour as dependent upon the caprices of the artist's inspiration. Thus Rowland

ought to let him [the artist] follow his fancy and look for his material wherever he thinks he may find it! A mother can't nurse her child unless she follows a certain diet; an artist can't bring his visions to maturity unless he has a certain experience. You demand of us to be imaginative, and you deny us the things that feed the imagination. In labour we must be as passionate as the inspired sibyl; in life we must be mere machines. It won't do! When you have got an artist to deal with, you must take him as he is, good and bad together. (191–2)²⁶

Hudson is speaking here specifically of aesthetic responsibility, but the analogy of the mother and the child gives his claim a strong interpersonal resonance. Both artist and mother, before they can be responsive to another, have first to be responsive to the claims of “fancy,” to “follow” the movements of the appetitive “imagination.” Amenability to “material,” openness to the world's nourishment of the world, ideas given feminine contours in the figure of a nursing mother, are imagined as vital to the active fulfilment of responsibility. Significantly, of what the “material,” the “certain diet,” consists is unspecified, *unspecifiable*; for one cannot know in advance what fancy, imagination, appetite will “recognise”; to which experience it will “react,” respond, or be called to respond, and, therefore, what will “nourish” the children of art. Rowland is convinced that Christina, for instance, is “dangerous” to Roderick's inclination (151) —she is “unsafe” for the appetite (168). (She might “bite” back (151).) But who can know? Hudson doesn't argue that she *isn't* dangerous. All he knows is that his fancy is taken

²⁶ There are resonances between Roderick's polemic and James's “The Art of Fiction.” Addressing the apprentice novelist, James asserts that “[a]ll life belongs to you, and don't listen either to those who would shut you up into who would shut you up into corners of it and tell you that it is only here and there that art inhabits, or to those who would persuade you that this heavenly messenger wings her way outside of life altogether” (“The Art of Fiction,” *Longman's Magazine* 23, no. 4 (September 1884): 502–521 (520). It is also of note that Howell's “Henry James, Jr.” makes a claim for James comparable to that which Roderick makes for all artists. Howells writes, “If we take him [James] at all we must take him on his own ground, for clearly he will not come to ours. We must make concessions to him...” (26).

by her, his sensibility affected by her, and that it is neither for himself nor for Rowland to regulate or pre-empt by what or whom they are affected. With Christina, Roderick may have found his ideal “subject” (111); on the other hand, he may be have been led “along to the very edge of fulfillment,” having sacrificed everything, “my work, my fortune, my future, my honour!” only to have good faith, “belie[f],” crushed at the last by the treacherous other (325, 324). It’s a risk that must be taken, Hudson argues—by himself and by Rowland in relation to him.

The question this might leave one with isn’t, Is Hudson right or wrong that revival resides in surrender? But, why is “unlimited experimentation” never hazarded in the novel (192)? Rowland will imagine that he has triumphed over his baser inclinations by choosing not to join Hudson in his illusion. Instead, he will do all he can to *prevent* Hudson from becoming (echoes of James’s Balzac here) a “dupe” of his “inventions” (227).²⁷ Why is it that Rowland is unable to think of Roderick’s “theory” “as anything but a pernicious illusion” (192–3)? In this context, it seems important to acknowledge the intensity of Rowland’s own exposure were he to be duped, enchanted, overcome. Even if Mallet is inclined to take Roderick “on his own terms if it were only I that was concerned”—as he confesses he is to Cecilia—yielding to Roderick would not revoke his accountability to Mrs Hudson or Mary Garland (238). While responsive in one direction, following Roderick as he “follow[ed] his fancy,” would make Rowland culpable in another. To develop this point further: regardless of whether he is receptive to Roderick or accountable on behalf of him, the interdependence of the two men is inescapable; the person of Rowland is inevitably touched, affected by what happens to Roderick. The accentuation the novel places upon Rowland’s derivation of identity from Roderick’s being and doing would appear to suggest that it is the character’s attachment to a particular experience of self that warns Rowland against acquiescing to Roderick’s demands.

²⁷ It is in relation to Christina that Rowland thinks this: “she herself was evidently the foremost dupe of her inventions” (227).

When Hudson's gifts are first flourishing, all that the sculptor's fancy is responsive to readily meets with Rowland's appreciation. Not coincidentally, Roderick's sculptures, and the artist himself, are sources of "immense satisfaction" to Rowland (108). When Roderick produces *Adam*, Rowland says to himself that if he has "staked his reputation on bringing out a young lion he ought now to pass for a famous connoisseur" (114). When *Adam* is joined by *Eve*, James makes use of a deictic "his" that presumably but unsafely nominates the "Roderick" of some nine sentences earlier to write that Rowland "took an extreme satisfaction in his two statues" (116). But the pronominal ambiguity has the effect of implicating Rowland not only in the feeling of "satisfaction" but also in the experience of possession: the "two statues" are "his." Rowland is eager to identify, to nourish himself with the products of Roderick's wholesome appetites; he derives the "immense," "extreme" "satisfaction" of a gourmet, or a "connoisseur," from the fruits of the sculptor's receptive imagination. But Hudson is quickly "surprised at his own taste"—startled by the kinds of experiences to which he is sensitive (137). These new tastes are not palatable to Mallet, who finds, for instance, "Roderick's taste as to companions...singularly capricious" (222). Roderick's changing inclinations are engaged by the very kinds of experiences once dreadful in their import for Rowland: his fancy is struck by the charm of loafing, of idling, of unworked pleasure. Although it is largely according to Rowland's perspective that readers observe the effects of these experiences upon the sculptor, the consequences are precisely those Rowland feared for himself at the novel's beginning, and those James describes in *A Small Boy*: want of rigorous activity sees Roderick precipitously disintegrate, dissipate, get "miserably tipsy" (238); where once he was "strong," "[n]ow, literally, he is lying prone!" (238). At one point, reprising the concatenation of work and action with masculinity, speechifying and passivity with male effeminacy, Rowland almost orders Roderick to return to his work, to "Be a man...and don't, for heaven's sake, talk in that confoundedly querulous voice!" (144).

Rowland's chariness towards Roderick's appeal for their joint susceptibility (Rowland's to Roderick, Roderick's to Christina) thus lends itself to being interpreted alongside his aversion to one mode of being and his desire for another that has been promised by, imagined in, Roderick and his doings. Were Rowland no longer to regulate the sculptor's capacity to be affected, Roderick's affections would presage both men becoming ever more closely identified with the "irresponsible" personhood from which Rowland initially sought escape (55). Yet as Michael Wood observes, writing of James's sensitivity to "the impl[ie]d and project[ed]...possible other case" (2:1229)—that is, to literature's capacity to tempt us with the "exceptional, fanciful" possibility—"[r]esisting the thought of this other case may seem like mere sanity, and it often is; but resisting it all the time is going to look like an expression of fear."²⁸ When Rowland, therefore, calls the sculptor's enthrallment to Christina "another case of Ulysses and the sirens," we might also hear him describing his own relationship to Roderick (237). For even as Roderick continues to "appea[l] to Rowland, to "char[m]" him, Mallet struggles, like his namesake, to remain firm—fearful of loosening himself from the mast of the vigorous identity once obtained in being responsible for the sculptor's "doing something" (190, 343).

Prospective Regret

If Rowland is unimpressed by the case Roderick makes for modes of life associated with the *vita contemplativa* as far more richly inflected than Rowland has allowed for, the novel is itself attuned to what might have been for the relationship between the two men had he been more pliable. Prior to Mallet's making his proposal, the two men loaf together on the slopes of Mount Holyoke. As Rowland takes in the scene and the young man beside him, "suddenly a strange feeling of prospective regret took possession of him. Something seemed to tell him that later, in a foreign land, he should remember it with longing and regret" (69).

²⁸ Michael Wood, *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 67.

He is “burdened” with what James will later call “the oddity of a double consciousness”—the Strether-like ability to find “detachment” in one’s “zeal.”²⁹ It is not that Rowland is *anticipating* regret in this instant; it is “strang[er]” than this: the feeling is of present regret situated in a future that is somehow already past but that itself contains this moment, the regretful present. It is as though Rowland’s regret is now a fixed, inexorable horizon: if Rowland is in the past, there is regret; if in the present, regret is there too; the future awaits him, its sky darkened with regret. The very moment which Rowland has remembered, remembers, will remember with “longing and regret” is, tellingly, one of unworked susceptibility to loveliness: to the pleasure of Roderick’s “beautiful, supple, restless” movements beside him, to the scent of “balsam” and “mown grass,” to the “tickle” of a “gentle breeze” (69). It comes to seem as though regret is attached to the puncturing of this instant of self-loss in which Rowland appears nothing more than his reception of the scene; as though all the activity to come will be, or was, a falling away from this experience of being, as Roderick will later phrase it, “like water into water” (105).

It is an experience which connects powerfully to a desire of which Rowland has earlier spoken when he describes being

tired of myself, my own thoughts, my own affairs, my own eternal company. True happiness, we are told, consists in getting out of one’s self; but the point is not only to get out—you must stay out; and to stay out you must have some absorbing errand... I want to care for something or for somebody. And I want to care with a certain ardour; even, if you can believe it with a certain passion. (53)³⁰

In this passage, Mallet’s yearning to discover a “faculty” for expressing himself is counterpointed by a vision of “getting out” and away from the self permanently. Rowland appears to describe here the kind of “absorption” in “something” or “somebody” to which

²⁹ Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, ed. Nicola Bradbury (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2.

³⁰ Christina will express to Rowland a very similar desire: “I am tired to death of myself; I would give all I possess to get out of myself.” Rowland’s rather ungenerous response is that he doesn’t “understand...why a person should willingly talk nonsense” (182).

James is so attentive in the essays on Balzac, whereby self-concern disappears in “care” for another.³¹ It is significant that Mallet describes this experience as brought about by an “errand”—a word with very different valences from related ones like “activity” or “occupation.” The latter examples of “doing” have a way of implying an agent by which an activity or occupation is prosecuted; they seem in some way to dictate a self not lost but actuated. An “errand,” unlike the other three, has strong undercurrents of “errancy” (to be errant; to be erring; to go on a fool’s errand). Particularly alongside “absorbing,” “errand” evokes a romance wherein the hero is forever deviated from his nominal purpose, seduced from himself. For Rowland to want “some absorbing errand” casts the character’s allusion to lotus eaters in a new light—as a desirable, if taboo, mode of being. The word “errand” has also a further, now obsolete, meaning: “a message, a verbal communication.”³² So one can also hear Rowland say that he wishes to “stay out” of himself by being the bearer of—or becoming—a communication, a link in an interlocutory chain which would never end and thereby never see Rowland return.

The paralysis of Roderick’s talents and his death are left by the novel mysterious, chance events. Hudson’s powers are faltering even before the arrival of Christina, while Christina herself is a catachrestic figure for any number of the “unsafe” lures which might have felled the fatally flawed Roderick. Similarly, his death may have been suicide but it may equally have been a fall. It seems readers can point neither to Roderick, nor to Christina, nor to Rowland as the “tangible, sensible, responsible cause” of the sculptor’s misfortune (231). Nonetheless, Rowland is held and holds himself to blame. As written, *Roderick Hudson* is a powerful tragedy of unfulfilled promise and of strict liability; accordingly, the final part of this

³¹ We may recall here that “absorbed” is the word James uses to describe Rowland’s encounter with Roderick’s *Thirst*: “But he was absorbed” (59). Rowland’s absorption in and care for Roderick’s “doings” could be viewed as the displacing of possible absorption in and care for Roderick.

³² “errand, n.”. OED Online. June 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/64099?redirectedFrom=errand> (accessed July 10, 2019).

chapter does not intend to suggest that the novel “ought” to have taken another direction, and thereby had a different conclusion. I do, however, want to explore an extra-narrative possibility as to why Rowland is positioned so as to be liable, culpable, and eventually blameworthy in the first place. Why, that is, he is activated as an agent in relation to Roderick, rather than remaining an observer of his adventure, and why he remains accountable despite intimations that he might have done otherwise.

James’s Marble Faun

A letter of 1898 from James to Mary Ward offers a glimpse into a dimension of responsiveness that this project has not yet addressed: into the author’s readerly responsiveness. Commenting on Ward’s latest novel, James writes that his “interest & admiration” for the book of another author finds expression through an interleaved process of receiving *and* reimagining: as he reads, he is simultaneously rewriting the book at hand. James suggests that this proclivity is something of a fault when he confesses to Ward that he feels himself “too special & too technical a reader” because he cannot help but “*do*” another’s “subject” as he reads: “I *do*, myself, if I can read a novel at all, the subject over (as I go) as I see it artistically conditioned.”³³ Ultimately, James frames a process which might be construed as a kind of imaginative colonisation as an act of homage, an ethical response. In 1900, following the publication of Ward’s novel *Eleanor* (1899), James again took the opportunity to express his gladness for “the chance to overflow into my favourite occupation of re-writing, as I read, such fiction as—I *can* read! I took this liberty in an inordinate degree with *Eleanor* – & I always feel it the highest tribute I can pay...”³⁴ While the Prefaces are attentive to the

³³ Henry James: *A Life in Letters*, ed. Philip Horne (London: Penguin, 1999), 303. James’s comments regarding reading and re-writing arise *apropos* of his response to Ward’s recently published novel, *Helbeck of Bannisdale* (1898). After pointing out that his re-imaginings should be interpreted as a “tribute” and not as a denigration of the quality of the book, James points out the “greater intensity” Ward’s novel could have achieved had the author limited its focalisation to her heroine.

³⁴ *Letters*, 349. In a letter to Ward of the year before (1899), however, James did charge himself with theft, “violence” and “mutilation” after he had preemptively advised Ward on *Eleanor*. He sought her forgiveness for “giving way to my irresistible need of wondering how, *given* the

“undone” potential of the author’s own subjects there are certain of his novels—*The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), for instance, with its “re-writerly” connection to George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871–2) and *Daniel Deronda* (1874–6), or *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) to Turgenev’s *Virgin Soil* (1877)—that have, to a degree, emerged from an imaginative re-doing of the latent possibilities in the subjects of other authors.³⁵ *Roderick Hudson* is a further manifestation of this process: the novel’s critics have touched upon the intricacy of its involvement with a variety of sources, including Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun* (1860).³⁶ It is to James’s comments on the character of Donatello, one of the four main characters in *The Marble Faun*, that I wish now to turn for the light which these remarks may shed upon the part that Rowland’s tenacious sense of accountability plays in the formal economy of the *Roderick Hudson*.³⁷

A recurring interest of *Hawthorne* (1879) concerns the degree to which the novelist’s characters appear to reach the threshold of literary realism; a generic condition associated by James with what Howells would call “character-painting”—psychological complexity, relationality, the air of verisimilitude. Although James expresses disappointment that Hawthorne seems to assay this threshold but not to cross it, he tempers his reproach by finding much to admire in certain exceptions: characters who intimate the presence of “the moral, psychological realm.” Hawthorne “cared for the deeper psychology...in his way, he tried to

subject, one could best work one’s self into the presence of it. And, lo and behold, the subject isn’t (of course, in so scant a show & brief a piece) ‘given’ at all—I have doubtless simply, with violence & mutilation, *stolen* it. It is of the nature of that violence that I’m a wretched person to *read* a novel—I begin so quickly and concomitantly, *for myself*, to write it, rather—even before I know clearly what it’s about” (320).

³⁵ In *Roderick*, the narrator goes on to impute James’s tendency to take as a spur to his aesthetic inventiveness “effects he saw just missed or half expressed in the works of others” to Roderick (115).

³⁶ Robert Emmet Long’s *The Great Succession: Henry James and the Legacy of Hawthorne* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979) shows *The Marble Faun* as a major antecedent for *Roderick Hudson*. See also Sheila Teahan, *The Rhetorical Logic of Henry James*, Ch. 3 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995).

³⁷ James’s book-length critical study *Hawthorne* was published in 1879, the same year that he revised *Roderick Hudson* for the English edition. It is likely that James reacquainted himself with Hawthorne’s novels in the years before the publication of his essay on the author, perhaps during the period in which *Roderick* was initially written.

become familiar with it” (1:368). Donatello is one such figure in which James glimpses this profundity, but it is precisely in the case of characters such as this that “the absence of the realistic mode of treatment is felt as a loss” (1:417). Describing Donatello as “not so much a man as a child, and not so much a child as a charming, innocent animal,” James deems the character “rather vague and impalpable; he says too little in the book, shows himself too little, and falls short, I think, of being a creation” (1:445). The author comes to regard the problem as stemming from the ambiguous generic nature of the character: Donatello belongs neither wholly to the “real,” nor to the “realm of fancy”; he is not strictly a figure of romance but neither is he of the same “substance” as his “companions” (Miriam, Hilda, and Kenyon): “[h]is companions are intended to be real—if they fail to be so, it is not for want of intention; whereas he [Donatello] is intended to be real or not, as you please” (1:447).

James’s description of Donatello as a “charming, innocent animal” strikes a chord with Rowland’s fancying of Roderick as “some beautiful, supple, restless, bright-eyed animal” (69). “[C]harming” and “joyous,” are also two of the preferred illustrative terms for Roderick: he is said, serially, to give a “joyous kick” (73), to “always [have] an air of joyous intentness” (122), to talk the most “joyous nonsense” (139), to burst into “joyous laughter” (176); he has “brilliant personal charm,” a “charming gaiety” and is a “charming fellow” (238, 94, 102). And while it could not be said of Roderick that he “says too little,” he is deeply “fanciful,” oddly “vague.” James textures his character using the rhetoric of romance: Roderick is heard by his friend singing snatches of song from *The Princess* and declaiming fragments of Ariosto. In death, he evokes echoes of Shelley.³⁸ Finally, Roderick’s improvisational relationship to being leaves one with a sense for the character as indefinite, changeable: if sometimes he is an aesthetic, an “original” American, or a symbol for the imagination, Roderick is also, at various points in the book, an archetypal Southerner, a Hellenist, a sensualist, an idealist, an ascetic, a

³⁸ Richard Poirier argues that Roderick, along with Felix Young in *The Europeans* (1878), is one of the more obviously “romantic” characters in James’s *oeuvre* (*The Comic Sense of Henry James: A Study of the Early Novels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 41–42).

wanton, a socialite, and a recluse (72). Paul Armstrong has observed that the character has “a manner of being-in-the-world different from others”—a manner of being open, one might say, to *any* manner of being.³⁹ Exempted from the pressures imposed by what Leo Bersani calls “the structured self” of realist fiction, Roderick is eminently plastic, resistant to final form.⁴⁰

The dialectic playing out within the character between form and flux would appear, on the face of it, to be belied by Roderick’s identification with the art of the sculptor. (Although Hudson would like to have a similar relationship to vocation as he does to identity: some days he wishes to paint scenes from Ariosto like “Titian and Paul Veronese” (107). Yet while sculpture is typically considered the least transitory or dynamic of the artforms, the novel’s ekphrases of Roderick’s productions sustain the revolution of fluidity and form associated with their maker. Rowland’s admiration for *Thirst* is directed towards a “beauty” that is “the beauty of natural movement” (59). Roderick’s art would seem to aspire to “catch” what James will describe in “The Art of Fiction” (1884) as the “strange irregular rhythm of life.”⁴¹ It is the felicity with which his sculpting does so that represents, James writes in the Preface, the “claim” of the novel: “[t]he very claim of the fable is naturally that he [Roderick] *is* special, that his great gift makes and keeps him highly exceptional” (2:1047). James here extemporaneously refines his claim so that the “special” nature of Roderick becomes the “highly exceptional” nature of “his great gift.” But even as rarity is shifted away from the character himself in order to define his “gift,” James would seem subtly to acknowledge what is overtly said of Roderick by many a character: “[t]here is something strange about him” (184).

It could be ventured that Roderick has retained something of the uncanny generic condition which James regarded as problematic vis-à-vis Donatello. Neither character is quite

³⁹ Armstrong, *Phenomenology*, 67.

⁴⁰ Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), 6.

⁴¹ James, “The Art of Fiction,” *Longman’s Magazine* 23, no. 4 (September 1884): 502–521 (515).

modern, nor yet antique; not straightforwardly a product of romance, nor wholly a fitting candidate for realism. Certainly a romantic or “fanciful” figurative register is a part of the way in which James writes of his titular subject in the Preface, a text written in connection with his re-reading and revising of the novel for the New York Edition.⁴² The dominant conceit for the writer and his task, at the beginning of this text, is that of a novice sailor embarking on his most daring “adventure” yet. James writes, “I had but hugged the shore on sundry previous small occasions; bumping about, to acquire skill, in the shallow waters and sandy coves of the ‘short story’” (2:1040). The metaphor recalls that which Rowland makes use of when he clarifies for Sam Singleton, the diligent water-colourist, the difference between Sam’s talents and temperament and Roderick’s: “You sail nearer the shore,” Rowland tells him, “but you sail in smoother waters” (171). Prior to beginning work on *Roderick*, James understands himself to have sailed, like Singleton, in tranquil waters and in sight of land; the “subject of ‘Roderick’” is likened to “the blue southern sea” which “seemed to spread immediately before me,” bringing the “breath of the spice-islands” (2:1040). The “subject of ‘Roderick’” emerges before the author as a vast liquid stretch of unbroken telling, couched in the imagery of romance—in the vein of Hawthorne, perhaps. Or, more likely, of George Sand, upon whom James published four critical pieces between 1868 and 1877, and whose novels also serve as sources for *Roderick*.

In Sand, James admired a restless, various, inexhaustible imagination, and a graceful, unassuming style. In his 1868 review of Sand’s novel *Mademoiselle Merquem* (1868), he compares her to Balzac, observing that an “intelligent reader” need not choose between these contemporaries, for they are not “mutually inimical,” Balzac being “a novelist” and George Sand “a romancer” (2:701). It is the “romancer” in Sand that will, however, progressively become a source of James’s critique—particularly regarding the looseness of form this generic

⁴² See Philip Horne, *Henry James and Revision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 333.

predilection is considered to engender.⁴³ In the same review, he writes that her “narrative gushes along copious and translucent as a deep and crystalline stream” (2:698). Although he continues to praise Sand for her “indefatigable, inexhaustible” imagination, James warns that “it is restless, nervous, and capricious; it is in short the imagination of a woman”; her novels accordingly suffer from being “too limpid, too fluent, too liquid” (2:699, 2:700). The prospect of capitulating to a liquescent shapelessness is taken up in the Preface when James imputes to the “subject” the power of a siren to lure the novelist into the eddies of narrative “‘developments’.” James recalls the sight of the “blue southern sea” as having given on to “the ache of fear, that was to become so familiar, of being unduly tempted and led on by ‘developments’” (2:1040).⁴⁴ Such intimations of disquiet regarding the artist’s susceptibility mirror Rowland’s repeated warnings to Roderick of the dangers of Christina’s “eddies.”⁴⁵ Rowland will thus imagine his relation to the artist as one of “only holding himself ready to point out shoals and pitfalls and administer a friendly propulsion through tight places” (113). But are the poetics of the novel and the aesthetic trepidations James recalls in the Preface only echoing one another here, or might the latter have a more direct relation to the former? That is to say, if Rowland imagines his responsibility as one of protecting Roderick from the “shoals and pitfalls” which threaten his “gift” and his “sentimental security,” Rowland’s commitment to this duty, overruling all appeals, may also have the effect of securing the vessel of James’s novel, “‘Roderick,’” against the “‘developments’” that appear to menace its well-being. Rowland’s interposition between Roderick and the dissipations of Christina, gambling, and

⁴³ Henry James, *Parisian Sketches: Letters to the New York Tribune, 1875–1876*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Greenwood Press, 1958), 183.

⁴⁴ Rebekah Scott has recently proposed that James’s lingering sensitivities to certain effeminate notes in the novel were a factor in his revisions to the text for the New York Edition (“Henry James: ‘In the Minor Key’” (paper presented at the Henry James Society 8th International Conference, University of Trieste, Italy, 4 July 2019)).

⁴⁵ Leland S. Person notes that Christina bears a resemblance to James’s George Sand, “‘the great *improvisatrice of literature*’...both in her resistance to easy classification and in her power of ‘extemporizing’ a ‘fictitious history’—that is, writing her own story and, presumably, her own role in it” (*Henry James and the Suspense of Masculinity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 59).

drink could then be thought to have an aesthetic function—his regulative involvement with Roderick’s “immense susceptibility” precipitated by, or at least useful to, James’s desire to limit his attention to the narrative temptations inherent to “‘Roderick’.”

This interpretation would impart an added significance to the moment in the Preface when James recollects his “bliss” upon discovering the means by which he could solve his dilemma of the excessive amount of novelistic “time” Roderick’s adventure would require if handled directly. He writes,

My subject, all blissfully, in face of difficulties, 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. [...] It [“the work”] remains in equilibrium by having found its centre, the point of command of all the rest. From this centre the subject has been treated, from this centre the interest has spread, and so, whatever else it may do or may not do, the thing has acknowledged a principle of composition and contrives at least to hang together” (2:1049–50).

The position of Rowland between the story of Roderick and the telling of that story permits episodes like the three-month flurry of artistic activity in which Roderick produces *Adam and Eve*, or the sculptor’s misadventures at Baden-Baden, or his long stretches of paralysed inertia, to be narratively condensed: if these periods in Roderick’s life seem, to the reader, curtailed, it is because they are already partial and elliptical when seen “indirectly” by a witness. But Rowland’s status as the “point of command” is, as we noted at the beginning of this chapter, not limited to a command over what is seen; he has also an active role and a profound investment in what is done and not done by Roderick. Rowland’s warrant to “point out shoals and pitfalls and administer a friendly propulsion” to Roderick (to “‘Roderick’”) comes only with the act of launching him and is sustained by the accountability he takes on Roderick’s behalf. James’s aesthetic trepidations regarding the subject of “‘Roderick’,” therefore, might furnish additional insight not only into the relocation of Rowland from observer, to investor in, to agent of Roderick’s doings, but it may also indicate why the novel’s latent *Ambassadors*-like plot, wherein Rowland is charmed by his Chad into relinquishing responsibility for an

errand, is courted but tempered. In Rowland's remaining accountable, in his being tempted but not "unduly tempted" by Roderick's appeals, may reside James's power to negotiate with a potentially errant subject and its "too fluent, too liquid" currents.

There is a great deal to be said of James's revisions to the novel. It is one of the more heavily revised in the Edition, and the alterations are so intricately interdependent that to isolate the variations in a single figure is to omit the extent to which these variations are themselves responsive to the transformations made to others. The "exemplary damages" that James seeks for Sam Singleton, for instance, in whom artistic skill is amplified even as decency remains consistent, might temper one's impulse to forgive Roderick's conceitedness (2:1337). Yet a reader's undermined sympathy for Roderick may, by turns, take account of the degree to which James accentuates the overwhelming nature of Mrs Hudson's maternal love. Philip Horne traces the choreography of these alterations with great care and is particularly concerned to situate James's modifications to Rowland's character in the context of the shifting relations of the New York Edition text. Alluding to James's writings on the sculpture of Michelangelo, Horne concludes that "[h]is [Rowlands's] conduct, so far from perfection, so finite, so full of errors, so broadly a target for criticism, yet by its conscious effort at integrity manages at least partially to redeem itself from subjection to its details and appeals most forcibly to the generosity and sympathy of the mind."⁴⁶ But even while contextualising the changes to Rowland, acknowledging their qualified significance to the trajectory of the novel, and agreeing that Rowland remains a largely sympathetic figure, one finds that it is, nonetheless, hard not to be struck by the degree to which the changes in Rowland attenuate his capacity for the thing for which he early on yearns: "getting out of one's self."

Notable in the revisions is the degree to which the character's desire and capacity to be something other than he is diminishes. For instance, whereas once Cecilia described Rowland as having the signs of a "benevolent" "character"—a fund of untapped potential

⁴⁶ Horne, *Henry James and Revision*, 121.

that required only something or someone to liberate it—she now remarks upon his “turn” “for doing nice things and behaving yourself properly.”⁴⁷ What was a latent possibility becomes an established facet of personality. Likewise, Rowland formerly recollected his service during the Civil War as a moment in which his yearning for a richer experience of self was fleetingly realised. In the New York Edition, it is recounted as an experience more endured than appreciated: it was simply “performed, if not with glory, at least with a noted propriety” and “by the aid of much grinding of the teeth.”⁴⁸ Small emendations such as these contribute to one’s impression that Rowland is less aspiring, more self-satisfied than he once was, less susceptible to what James spoke of in *A Small Boy and Others* (1913) as “an acuity of perception of alternatives,” a cognisance of alternative “horizons” for the self, with “further range” and “finer shade.”⁴⁹ This suggestion coordinates with changes which indicate the attenuation of Roderick’s charms for Mallet. For instance, in the 1879 text, Mallet’s initial reaction to Hudson is a subjective, intimate one to which Mallet feels as if he is “confess[ing]”: “I confess I like him,” he tells Cecilia. The revised text has Rowland in a far more coolly curious frame of mind. Roderick is of interest as a “type,” but there are no personal sympathies exposed: “Isn’t he a case of what’s called the artistic temperament? That’s interesting to see, for the ‘likes’ of *us*.”⁵⁰ In multiple places, Hudson’s ability to affect Rowland becomes Rowland’s disinterested observation that Hudson is affecting. In 1879, Rowland takes “a great fancy to him, to his personal charm and to his probable genius” (68); in 1907, “Rowland recognised afresh, recognised them as irresistible things, his personal charm and his presumable gift.”⁵¹ To “recognis[e]” qualities as “irresistible” introduces distance between the experience and the experiencing subject: for Rowland to *note* that Roderick’s “personal charm” and “presumable gift” are irresistible merits indicates a modicum of removal from the experience of his being

⁴⁷ Henry James, *Roderick Hudson* (New York: Scribner’s, 1907), 3.

⁴⁸ James, *Roderick Hudson*, 15.

⁴⁹ Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others* (New York: Scribner’s, 1913), 175–6.

⁵⁰ James, *Roderick Hudson*, 27.

⁵¹ James, *Roderick Hudson*, 40.

unable to resist Roderick, of his taking “a great fancy” to him and his merits. Might not these differences weaken the reader’s capacity to imagine that Rowland could have been receptive to an order of values wherein susceptibility was not radically separate from responsibility? It is perhaps the diminishment of this possibility that makes the 1907 text less of a personal tragedy for Rowland—for whereas with regard to earlier editions one may argue that Mallet misses his promise even as Roderick misses his, James’s revisions to the ending of the novel temper the degree to which we might think of Mallet as a tragic figure (apart from the tragedy of being culpable in spite of good intentions). In 1879, one of the novel’s final lines reads, “Now that all was over Rowland understood how exclusively, for two years, Roderick had filled his life. His occupation was gone” (387). There is an echo of Othello and Desdemona here—of “Othello’s occupation’s gone.” Rewriting the passage, James drops the allusion, while retaining the dramatic frame.⁵² Instead, he writes: “Now that all was over Rowland understood how up to the brim, for two years, his personal world had been filled. It looked to him at present as void and blank and sinister as a theatre bankrupt and closed.”⁵³ In place of a man who has killed his life’s love, James gives us the image of spectatorship, of a man whose personal stage has been voided of its star. Yet one could argue that this may itself be a try for “poetic justice”: if the aesthetic security of the novel is, in some sense, built upon the importance of its “point of command” not abandoning his post for the songs of sirens, it is perhaps a kind of justice, at the characterological level, that Mallet should have had less potential to have done so.

⁵² James may also have removed this allusion because he uses it again of Christopher Newman in the New York Edition text of *The American*: “He had nothing to do, his occupation had gone, had simply strayed and lost itself in the great desert of life” (*The American* (New York: Scribner’s, 1907), 529).

⁵³ James, *Roderick Hudson*, 526.

Chapter Four

The Bostonians: “Absolutely Irresponsible”

“I can’t talk to those people, I can’t!” said Olive Chancellor, with a face which seemed to plead for a remission of responsibility.¹

The Bostonians (1886)

An Act of Omission

This chapter begins by considering James’s ostensible “disavowal” of authorial responsibility for *The Bostonians* (1886) in light of its absence from the New York Edition.² James alludes, in the Prefaces to *Roderick Hudson* and *The Golden Bowl*, to those novels and tales excluded from the Edition as having been subjected to “the detachment of aversion”; they are “dismissed” (2:1046); they have fallen under the shadow of “disconnexion and disavowal” (2:1340). In the Preface to *Roderick*, James ventures to explain that if a novel or tale “breaks down” under his attempts to excavate the “old reasons” for the work’s existence then “[t]he only possible relation of the present mind to the thing is to dismiss it altogether”: the “old reasons then are too dead to revive; they were not, it is plain, good enough reasons to live” (2:1046). But with each of the words James lights upon to describe the consequences of a communicative failure between work and writer there is a certain degree of contradiction. “Detach,” “disconnect,” “dismiss,” “disavow,” have all a privative sense, implying the withdrawal of the action, but this privation depends upon first inscribing the deed: “detach” cannot but summon the attachment, “dismissal” the missive. Like Rowland Mallet’s “famous philosopher who wished to abbreviate his mourning for a faithful servant [and] had said to himself in substance ‘Remember to forget...’,” the excluded works are avowed in their

¹ Henry James, *The Bostonians*, ed. Daniel Karlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 33. References (as *BO1*, followed by issue and page number) are hereafter given in the text.

² Henry James, *Literary Criticism, Vol. 2: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 2:1340. References are hereafter given in the text.

disavowal.³ James's preferred term for the absence of his 1886 novel, *The Bostonians*, though, is "omission." If there is hesitation in the "de—" and "dis—" terms, his use of "omission" is thoroughly equivocal. Like "disavow," "omission" can summon an ethical framing when the omitted action "ought" to have been performed (as in Catholicism's "sins of omission"). In contrast with the others, however, an instance of omission is eminently capable of being either inadvertent or deliberate. Whereas it is unusual to dismiss or disavow unintentionally, it is common to overlook something or someone and thereby practice omission inadvertently. In several letters written between 1908 and 1915, James addressed the absence of *The Bostonians* from the Edition. In each, his use of "omission" educes an ethical register but whether the act of omission is purposeful or unintended is intriguingly unclear.

The association of omission with a wrong or an injustice is first signaled in James's 1908 letter to William Dean Howells. The publication of the New York Edition is ongoing when Howells asks after *The Bostonians*. James responds by agreeing that the novel is to be a "too marked omission" from its contents.⁴ For whom is it "too marked"? Probably James is not referring to the novel's readers who could not have been expected to miss a novel which, he goes on to write, they were the first to overlook when it was published "nearly a quarter of a century ago." *The Bostonians*, James sighs, has never "even to [his] much-disciplined patience, received any sort of justice" (LL 464). It seems that "too marked" refers, then, to James's feelings and that he would have Howells infer that the book was not omitted on his account. So was it an accidental or obligatory omission? Earlier in the letter, reflecting upon the reasons for the exclusion of certain texts, James refers Howells to the material circumscriptions of the Edition, explaining that while certain novels and stories have been deliberately excluded "from

³ Henry James, *Roderick Hudson* (London: Penguin, 1987), 120. The "famous philosopher" referred to is Kant who is said to have written, after dismissing his faithful servant (Lampe) of two decades, "Mem.: February, 1802, the name of Lampe must now be remembered no more." Thomas de Quincey wrote of this episode in *The Last Days of Immanuel Kant* (1827).

⁴ *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Philip Horne (London: Viking, 1999), 464. References (as LL followed by page number) are hereafter given in the text.

deep-seated preference and design,” there are also those “crowd[ed] out by want of space and by the rigour of the 23 vols., and 23 only, which were the condition of my being able to arrange the matter with Scribner’s at all” (LL 463). If *The Bostonians* is not an example of the former (the casualty of a conscious cut) was it subject to the strictures of Scribner’s? It is left unclear as James makes *The Bostonians sui generis*. He lists those works purposefully left out and those lost to external constraints before going on to write, “[a]nd I have even, *in addition*, a dim vague view of re-introducing, with a good deal of titivation and cancellation, the too-diffuse but, I somehow feel, tolerably full and good ‘Bostonians’” (LL 463; emphasis mine). Although James’s description of the novel as “too-diffuse” indicates that he considers the novel’s “space-hunger and space-cunning” too great, in its present state, to be included in the Edition, it is, nonetheless, referred to as a kind of indeterminable remainder—its absence the result neither of authorial preference nor of higher decree (2:1278). But by 1914, in letter to Andre Raffalovich, James is unequivocally including the novel in the category of the consciously disavowed: it was excluded, he writes, due to the “rather rueful feeling” harbored for his novel—a sentiment which “prevented [his] including it in the Edition” (LL 532).⁵ Just a year later, however, one finds James explaining to Edmund Gosse that if he had left the novel out, he had intended to do so only temporarily: it was to have been a “provisional omission,” an

⁵ Explaining his feelings of ruefulness, James writes to Raffalovich of the “comparatively thankless effort” that the book’s composition and publication entailed for him. James’s sense of unrewarded toil may gesture to any number of difficulties: the complexities of the novel’s subject and the expansive treatment it required all together upset James’s plan to write a “shortish novel” that would, he told Grace Norton before beginning work, “mark a new era in my career, and usher in a series of works of superior value to any I have yet produced” (Michael Anesko, *Friction with the Market: Henry James and the Profession of Authorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 85). Yet despite—or perhaps due to—the unruliness of the subject, James felt the novel compelling enough to justify the time he spent on it and the attention it would require of readers. As installments of the book spooled out, however, James received few indications that *The Bostonians* was making the kind of impression upon readers that would confirm a “new era” in his career had begun. The novel’s passage from serialisation to book publication was no less painful: when *The Bostonians* was eventually issued by Macmillan, George E. Brett, Macmillan’s New York agent, confided to management that he “never knew of a book being more thoroughly condemned” by readers and reviewers alike (Anesko, *Friction*, 99).

injustice he would sooner or later repair (LL 559). Over the course of seven years, then, the omission (and the implied disavowal) traverses the distance between the unintended and the intended to end up somewhere in the middle: a (now permanently) provisional intended. But perhaps James's equivocation can be better understood if one adds to the melee of slippery words thus far adduced a now largely obsolete sense of the adjective "rueful." Supplementing its idiomatic sense ("Expressive or suggestive of penitence, remorse, sorrow, or regret")⁶ with an older definition indicating "full of pity or compassion; merciful, compassionate," we are left with the suggestion that *The Bostonians* evoked for its author a thorny and complex sentiment: at once compassion *for it* and compunction *over it*.⁷ And while compassion may magnetise us toward the object of our feeling, compunction, kin to shame, urges us to avert our gaze, to save our face.⁸ James's letters indicate that he was caught vacillating between these modes of relating to the novel: drawn to embrace it, inclined to practice "the detachment of aversion."

It seems that the prospect of his having to give up his divided relation to the novel, to brazen out his compunction and "really to look at it [the novel]," became the final impediment to its inclusion (532). In the letters to Raffalovich and Gosse, James describes his anticipation of the revisory attention the novel would demand as a "formidable," a "peculiarly formidable" thought (LL 532, 559). Although he concedes that its "*immediate* inclusion" was also "rather deprecated by my publishers," James admits to having "left it out partly because I hadn't the courage really to look at it again" (LL 559, 532; emphasis in the original). Compunction wins out by default; disavowal is practised. But this is James, so of course we

⁶ "rueful, adj. 1". OED Online. June 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/168534?redirectedFrom=rueful> (accessed July 20, 2019).

⁷ "rueful, adj. 2". OED Online. June 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/168534?redirectedFrom=rueful> (accessed July 20, 2019).

⁸ As Olive Chancellor does towards the end of the novel when, unable to confront her defeat to Basil and her loss of Verena, she collapses into a "sightless, soundless shame," hiding her face in the unlikely lap of Verena's mother (BOI 384).

make the semi-circular turn of ambivalence in order to regret the compunction and to desire the disavowal rescinded. In fact, he writes, ending his remarks to Gosse on *The Bostonians*,

I *should* have liked to review it for the Edition—it would have been much truer and a more curious thing (it was meant to be curious from the first); but there can be no question of that, or of the proportionate Preface to have been written with it, at present—or probably ever within the span of my life. But think of noting that *that* is a thing that has perished! (LL 559)

It is thought-provoking to find the author reserving his last word for the novel's undone "proportionate Preface." Although in the final line, James appears to be inviting Gosse to be amused by the thought of his "noting" the demise of something as trifling as "*that*," a preface, it is worth "noting" or imagining what James may have imagined a Preface could have done for his relationship to *The Bostonians*.

As chapter two of this study proposed, among the many narratives which play out in the prefatory spaces of the New York Edition, one concerns creative labour as a form of response: a practice by which the writer instantiates, or gives form to, his awareness of being in a relation of responsibility to and for the literary subject that has appealed—in the double sense of both sounding a demand and attracting writerly attention. In several, James comments that his ability to revive "creative intimacy" with an old novel or tale depends upon the extent to which he can discern, in the lineaments of the text before him, a felicitous response to the summons of a subject (2:1046). If we view the Prefaces as, in one dimension, loci for the appraisal of the relation between appeal, responsibility, and response, it may, to some extent, elucidate why James felt the want of a Preface for *The Bostonians* a particularly keen loss. Writing its "proportionate Preface" may have been a part of the process by which James discovered "reasons" or intentions not "too fatally faded," "blackened or 'sunk'" for the novel to be reanimated (2:1045). Yet the possibility of ascertaining this may also have amplified for James the "formidable" aura surrounding the novel: had he found archived in the text a felicitous

response to his subject, how might he have then set about defending the responsibility of this response in light of the contemporary accusations that his novel lacked this very quality?

Perhaps one of the most readily apparent of the hazards of drawing responsibility closer to the idea of responsiveness to the singularity of another—whether of another person, group of persons, or of an entire milieu—is that what one gives in the name of responsiveness may be, in a word, irresponsible: irresponsible according to the rigours of “responsible” conduct as it is construed by what Derrida calls “the monotonous complacency of discourses on morality, politics, and the law,” but also irresponsible as in *irresponsive*: when the one addressed experiences the response as no answer at all.⁹ We touch here overtly upon a concern raised throughout this project: upon the difficult and essential question of the violence at the heart of responsiveness. Can responsiveness always preserve the other’s desire not to be “injured,” while answering to the felt, unvoiced, or voiced appeal? Who can say that Maggie Verver is not answered even as she is injured? Does the injury negate the responsibility of Amerigo and Charlotte’s response? This chapter claims that such questions become pressing in relation to *The Bostonians*. Antagonistic to dominant late-nineteenth-century conceptions of what it meant for novels to be “responsible,” *The Bostonians* appears also to have transgressed, for its first readers, the indeterminable border between responsiveness and injury. The effect, James invites us to understand, was the end of the possibility of a dialogue between author, novel, and milieu. He wrote to William in 1885 of *The Bostonians* as a “fiasco, as not a word, echo, or comment on the serial (save your remarks,) have come to me (since the row about the 1st 2 numbers) from any quarter whatever” (*LL* 181). It is beside these events that this chapter intends to set James’s uncertainty as to whether to aver or disavow his responsibility for *The Bostonians*. I explore whether we might understand the book’s ambiguous omission as registering the awkward choice James faced over whether to reaffirm the novel’s dissent from

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 85–86.

prevailing ideas of responsible literary representation—those that it had provocatively, if equivocally at times, sought to contest—or refraining from rearticulating the novel’s irresponsibility.

The Peabody Affair

In February 1885, the month *The Bostonians* began its run in the *Century Magazine*, brother William wrote to Henry, then settled in London, to inform him that he was accused of exploiting the identities of those in Boston’s activist circles to people the milieu of his novel. The men and women among whom James had spent some part of his childhood and young adulthood had reacted severely to perceived parallels between members of the group of social reformers at the center of *The Bostonians* and living individuals. To certain eyes, the character of Miss Birdseye bore an especially uncomfortable resemblance to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, “a pupil of Emerson, acquaintance of Henry James Senior and Transcendentalist reformer” (LL 169n1). The charge that James faced relates to an ethics of life-writing. The incident asks us to consider the entitlements belonging to the subjects of artistic representation and the obligations of the artist handling their identities.¹⁰ A few years following the publication of *The Bostonians*, it was argued that the arrogation of a person’s identity for use in a variety of media forms could constitute not just an ethical harm but a legal violation. In 1890, lawyers Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis co-authored a prominent article for the *Harvard Law Review* entitled “The Right of Privacy” in which they argued that the “[a]ppropriation, for the defendant’s advantage, of the plaintiff’s name or likeness” should be regarded as a breach of an individual’s “right to an inviolate personality.”¹¹ As noted in Chapter One, it is on the

¹⁰ It is worth reading the Preface which pertains to “The Coxon Fund” (1894) in relation to these questions. Therein, James asserts that anything the artist takes directly from life must be “artistically dealt with” to the ends of its having “its prime identity destroyed”—that is, it ought no longer to be recognisable as a “thing of fact”; it should have become instead a “thing of truth” (2:1237). It is possible to conceive of Miss Birdseye as a creation that has only partially made this transition.

¹¹ Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis, “The Right to Privacy,” *Harvard Law Review* 4, no. 5 (1890): 193–220 (205, 193).

assumption that selfhood is a type of cloistered property, rather than a fungible site of continuities, that arguments have been made for Jamesian life writing as a violation of certain selves: most notably, those of William Wetmore Story; and of Minnie Temple and William James, whose letters Henry revised for inclusion in *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914).¹² The row concerning James's possible depiction of Peabody is not unrelated to concerns for the injurious potential of life-writing: the minor controversy caused by the first installments of *The Bostonians* likely had less to do with the simple act of appropriating Peabody's likeness than with the perceived defacement of this likeness. An 1885 edition of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, for instance, argued that had James drawn Miss Peabody, "one of the most estimable ladies in Boston," in "a pleasant manner" umbrage would not have been taken; as it was, his "burlesque" was "a gross violation of good taste and an unpardonable invasion of personal rights, as well as an unwarranted extension of the author's privileges."¹³

To gain a finer sense for why the "burlesque" may so have troubled a number of the novel's readers, it is beneficial to acknowledge some features of the contemporary scene. The years in which *The Bostonians* is set and during which it was published (1875–1886) had an anxious coloring for the United States at large—economic crisis, a presidential assassination,

¹² The dispute over James's treatment of the family letters for inclusion in *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914) can be viewed as a further episode in which a particularistic sense of responsiveness and a more conventional idea of writerly—in this case, editorial—responsibility vied with one another. Whereas William James's son strongly objected to the alterations James made to his father's letters, James, in a letter poised between apology and defence, presented his actions as expressive of profound fidelity. James writes of having felt William request that he do, in a literary sense, "the best thing by him":

I found myself again in such close relation with your Father, such a revival of relation as I hadn't known since his death, and which was a passion of tenderness for doing the best thing by him that the material allowed, and which I seemed to feel him in the room and at my elbow asking me for as I worked... (*Henry James: Letters*, 4 vols., ed. Leon Edel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974–1984), 4:802–803).

For a sensitive, insightful analysis of this episode see Tamara Follini's "Pandora's Box: The Family Correspondence in *Notes of a Son and Brother*," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (1996): 26–40 (39).

¹³ "Literary Personalities," *Chicago Daily Tribune*. 1 February 1885: 4. I thank Philip Horne for bringing this article to my attention. To my knowledge, it has not previously been cited in the critical literature on *The Bostonians*.

the politicisation of women, an increasingly fractious labor movement, and the failure of Reconstruction preoccupied the public consciousness. Against the background of these concerns, Elizabeth Peabody figured in the American imaginary as a surviving representative of a golden era in the country's short history.¹⁴ She was related by marriage to Nathaniel Hawthorne and had been a close friend of Emerson and Margaret Fuller; she had advocated for educational reform, for the abolition of slavery, and for the civil rights of Paiute Native Americans. Each of these movements, particularly the efforts to end slavery, had wrought palpable achievements; achievements that could be thought to have redeemed the enmity and conflict the efforts had themselves had occasioned. As a "personality," Peabody stood, in one sense, for the good works forged from national crises—a promissory sign for the progress that could make of contemporary fractures a contingent stage in the life of the democratic endeavor. Some thirty years earlier, in seven lectures entitled *Representative Men* (1850), Emerson had acknowledged the importance of such "representative" individuals to the life of a community: they express with special intensity a people's often aspirational understanding of its past and present identity.¹⁵ The representative individual is a manifestation of "ideas," Emerson writes, she paints "her image on our eyes," becoming the "lens through which we read our own mind"—from her, our life receives "some promise of explanation."¹⁶

Considering Peabody's symbolic salience for a certain section of American society, James's offence was not that he had made her a source for his portrait of a presiding Boston luminary with an unconventional life and a long association with progressive campaigns; it

¹⁴ Readers curious to know more of Peabody's life and of the vibrant New England culture in which she and her two sisters were immersed may wish to consult Megan Marshall's *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).

¹⁵ Thomas Carlyle wrote a book comparable to Emerson's in 1841 called *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History* in which he advocated for the value of autocratic, charismatic leadership. Basil Ransom is described by the narrator as "an immense admirer of the late Thomas Carlyle" and "very suspicious of the encroachments of modern democracy" (BO1 169). Carlyle's warnings about "the encroachments of modern democracy" feature in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850) and in "Shooting Niagara—And After?" (1867).

¹⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* (Boston: Phillips, 1850), 12.

consisted, rather, of evoking the likeness of Elizabeth Peabody only to describe the character who bore it as a

confused, entangled, inconsequent, discursive old woman, whose charity began at home and ended nowhere, whose credulity kept pace with it, and who knew less about her fellow-creatures, if possible, after fifty years of humanitarian zeal, than on the day she had gone into the field to testify against the iniquity of most arrangements.¹⁷

Each of the adjectives and descriptive phrases in this passage appears precisely calibrated to critique the mythopoeic image of a New England reformer. The suprahistorical insight associated with the Transcendentalists is rendered as “confusion” and “gullibility”; the conversion of Puritan enthusiasm into the progressive energies of Boston’s era of reform is devolved back into fanaticism with “humanitary zeal”; the importance of human striving to the reformers is economically punctured with the one word: “inconsequent.” The novel’s narrative voice goes on to lance the popular belief that disinterested idealism lay behind such efforts with its question as to whether Miss Birdseye did not, “in her heart of hearts,” “sometimes wish the blacks back in bondage” for the sake of the “excitement” she had had “helping some Southern slave to escape” (BO2 29:539). By the end of the portrait, readers are left not with a representative “the heroic age of New England life—the age of plain living and high thinking, of pure ideals and earnest effort” but with an image evocative of Dickens’s Mrs Jellyby (though of course her charity does not begin “at home”) (BO1 158). It was representational acts of sabotage such as these, whereby she who had been an Emersonian “idea” became a “discursive old woman,” that negatively implicated James’s novel in a framework of cultural meaning developing around the idea of responsible literary activity. When Boston’s *Evening Traveler* reviewed the book publication of *The Bostonians*, it took the opportunity to pronounce “the author’s pictures of the home of his early and pre-historic

¹⁷ Henry James, “The Bostonians,” *Century Magazine* 29 (February–April 1885): 539. References (as BO2 followed by issue and page number) are hereafter given in the text.

youth . . . rather appalling.”¹⁸ Even if the artist’s intention was not to “ridicule,” the novel is, nonetheless,

a series of exaggerations rather than of faithful pictures. It satirizes much that is earnest, noble and true. . . . The noble men and women who have stood for sublime ideas of human justice and truth and heroism and all that makes for social progress are not subjects for a caricature...¹⁹

The review is illustrative for the way it sublimates qualities (“noble”) into persons (“noble men and women”), transmutes persons into “sublime ideas,” and “ideas” into the vehicles of “social progress.” Its writer implies that when they are not “faithful,” when they disable the connection between persons and their symbolic identities, literary “pictures” have the power to unmake or stall the civilising process. To this end, the review registers an acute cognisance of the responsible work anticipated of contemporary fiction. By exploring this work at greater length, we can better appreciate the pointed failure of *The Bostonians* to answer its demands, and thus clarify James’s ostensible irresponsibility to the American scene.

The Responsible Novel

While an earlier generation of cultural authorities in the United States had reacted censoriously to the popularity of the novel form among the reading public, the latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed a marked shift in the rhetoric: from proscription to that of instruction in the face of an incontrovertible new cultural order wherein the novel was preeminent.²⁰ The ways in which fiction ought to be read, studied and, crucially, written thus constituted a significant focus of the criticism published by the country’s belletrists and academicians. At the universities, where the study of literature was beginning to be shaped into a discrete discipline, literary fiction and poetry were often taught in connection with moral

¹⁸ Kevin J. Hayes, *Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 157.

¹⁹ Hayes, *Contemporary Reviews*, 157.

²⁰ See Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1984). Baym indicates that the popular ascension of the novel between 1840 and 1860 obliged literary critics and social commentators to establish new relationships to the form and to the novel-reading public.

philosophy.²¹ The intimacy between moral philosophy and literature in the learned mind was evinced in the prevailing conviction that “literature undertook ethical missions—indeed, this belief provided an enduring rationale for literature.”²² James Russell Lowell, poet, professor of literature at Harvard, and the first editor of the *Atlantic*; George Ripley, editor at *Harper’s Magazine*; Charles Eliot Norton, Harvard professor, and editor at the *North American Review*—all Boston dwellers and friends of the James family—were among the most prominent of literary men who set store in the novel as a socially ameliorative form: each in his own way charged the novel with offering not only *representations* but *representative* visions of life; with chronicle diversity and at the same time distilling from this diversity truths that were unifying; with compelling unity but without violating individual autonomy.²³ In short, the novel was valued for its role in responding with an idealistic brightness to long-recognised difficulties inherent to the democratic project.

William Dean Howells’s 1891 critique of the facile idealism of many a contemporary novel illustrated the problem as a preference for a “wire and cardboard” grasshopper over a grasshopper found “out there in the grass.” The former, Howells writes, is “very prettily painted in a conventional tint, and it’s perfectly indestructible. It isn’t very much like a real grasshopper, but it’s a great deal nicer, and it’s served to represent the notion of a grasshopper ever since man emerged from barbarism.” Howells’s reference to barbarism is significant, for it implies that the writer who attends to the less than “nice” may be perceived as attempting

²¹ For instance, Henry Reed and Hiram Corson, prominent public lecturers and professor of English literature at the University of Pennsylvania and Cornell respectively, began their careers as professors of moral science and philosophy.

²² Nancy Glazener, *Literature in the Making: A History of U.S. Literary Culture in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 111. This chapter has also benefited from the following studies on the institutionalization of English literature: Elizabeth Renker, *The Origins of American Literature Studies: An Institutional History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); David R. Shumway, *Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as an Academic Discipline* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

²³ Leslie Butler gives a fine account of the influence of these writer on the constitution of literary value in post-Civil War America. See *Critical Americans: Victorian Intellectuals and Transatlantic Liberal Reform* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2007).

to undermine civilization, order, harmony. To write of the grasshopper as it is “out there” is, Howell suggests, to “sin against culture.”²⁴ But on the other hand it might also be to wonder and to ask others to wonder whether the work of civilization is yet complete. Howells’s critique speaks to James’s insight in “The Art of Fiction” (1884) that the novel is markedly beset, in Britain and the United States, by the expectation that it occlude the “difficulties with which, on every side, the treatment of reality bristles,” and thus respect the “traditional difference between that which people know and that which they agree to admit that they know, that which they see and that which they speak of, that which they feel to be a part of life and that which they allow to enter into literature.”²⁵ But if such a prohibition not only hopelessly attenuates the “province of art,”²⁶ it also attenuates its ability to, in the words of Jacques Rancière, “redistribute the sensible”²⁷—that is, to relocate what has been deemed impermissible for one to see, know, or feel to the domain of the visible, the apprehensible, the affecting.

Although the Peabody controversy was a parochial affair, confined to the environs of Cambridge, and—even more narrowly—to a small social circle positioned at its cultural apex, the expressions of hurt to which James’s acquaintances gave voice may be thought of as sounding grievances felt by a wider community of readers (“no word or echo” from any other reader is in and of itself a potent index of something less than pleasure); for if many a sensibility would not have been affected by the disfigurement of a New England reformer, this aesthetically and geographically local act of irresponsibility is one which anticipates others with greater resonance. *The Bostonians* draws a parallel between, on the one hand, Boston in the late

²⁴ William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* (New York: Harper, 1891), 11.

²⁵ Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” *Longman’s Magazine* 4, no. 23 (1884): 502–521 (519–20).

²⁶ James, “The Art of Fiction,” 515.

²⁷ For Rancière, “[p]olitics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (*The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004), 13). Artworks have the potential to effect a rearrangement of what belongs in any one of these categories; this ability represents the political kernel at the heart of aesthetics, and the aesthetic core of political discourse.

1870s and the “agitation” for women’s rights and, on the other, the city’s history as the seat of the abolitionist movement and the Civil War fought just a decade or so earlier (in the chronology of the novel) over the legitimacy of slavery. In a book that is preoccupied by the power of the voice to compel and to disturb, the movement for emancipation on which it centres is also the medium through which the unruly ghost of the Civil War speaks.²⁸ On the ground of these two historical events, James gathers three central protagonists: Olive Chancellor, a Bostonian who has lost two brothers in the war and whose own fantasies of a comparable martyrdom have been cathected onto the feminist movement; Basil Ransom, a former Confederate soldier, an “offshoot of the old slave-holding oligarchy,” ferociously opposed to the “querulous, hysterical, maudlin” politics of his estranged cousin (*BOI* 11, 169); and Verena Tarrant, a daughter of the Abolitionists, over whom Olive and Basil struggle for supremacy. It is around the figure of Verena that the novel’s not infrequent allusions to slavery—from the description of Mrs Burrage who is said to have “lived and fattened on abuses, prejudices, privileges, on the petrified, cruel fashions of the past” (267), to Olive’s comparison of Ransom to a “slave-driver,” to Olive’s own vision of subjugating the male population until the “last particle of expiation” has been exacted “from the other, the brutal, blood-stained, ravening race” (325, 34)—coalesce. Likened to an Oriental and a gypsy by Ransom, sold by her father, Selah, bought by Olive, Verena’s intimacy, in the figurative economy of the novel, with the enslaved, “tyrannised” other is often too close for comfort (284).

Given its subject and its prime agents, then, both of which patently re-inscribe or or “re-live” the Civil War, and in spite of James’s later insistence in a letter to William that he “hadn’t a dream of *generalizing*” in *The Bostonians*, the novel could not but have yielded a valence

²⁸ For an exploration of the novel’s attentiveness to voices, language, and sexuality see Tony Tanner, “*The Bostonians* and the Human Voice,” in *Scenes of Nature, Signs of Men: Essays on 19th and 20th Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 148–175.

that was *general* (LL 184; my emphasis).²⁹ James's notebook entries are in fact indicative of his early view that Boston and its preoccupations could be synecdochally related to the country and its "agitation[s]": [t]he whole thing as local, as American, as possible, and as full of Boston," he writes. Ever the cosmopolitan, James gives the idea of parochiality a global inflection: the "whole thing" will be "local" to America; but the peculiarly American is, for James, at least in this moment, downright Bostonian.³⁰ (James's "whole thing" recalls Balzac's and it is possible that he is thinking in this passage not only of the synecdochic significance of Paris to France in *La Comédie Humaine* but also of correcting for the lack of a global perspective he associates with the "essentially local" nature of Balzac's genius.³¹)

However, if the novel was deemed faithless in its response to Boston's representatives, to the "sublime ideas" they stood for, and the "progress" they promised, its response to the post-war "whole" appears to have been no less disloyal for confronting readers with the idea that the nation may have been irrevocably alienated from its myth of unity; that the war had survived the end of the War, finding outlet in what Olive thinks of as the potentially "internecine" "relations of men and women" (BOI 135–6). As Barbara Hochman has observed in her recent study of the novel in its periodical setting, neighboring texts in *Century Magazine* handling the war's aftermath studiously avoided lingering or even acknowledging these possibilities, favoring forward-looking narratives of "hope and recovery."³² Beyond periodicals, Nina Silber has documented the degree to which most media

²⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 12, ed. and trans. John Strachey, 145–156 (London: Hogarth Press, 1958).

³⁰ Henry James, *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 19.

³¹ In "Honoré de Balzac" (1875), James writes that "Paris became his world, his universe"; and "[h]e never perceived with any especial directness that the civilized world was made up of something else than Paris and the provinces" (2:35).

³² Barbara Hochman, "Reading Historically/Reading Selectively: *The Bostonians* in the *Century*, 1885–1886," *The Henry James Review* 34, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 270–78 (274–3). The theme of reunion also crossed over to those novels which dealt with emergent changes in relations between the sexes. Such narratives often told of a young heroine who engaged in the modern world of work for a time before accepting a proposal of marriage and returning to the domestic

forms, including novels, newspapers, popular magazines, minstrel shows, and tourist literature, “paid homage to [the] romantic and sentimental culture of conciliation that characterised the North-South relationship in the Gilded Age years.”³³ This cultural desire to think of the disunities of wartime as a part of a temporally-bound period that had been superseded is belied by a novel which stresses persistence. Indeed, the regularity with which the narrative voice occupies itself by making reversions to past events or preemptive allusions to the future—thereby repeating the past in the present, or drawing the future back into the embrace of its past—has the effect of creating a novelistic time curiously arrested. The enterprise of *The Bostonians* thus takes on singularly threatening proportions, seemingly designed to *unwork* as much of the “responsible” work of literature as might be arranged for in a single narrative. The following parts of this chapter will study the techniques by which James disavows this work, but it will also explore the responsiveness of this abjuration; a response that the author was disheartened not to have seen answered with “any sort of justice” in turn (*LL* 464).

Partial Portraits

If the novel’s initial portrait of Miss Birdseye was perceived by some as an act of vandalism, perhaps the “justice” James sought for his novel would have taken account of the intense degree of self-conscious critique with which the novel fashions, and with which it attends to the idea of, representative figures. The illustrations of character attempted in the early stages of the novel appear to suggest the invariably prejudiced motives which attend the act of representing—the significances drawn from personalities and appearances more telling of perceiver and of the desires served than of the individual observed. That is to say, if there is something injurious in the novel’s depictions, it may be because there is inevitably a place for harm in fashioning representative representations, regardless of whether the motive is

sphere. Marcia Jacobson remarks upon the influence of the nascent “New Woman” novel on *The Bostonians* in “Popular Fiction and Henry James’s Unpopular ‘Bostonians,’” *Modern Philology* 73, no. 3 (February 1976): 264–75.

³³ Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 72.

malign or faithful. The beleaguered coherence of the novel's acts of portraiture, the unsettling capacity of its figures to decouple themselves from these acts, are indicative of the troubled and troubling work that is required in order to have another to meet one's needs.

The first scene of the novel—the encounter between the Mississippian Basil Ransom and his Boston cousin Adeline Luna—barely begins before the language of representative portraiture is separated from an untroubled power to bring forth the object of its study. Adeline Luna's depiction of Boston as an "unprevaricating city" in which "nobody tells fibs" is a hyperbole to begin with, a linguistic over-determination betraying distortion (*BOI* 5). Ransom points out that Adeline has, in placing herself on the outside of this typical Bostonian trait, implicitly represented herself as a liar, a self-representation that Adeline is quick to correct. Certainly, between the shared representational labor of Ransom and the narrator, the study of Adeline suggests a woman who can barely be contained, let alone be said to conceal anything. Adeline is hyperbolic not only in her speech but in all aspects, straining the very form that language would give to her. Voluble, plump, "intolerably familiar," somewhere between the vision of the narrator and that of Ransom's, Adeline is seen to "crack with her vivacity" (6). Nonetheless, Ransom wonders what "body of doctrine" Adeline fits her unbiddable figure into in community where, Adeline tells him, all fall somewhere along the spectrum of "witches and wizards, mediums, and spirit-rappers, and roaring radicals" (7). Ransom, in his pursuit of well-ordered categories to which people can be consigned, is a man who likes to "understand," and so, seemingly, is the narrator, for it is this incorporeal voice who gives Ransom to the reader as a "representative of his sex" (7, 6). Yet the representation is of a piece with what has come before—that is, scattered by Ransom's contradictions. It is said that Ransom's look is hard and discouraging "in spite of a friendly face" (5); that the clothes he wears bespeak refinement, and yet "in spite of this decoration the young man looked poor" (6). Or rather, "as poor as a young man could look who had such a fine head and such magnificent eyes." His eyes are those of "a great American statesman; *or, on the other*

hand, they might simply have proved that he came from Carolina or Alabama.” “*In fact*,” the narrator amends, Ransom is from Mississippi, although representing “by any combination of characters” Ransom’s distinctive accent is beyond the narrator’s “power” (6; emphasis mine). These syntactical feats of self-revision suggest a perceiving consciousness continually experiencing itself thrown from an assured grip upon the subjects it would represent.

The opening chapters continue proliferating representations, infelicitous insofar as they disable the possibility of an integral continuity between a subject and its image. While Adeline overwhelms her depictions, Olive shrinks from hers. As the sisters exchange places before Ransom—Adeline leaving as Olive enters the room—Adeline parts from Ransom with a warning that he is to come face-to-face with “a radical,” “a female Jacobin,” “a nihilist” (7). The iteration of Olive that crosses the threshold of Ransom’s perception meets neither his anticipations nor his gaze. Impassive and puritanically dressed, Olive sits motionless and unspeaking before him, refusing to meet Ransom’s eyes. But Ransom negates the inscrutability of Olive by taking refuge in another “generalization.” For Ransom, Olive belongs to one of two “division[s]” that together cover the “human race”: she is one of “the people who take things hard” (9). It is, for Ransom, “plain as day that she was morbid” (11–12). Morbidity is as partial a portrait of Olive as Ransom’s first stab. It may be used to define someone as psychologically ill but William James would write of “morbidity-mindedness” as, in some degree, common to us all—one inflection in the “scale of experience.”³⁴ It is also a word consonant with painting, in the lexicon of which it names only “lifelike delicacy in flesh tints; painted with morbidezza.”³⁵ To be at all “lifelike,” then, is to be in some degree morbid.³⁶ Although it is

³⁴ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Boston: Longmans, 1902), 163.

³⁵ “morbidezza, n.”. OED Online. June 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/122123?redirectedFrom=morbidezza> (accessed July 22, 2019).

³⁶ The description of Olive as “morbidity” may also acknowledge one of James’s sources for *The Bostonians*—Daudet’s *L’Évangéliste* (1883), a study of “morbidity psychology” that tells of a zealous group of feminist Protestants. For a discussion of James’s engagement with Daudet in *The Bostonians* see Peter Buitenhuis, *The Grasping Imagination: The American Writings of Henry James* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1970), 142–45.

said that Ransom “misses” Olive when he thinks it a “great discovery” to see that she is morbid (“Why was she morbid . . . Ransom might have exulted if he had gone back far enough to explain that mystery”), the narrator demurs from refining upon Ransom’s observation with its own authoritative move “back far enough” (12). Instead, the narrator’s similarly pathological diagnosis of Olive as subject to “fits of tragic shyness,” “unable to meet even her own eyes in the mirror,” let alone to countenance our readerly gaze, only intensifies Olive’s illustrative insubordination; tragic shyness proposes to account for Olive’s successful shielding of her interiority from the narrator’s self-professed “occult” insights (11).

In a letter of 1899 to Mary Ward, James describes himself “‘go[ing] behind’ right and left in ‘The Princess Casamassima,’ ‘The Bostonians,’ ‘The Tragic Muse’” (LL 320). The phrase “‘going behind’” would appear to designate the writerly act of penetrating past kaleidoscopic surfaces to gain purchase upon a substrate of identity. In this instance, however, for James to style himself “‘go[ing] behind *right and left*’” is to frustrate the excavating impulse at the root of the phrase. The author turns his move “behind” into a quickstep “right and left,” as if instead of turning his people inside out he could only catch glimpses from alternate angles. The image is particularly fitting for *The Bostonians*, which offers up a profusion of appearances, yet conveys a sense for its subjects as having always already escaped the grasp of their appearances. Fugitive from the depictions which would allow the expectations of readers and of other characters to slip over them, characters are sharp-edged only momentarily before they are again seen dimly. This process is especially noteworthy in the case of Miss Birdseye, whose resemblance to Elizabeth Peabody was so unnerving for certain contemporary readers. While Birdseye’s lineaments may be suggestive enough to evoke a lively antecedent, the character is, under closer attention, a representational abyss into which the possibility of a representative woman falls.

In her first, contentious appearance in the novel—an appearance that is, in fact, focalised through Ransom—Miss Birdseye is “a revelation of a class . . . a multitude of socialistic

figures, of names and episodes that he had heard of, grouped themselves behind her” (*BOI* 26):

She had a sad, soft, pale face, which (and it was the effect of her whole head) looked as if it had been soaked, blurred, and made vague by exposure to some slow dissolvent. The long practice of philanthropy had not given accent to her features; it had rubbed out their transitions, their meanings. The waves of sympathy, of enthusiasm, had wrought upon them in the same way in which the waves of time finally modify the surface of old marble busts, gradually washing away their sharpness, their details. In her large countenance her dim little smile scarcely showed. It was a mere sketch of a smile, a kind of instalment, or payment on account... (24)

Her appearance is telling of the world vision that Ransom ascribes to these “socialist figures.” In the countenance of Birdseye, Ransom confronts the triumph of an invidious democracy, extinguishing individuality in the name of “humanitary zeal” (26). It is the face of self-abnegation in response to the exile, the refugee, and the slave. Yet although Ransom extrapolates from Birdseye’s features an archetypal significance, it is the very “vague[ness]” of her features that permits the representation in the first place, while simultaneously according to it an auto-destructive tendency. Birdseye’s face is compared to a series of mediums that have all eroded, as if the material had the power to call down upon any image imposed upon it the fate of destruction: the photograph seeks the “slow dissolvent” that corrodes it, the marble summons the elements that erase its features, the artist who began the “sketch of a smile” abandons the attempt. The beguilingly featureless quality of Birdseye’s face allows for the projection upon it of a plenitude of designs, yet the medium permits none to take hold. Thus when we return to Miss Birdseye through the eyes of Olive, the nebulous, smudged quality of Birdseye’s face—indexing for Ransom the effects of indiscriminate socialism—registers a “heroic” martyrdom: “[s]he had been consumed by the passion of sympathy; it had crumpled her into as many creases as an old glazed, distended glove” (35). (One might register the “dis-” terms James uses in relation to Miss Birdseye (“distended,” “dissolve,” “displaced”) as accomplishing a process akin to that which “disavow” and “dismiss” achieve in the Prefaces: they inscribe the representative subject only to rescind it before the mind’s eye.) Nonetheless,

Miss Birdseye is for Olive the representative ideal: “[s]he was heroic, she was sublime, the whole moral history of Boston was reflected in her displaced spectacles” (32).

These first chapters intimate that the “representative” individual is an alarmingly malleable locus of investments, open to any number of competing significances, redemptive or insidious. If from historic reformers, southern men or northern women, our lives receive “some promise of explanation,” that explanation is far from intrinsic, axiomatic, or universally endorsed. James’s portraits appear to bring out the unfulfilled quality of Emerson’s suggestion that these individuals provide “some promise of explanation”; like Miss Birdseye’s “sketch of a smile,” the promise is always promissory, “a kind of instalment, or payment on account,” never adequate to all needs or to all truths. The work of fashioning representatives is liable not only to occlude these issues but also to incite conflict regarding them: who controls the image of the other? Whose needs is it rightfully to serve? Analogous questions are elaborated in the narrative of *The Bostonians* as its agents struggle for undivided rule over the form and the voice of Verena—imagined in the minds of family, journalists, and putative lovers as an vehicle for truth that must needs be captured, imbued with the appropriate significance, and defended from the incursions of rivals. While Miss Birdseye’s non-adhesiveness belies the imports applied to her, Verena is imagined as someone whose capacity to embody a message is unparalleled. According to Basil at least, the “pure” tone of her voice, her “simple,” “charming” manner leave Verena in possession of the ability to “put truth into a form that would render conviction irresistible”: “She had indeed—it was manifest—reduced the company [in Mrs Burrages’s drawing room] to unanimity” (232–3).

The Bostonians discloses that upon which a responsible novel is premised: not only, in the first instance, upon a kind of self-censorship whereby it must remember not to forget that it cannot see, say, or feel what is inadmissible. (What of Elizabeth Peabody and of her life requires effacing in order that she might stand for the “sublime idea of human justice and truth and heroism”?) But also the degree to which its ability to produce the indivisible truth

of representative individuals or historical events entails the coercion—through the kind of rhetorical seduction by which Olive or Ransom would impart the truth to Venera, and through Verena to her audiences—of others to this veracity; in effect, the suppression of truth itself which is never an empty form awaiting homogenous content but invariably brimming with heterogenous, heteroglossic substance. The processes by which a responsible artwork emerges then comes perilously close to suggesting the transgression of the civilised ideal which may be reflected therein. By subduing the diverse voices that compete to speak to the salience of a countenance, a person, or a historical event, the work of responsibility appears to involve the very violence it would forget and to incite the dissension it would quell when the truth is discovered to be inadequate to *all* demands. That James's novel would concentrate upon the work yet to be done to be able to accomplish, in good faith, and without repetition of the means which would presage their collapse, the achievements of civilization may be the sincerest indication of its responsiveness to the social, political scene.

The complex positioning of the text's narrative voice is a further example of the ostensibly irresponsible yet responsive relation of this novel to readers' profound desire for hope and recovery. *The Bostonians* is rare in James's canon for the extraordinary mobility of its point of view. The field of perception may pass from the narrator, to a central figure, to any number of minor characters over the course of a single chapter—or, indeed, a single sentence. It is the plurality of visual structures that affords to each character its multiple and contradictory portraits. But it is also the unorthodox position of the narrative voice in the fabric of the text that prevents any of these visionary arrangements from monopolising the “truth” of the representational field. James's veering experiments with objective reporting, multiple internal focalisers, and free indirect style leave the narrator neither wholly internal nor wholly exterior to the fiction; neither inhabiting the mimetic space nor ontologically distinct from it. The difficulty of perceiving the scene as a totality is, therefore, an intractable one for the reason that the relative powerlessness of the narrative voice prevents it claiming for any

one source of vision the right to the status of veracious. The novel can only contain in uneasy tension a plurality of perspectives and voices, thereby placing in abeyance the possibility of a redemptive, preemptive wrangling—at the level of form—of agreement from discord.

The critical consensus that has grown up around *The Bostonians* has far from neglected the role of the narrator in contributing to the intransigence of this novel to readers' expectations of narrative authorial endorsement for one or other of the perspectives it contains. Predominantly, the critical impulse has been, nonetheless, to line up the vision of the novel with one of the many positions it examines. Lionel Trilling claimed for the narrator's sympathies (and for those of James) the "romantic conservatism" of Basil Ransom, pointing to their mutual "attachment to tradition" and distrust of "abstract intellectuality."³⁷ Others have noted, however, that the satiric instinct of the narrative voice is so indiscriminating in its targets that it abandons readers by "leaving the question of narrative endorsement in doubt."³⁸ But when critics have attended to its refusal to respond readily to ideological probing, the tendency has been to impute this difficulty to the aesthetics of the novel, rather than to reassess the value of the critical approach itself. *The Bostonians* is often deemed flawed by its modern readers because the "uncertain[y] of its position with regard to its principal ideological players"³⁹ is counted as a problem rather than a provocation to examine one's readerly desire for "narrative endorsement" of a critical position.⁴⁰

In fashioning the New York Edition twenty years later, James was given the opportunity not only to give an account of the novel's "old reasons" for existing but to reinscribe these reasons through the process of revision. That he could not easily embrace the venture registers a certain amount of doubt as to whether the novel's "reasons" were

³⁷ Lionel Trilling, *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 115, 113.

³⁸ Andrew Taylor, *Henry James and the Father Question* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 146.

³⁹ Taylor, *The Father Question*, 146.

⁴⁰ Taylor, *The Father Question*, 146.

themselves “good enough reasons to live.”⁴¹ Yet these misgivings seem to show up even as James is still writing—at points when the novel swerves into surprisingly conciliatory territory. Considering *The Bostonians* through the lens of its serialised mode of production, it is possible to conceive of James faltering before his readers’ aggrieved and then lackadaisical response to the novel’s successive installments. Miss Birdseye’s elegiac death and the chapter in which Verena and Basil encounter Harvard’s Memorial Hall have, for instance, struck critics and readers alike as curious episodes, sequestered in their content, aesthetic finish, and affective designs, from an otherwise sharp, un-appeasing novel.⁴² The following section will propose that the chapter at Memorial Hall is the closest the novel comes to flirting with the possibility that it might bear a more redemptive significance to its interlocutors, thereby realising a more conventionally responsible aesthetic. It is perhaps episodes of hesitation such as these that presented as “peculiarly formidable” challenges to the author’s revisory imagination, for they may have required of the older James, one way or the other, a commitment: to elucidate and clarify his “irresponsible” novel, or to reconceive it from within the more orthodox *poesis* gestured to in these narrative acts.

Sensus Communis

At several points in the novel, the narrator describes himself as a “historian,” his work as a “history” (BO1 236, 11).⁴³ James’s ascription to his narrator of the historian’s role is not unique to *The Bostonians* but it is noteworthy given that he writes in “The Art of Fiction” (1884),

⁴¹ James, *Literary Criticism*, 2:1046

⁴² Tony Tanner describes the gently-handled death of Miss Birdseye as “something of an apologetic reparation” for what has come before (“Human Voice,” 168). Susan M. Ryan describes the Memorial Hall chapter as occupied on “a sort of tour-guide tangent” (“*The Bostonians* and the Civil War,” *The Henry James Review* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 265–72 (267)).

⁴³ The uses and abuses of history are of note throughout the novel. Olive and Verena “read a great deal of history together, and read it ever with the same thought—that of finding confirmation in it for this idea that their sex had suffered inexpressibly...” (BO1 164). Meanwhile, Ransom intends to engage in a revisionist project that would find the Civil War to have been started by the Abolitionists under Eliza P. Moseley, who herself was “the cause of the biggest war of which history preserves record” (BO1 84). For a discussion of *The Bostonians* and historical discourse see Roslyn Jolly, *Henry James: History, Narrative, Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), Ch. 2.

published a year prior to the serial's appearance, that the novelist, in staking his claim to say something truthful about human experience, must "speak with assurance, with the tone of the historian."⁴⁴ James's proposal is that a novelist should claim for his or her work the same prerogative as that generally accorded to a history: to be regarded as a truth-bearing discourse. James does not advocate, though, that the novelist necessarily adopt the agenda of the historian, an agenda which, at the time, often looked to attribute to the passage of time a progressive bearing. Accounts of the Civil War, for example, portrayed the Emancipation Proclamation as though it formed a necessary part of the path that the United States was taking towards perfect equality. It is a way of rendering history that tends "to omit rather than to recognize the significance of certain facts"—such as, that "Lincoln swore to save the Union whether it demanded freeing all the slaves or freeing none."⁴⁵ At the beginning of the eighth installment of *The Bostonians*, though, it is not simply the "tone of the historian" one can discern but also the perfectionistic lens on which this figured historian might turn on events in the novel.

Insofar as these can be captured, there are key differences to note between the style and the preoccupations of chapters twenty-four and -five. The former marks the final chapter of the seventh installment; it is a chapter in which the reader's attention has been drawn throughout to the discrete identities and intensely inconsonant views of the prime agents. Observing the conversation of Verena and Ransom on her latest oratorical success at a national convention for women, the narrator devotes long paragraphs to contouring the interiors of the characters, while announcing himself self-reflexively at several points in the short chapter.⁴⁶ Elaborating upon these stylistic indexes of the separation of each from the

⁴⁴ James, "The Art of Fiction," 504.

⁴⁵ Ari Helo, *Thomas Jefferson's Ethics and the Politics of Human Progress: The Morality of a Slaveholder* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 11.

⁴⁶ See "as I have mentioned" (BO2 30:563); "it may be communicated to the reader" (BO2 30:566); "which I shall presently mention" (BO2 30:568); "As I have already said" (BO2 30:568).

other, the plot stresses the enduring antagonisms between Ransom, Olive, and Verena. Despite his time in cosmopolitan New York, Ransom advises Verena that he hasn't "changed at all": he has neither "given up" his political opinions, nor his allegiance to his "poor, dear, desolate old South" (BO2 30:566). Concurrently, Verena is at the height of her commitment to Olive and to their cause, informing Ransom that he is "a great enemy of [her] movement" (BO2 30:564).

The subsequent chapter comes after a break in the serial, standing at the commencement of a new installment. The resumption ushers in a change in the style of the narration. Likely in preparation for the ameliorative work this chapter will assay, the narrative pulls away from the particularity of each figure. The scene opens upon Verena and Ransom leaving the Tarrant house together to explore Cambridge. As they walk, Verena and Ransom engage in a rebarbative, flirtatious back and forth. Regardless of the attractions of this charged encounter for speculative forays into what may be "going [on] behind," however, the narrative voice is confined largely to reportage and description; nor are there any pronouncements, on the narrator's part, of a differentiated "I." It is within this markedly more de-personalised frame that Verena and Ransom reach Harvard's Memorial Hall, a site commemorating the University's war dead and a symbol "of Boston's commitment to the Unionist cause and the abolitionist movement in America."⁴⁷ The heated response of Ransom to Verena's rhetorical triumph for the overwhelmingly northern feminist movement would appear to presage the effect upon him of a vast testament to the "sons of triumph" who prevailed over his "poor, dear" South. It is therefore startling that Ransom's entrance into the emblematic heart of the building—the Memorial transept in which the names of the dead are recorded—is said *not* to be for him "a challenge nor a taunt." Rather, the transept

touched him with respect, with the feeling of beauty. He was capable of being a generous foeman, and he forgot, now, the whole question of sides and parties; the

⁴⁷ *Harvard University: An Architectural Tour*, ed. David Shand-Tucci and Robert Cheek (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), 158.

simple emotion of the old fighting-time came back to him, and the monument around him seemed an embodiment of that memory; it arched over friends as well as enemies, the victims of defeat as well as the sons of triumph. (BO2 30:695)

It is not only the character's sense of fellowship that is arresting in this passage but the centrality of aesthetic experience to its occurrence. Ransom's "feeling of beauty" is inspired by the sight of the engraved tablets, yet it comes to take in the entirety of the "monument around him. It is this aesthetic sentiment, "beauty," attended by the character's "memory" of the "simple emotion of the old fighting-time," that has the effect of erasing, for Ransom, thoughts of past (and present) conflict ("he forgot, now, the whole question of sides and parties") and conspiring to create an experience of intersubjectivity: affect, memory, and monument collapse into one another, seem to form an arch under which gather "friends as well as enemies, victims of defeat as well as the sons of triumph." The Hall presides over an experience that appears to recuperate the event of the Civil War—once a locus of discord, now one of corporate remembrance.

The scene resonates with Kant's account of the potential for beauty to forge communities of like-mindedness from subjective aesthetic experiences. Kant's aesthetic theory reserves a privileged role for the perception or judgement of beauty for the reason that such judgements appear to be disinterested. The philosopher argues that we judge beauty as if it were an intrinsic property of the object—as though it were "out there," rather than a subjective response. When the individual discerns beauty, therefore, she would also appear to be making a universal claim: not *I find* this beautiful, but *this is* beautiful. She judges as if she had the right to expect the agreement of everyone to her individual response. Kant famously describes this agreement as the "universal assent" of all others, where "assent" here is the German *Stimme*, which can mean both "voice" and "vote." It is this idea of a universal voice of accord for which Kant uses the term *sensus communis*, describing the virtual community brought about by

the pronouncement of beauty.⁴⁸ Ransom's experience of the memorial recalls such a movement from the experience of beauty to imagining a community formed under the auspices of the beautiful object. The moment is all the more noteworthy for the fact that the novel encourages one's own participation, as a reader, in the *sensus communis*.

In the sentences leading up to the scene, James shifts tenses into the present perfect with the effect of uniting the reader's readerly temporality with that of the novel's. Meanwhile, the narrator begins to speak to the significance of the transept and its effect on the viewer from the perspective of the universal "visitor":

The effect of the place is singularly noble and solemn, and it is impossible to stand there without a lifting of the heart. It is erected to duty and honour, it speaks of sacrifice and example, seems a kind of temple to youth, manhood, and generosity. Most of them were young, all were in their prime, and all of them had fallen; this simple idea hovers before the visitor and makes him read with tenderness each name and place—names often without history, and forgotten Southern battles. (BO2 30: 695)⁴⁹

It is a passage which implies unanimous assent for its judgement of the building: the "effect" of the Hall upon the visitor *is* "noble and solemn"; it unequivocally "speaks of sacrifice and example." Although it is the Hall which ostensibly compels the visitor's interpretative faculties (conspiring to "*make* him read with tenderness" (my emphasis)), it is of course the text that would "make" the reader experience the place in the terms it provides, thereby gathering her,

⁴⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 239.

⁴⁹ It is difficult to know if James includes his own feelings in this description. In the "Boston and Cambridge" chapter of *The American Scene*, James describes the Memorial Hall as evocative of his own personal "company of lurking ghosts," those he had known in the Cambridge of old. His thoughts on the building itself, though, are decided mixed (*The American Scene* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1907), 60). He is touched, as Basil is, by the "collective beauty" of the "recording tablets of the members of the University sacrificed," but is critical of the Hall's architecture which is described as suffering from "the too scant presence of the massive and mature" (61). Ultimately, he concludes, chary perhaps of courting controversy, that it is a place of which, "tactfully speaking," one cannot be critical: "The reflection follows close moreover that, tactfully speaking, criticism has no close concern with Alumni Hall; it is as if that grim visitor found the approaches closed to him—had to enter, to the loss of all his identity, some relaxing air of mere sentimental, mere shameless association" (61–62).

along with Ransom, into the communal experience. But the reader of an artwork (as we will see) can only truly be *made*, as James concedes in “The Art of Fiction,” if she assents, “say[s] Yes...to what the artist puts before [her]”⁵⁰ and becomes the “passive, receptive, appreciative,” “the responsive, the imaginative” reader of which James writes in his Preface to *The Golden Bowl* (1909) (2:1329).

In light of how thoroughly demystifying most of *The Bostonians* is with regard to its representative phenomena, it is difficult to overstate both the incongruity and the centrality of the Memorial Hall episode. The book’s ambition seems to be one of good faith to a “cardboard” idea of the Civil War, to an event which stands for concepts the narrator refrains from complicating—“duty,” “honour,” “sacrifice,” “manhood,” and “generosity.” The aspiration, though, is decidedly brief, as what may be an authorial experiment in good faith comes bathetically to an end. The symbolic event commemorated by Memorial Hall, evoked by the narrator, is stripped of its charm by Verena’s comic interruption into Ransom’s reverie:

‘It is very beautiful—but I think it is very dreadful!’ This remark, from Verena, called him [Ransom] back to the present. ‘It’s a real sin to put up such a building, just to glorify a lot of bloodshed. If it wasn’t so impressive, I would have pulled it down.’ (BO2 30:695)

Verena’s comment serves to recall the reader, as well as Ransom, “to the present,” reminding us, perhaps, that the *sensus communis* refers to judgments of taste alone, not socio-political ones. Verena consents to belong to the aesthetic community that deems the building “beautiful,” but she resists the collective “we” for whom the beauty of the Hall becomes the beauty of the war and “a lot of bloodshed” is thereby “glorif[ied].” Verena’s feelings may be close to those of James on this point for the rest of the novel takes its cue from her dissenting remark, hewing ever more closely to a path which separates its work from that of the redemptive.

⁵⁰ James, “The Art of Fiction,” 518.

“Absolutely Irresponsible”

This chapter has argued that *The Bostonians* presses back against the obligations devolved upon contemporary fiction; it could, however, have queried whether the novel is not as irresponsible as it is irresponsible, for in abjuring its responsibilities it could be said to have dismissed the appeal of a community of readers who felt they could afford neither to demystify their representatives, nor to disinvest in their “Civil War amnesia.”⁵¹ But responsiveness to the other is not necessarily a question of the demand that is addressed with the most imperiousness. The novel intimates that to engage in the kind of conciliatory thinking for which the present intensely appeals is to surrender responsiveness to and for a future that would not need compensatory aesthetic solaces to stand *in place of* actual ones. Nonetheless, James’s equivocation regarding the “omission” of *The Bostonians* may signal his feeling that the novel had misjudged the degree of tact required to pursue an imaginative relation to the American scene, without injuring a living relation, to its present readership.

Responding to the letter in which William related the conniptions caused in Boston by the appearance of the novel’s initial instalments, James described the “charge” of having made a “portrait from life” of Elizabeth Peabody as an “assault” (LL 169). It was, he began, an “idiotic & insulting” accusation. His strident denial modulates, however, over the course of the epistle, into a refutation hedged by hypotheses as to how Miss Birdseye may incidentally have become Miss Peabody or vice versa. James settles on the following formulation: although “Miss Birdseye was evolved entirely from my moral consciousness... if [the creation] is at the same time a rendering of Miss Peabody I am absolutely irresponsible & extremely sorry for the accident” (LL 170). The phrase “absolutely irresponsible” seems (as Olive does in the epigraph to this chapter) to “plead for a remission of responsibility”: if Miss Birdseye is “at the same time” Miss Peabody, it is a sin of omission rather than of commission—an “accident.” But it is also a phrase which plays along the same fine line as the book: *The*

⁵¹ Silber, *Romance of Reunion*, 4.

Bostonians may be “irresponsible” in the sense that it actively violates a certain idea of responsibility, but it is not altogether irresponsible, for it remains profoundly responsive to its milieu. And yet it is not wholly or straightforwardly responsible in this sense either. It is a situation which seems to have left James ever, if equivocally, “sorry” for his novel.

Chapter Five

Uncanny Responsivity

‘[W]e must each remember that we shall fall to pieces if we don’t manage to keep hold of some little idea of responsibility.’¹

Hosting at Home

Presiding at Venice like a tutelary spirit, Mrs Katherine Bronson, writes James in *Italian Hours* (1909), “sat for twenty years at the wide mouth, as it were, of the Grand Canal, holding out her hand, with endless good-nature, patience, charity, to all decently accredited petitioners.”² The palatial niche in which the “genial” Mrs Bronson “sat” is the nominal subject of James’s essay—“Casa Alvisi,” first published in 1902 (110).³ The essay commemorates the house of this “most generous of hostesses” (110) as a place of refuge for those seeking

easy—when not indeed slightly difficult—polyglot talk, artful *bibite*, artful cigarettes too, straight from the hand of the hostess, who could do all that belonged to a hostess, place people in relation and keep them so, take up and put down the topic, cause delicate tobacco and little gilded glasses to circulate, without ever leaving her sofa-cushions or intermitting her good-nature. (111)

It is the refreshments that are overtly “artful” in this passage but James’s subtler attentions are to the arts of Mrs Bronson—to the virtuosity with which she fashioned an environment of “charming personal welcome,” made for “the pleasure of talk” (109, 115). James’s syntax intimates that Mrs Bronson’s adeptness resided in her ability to do “all” a hostess would without actually presenting herself as the hostess of the scene. Where one might imagine a hostess or host performing his or her duties overtly, James draws the reader’s attention to

¹ Henry James, *The Awkward Age* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 194. References are hereafter given in the text.

² Henry James, *Italian Hours* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909), 109–10. References are hereafter given in the text.

³ “Casa Alvisi” began life as the prefatory note to a selection of Mrs Bronson’s own recollections of her friendship with Robert Browning, entitled “Browning in Venice.” Both pieces were published in *Cornhill Magazine* in February 1902.

Bronson's genius for sublimating her efforts: the cigarettes may come "straight from the hand of the hostess" but they are not proffered; Mrs Bronson remains seated on "her sofa-cushions," presumably alongside and amidst her guests, never "intermitting" her part in the conviviality to ostentatiously figure as the mistress of ceremonies who "place[s]" visitors, "take[s] up" the talk, or "cause[s]" the refreshments to "circulate."⁴ The arrangement of Mrs Bronson figures her in the role of a guest even as the duties of the hostess find themselves accomplished through her. The idea of Mrs Bronson complexly situated between positions corresponds to James's portrayal of the casa itself. Initially introduced as a domestic space, the Casa Alvisi takes on an increasingly dramaturgical significance; the intimate home becomes a theatrical house: a "setting" for "the pleasures of talk," its drawing rooms, "a friendly private-box at the constant operatic show" of the Grand Canal (111). Reception of others and an environment of responsiveness is enabled in a house that is not quite a home, by a woman who is not quite its mistress.

The aim of this chapter is to examine, in James's fiction, the idea of separation from places that are homely, including physical structures and structures of identity. (Here I follow Émile Benveniste who identifies an intimate connection between these two mode of being "at home." Benveniste observes that the Latin word "ipseity," generally taken to mean "personal identity," indicates "the master of the home, the one in charge." The linguist contends that the concept of self-identity, the notion of possessing a self, is historically derived from a material position: master or mistress of the home.⁵) The reason for making a closer study of this motif is in order to encounter directly a particular line of thought that runs through this project: that responsibility to and for another can be occasioned by, or occasions, a departure

⁴ There is something of Mrs Bronson in Milly Theale's "circulating" among the weary guests at her Venetian palazzo, bringing them "into relation with something more finely genial" (James, *The Wings of the Dove*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1902), 2:233).

⁵ See Émile Benveniste, "L'hospitalité," in *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969), 87–101.

from the place of self-identity (“getting out of one’s self,”⁶ to quote Rowland Mallet)—if only in the hope of gaining a richer subjective “horizon”; of becoming “a master” by becoming “a dupe”; of achieving the impossible everything by losing oneself to it.⁷ James’s presentation of Mrs Bronson as one who is not, or not straightforwardly, “mistress of the home” is a late incarnation of a long-standing association in the author’s work between the idea of responsiveness and persons or characters who evince separation from homeliness. Those Jamesian figures for whom dwelling-place is a meager, provisional, or absent concept, or whose abodes are curiously unhomely, are also often figures for whom the self is a contingent edifice, responsive to the presence of others. This chapter asks, however, whether such unhomed or unhomely responsiveness is necessarily *responsibility* to others? Is not the quality of being unhomely, in James, a potentially uncanny one—an anxious-making, threatening mode of being that induces questions of what may be being “concealed and kept out of sight”?⁸ If responsibility no longer chiefly pertains to a locatable, accountable, perdurable self, describing what is and is not generally expected of this self, how might one know that the responsivity of one who is not at home, but who is, instead, a response to you, *is* responsibility and not something else?

Instances in which responsiveness and unhomeliness come together in James are manifold but we might consider a few figures from the major novels: the nomadic, highly

⁶ Henry James, *Roderick Hudson* (London: Penguin, 1987), 53.

⁷ Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others* (New York: Scribner’s, 1913), 175–6; Henry James, *Literary Criticism, Vol. 2: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 2:1294–5.

⁸ I am using “uncanny” in an approximately Freudian sense. The German word for uncanny is *unheimlich* and its opposite is *heimlich* (homely). Freud examines the meaning of *heimlich* and concludes that the term “belongs to two sets of ideas. On the one hand, it means what is familiar and agreeable” (as in “arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within the four walls of his house”) and on the other, “what is concealed and kept out of sight” (“The Uncanny,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, ed. and trans. John Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 215). *Unheimlich* disrupts the force of the first meaning; the idea of the uncanny, then, is concerned with the fact that the very environment of the home, which is supposed to offer shelter and safety from the uncertainties of everyday life, is in fact entailed with anxiety-inducing ambiguities.

performative siblings, Eugenia Münster and Felix Young; the itinerant *improvisatrici* Christina Light (rechristened the Princess Casamassima), Verena Tarrant, Rose Armiger, and Mrs Brook; Hyacinth Robinson and Lambert Strether, both of whom have tattered attachments to the idea of home, are malleable subjects, formed and reformed in relation to magnetic figures like Paul Muniment and the Princess Casamassima, Maria Gostrey, Chad Newsome, and Madame de Vionnet. Madame Merle—admired by Isabel as a “brilliant fugitive from Brooklyn”⁹—and Charlotte Stant—described by Fanny Assingham as a woman with “no home—absolutely none whatever”¹⁰—are able to live, in effect, as professional houseguests because their material deprivation goes hand in hand with the ambiguous “capital”¹¹ of an apparent deficiency of “proper” identity (“Belonging to as a possession, attribute, or quality; owned as property; that is a property or quality of the person or thing specified; intrinsic, inherent”¹²). Charlotte, for example, is described by the Prince as “a rare, a special product” precisely because “her singleness, her solitude, her want of means, that is her want of ramifications and other advantages, contributed to enrich her somehow with an odd, precious neutrality.”¹³ This “neutrality,” when probed by Amerigo, reveals itself as a responsive plasticity, the ability to become whomever is requested; for him, Charlotte’s gift shows itself in the perfection of her Italian when they converse in his native tongue.

Fleda Vetch descends from and looks forward to these figures in that the sensitivity to others with which the character is imbued appears to move in concert with a penury at once material and subjective. Described in *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897) as a young woman “[w]ithout resources, without a stick, as she said, of her own,” with “no home of her own,” Fleda is also

⁹ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1881), 1:246. This description of Madame Merle is only found in the 1881 edition of the text.

¹⁰ Henry James, *The Golden Bowl*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner’s, 1904), 1:41.

¹¹ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 1:56.

¹² “proper, adj., n., and adv.”. OED Online. June 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/152660?rskey=Jza0v9&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed August 25, 2019).

¹³ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 1:56.

said to be as often conscious of the “impressions” of “somebody’s else” as her of own.¹⁴ In James’s Preface to *The Princess Casamassima* (1908), alongside the “sufficiently thoughtful and sufficiently ‘disinherited’”¹⁵ Hyacinth Robinson, and several others including Strether and Maisie, Fleda is valorised by the novelist as a character whose “doing” consists of nothing less indispensable James than her “feeling”: “I then see their ‘doing,’ that of the persons just mentioned [“my hero, my heroine”] as, immensely, their feeling, their feeling as their doing” (2:1091). In a quintessentially Jamesian transmutation of lack into plenitude, an absence of the kind of characterological property that would register “doing”—“action,” “application”—is converted into a different type of “capital”: a “degree[e] of feeling” that is of the “acute, the intense, the complete, in a word—the power to be finely aware and richly responsible.” In this quotation, “responsible” is indissociable from qualities with which one would associate responsivity; it is homologous to “feeling,” to “being finely aware.” Yet the word is also being used in a more straightforward way: to mean a “rich” “accountability,” or “answerability.” The “rich responsibility” of a focaliser, reflector, or centre of consciousness—his or her sensitivity to the events of the narrative and to other figures—makes, James suggests, this focaliser answerable to readers. We can count upon them because their “acute,” “intense,” “complete” degree of feeling “enables us, as readers of their record, as participators by a fond attention” to “‘get most’ out of all that happens to them” (2:1088). Denied the properties of the well-housed character, James endows his figures with a finer portion so that the reader might trust to them to lose none of the value or the significance of the narrative they have been delegated to perceive.

The qualities with which James empowers the unhomely figure do not, then, automatically have ethical implications. That is to say, a figure’s being responsive and responsible in an aesthetic sense differs from its being a responsive and responsible character.

¹⁴ Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton* (London: William Heinemann, 1897), 56, 105, 13. References are hereafter given in the text.

¹⁵ James, *Literary Criticism*, 2:1096. References are hereafter given in the text.

These qualities are, in the first place, extra-ethical, beyond good and evil, one might say. As a compositional maneuver, affording to certain characters a heightened degree of susceptibility frees the novelist from the obligation of providing the reader with potentially heavy-handed passages of interpretative exposition. Yet in the case of many of the focalisers James mentions in this Preface, the compound of unhomeliness and responsiveness is lent a profoundly, if complexly, positive ethical valence in the novels themselves. To turn back to *The Spoils of Poynton*, one might situate Fleda's estrangement from the place of home rewardingly against Mrs Gereth's over-identification with the same, particularly with regard to their respective capacities to welcome another.

In one of James's more deliberately evinced instances of a tropological relation between a physical structure and a structure of the self, the amalgamation of *objets d'art* and architecture that is Poynton serves as a tactile register of Mrs Gereth's tastes, memories, and intimacies, situating the widow at the centre of and in unbroken contact with personal identity. Yet the intensity with which the character experiences herself as "the master of the home, the one in charge" seems closely correlated to her inability to receive or respond to any one whose admission into the intimacy of Poynton would alter its contours. Brash, boisterous Mona Brigstock, the woman Mrs Gereth's son intends to marry, figures to the widow as a force of variation and ruin. In Mrs Gereth's imaginary, Mona's arrival presages the adulteration and alteration of Poynton: Mona will perpetrate "horrors," "neglect" Poynton's treasures, "force" them to "mix" with "the maddening relics of Waterbath" (18–19). In the realm of identity, Mona represents a challenge to Mrs Gereth's personhood "itself," to the very notion of her enduring self-sameness. An unwelcome guest at Poynton, Mona is simultaneously an unwelcome intrusion into the "I" of Mrs Gereth. To hold oneself "master" of the property, of the proper self, would appear allied, in *Spoils*, to the project of preventing its loss or modification, a project which excludes the prospect of receiving anyone who even hints at these possibilities. As many a guest to the Palazzo Roccanera—where Gilbert Osmond is

“master of the house”—discovers, callers to Poynton are welcome only on condition that they pass a test of self-erasure, assenting to shed their preferences and particularities to fit the house style.¹⁶ Faced with Mona’s resistance to assimilation, Mrs Gereth begs her son to break with Mona and marry Fleda. Ironically, it appears that the mistress of Poynton prizes Fleda’s responsiveness; her ecstatic reaction to Mrs Gereth’s home registers the very quality the elder woman lacks: the ability to be susceptible to another to the degree that it is said of Fleda that she “perfectly understood how Mrs. Gereth felt” for Poynton (21). Mrs Gereth insists upon Fleda for her son’s wife because only Fleda is qualified to “replace,” like for like, Poynton’s original mistress (33). The house, in her hands, need not vary because Mrs Gereth will in essence never have left: Fleda will dwell at Poynton not as another Mrs Gereth, Owen Gereth’s wife, but as *the* Mrs Gereth. The modulation of unhomeliness into responsiveness and responsibility, in this particular novel, might then be said *just* to side-step the unnerving, for although Fleda’s responsiveness to Mrs Gereth presages her metamorphoses into the widow, James navigates Fleda around this possibility. Her sensitivity to the perspective of Mona Brigstock permits Fleda to circumvent unmitigated like-mindedness with Mrs Gereth; homeless as she is, Fleda may take up many places, yet finally belong to no one of them.

It seems fruitful to relate such moments in James’s work, wherein estrangement from proper place and responsibility come together, to the observation that for a certain period of his life the author gave special weight to his own unsettled condition. Edmund Gosse described James as a “homeless man in a peculiar sense, for he continued to be looked upon as a foreigner in London, while he seemed to have lost citizenship in the United States.”¹⁷ William James’s poignant and perturbing claim that his brother was “a native of the James

¹⁶ Isabel is described as “oppressed” by the “accumulation of beauty and knowledge” presented to her by Osmond, “the master of the house,” who escorts her through his Florentine apartments (*The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Michael Anesko (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 253, 366). Eager to be acceptable, Isabel expunges her preferences for fear of exposing a “possible grossness of perception” by admiring what she oughtn’t to or ignoring “something at which the truly initiated mind would arrest itself” (253).

¹⁷ Edmund Gosse, *Aspects and Impressions* (New York: Scribner’s, 1922), 28.

family, and had no other country” would seem to confirm the “peculiar sense” in which Gosse felt James to be without home.¹⁸ Yet liminality (notwithstanding his positive belonging to the Jameses) was not necessarily a source of anxiety for James. In 1888, he wrote to William of aspiring to cultivate his personal dislocation as a part of his literary style. Telling William of his hopes for achieving an aesthetic that no reader would be able to call either American or English, James announced that if he could realise “such an ambiguity I should be exceedingly proud of it, for it would be highly civilized.”¹⁹ The word “civilized,” so suggestive of cultural and ethical maturity, of a refinement in manners, taste, and sociability, speaks to Derrida’s elaboration of Levinasian responsibility into an ethics of “civilized” hospitality. In Levinasian thought, to be responsible to another calls for conceiving of one’s self as primordially a placeless wanderer welcomed into the home of the self in the event of one’s encounter with another person. Derrida interprets this idea as a reversal of the traditional philosophies of hospitality. In “the Greco-Roman tradition and even the Judeo-Christian one, [in] all of law and all philosophy of law up to Kant and Hegel in particular, across the family, civil society, and the State,”²⁰ Derrida claims that it is considered indispensable to possess “a place in order to *welcome* the other.”²¹ According to Derrida’s elaboration, Levinasian philosophy contends, in contradistinction, that if the subject conceives of herself “at home”—metaphysically, materially—then the arrival of an alien, a refugee, or a stranger will threaten a crisis concerning what is properly one’s own; the well-housed subject has everything to lose and little to gain from the arrival of another. It is only, Derrida submits, when an individual, a community, or a nation state calls into question the vantage point of home that it can play host to a stranger.

¹⁸ William James quoted in Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, 2 vols (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1935), 1:412.

¹⁹ *Henry James: Letters*, 4 vols. ed, Leon Edel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974–1984), 3:244.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 77.

²¹ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 39–40.

Loosening one's grasp on the *chez soi* of identity, one gives hospitality by receiving: in the style of Mrs Bronson, my guest hosts me as her host, welcomes me into the role of host. Playing upon the double valence of the French word "*hôte*" which may denote both "host" and "guest," Derrida writes of the host who "receives the hospitality that he offers in his own home": "[t]he host, as '*hôte*', is a *guest*."²²

There is a risk however, as I earlier indicated, of overdetermining the connection in James between those figures who lack proper place and the kind of responsiveness which could convey responsibility. It is through characters like Eugenia Münster, Christina Light, Madame Merle, or Verena Tarrant that readers of James, early on, are obliged to acknowledge the bleeding of responsiveness—a process by which one situates and adjusts oneself to the requests of others—into something that looks like calculated self-fashioning, whereby one construes a self in order to deceive or manipulate. Both concepts involve attending to one's interlocutor or audience and shaping one's self accordingly, but if the consanguinity of response and responsibility implies that this process occurs in the interests of another, the proximity of responsivity to self-fashioning directs us to suspect this implication. This is not to suggest that these heuristic categories don't intersect or that many of James's characters don't partake, to some degree, of both; this chapter does, however, propose that in the context of the late 1890s, it becomes increasingly difficult to affirm the suggestion that not being one's own proper person or having a place proper to one facilitates, in James, a responsiveness to others that is also responsibility to others.

The novels from the last years of the nineteenth century are distinctive in the context of this study for the intensity of the scepticism they appear to turn upon absences from the material and metaphysical home. These are the years of *The Other House* (1896), *What Maisie Knew* (1897), "The Turn of the Screw" (1898), and *The Awkward Age* (1899), fictions in which departures from the domestic home and perdurable identity are permeated with the suggestion

²² Derrida, *Adieu*, 79.

of forsaken responsibilities—particularly those which traditionally pertain to mothers, fathers, wives, and husbands. There is little, for instance, that may favourably be said of Mr and Mrs Beale’s efforts to liberate themselves from their familial emplacement; to slough off their roles as parents and spouses so that they may move unencumbered by restrictive identities through London’s sociable circles. Comparable to Maisie in her status as an impediment, the domiciled state little Effie imposes upon her father, Tony Bream, quickly makes her a target for the family’s frightening houseguest, Rose Armiger. Disconcertingly plastic, Rose is a guest of the occasion, a player of localised selves suited to the character with whom she is in dialogue, but it is hard to imagine an argument which convincingly aligned her capacity to answer another’s desires with responsibility, however generous one’s interpretation of the concept. It is upon James’s last novel of this decade that the second half of this chapter will focus. Not only does *The Awkward Age* leave as a deeply ambiguous one the question as to whether the unhomely and responsive community it depicts is responsible, but in the figure of Mr Longdon—a characteristically ambivalent emissary for the domestic territory of Beccles—it might be thought to restore, or at least to make the case for restoring, responsibility to the place from which this project initially sought to detach it: with the locatable, self-possessed individual for whom responsibility is constituted by a set of well-defined virtues. This chapter will regard *The Awkward Age* as something of a turning-point for this study: to what extent does the novel continue to permit us to align “getting out of one’s self,” with the kind of responsivity which registers responsibility?²³ What are the hazards now of doing so? What might the answers to these questions presage for James’s responsibility as we enter the period of the late novels?

The Awkward Text

“Irresponsibility” is a mainstay of *The Awkward Age*’s critical evaluations. In *The Pilgrimage of Henry James* (1928)—a polemic, incidentally, against unhomeliness due to the fact

²³ Henry James, *Roderick Hudson* (London: Penguin, 1987), 53.

that, in the critic's opinion, James's too-long separation from his native land had made his art convoluted, inferior, and corrupt—Van Wyck Brooks described the novel as the “fruits of an irresponsible imagination.”²⁴ While the majority of the book's readers have since refrained from ascribing the irresponsibility of *The Awkward Age* directly to James's imagination, the novel is often compared to *What Maisie Knew* for its attention to the “injuries, psychological and moral, that irresponsible, self-centred, pleasure-seeking parents of the leisured classes could inflict on their children.”²⁵ The irresponsibility is thought largely to belong to Mrs Brook, while describing her laissez-faire attitude towards the “impossible” (in this case read: improper, unsuitable, impractical) state of her house, her guests, and their talk given the arrival of her daughter, Nanda, in the midst of it all.²⁶ Reminiscent of those at the Casa Alvisi, Mrs Brook's drawing rooms are the setting for a gathering of men and women, some intelligent, others merely wealthy or curious, who together collaborate in the art of periphrastic, insinuating conversation.²⁷ But now Nanda, the hostesses' daughter, menaces with her susceptible virtue the candid talk of the company. Allowing for the prejudices of the age, Nanda's presence, her youth, her unmarried status, ought to be answered by the company with a degree of self-censorship, her unworldliness sensitively guarded against the circle's “free talk.” Ought “account to be taken, in a circle of free talk, of a new and innocent, a wholly unacclimatised

²⁴ Van Wyck Brooks, *The Pilgrimage of Henry James* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), 134.

²⁵ Dorothea Krook, *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 114. Michèle Mendelssohn phrases it more mildly when she says that the novel “compel[s] readers to question the adults' responsibility” (“‘I'm Not a Bit Expensive': Henry James and the Sexualization of the Victorian Girl,” in *The Nineteenth-Century Child and Consumer Culture*, ed. Dennis Denisoff (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 82).

²⁶ The epithet “impossible” is applied to a great deal that belongs to the signifying order of Buckingham Crescent: to Buckingham Crescent itself (50) and the people it welcomes (46); to Mitchy and Mitchy's conversation (64, 142); to Tishy Grendon's house (71); to Mrs Brook (102); to Van's “impossible book” (197); to Nanda, who effectively, in her own words, “cover[s] everything else with [her] own impossibility” (309).

²⁷ In “Casa Alvisi,” James uses the metaphor of a private box at an opera to evoke the theatrical atmosphere of Mrs Bronson's drawing room. He uses the image again in the context of Buckingham Crescent when the Duchess is described observing the company from one of her hostess's “admirable ‘corners’”; she “watched... as from a box at the play, comfortably shut in, as in the old operatic days at Naples” (71).

presence?” (2:1122). A favourite of Mrs Brook’s and an (im)possible suitor for Nanda’s hand, Vanderbank remarks that his hostess has been obliged to consider “keeping the place tidy...for the young female mind” (170). Will Mrs Brook restore domestic order to her unhomely house—cleanse the conversational atmosphere, purge the house of contaminating elements (the licentious fiction, the more insalubrious guests) to provide Nanda welcome there?

According to characters like the Duchess, an advocate for the old world proprieties, Mrs Brook is quite deliberately failing to render all that is “impossible” in the realm of Buckingham Crescent “proper” (decorous, seemly) for her daughter (46). It is difficult to agree entirely with the Duchess on this point, for in calling the home into question Mrs Brook’s circle might be thought to create the conditions for a community responsive to the insincerity of the values and customs to which the Duchess’s notion of “proper” points. Why continue to act as though one’s daughter were an empty, fragile vessel when this fiction has itself never been more empty and fragile? But if this interpretation were to be pursued in an unmitigated way, it would omit the far more self-interested motives readily attributable to Mrs Brook’s resistance to instituting a “tidy” home. There may, in spite of all its *habitués* say, be very little that is worthy or commendable emergent in Buckingham Crescent’s dialogic community. Perhaps it is actively inhospitable, unresponsive to the arrival of another who would seem to threaten its continuation? Such is the contention of Merle Williams, who describes the “selfish ambition and deeply seated insecurities” of Mrs Brook and Vanderbank and their “trite evasion of any taxing responsibility” for Nanda as “pollut[ing] the exercise of hospitality.”²⁸ To enlarge upon the novel’s interest in the interpretative indeterminacy of the photographic

²⁸ Merle A. Williams, “Transforming Hospitality and Friendship in Henry James: From “A London Life” to *The Awkward Age*,” in *Transforming Henry James*, ed. Anna De Biasio, Anna Despotopoulou, and Donatella Izzo, 196–210 (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 200, 201, 207.

portrait,²⁹ *The Awkward Age* might be compared to what is called a “reversible figure,” an image which provides multiple perceptions simultaneously: it is possible to look upon the responsiveness of Buckingham Crescent as at once civilized and uncanny, responsible and irresponsible.³⁰

One’s ability to view the text according to concurrent perspectives is traceable, in part, to its generic itinerancy. In terms of its residence within the category of the novel, it is among the least “at home” of James’s productions. *The Awkward Age*, like *The Other House*, wanders in a terra incognita separating the playhouse from the author’s famous house of fiction. Intensely dialogic, thrifty in its attention to interiorities, the effect of the novel’s form is largely to occlude the place of interior life so that the talk and conduct of the majority of its characters would appear to stem from nowhere that is proper to the individual but to come instead as response to the promptings of an interlocutor. Hampered from readily equating, comparing, or juxtaposing what is expressed with the substance of an inner world, readers may cloak the expressivity of, for instance, Mrs Brook in such a valence as to make the character subject to accusations no less serious than those readers would level at Rose Armiger: jealousy of a child, covetousness of the man who might be stolen by the child, the brutal prevention of the possibility. The novel might be thought to evoke a correspondence between the two eerie women by reviving a question which haunts *The Other House* (“Where is Effie?”³¹ becomes “Where is Nanda?”³² a question posed to Mrs Brook at various points in the novel and one which recollects Effie Bream’s drowning at the hands of Rose Armiger). Yet the suggestion that Mrs Brook may figuratively have sacrificed a child to her desires remains just one

²⁹ Susan Mizruchi points out that Nanda and Aggie are both initially introduced as photographed images. The images themselves and the materials by which they are framed—crimson fur and glazed white wood—present an interpretative conundrum to Longdon. See “Reproducing Women in *The Awkward Age*,” *Representations*, 38 (Spring 1992): 101–130 (120).

³⁰ Classic examples include the rabbit–duck and the Rubin vase (sometimes known as the Rubin face or the figure–ground vase); both are instances of ambiguous or bi-stable (i.e., reversing) two-dimensional forms.

³¹ Henry James, *The Other House* (New York: Macmillan, 1897), 292, 299, 301, 302, 312.

³² Variations of this question can be found on pages 105, 110, 112, 172.

interpretation. Even as the form would make it challenging to shield Mrs Brook from such insinuations, it would at the same time make it feasible to equivocate on behalf of her responsible intentions.

The possibility that there may be something responsible at work in the responsiveness of Buckingham Crescent is made all the harder to dismiss given the complex tone and focalisation of James's Preface to the novel. In the Preface to *What Maisie Knew* (1908), the destabilised houses and adults which feature in the novel are presented, in accord with the novel's point of view, from the perspective of the child for whom both are menacing. Writing from within the circumference of Mrs Brook's circle, James positions himself beside "the wide glow" of the "liberal fireside" in order to imagine "female adolescence," a stalking predator with an "ingenuous mind and a pair of limpid searching eyes," "hover[ing] and wait[ing]" at the edges of the light" (2:1123). Adjusting the focalisation in the Preface to *The Awkward Age* (1908), the author looks upon the child from the place of unhomely responsiveness to see all that is "menaced" by *it*. James proceeds to write of the "charm" of houses that are analogous to Buckingham Crescent, a charm that is comprised of "freedom" and a "hundred other things" (2:1124). The suggestion becomes one of an experience that would seek defence against the menace of "the ingenuous mind," or more accurately, protection against the expectation that the creators of this experience take a certain kind of "account" for the ingénue. To what extent can we take James at his word? The following section of this chapter will proceed in terms of a speculative enquiry: how stable is the perception of responsibility in the responsiveness of Buckingham Crescent, its hostess, and its *habitués*? If it exists, what are its charms?

The Responsive Community

Joining together the most intimate of Buckingham Crescent's denizens is a sense for the self as given, and not *a given*. As Vanderbank and Mitchy formulate it, one is conscious of one's self because one is conscious of others:

'Besides how can we be properly conscious of each other—?'
'That's it —' Vanderbank completed his [Mitchy's] idea: 'without my finding myself, for instance, in you and Mrs. Brook? We see ourselves reflected—we're conscious of the charming whole.' (180)

Being "properly conscious" (rightly, duly aware) of the other—something of the circle's *raison d'être*—entails a consciousness of just how improper (not one's own) one's consciousness is. Enacting together the process of which they speak, Mitchy and Van offer a reading wherein "finding" oneself requires the "we," requires the "charming whole." Whether it is Van admiring his reflection in Mitchy and Mrs Brook; Mrs Brook finding in Van "some admiring reflection of the fine freedom of [her own] mind" (115); Nanda reminding Van that it was he who "brought her [Mrs Brook] out" (290); Harold Brookenham telling his mother that he depends upon her promptings to act (41); or Mrs Brook warning Cashmore that he has been "more or less produced" by the collective "we" (109), the consensus of the set is that identity reverts to one from the outside. I earlier indicated that the aesthetic treatment of the subject can be interpreted as a form of complicity with the internal conviction. Unimaginable without James's experiments in writing for the stage, *The Awkward Age* is presented by its author as the transposition of the dramatic form to the domain of prose fiction: "dialogue," James writes, "organic and dramatic," "representing and embodying substance and form" (2:1127); talk stands in for ("represents") or instantiates ("embodies") what it might elsewhere supplement: character. One consequence of this is that one might read individual instances of character as little more than questions, statements, answers, revisions, articulations and re-articulations vis-à-vis others. But ought readers to conclude that the novel's formal emulation of a belief within the fiction is equal to the novel's point of view sharing this belief?

Several influential readings recommend this line of interpretation. David Kurnick has argued that the “effect of the novel’s commitment to dialogue is a disruption of any notion of psychological depth”; “what the characters speak *is* all we need know of them.”³³ For Todorov, too, the novel refuses “the existence of an immutable identity at the core of each being.”³⁴ Leo Bersani considers *The Awkward Age* a part of James’s struggle, in the late fiction, against the “crippling notion” that a character’s proper being is to be found “beneath” or “behind” their linguistic self-representation. Language in these novels, Bersani maintains, “no longer reveal[s] character or refer[s] to desires ‘behind’ words” but presents “the unfolding of an improvised and never completed psychological design.”³⁵ (One radical conclusion to these positions might be that the difference between truth and lie, performativity and authenticity, responsiveness and self-fashioning is a false one.) Yet while a belief in the unhomeliness of the self may be shared by the innermost members of the circle, it is not one which can be ascribed to the totality of the novel’s cast, some of whom not only conceive of themselves as self-possessed but bring this interpretation to bear upon those who disavow self-belonging. The novel, moreover, seems just as committed to the point of view of those characters who consider themselves proper as with those who do not (a claim to which I will return). If through the text circulate divergent perspectives on this point, the novel might then be thought to encourage its readers to pose questions of these perspectives: why is it that certain characters believe or wish to believe themselves proper or improper? It is to the latter perspective that the following paragraphs are addressed.

When Mrs Brook bemoans the “fourth-rate” quality of the circle’s conversation since her daughter’s arrival, she informs Vanderbank: “I happen to be so constituted that my life

³³ David Kurnick, “‘Horrible Impossible’: Henry James’s Awkward Stage,” *The Henry James Review* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 109–29 (116, 122).

³⁴ Tzvetan Todorov and Patricia Martin Gibby, “The Verbal Age,” *Critical Inquiry* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1977): 351–371 (366).

³⁵ Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), 138, 130.

has something to do with my mind and my mind something to do with my talk” (170). Her summation of the relationship between her being (“mind”) and her doing (“life” and “talk”) lends itself to two interpretations. On the one hand, the comment may point to a continuous if not necessarily symmetrical relation between divisible aspects of Mrs Brook’s being, those of consciousness, of action, and of speech. Her composition or “constitution,” she intimates, is based upon a substrate of “mind” that exists prior to her expressive capacities and that directs her “talk” and “life.” The “something to do with” would imply that the reflection of her being in its doing is not un-refracted; a certain torque upon speech and gesture may be exercised. This interpretation would contradict the claim that if the text expunges the veneer of psychology it is because self is not possessed, but it would accord with the view of the Duchess, who believes Mrs Brook to be comparable to herself: an intensely calculating woman. It is the Duchess who foresees Mrs Brook’s performance at Tishy Grendon’s soirée, while inviting Longdon (and the reader) to construe it as a premeditated attempt to guarantee that Van will fail to accept Longdon’s proposal of money in return for his marrying Nanda. In a corner of Tishy’s parlor, the Duchess asks Longdon to sit beside her, in anticipation of Mrs Brook’s spectacular *coup de grâce*: “She can *keep* Mr. Van... She can work on him,” the Duchess tells Longdon, “[c]overtly” studying Mrs Brook from across the room, “Sit down—you’ll see” (236).

On the other hand, the line “my life has something to do with my mind and my mind something to do with my talk” leaves open the possibility of another reading which would undermine the Duchess’s appraisal of Mrs Brook, while leaving intact our knowledge of the Duchess as a figure who operates in terms of interested individuals. The semi-chiastic structure of the sentence (fully chiastic if, as it appears in the novel, “life” is synonymous with “talk”) provokes one to interpret the causal rapport between mind and talk backwards as well as forwards: rather than there being a preceding consciousness which talk describes or renders, queering or obscuring the mind as it goes, talk occasions the mind, produces the consciousness

that takes shape as one speaks.³⁶ This would be the preferred interpretation of Mrs Brook, who repeatedly denies being “deep” (268). Resuming with Mrs Brook after the “smash” that has splintered the circle, Mitchy greets her with admiration for the virtuosity with which she “worked” on the night of Tishy’s dinner to accomplish her ends: “you didn’t want him [Van]. For *her* [Nanda], I mean. So you risked showing it.” “*Did I?*,” Mrs. Brook responds with a look of “surprise,” later adding, “Every one that night seems to have made out something! All I can say is at any rate...you were all far deeper than I was” (253, 267-8). Deflecting the depths imputed to her onto others, charging Mitchy and Van with profundities for having “made out something” in her manner, Mrs Brook’s suggestion that her actions were unmotivated is entirely foreseeable given the consistency with which she portrays herself as an instance of “blind instinct, without a programme or a scheme” (268). “[W]hat a mistake you would make,” she has earlier warned the two men, “to see abysses of subtlety in my having been merely natural” (180).

It is with recourse to the idea that she is only “natural,” “instinct[ively]” responsive to the occasion, that Mrs Brook justifies her apparent failure to shelter Nanda from the liberating, compromising regimes of modernity: she can neither keep unwholesome guests from the house, nor dissuade Nanda from pursuing tainting friendships, nor induce her daughter to marry Mitchy, for to do so would be to arrogate a place from which to exert agency over forces to which she is but an answer. When Mr Cashmore expresses his astonishment that Mrs Brook should have no idea of Nanda’s whereabouts, she reminds him that

[Nanda] has her free young life, which, by that law of our time that I’m sure I only want ...to accept – she has her precious freshness of feeling which I say to myself that, so far as control is concerned, I ought to respect... I’ve gone in, I mean, frankly

³⁶ Kevin Ohi, working in the vein of Bersani, makes a similar point regarding metaphors in the late fiction and the way in which these metaphors “cease to be subordinated to the representation of consciousness” (*Henry James and the Queerness of Style* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 45): “It is less that figures render characters’ thoughts than that the thoughts themselves seem to occur in, even to be ‘caused’ by the movement between figures” (49).

for my very own Time—who is one, after all, that one should pretend to decline to go where it may lead? (105–6)

There is a certain tension in Mrs Brook's wanting to "accept" and "respect" a law that she says she has already "gone in...for," as if she were forcing herself to submit to a "law" that promises to leave her powerless, without "control," even as it puts Nanda in possession of "her free young life." But cultivated passivity appears to gain the verbal upper-hand as presuming to have the authority "to decline" the lead of "Time" could only ever be, Mrs Brook intimates, a "preten[se]." By claiming to be nothing more profound than a response to "Time," to "the inevitable," a "submission to fate," Mrs Brook would attempt to erase the possibility of her own agency (253, 187). We may still want to construe, as the Duchess does, her rhetoric as designed to insulate her from accusations that hers is an inherently self-interested performance. As Scott Paul Gordon clarifies, what he terms the "passivity trope" has a rich history of usage in discourses which seek to "construct a self whose disinterestedness is guaranteed."³⁷ By ascribing one's expressivity to the promptings of external events, one thereby avoids or attempts to avoid the troubling proposition that all individual behaviour is inevitably motivated, for better or worse. Before addressing Mrs Brook's assertions from within a hermeneutics of suspicion though, it is worth considering the degree to which they partake of what appears to be something of an aspirational ideal at Buckingham Crescent. I want to suggest that the efforts of Mrs Brook and her intimates to disown proper self, to extricate themselves from the grammatical and conceptual structures of self-belonging, appear to go towards the idea of a community that might disinterestedly respond to the events, persons, incidents which stray into its purview. As Gordon suggests, to allow others to infer that one's conduct has come from a private place is inevitably to be suspected by others of bias, partiality, or self-interest, but if one can claim to have left that sequestered site behind—

³⁷ Scott Paul Gordon, *The Power of the Passive Self in English Literature, 1640–1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5.

by suggesting, for instance, that one is a creation of “the charming whole,” or that one is principally moved by “Time”—then the claim to be a responding in the absence of prejudice may follow.

There is great talk among the *habitués* of Buckingham Crescent about the importance of being without this quality. Nanda proudly informs Longdon, who confesses to having “quite prejudices enough,” to the lack of any among the “we” of the circle: “We discuss everything and every one,” Nanda tells him; “Mother says we haven’t any prejudices” (99). “*Prejudice*” may be thought to stand for all “within” the subject that it brings to encounters: anticipations, preconceptions, preferences, interests. In its transitive sense, “to prejudice” something also suggests what the prejudiced individual is likely to do: to impair or adversely affect the thing to which its partialities are brought. The condition of belonging to the circle Mitchy describes as “one beautiful intelligence” is to relinquish one’s self and the prejudices therein so as to be able to “discuss everything,” to come “face to face with things as they are,” to “look the truth in the face and not be angry or silly about it” (177, 106, 111). This at least is the test of initiation that Mrs Brook puts to Longdon when she invites him to understand that the Duchess is engaged in an affair with Petherton. For Longdon to parse the game of insinuation, to acknowledge the meaning of Mrs Brook’s obliquities, would be for him to consent to break the sign from its prearranged place with the referent (at Buckingham Crescent “[w]e all call everything—anything,” Van tells him (165)) and to shed his moral biases in order to join this “one beautiful intelligence” as it registers the “interest” of the Duchess’s efforts to “steer” her conduct around little Aggie’s guileless mind (123). “[W]e’re watching to see if the Duchess can carry it through,” says Mrs Brook, opening the “temple of analysis” to Longdon (122, 205). Severely dissociating his “I” from Mrs Brook’s “we’re,” Longdon declines both the implication and the invitation “that I should watch *with* you” (122).

Longdon’s selective refusal to understand, to grasp the joke, to hear the intimation is the means by which he preserves his separation from this modern instance of sociability—

that is, his allegiance to an older one. (Others, like Lady Fanny, little Aggie, and Edward Brookenham are excluded from the contours of the “beautiful intelligence” on the basis of their being (ostensibly) too dim-witted to register the play of a language game.) Despite the “waft of cold air” Longdon suffuses over the circle’s aspiration to unprejudiced responding, however, it remains to be spoken of by others as a laudable aim (122). In the wake of Longdon’s offer to settle a substantial amount of money upon Nanda in return for Van’s marrying her, Van will speak in what appears to be a lauding tone of his, Mitchy’s, and Mrs Brook’s ability to discuss the prospect of his marrying Nanda without *self*-ishness. “[W]hat *is* splendid,” Van reflects, “is this extraordinary freedom and good humour of our intercourse and the fact that we do care—so independently of our personal interest, with so little selfishness or other vulgarity—to get at the idea of things” (179). Van’s comment is ambiguous as to whether “personal interest,” “selfishness or other vulgarity” can be escaped, for while “independently” could suggest “free of” interest, “*our* personal interest” would indicate that he, Mitchy and Mrs Brook might only try to set aside an ugly actuality. Can they discuss the prospect of Vanderbank and Nanda marrying each another, a prospect in which each might be said to have overwhelming personal interests, as though it were only “awfully interesting”³⁸ (another ambiguous phrase)? What is the good or what are the goods of doing so? The next section suggests that this pledge to attend without “personal interest” forms the basis for a transmutation of responsiveness into a difficult “idea” of responsibility.

A Little Idea of Responsibility

The possibility of perceiving the denizens of Buckingham Crescent as at once irresponsible and responsible may also be traced to the theoretically and practically challenging type of responsibility that one encounters there. Lamenting the prospect that she may be

³⁸ A favourite phrase of the set: (Van) “You’re awfully interesting” (29); (Mitchy) “that’s awfully interesting” (82); (Mrs Brook) “it’s awfully interesting” (106); (Nanda) “it *will* be awfully [interesting]” (295).

forced to house and provision her children for longer than she anticipated, with “money, money, money at every turn running away like water,” Mrs Brook probes Nanda as to when she intends to stay with Longdon (193). She reminds her daughter, “we must each remember that we shall fall to pieces if we don’t manage to keep hold of some little idea of responsibility” (194). Mrs Brook’s “we” might easily be glossed as referring to the immediate family, and her line read as insisting that “each” member of the Brookenham clan must “keep hold of” his or her “little idea of responsibility” if the family is to be kept whole. That is to say, Nanda is to remember that the family is economically insecure, acutely dependent upon the largesse of others to make ends meet; she must be the recipient of hospitality as often as she is a member of the house that hosts. But is Mrs Brook’s “we” so exclusive? And does her “little idea of responsibility” belong to the individual or to the “we” as a whole?

The “each” of Mrs Brook’s “[w]e must each” serves retrospectively to divide the collective she initially conjures into individual members, but ascribed to this individual subject is the verb “remember,” as in “each of us must remember.” “Responsibility” could still be referring to this individualised “each” (in which case, “we shall fall to pieces” would be an individualised falling to pieces), but this isn’t the most obvious interpretation once “we” has returned for a second and third time. The reappearance of the de-individuated plural suggests that it is by this pluralised subject that the “little idea of responsibility” must be kept “hold of”; it is also the unity of this “we” that is at stake if the “little idea” slips from their collective hand. To whom “we” refers, whom it distinguishes, excludes, and coerces, is a less soluble conundrum, and one which pervades a novel surfeited with expansive, exclusive, and absorbing “we”s. This particular “we” includes Nanda and her mother but both can also be positioned on the inside of the “we” of Nanda’s “we haven’t any prejudices,” the “we” of Vanderbank’s “we do care...to get at the idea of things,” and the “we” of Mitchy’s “here we

are together, share and share alike – one beautiful intelligence” (177). It is this “we” that is said to have “fallen” or been “smash[ed]” “to pieces” at the climax of the narrative (253).³⁹

Mrs Brook’s possible attachment of responsibility to “we” would indicate that if Buckingham Crescent contains no proper persons to which responsibility may be attributed, the plural subject formed upon the basis of being improper itself holds responsibility. It is in this way that whoever belongs to the “we” might be said to be both simultaneously irresponsible and responsible: separately irresponsible, collectively responsible. Mrs Brook poses just such a challenge of double-vision to the Duchess. When the Duchess apprises Mrs Brook of her obligation to care for her daughter so that Nanda isn’t damaged, Mrs Brook responds by seeming to deny her responsibility while including herself in the “we” that is responsible. Adopting the plural, and speaking of the Duchess’s “solicitude” with great irony, Mrs Brook reassures her how intensely “we feel your solicitude...I needn’t tell you at this time of day what weight in every respect we attach to your judgement” (70). Mrs Brook’s claim that there is communal concern for Nanda’s welfare and communal gratitude for the solicitude of the Duchess amounts to the suggestion that what is not *her* responsibility is a collective one. This “we” explicitly excludes the “your” of the Duchess but it probably includes some of the very people with whom the Duchess would rather Nanda and, more importantly, little Aggie, the Duchess’s ward, were not conjoined.

Collective responsibility, as it belongs to a group, community, or plurality, has been notoriously challenging to theorise.⁴⁰ How is a plurality brought into existence? To what or

³⁹ “We’ve fallen to pieces,” Mrs. Brook insists. “You pulled us down,” Vanderbank tells her: “The smash...was indeed as complete, I think, as your intention. Each of the ‘pieces’ testifies to your success” (253).

⁴⁰ Strictly speaking, “collective responsibility” covers all instances of non-distributive responsibility. It refers to the responsibility of a group *qua* group. Up close, however, collective responsibility has been thought to describe a spectrum, bracketed, on the one side, by the legal responsibility of incorporated entities and, on the other, by the more loosely defined responsibility of informal groups and collectives. For a selection of approaches to these questions see *Collective Responsibility: Five Decades of Debate in Theoretical and Applied Ethics*, ed. Larry May and Stacey Hoffman (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991).

whom is the responsibility of a plurality addressed?⁴¹ On the philosopher Margaret Gilbert's account, a plural subject is formed when two or more subjects make a mutual commitment to do something together, or as Gilbert prefers to say, "as a body."⁴² This body and the commitment from which it emerges become, respectively, the agent of responsibility and the subject of responsibility. We might think of the aspiration to respond without prejudice or interest as the commitment upon which the circle at Buckingham Crescent is founded: the aspiration "so independently of our personal interest, with so little selfishness or other vulgarity" to "get at the idea of things." The commitment not to be "selfish" forms a collective consciousness with a "little idea of responsibility" that cannot be forgotten lest the collective revert to its "pieces." Van, Mitchy, Mrs Brook must strive to discuss the idea of Van's marriage to Nanda aside from "personal interest" if the commitment is not to be broken, the community fragmented. But if James announces in the Preface to the novel, addressing himself to an imaginary "critic," that "you can't resolve the elements of my whole into different responsible agents," this is precisely what Longdon's offer menaces: to "resolve" the responsible community into "agents," responsible to and for their own "personal interests" (2:1136).⁴³ There is just too much interest bound up in the proposal for it to be merely "interesting": Mitchy's attraction to Nanda coupled with his admiration for Van, the respective pecuniary concerns of Mrs Brook and Van, her covetousness of him, and Van's for his

⁴¹ For a consideration of community separate from the question of responsibility see J. Hillis Miller's "Unworked and Unavowable: Community in *The Awkward Age*," in *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 101–150.

⁴² Margaret Gilbert, *Sociality and Responsibility: New Essays in Plural Subject Theory* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 147.

⁴³ James is speaking here of the mistake a hypothetical reader or critic would make if he or she were to try to distinguish between the "substance and the form" of the novel—between the novel's subject and its treatment of that subject. James denies that this critic will be able to see "the two discharged offices [substance and form] as separate" (2:1135). Addressing this reader, James writes that, "you can't resolve the elements of my whole into different responsible agents or find your way at all (for your own fell purpose)" (2:1136). Although James is not speaking of individual and collective responsibility as it pertains intra-textually to *The Awkward Age*, it is, nevertheless, arresting that the idea of whole and part responsibility comes to his mind in relation to this novel and no other.

freedom. It is perhaps in recognition of the danger it poses that Mrs Brook attempts to exhaust the prospect of its interest for the collective “we.” In a series of future perfect statements, Mrs Brook predicts or precipitates the failure of the plan:

“Dear Van will have done his best, and we shall have done ours. Mr Longdon will have done his—poor Nanda even will have done hers. But it will all have been in vain. However,” Mrs Brook continued to expound, “she’ll probably have the money. Mr Longdon will surely consider that she’ll want it if she doesn’t marry still more than if she does. . . . [I]t lacks, as I say, the element of real suspense.” (178–79)

By pointing up its dreary predictability (“will have done . . . will have done . . . will have done”), its “lack” of “real suspense,” Mrs Brook would exorcise the plot as a subject for the circle’s responsive imagination, thereby expelling the threat of “personal interest” irrupting in their midst. But her lines may also be read as a performative attempt to prejudice the outcome—a possibility Van is quick to underscore even as he ostensibly disables it. Van raises the spectre of Mrs Brook’s “personal” feelings in the matter only to say they mean “nothing” to her prediction: “all she wants is to see what may really happen, to take in the truth of the case . . . She offers me the truth, as she sees it, about myself” (180). The inexorable presence of partiality to a specific conclusion is playfully, provocatively courted, if defended against in the name of preserving the fragile community and the “goods,” the “charms” its “little idea of responsibility” might be said to foster.

Most notably, there would appear to something highly desirable, for Nanda’s sake, in operating as though a disinterested response to her coming of age were not “impossible.” To approach such an event with an attachment to the “proper” way in which Nanda ought to be handled may, to quote James’s Preface, resemble an attempt “to fit propriety into a smooth general case which is really all the while bristling and crumbling into fierce particular ones” (2:1126). What is the proper response to a girl who describes herself to Van as an “old-mannered, modern, slangy hack” (132)? Using the slang for a hackney carriage, Nanda presents herself as a dissonant fusion of the antique and the contemporaneous, the formal and the

colloquial. She is neither wholly “modern” like the train or car, nor yet properly “old-mannered” like a barouche (290). Thus while Nanda’s candour, her “serious[ness],” her “extraordinar[y] simpl[icity]” make it difficult to consider her at home in the playful, clever, performative milieu of her mother, she would also seem an infelicitous fit for the role that Longdon and the Duchess imagine her playing: wife and mother to “a fine old English family” (94, 91, 152).⁴⁴ Whatever else it may be (hazardous, unthinking, narcissistic) Mrs Brook’s apparent detachment from the place of interest in her daughter’s advent permits Nanda, “a most uncanny little wretch,” to slip the net of the “smooth general case” which would otherwise oblige her rushed exit from the liminal, disconcerting, the dynamic, experimental space in which she situates herself (290). Nanda is stranded, loosed into a “really rather exciting” realm wherein the commitment to disown prejudice appears to have catalysed the capacious intimacies and “queer condonations” characteristic of Buckingham Crescent (135).⁴⁵

If responsibility has been deindividuated and collectivised, so forms of intimacy usually exclusive, restricted to select participants may also be said to have become communal. Mrs Brook’s maternal passion may be attenuated with regards to her children, for instance, but this perception might be balanced against a sense for its arresting diffusion among participants who would normally remain outside this iconically restricted domain of feeling. It is, for instance, upon the child-like Mitchy that Mrs Brook is said to gaze “as no painted Madonna’s [face] had ever covered the little charge at the breast beneath it” (64). If maternal solicitude has been disseminated, the erotic life of the circle seems to have been concentrated, pooled in the person of universally adored, eternally disinterested Vanderbank. “[W]e were in

⁴⁴ Adrian Poole notes that Nanda shares a sense of humour not with her mother’s circle but with old-mannered Longdon: it is for him she breaks “almost for the first time into the semblance of a smile” (153). See “Nanda’s Smile: Teaching James and the Sense of Humor,” *The Henry James Review* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 4–18.

⁴⁵ To Longdon’s comment, in the garden of Mitchy’s rented party house, at the horror of it all, Nanda counters: “Don’t you think it’s really rather exciting? Everything’s ready, the feast all spread, and with nothing to blunt our curiosity but the general knowledge that there will be people and things, we comfortably take our places” (135).

love with him [Van],” Mrs Brook tells her husband, situating desire for and the desirability of Van at the level of collective fancy (265). Even Nanda’s expression to Mitchy of her wish to “love” (presumably Vanderbank) “in vain” might signify not simply tragic arrestment but also, perhaps mainly, a form of investment by which pleasure is derived from contributing to the fund of adulation from which returns will never be seen (210). Whether or not James would have covered this relational effusiveness with the word “charm,” many a modern reader and critic is inclined to consider it a part not only of the attractions of Buckingham Crescent but of its ethical value. David Kurnick, for instance, has written of the novel’s generic and cognitive “impossibility” as the means by which James imagines and sustains a “utopian social world,” “a more capacious social world.”⁴⁶ Kurnick’s take may be overly affirming and might fruitfully be set beside Cynthia Ozick’s corrective observation that Mrs Brook’s world holds more “panic, shame, helplessness, and chaos than James could candidly face.”⁴⁷ Nonetheless, the group’s idiosyncratic answer to Nanda’s intricate historical position—exiled from the past, caught on the cusp of modernity, held like Walter Benjamin’s angel of history between hope and catastrophe—does stand out appealingly, for this reader at least, from the Duchess’s treatment of little Aggie. What is it then that makes it, for a final time, perverse simply to allow the responsiveness of Buckingham Crescent its fruitful idea of responsibility? The final section of this chapter proposes that it is the introduction into Buckingham Crescent of what is termed “the point of view of Beccles” (123) that—to a greater extent than the novel’s formal difficulty, or the unusual type of responsibility figured in it—makes it impossible not to look upon Buckingham Crescent with double vision, a locus of responsibility and irresponsibility.

The Point of View of Beccles

⁴⁶ David Kurnick, “‘Horrible Impossible’: Henry James’s Awkward Stage,” *The Henry James Review* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 109–29. For other arguments which pay special attention to the affirming nature of James’s portrayal of queer sexuality and relationality see Pamela Thurschwell, “*Bringing Nanda forward, Or Acting Your Age in The Awkward Age*,” *Critical Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (July 2016): 72–90.

⁴⁷ Cynthia Ozick, *What Henry James Knew* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993)

For all that the natives of Buckingham Crescent can be thought of as decoupled from their proper places, it is Longdon who quite literally calls the place of home into question: ending his thirty-year domicile in the Suffolk countryside to turn up in the modern metropolis like a revenant of the past, “mouldy,” “disinterred,” with neither “mass, substance, [nor] presence” (20, 22). But if Longdon is framed by James in the mode of the uncanny, his perturbing presence in the context of Buckingham Crescent might poignantly be said to stem from the homeliness to which he points. As Poynton is to Mrs Gereth, so Beccles is to Longdon, not only a dwelling, the house in which Longdon is master, but the index of his residing within the *chez soi* of personal identity:

Beyond the lawn the house was before him, old, square, red-roofed, well assured of its right to the place it took up in the world. This was a considerable space—in the little world at least of Beccles—and the look of possession had everywhere mixed with it, in the form of old windows and doors, the tone of old red surfaces, the style of old white facings, the age of old high creepers, the long confirmation of time. (197)

Everything of the aesthetic of Beccles bespeaks integrity and definite residence: from its unbroken connection to the past, registered by way of a steady beat of “old” that culminates “the long confirmation of time,” to the “assur[ance]” with which it takes its “place,” takes up “considerable space”; its “look of possession” a kind of patina “mixed” in with its form, tone, style. Beccles serves to corroborate Longdon as one for whom self is inalienable, immovable property: “Mr Longdon had not made his house, he had simply lived it” (204). While Longdon leaves Beccles, he carries its imprimatur with him, for James’s treatment of the character continues to differentiate his mode of being from that of the others.

In construing the significance of a gesture, tone, or expression, the novel’s narrative voice regularly invokes conditional spectatorship, foregrounding the suppositional nature of its analysis, reminding auditors that the psychological substance they have attributed to a particular character has an uncertain ontology at best. Accordingly, it is arresting when it is said, during a gossipy discussion between Longdon and the Duchess that causes Longdon to

shift on the sofa, that “a spectator [to their conversation] would easily have gathered from the long, suppressed wriggle that had ended in his falling back” a discomfort at “some sacrifice of his habit of not privately depreciating those to whom he was publicly civil” (233). Not only does this “easily” obtained glimpse into the character’s mind ascribe to him a moral aversion to performativity, it also works to secure for the character a subjective “home,” an inner sense of the self as a given, while acting to carve Longdon out as a legible figure. Arranging for an agreement between his expressivity and inner life—the sign (the hand to the eyes) readily indicates a subjective state (suffering)—James not only endeavors to guard Longdon from the suspicion of pervasive dissimulation which clings to rest of the company, he makes our readerly suspicion of the others all the more acute by setting their opacity against Longdon’s transparency. While Mrs Brook’s form is all mutability—“her flexibility, her flickering colour...her natural, quavering tone” (40)—Longdon’s body is figured as a uniquely coherent register of thought and affect. Wondering aloud whether Longdon has shared her idea of “brib[ing] him [Van] to take her [Nanda],” the Duchess fixes Longdon with a searching look before declaring, “[y]ou’re of a limpidity, dear man!—you’ve only to be said ‘bo!’ to and you confess. Consciously or unconsciously—the former, I’m inclined to think—you’ve wanted him for her” (152). Set against Longdon’s clear, upright presence the responsiveness of Buckingham Crescent becomes alarming in its opacity, seriously beset by the question, *is* this responsibility? Does the itineracy of the Brookenhams and their intimates represent a “trite evasion of responsibility,” an unwillingness to remain in place and to take up the obligations of caring for one’s property and one’s family, or does it register the related state, the condition of being the other’s host and the host’s other? If we cannot *know* the answer to this question, we can trust to the candor of Longdon’s feelings on the matter: one of the “greatest shocks” modernity reserves for the character is the fact that landed families like the Brookenhams rent their estates (contemptuously referred to by Mrs Brook as “the Hovel”(168)) to fund their sociable metropolitan lives (134). “[W]hat are people made of,” Longdon asks Nanda with

dismay, “that they consent, just for money, to the violation of their homes?” (135). But it is precisely due to the interest Longdon takes in the sanctity of his home (we hear of his tending the garden, sending the best of his flowers to Nanda, treasuring ancestral heirlooms) that his welcome of Nanda, Mitchy, and Vanderbank at Beccles may be read as a profoundly sincere instance of hospitality. If Longdon is partial to Beccles, he must be especially fond of Nanda, for his chiding her for not taking the part of hostess in relation to Mitchy and Van “show[s] her in this way, to her pleasure, how far he had gone toward taking her, as he called it, into the house” (196); while Longdon’s hospitality may be more circumspect, less permissive than Mitchy’s or Mrs Brook’s, it would seem to be all the more sincere for its restrictiveness.

A similar argument may be made for Longdon’s efforts to step into the role of Nanda’s responsible guardian. These efforts can look, beside the apparent responsibility of cultivated disinterestedness, parochial and dismally nostalgic. His proposal may be criticised for its conversion of Nanda into fungible property, for its appeal to Van’s baser motives, for its conservative rendition of responsibility into the respectability of a proper place for Nanda, either with Van or with himself at Beccles; nor can Longdon’s actions be dissociated from his ambiguous attraction to Nanda for her arresting likeness to Lady Julia, her maternal grandmother. Given Longdon’s thwarted love for Lady Julia *and* for Van’s mother, his ambition to occasion the marriage of the descendants of the matriarchs bears relating to Strether’s feelings for Chad and Madame de Vionnet: “Yes, they’re my youth, since somehow, at the right time, nothing else ever was.”⁴⁸ This is to say that our ability to make a claim for Longdon’s receptiveness to the fierce particularity of Nanda and Van must contend with the degree to which he may be at once over-imagining them and under-imaginatively responding to them. But if Longdon’s responsibility lacks the pliability and the commodious horizons of that furnished by Buckingham Crescent, neither his prejudices nor his motivations give the lie

⁴⁸ Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, ed. Nicola Bradbury (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 214–215.

to the sincerity of his efforts. The same cannot be said of the pledge to respond freely, a commitment which may harbour an idea of responsibility but which may also (or instead) act as the license by which Van ensures he is “let” “off” any troublesome beholdenness, or the means by which Mrs Brook keeps a firm hold upon the subjects of her interest (277). Perhaps the test of initiation which would see a prospective member of the temple shed his or her prejudicial self is also a sacrifice of the self’s agency to Mrs Brook as the treacherous mistress of ceremonies. The curiously static drama of Lady Fanny, perennially trembling upon the brink of elopement with Captain Dent-Douglas, is a particularly stimulating subject for the group’s responsive capacities. Lady Fanny is, as Mrs Brook puts it, “the delight of our life... She will, she won’t—she won’t, she will! It’s the excitement, every day, of plucking the daisy over” (113). Yet Van submits that it is not, in fact, “fate” that has given the group Fanny as an eternal “occupation” but Mrs Brook who arranges to “kee[p] her on the edge,” perpetually poised to take flight and thus a perpetual locus of interest (168). Likewise, her claim to be following the lead of “Time” with regard to Nanda’s advent has the effect, regardless of the sincerity of Mrs Brook’s claim, of stalling Nanda in her uncanny state, thereby prolonging the exhilarating drama Mrs Brook informs Mr Cashmore that she and Nanda are producing; a theatrical called “the modern daughter.” “It *is* the modern daughter—we’re really ‘doing’ her, the child and I” (106). Mrs Brook would not then be the hostess as *bôte*—a guest of her hosts, a host of her guests, an indistinguishable part of one communal consciousness—but one who receives only to arrest and master her visitants to the profit of her appetite for “the element” of “suspense.”

Given the impossibility of warding off such a reading, might *The Awkward Age* represent the culmination in a series of novels that drastically diminishes the possibility of an affiliation in James between the responsive self and responsibility? For while being in lieu of a home might make one imminently responsive to another, *The Awkward Age* would suggest that such a condition not only makes one radically suspect but that the claim to have expropriated oneself of motive, interest, a proper place, is an elusive ideal at best and a false position at

worst. The novel adduces this latter point through Longdon's proposal itself—an offer which relentlessly provokes the self-concern of both Van and Mrs Brook. If Van's agreement to the proposal might have disclosed his financial interests, his refusal by omission continues to tell of a lingering queasiness or prejudice towards the “uncanny” Nanda that is as discouraging as it is plausible. Meanwhile, Mrs Brook's aspiration to accept her fate disinterestedly is severely put to the test when she is met with the opportunity to alleviate her family's material privation—but only if she will work Longdon's attachment to Nanda. “[I]nstant” or cold-blooded scheming, saving Nanda or sacrificing her, however one reads Mrs Brook's exposure of Nanda's inaptness for marriage, it works to ensure that her daughter will, as she predicts, “have the money,” thereby mitigating the fiscal precarity of the Brookenhams. After all, it seems Mrs Brook would rather have her home than lose it. With her confrères, Mrs Brook will hold the party line, insisting upon the spontaneous nature of her response to the appearance of the ruinous book, while Nanda, in her role as conciliator, will endeavor to remind her mother's erstwhile collaborators of their commitment to one another. But if Mrs Brook has pulled down the temple, she may also have pulled it down it upon the fiction or conviction upon which the temple is built: that one might be without one's self, without “selfishness or other vulgarity.”

I don't think “we,” or less coercively “one,” can completely abandon the reading which would regard the group's “little idea of responsibility”—of un-predetermined attentiveness to what is unprecedented and “extraordinary” (310)—as a serious notion, at least for some, nor dismiss the disorientating, thrilling, enriching involvements it allows for, but *The Awkward Age* leaves one with a sense for how precarious the separation of response to the other is from hostility for the other. The well-founded decencies for which Longdon stands and through which he expresses concern for Van and Nanda may offer very little that is appealing to the future onto which the novel faces, but he and they have served to make the quiet uneasiness lingering over the responsibility of self-less response loud and impossible to

dispel. What is one to make of Strether's susceptibility to Chad? Responsibility or enchantment with a life otherwise "diffused, postponed, avoided, sublimated, obscured, or more or less missed"?⁴⁹ How to interpret Kate Croy's response to the yearnings of Milly Theale? Kindness or cruelty? Is responsibility in James, and particularly in late James, ever fully present or fully absent, wholly selfless or wholly self-regarding? Given how closely readers are asked to question the ostensibly responsive nature of being and doing in the late novels, perhaps it is now, as Mrs Brook puts it, "every one's fate to be in one way or another the subject of ideas" (272).

⁴⁹ Kevin Ohi, "Belatedness and Style," in *Palgrave Advances in Henry James Studies*, ed. Peter Rawlings, 126–146 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 126.

Afterword

The Responsible Lie

‘Do you know I think I won’t wait?’

‘Not to see her—after coming?’

‘Well, with you in the field—I came for news of her, but she must be all right. If she *is*—’
But her took her straight up. ‘Ah, how do I know?’ He was moved to say more. ‘It’s not *I*
who am responsible for her, my dear. It seems to me it’s you.’¹

The Wings of the Dove (1902)

This thesis began by proposing that our engagement with James’s work might be enriched if we gave greater weight to a kind of responsibility which did not only, or predominantly, describe an individual’s relationship to her actions, but that named an unlimited, particular involvement by virtue of a relationship’s limitlessness and particularity—a process of sensing, recognising, and receiving another’s appeals and the giving or withholding of response. Yet I have also sought consistently to return to the ways in which James addresses the fraught implications of detaching the concept from individual accountability. Liability for one’s actions, however inelastic or under-nuanced this paradigm, offers us a kind of ideal clarity regarding the constitution of responsibility: it is I who am responsible; responsible, that is, for my doings, and responsible for doing well or ill. The idea of responsibility as responsivity explodes this clarity: how did I come to be responsible? To what extent is it in my power to determine to whom I am responsible and the means by which it is expressed? How do I express responsibility? Is *this* responsibility? How might I know? The project has attempted to trace the ways in which James’s work bristles with such questions, but in structuring it around a process of questioning, I am acutely aware that some readers may lament the fact that I have not presented the kind of transparency for responsiveness that is ostensibly a part of our ordinary understanding of responsibility. This study has looked instead to indicate some of the hopes and fears responsiveness catalyses, as

¹ Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner’s, 1902), 2:100.

well as a number of its defining aspects—namely, its place “in between” particularities, its temporally unceasing condition, its exorbitance, and its disconcertingly slanted relation to the conventional (indeed, its “irresponsibility”), but I have considered it antithetical to the spirit of a responsibility so contextually dependent, so ambiguous, and so dis-organised to extend generalised answers to questions that are best pursued within texts rather than superimposed upon them.

Numerous possible avenues of inquiry have presented themselves as this project advanced, but it has become increasingly clear to me that further study pertaining just to James’s personal writings, or to his capacious correspondence, would disclose dimensions of responsivity idiosyncratic to those forms—faced as they are, to a greater intensity than the novels and tales, with negotiating the very real claims of the living and the dead. Perhaps more pressingly, and in the context of its attentiveness to James’s novels in the second half, this project will remain incomplete until it has broached the topic of responsiveness and responsibility in the wake of *The Awkward Age*. Thus not wanting to close without returning, however briefly, to a consideration of James’s late novels, in the remainder of this afterword I take up one of the looser threads strung over the course of the project: the correspondence, alluded to in the essays on Balzac, in the Prefaces, and in *Roderick Hudson*, between the experiences of absorption, involvement, or saturation in the appeal of a human or an aesthetic instance of otherness and the idea of being duped, hoodwinked, or (more menacingly) deceived. For example, James writes of Balzac’s eminent responsiveness to his creation as involving his being “beguiled and carried along” by it²; moreover, as we have seen, James connects the writer’s responsible involvement with his “prime object” to the experience of

² “His work at large tastes of the same kind of humour [“the joy of power and creation”], and we feel him again and again, like any other great healthy producer of these matters, beguiled and carried along. He would have been, I dare say, the last not to insist that the artist has pleasures forever indescribable; he lived in short in his human comedy with the largest life we can attribute to the largest capacity” (*Literary Criticism, Vol. 2: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson, (New York: Library of America, 1984), 2:100).

being a “dupe.”³ The next paragraphs return to this idea in order to set forth a tentative proposition regarding the working of responsibility in *The Wings of the Dove* (1903). Were this thesis to be developed further, the exploratory ideas I offer here would likely change as they were both deepened and extended, but I will would like to end by sketching an afterlife for the thesis.

When James writes, in his first essay on the author from 1875, that “he himself [Balzac] was his own most perfect dupe,” the phrase registers James’s impatience with the novelist’s proclivity for interrupting his narratives, apparently in *propria persona*, to invent and expound mad philosophies, “to concoct...elaborate messes of folly” (2:47, 2:46):

The chief point is that he himself was his own most perfect dupe; he believed in his own magnificent rubbish, and if he made it up, as the phrase is, as he went along, his credulity kept pace with his invention. (2:47)

Personifying, as he often does, cerebral faculties, James has Balzac’s capacity for self-deception steadfastly keep up with his powers of creation; he succumbs to invention even as he invents, in an endless overturning of mastery by dupery, dupery by mastery. This is one of several reflections in the 1875 essay on the place of deception in Balzac’s art, but it is also one of the more reproachful. Towards the beginning of the piece, James takes a different tone when writing of Balzac’s gift for being taken in by his creations. Observing how little autobiographical material there appears to be in the *Comédie*, James suggests that this is because Balzac did not so much live a life separable from his art as live the lives in his art: “[t]he things he invented were as real to him as the things he knew, and his actual experience is overlaid with a thousand thicknesses, as it were, of imaginary experience. The person is irrecoverably

³ *Literary Criticism, Vol. 2: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson, (New York: Library of America, 1984), 2:1294–5. References hereafter are given in the text.

lost in the artist.” (2:36). James suggests that Balzac was “lost” to his invention in a double sense: it is as though his life is enfolded into (secreted within) the invented world, his “actual experience” shrouded in or “overlaid” with the “imaginary”; at the same time, Balzac is “lost” to an illusion, for his fictitious “things” are as “real to him” as the knowable world.

I observed in chapter two that these different kinds of absorption are significant to James’s understanding of the *Comédie*’s power: Balzac lets his subjects have their way with him to the degree that he is absorbed in or by them; this, in turn, grants his creations their “liberty”—things “invented” become “real,” and not only for Balzac, but for the reader. It is “we” readers who sense that Balzac’s people are “going of themselves and acting out their characters” (2:132). There is one further twist to the idea of deception in the 1875 essay, and it might be thought to serve as a point of transition between James’s admiring feelings for Balzac’s beguilement at the hands of his aesthetic creations and his less enthusiastic impression of Balzac’s self-deluding capacities: if Balzac is quick to dupe himself and to be duped, he is also “more in sympathy with a theory of conduct which takes account of circumstances and recognises the merits of duplicity, than with the comparatively colourless idea that virtue is nothing but uncompromising” (2:46).⁴ James’s successive considerations of Balzac’s affinity to dupery come across as increasingly troubled: when Balzac is the credulous subject of the deceptive power of his art, the tone may be heard as mostly appreciative; with Balzac’s enthusiasm for duplicity, James’s tone becomes ambivalent, erring on the side of censure; when Balzac is self-deceiving, he is actively critical. Yet these modes of relating to deception seem intricately allied: we might imagine that a willingness to be duped is to be a lover of duplicity and willing to dupe one’s self. I want to suggest that this particular version of a

⁴ James speculates that Balzac’s fondness for deception has, in part, an aesthetic motivation: “he praises duplicity because it is original and audacious to do so. But he praises it also because it has for him the highest recommendation that anything can have—it is picturesque. Duplicity is more picturesque than honesty—just as the line of beauty is the curve and not the straight line. In place of a moral judgment of conduct, accordingly, Balzac usually gives us an aesthetic judgement” (2:49).

“slippery slope,” wherein one’s being duped by another may entail one’s valuing duplicity and practicing self-delusion, has a subtle role in James’s thinking about responsiveness in the texts already discussed.

If one returns to James’s letter to Mary Ward regarding the “five million” rubrics for five million subjects, it presents us with the idea that one’s receptive-responsive “involvement” with a creation begins with the acknowledgement that the “rules” of engagement cannot be carried from one “particular case” to the next.⁵ Given such an unruly tryst—a “particular obsession,”⁶ James calls it elsewhere—responsibility must be a profoundly inventive, experimental practice. To set apart the thought of responsibility from many known goods is to empty one’s ethical space of its orienting landmarks so as to put one’s “good faith” in another’s plea and demand (made again and again in episode after episode). It is to live, as James says in a later Balzac essay, “in the particular necessary, the particular intended connection” (2:124). It is just this prospect of responsibility as a kind of lawless process, realising itself provisionally through the ways in which we attend or do not attend at all times to specific others of which Levinas writes. Disenchanted with rational systems—legal structures, moral laws, ethical norms—which regulate in advance how and why and to whom we are responsible, Levinas images responsibility otherwise, as an anti-rationalistic “obsession,” “a relation between particulars prior to the institution of rational law.”⁷ But if we have, in some sense, been appealed to, duped into, leaving behind the commonplace, ratiocinative touchstones regarding responsible expressions, might it not be the case that this leaves one vulnerable to being deceived or deceiving oneself into the idea that one’s responsiveness is of “merit”?

⁵ *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Philip Horne (London: Viking, 1999), 319.

⁶ *Life in Letters*, 341.

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, “Substitution,” *Transcendence and Height: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 81.

I raised the spectre of this possibility in chapter four, regarding the fraught relation of *The Bostonians* to its contemporary readership. It is also present in *The Awkward Age*: being “taken in” by the circle at Buckingham Crescent may not be the beginning of a character’s participation in “some little idea of responsibility,” but the advent of their complicity in a delusional enterprise.⁸ The risk that one’s ostensible responsivity may be a descent into ethical derangement arises a further time in *Roderick Hudson*. While wandering alone in the countryside near Florence, Rowland contemplates yielding to Roderick’s “illusion” (that in the sculptor’s surrender lies his recuperation): if Roderick is set upon “plunging,” why not, Rowland asks himself, “help him on the way”? Why not “smooth the *descensus Averni*”?⁹ It would have the virtue of answering Roderick’s appeal, and if Mary were to be left free in the event of Roderick’s death, it would not be without a “reversionary interest” for Rowland.¹⁰ Rowland perceives the merits of duplicity; perceives the possibility of deceiving himself in such a way that he could believe himself responsible in choosing to surrender to Roderick’s self-deception.¹¹ Rowland finally rejects his vision, coming to look upon it not as a prospective manifestation of responsiveness but as a kind of moral *folie à deux*. In comparison, *The Wings of the Dove* (1903) might be said provocatively to pursue the idea that duping oneself, being duped, and perceiving the merits of duplicity are (at least in the circumstances of this novel) the conditions by which responsibility is realised; perhaps duplicitous invention is responsiveness, or at least a responsibility-to-come.

In his Preface to the novel, James appears to entertain the idea that it is an expression of responsibility of all those who surround Milly Theale—Kate and Merton, Aunt Maud,

⁸ Henry James, *The Awkward Age* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 194.

⁹ Henry James, *Roderick Hudson* (London: Penguin, 1987), 193, 251.

¹⁰ James, *Roderick*, 251. A term from trust law: an interest (Mary) that reverts back to the settlor of a trust (Rowland) once the beneficiary’s (Roderick’s) interest has come to an end.

¹¹ James, *Roderick*, 227.

Susan Stringham, Lord Mark—to encourage, to enter into, under Milly’s “appea[l],” the young woman’s “illusion”:

If her impulse to wrest from her shrinking hour still as much of the fruit of life as possible, if this longing can take effect only by the aid of others, their participation (appealed to, entangled and coerced as they find themselves) becomes their drama too—that of their promoting her illusion, under her importunity, for reasons, for interests and advantages, from motives and points of view, of their own. (2:1289)

The logic with which James presents us is that Milly’s wish to gather her rosebuds requires the “aid” of others if it is to “take effect.” But while the first clause of the sentence imagines Milly’s “longing” quietly waiting to be realised, the parenthetical clause amends the character’s desire to an active supplication: all participants to Milly’s drama are now “appealed to.” Indeed, this appeal is stronger, more urgent and compelling than a simple request: it represents “coerc[ion]” and, later, “importunity.” The help they are compelled to render involves their responding to Milly’s insistence (“her importunity”) that they “promote her illusion”; if she has summoned them as her dupes, she has suborned them to dupe her. James’s sentence would also imply, recalling *The Awkward Age*, that one cannot expel self-interest from the enterprise of responding: folding self-interest into the project of responding, the syntax indicates that answering Milly’s “importunity” *and* doing so for one’s own “reasons, for interests and advantages” could be undifferentiable parts of the same endeavor. Its implication might be stated in the following way: interest and advantage are commensurable with responsibility to another; what is selfish and what is responsive are not mutually exclusive.

One could argue that the passage represents an example of the same unsound, vertiginous moral reasoning that Kate and Densher practise upon themselves and each other in the novel. The conditional clauses, James’s “ifs,” indicate that we are probably involved, to some degree, with the perspective of Kate and Densher, who do work according to a speculative interpretations. It may be that James is reproducing, or performing their act of reading too freely, too liberally into what is “given” of Milly: has Milly truly asked to be

deluded? Can self-interested motives slip so readily into the project of aiding the young woman? The sentence echoes, to a degree, Densher's fancying in the novel that if he and Kate have offered "the impression" that she does not return his love, Milly herself has taken an active, motivated part in the fiction. Milly will never, Densher thinks, induce him to puncture the enchantment; hence, to do so would be sheer brutality:

Milly wouldn't herself precipitate his necessity of intervention. She would absolutely never say to him: "Is it so impossible she shall ever care for you seriously?"—without which nothing could be less delicate for him than to aggressively set her right. [...] This brought him round again to the acceptance of the fact that the poor girl liked him. She put it, for reasons of her own, on a simple, a beautiful ground, a ground that already supplied her with the pretext she required. The ground was there, that is, in the impression she received, cherished, retained; the pretext, over and above, was the pretext for acting on it. That she now believed as she did made her sure at last that she might act; so that what Densher therefore would have struck at would be the root, in her soul, of a pure pleasure.¹²

Whereas before this turn of cogitation, Densher has proposed to himself that he is guilty of "decep[tion] if he does not "spea[k] the particular word"¹³ that would break the spell of Milly's impression, now his not dissipating this same impression (thereby becoming complicit in the deception) is a (passive) act of responsibility—a refusal to sacrifice Milly's "pure pleasure" for conscience's sake. Of course, with such tortuous reasoning as this, one can think of Densher as having slipped into a realm of unhinged speculation, wherein the opportunity to form vast airy structures of fancy that cannot sustain the touch of reality presents itself with alacrity. If however the Preface is ironically echoing Densher's self-serving lucidity, it is also engaging with a provocative possibility raised by the novel: if Milly's desire to live and to love is realised, then will not duplicity have become, *après coup*, a form of responsibility? The novel could be said to contain a potential world in which the conditional responsibility implied in Kate and Densher's project of pretending to answer Milly's desires would be transformed, upon the success of the endeavor, into responsibility proper: that is, *if* it were granted that Milly had

¹² James, *Wings of the Dove*, 2:85.

¹³ James, *Wings of the Dove*, 2:84.

lived and loved due to the couple's maneuverings, *then* the work of deception that made this possible would resemble the work of responsibility. All that such a conditional instance of responsibility would ask for its success is that its fragility be preserved from the pressure of the countervailing actuality until "things" "invented" have become true, "actual experience" and "imaginary experience" enmeshed (2:36). To end with a glance towards the opportunities that an idea of conditional responsibility might afford for further study, it would appear to play an arresting role in *The Golden Bowl* or *The Ivory Tower*—its baroquely beautiful form and breath-stopping suspension above the realm of the "offensive real"¹⁴ offering to comprehend a part of our investment, as readers, in the prolongation of some kinds of putative irresponsibility.

¹⁴ James, *Wings of the Dove*, 2:174.

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