

HENRY JAMES AND JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER: REPRESENTING  
MODERNITY

by

LISA ANNE MACLEAN

B.A., The University of British Columbia, 1980

B.F.A., Open University in conjunction with Emily Carr College of Art and Design, 1990

M.F.A., The University of British Columbia, 1991

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Interdisciplinary Studies [English / Fine Arts / Sociology])

We accept this thesis as conforming  
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

February 1997

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Department of INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

The University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, Canada

Date Oct 8/97

## Abstract

This thesis is an examination of Henry James and James McNeill Whistler as cultural analysts of modernity. Using the theoretical work of Peter Burger, Jurgen Habermas and Theodor Adorno as a frame, I analyse James's and Whistler's theoretical and artistic responses to modernity and the problematic status of autonomous art and the modernist artist in late nineteenth century industrial capitalism. In so doing, I place both figures in their social and historical context and show how their work not only reflects but itself participates in the complex social and cultural transformations of late nineteenth century society.

While Henry James has continued to attract critical attention from many quarters, those who have studied him in the larger context of nineteenth-century avant-garde culture are still relatively few. Of those contextual studies, none has examined James's career and work in the light of parallel developments in avant-garde visual art during this important and complex period. James McNeill Whistler, like Henry James an American expatriate working in late nineteenth century London, has been the subject of many studies describing his formal achievement; however, he has not yet attracted the attention of critics interested in theories of modernist representation, gender and sexuality. Because modernisation was a phenomenon which had an impact on all aspects of late nineteenth century culture, as both James and Whistler themselves acknowledge, my interdisciplinary, contextualist approach to cultural production can illuminate aspects of cultural theory and practice which might remain hidden in analyses contained within disciplinary boundaries. The present thesis is not primarily a work of art-historical scholarship nor is it an in-depth

textual analysis of the Jamesian canon; it is an analysis of the ways in which two individuals deal with the conditions of their artistic practice. My thesis is original in its bringing together of two important figures - a writer and a visual artist - whose theory and practice reveals the complexity of early modern art's dialectical relationship with modernity. In so doing, I offer a critical reevaluation of the work of Henry James and James McNeill Whistler in light of its engagement with the discourses of modernity and modernism.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract		ii
Table of Contents		iv
List of Figures		v
Acknowledgements		vi
INTRODUCTION		1
CHAPTER I	Modernism and Modernity	10
CHAPTER II	Henry James's Literary Theory	34
CHAPTER III	James McNeill Whistler's Aesthetic Theory	66
CHAPTER IV	Realism and Human Subjectivity: <u>At the Piano</u> , <u>The Music Room</u> , and <u>The Portrait of a Lady</u>	105
CHAPTER V	High and Low: <u>The Tragic Muse</u> and <u>Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks</u>	145
CHAPTER VI	Modernity and Masculine Subjectivity: In Venice	187
CHAPTER VII	Aestheticism and Commodification: A Problematic Resolution	235
CONCLUSION		280
BIBLIOGRAPHY		283

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	<u>At the Piano</u> (1859)	112a
Figure 2	<u>Harmony in Green and Rose: The Music Room</u> (1860-61)	126a
Figure 3	<u>Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks</u> (1863-4)	175a
Figure 4	<u>Black Lion Wharf</u> (1859)	217a
Figure 5	<u>Little Venice</u> (1879-80)	217b
Figure 6	<u>Nocturne</u> (1879-80)	222a
Figure 7	<u>Two Doorways</u> (1879-80)	223a
Figure 8	<u>Nocturne: Furnace</u> (1880)	223b
Figure 9	<u>The Lime-burner</u> (1859)	223c
Figure 10	<u>Nocturne in Blue and Silver</u> (1871)	239a
Figure 11	<u>Nocturne: Blue and Gold - Old Battersea Bridge</u> (1872-3)	239b
Figure 12	<u>Harmony in Pink and Grey: Valerie, Lady Meux</u> (1881)	255a
Figure 13	<u>Arrangement in Flesh Color and Black: Theodore Duret</u> (1882-4)	255b

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply indebted to my supervisor, Ross Labrie, for his support throughout the preparation and writing of this thesis. I would also like to thank committee member Jeff Wall for his very useful suggestions and detailed comments on an earlier draft of this project. In addition, I want to acknowledge committee member Roger Seamon for his helpful comments and criticisms. Roy Turner, the fourth member of my committee, also provided important support for this project. Finally, for his many years of unfailing support and encouragement, for his sense of humour, and for his patience, I would like to dedicate this thesis, with many thanks, to my husband, Vlad Konieczny.

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an examination of Henry James and James McNeill Whistler as cultural analysts of modernity. Using the theoretical work of Peter Burger, Jurgen Habermas and Theodor Adorno as a frame, I analyse James's and Whistler's theoretical and artistic responses to modernity and the problematic status of autonomous art and the modernist artist in late nineteenth century industrial capitalism. In so doing, I place both figures in their social and historical context and show how their work not only reflects but itself participates in the complex social and cultural transformations of late nineteenth century society.

While James has continued to attract critical attention from many quarters, those who have studied him in the larger context of nineteenth century avant-garde culture are still relatively few. Some examples of contextual studies which have been useful to my project include Ross Posnock's Trial of Curiosity in which James is placed in the context of nineteenth and twentieth century critical theorists such as Adorno, Dewey, and Santayana and Jonathan Freedman's fascinating analysis of James's complex relationship with British Aestheticism, Professions of Taste. Although the subject of many studies describing his formal achievement, Whistler has not yet attracted the attention of critics interested in theories of representation, gender and sexuality, a lack which is surprising considering his connections with other avant-garde artists and the complexities of his theory and practice. By examining these two complex individuals and their conflicted careers in tandem, I hope this study will make a contribution to a critical reevaluation of

Henry James's and James McNeill Whistler's work in light of its engagement with the discourses of modernity and modernism.

James and Whistler were the first American artists to whom "modernity" was both an imperative and a problem. Both artists have been seen by some critics as effete aesthete expatriates whose works are flawed by their lack of interest in "social reality" and immersion in an enervated art-for-art's sake aestheticism. For example, the American cultural historian Vernon Parrington condemned both James and Whistler for their over-fine sensibilities and the thinness of their art:

Life, with James, was largely a matter of nerves. In this world of sprawling energy, it was impossible to barricade himself against the intrusion of the unpleasant. His organism was too sensitive, his discriminations too fine, to subject them to the vulgarities of the Gilded Age, and he fled from it all . . . . And so, like Whistler, he sought other lands, there to refine a meticulous technique, and draw out ever thinner the substance of his art. (239-40)

Maxwell Geismar, in Henry James and the Jacobites, has a comparable assessment of James's contributions to literary culture:

And perhaps never in the history of humane letters had a novelist done so much with so little content as Henry James himself: the Dark Prince of the American leisure class, the self-made orphan of international culture, the romantic historian of the ancien regime, the European inheritor, the absolute esthete, the prime autocrat of contemporary (and contrived) art. (410-11)

A similar point was made in 1920 by the English critic Charles Marriott with respect to Whistler:

Whistler stood for that impossible thing, a cosmopolitan art . . . . it is art divorced from life and depending entirely upon culture . . . . lacking the imagination, or perhaps the courage, to translate the facts of nature boldly into terms of his medium, he waited for or reinvented conditions in which the facts would not be too obvious, and made them “decorative” by arrangements that were entirely lacking in the logic of design. (Spencer, Whistler: A Retrospective 370-71)

However, although Whistler may be outside the main trajectory of modernism as it has been constructed and James may still be condemned by some critics for his focus on the lives and exploits of the super rich, I will argue that the work of James and Whistler perfectly articulates its historical moment and reveals the complexity of early modern art’s dialectical relationship with modernity.

My study is interdisciplinary and contextualist. It is not primarily a work of art historical scholarship nor is it an in-depth textual analysis of every nuance of James’s fiction. It is an attempt to analyse the ways in which two individuals deal with the conditions of their artistic practice. Although it would have been possible to look at one or the other of James and Whistler on his own, so to speak, I believe that each of these figures is more fully illuminated when placed in relationship with the other. Both James and Whistler were theorists of the aesthetic as well as practitioners. This in itself is not unusual; what is unusual in their case is that their theorisations and their creative work (not that theory is not creative in its own way) were self-conscious attempts to grapple

with the relationship of art and the artist to modernity. While Baudelaire and Mallarmé were also artists who theorised about the modern, they did so from a location at the cultural centre of nineteenth century modernism. James and Whistler, in contrast, although each did spend time in Paris and had colleagues in French avant-garde circles, wrote and practiced from a more marginal location. As American expatriates based in London, James and Whistler saw themselves as outsiders, engaged in a competitive struggle for cultural legitimacy with their peers and with other cultural products. For the American high modernists who would follow them, James and Whistler provided a model for them to emulate. However, the complexity of their careers is such that James and Whistler can also provide late twentieth century artists and critics, if not necessarily models to emulate, mirrors in which to see our own similarly conflicted careers.

It is surprising, perhaps, that Whistler and James have not yet been studied together. While James and John Singer Sargent have been linked by some critics, James and Whistler have not proved to be an intriguing pairing for critical analysis.<sup>1</sup> Although Sargent's representations of the world of wealthy expatriates may initially make him a possibility as a visual art analogue of James, he is ultimately unsuitable because he was not in any sense a modernist nor was he a part of the cultural avant-garde. In contrast, Whistler is, like James, both an early modernist and a most vocal member of nineteenth century avant-garde culture. However, the only critic to link James and Whistler together in their contributions to culture thus far has been Ezra Pound who wrote the following in 1912:

America is the sort of country that loses Henry James and retains to its appreciative bosom a certain Harry Van Dyke . . . [In] our own time the country has given to the world two men, Whistler, of the school of masterwork, of the school of Durer, and of Hokusai, and of Velasquez, and Mr. Henry James, a follower in the school of Flaubert and Tourgueneff . . . . But what Whistler [and James] ha[ve] proved once and for all is that being born an American does not eternally damn a man or prevent him from the ultimate and highest achievement in the arts. (Spencer, Whistler: A Retrospective 367-8)

That this “ultimate and highest achievement in the arts” is James’s and Whistler’s contributions to modernist discourse is the unstated but implicit assertion of Pound’s comments in Patria Mia. And as individuals who were the beginning of America’s “Great Tradition” James and Whistler will repay being examined together in their complex articulations of and responses to modernity and modernist aesthetics. Having said that, however, this thesis is not a study of James as the aloof grand-master of fiction and Whistler as the cosmopolitan dandy-who-painted; it is an examination of their struggles and inconsistencies as well as their considerable achievements.

My linking of James with Whistler would perhaps have been approved of by the author himself. That James saw the need to align the art of fiction with developments in the visual arts is evident from his literary theory. In “The Art of Fiction”, as I shall discuss in chapter two, he pressed for the equality of fiction and painting when making his arguments in favour of fiction as art. In order to argue for the importance of fiction and his own place in the history of Anglo-American letters, James asserted that the novelist



and the painter were equals who pursued the same aims with the same means. As a model of how to create a modern art and an audience for that art, James had the example of James McNeill Whistler in the field of visual art, arguably the only avant-garde Anglo-American visual artist working in London in the late nineteenth century. And indeed James acknowledged Whistler as one of his "Brothers" in an 1897 letter to the painter and declared his artistic solidarity with him:

For the arts are one, and with the artist the artist communicates. [You are] one who knows. You know, above all, better than anyone, how dreadfully few are such . . . You have done too much of the exquisite not to have earned more despair than anything else; but don't doubt that something vibrates back when that Exquisite takes the form of recognition of a not utterly indelicate brother. (Edel, Letters IV 43)

Parallels exist in both James's and Whistler's aesthetic theory and in their practice. As I shall demonstrate throughout this study, their response to the problems posed by modernity takes similar forms and addresses similar issues. The following chapters will examine those forms and issues.

Chapter one provides the theoretical skeleton for my project. In it I discuss the characteristics of the modernist artifact, the socio-historical conditions that created the climate for modernism and lastly, using the work of Peter Burger and Jurgen Habermas, the complex dialectical relationship between socio-cultural modernity and aesthetic modernism. Having erected the theoretical framework for subsequent discussion, in chapters two and three I analyse James's and Whistler's aesthetic theories, pointing out

their connections with and responses to competing cultural theories and forms and to the burgeoning late nineteenth century cultural marketplace. I argue that both James and Whistler actively tried to position themselves within the expanding cultural sphere as aesthetic professionals and in so doing participated in the very phenomena they critiqued: the industrialisation of art and the commodification of the aesthetic. By “industrialisation” I am referring to the modernisation of the cultural sphere and by “commodification” I mean the processes by which art and literature, and indeed the producers of cultural artifacts themselves, become commodities for sale dependent upon the open cultural market.

In chapter four I examine James’s and Whistler’s early realist work Portrait of a Lady, At the Piano and The Music Room. Using Michael Fried’s work on “absorption” as a template with which to analyse James’s and Whistler’s achievement, I will demonstrate that these works have formal and thematic similarities in their critiques of modernity’s physical-psychic effects on human subjectivity. Chapter five focuses on the similar ways in which James and Whistler appropriate low culture for their high art experiments in form: Whistler’s Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks and James’s The Tragic Muse use the raw material of what nineteenth century Britain saw as low culture - Japanese prints and the theatre respectively - to transform their work. Linking the painting and the novel further is the figure of the actress who epitomised for the male avant-garde the seductive lures of a popular culture against which they must guard themselves. I will argue that while Whistler’s painting and James’s novel are not technically successful in

their assimilation of their low cultural sources, their very aesthetic failure successfully reveals the complex entanglement of high art and a modern commodity culture.

While modernity certainly had its negative aspects, it also offered new and exciting possibilities for experiments in masculine subjectivity. Chapter six concentrates on the work James and Whistler produced in and about Venice, showing how it expresses what Stephenson has called the “delirious multiplication of the possibilities of the male self” (275) that modernity allowed. I will show that both James and Whistler articulate an imaginary femininity that enables them to critique the compulsively masculinist values of nineteenth century Britain. In so doing, I argue that both participated in British Aestheticism’s project of expanding the conventional limits of masculinity within late nineteenth century Anglo-American culture.

In chapter seven I consider the fully-elaborated aestheticism of James’s Golden Bowl and Whistler’s nocturnes and two portraits of the 1880s which represent the culmination of their careers. In the case of both artists this late work revisits and reworks earlier concerns and brings them to a problematic resolution. I will demonstrate that Whistler’s nocturnes and portraits and James’s Golden Bowl perform modernism’s project of reimagining the world; they glorify the values of individual subjectivity, of beauty, of art for its own sake, and in so doing they stand in opposition to the lack of those same values in the “life-world”. However, this opposition is not without its problems. As a revelation of the enmeshment of aesthetic in the culture of consumption and of the aesthete as intensely acquisitive, James’s novel registers with uncanny accuracy the connections between aestheticism, with its valorisation of intense states of perception and beauty, and

commodity culture, with its transformation of the aesthetic into consumable commodity. Similarly, Whistler's nocturnes and 1880s portraits, with their articulation of beauty and technical experimentation embodied in objects which were for many indistinguishable from "mere fashion", record the problematic ability of modern consumer culture to transform critiques of itself into objects of consumption themselves. Although James and Whistler both argue for the aesthetic as a transcendent autonomous realm of value above and beyond the social world and its commodities, I will show that it is especially in their aestheticist work that the *inability* of the aesthetic to transcend the social is articulated.

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<sup>1</sup> See David Lubin, Act of Portrayal: Eakins, Sargent, James; Adeline R. Tintner, The Museum World of Henry James; Viola Winner, Henry James and the Visual Arts and Albert Boime, "Sargent in Paris and London: A Portrait of the Artist as Dorian Gray".

## CHAPTER ONE

### Modernism and Modernity

This study will trace the parallel careers of the novelist Henry James and the artist James McNeill Whistler in their engagement with modernity. In their response to the complex social and cultural transformations of late nineteenth century society, their articulation of technically innovative aesthetic forms, and their representations of the anxieties and dreams of the bourgeoisie, James and Whistler were the first American artists to whom “modernity” was both an imperative and a problem. This thesis will examine how and why this is the case.

Modernism as an aesthetic movement began in the mid-nineteenth century. It is dialectically related to the socio-historical development that is modernity. Following Peter Burger I see nineteenth century modernism as inherent in the developmental logic of the institution of art in capitalist society.<sup>1</sup> As I shall discuss below, the development in the arts leading from autonomy in the late eighteenth century to Aestheticism<sup>2</sup> in the late nineteenth was an intensification of high art’s separation from bourgeois society. From this perspective late nineteenth century Aestheticism, of which both Whistler and James were a part, represents the end point of art’s social ineffectuality, its conversion of content into form. However, before I outline this position, I would like to note that although the term modernist can be applied to many stylistically diverse aesthetic products, modernist art forms in general are characterised by a break with past traditions and a focus on contemporary experience. In both literature and art, modernist artists reveal in their work an altered conception of the nature of the physical world, a new attitude toward aesthetic

tradition and a preoccupation with art's formal or technical properties. In order to comprehend the ways in which James and Whistler responded to modernity, we need to have some grasp of the techniques, materials and subjects of modern art. Let me emphasise that no attempt will be made here to be exhaustive. What follows will be a description of those modernist features that both figures will explore in their work and that I shall analyse in the coming chapters with respect to their dialectical relationship with modernity. First I will discuss the characteristics of the modernist artifact, then the social and historical conditions that produced modernism in the arts and lastly, following the work of Jurgen Habermas and Peter Burger, the connection between socio-cultural modernity and aesthetic modernism. With this foundation in place, I will then in the remaining chapters of this study examine the complex and contradictory nature of James's and Whistler's engagement with modernity.

## I

While modernism represents neither a uniform artistic vision nor a unified artistic practice, the characteristics of the modernist artifact have tended to be viewed over the past several decades as including the following features.<sup>3</sup>

1. The work is autonomous and, while claiming to be totally separate from the realms of mass culture and everyday life, is also complicit in that culture. I will discuss the genesis of modernist art's autonomy below; here I just want to observe that, unlike the art of earlier periods such as the high Middle Ages, the modern art object has been viewed as not serving an overt social function. What I mean by "social function" will be clarified by comparing modernist with sacral art. Sacral art served the church as a cult object and was

completely integrated into the social institution of religion. Its production and reception were collective. Modernist art, in contrast, occupies its own sphere, serves no explicit social function and is the expression of a purely individual consciousness. Its production and reception are individual acts.<sup>4</sup> Where sacral art existed to articulate religious ideas to a community of believers, modernist art is seen as existing only to express the individual subjectivity of the artist and is often inaccessible to the larger community. Modern art also defines itself in opposition to other (lesser) cultural forms that emerged during the nineteenth century such as mass market literature, advertising and kitsch painting. The reasons why this should be the case will be discussed below. Here I want to note that both James and Whistler held the position that the best of modern art must be autonomous and that art exists in its own separate sphere, the consequences of which will be discussed further in chapters two and three in my examination of their aesthetic theories.

2. The modernist art work is self-referential, self-conscious, frequently ironic, and rigorously experimental. Modern artists and writers often draw attention to the materials and procedures of creation in their works. Writers, for example, will express doubts about the ability of conventional language to express individual subjective experience. They will attempt to create a new language capable of articulating their new experiences. Writers will also explore the difficulties of novelistic creation in their books (e.g. Joyce's Ulysses) while poets will reveal a heightened self-consciousness about the nature of poetic language and see words as objects in their own right (e.g. Mallarmé and Gertrude Stein). Visual artists will use colour's evocative or symbolic properties as legitimate subjects for expression (e.g. Whistler and Kandinsky). Artists will also emphasise their brushwork and

allow areas of bare canvas to show in their paintings in order to make the viewer aware of the image as paint on fabric and representation, therefore, as 'made', as artifice (e.g. Manet and the Impressionists). In doing so, modernists reject the notion of art as a mere reflection or representation of an already pre-existing reality. Instead, they assert that the artist creates his or her own world.

In addition to being a repudiation of naive realism, the modernist aesthetic is also a departure from the earlier expressions of feeling found in art that is associated with "Romanticism". Rather than attempting to reveal some kind of authentic emotional response to external stimuli as in Romanticism, the modernist art work will often reveal its own reality as artifice; this display of artifice may take the form of visual or literary distortion to convey intense subjective states of mind or an emphasis on the "constructedness" of both the artifact and, by extension, the world. Modernist literature since Flaubert is a persistent investigation of and encounter with language and modernist painting since Manet is an equally persistent elaboration of the medium itself: the flatness of the canvas, the structuring of paint and brushwork, the problem of the frame. In the later James this encounter with language is evident in his use of what his brother William called "narration by the interminable elaboration of suggestive reference" (qtd. in Hocks 20). In The Golden Bowl in particular, as I shall discuss in chapter seven, language is fetishised and played with for its own sake. Chapter seven will also address itself to Whistler's attention to colour, framing, stylistic experimentation and his preoccupation with the materials and techniques of the creative process.



3. The modernist art work can use simultaneity, juxtaposition, or montage. The modern literary artifact sometimes seems to take on the attributes of painting, stressing stasis and spatiality. In much modernist literature, narrative and time sequence are weakened in favour of a presentation that gives priority to synchronicity or “spatial form”.<sup>5</sup> Rather than emerging from the interaction of characters in a conventional linear narrative, modernist literary unity is often created by the juxtaposition of various points of view on a single situation. Instead of a traditional representation of events unfolding in a sequential progression, the modernist art work represents what Lunn calls a “continuous present” (35) in which multiple experiences or objects are juxtaposed (e.g. Joyce, Woolf, and Proust). We see this characteristic revealed in James’s use of point of view, in his frequent refusal to give conventionally satisfying closures to his fictions and in his linguistic experimentation in the late work. In The Golden Bowl, which will be discussed in chapter seven, James’s novel approaches the condition of spatiality in its use of language. In art, the attempt to realistically render a three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional canvas using the conventions of perspective and modelling is given up in favour of an emphasis on the juxtaposition of different points of view, contradictory or conflicting realities and on flatness itself. In Whistler, modernist ambiguous space makes its appearance early on in his work and reaches its apotheosis in the “nocturnes”, night-time views of London as a poetic, aestheticised fantasy. In their use of these techniques, modernist artists repudiate a traditional literary art of sequential narrative, or the codes of Renaissance perspective, in favour of what Ernest Lunn calls an art “without apparent causal progression and completion” (35). In so doing, modernists hoped to escape from

historical thinking and conventional modes of expression, “‘defamiliarising’ the expected and ordinary connections between things in favor of new, and deeper, ones” (Lunn 36).<sup>6</sup>

4. The modernist art work deals with paradox, ambiguity, and uncertainty.

Confronted with the collapse of religious, philosophical and scientific certainties in a post-Darwinian world, modernists explore the “paradoxical many-sidedness of the world” (Lunn 36). Since there no longer appear to be any transcendent truths, the modernist art work presents reality as constructed by multiple or fallible viewpoints. These viewpoints are often contradictory, irresolvable and incomplete. In modernist art, these multiple or contradictory viewpoints may appear as different and irreconcilable spatial perspectives or unrecognizable environments. Both James and Whistler make use of ambiguity and uncertainty as subject and as means of representation in their work. The connections between their ambiguous aesthetic forms and modern subjectivity will be the focus of chapters four and six.

5. The modernist art work deals with “dehumanisation” and the demise of the integrated individual subject. In much nineteenth century literature, individual characters have well-developed personalities and evolve through an interaction with a realistic and recognisable social world. In contrast, for the modernist writer, character is not a stable coherent entity but, as Irving Howe has written, a “psychic battlefield, or an insoluble puzzle, or the occasion for a flow of perceptions and sensations” (qtd. in Lunn 37). In modernist visual art, the human form is often distorted or disfigured or removed altogether, as in abstract art. James’s use of multiple points of view and exploration of his character’s inner psyches and Whistler’s manipulation of the human body and its

environment represent a movement towards the “crisis of individuality” most clearly articulated by later modernists such as Joyce and Faulkner in literature and the cubists in art. The issue of modernity’s physical and psychic effects on human beings as they are expressed in aesthetic form will be taken up in chapters four to seven of this study.

To summarise, the major premises of the modernist art work are the rejection of all classical systems of representation, the effacement of “content” in favour of “form”, the erasure of coherent, stable subjectivity, the repudiation of verisimilitude and the acknowledgment and often embrace of ambiguity and uncertainty. However, it is not only the innovative techniques of the artifact that make it “modernist”, it is also the subject matter (or apparent lack thereof). Modernist art is dialectically related to the new social conditions of modernity. And what were these new social conditions? Having given some idea of the characteristics of aesthetic modernism, I will now briefly describe the social and historical environment in which these aesthetic forms developed.

## II

In “Modernism in Comparative Perspective”, Eugene Lunn notes that modernism developed in its initial stages, between 1850 and 1880, within the larger context of the decline of religious faith that occurred partially as a result of discoveries in science, particularly in biology and geology.<sup>7</sup> This decline encouraged artists and writers to substitute a “religion of art” for the vanishing religious certainties of the institutional churches. In addition, science itself was increasingly seen by artists and intellectuals as unable to fully account for what it meant to be human. With its emphasis on the material and the objective, science was seen by many, including Henry James, as limited and partial

in its understandings. In "Is there a Life After Death?" (1910), James meditated on the "human condition" as revealed by positivistic science: "Whatever we may begin with we almost inevitably go on, under the discipline of life, to more or less resigned acceptance of the grim fact that 'science' takes no account of the soul, the principle we worry about . . ." (qtd. in Crowley and Hocks 472). While acknowledging the embeddedness of the temporal body in the quagmire of the "abject actual", James refused to believe that this material substance was the final arbiter of "humanity". The "perishable" matter of which his "personality [was] composed" James saw as merely the "encasement or sheath, thicker, thinner, coarser, finer, more transparent or more obstructive" of the soul (472). James and many other artists yearned to "reach beyond the laboratory-brain" that was science and the individual as understood by science.

According to Lunn, the loss of faith in religion and in science was brought on in part by a political and intellectual crisis of liberalism. Middle class radicalism had largely declined by 1880, and a protracted depression between 1873 and 1896, which prompted governments to turn away from free trade, caused many people to feel that the economic system was running down. Expansions of the franchise and the rise of new mass movements caused anxiety for the bourgeoisie who saw their own power and privilege threatened by others. Darwinian determinism and the decline of the middle and upper class birth rate created a fear of degeneration and race-suicide that replaced earlier expectations of indefinite progress. Initially prompted by the Origin of Species (1859), these fears were increased after the 1871 publication of Descent of Man in which Darwin emphasised the

heredity of characteristics and mentioned the possibility of using sexual selection as a way of improving Victorian society:

Yet [man] might by selection do something not only for the bodily constitution and frame of his offspring, but for their intellectual and moral qualities. Both sexes ought to refrain from marriage if they are in any marked degree inferior in body or mind . . .<sup>8</sup>

In Darwin's words here we see the two conflicting possibilities that evolution presented to the Victorian mind: either progressive development or degenerative decay. While many asserted that middle class Victorian society occupied the top rung of the evolutionary ladder, an undercurrent of anxiety and fear of degeneration can be detected in the work of taxonomists, medical specialists and criminologists who attempted to scrutinise and classify human behaviour and social structures.<sup>9</sup> The characteristics of the modernist art work were a response to this sense of cultural crisis. Decline of belief in unending linear progress, fears about the rise of the masses, religious uncertainties, industrialisation and mechanisation all contributed to the modernist emphasis on "present consciousness", paradox, ambiguity and the formal properties of art.

In addition to the decline of faith and fears of degeneration, a changed conception of nature influenced modern artists and their art. Artists and intellectuals could no longer see nature as the source of inspiration and refuge from the wasteland of urban-industrial life it had been to the Romantics. By the later nineteenth century, nature was increasingly being gobbled up by urban expansion, industrial growth and suburban housing developments. Nature was now a source of fuel for the industrial machine or of wealth for

the property owner. Converted into slag heaps and slums or the privatised paradise of the urban rich, nature could no longer be the uncontaminated pure realm for authentic individual aesthetic and spiritual experience that it had been for Romantic artists and writers. While Romantics such as Wordsworth and Turner sought to express the beauty and sublimity of nature and the intensity of their own response to the natural world, modernists saw nature remade by culture and technology. As articulated by Lunn, “[the] technical ability to master and control the given environment, the ‘humanization’ of nature through the modern city and its various technological extensions, was also a source of the tendency since Baudelaire to view art and science as objects in their own right - as self-reflexive constructions, instead of as more or less direct expressions of feeling or as representations of outer or inner reality (as they had largely been seen in romantic aesthetics)” (40). If the natural world was transformed by technology and commerce, remade in the image of the machine and the market, then why should not artists remake a world in their own image? Faced with the pervasiveness of technology and its instruments, and their accompanying colonisation of physical and psychic space, modernist artists and writers responded by emphasising *art’s* constructive and reconstructive abilities.

The changes that industrial capitalism brought to the bourgeois social landscape of the nineteenth century also changed the physical-psychic makeup of human beings and their cultural products. Marx noted this fact in the Communist Manifesto where he described how the new economic system differs from older systems:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole

relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones . . . . All that is solid melts into air. (161-2)

Marx here identifies some of the changes that modernism will articulate: fragmentation of earlier organic totalities, estrangement, alienation. These changes will then be compensated for in the elaboration of a realm of purely individual and private subjective freedom celebrated in idealist philosophy and articulated in modernist cultural products. The paradox of modern subjectivity - that as we become more subject to social determinants in the form of technology, industry and bureaucracy, we more forcefully assert our own individual subjective freedom - arises historically. In chapter four I shall discuss the ways in which this historically-specific paradox is articulated in Whistler's and James's early realist work.

The emphasis by modernist artists such as James and Whistler on "subjective" vision, the ways in which the individual artist's consciousness constructs his or her world, can thus be seen as a result of the same modernisation processes at work in the realms of technology and commerce. In Techniques of the Observer, Jonathan Crary outlines the ways in which this modernist artist/observer comes to be formed by societal modernisation. As a subject required to function within and thus formed by "disjunct and defamiliarized urban spaces, the perceptual and temporal dislocations of railroad travel, telegraphy, industrial production, and flows of typographic and visual information" (Crary

11), the modern individual's subjectivity is qualitatively different from earlier modes. In this development what Crary calls a "separation of the senses" occurs as a result of the modern "remapping of the body" (19). Sight becomes isolated and autonomous and its objects come to assume a "mystified and abstract identity" (19). Interestingly, while objects in the modern world become increasingly abstract and mysterious, they also become more intertwined and interdependent. In the world of urban modernity, new technologies and images come together to create a spectacular world in which all is in circulation.<sup>10</sup> The modernisation of bourgeois society entails the uprooting of previously entrenched value systems and the mobilisation of previously fixed social forms and conditions. Hence, as we shall see in the work of James and Whistler, the formal characteristics and subject matter of modernist art are a response to the changed historical and social conditions of the late nineteenth century.

### III

As I have outlined above, late nineteenth century modernism's new forms and subjects are dialectically related to the new social and historical conditions of modernity. In summary, these include scientific discoveries that altered the understanding of material reality, increasing secularism, an altered conception of time, and most importantly for this study, capitalism and consumerism. Traditional art forms, seen by modernist artists as incapable of expressing the new reality, were rejected in favour of experimental, subjective and difficult to understand forms. Although some critics, such as the later Clement Greenberg, have argued that the forms and techniques of modern art evolved independently of social and historical conditions, others such as Peter Burger and Jurgen



Habermas have insisted that the emergence of modern art cannot be understood without understanding the conditions of socio-historical modernity.<sup>11</sup> This is a view with which I agree and I will argue that the work of Whistler and James as analysts of modernity can only be fully understood if it is seen as a response to the complexities of its particular social and cultural moment. These complexities include, in addition to the above-mentioned, the development of an oppositional avant-garde culture.<sup>12</sup> The modernist artist increasingly saw him or herself as neglected by and alienated from the larger social world and cultivated his or her own community of peers to whom manifestos were addressed and appeals made. However, even though society at large was often demonised as philistine, illiterate and materialistic, modernist artists continued to occupy a position within it, albeit one which was contradictory and uncomfortable. It was this conflicted space that was occupied by Henry James and James McNeill Whistler. How and why such artists should stand at the same time outside and inside their society is examined by Jurgen Habermas in "Modernity - An Incomplete Project".

Habermas argues that in the course of the nineteenth century a radical consciousness of modernity emerged out of earlier conceptions of the "modern". Enlightenment thinkers had characterised the modern as "the infinite progress of knowledge and . . . the infinite advance towards social and moral betterment" (Habermas "Modernity" 4) as revealed by modern science. In contrast, Romantic artists and thinkers conceived of the modern as in opposition to the "antique ideals" of the late eighteenth century classicists and located the modern spirit, paradoxically, in an idealised Middle Ages. From these two earlier formulations came the mid-nineteenth century notion of

“modern” of which we are still the beneficiaries, that of a modernity freed from any and all historical ties and associations. Habermas, following Max Weber, describes this culture, our culture of modernity, as a result of the dissociation of the previously united spheres of science, morality and art.

Prior to the Enlightenment, according to Habermas, science, morality and art were largely unified in religious and metaphysical world-views that integrated theoretical knowledge, morality and cultural expression. Since then, with the collapse of the unified world-views of religion and metaphysics, these three spheres of activity have become differentiated. Questions of truth, morality and beauty are now, post-Enlightenment, handled separately as issues belonging to clearly-delineated and unattached realms of knowledge. Once separated from one another, scientific discourse, moral theories, and art production and criticism could be “institutionalised”. Each separate and distinct field of enquiry now becomes a specialty with its own rules and practitioners. As articulated by Habermas, each of these separate domains of culture “could be made to correspond to cultural professions in which problems could be dealt with as the concern of special experts” (9). As these spheres become autonomous domains, each with its own experts, the distance between the experts and the larger public grows. With this increasing distance comes alienation and the impoverishment of what Habermas calls the “life-world”, that is the real material world in which we exist. As formulated by Habermas, aesthetic modernity and the separation of the sphere of art from other cultural spheres is a function of the logic of modernisation in which the division of labour required by industrial capitalism is manifested in all aspects of life.

With this dissociation of spheres during the nineteenth century, art theory and practice took on greater and greater autonomy. Whereas prior to the Enlightenment art had been a function of and dependent upon sacred and courtly life, during the late eighteenth century literature, the fine arts and music were institutionalised as activities independent of church and court. From there, according to Habermas, an “aestheticist” conception of art emerged in the mid nineteenth century, a conception that “encouraged the artist to produce his work according to the distinct consciousness of art for art’s sake” (“Modernity” 10). As a result of this, artistic autonomy becomes what Habermas calls a “deliberate project”: “[The] talented artist could lend authentic expression to those experiences he had in encountering his own de-centered subjectivity, detached from the constraints of routinized cognition and everyday action” (“Modernity” 10). In other words, the artist makes art that expresses his own sense of alienation from the social world around him as well as celebrates his special and unique position as artist. Consequently, after the mid nineteenth century “color, lines, sounds and movement cease to serve primarily the cause of representation; the media of expression and the techniques of production themselves became the aesthetic object” (“Modernity” 10). Artistic autonomy gives the artist his own special subjects and objects; it also gives him alienation from a life-world that neither understands nor appreciates him. By eliminating art’s earlier social function, such as to serve the king or the church, autonomy allows the modernist artist the freedom to be socially and politically marginal.

As I will discuss in chapters two and three with respect to their aesthetic theories and in the remainder of this study with respect to their practice, the significance of art’s

autonomy for both James and Whistler is enormous. Because modern art occupies its own separate sphere of activity and knowledge with its own codes and understandings, questions of “morality” are no longer applicable to, or even a consideration of, art. Theories of morality belong to the sphere of ethics or the institutions of religion, not to the domain of art. Autonomous art concerns itself only with questions of aesthetic form, beauty, taste and the like. Hence, as James will argue in his literary theory, art has its own field with its own concerns: “[When] discussing the Art of Fiction . . . questions of art are questions (in the widest sense) of execution; questions of morality are quite another affair” (“Art of Fiction” 181). In other words, art’s morality, a subject that obsessed many of James’s critics and readers, was irrelevant. What was relevant, according to James and other modernists, was not the “morality” of the novel’s story but the artist’s ability to create a unified aesthetic whole from whatever materials with which he or she chooses to work. Similarly, against Ruskin’s insistence that art be moral, Whistler will assert that art is “occupied with her own perfection only” (Thorp 80) and those who look not at a picture but “through it, at some human fact, that shall or shall not, from a social point of view, better their mental, or moral, state” (81) are sadly mistaken. The realm of the aesthetic is separate from all other realms and from the social world and does not enact any social function.

Habermas’ account of the separation of the spheres of culture under modernity offers a theorisation of the modern that illuminates the position in which James and Whistler found themselves in the late nineteenth century. However, Habermas’ theorisation cannot completely account for the position of modern artists at that moment,

because his explanation deals with individual art works rather than with the institution of art itself. For a consideration of modernist art that historicises Habermas' account we may turn to Peter Burger's Theory of the Avant-Garde. Burger argues that, while the institution of autonomous art was fully developed by the end of the eighteenth century, there remained within this sphere art works whose contents retained a political and social character which "militate[d] against the autonomy principle of the institution" (26). Speaking about the historical avant-garde, Burger suggests that their criticism of the social subsystem "art" was only possible once the content of art works had lost their political character and became "nothing other than art" (27).<sup>13</sup> This he sees as occurring at the end of the nineteenth century with Aestheticism.

For Burger, Aestheticism is the culmination of art's autonomy status within bourgeois society. In his formulation, the development leading to Aestheticism can best be seen as a transformation of form into content. As art becomes increasingly and uncomfortably separate from life, aesthetic form becomes the art work's content: "The apartness from the praxis of life that had always constituted the institutional status of art in bourgeois society now becomes the content of the works" (27). Art's concern with its own forms and materials and the inability of the larger public to understand or appreciate those forms and materials lead to an aesthetic and philosophical crisis for the artist. Burger describes this crisis as follows: "As institution and content coincide, social ineffectuality stands revealed as the essence of art in bourgeois society, and thus provokes the self-criticism of art" (27) that would be articulated by the historical avant-garde in the twentieth century. For Whistler and James, whose cultural production culminates in

Aestheticism, Burger's account of the characteristics of that form of art is especially suggestive.

Whereas sacral and courtly art had been integral to social life, sacral as cult object for a community of religious believers and courtly as the "glory of the prince and the self-portrayal of courtly society" (47), bourgeois art, of which aestheticist art is the culmination, no longer has a specific social function. Rather than being produced and received collectively, bourgeois art is produced and consumed by isolated individuals. Bourgeois art, which portrays bourgeois self-understanding, occurs in a sphere that exists outside the "praxis of life". This "praxis of life" Burger describes as the "means-ends rationality of the bourgeois everyday" (49). All the needs that remain unsatisfied in everyday life, because competition, division of labour, and mechanisation pervade all aspects of life, can be satisfied in aestheticist art. According to Burger, values such as humanity, joy, truth, and solidarity, while removed from actual life, are preserved in art. The individual who in everyday life has been reduced to a cog in a large impersonal machine can be discovered in art as a "human being". Therefore, within bourgeois society, art plays a contradictory role. First, while offering in art an image of a better world and thus protesting against the existing world, it also relieves the existing society of actually creating such a better world in practice by realising the better world as a semblance only. Second, because art is separate from life, it has the freedom and the means to critique life. Autonomy is the necessary precondition of such critique. However, also because of its distance from life, modern art's criticism of the existing order remains ineffectual, unable to effect any real change. Modern art also runs the risk of becoming so absorbed in its

own means and processes that it loses any connection to the world outside itself and thus any relevance to an audience to which it tries to speak. As we shall see in the following chapters, these contradictions and complexities inform the position of advanced nineteenth century artists such as James and Whistler. However, a further twist on these problems emerges when we look closely at the concept of autonomous art itself. For, while James and Whistler will maintain, rightly, that they and their art are autonomous, that very autonomy is *itself* a social institution. To see why this is so we need to examine Burger's explanation of the institution of autonomous art.

In Burger's account the autonomy of art is a function of historical processes. The relative dissociation of art from other aspects of bourgeois society has produced the erroneous notion that the modern work of art is independent of society. According to Burger, the aestheticist work of art, the end point of this historical development, is not thus entirely independent from society but rather operates within a social institution, that being the institution of autonomous art which is itself a category of bourgeois society. Such art's social status, its function and prestige in society, is itself institutionalised as commodity, as investment, and as object of bourgeois "self-understanding". As such, modernist art, especially aestheticist art such as that of James and Whistler, occupies a position both within and in opposition to the larger social order. These art works celebrate the values of individual subjectivity, of beauty, of art for its own sake, and in so doing they stand in opposition to the lack of those same values in the "life-world". In addition, as autonomous individual producers, James and Whistler are free to create whatever and however they please and sell the products of that creativity on the open aesthetic market.

The very autonomy of their art and themselves as artists thus becomes a commodity for sale. Therefore, autonomy itself, while necessary for art to critique society, is also the means by which art becomes commodified. As shall be examined in the pages that follow, the art of James and Whistler is both opposed to and enmeshed in the culture of the commodity, to be continuously appropriated by that culture as investment, advertisement and affirmation. In their attempt to separate themselves from a materialistic, industrialised society and its mass culture, by an ongoing negation of that culture's appropriative impulse through a search for new subjects and forms, modernist art and artists make the problems and contradictions of modernity visible. In the work of Henry James and James McNeill Whistler the contradictory and transitory nature of modernist art is articulated. Their moment, the moment of late nineteenth century Aestheticism, is an historically specific moment; it represents the culmination of art's transformation of form into content and inaugurates the dialectical dance of aesthetic and commodity that modernism performs.

#### IV

Having established the bare bones of the characteristics and evolution of modernist art as a field, what remains to be established is the impact of modernity on James and Whistler with respect to what I shall call their experiments with alternative subjectivities opened up by modernity's transformations of social, political and sexual relationships. For some male modernists, among them Oscar Wilde, James and Whistler, as I shall discuss in chapter six, modernism also allowed an imagining of masculine identities which were alternatives to the mode of masculinity required by the dominant culture. I will argue that



both James and Whistler articulate an imaginary femininity that allows them to critique the compulsively masculinist values of nineteenth century British society. In so doing, both participated in British Aestheticism's project of expanding the conventional limits of masculinity within late nineteenth century Anglo-American culture. This imaginary femininity was also problematic, however, because the feminine, as I will discuss in chapters two and five, was also constructed as inferior. This difficulty is dealt with by James and Whistler in the alignment of certain stylistic innovations with qualities culturally-coded as masculine: consciousness and superior acuity.<sup>14</sup> In the construction of modernism as a field, discourses of gender are also mobilised to differentiate high art from low, popular or mass cultural products. While Peter Burger does not devote his attention to the persistent gendering of certain kinds of art work and writing as either "masculine" or "feminine", others such as Andreas Huyssen have examined this issue, an important one for any consideration of James and Whistler as will be addressed in later chapters. Andreas Huyssen's discussion of modern art's resistance to its excluded "others" - mass culture and femininity - will be of help here to briefly outline issues I shall be addressing in fuller detail later.

In "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other", Huyssen argues that the "masculinist mystique" of modernism is dialectically related to the persistent gendering in the late nineteenth century of mass culture as feminine, inferior and threatening. For Huyssen, the autonomy of the modernist art work is always "the result of a resistance, an abstention, and a suppression - resistance to the seductive lure of mass culture, abstention from the pleasure of trying to please a larger audience, suppression of everything that

might be threatening to the rigorous demands of being modern and at the edge of time” (55). He notes that there seem to be obvious homologies between Freud’s privileging of the ego over the id, Marx’s privileging of production over consumption and the modernist artist’s privileging of modern art’s complexity, rigour and self-contained organicity over mass culture’s dreams, delusions and desires. In order to maintain its purity and autonomy undefiled by the “seductive lures” of mass culture and the feminine, modern art must continually fortify its boundaries against the fluidity and waste of the pseudo-aesthetic. However, even as modernists hold themselves together and apart from these excluded others, these others remain beguiling. As I shall discuss in chapter five, James’s and Whistler’s modernist will to mastery coexists with their interest in low culture and the feminine. And in chapter six I shall address the issue of avant-garde imaginary femininity in connection with James’s and Whistler’s Venetian work.

Both James and Whistler saw themselves as outsiders within the world of late nineteenth century Europe, engaged in a competitive struggle for cultural legitimacy with their peers and with other cultural products. And both used the position of avant-garde outsider as one from which to express their disgust for and alienation from what were perceived to be the bad aspects of modernity - industrial capitalism, materialism, burgeoning mass culture, filth, waste - and to celebrate the good aspects; the “delirious multiplication of the possibilities of the male self” (qtd. in Stephenson 275). In this study, I will look at the similar ways in which “modernity” as a social formation and a state of mind are dealt with in James’s and Whistler’s work.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

<sup>2</sup> I capitalise Aestheticism here to indicate that I am talking about a particular style and historical phenomenon, not simply about some features of art that are generally or transhistorically apparent.

<sup>3</sup> For the following discussion of the characteristics of modernist art, I have closely followed the concise and interesting accounts of Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other", After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism, 53-4 and especially Eugene Lunn, 34-7. The characterisations of modernist art described here are a result of successive canonisations by various historians and critics of aesthetic styles and artists. The characteristics of the modernist artifact, and the values of modernist art history (that approach that sees art as developing within its own sphere unaffected by history and the social), have in recent years been contested from a variety of perspectives. For an analysis of modernist criticism and a critique of canonical modernism from a feminist perspective see, for example, Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker, Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement and Griselda Pollock, Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and histories of art. For a post-structuralist perspective, see Victor Burgin, "The Absence of Presence: Conceptualism and Postmodernisms", The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity, 29-50 and Donald Preziosi, Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science. In the chapters that follow I shall be paying attention to issues of gender, sexuality, and class in my analyses.

<sup>4</sup> On the differences between socially-integrated art and modernist art, see Peter Burger, 47-50.

<sup>5</sup> On the idea of spatial form in literature, see the pioneering article by Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature", The Widening Gyre, 3-62 and also, by the same author, The Idea of Spatial Form.

<sup>6</sup> "Defamiliarisation" is the term used by the Russian Formalist literary critic Victor Shklovsky to define what art does. Art makes objects strange (ostranenie) and thus renews perception. On Structuralism and Russian Formalism, see Fredric Jameson, The Prison-House of Language.

<sup>7</sup> For interesting discussions of the influence that science had on literary form in the nineteenth century, see Gillian Beer, Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth Century Fiction; L.J. Jordanova, ed., Languages of Nature: Critical Essays on Science and Literature and U.C. Knoepfelmacher and G.B. Tennyson, eds., Nature and the Victorian Imagination.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Darwin, "The Descent of Man", Darwin: A Norton Critical Edition.

<sup>9</sup> This anxiety is perhaps most apparent in the discourse of eugenics articulated by Darwin's cousin Francis Galton. See Francis Galton, Hereditary Genius and Essays in Eugenics. According to Galton, the perfection of the British nation would be ensured by instituting measures to reduce the reproductive rate amongst the so-called lower orders of society and to increase the rate of reproduction amongst the higher orders. Eugenics reformers saw themselves as simply performing more humanely what nature would inevitably do - eliminating the lesser components of humanity from the struggle for which they were ill-adapted anyway. As noted by Allan Sekula, eugenics was a kind of twisted utopian ideology, but a utopianism haunted by a sense of social decline and exhaustion. See Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive", The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography, 343-89.

<sup>10</sup> On the spectacularity of modernity, see Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle. In the following passage, Debord describes one of the spectacular society's primary characteristics: "Since the spectacle's job is to cause a world that is no longer directly perceptible to be seen via different specialized mediations, it is inevitable that it should elevate the human sense of sight to the special place once occupied by touch; the most abstract of the senses, and the most easily deceived, sight is naturally the most readily adaptable to present-day society's generalized abstraction" (sec. 18). I shall take up the issue of modernity's proliferations of spectacle and illusion in chapters five and seven.

<sup>11</sup> For Greenberg's views on modernism, see John O'Brian, ed., Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism. On modernist criticism in general and Greenbergian modernism in particular, see Benjamin H.D. Buchloh et al, eds., Modernism and Modernity: The Vancouver Conference Papers and Francis Frascina, "Greenberg and the Politics of Modernism".

<sup>12</sup> I am using the term "avant-garde" interchangeably with the term "modernist" to describe advanced nineteenth century artists and writers. Nineteenth century modernists occupied an avant-garde position within bourgeois society. However "avant-garde" as a descriptive term for nineteenth century figures is not the same as what Burger calls the "historical avant-garde", that movement in the 1920s which, in his analysis, was the first movement to understand the position of high art in bourgeois society - social inconsequentiality as a result of its autonomy - and to turn against the institution of art and the way that institution functions in society. Nineteenth century modernists accepted art's autonomous status whereas

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the historical avant-garde sought to alter it by reintegrating art with life. While I persist in using the term avant-garde to describe nineteenth century modernists whom Burger would simply call "modernists" I do so because the term was used by the artists and critics themselves and still proves useful as a descriptive term for this social phenomenon. This issue will be discussed further below.

<sup>13</sup> By "historical avant-garde", Burger means the avant-garde of the 1920s in Europe: the Futurists, the Dadaists, the Surrealists and the left avant-garde in Russia and Germany.

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, as Andreas Huyssen has pointed out, the imaginary femininity of the male avant-garde, which often grounds their opposition to bourgeois society also goes hand-in-hand with the exclusion of real women from the cultural enterprise and with the "misogyny of bourgeois patriarchy itself" (45).

## CHAPTER TWO

### Henry James's Literary Theory

In "Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism", Raymond Williams argues that it was the "new and specific location" of the artists and intellectuals of the modern movement within the changing cultural space of the large urban city that was the important factor in their modernity rather than any thematic response to the new experience of the city (44). In the complex and mobile environment of the metropolis, new opportunities existed for artists of divergent interests and ideologies to develop an audience for their work. Groups of artists and writers competed within this shifting social field for the available opportunities. As an entrepreneur, the artist needed to establish a position by whatever means possible, to mark out a territory which could be claimed as his or her own. Both James and Whistler did just that in late nineteenth century London by setting themselves up in opposition to a materialistic society and its degraded mass cultural products.

The novelist and the painter traveled similar paths, from an early engagement with realism, the aesthetic form that was most clearly "modern" in mid-century art and literature, to a late aestheticism which was, as I suggested in chapter one, the art form that represents the culmination of the modernist transformation of content into form. Their aesthetic theories, articulated by James in literary reviews, essays and the prefaces to the New York edition, and by Whistler in letters to other artists, exhibition pamphlets and the "Ten O'Clock" lecture, reveal many similar beliefs and strategies. As aesthetic producers, Whistler and James functioned within the social institution of autonomous art. Both saw

themselves as professionals possessing specialised knowledge and both actively attempted to create a market for their own work. By elaborating a rhetoric of mastery and originality, James and Whistler established a position within the competitive late century cultural marketplace. This chapter will examine Henry James's literary theories and the context in which they were written, while chapter two will look at Whistler's aesthetic theories and their context. I will show that James and Whistler shared fundamental ideas about art and the nature and function of the artist, ideas which distinguished them from their English and American contemporaries and situated them at the forefront of late nineteenth century aesthetic debate. Their artistic practice was underpinned by a fully-elaborated aesthetic theory that provided support for their own work and participated in the public discourse about the nature of modern high art. I will also analyse the contradictions of their position as aesthetic professionals that inhere in their theory and practice, contradictions that clearly indicate the uneasy relationship of the modernist artist to modernity.

## I

In the 1870s James was both a popular and critical success with realist works such as Daisy Miller, The American, and Roderick Hudson. To his dismay, his work became increasingly less popular as the century progressed. Although there were a few critics and fellow artists who appreciated the late work, most agreed with William James's assessment:

[The] method of narration by the interminable elaboration of suggestive reference .

. . . goes agin the grain of all my impulses in writing . . . why won't you, just to

please Brother, sit down and write a new book, with no twilight and mustiness in the plot, with great vigor and decisiveness in the action, no fencing in the dialogue, no psychological commentaries, and absolute straightness in the style?  
(qtd. in Hocks 20)

The oblique and aestheticised world of The Golden Bowl, James's last published novel, represented to most readers an unfortunate decline with its metaphoricity, indirectness and stylistic distortions. However, although he was often unappreciated by many of his reading public, for James's elite audience, his peers in literature and the arts, his experiments in literary form paved the way for high Anglo-American literary modernism.<sup>1</sup> His very financial failure could be, and was, seen by James and his supporters as evidence of the philistinism of his audience and the superiority of his own work. Although apparently resigned to his lack of wider success in later years, the problem of audience was one that James addressed from the beginning and continued to address until the end of his career. His position was a paradoxical one. He aspired to popular as well as critical success but was unwilling to give the public the kind of work it demanded. He was sceptical of his audience's ability to understand what he was doing but continued to put forward his theoretical principles in articles and reviews throughout his career. He did not withdraw into cynical silence but continued to exhort, to cajole and to contradict the cultural status quo.

Henry James's literary theory was intended to establish the criteria for literary art and to educate an audience for his own writing.<sup>2</sup> Theoretical statements such as "The Art of Fiction" (1884) and the prefaces to the New York edition of his fiction written between

1906 and 1908 explain his own production and try to create a receptive public. In these writings he will identify his work as new and different from the established norms of British and American literature, while at the same time linking himself to those two traditions, positioning himself as heir to both. He will also differentiate his work from that of masses of what Hawthorne had earlier described as “scribbling women” and others whom he sees as churning out vast quantities of inferior popular writing.

The “Art of Fiction” was written in the context of increasingly intense debates about the nature of Anglo-American literature. Its immediate inspiration was a lecture given by Walter Besant also entitled “The Art of Fiction” in which Besant detailed the importance of virtuous, happy, and lively “stories”.<sup>3</sup> For James, however, it was not the “story” that was important, it was the form which the story takes that distinguishes literary art from non-art, or popular, writing. James begins his article by commenting on the lack of self-consciousness in the practice of literature in England, particularly in comparison with France. The English novel is not “discutable”, it “ha[s] no air of having a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it” (165). James identifies this lack of theoretical framework as detrimental to English literature. For James, the practice of any art requires theory, discussion, debate, self-conscious awareness of what is being undertaken: “Art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints” (165-66). Such authorial self-consciousness is necessary because modern literary art in the nineteenth century is a specialised field with its own rules and codes. An awareness of and engagement with these rules and codes is a prerequisite for the production of literary art.



The domain of serious literature is concerned only with questions of aesthetic form, beauty, and taste not with questions, such as those of morality, applicable to other spheres of inquiry. Against Besant, James asserts that literature's content, the subject matter of its stories, is irrelevant. What is relevant, and worth debate, is literary form. However, for Anglo-American audiences the question of the morality of art continued to be important in assessing the value of literature, a consideration which James argued was misplaced.

With the dissociation of the spheres of science, morality and art in the nineteenth century, the problems applicable to each field could be treated separately as the domain of specialised experts. Within the sphere of autonomous art the applicable problems become those of what Habermas calls "aesthetic-expressive rationality" ("Modernity" 9). These problems - beauty, taste, expressive form - can then be solved by aesthetic professionals such as James who are "more adept at being logical in these specialised areas than other people are" (Habermas "Modernity" 9). James sees this separation of art from morality as necessary and argues that the emphasis by English critics and novelists on the story and its moral implications is naive and evidence of an "evangelical hostility" to the novel ("Art of Fiction" 166). To James, the novel's goodness does not inhere in its "representing virtuous and aspiring characters" or in having a "happy ending" but in its ability to create an aesthetic whole out of whatever materials it takes on. To support his point he uses the example of the visual arts: "You wish to paint a moral picture or carve a moral statue: will you not tell us how you would set about it? We are discussing the Art of Fiction; questions of art are questions (in the widest sense) of execution; questions of morality are quite another affair" ("Art of Fiction" 181).<sup>4</sup> James insists, against the older view of

literature represented by Besant, that a modern literary art exists in its own separate field, with its own concerns, those of form and technique: "We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his *donnée*: our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it" (175).

James's insistence on granting the writer his *donnée* was, for critics such as Besant, a radical and dangerous proposition. "The Art of Fiction" articulates James's reaction against prevailing literary and moral orthodoxies represented by Besant, orthodoxies which were making the relations between advanced writers and their critics and audience increasingly tense. In addition, "foreign" writers such as Flaubert, Zola and Ibsen were greeted in the Anglo-American world with an outrage that James saw as evidence of the public's lack of understanding of what literature was. His attacks in "The Art of Fiction" on the public's and critics' desire for virtuous characters, happy endings, lively incidents and sympathy are responses, as William Veeder and Susan Griffin have noted, to precisely what contemporary reviewers found lacking in James's own fiction.<sup>5</sup> Criticism of his work because of its lack of morally-uplifting themes and often ambiguous endings was to James entirely inappropriate because the function of literary art was not to educate or uplift but to offer a well-crafted aesthetic artifact for the reader's consumption. However, how was James to convince readers and critics of this critical point? As a field which in the Anglo-American world had a lack of both status and theoretical self-consciousness, fiction-writing needed to be linked with other intellectual activities which were seen as having those attributes. One such field was that of visual art.

In "The Art of Fiction" James presses hard for the equality of fiction and painting. By doing so, he hopes to give the relatively new art form of the novel the same status as that of painting. Like painting, the novel exists to "represent life":

The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life.

When it relinquishes this attempt, the same attempt that we see on the canvas of the painter, it will have arrived at a very strange pass. It is not expected of the picture that it will make itself humble in order to be forgiven; and the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete. Their inspiration is the same, their process (allowing for the different quality of the vehicle), is the same, their success is the same. They may learn from each other, and the honour of the one is the honour of the other. (167)

James emphasises the novel's need to "represent life" in order to distinguish it from the stories which Besant had praised. Fiction is not make-believe or fantasy; it is an art that deals with the real world and its problems through the application of a body of theoretical knowledge. Rather than being simply an inconsequential piece of make-believe, James argues that the novel is a form of serious art like painting.

Throughout the "Art of Fiction" James also attempts to differentiate literary art from its non-art competitors. Unlike popular writing, literary art is serious. James makes a case for the novel as a serious form by linking it to historiography: "[A]s the picture is reality, so the novel is history" (167). Like painting and history, the novel represents life and does not apologise for it. To make the case for the seriousness of fiction even more clear, James goes on to link the novelist with the philosopher: "It seems to me to give him

[the novelist] a great character, the fact that he has at once so much in common with the philosopher and the painter; this double analogy is a magnificent heritage" (167). Near the end of the article, James goes as far as saying that the novel is the most magnificent art form, more magnificent even than painting because it offers "innumerable opportunities" and "few restrictions" (182). In comparison with the other arts which "appear confined and hampered" because the "various conditions under which they are exercised are so rigid and definite" (182), the novel represents artistic freedom. Anything may be said within the expansive form of the novel.

The novel is of all pictures the most comprehensive and the most elastic. It will stretch anywhere - it will take in absolutely anything. All it needs is a subject and a painter. But for its subject, magnificently it has the whole human consciousness.

("The Future of the Novel" 244)

In his theoretical statements James identifies the field of literary art as one which has its own particular concerns and characteristics, qualities which constitute it as a separate sphere of intellectual activity. These characteristics include attention to aesthetic form, seriousness and freedom, all characteristics which James will use to distinguish literary art from other degraded cultural forms. Just as the field of literary art has its own characteristics, so too does the practitioner of such art. Interestingly, when he comes to identifying the qualities peculiar to the writer of literature, James brings back the previously excluded notion of morality to underpin his conception of the ideal artist. Although morality is not, according to James, a concern of literary art, it can be used to identify the true literary artist.

For James, the only sense in which the question of morality is applicable to the novel is that in which the quality of the artist's mind is at stake. James links morality with intensity of consciousness, the ability of the writer to capture the "illusion of life" in his work. The intensity of this "illusion of life" is then held to be evidence of the artist's moral quality. The greater the artist's intellect and ability, the greater the work of art and the greater its "moral sense":

There is one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together; that is in light of the very obvious truth that the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer. In proportion as that intelligence is fine will the novel, the picture, the statue partake of the substance of beauty and truth. To be constituted of such elements is, in my vision, to have purpose enough. No good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind . . .

(181-82)

The equation that James wants to make here is artist=superior mind=accurate vision=moral truths. In this essay, James is concerned to establish certain fundamental characteristics necessary for legitimate, serious writers to have. They must be intensely conscious, they must be perceptive, they must be bright, and if they are, they must be moral. As I shall discuss below, these particular attributes are characteristics which James will use to differentiate himself and his work from competitors.

In the "Art of Fiction", James argues that literary theory is vital to literary practice. A modern literary art is self-aware and self-critical and the practice of fiction writing requires a theoretical framework to support it. It is not enough simply to write - one must

be conscious of the context within which one is writing. Modern fiction writing, like any other serious sphere of activity, has, or should have, a body of knowledge which must be assimilated in order to properly practice it. Unlike earlier "men of letters" who were cultured amateurs, the modern writer is a professional pursuing a specialised career with its own concerns and interests. As an aesthetic professional, James is himself the one best able to establish the characteristics of the field of fictional art and impart these characteristics to a public. "The Art of Fiction", in addition to laying out the criteria for novelistic art, also establishes James's own credentials as a theorist of the aesthetic within a specialised disciplinary field.

## II

As we have seen, James was concerned to identify the necessary characteristics of a modern literary art. Although he argues for fiction's autonomy, the characteristics he identifies take on social significance when they are examined in light of the instability of the expanding Anglo-American cultural marketplace. In James's modernist literary theory, literary art must be resolutely marked off from the mass cultural products produced and purveyed by competitors. These competing forms include popular women's writing, romance novels and new mass market productions such as newspapers and magazines. James's literary theory carves out a place for the writer of serious fiction that is above and beyond the contaminations of these lesser cultural artifacts.

As we have seen, James was intent upon defining literary art as "serious". Seriousness was important because it was this quality which identified a cultural product as an art rather than merely an entertainment. Seriousness was the province of high art

such as painting and of the important intellectual activities of philosophy and historiography, activities which were in the nineteenth century gendered categories largely restricted to men. James's linkage of fiction with painting, philosophy and history attempts to give fiction-writing a legitimacy it did not yet have in the minds of many observers. That fiction was somehow "illegitimate" was perhaps the result of its being written largely by and for women. The position of the male writer in nineteenth century America where James began his career was an unstable one because writing was a suspect activity associated with the female sphere of culture and domesticity. Novels, in particular, were seen in mid-century America as appealing mostly to women.<sup>6</sup> In the 1850s, when James came of age, the best-selling American novelists were primarily women writers of sentimental and domestic fictions against whom "serious" writers such as James were competing. Many male writers and critics railed against the prevalence of sentimentality and domesticity in contemporary writing. In early book reviews written between 1864 and 1867, James was no exception. Many of his reviews of works by women have a tone described by one critic as "ranging from condescension to outrage" (Habegger Woman Business 9). Against an insurgent crowd of women writers - Hawthorne's "scribbling women" - James's literary theory is partially an attempt to define a legitimate public role for the male novelist.

The idea of becoming a great "man of letters" was appealing to James because it offered an escape from an impossible norm of masculinity represented by the American world of commerce and business.<sup>7</sup> As a legitimate public role, "man of letters" also helped to contain the threat of becoming feminised, a threat prompted particularly by

contemporary critical discourse which characterised James as effeminate.<sup>8</sup> In order to differentiate his own work from that of popular women writers, James elaborates a rhetoric of mastery in which the popular writings of American women are seen as lacking in the essential qualities of “art” and, as I shall discuss below, an authentic literature is aligned with capabilities and qualities culturally-coded as masculine - vision, consciousness, mastery.<sup>9</sup> In chapter six below I shall address the question of James’s, and Whistler’s, appropriation of the feminine and the ways in which they strategically deployed feminine qualities and a feminised aesthetic as a social critique. However, here I want to concentrate on the complexity of James’s theoretical position.

In addition to the sphere of popular literature which, in both the United States and Britain, was dominated by women, the sphere of “serious literature” - that written by men and the occasional exceptional woman - was also competition for James. As an expatriate in London, James was concerned with asserting himself within a nationalistic American context as well as establishing his credentials in Europe. Serious American literature in the nineteenth century was preoccupied with the question of its own independence and originality. American writers yearned to be free of the memory, history, and representations associated with European literary tradition. In the early 1870s, Henry James acknowledged his own awareness of the “problem of Europe” with his comment that “It’s a complex fate, being an American, and one of the responsibilities it entails is fighting against a superstitious valuation of Europe” (Edel, Letters I 13). This “anxiety of influence”, as Harold Bloom has called it, is expressed as the American effort to escape from the pressure of history and the weight of the past.<sup>10</sup> As James so clearly notes,



American literary and artistic independence necessitates a struggle with a European double with whom the American is juxtaposed and from whom his or her identity is derived, an identity predicated on difference from this originary source.

For John Carlos Rowe, the American insistence on “self-begetting” is the characteristic which constitutes its modernity.<sup>11</sup> In his search for a new and distinctive literary form that will incorporate and supersede the nascent literary tradition represented by Hawthorne, as well as the established European tradition represented by Balzac and Eliot, James is actively engaged in creating a modern literary art. The form which this literary modernity takes, as outlined in the “Art of Fiction”, is realism:

One can speak best from one’s own taste, and I may therefore venture to say that the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel - the merit on which all its other merits . . . helplessly and submissively depend. If it be not there they are all as nothing, and if these be there, they owe their effect to the success with which the author has produced the illusion of life. The cultivation of this success, the study of this exquisite process, form, to my mind, the beginning and the end of the art of the novelist. (173)

The realism theorised by James is not, however, the realism of Hawthorne, Eliot, or Flaubert. For James, Hawthorne’s romanticism and “thinness” of specification make him unable to convey the “air of reality” so necessary to the novel, while Eliot’s intrusive authorial omniscience mars her novels’ “illusion of life” and Flaubert’s low-life characters have insufficient “consciousness”.<sup>12</sup> “The Art of Fiction” is a polemic against both the overt moralising of the English novel and what James sees as the inartistic worldliness of

the French novel. Fiction should be, in James's account, neither a didactic, quasi-religious tract, nor the exposé of the tawdry activities of the lower classes favoured by Flaubert and Zola. Neither should it be the "loose and baggy monster" that James characterises Tolstoy's creations as. Instead it must be a "sublime economy" of form that illustrates the growth and progress of a superior consciousness. The function of the modern work of literature, according to James, is not to offer a moral or reflect a pre-existing, and in the case of Zola, degraded reality but to create a coherent organic whole that represents the interior experiences of the aesthetic consciousness. Modern literary art must be engaged with modern life and must use the forms appropriate to that engagement. Overt authorial omniscience which presupposes a totalising "God's-eye" view of the world cannot articulate the experience of modernity nor can the naive documentary realism of the American literary realists such as William Dean Howells and Frank Norris.

Just as the contemporary debates surrounding the morality of literature were active and heated, so too were the debates about the form literary realism should take. Realism was both a necessity and a problem in nineteenth century American fiction, necessary because the older romanticism of, say, Hawthorne was outdated and incapable of representing the "everlasting uncertainty and agitation", in Marx's words, of modern America, and problematic because the complexity of life in a rapidly changing society made reality itself seem uncertain, something to be "sought after rather than merely lived".<sup>13</sup> Realists try to construct a coherent social world from their confrontation with a contradictory and complex reality and in nineteenth century America the complexities were particularly acute. The rapid changes in post-civil war society produced fragmented

and competing social realities, while the simultaneous development of mass culture seemed to offer an equally threatening homogeneity. Confronted with these developments, realism was a strategy for managing the threats of social change. Realist works were in competition with older literary forms such as the romance, with the popular novel, and with emergent forms of mass media such as newspapers, magazines, and advertisements. If we consider realism as in competition with other cultural practices, it also becomes a strategy for defining and legitimating the position of the author. To call oneself a realist means to make a claim, as we have seen James do, for the cognitive value of fiction and for one's own cultural authority to possess and dispense access to the real. Within the expanding and modernising literary marketplace, James makes a case for his own realism as the most advanced fictional form and the one most able to capture the look and feel of modern social circumstances. As I shall discuss in chapter four, James's experiments with realism in The Portrait of a Lady do articulate the complexities of bourgeois female subjectivity.

In addition to the elaboration of an intelligible public sphere, realists also formulated a new public role for the author in a mass market. James and Howells were both instrumental in this process, although their definitions of the art of fiction differ sharply. For both, however, romance and popular fiction were equally inadequate for representing the new social conditions of modern life. While James and Howells both considered themselves realists, they articulated conflicting ideas about the nature of realism and the form it should take. For Howells, James's primary competition in the field of American literature, romance, with its enslavement to past conventions, idealization of

subject matter, and aristocratic pretensions, was the “last refuge” of that “aristocratic spirit” which was fast disappearing from American politics and society.<sup>14</sup> Realism, in contrast, was “democracy in literature” and able to represent a contemporary life beyond the limited range of the “cultured classes”. Popular fiction was also attacked by Howells as a coarse form of amusement for the “unthinking multitude”.<sup>15</sup> Realism stands in opposition to the elitism of romance and the mindless entertainment of popular culture - it is productive work for both readers and writers.

For Howells, realism is connected with industriousness and self-discipline. The realist novel depends for its effect upon the “faithful, almost photographic delineation of actual life” but without any unnatural straining after the “intenser and coarser emotions of flood and fire”. The “standard of the arts” to which the writer should aspire was “the simple, the natural, the honest”. To Howells, the proper subject of literature was the “everyday world”, not the “superstition of the romantic, the bizarre, the heroic”. Howells’ realism emphasises the direct observation and recording of facts, effacing authorial presence through its directness of presentation.<sup>16</sup> He was unconcerned with the author’s role in shaping fiction into a harmonious aesthetic whole and to James his work seemed formless and weak. In contrast, James stresses the role of the controlling consciousness of the author in constructing a compelling artistic vision. Against Howells’ advocacy of a “democratic” realism, James advocates an aristocracy of artistic vision. For James, Howells’ insistence on a documentary realism was evidence of his enslavement to the “abject actual”. In contrast, James insists on the importance of the mind’s role in shaping reality.

While Howells' realism was an attempt to objectively record the material world, James's approach emphasises the subjective nature of all experience. This emphasis on subjectivity, as I have discussed in chapter one, is characteristic of modernist aesthetic production. Subjectivity for James meant a unique individuality through whose heightened consciousness we perceive the world. The quality of the perceptions of this unique subject - who is the author's surrogate - makes a novel worth reading. Recall with respect to this point James's assertion that "In proportion as [the artist's] intelligence is fine will the novel, the picture, the statue partake of the substance of beauty and truth" ("Art of Fiction" 181). Since James's own work features individuals of acute perception and elevated consciousness through whose subjectivity we apprehend the fictional world, we may safely assume that it is his own work that most clearly manifests that "beauty and truth" of which literary art should partake. If the modernist project is not simply to record the world but to construct the world in one's own image, then Howells' and Norris' feeble and unconscious subjects can in no way compete with James's superior ones in this endeavour.

In the late work James's movement away from realism towards a stylistically advanced aestheticism can be seen as the problematic culmination of his engagement with modernity. As will be argued in chapter seven, James resolves the problems dealt with in his earlier work by at the same time internalising the commodification of culture and asserting that it is the aesthetic that is the ultimate source of value. However, while James argues for the aesthetic as a transcendent autonomous realm of value above and beyond the social world and its mass cultural commodities, The Golden Bowl demonstrates the

enmeshment of the aesthetic in that which it purports to stand above. In The Golden Bowl, his last novel, James describes a world in which people treat one another like commodities but whose narrative of objectification is redeemed by being molded into the static perfection of a smooth, symmetrical golden bowl. James's stylistic innovations and use of language itself reinforce the content of the novel. Rather than being the realistic representation of an external world required by readers accustomed to clearly-articulated stories, The Golden Bowl places us inside an authorial consciousness that is itself consumption-oriented.

With the increasing complexity of late nineteenth century life, realism as an aesthetic strategy was no longer able to represent a society in which "all that is solid melts into air". In the 1890s the full implications of the new cultural market situation, as well as the broader social changes outlined in chapter one, made themselves apparent in the radically changed forms of aestheticism with its emphasis on art as an expression of a unique subjectivity rather than a mirror of the natural or social worlds. Instead of revealing some objective truth about the external world, aestheticist art reveals the mind of its producer. However, that such art is explicitly devoted to an articulation or examination of heightened consciousness does not, as I shall demonstrate below, mean that James's aestheticist art is unconnected with or unaffected by the social world.

### III

In "The Art of Fiction" James had begun to stress the importance of consciousness as an attribute of the artist. He will go on in the prefaces to the New York edition to assert that human consciousness is the most important factor in producing a piece of literature.

James's concentration on the role of consciousness here should be seen in light of contemporary post-Darwinian notions of evolutionary progress in nineteenth century Britain and America. While it is beyond the scope of this study to go into detail about the significance of the issue of consciousness to nineteenth century theories of gender, class and race, what is important to note is that in such theories, consciousness was seen as an attribute of the highly-evolved.<sup>17</sup> In somewhat hysterical language, cultural critics and social scientists elaborated on the distinctions between the sexes, classes and races in terms of ability to think and be original. The most highly evolved individuals were those who were most capable of original thought and abstract reasoning. For social scientists such as Max Nordau and Harry Campbell, originality and individuality were what separated men from women and the "superior" classes and races from the "inferior".<sup>18</sup> For James and some other avant-garde bourgeois male artists, these simplistic distinctions were complicated by their alienation from what they saw as the materialistic, compulsively masculinist values of their class.<sup>19</sup> However, while the extent to which James himself subscribed to contemporary theories of evolutionary development is unclear, what is clear is that, just as evolutionary discourse saw consciousness as the attribute of the most highly evolved human beings, James emphasised consciousness as the most important characteristic of the artist. As a fully conscious being, the artist described in James's New York edition prefaces is the epitome of human excellence, one who, confronted with the anxieties of modernity, constructs a world in his own image.

The series of works that make up the twenty-four volume New York edition, begun in 1906 and completed in 1908, were intended to be James's definitive literary and

theoretical statement. The New York edition was to be a deluxe production, carefully edited, and specially designed with prefaces to each volume written for the occasion and commissioned photographic frontispieces. As literary manifesto, aesthetic object and artistic self-portrait, the New York edition can be seen as a modernist creation par excellence.

Although he was acknowledged as a “Master of prose fiction”, James’s work was neither selling well, nor receiving the careful, serious attention he felt it deserved. James wanted to give his works a coherence and unified form that would allow them to be properly understood by an ideal audience. The New York edition was designed to create the sort of critically sophisticated and intellectually acute readership he desired. It was the result of a particular thematic design, and its inclusions and exclusions of certain works, as well as their extensive revisions, were an integral part of that design, intended to give the entire body of work an overall unity of style and structure.<sup>20</sup> As an aesthetic object, the New York edition is the fully-evolved organic whole for which the modernist aesthetic longs. It is also a testament to the modernist desire to erase history and context, to be self-originating and self-authenticating.

The New York edition is a particularly compelling example of James’s obsession with authority and originality. In this edition, the stylistic variations evident in a historical chronology of his work are minimised and particular aspects of character and voice are emphasised through revision.<sup>21</sup> His entire body of work is reconstructed as a homogeneous, synchronic whole, rather than a diachronic record of change through time. Through his revisions James effaces some of the evidence of his development as an author



in favour of presenting his work as a self-portrait of achieved artistic excellence.<sup>22</sup> In its self-contained, self-referential wholeness, complete with a photographic portrait of the master himself in the first volume, the direction of his head pointing the way for the reader to follow, the New York edition constructs James as an exemplary modernist artist - self-created, self-defined and self-aestheticised.

In all his theoretical writings, including the early essays and the New York edition prefaces, James is concerned to present a picture of the artist as a kind of heroic figure who stands opposed to the materialistic industrialised society around him. The increasingly marginal position of literature and the arts in a society concerned with “traveling and shooting . . . pushing trade and playing football” (“Future” 247), coupled with that society’s devotion to a flood of debased mass culture, meant that an artist such as James was doubly threatened. Elaboration of a theory of consciousness allows the artist to set himself apart from the vulgar, uncritical and unreflective bourgeois consumers and working class masses. For James, it is the artist who has the most highly developed consciousness and thus the greatest ability to penetrate the ambiguities of contemporary existence. For example, in the preface to the Portrait of a Lady, James tells us that

The spreading field, the human scene, is the “choice of subject”; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the “literary form”; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher - without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has *been* conscious. Thereby I shall

express to you at once his boundless freedom and his “moral reference”. (AN 46-7)

The questions to be asked of piece of fiction are “Is it valid, in a word, is it genuine, is it sincere, the result of some direct impression or perception of Life?” (AN 45). The qualities of genuineness, sincerity and perception distinguish the work of fictional art from the “story”, that piece of insincere, inartistic “make-believe” that currently overwhelms the literary marketplace. It is the quality of the artist’s sensibility that dictates the sincerity or genuineness of his perceptions: “There is, I think, no more nutritive or suggestive truth in this connexion than that of the perfect dependence of the ‘moral’ sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it. The question comes back thus, obviously, to the kind and degree of the artist’s prime sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs” (AN 45).

The artist’s consciousness is active and acute. It is fully as highly developed as a scientist’s or detective’s. Indeed, in the preface to Portrait James describes the artist as a kind of detective, having a “pair of glasses” or a “fieldglass” which forms a “unique instrument” able to give a “distinct impression” (AN 46). In the preface to Roderick Hudson, James compares the artist to the mathematician; both create their own ideal coherent worlds:

Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, a circle within which they shall happily appear to do so. (AN 5)

James sees the novel as the perfect art form because its “sublime economy” has the capacity to order and control an experience which is essentially disordered and uncontrolled. Life is messy but art is not: “There is life and life, and as waste is only life sacrificed and thereby prevented from ‘counting’, I delight in a deep-breathing economy and an organic form” (AN 84). The artist improves upon nature by converting the formlessness of life into the organic wholeness of art. “Life being all inclusion and confusion, and art being all discrimination and selection”, the “sublime economy” of art redeems the “splendid waste” of life (AN 120). Here, the art of fiction is again opposed to the “contemporary deluge” of popular literature for whose audience “taste is but an obscure, confused, immediate instinct” (“Future” 244, 243). The taste and sensitivity of the artist is in stark contrast to the lack of sensitivity of the consumers who make up the primary audience for literature.

In the New York edition prefaces James completes the picture of modern literary art and the literary artist which he began in “The Art of Fiction”. Fiction is to be a self-conscious, self-contained aesthetic whole which is revelatory of a heightened consciousness. Rather than being content merely to reflect a pre-existing world, the literary artifact creates its own world, a world which is superior to the degraded materialistic insensitive world of late nineteenth century society. Having created this picture of what literature should be, James then used this creation as a means of marketing himself and his own work as that best equipped to correspond to this picture.

#### IV

As I discussed in chapter one, advanced artists such as Henry James occupied an uneasy position both within and in opposition to the larger social order. As an autonomous aesthetic producer, James is free to create whatever he pleases and sell the products of that creativity on the open market. His works and indeed he himself are commodities for sale. While James seeks to set his work apart from society's mass cultural artifacts and differentiate his art from other market commodities, James finds himself enmeshed in the cultural marketplace. As only one voice among many others in an increasingly crowded, competitive aesthetic marketplace, James must strain to sell himself as an avant-garde artist.

James's attempt to define a position for himself took place in a cultural sphere which was expanding and mutating. In his 1899 essay "The Future of the Novel" James remarked on the huge increase in reading material available to a newly literate audience by saying that "The flood at present swells and swells, threatening the whole field of letters, as would often seem, with submersion . . . The book, in the Anglo-Saxon world, is almost everywhere" (242).<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the late nineteenth century literary marketplace in which James found himself was significantly different from that of the first half of the century.<sup>24</sup> Changes in the production and distribution of books in both England and the United States allowed cheap paper reprints of older works as well as contemporary foreign fiction to proliferate. The publication of inexpensive one volume books in England challenged the earlier custom of publishing new works in expensive three volume editions. By the nineties, bookselling had become a large and lucrative business and the last decade of the century was marked by an explosion of publishing houses, bookstores, and authors. In

such a competitive situation, that a new and distinct literary form might also become a sought-after commodity was not lost on James. His emphasis on stylistic considerations in his literary theory suggests that he also saw the potential for an innovative literary form as a means of capturing his share of this new reading public. However, given the proliferation of more inexpensive and accessible texts, James's authorial and financial investment in the expensive New York edition was probably destined for failure from the start. Such failure, then, could be rationalised as evidence of the inadequate sensitivity and intellect of James's audience and confirmation of the avant-garde nature of his work.

Accompanying the increased availability of books was the growth of a new mass reading public. This modern public was a much different one than that addressed by the mid-century authors who stood as models for James. In his 1899 essay James indicated his own awareness of the changed nature of the reading public with the comment that "There is an immense public, if public be the name, inarticulate, but abysmally absorbent . . . [that] grows and grows each year" ("Future" 242). This broader cross-section of readers meant a new diversity of competing interests, with the majority of the readership composed of newly educated classes who were unfamiliar with literary tradition and the monuments of English literature. In such a situation, James's literary theory serves two purposes. It asserts an avant-garde position within a changing cultural field and also attempts to convert some of these new readers to his own work. In fact, James suggests in "The Future of the Novel" that both the "admirable minority of intelligent persons" and the "deceived and bored" audience for popular literature may come to appreciate the "great prose fable" that is the (Jamesian) novel (244).

With sophisticated methods of printing and distributing books and a greatly expanded reading market, the writing and publishing of books had by the late century become a modern commercial enterprise. With modernisation and industrialisation, separate spheres of cultural activity were articulated within which career paths were established. "Men of letters" such as James formed a new specialised class of professional writers and organizations such as the Society of Authors were formed to protect and promote writers' interests. As Rachel Bowlby points out in Just Looking, in the new world of images and signs that characterised the late century culture of consumption the status of writers became unstable. The "romantic genius" of the nineteenth century emerged at the same time as the industrialisation of literature attacked his authorial freedom:

Poetic genius pitted itself against the mechanical demands of the all-too-workaday commercial world, and neither side of the dichotomy, put this way, can be thought apart from the other. The same developments which were binding commerce and culture closer together, making commerce into a matter of beautiful images and culture into a matter of trade, a sector of commerce, also, paradoxically, led to the theoretical distinction whereby they were seen not only as heterogeneous terms but as antithetical in nature. The 'absolute' value of 'art for art's sake' versus the monetary values of commerce became a standard opposition in contemporary debates . . . (Bowlby 8-9)<sup>25</sup>

The position of fictional art and the artist himself is threatened by the "monstrous multiplications" ("Future" 245) of texts created by the literature industry. In "The Art of

Fiction” James had noted this threat with his comment that “good novels are much compromised by bad ones, and . . . the field at large suffers discredit from overcrowding” (169). Although the field in general “has been vulgarised . . . like everything else to-day”, James maintained that “there is as much difference as there ever was between a good novel and a bad one” (169). And the good novel, one concerned with “observation and perception . . . art and taste” (“Future” 250), will resist becoming simplified and cheapened by pandering to its audience. The good novel must challenge its readers by repudiating the stereotyped and pre-packaged: “It is certain that there is no real health for any art - I am not speaking, of course, of any mere industry - that does not move a step in advance of its farthest follower” (“Future” 249-50). Throughout his career, James continued to argue for the necessity of the art of fiction and the importance of the novelist to an audience for whom they seemed increasingly less important. As a member of a misunderstood oppositional avant-garde, James’s failure to reach a wider audience only served to reconfirm his own superiority to the philistines who refused to read him.

In his theoretical writings, James articulates a rhetoric of mastery in which the objectified and alienated human subject created by science, technology, and industrial capitalism is refigured as the active and engaged producer of his own destiny. The artist James constructs in his prefaces emerges as the archetypal human being in his ability to construct his own world of values through the exercise of a superior consciousness, values which are in opposition to those of mass culture. With his celebration of a sphere of autonomous high art enjoyed by a perceptive self-aware individual, James sets the artist apart from the purveyors of “stories” and the discriminating reader apart from the

uncritical consumer of those same stories. He also sets the artist up as the consummate professional. In the industrialisation and professionalisation of the newly-emergent autonomous sphere of the aesthetic, the artist is the possessor of a body of specialised knowledge about this new entity and makes a career out of imparting that knowledge to an unenlightened public.<sup>26</sup> As a professional the artist is a “self-authenticating authority” (Freedman xix) on the aesthetic.

However, also as a consequence of art’s autonomy in a market economy, the sphere of the aesthetic itself becomes commodified. Art is one more object to be acquired or appreciated for sensory enjoyment, investment or as evidence of one’s superior taste and sophistication. The artist or writer also participates in the process by which art becomes commodified by actively marketing the aesthetic. James’s own engagement with the literary marketplace throughout his career was driven by his search for an audience. From the early success of Daisy Miller to the late financial failure of the New York edition, sales of his work were a vital concern. Paradoxically, even the financial failure of the New York edition could be turned into a success in that it enabled James to make a place for himself within the avant-garde as a Master of the Art of Fiction.

The artist’s construction of himself as alienated, isolated and unread could be an asset in the new cultural marketplace. As Freedman says with respect to Rossetti, Swinburne and Wilde, the role of the alienated artist could and often did achieve financial, critical and social success in the same degraded world he claimed to rebel against (54). This issue will be discussed further in chapter three, but here I want to note that Whistler’s aesthetic theories, innovations and public persona were, like James’s, designed to assert



himself within the competitive artistic marketplace of late nineteenth century Europe. What James achieved by elaborating a literary-critical discourse focusing on his own mastery of fictional art, Whistler will achieve by the construction of an artistic persona that emphasised originality, mastery of an esoteric body of knowledge, and an "exquisite" sensibility. My point here is not to suggest that James or Whistler were acting in bad faith or dishonestly by participating in that which they critiqued. It is to argue that the contradictions of their position are a function of the cultural and social changes occurring within modernisation. His own critical awareness of these changes, and his attempts to deal with them, make the problems of modern high art cultural production visible in James's literary theory. They will also be made visible in Whistler's career path and theoretical statements, to an examination of which I now turn.

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<sup>1</sup> For financial information about James's work see Appendix I, "James's Sales", in Roger Gard, ed., Henry James: The Critical Heritage. In an 1888 letter to Howells, James lamented that the demand for his work was minuscule but also expressed hope that that would change: "Very likely . . . some day, all my buried prose will kick off its various tombstones at once". (Lubbock vol. 1 135). Two years later he wrote to his brother William that "One always has a public enough if one has an audible vibration - even if it should only come from one's self". (Lubbock vol. 1 170). In The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act Fredric Jameson argues that James's use of point of view, codification of it into a preeminent narrative technique, and elaboration of an entire aesthetics around it was the means by which James was transformed from a minor nineteenth century man of letters into America's greatest novelist by the 1950s (221-222). On James's canonisation, see Alfred Habegger, Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature. As representatives of high Anglo-American modernism the expatriates who followed James - Pound and Eliot - can be seen as exemplary.

<sup>2</sup> The success of James's literary theory may be judged by the fact that for so many years criticism of James tended to be Jamesian, technical and formalist. In particular, the prefaces to the New York edition elaborate the criteria by which James wished to be evaluated and Anglo-American New Criticism took its cue from James's direction.

<sup>3</sup> For studies of the James-Besant quarrel see John Goode, "The Art of Fiction: Walter Besant and Henry James" and Mark Spilka, "Henry James and Walter Besant: 'The Art of Fiction' Controversy".

<sup>4</sup> Even though James uses visual art here as an example of a field in which questions of morality do not intrude, he is incorrect with respect to British art as I shall outline in chapter three. For the British critics of Whistler his style and subject matter made his "morality" questionable.

<sup>5</sup> See the commentary on "The Art of Fiction" in Veeder and Griffin, 184-8. See also note 168:38 for a summary of the contemporary critical reaction to James's work.

<sup>6</sup> See Alfred Habegger, Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature and Louise L. Stevenson.

<sup>7</sup> James himself observed that American life was divided into two separate spheres of activity, the masculine world of commerce and business and the feminine world of culture. In his preface to The

Reverberator, James admitted that he was incompetent to grasp the American man: "The men . . . the fathers, brothers, playmates, male appendages of whatever presumption, were visible and thinkable only as the American 'business-man'; and before the American business-man, as I have been prompt to declare, I was absolutely and irredeemably helpless, with no fibre of my intelligence responding to his mystery" (AN 193).

<sup>8</sup> In the preface to Volume XV of the New York edition, James described his immersion in the feminine sphere of domesticity as being trapped "uptown", "alone . . . with the music-masters and French pastry-cooks, the ladies and children [who are] immensely present and immensely numerous", a feminised field marked by its "extraordinary absence . . . of a serious male interest" (AN 273). William Dean Howells suggested that James's male readers "were of a more feminine fineness, probably, in their perceptions and intuitions, than those other men who do not read him" (qtd. in Dupee 27). J.P. Mowbray commented more negatively on the lack of "virility" in James's writing: "[In] trying to form anything like a comprehensive estimate of James's mature work, the effeminacy of it has to be counted with. One cannot call it virile, and . . . hardly Saxon" (qtd. in Gard 331). By 1951, as Virginia C. Fowler notes, the equation of James and femininity had become a critical commonplace with Dupee's assessment of him as the "great feminine novelist of a feminine age of letters" (97). See F.W. Dupee, Henry James. See Fowler, Henry James's American Girl: The Embroidery on the Canvas chap. one for a discussion of James's views on women and culture. While earlier critics have seen James's "femininity" as simply negative, indicating a lack of power or virility on the part of the writer, they have not seen this femininity's socio-historical significance as part of the late nineteenth century avant-garde social critique. In chapter six below I shall address James's and Whistler's imaginary femininity with respect to its critique of bourgeois society.

<sup>9</sup> It is beyond the scope of the present study to examine in detail James's reviews of popular women's writing. For further information on this topic see the following studies. Several critics have discussed James's indebtedness to the women novelists of his day, from whom he would borrow plots, characters, and styles. See William Veeder, Henry James - The Lessons of the Master: Popular Fiction and Personal Style in the Nineteenth Century and Alfred Habegger, Henry James and the "Woman Business". For a discussion of James's relationship with popular women's writing and the mass market, see Michael Anesko, Friction with the Market: Henry James and the Profession of Authorship; Marcia Jacobson, Henry James and the Mass Market and Ann T. Margolis, Henry James and the Problem of Audience: An International Act.

<sup>10</sup> For discussions of the "anxiety of influence" in nineteenth century American literature, see John Carlos Rowe, Through the Customs House: Nineteenth Century American Fiction and Modern Theory and Robert Weisbuch, Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson.

<sup>11</sup> Rowe, Through the Custom House. In Essays: First Series Emerson asserts that the American can "live all history in his own person" and that "There is properly no history, only biography" (II, 6). In the American Jeremiad, Sacvan Bercovitch says that for the American the unidirectional, linear time of history collapses into an expansive present inhabited by a voluminous and comprehensive self. The American difference from Europe is a "merging, unprecedented in its absoluteness" of personal, national and spiritual aspirations. This conflation of self, nation, and God is articulated in a self-conscious, symbol-making literature in which the self is created, externalised, and then given dominion over the external world. See also R.W.B. Lewis, The American Adam: Innocence and Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century. While James saw the lack of a complex social machinery as detrimental to the practice of writing in America, later critics turned it into a virtue, seeing this lack as the distinguishing feature of an American tradition. With this reversal, the impoverished soil of American culture became the most fertile ground for the American literary tradition. The now familiar distinction between the European novel and the American romance was most fully articulated by Richard Chase in The American Novel and its Tradition. For a critique of Chase's romance thesis, see Amy Kaplan, The Social Construction of American Realism.

<sup>12</sup> In James's 1872 review of Eliot's Middlemarch he calls it both "one of the strongest" and "one of the weakest of English novels", a "treasure-house of details" but an "indifferent whole" (Art of Criticism 48). He believed that she, like so many other English novelists, failed to recognise the importance of literary

form. He reiterated this in 1873, saying of Romola that it was "overladen with learning, it smells of the lamp, it tastes just perceptibly of pedantry" (Art of Criticism 56). For James's views on the French and English novel, as well as his discussion of Hawthorne, see the selections contained in Veeder and Griffin.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the transformations in American society during the late nineteenth century and their impact on cultural forms, see T.J. Jackson Lears, No Place of Grace: Anti-Modernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880 - 1920. On American literary realism and its social context, see Amy Kaplan, The Social Construction of American Realism and Daniel H. Borus, Writing Realism: Howells, James, and Norris in the Mass Market.

<sup>14</sup> William Dean Howells, "Editor's Study", Harper's Monthly 75 (Sept. 1887): 639.

<sup>15</sup> William Dean Howells, "Editor's Study", Harper's Monthly 75 (April 1887): 825.

<sup>16</sup> For Howells's literary criticism, see Selected Literary Criticism.

<sup>17</sup> The classification schemes of such scientists as Linnaeus, Petrus Camper, Lavater and J.J. Virey offer a picture of a hierarchically-ordered universe in which the white European male occupies the highest position by virtue of his skin colour, anatomy, and physiology and the ethical and intellectual qualities associated with these physical characteristics. For a discussion of these theories and their influence on aesthetics, see J. Devisse and M. Mollat, The Image of the Black in Western Art Vol. 4: From the American Revolution to world War I.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Max Nordau, Degeneration and Francis Galton, Hereditary Genius. For a discussion of the impact of evolutionary discourse and its assumptions about the nature of consciousness on the arts in the late nineteenth century, see Bram Dijkstra, Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siecle Culture and Kimberley Reynolds and Nicola Humble, Victorian Heroines: Representations of Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Art. On James and consciousness, see Courtney Johnson, Henry James and the Evolution of Consciousness.

<sup>19</sup> James's own appropriation of the feminine, in his rewriting of the plots and characters of novels by women and in his immersion in the realm of the domestic, can be seen as both an attempt to contain and diffuse the feminine by redoing it and his protest against the compulsory masculinity of the American society in which he had grown up. For a discussion of male avant-garde appropriation of the feminine, see Rita Felski, "The Counter Discourse of the Feminine in Three Texts by Wilde, Huysmans, and Sacher-Masoch".

<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of James's revisions for the New York edition, see Philip Horne, Henry James and Revision: The New York Edition. For a discussion of the architecture of the New York edition and James's collaboration with photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn, see Ralph Bogardus, Pictures and Text: Henry James, A.L. Coburn, and New Ways of Seeing in Literary Culture. Sara Blair discusses James's obsession with literary mastery in the construction of the New York edition in "Henry James and the Paradox of Literary Mastery".

<sup>21</sup> For example, for a detailed analysis of the effects of James's revisions to Portrait of a Lady for the New York edition, see Nina Baym, "Revision and Thematic Change in the Portrait of a Lady".

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of James's concern with authority and origin in the New York edition, see John Carlos Rowe, "Forms of the Reader's Act, Author and Reader in the Prefaces to the New York Edition", The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James, 219-52 and David Carroll, The Subject in Question: The Languages of Theory and the Strategies of Fiction.

<sup>23</sup> With the respect to James's language here, identifying mass culture and its audience as a "flood" that "swells and swells", see Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other", After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism, 44-62. In chapter five below I will discuss James's gendered construction of popular culture with respect to The Tragic Muse.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of James's relation with the mass market see Marcia Jacobson, Henry James and the Mass Market and Sara Chapman, Henry James's Portrait of the Writer as Hero.

<sup>25</sup> In Henry James and the Art of Power Mark Seltzer discusses the ways in which the Society of Authors itself served to conflate the two incommensurable values of literary work - the "literary" and the "monetary". The primary objective of the Society was to maintain, define and defend literary property, a view of literature as property that seems opposed to the distinct aesthetic value that the society wanted to

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protect. The opposition between two conceptions of the Author, one as “man of letters” and the other as “man of business” were themselves oppositions produced by the industrialisation of literature.

<sup>26</sup> On James as an aesthetic professional and his interaction with British aestheticism and commodity culture, see the excellent study by Jonathan Freedman. Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture. Freedman’s text has been particularly useful to my own study.

## CHAPTER THREE

### James McNeill Whistler's Aesthetic Theory

In his literary theory, Henry James often used visual art, especially painting, as an analogue of fiction. In "The Art of Fiction", as we have seen, he pressed for the equality of fiction and painting when making his arguments in favour of fiction as art. That he did so is partially a result of the fact that in the nineteenth century, the fiction writer in the Anglo-American world had a lesser status than the painter. As described by Smith, the writer in London was "looked upon as something of a bastard child among the prodigy of the sister arts, certainly beneath the painter in cultural and aesthetic rank and not about to be included in forums concerning the future heights of English aesthetics" ("James, Degas, and the Modern View" 56). Writing to his friend Grace Norton in 1884, Henry James acknowledged this fact with the following statement: "I suppose it is the demon of envy - but I can't help contrasting the greater reward of a successful painter, here, and his glory and honour generally, with the so much more modest emoluments of the men of letters" (Edel, Henry James: The Middle Years 111). In order to argue for the importance of fiction and his own place in the history of Anglo-American letters, James asserted that the novelist and the painter were equals who pursue the same aims with the same means. As a model of how to create a modern art and an audience for that art, James had the example of James McNeill Whistler in the field of visual art, arguably the only avant-garde Anglo-American artist working in London in the late nineteenth century. In the previous chapter I discussed James's aesthetic theory in the context of the modernisation of the sphere of literature and the consequent unstable place of the serious literary artist. In this chapter I

shall discuss the ways in which these same conditions are revealed in the work of James's counterpart in the world of visual art.

James met Whistler in 1878 at the home of a mutual friend and, although they were never close friends, they continued to keep in touch throughout their careers. While James's first published view of Whistler's work in 1877 was that "[It does] not amuse me" (Painter's Eye 143), he came to appreciate the artist more and more as the century progressed.<sup>1</sup> Of Whistler's image of Henry Irving as Philip, James wrote in 1897 that it was "exquisite", "one of the finest of all distillations of the artistic intelligence" (Painter's Eye 258). To turn from Whistler's work to the rest of the exhibition was, for James, "to drop from the world of distinction, of perception, of beauty and mystery and perpetuity, into - well, a very ordinary place" (259). James acknowledged Whistler as one of his "Brothers" in an 1897 letter to the painter and declared his artistic solidarity with him:

For the arts are one, and with the artist the artist communicates. [You are] one who knows. You know, above all, better than anyone, how dreadfully few are such . . . You have done too much of the exquisite not to have earned more despair than anything else; but don't doubt that something vibrates back when that Exquisite takes the form of recognition of a not utterly indelicate brother. (Edel, Letters IV 43)

James's solidarity with Whistler is evident much earlier, however, as this examination of Whistler's aesthetic theories will show. In this chapter I shall first describe the evolution of Whistler's aesthetic, then demonstrate its similarities to James's, and then analyse the ways

in which he, like James, simultaneously repudiates and participates in the industrialisation of art under modernity.

## I

At the beginning of his career, Whistler, like James, was searching for a means of representing contemporary life. For Whistler, again like James, that means was initially realism. But what did “realism” in the visual arts mean? Just as it was in the field of literature, in art “realism” was also an important and contested issue. When Whistler came to Paris in 1855, drawn in part by the images of bohemian life he had read about in novels, debates about realism were raging in the press. The 1855 Exposition Universelle was in full swing, showcasing the work of Ingres and Delacroix, and Courbet’s Pavillion of Realism provided an overview of that artist’s work. Although the Exposition included many examples of Salon history and genre painting, for advanced artists and their critic supporters in the 1850s, academic history and narrative painting was outmoded and exhausted. Rather than representing the heroic events and people of the past, artists were exhorted to paint contemporary society. As the critic Champfleury put it, the “serious representation of present-day personalities, the derbies, the black dress-coats, the polished shoes or the peasants’ sabots” (qtd. in Nochlin, Realism 28) had much greater aesthetic interest than the objects of the past. Whistler took note of this advice and paid close attention, as had James, to the contemporary debates surrounding realism and representation.

For the mid century French avant-garde, realism was the representational form most suited to the depiction of contemporary life. Their slogan, “Il faut etre de son

temps", asserts the avant-garde's demand that contemporary art should reflect modern life. This assertion suggests that those living in a particular time - modernity - are obliged to be aware of its characteristics and represent those characteristics in their art. While for an earlier generation of painters, being of one's time might mean representing the heroism of contemporary history, such as Gericault's Raft of the Medusa, what was new in the 1850s was the notion that everyday life was worth recording. Being of one's time meant representing the appearance and experience of one's own surroundings, the "history of the future" (Farwell 86). Farwell suggests in Manet and the Nude that probably at no other time in the past did such an intense sense of their own position with respect to history pervade the writers and artists of the avant-garde. Rather than continuing to represent the same tired old historical subjects in the styles sanctioned by tradition, the avant-garde sought out new subjects and new ways of representing them: "[The avant-garde artists] make constant reference to their own century and its characteristics, as though conscious of playing a role on the stage of civilization that would be judged, or at least researched in the future" (Farwell 87). Whistler desired success on that artistic stage and familiarised himself with the critical discourse of modernity articulated by avant-garde artists and critics. He paid particular attention to the writings of Champfleury, Thoré and Baudelaire, in which the question of the modern becomes a pressing issue.

In an essay entitled "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), Baudelaire used the term "*modernité*" to describe a particularly modern identity: "By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable" (13). The modern, as articulated by Baudelaire, does not simply mean of



the present but a particular attitude *towards* the present. "Modern" describes a self-conscious experience of modernity, an experience which is characteristic of the modern period and distinguishes it from all other historical periods. For Baudelaire, being modern does not mean simply being up-to-date; it means expressing the experience of modernity: change, movement, flux. A modern art should emphasise the relationship of the individual to the contemporary social world.<sup>2</sup> Like Champfleury, Baudelaire asserted that rather than focusing on biblical or historical events and people, a modern art should represent contemporary life in all its complexity. For Baudelaire, the relationship between "modern" and "modernity" was not fixed, but shifting and changing and a modern art should reflect that experience.

Realism was seen by its supporters to be the means of representation that best articulated this understanding of the modern. As realism evolved, contemporaneity itself became more clearly defined as "this very moment". The image of the changing, the unstable, the impermanent, seemed closer to the experience of everyday life than the fixed, stable, and permanent. Courbet himself had written against academic history painting in favour of the representation of contemporary life, saying "I hold the artists of one century basically incapable of reproducing the aspect of a past or future century. It is in this sense that I deny the possibility of historical art applied to the past. Historical art is by nature contemporary. Each epoch must have its artists who express it and reproduce it for the future" (qtd. in Nochlin Realism 28). Courbet, like the American writer W.D. Howells, saw realism as "democracy in art". For both, realism stood in opposition to romanticism

and aristocratic pretensions.<sup>3</sup> However, for Whistler this conception of realism was inadequate as we shall see.

Just as James had, Whistler began his career with aspirations to be a realist. He was a close friend of Fantin-Latour and Alphonse Legros (with whom he formed the short-lived Society of Three) and knew Courbet, Manet and Degas.<sup>4</sup> In 1859 he joined a group of artists at Bonvin's studio for a life drawing session under the direction of Courbet, whom he called "A great man!" (qtd. in Anderson 76). He admired Courbet's work at the Salon of 1857 and in the period between 1857 and 1860 - 61 constructed his own version of realism which followed yet differed from that of Courbet. In chapter four I will discuss two of Whistler's early realist paintings, but here I want to note that his move away from realism, as represented by Courbet, may be linked to the criticism of the latter's work by one of the critics Whistler most admired, Baudelaire himself.<sup>5</sup>

Although initially supportive, Baudelaire turned away from Courbet's work in the 1850s because Courbet's realism seemed to lack imagination, an attribute he identified as the "queen of faculties". In a review of the 1855 Exposition Universelle, Baudelaire attacked both Ingres and Courbet for this defect:

[The] heroic sacrifice offered by M. Ingres in honour of the idea and the tradition of Raphaelesque Beauty is performed by M. Courbet on behalf of external, positive and immediate Nature. In their war against the imagination they are obedient to different motives; but their two opposing varieties of fanaticism lead them to the same immolation. (qtd. in Lochnan 197)

In his "Salon of 1859" Baudelaire theorised an opposition between two kinds of artists, the *imaginatifs*, for whom the act of creative imagination and the use of "comparison, metaphor, and allegory" are most important, and the *realistes* or *positivistes*, who represent reality as it is - "The universe without man" (qtd. in Fried, Courbet's Realism 4-5).<sup>6</sup> As a supporter of Delacroix, Baudelaire maintained that the Romantic emphasis on the creating imagination must be present in art.<sup>7</sup>

Realism's connections with materialism, democracy, and the apparently unmediated portrayal of the real precluded it from representing "modern beauty" as Baudelaire conceived of it. Realism was increasingly seen by critics such as Baudelaire and Thore as a slavish imitation of the material world rather than its imaginative recreation. This is a position Whistler would come to agree with, focusing as it does on the importance of the artist's imagination. It is also a position Henry James would have agreed with, as I have suggested in chapter one. While several of Whistler's early paintings show Courbet's influence, in an 1867 letter to Fantin-Latour written after he had moved to London, Whistler savagely repudiated both Courbet and realism:

Ah my dear Fantin what a frightful education I've given myself - or rather what a terrible lack of education I feel I have had! - With the fine gifts I naturally possess what a fine painter I should be by now! If, vain and satisfied with those gifts only, I hadn't shunned everything else! No! You see the time was not good for me! Courbet and his influence was disgusting! The regret I feel and the rage, hate, even, I have for that now but perhaps there's an explanation. It's not poor Courbet whom I find repugnant, any more than his work - As always I recognize its

qualities - I'm not at all complaining about the influence of his painting on mine - there is none, and you will not find it in my canvases - it couldn't be; because I'm too personal and know I've always been rich in qualities he doesn't have but which suit me well - but there's perhaps a reason why all this has been pernicious for me. It's that damned Realism which made an immediate appeal to my vanity as a painter! and mocking tradition cried out loud, with all the confidence of ignorance, "Long live Nature!!" Nature! My dear chap that cry has been a big mistake for me!

(Spencer, Whistler: A Retrospective 82)

The terms of Whistler's repudiation of Courbet and realism here are quite harsh, and suggest, as well as a disagreement with Courbet's politics and aesthetics, a personal animosity towards the other painter, sparked by a professional and personal rivalry. However the view he expresses here of realism and nature is one that recurs throughout his career.

## II

Both Whistler and James moved away from realism for the same reasons. It was insufficiently "aesthetic", in this case meaning refined and revealing of the imaginative processes of the artist, and devoted to the "fatal futility of Fact" (AN 122). Recall that for James, life, or nature, is indiscriminate, "all inclusion and confusion" (AN 120), while art selects and discriminates. It is the artist's job to pick and choose the elements from life that will make art, to redeem "clumsy Life" from her "stupid work" (AN 121). James's belief in the superiority of art to life was succinctly revealed in the words of the artist in his short story "The Real Thing": "I have an innate preference for the represented subject

over the real one; the defect of the real one was so apt to be a lack of representation” (Tales 194).<sup>8</sup> These words could well have been spoken by Whistler. Like James, Whistler saw nature as defective. In an 1883 letter to his sister-in-law Helen Whistler moaned about Cornwall where he had gone to paint: “Well - for dulness, this place is simply amazing! nothing but Nature about - and Nature is a poor creature after all - as I have often told you - poor company certainly - and artistically, often offensive” (qtd Anderson 256). That the artist who imitates poor nature is also a poor creature was expressed by Whistler in The Red Rag (1878); “The imitator is a poor kind of creature. If the man who paints only the tree, the flower, or other surface he sees before him were an artist, the king of artists would be the photographer. It is for the artist to do something beyond this” (Thorp 52). The “something beyond” is to improve upon nature through the exercise of the artist’s vision and imagination.

In its insistence on “art for art’s sake”, that art has its own separate sphere and function, and his devotion to aesthetic form, Whistler’s aesthetic theory is similar to that of James. Just as James had railed against the importance of story and moralising in the English novel, so too did Whistler attack the British propensity for those characteristics in its art. Thinking back to when he had first come to London in the early 1860s, Whistler commented on the importance of the “subject” to the British painting:

When I came to London I was received graciously by the painters. Then there was coldness, and I could not understand. Artists locked themselves up in their studios - opened the doors only on the chain; if they met each other in the street they barely spoke . . . Then I found out the mystery: it was the moment of painting the

royal Academy picture. Each man was afraid his subject might be stolen. It was the great era of the subject. And, at last, on Varnishing Day, there was the subject in all its glory - wonderful! The British subject! What! (Spencer, Whistler: A Retrospective 63).

The British insistence on the importance of subject was anathema to Whistler, who insisted that a painting was before anything else an arrangement of colours and forms on a canvas. In the "Ten O'Clock Lecture" (1885) Whistler will go on to say that the painting is not "a novel, a history or an anecdote" (Thorp 87) and to look at it as such is to miss the point. The "painter's poetry" is to "put form and color into such perfect harmony that exquisiteness is the result" (87).

In The Red Rag interview, Whistler succinctly laid out his aesthetic theory.

Commenting that the English called him eccentric for naming his paintings after musical terms, Whistler notes that "The vast majority of English folk cannot and will not consider a picture as a picture, apart from any story that it may be supposed to tell" (Thorp 51). The subject of the picture is irrelevant, Whistler asserts, and "if [people] really care for pictorial art at all, they would know that the picture should have its own merit, and not depend upon dramatic, or legendary, or local interest" (51). By linking his art to music, Whistler argues that he further reduces the importance of the subject matter and increases the importance of the work's formal qualities:

Art should be independent of all clap-trap - should stand alone, and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love, patriotism, and the like. All these have no kind of

concern with it, and that is why I insist on calling my works “arrangements” and “harmonies”. Take the picture of my mother, exhibited at the Royal Academy as an “Arrangement in Grey and Black”. Now that is what it is. To me it is interesting as a picture of my mother; but what can or ought the public to care about the identity of the portrait?” (52)

This view is certainly a paradigmatically modernist assertion, and one which shows Whistler to be in the vanguard of nineteenth century painting.<sup>9</sup> It is also somewhat disingenuous, however, because in his choice of subjects Whistler was concerned with more than simply the arrangement of forms on canvas, as I shall discuss in the following chapters. He was concerned with both the subject and its formal qualities but it is his emphasis on the work’s formal properties that distinguishes his aesthetic from that of the English academicians and identifies him as a modernist.<sup>10</sup> Whistler’s emphasis on aesthetic form here echoes Henry James’s words of five years earlier when the writer noted in 1873 the distinction between his own work and that of George Eliot: “To produce some little exemplary works of art is my narrow and lowly dream. They are to have less ‘brain’ than Middlemarch; but (I boldly proclaim it) they are to have more *form*” (Art of Criticism 57). Just as James had argued against the public’s demand for moral instruction and entertainment in literary art, Whistler argues against its demand for moral instruction and storytelling in visual art. For both artists, the concerns of the sphere of serious art were those of aesthetic form not morality - the concern of religion - or storytelling - the concern of popular art.

### III

As I have indicated in chapter two, James experimented with different literary forms during his career. Similarly, Whistler's production changed over the course of his career as he continued to search for a means of representation that would most completely articulate his ideas about modernity. Having abandoned realism, Whistler experimented with japonisme, which I shall discuss in chapter five, a Pre-Raphaelite aestheticism, and a strange sort of classicism inspired by the drawings of Albert Moore and the Parthenon statuary in the British museum. It was only with the "nocturnes", beginning in the late 1860s and early 1870s and to be discussed in chapter seven, that Whistler seemed to find a technique and subject he would call his own.<sup>11</sup> And this owning of a particular aesthetic technique was of utmost importance to him. For Whistler, an "original" aesthetic form was imperative in that it distinguished him from his colleagues and signified that he had broken with tradition and forged new aesthetic ground.

Why was "originality" so important to avant-garde artists and critics? Just as "consciousness" was seen by cultural critics and social scientists as an attribute of the most highly evolved individuals in a society, so too was the capacity for original thought and original cultural expression. In this, the economic system of bourgeois society and its scientific and cultural discourses mirror one another. Just as capitalism requires the ceaseless production of desires which can only be satisfied by the manufacture of "new" - original - commodities (or the same old ones repackaged to look new), so these new and original commodities, discourses, theories are seen as revealing the quality of mind of the entity producing them. Originality in expression, then, was revealed by an artist's use of new aesthetic techniques. In a work on late nineteenth century visual images of women



entitled Idols of Perversity, Bram Dijkstra argues that the importance placed upon originality as a sign of advanced evolution had a great impact on the evaluation of artistic achievement during the last decades of the century: “[It is] by no means accidental that the numerous fundamental innovations in style and means of representation in painting developed during this period. As conservative critics of the time never grew tired of emphasizing, many artists were beginning to pursue what was new virtually for its own sake, to prove that they were original and not imitative” (207). Conservative critics were not alone in emphasising originality, however. While for conservative critics the obsession with originality was negative, for avant-garde artists and critics originality was a positive quality and indeed necessary if one were to be considered avant-garde. Whistler saw and marketed himself as an original and, in the competitive nineteenth century cultural marketplace, originality could be an important asset because the possibilities for reputation and financial success increasingly depended upon evidence of an artist’s innovation.

Originality in late nineteenth century art signified avant-garde, modernity and opposition to Academic conventionality. The construction of this opposition is dealt with in Richard Shiff’s Cezanne and the End of Impressionism, in which he argues that the “technique of originality” practiced by both the Impressionists and Symbolists was consistently revealed negatively, as the antithesis of conventional academic procedure: “[If] the one is deliberate, the other is spontaneous; if one employs (‘artificial’) chiaroscuro transitions, the other employs (‘natural’) violent oppositions of value or hue; if the one is orderly or systematic, the other appears haphazard; if the one is complex in its internal compositional differentiation, the other is simple in its uniformity” (98). Original

or innovative aesthetic techniques could be recognised in their difference from and opposition to the traditional forms employed in academic art. So, here “originality” meant technical innovation.

Originality also meant individuality, a unique artistic subjectivity that was revealed in the art work. I will discuss Whistler’s preoccupation with originality below but first I want to suggest that Whistler’s preoccupation was part of a larger cultural preoccupation with the marketing of contemporary art in a field more familiar with old master and academic art. The discourse of originality and individuality was mobilised by artists, critics and art dealers who were all part of the effort to sell contemporary art. In the first half of the nineteenth century, as Nicholas Green notes in “Dealing in Temperaments”, the market for contemporary art in France was small. Most of the capital invested in art went to acquire the work of “old masters”, whose rarity and authenticated greatness guaranteed a good financial return. However, beginning in the 1860s, dealing in contemporary art emerged as a distinctive and lucrative economic practice. Green argues that the “success of big speculative ventures in modern painting”, such as that of Paul Durand-Ruel and Georges Petit, “depended upon particular discourses of individualism grounded in the dominant ideology of the Third Republic” (61). Green demonstrates that the artist’s choice of subject matter and handling of paint, initially in nature painting then in other kinds of work, were seen as revealing the complex unity and uniqueness of the artist’s personality. Rather than being measured by the art object’s rarity, its worth was now specified as being its revelation of the uniqueness of the artist. The market in contemporary art was reoriented, as Green and others have argued, around the buying and

selling of individual artists.<sup>12</sup> Contemporary art was marketed to a middle class public as revealing an authentic and unique personal vision rather than an outmoded and derivative academic traditionalism.<sup>13</sup>

In England, the status of “originality” is more difficult to define. While the importance of the Salon had declined for many advanced artists in France, in London the Royal Academy continued to exert an enormous influence right up until the turn of the century. For English academic artists, originality was a non-issue. It was not necessary to their success to be “original”; they stressed instead their connection to the established traditions of English art.<sup>14</sup> For Whistler, success at the Royal Academy was not forthcoming, as is indicated in an 1878 letter - “First I am *known* and *always have been known* to hold an independent position in art, and to have had the Academy opposed to me” (Thorp 54) - and, in any case, he aspired to compete with his peers in France as well as those in England. Therefore, an emphasis on originality and independence could be an asset in both arenas, gaining him respect and avant-garde status in Paris and notice and notoriety in London.

So, like James, Whistler was obsessed with the idea of originality because originality meant reputation and financial success. He was protective of his ideas and fearful that anyone should think he was influenced by others. Whistler continued throughout his career to vehemently deny that he was influenced by anyone and insisted that he was unique and self-made. Any thought that he might have been influenced in some way was troubling to him.<sup>15</sup> However, by 1873 this concern about influence seems to have been alleviated and, in a letter to George Lucas, Whistler was proudly announcing his own

aesthetic innovations and emphasising his individuality and originality in terms that indirectly link these qualities to marketplace considerations:

You will notice and perhaps meet with opposition that my frames I have designed as carefully as my pictures - and thus they form as important a part as any of the rest of the work - carrying on the particular harmony throughout. This is of course entirely original with me and has never been done . . . . and I wish this to be also clearly stated in Paris that I am the inventor of all this kind of decoration in colour in the frames; that I may not have a lot of clever little Frenchmen trespassing on my ground. (qtd. in Anderson 190-91)

The occasion of this letter was Whistler's inclusion in an 1873 exhibition at Durand-Ruel's, an exhibition represented his re-entry into the Paris art world as he directly points out in the letter: "[My art works are] not merely canvases having interest in themselves alone, but are intended to indicate slightly to 'those whom it may concern' something of my theory in art. The science of colour and 'picture pattern' as I have worked it out for myself during these years" (qtd. in Anderson 190). Whistler concludes his letter to Lucas, an influential collector, with the words "This exhibition of mine you will see clearly is especially intended to assert myself to the painters, in short, in a manner to register among them in Paris as I have done here [London] my work" (qtd. in Anderson 191). As James had, Whistler saw the necessity for a theoretical foundation to support the practice of art. Whistler's practice is underpinned by a theoretical "science" which he sees his work as revealing and which, he is quick to point out, he has worked out himself. This science is, of course, itself part of Whistler's marketing strategy, just as James's was.

Whistler's modernity is revealed in his insistence on "self-begetting". Not content to imitate the conventional aesthetic forms on display in the Salon and the Royal Academy, he developed new ones and argued hard for their legitimacy by elaborating an aesthetic theory that emphasised the necessary autonomy of art and the characteristics that art must have within that field. He positioned himself, as had James, as a member of the avant-garde and as such took it upon himself to critique the hegemony of the Academy in British cultural life.

#### IV

As we have seen, Whistler's emphasis on the autonomy of art and the importance of aesthetic form were beliefs which placed him in the artistic avant-garde, well in advance of his English colleagues and his audience. Although early on he had aspired to success at the Academy, Whistler never became an Academician and increasingly saw himself as an artistic outlaw, working against the forces of aesthetic darkness represented by England's old guard. This became very apparent in Whistler's 1878 libel action against the influential critic John Ruskin.<sup>16</sup> I will not spend a great deal of time here on the details of Whistler's position - for that I direct you to Linda Merrill's account. Instead I would like to show briefly why Whistler's aestheticism was largely incomprehensible to his English audience and how it contributed to his conflicted position within the aesthetic marketplace.

During the Ruskin trial Whistler reiterated the point that his works were arrangements of colour and form on a canvas rather than realistic representations of nature. On the term "nocturne", Whistler elaborated:

By using the word “nocturne” I wished to indicate an artistic interest alone, divesting the picture of any outside anecdotal interest which might have otherwise attached to it. A nocturne is an arrangement of line, form, and colour first. I make use of any means, any incident or object in nature, that will bring about a symmetrical result. (qtd. in Merrill, A Pot of Paint 135)

Throughout the trial Whistler repeated his assertion that subject matter was immaterial and that the “whole scheme [of the picture] was only to bring about a certain harmony of colour” (130). To his English audience, this kind of aesthetic was difficult to understand, particularly because of the links that English critics made among subject matter, evidence of artistic labour and monetary worth.

To most of his viewers, Whistler’s works did not show any evidence of labour and this lack was problematic when it came to assessing their value. Whistler’s work appeared to be sketchy and unfinished, studies rather than completed paintings. Many English critics argued that an objective and reliable measure of a painting’s monetary (and aesthetic) worth was the amount of labour expended in producing it. To those unsupportive of Whistler, his sketchy work did not require enough labour to justify the price asked. For example, the Penny Illustrated Paper asserted that

Mr. Whistler has hit upon a happy expedient for extracting the coin from his believers. He has contrived to persuade a number of the aesthetic individuals who have more money than brain to pay high prices for a few hour’s slapdash work with his brush. (qtd. in Merrill, A Pot of Paint 220)

Similarly, Edward Burne-Jones fumed during the trial that "There is often not so much appearance of labour in one of his pictures as there is in a rough sketch by another artist, and yet he asks for and gets as much for one of these as most artists do for pictures skillfully and conscientiously finished" (qtd. in Merrill 220-21). For such critics, a painting, to be complete, must offer a recognizable narrative in a highly detailed realist manner. Whistler, according to Burne-Jones, produced nothing but incomplete sketches, "more or less clever, often stupid, sometimes sheerly insolent, but sketches always" (qtd. in Merrill 223). Unlike sketches, real artistic labour was hard work, and the closer a painting came to completion the harder it became. An inability, or unwillingness, to go through all the steps required to bring a painting to completion was evidence to Burne-Jones and his supporters of incompetence or, even worse, laziness. The artist's ability to finish his painting, understood as the ability to complete the task at hand, was an index of the English national character.<sup>17</sup> In addition, for the English consumer, evidence of finish was evidence of labour and hence of value for money, an attitude that persisted throughout the century. Against this attitude, Whistler argued during the trial that the artist's professional experience was more important than any number of hours spent "hammering away" on a painting. Suggesting that a prolonged period of work would not improve a painting and might even harm it, Whistler asserted that his pictures would lack the aesthetic form they required if he were to labour over them. His creativity, and the subsequent value of his pictures, were to be measured by his ability to "instantaneously" deliver an aesthetic concept directly from his mind to the canvas. The criteria of labour used to assign value in other spheres of activity, such as perhaps wordworking or dressmaking, could not be

applied to the sphere of art because the artist's labour was not the manual labour of the worker but intellectual labour realised in fully-crafted aesthetic form.

Just as Whistler's style and technique were difficult to understand for an audience to whom these principles were not self-evident, so too were his "subjects". For an English audience accustomed to paintings with a clearly-articulated moral or story, Whistler's subjects, in particular the nocturnes, were illegible and quite possibly immoral. Victorian paintings, like the Victorian "stories" James had railed against, were supposed to express the national character and that character was industrious and moral. For nineteenth century advocates of an English school in painting, it was its rigorous attention to morality and propriety that differentiated English art from its European counterpart.<sup>18</sup> For example, in an 1862 review of English painting, the Art Journal had stated:

The French paint genre with more point and play of intellect, the English with greater breadth of sympathy; the French with more vivacity and cleverness, the English were more sobriety and decorum . . . Virtue is respected' . . . nothing, however, can be more healthful, honest, and heartfelt, than many of our English pictures. (qtd. in Nead 57)

This attitude was one that persisted throughout the century and many critics continued to regard foreign, especially French, art with suspicion and sometimes hostility. For instance, in an 1886 review of the New English Art Club's first exhibition, the Times noted:

"Perhaps it would be accurate enough to say that the pictures nearly all show signs of the influence of the modern French school, though in most cases there is a sincerity, an absence of theatrical display, and a preference for subjects that are beautiful rather than



ugly which is English and not French” (April 12, 1886, 12). The language used here by the Times art critic to disparage French art is very similar to that used by English literary critics to attack Henry James’s work. Like James, Whistler was subject to critical attacks on the basis of his perceived “immorality”. Chief among his attackers was Edward-Burne Jones who saw Whistler’s way of working and subject-matter as a threat to British art and indeed the morality of the nation.<sup>19</sup>

That the English response to new painting, whether that of the French Impressionists or Whistler, was in many cases suspicion and hostility may in part be the result of identifying artistic innovations with social upheaval as Kate Flint chronicles in Impressionism in England: The Critical Response. In a comment on the 1874 exhibition at Durand-Ruel’s in London, the Times critic concluded, “One seems to see in such work evidence of as wild a spirit of anarchy at work in French painting as in French politics” (Flint 14). Again in 1876 the Times described the Impressionists as “ostentatiously defiant both of rule and culture” and in 1883 as “the chosen representatives of the Extreme left in painting” (Flint 14). Flint observes that Wake Cook was probably the most fervent and extreme of the British critics who equated change in art with political revolution:

The very title of his work, ‘Anarchism in Art and Chaos in Criticism’ draws this analogy, which he elaborates with a vituperative attack against the ‘anti-patriotism’ which an interest in French art reveals, condemning, with a neat bit of bellicose word play, those artists who, in the late nineteenth century, tried to upset British painting as ‘A few daring anarchists [who] crept in and tried to spike the canons of Art and to dynamite established reputations’. (15)

It is not difficult to see that, given the equation of aesthetic innovations and social upheaval prevalent among many British critics and the tense relations between advanced artists and the prevailing orthodoxies of the Royal Academy, Whistler's artistic innovations should remain incomprehensible to his general audience while at the same time become his means of maintaining his position within the larger European avant-garde.

Although the Ruskin libel trial verdict was in his favour, Whistler received only one farthing in damages. Even though forced into bankruptcy by his inability to pay his court costs, Whistler did manage to generate enormous publicity for his cause after the trial by issuing his first written manifesto. "Whistler v. Ruskin. Art and Art Critics", published immediately after the trial, was so popular that by January 1879 it had gone into its sixth edition. With the success of this initial foray into manifesto writing, Whistler saw the potential for his own written aesthetic declarations to be a means of controlling his reception. After 1878, he issued many more pamphlets and wrote innumerable letters to the editors of major magazines and newspapers stating his position and taking issue with other artists and critics.<sup>20</sup>

## V

Whistler's aesthetic theories occupy a place within a greatly expanded late nineteenth century cultural sphere. With the proliferation of industrial visual material such as advertisements, posters, magazines and newspapers, the construction of such consumerist palaces as the department store, and the multiplication of aesthetic commodities such as wallpaper and "aesthetic" dress competing for attention and consumers, high art painting, like the novel, was for avant-garde artists threatened with

submersion by a flood of mass cultural products. In the face of this threat, and the inability of the public who had in 1879 rejected his aesthetic to distinguish in 1885 between his work and these new commodities, Whistler put forward his most sustained aesthetic statement in the "Ten O'Clock" lecture. Part manifesto, part propaganda and part self-promotion, the "Ten O'Clock" was a modernist media event. The "Ten O'Clock" also clearly reveals the similarities between the aesthetic theories of Henry James and those of Whistler. In chapter seven I shall discuss in more detail the contradictions inhering in Whistler's theoretical stance and his actual practice with respect to the nocturnes and two of his 1880s portraits. Here I want to focus on the parallels between Whistler and James with respect to the theoretical statements themselves and the use each made of the position of the aesthetic professional within an expanding cultural sphere.

Whistler opened the "Ten O'Clock" with an attack on Wilde and what he perceived to be a Wilde-promoted British Aestheticist craze's vulgarization of art: "Art is upon the Town! - to be chucked under the chin, by the passing gallant! - to be enticed within the gates of the householder - to be coaxed into company, as a proof of culture and refinement!" (Thorp 80). With the rise of "Birmingham and Manchester" - Whistler's code words for industry and trashy vulgarity - art has become a commodity to be used as proof of taste and evidence of status. In Whistler's view, the aestheticisation of society means that everything has become an art, making high art itself ashamed: "If familiarity can breed contempt, certainly Art, or what is currently taken for it, has been brought to its lowest stage of intimacy! - The people have been harassed with Art in every guise . . . their homes have been invaded - their walls covered with paper - their very dress taken to task" (80).

Whistler characterises the commodification of the aesthetic as the work of “false prophets, who have brought the very name of the beautiful into disrepute” (80). In this attack on the designers and purveyors of aesthetic dress, wallpaper and house furnishings as false prophets worthy of derision, Whistler wants to insist on the separation of true art from household commodity. True art is “reticent of habit - abjuring all obtrusiveness” (80), unlike the vulgarity of the so-called aesthetic commodity. Here Whistler sounds much like the Henry James of the preface to the Tragic Muse: “[Whereas] the most charming truth about the preference for art is that to parade abroad so thoroughly inward and so naturally embarrassed a matter is to falsify and vulgarise it” (AN 83). Both artists agree that true art’s “only honours are those of contraction, concentration and a seemingly deplorable indifference to everything but itself” (AN 83). Like James, Whistler saw art as existing in its own rarefied world of beauty uncontaminated by contact with the vulgar mob. That it is this “vulgar mob” to whom his manifestos are addressed and from whom ultimately any financial reward will come, Whistler does not acknowledge here. However, the very fact that the “Ten O’Clock” was designed to be a media event, much like any mass media spectacle or advertising pitch, highlights the contradictions between Whistler’s proclamations and his actions.

Just as James had, Whistler too asserts the autonomy of art. Against Ruskin and others who insisted that art must be moral, Whistler argues that art is a “goddess of dainty thought . . . withal selfishly occupied with her own perfection only - having no desire to teach” (80). Those who ask of a work of art “What good shall it do?” are mistaken and do not look at the picture, but “through it, at some human fact, that shall or shall not, from a

social point of view, better their mental, or moral state” (81). The realm of the aesthetic for Whistler and for James is one that is separate from the social world. The autonomous aesthetic artifact is useless, in that it exists for itself only, not to enact any social function. The irony that Whistler’s assertion of the autonomy of high art is made in the form of a media spectacle is, however, unacknowledged.<sup>21</sup>

Having defined true art and asserted its independence from social utility, Whistler then goes on to assert the superiority of art to nature. Just as James had said that it is “art that *makes life*, makes interest, makes importance” (Letters IV 770), for Whistler also art is superior to life:

Nature contains the elements of color and form of all pictures - as the keyboard contains all the notes of music - but the artist is born to pick, and choose, and group with science, these elements, that the result may be beautiful . . . . to say to the painter, that nature is to be taken, as she is, is to say to the player, that he may sit on the piano! - That Nature is always right, is an assertion, artistically, as untrue, as it is one whose truth is universally taken for granted - Nature is very rarely right, to such an extent even, that it might almost be said that Nature is usually wrong - that is to say - the condition of things that shall bring about the perfection of harmony worth a picture, is rare. (84-5)

Here Whistler echoes James’s fictional character’s words: “I have an innate preference for the represented subject over the real one; the defect of the real one was so apt to be a lack of representation” (Tales 194). Nature is for Whistler as it was for James “all inclusion and confusion” (AN 120) and art is “all discrimination and selection” (AN 120). The artist

creates his own world, not content to merely reflect nature's "stupid sunsets". The artist's masterpiece "surpasses in perfection" all the Gods have "contrived in what is called Nature". Confronted with the artist's work, the gods "marvel - and perceive how far away more beautiful is the Venus of Melos, than was their own Eve" (86).

In its description of the artist, Whistler's theory accords with James's. Like James, Whistler sees the artist as an individual with an acute consciousness, one who sees what others do not. The first artist was a "dreamer apart", "chosen by the Gods" (82) who "with the power of creation . . . went beyond the slovenly suggestion of nature" (83). Just as James had identified the artist's mind as his most important attribute - "No good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind" ("Art of Fiction" 182) - Whistler also emphasises the mind as the artist's most vital resource: "Through his brain, as through the last alembic, is distilled the refined essence of that thought which began with the Gods, and which they left him to carry out" (86). The production of art is not the mechanical physical labour valorised by Burne-Jones but "mind work", the product of a heightened sensibility and acute mind.

Throughout the "Ten O'Clock" Whistler describes art as "delicate", "exquisite", "refined", "dainty". Art is a "goddess of dainty thought" (Thorp 80). The characteristics Whistler identifies art as having, particularly delicacy, exquisiteness, refinement and daintiness, are those that were usually constructed as feminine in contemporary art-historical discourse.<sup>22</sup> And indeed in a section of the lecture Whistler does assert his solidarity with the feminine: "Know then all beautiful women, that we are with you - pay no heed we pray you to this outcry of the unbecoming . . . Your own instinct is near the

truth - your own wit far surer guide than the untaught ventures of these thick-headed Apollos! [vendors of Aesthetic dress]" (Thorp 91). However, while asserting his solidarity with the feminine in his theory, and articulating an imaginary femininity in his practice, as I shall discuss in chapter six, Whistler tries to avoid the negative implications of this femininity by aligning delicacy, exquisiteness and daintiness with the masculine characteristics of mental acuity and superior consciousness. Art, who in Whistler's aesthetic discourse is always female, sings her song to the true Artist who is the "man worthy her love" (Thorp 93-4). The goddess Art knows the true artist by his "refinement" and "where *he* is, there *she* appears" (Thorp 93, 94). That these truly refined beings are rare, perhaps even limited only to Whistler himself in the modern period, is suggested by the "Ten O'Clock": "With the *man*, then, and not with the multitude are her intimacies - and in the book of her life, the names inscribed are few - scant indeed the list of those who have helped to write her story of love and beauty" (Thorp 94). Whistler appropriates an aesthetic culturally-coded as feminine and reconfigures it as masculine by aligning particular artistic styles with superior mental powers. That his reconfiguration was not entirely successful will be apparent in my discussion in chapter seven below. Here, however, I want to note that this appropriation of the feminine was part of the larger late nineteenth century avant-garde project of critiquing the instrumentalism and materialism of bourgeois society and expanding the limits of masculinity tolerated within that society.

While Whistler is certainly explicitly critical of a modern society devoted to a vulgar materialism, his notion of autonomous art is such that any social critique is only revealed negatively. It is not the function of art to articulate an explicit social message.

The artist is not, against Ruskin, a social reformer, he stands apart from his society. As examples of such artists, Whistler cites Tintoretto, Veronese and Velasquez whose "world was completely severed from that of their fellow creatures" (81). The function of the artist is only to make his work, not to "[improve] the ways of others":

Their productions, alone, were their occupation, and filled with the poetry of their science, they required not to alter their surroundings - for as the laws of their Art were revealed to them, they saw, in the development of their *work*, that real beauty, which, to them, was as much a matter of certainty and triumph, as is to the astronomer, the verification of the result; foreseen, with the light given to him alone. (81)

Throughout the "Ten O'Clock" the spectre of mass culture haunts Whistler's artist as it had James's. James had seen the expansion of the literary marketplace as a "vulgarisation", a "flood" that "swells and swells", producing enormous quantities of inexpensive "stories" for an audience without taste ("Future of the Novel" 242, 243): "The high prosperity of fiction has marched, very directly, with another 'sign of the times', the demoralisation, the vulgarisation of literature in general . . ." (245). Although the total audience for stories, "reader[s] irreflective and uncritical", had expanded enormously, the audience for the novel was small (245). While James focused on the problem of the lack of audience for serious fiction, in the "Ten O'Clock" Whistler attacks the producers of mass cultural artifacts. In the historical progress of art that Whistler charts, from the first artist through the centuries to the present, "all peoples continued to use what *the artist alone produced* - And centuries passed in this using, and the world was flooded with all that was



beautiful” (Thorp 84). In contrast, in nineteenth century England there “arose a new class who discovered the cheap - and foresaw fortune in the facture of the sham - Then sprang into existence, the tawdry - the common - the gewgaw - the *taste* of the tradesman, supplanted the *science* of the artist” (84). In the present moment, the “Artist’s occupation was gone - and the manufacurer [sic] and the huckster took his place” (84). The “one unspoken sympathy that pervades humanity - is Vulgarity!” (90). For Whistler as it was for James the “sign of the times” is vulgarity and it is this vulgarity to which Whistler’s exquisite sensibility stands in opposition.

As the champion of Art against the “tawdry - the common - the gewgaw”, Whistler sets himself up as an arbiter of taste and refinement. True art, his art, is not loud and flashy, it is a “goddess of dainty thought” (Thorp 80) who speaks not to the many but to the chosen few: “[S]cant indeed the list of those who have helped to write her story of love and beauty” (Thorp 94). True artists are few, and they are swamped by the “horde of pretenders” whose “Industry is vice” (94). The artist is distinguished by Whistler from the “Dilettante”, the “Aesthete” and the “Amateur”. He is also distinguished from the industrialist. Although Whistler strictly differentiates himself from the manufacturers of mass cultural and industrial products, he used their marketing strategies in his own career. In “Whistler’s Early Relations with Britain and the significance of Industry and Commerce for his Art. Part II” Robin Spencer describes the similarities between Whistler’s career and that of one of his industrialist patrons, John Gerald Potter, who was a wallpaper manufacturer. Spencer chronicles the careers of both Potter and Whistler, considering them both as producers “obliged to defend *laissez-faire* freedom for their products by

whatever practical means were to hand” (667). Noting that Whistler’s career as an artist was in essence a “microcosm of Potter’s as an industrialist” (667), Spencer argues that Whistler’s art production as a maker of both paintings and editions of prints and his need to find markets for both kinds of work matched that of Potter for whom market success depended upon the correct balance between machine and hand printed artifact. Spencer details the evolution of Whistler’s etching style and the size of his print editions as aspects of his marketing techniques. Although Whistler contrasted his own production with that of industrialists such as Potter and with William Morris’s Ruskinian ideology of labour, ironically, as I shall discuss in fuller detail in chapter seven, Whistler’s nocturnes were themselves seen by some as “delicately tinted wallpaper” (Merrill, A Pot of Paint 177, 179-80).

In addition to using the marketing strategies of industry, Whistler also used their advertising and display techniques to present his work to its best advantage. His paintings were not only evocations of the heightened artistic consciousness, they were also objects whose aesthetic qualities extended into their framing and exhibition. Whistler exerted complete control over his solo exhibitions and sought to determine the way in which his work was seen by designing the exhibition space, the invitations and even the costume of the footman who greeted the guests.<sup>23</sup> The details of Whistler’s innovations and their connection with contemporary advertising and sales practices will be addressed in chapter seven. Here I want to note that, conducted like the advertising campaigns they were, Whistler’s exhibitions reveal the extent to which he was enmeshed in the very practices he had condemned in the “Ten O’Clock”. And also like the professional advertising

executive, Whistler insisted that his control over a body of specialised knowledge and techniques allowed him to act as gatekeeper to that knowledge.

Whistler maintained that as an artist he possessed a body of knowledge which he alone had the right to convey to an audience. Only the painter was qualified to talk about painting.<sup>24</sup> This position was first put forward in “Whistler v Ruskin” where Whistler stated that Ruskin, as a man of letters, was unqualified to speak on matters of art:

We are told that Mr. Ruskin has devoted his long life to art, and as a result - is “Slade Professor” at Oxford. In the same sentence, we have thus his position and its worth. It suffices not, Messieurs! a life passed among pictures makes not a painter - else the policeman in the National Gallery might assert himself. As well allege that he who lives in a library must needs die a poet. Let not Mr. Ruskin flatter himself that the more education makes the difference between himself and the policeman when both stand gazing in the Gallery. (Thorp 57)

Whistler berates Ruskin for “preaching to young men what he cannot perform” (61) and asserts that artists have made their own history for hundreds of years and do not need the “wisdom of the passer-by” (61) who is incompetent to say anything about it. The issue is taken up again in the “Ten O’Clock” where the “unattached writer” is judged unfit to speak about art.<sup>25</sup> By determining how and when his art was seen and the critical framework in which it would be discussed, Whistler became the first truly professional avant garde Anglo-American artist in London (or indeed anywhere).<sup>26</sup> And as such the contradictions of his position as an avant garde artist opposed to the culture of the

commodity yet using the ideologies and sales strategies of that culture to sell himself and his work are apparent.

## VI

In their aesthetic theories Whistler and James proclaim themselves rare and superior beings capable of special acts of consciousness and perception. As authorities on the aesthetic, they are members of an elite whose position is based on taste and discernment rather than aristocratic privilege. In his incarnation as Dandy, Whistler carries this stance even farther than James.<sup>27</sup> His language, dress, gestures, and connoisseurship all assert that he is an individual of unique refinement, discernment, distinction and taste even though he lacks birth and wealth.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, even though both James and Whistler articulated a rhetoric of separateness from and transcendence of the social, the stance of aesthetic professional enabled both an upward social mobility and a position within the expanding and transforming cultural marketplace. In Professions of Taste, an account of Henry James's relationship with the British Aestheticist movement, Jonathan Freedman distinguishes the British movement from its German counterpart by pointing to the British movement's "complex entanglement with the development of a cultural apparatus at once thoroughly professionalized and wholly commodified" (xix). Because of this entanglement, artists such as Whistler and James were able to set themselves apart from commodity culture and at the same time remain within it as aesthetic professionals. Freedman's description of aesthetic professionalism is an apt one for both James and Whistler:

The “aesthetic movement” itself may represent in part the formation of an avant-garde beachhead on the resistant shores of London or Boston, but it also represents a process by which the newly emergent sphere of the “aesthetic” - a sphere hitherto defined for the Anglo-American audience by the likes of German idealist philosophers and romantic poets - got put into social play as a startlingly successful form of professionalism. For what is the aesthete but the consummate professional: the possessor of a “monopoly of knowledge” about the provenance and extent of this mysterious entity, “the aesthetic” - the man (and sometimes the woman) who responds to the demands of a rapidly professionalizing world by forging a career for himself out of the imparting of knowledge about this new “field” to an awed and appreciative public? (xix)

And within the cultural marketplace, as aesthetic producers and critics, James and Whistler were exemplary professionals.<sup>29</sup>

Late nineteenth century British Aestheticism, in Freedman’s account, helped to create “a new caste of professionals who designated themselves experts in cultural knowledge, and who defined their own role as that of instructing others in the lineaments of that knowledge” (55). Freedman argues that the texts of British aestheticism work as forms of specialised and esoteric knowledge that both describe and construct the aesthetic and mystify the authors’ authority. As a result, the appreciation of Fictional Art or Beauty is no longer a communal experience theoretically available to all but rather one that an audience accesses under the professional’s direction. As specialists in aesthetic theory and practice, Whistler and James provide in their theoretical statements ways of understanding

and accessing the newly autonomous sector of modern art and literature. If this is the case, why should Whistler attack Wilde for engaging in the very same activities he himself engages in? I think that Whistler saw Wilde as a dangerous competitor, one who was perceptive, knowledgeable and perfectly capable of seeing Whistler's strategies clearly for the contradictory practices they were and as such was a threat. I also think that it was Wilde's excess, coded as vulgarity, that disturbed Whistler. Wilde could be seen as Whistler taken to the extreme - Whistler's dandyism translated into explicit effeminacy and Whistler's "exquisite sensibility" translated into an over the top decadence. To Whistler, Wilde was a caricature who owed his public facade to the painter and who both failed to acknowledge his indebtedness to Whistler and took this persona to an unacceptable extreme. To Wilde's vulgarity Whistler opposes his own sensitivity and taste and it is these characteristics that Whistler points to as required for a true understanding and appreciation of the aesthetic and thus requisite for any professional in that field.

As an aesthetic professional, Whistler stands both opposed to and within the culture of the commodity. As I have discussed in chapter one, the dissociation of the sphere of culture from the political and economic systems that makes high art autonomous also makes it dependent upon a market economy. As Adorno, Huyssen and others have argued, the autonomy of art has from the beginning been dialectically related to the commodity form.<sup>30</sup> The more the industrialisation of culture makes the artist an entrepreneur or businessperson, the more the aesthetic value of the work is seen as absolutely incommensurable with its economic value. The more that high art becomes socially marginal, the more the artist as constructed by Whistler and James becomes

imaginatively and symbolically central. The freedom of the novel so strongly articulated by James stands in opposition to the regulation of literature by the literary marketplace. The acute consciousness of the heroic artist articulated by Whistler opposes the passive mindless consumption of the faceless masses. The formal integrity and beauty of the art object, whether literary or visual, contrasts with the “shapelessness of human life subject to production-rationality” (Crow 250). Paradoxically, even when, perhaps especially when, repudiating them, the modernist artist is deeply involved in the processes and pressures of industrialisation and modernisation.

As aesthetic experts, Whistler and James differentiated themselves and their work from the purveyors and commodities of mass culture. That they were also themselves part of that culture and its commodification of the aesthetic was inevitable, given the ability of a fully-developed consumer society to transform everything, including criticisms of itself, into objects of consumption themselves. For James, an existence in a marginal “artistic elite” of the unread enabled his central position as Author of the Art of Fiction. And in Whistler’s case, a dandified bohemianism and astute public relations savvy ensured fame and notoriety which was followed, in the 1890s, by institutional acclaim and financial success.

Just as there are parallels in James’s and Whistler’s aesthetic theory, there are also parallels in their work. Their response to the problems posed by modernity takes similar forms and addresses similar issues. The following chapters will examine those forms and issues.

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<sup>1</sup> For James’s published reviews of Whistler’s work, see The Painter’s Eye: Notes and Essays on the Pictorial Arts.

<sup>2</sup> In "The Painter of Modern Life", Baudelaire is referring specifically to the illustrator Constantin Guys but uses his example to put forward the image of his ideal artist, a "man of the world" who is a "passionate spectator", a "lover of crowds", a "prince" who "rejoices in his incognito". The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays 9. Since the 1960s feminist critics have criticised Baudelaire's notions about modernity for being limited to the experience of middle class men. The ability to stroll unbothered through the crowds of the modern urban metropolis was an experience that was not available to women and thus the canonical construction of what constitutes modernity does not include the experience of women. The notion of "modernity" itself as a gendered construction will be discussed in chapter four and following as it relates to James's and Whistler's work. For a critique of the gendered construction of Baudelaire's ideal artist, see Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the spaces of Femininity", Vision and Difference: Femininity, feminism and histories of art, 50-90. For an argument that the canonical literature of modernity represents only the experience of men, see Janet Wolff, "The invisible flaneuse: women and the literature of modernity".

<sup>3</sup> For Courbet, realism was a political as well as artistic statement linked to a Republican opposition to the regime of Napoleon the Third. On Courbet's politics, see Linda Nochlin, The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society.

<sup>4</sup> On the similarities and differences in Whistler's and Manet's representations of modern life see Robin Spencer, "Whistler, Manet, and the Tradition of the Avant-Garde". In two recent articles Michael Fried discusses Manet and the "generation of 1863", in which he includes Whistler, Fantin and Legros. See "Manet in His Generation: The Face of Painting in the 1860s" and "Between Realisms: From Derrida to Manet". Fried's analyses have been very helpful to my study, particularly his ideas about absorption which will be dealt with in chapter four below. On the similarities and differences between Degas and Whistler see Theodore Reff, "The Butterfly and the Old Ox". Reff's analysis will be taken up in chapter six.

<sup>5</sup> See Katharine A. Lochnan, Whistler's Etchings and the Sources of His Etching Style 1855 - 1880 chapter 14 for a discussion of Whistler's rejection of Courbet's realism.

<sup>6</sup> In Courbet's Realism Michael Fried argues that Baudelaire is wrong in his characterisation of Courbet, that Courbet is "eminently imaginative in Baudelaire's sense of the term" (5) and that the issue of realism was "ideologically overdetermined" in that "the philosophical, political, and even moral connotations of realism made it all but inconceivable that a work of art, especially a painting, could be both realistic in effect and imaginative or metaphorical in its relation to its materials" (5). It is clear from Whistler's comments that he subscribed to a view of Courbet's realism as lacking imagination.

<sup>7</sup> That Whistler was considered by others, and considered himself to be, a follower of Delacroix is seen in his inclusion in Henri Fantin-Latour's group portrait of 1864 Homage to Delacroix. Along with Whistler, who is given a prominent position standing right next to Delacroix's picture, are Fantin himself, Alphonse Legros, Edouard Manet, and the critics Champfleury and Baudelaire.

<sup>8</sup> In "The Real Thing" James invokes the photograph, which he had called "hideously inexpressive" in an early art review, as the opposite of the painting to make his point that the Monarchs are simulacra rather than the real thing. James initially thought that photography was documentary rather than an art form. Photography's seeming ability to merely passively reflect the material world was evidence for James of its alignment with the crude realism he had repudiated. However, by the turn of the century, with photography's evolution into a "legitimate" aesthetic form, James saw the potential offered by the photograph to evoke the feel of contemporary life. James's new respect for the aesthetic potential of the photograph is evidenced by his asking Alvin Langdon Coburn in 1906 to provide photographic frontispieces to the New York edition.

<sup>9</sup> Here Whistler sounds as if he could be an early version of the American art critic Clement Greenberg whose views on modernism have so influential. In an important early article "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), Greenberg identified the avant garde as the force that "keeps culture moving" beyond the sterility and stasis of academic "alexandrianism" (36). In distinguishing between avant-garde and kitsch, Greenberg argued that the aim of the avant-garde was to advance culture by defining and engaging with the proper concerns of art: "In turning his attention away from subject matter or common experience, the poet or artist turns it upon the medium of his own craft" (37). Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch".



<sup>10</sup> On the question of Whistler's subjects vs. his emphasis on form, see Elizabeth Broun, "Thoughts That Began With the Gods: The Content of Whistler's Art. Broun argues that to "take Whistler at his word that his art had no subject beyond its formal properties is to miss his most significant achievement" (36). Broun analyses several of Whistler's earlier works and offers a somewhat simplistic psychological interpretation of them. She does not pay any attention to the socio-historical context of Whistler's work and her readings lack depth.

<sup>11</sup> Whistler's use of musical terms to name his images was designed to prevent any specific and limiting association from being given to his pictures and to force his viewers to read the images in the way he wanted them read - as harmonious aesthetic objects rather than illustrations of a moral or narrative point. After Whistler's aesthetic theory was formulated in the 1870s, he retitled many of his earlier works to conform with his theoretical ideas. The Morning Call, for example, became Harmony in Green and Rose: The Music Room, a title that emphasises the aesthetic form of the image rather than any possible narrative content.

<sup>12</sup> See also Albert Boime, "Entrepreneurial Patronage in Nineteenth-century France". That this paradigmatic individual was male is unstated but assumed. The bourgeois subject of eighteenth and nineteenth century civic and cultural discourse was inevitably male. An articulation of sexual difference has in the past excluded women from participation in the discourses of both civic humanism and modernism. In the nineteenth century female artists were prohibited from joining the academies, from studying the nude, the basis for much history painting, and from being a part of the avant garde social scene. Such exclusions worked to limit the kinds of art which women could make and thus to confine them to the ghettos of genre and still life painting. Because women were unable to participate in the avant-garde, with a very few exceptions, they were excluded from the construction of modernism. Such exclusions also served the purpose of ensuring that women artists were not able to be competitors in an increasingly crowded market. For a critique of women's exclusion from the construction of modernism, see Whitney Chadwick, Women, Art and Society; Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays, 145-78; Griselda Pollock, Vision and Difference; Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock, Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology and Lisa Tickner, "Feminism, Art history and Sexual Difference".

<sup>13</sup> Against this, some revisionist critics have tried, unsuccessfully, to argue that the work of the avant garde did not differ all that much from that of the Academy. See, for example, Albert Boime, "The Teaching of Fine Arts and the Avant-garde in France during the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century".

<sup>14</sup> In Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception Kate Flint (ed.) notes that while Impressionist paintings were seen annually in London between 1887 and 1905, very few of them were sold to British collectors. She speculates that for the British "investment in an art form which might, after all, prove to be no more than a passing phase, does not appear to have been considered worthwhile" (8). For such collectors, the fact that Impressionism was innovative and original in technique does not appear to have been sufficient to impell them to invest in it. More conservative and insular than their French counterparts, British collectors doubted that such technical experiments were anything other than a passing fad. The British reluctance to embrace innovative aesthetic forms would prove to be problematic for Whistler whose career was based upon his aesthetic innovations.

<sup>15</sup> An example of this concern over influence is an 1870 letter Whistler wrote to the English artist Albert Moore in which Whistler expressed the fear that Moore would think he had copied him: "[It] struck me dimly - perhaps - and with great hesitation that one of my sketches of the girls on the sea shore, was in motive not unlike your yellow one - of course I don't mean in scheme of color but in general sentiment of movement and in the place of the sea - sky and shore etc -" (Thorp 41). Whistler was so irked by this possibility that he asked a mutual friend to compare the works and dispell his anxiety.

<sup>16</sup> No permanent record of the trial was kept but Linda Merrill reconstructs it from existing newspaper accounts. See A Pot of Paint: Aesthetics on Trial in Whistler v Ruskin. Whistler also published his own account more than ten years after the event in The Gentle Art of Making Enemies.

<sup>17</sup> In Modern Painters, Ruskin himself notes that "One of the most remarkable points of difference between the English and the Continental nations is the degree of finish given to their ordinary work" (vol. 3, 5:151-52).

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of the connections among moral propriety, social institutions and English painting see Lynda Nead, Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain.

<sup>19</sup> In a pre-trial letter to Ruskin's lawyer Burne-Jones wrote that Whistler's methods were a dangerous threat to British art: "[His art's] deficiency is insuperable and he is clever enough to know it; and being notoriously without any principle or sentiment of the dignity of his art, he is perpetually eager to make the world believe that his own low standard of excellence is that standard that is alone desirable" (qtd. in Merrill, A Pot of Paint 223).

<sup>20</sup> Many of these were collected in James Whistler, The Gentle Art of Making Enemies.

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed discussion of Whistler's use of the media for self-promotion see Deanna Marohn Bendix, Diabolical Designs: Paintings, Interiors and Exhibitions of James McNeill Whistler, 5-47. Bendix' study is an analysis of Whistler's contributions to the nineteenth century British design reform movement.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of the gendered nature of art-historical discourse in the nineteenth century, see Tamar Garb, "Gender and Representation", esp. 228-32 and 278-89 and Griselda Pollock, "Vision, Voice and Power: Feminist Art Histories and Marxism", esp. 20-21. Garb notes that the most frequent adjectives used to describe work by women which was admired during this period were "delicate", "tender" and "charming", qualities which were admired in women themselves. In the hierarchy of the arts established by the academies, genre and still life paintings were at the bottom of the artistic ladder and thought to be suitable subjects for women because of their innate delicacy and sensitivity. As articulated by one critic, the beauty and fragility of the flower was an apt metaphor for the ideal female artist: "[Let] men busy themselves with all that has to do with great art. Let women occupy themselves with those types of art they have always preferred, such as pastels, portraits, or miniatures. Or the painting of flowers, those prodigies of grace and freshness which alone can compete with the grace and freshness of women themselves" (Leon Le Grange, Gazette de Beaux-Arts 1860). Whistler uses terms which have gendered connotations to describe an ideal - his art - that is at the same time masculine.

<sup>23</sup> See David Park Curry, "Total Control: Whistler at an Exhibition".

<sup>24</sup> In his response to Whistler's "Ten O'Clock" lecture in the Pall Mall Gazette, Wilde took exception to this: "Nor do I accept the dictum that only a painter is a judge of painting. I say only an artist is a judge of art; there is a wide difference. As long as a painter is a painter merely, he should not be allowed to talk of anything but mediums and meglip" (qtd. in Anderson 270).

<sup>25</sup> Because Whistler wanted to maintain control over his own work and reputation, he sought to discredit the work of other critics and artists who negatively critiqued his work. Many of his exhibition pamphlets consisted of critics' comments on his paintings, often taken out of context, designed to make the critic look stupid. With the negative critic reduced to a sputtering caricature, Whistler then appeared to be even more astute than he had been before. For samples of this practice see Bendix.

<sup>26</sup> American artists and writers who would follow Whistler saw him as providing an example which they could emulate. For example, Ezra Pound hailed James and Whistler as the only two American artists prior to the twentieth century to escape provincialism and to gain recognition in the international arena. See "Patria Mia".

<sup>27</sup> On Dandyism, see Ellen Moers, The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm.

<sup>28</sup> In an amusing anecdote Theodore Reff identifies the differences between what he calls the "brilliant, belligerent, frequently insecure American expatriate, who sought fame even at the price of notoriety" and the "conservative, increasingly secluded Frenchman" Degas as exemplified by their dress: "[Degas] could be more cutting than Whistler himself: 'You behave as though you have no talent,' Degas once said to him; and again when Whistler, chin high, monocle in his eye, frock-coated, top-hatted, carrying a tall cane, walked triumphantly into a restaurant where Degas was sitting: "Whistler, you have forgotten your muff" (Degas: The Artist's Mind 18).

<sup>29</sup> In The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America Burton Bledstein describes the rise of the professional as a result of the rationalisation of time and space produced by a capitalist economy. Within the separate spheres of activity delineated by industrial capitalism, life paths were organised into discrete careers, each with its own distinct experts and bodies of knowledge. Within these discrete spaces, the professional is authorised, authorises him or herself, to dispense his special knowledge to an appreciative public. On British professionalism, see W.J.

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Reader, Professional Men: The Rise of the Professional Classes in Nineteenth-Century England. For the avant-garde artist such professionalism enabled “career management” but the artist, unlike other professionals such as doctors or lawyers for example, did not offer what the general public would conceive of as an “essential service” or product thus making his or her career path much more complex as this study will demonstrate.

<sup>30</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment; Philosophical Fragments, esp. “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” 120-67. Andreas Huyssen, “Adorno in Reverse: From Hollywood to Richard Wagner”, After the Great Divide, 16-43. See also Thomas Crow, “Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts”. Whistler’s and James’s use of popular or low culture will be addressed in chapter five.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Realism and Human Subjectivity: At the Piano, The Music Room, and The Portrait of a Lady

In chapters two and three I have discussed the problems that modernity posed to James and Whistler as they were articulated in their aesthetic theory. In this chapter I would like to turn to the ways in which the problems of modernity are expressed in the early masterpieces for which James and Whistler were celebrated: At the Piano (1859) and Harmony in Green and Rose: The Music Room (1860-61) and The Portrait of a Lady (1881). All three works I will look at in this chapter are “realist”. However, their realism is one that is metamorphosing into something else, that “something else” being a new and different kind of aesthetic form emerging from and reflecting the historical conditions in which the works were produced. At the Piano, The Music Room and Portrait occupy transitional historical spaces in which competing representational modes have an uneasy coexistence. Each of these works has many attributes of conventional realist form which exist side by side with new forms which contradict or oppose those conventions. In these works the new aesthetic forms emerge out of older residual realist forms. In addition, for the viewer or reader of these works, the aesthetic experience becomes more one of tension and estrangement than harmony and satisfaction. In At the Piano, The Music Room and Portrait we can see what Jochen Schulte-Sasse describes as a tension between the “physical-psychic effect of the material organization of society” and “the prevailing ‘text’ of a period” (xxvii), in this case realism. As I have discussed in chapters two and three, realism was the prevailing mode of literary and artistic production when Whistler and James were beginning their professional careers. Realism was, and is, also the language of

popular culture and the “culture industry” then emerging. The modern system of hyper-real spectacles, images and representations created by industry and mass culture with which we are only too familiar was designed to offer an illusory happiness and satisfaction and to efface the psychic tensions and contradictions of modern social reality which James’s and Whistler’s work makes apparent. It will be the task of this chapter to identify the new representational modes in these three works and to suggest how and why these new forms articulate contradictions inherent in the progress of modernity.

## I

In chapter one I briefly summarised some of the changes that scientific discovery and industrial capitalism and its machines and technologies had brought to the bourgeois social landscape of the nineteenth century: decline of religious faith, decline of belief in unending progress, fears about the rise of the masses, loss of nature as refuge from the wasteland of urban-industrial life, fragmentation of earlier organic totalities, estrangement, and alienation. Such changes are then compensated for in the elaboration of a realm of purely individual and private subjective freedom celebrated in idealist philosophy and articulated in modernist cultural products. How can it be that human beings who are subject to social and historical constraints experience themselves as autonomous subjects?

In The Political Unconscious Fredric Jameson has suggested how the paradox of modern subjectivity - that as we become more subject to social determinants in the form of technology, industry and bureaucracy, we more forcefully assert our own individual subjective freedom - arises historically:

[What is interesting] is not the denunciation of the centered subject and its ideologies, but rather the study of its historical emergence, its constitution or virtual construction as a mirage which is also evidently in some fashion an objective reality. For the lived experience of individual consciousness as a monadic and autonomous center of activity is not some mere conceptual error, which can be dispelled by the taking of thought and by scientific rectifications: it has a quasi-institutional status, performs ideological functions, and is susceptible to historical causation and produced and reinforced by other objective instances, determinants, and mechanisms . . . [The] emergence of the ego or centered subject can be understood [as follows]: the dissolution of the older organic or hierarchical social groups, the universal commodification of the labor-power of individuals and their confrontation as equivalent units within the framework of the market [and] the anomie of these now “free” and isolated individual subjects [provide the conditions for] which the protective development of a monadic armature alone comes as something of a compensation. (Political Unconscious 154)

While Jameson does not focus on the extent to which such subjection falls more heavily on the less-privileged members of society, it is clear that in the nineteenth century women were more forcefully constrained than men both psychically and physically. In At the Piano, The Music Room and Portrait this historically-specific paradox is articulated in aesthetic form. These works are transitional ones which occupy a position between the earlier realism of, respectively, Courbet and Eliot and a fully-evolved modernism, and their importance lies in their transitional, contradictory nature because it is in these

contradictions that the historical moment is expressed. Each of these works, with their competing representational modes and contradictory images of human subjectivity, represents a world in which classical notions of the harmony and unity of the human body and its environment are collapsing, to be replaced by the modernist reality of fragmentation, isolation and disharmony. Portrait of a Lady, At the Piano and Music Room are critical of modernity and its effects, commenting negatively on the increasing reification, commodification and unfreedom in a society for which modernity was supposed to bring liberation from all debilitating socio-historical constraints.

I have described each of these works, At the Piano, The Music Room and Portrait, as “realist”. As such, they, like any realist artifact, can be seen as “processing operations” (Jameson Political Unconscious 152) whose function is to accurately describe the world. Realism in literature, for example, as I discussed in chapter two, is specifically opposed to earlier narrative forms such as the romance or myth and attempts to construct a coherent social world from its confrontation with a complex and contradictory reality. Similarly, as was discussed in chapter three, realist painting specifically seeks to represent the world of the “here and now” rather than that of biblical or historical times. Jameson has argued that realism plays a role in a “bourgeois cultural revolution” (152) through acting as a decoder of myth and a producer of the modern subjectivity it describes. His description focuses on the nineteenth century realist novel but his observations can also be applied to the realist painting:

The “objective” function of the novel is thereby implied: to its subjective and critical, analytic, corrosive mission must now be added the task of producing as

though for the first time that very life world, that very “referent” - the newly quantifiable space of extension and market equivalence, the new rhythms of measurable time, the new secular and “disenchanted” object world of the commodity system, with its post-traditional daily life and its bewilderingly empirical, “meaningless”, and contingent Umwelt - of which this new narrative discourse will then claim to be the “realistic” reflection. (Political Unconscious 152)

Thus, according to this account, realist novels such as Eliot’s and Balzac’s and paintings such as Courbet’s chart the emergence of a new kind of social world, with new relationships and new kinds of consciousness. However, the characters in these earlier realist novels are still subordinated to an intrusive god-like authorial omniscience. In contrast, in James’s realist novel The Portrait of a Lady, the bourgeois subject is more fully evolved in that we are often left squarely within one singular isolated consciousness which is specifically opposed to the world in which it finds itself. James’s representation of interiority and isolation in the Portrait is one that reflects a later moment in the progress of modernity than Eliot’s reconciliation of individual and society in, for example, Middlemarch. The differences between James’s and Eliot’s projects will be discussed in more detail below; here I simply want to note that the reconciliation that was possible for Eliot is no longer possible for James. Similarly, Courbet’s representation of the appearance of the material world and the lives of workers in that world reflects an earlier moment than Whistler’s evocation of the interior psychological states of his subjects in At the Piano and The Music Room. Both James and Whistler, as we shall see, will emphasise the lived



experience of individual consciousness as isolated and autonomous centres of activity in a way that highlights the paradox of modern subjectivity. James's insistence on telling his story from the point of view of Isabel's consciousness, and Whistler's depictions of bourgeois interiority, can be seen as accurate accounts of the way in which we are subjected *and* how we reconfigure that subjection as freedom. These contradictions in the nature of bourgeois, especially female, subjectivity appear in At the Piano, The Music Room and the Portrait as contradictions in aesthetic form. In order to see how this is the case, I will compare the form and subject of two scenes in the Portrait of a Lady with Whistler's two paintings to which they have an uncanny formal and thematic similarity.

## II

The Portrait of a Lady was considered by contemporary reviewers to be James's first masterpiece. Likewise, Whistler's At the Piano (1859) and Harmony in Green and Rose: The Music Room (1860-61) were among the artist's first publicly-exhibited works and At the Piano was generally well-received. All three focus on the middle-class domestic realm and the experience of women within it. Indeed, the thematic and technical similarities between Whistler's pictures and James's novel are compelling and all three express remarkably similar characterisations of modern bourgeois existence.<sup>1</sup>

Before I begin a detailed examination of the three works, I want to briefly lay out the argument I will be making here. I will argue that the "portrait" of bourgeois interiority painted by the Portrait is, like those painted by Whistler, revealing of contradictions inherent in modern subjectivity. These works are not the objective records of material fact that contemporary discourse held "realism" to be. Instead they are records of the response

of subjectivity to the material conditions of modernity. James makes this project clear when he indicates in his preface to the The Portrait of a Lady that his story originated not in a plot but in a picture of a “young woman affronting her destiny” (AN 48). James tells us that in order to make his story of such a “slight” person important and interesting, he decided to “place the centre of the subject in the young woman’s own consciousness” (AN 51). The things that happen to Isabel are not necessarily exciting in themselves, but exciting as they reveal her awareness of them: “Without her sense of them, her sense for them, as one may say, they are next to nothing at all; but isn’t the beauty and the difficulty just in showing their mystic conversion by that sense” (AN 56). Isabel’s first sight of Madame Merle at the piano is one such incident. Another is the representation in chapter forty of Isabel’s “motionlessly seeing” which James describes as “designed to have all the vivacity of incident and all the economy of picture” (AN 57). The way these two pivotal incidents in the novel are rendered, like the pictures painted by Whistler, is complex and contradictory. In the novel it is Isabel’s “exciting inward life” that is most important and this inward life is shown through her psychological response to impressions she receives from particular pictorial tableaux. However, the way in which Isabel is represented is inconsistent with what she experiences: although believing herself to be a free subject, she is in reality a subjected “dull un-reverenced tool” (484); although she is a centre of consciousness, she is also the object of a disembodied narrative eye. Similarly, in At the Piano and The Music Room Whistler presents us with absorptive motifs which signify intensity of interior consciousness and flat, silhouetted forms, shallow spaces and the truncation of forms by framing, all of which act against that suggestion of psychological or

spiritual depth. In these works the co-existence of formal devices which offer contradictory or competing representations of their characters' lives serves to point out how modernity has profoundly altered the nature of "reality" itself.

At the Piano (1859) (fig. 1) was the second picture Whistler painted. It was begun in London, finished in Paris in 1859 and accepted for exhibition at the London Royal Academy in 1860, the first of his paintings to be shown in England. At the Academy, the painting was generally well-received, as is evidenced by the Times review:

The name of Mr. Whistler is quite new to us. It is attached to a large sketch rather than a picture called At the Piano. This work is of the broadest and simplest character. A lady in black is playing the piano, while a girl in white listens attentively. In colour and handling this picture reminds one irresistibly of Velasquez . . . if this work be the fair result of Mr. Whistler's own labour from nature, and not the transcript of some spanish picture the gentleman has a future before him, and his next performance will be eagerly watched. (qtd. in Anderson 89)

The novelist Thackeray "admired it beyond words and stood looking at it with real delight" and the painter Millais called At the Piano "[The] finest piece of colour that has been on the walls of the Royal Academy for years" (qtd. in Prideaux 39). In the Athenaeum, the artist's "genuine feeling for colour" and "splendid power of composition" were seen as evidence of his "just appreciation of nature", a quality "very rare amongst artists" (qtd. in Anderson 90). The picture was not universally praised, however; the critic for the Daily Telegraph called it "an eccentric, uncouth, smudgy, phantom-like picture of a

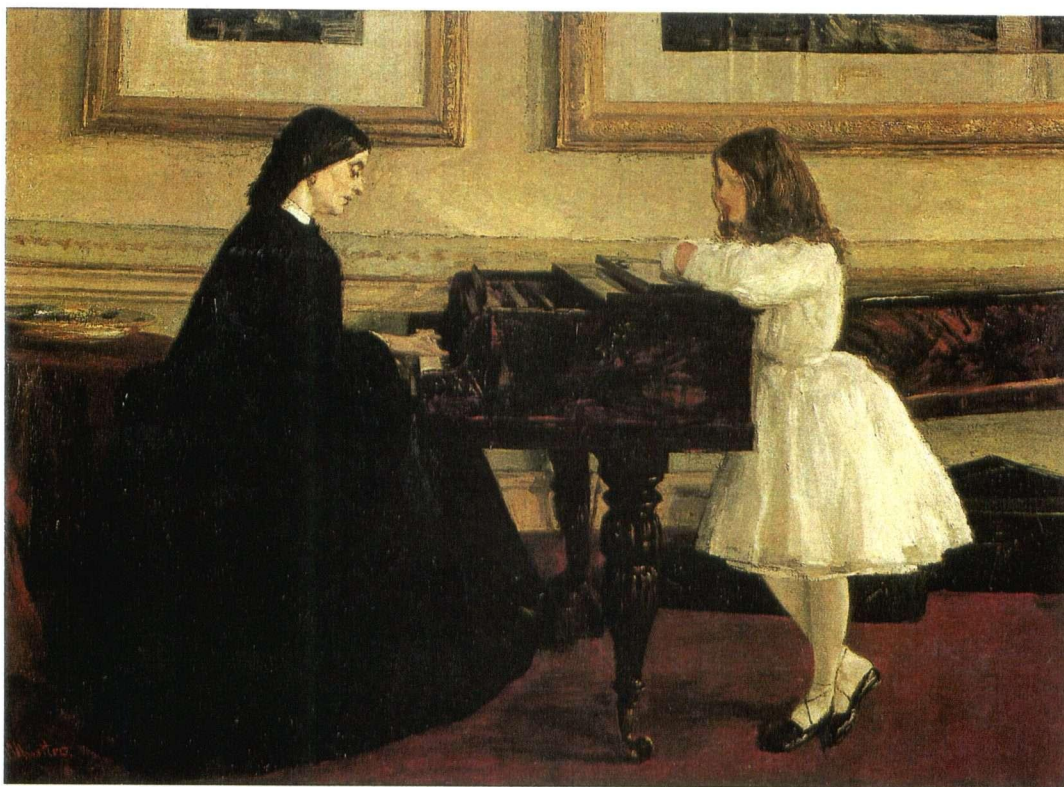


Figure 1 At the Piano (1859)

lady at a pianoforte, with a ghostly-looking child in a white frock looking on" (qtd. in Anderson 89) and the Athenaeum noted Whistler's "recklessly bold manner and sketchiness of the wildest and roughest kind" (qtd. in Anderson 90). The conjunction of "a recklessly bold manner", "eccentricity", and "sketchiness" with "a feeling for colour" and "just appreciation of nature" in these accounts suggests that critics saw something in Whistler's work that they could not reconcile. What this irreconcilability might be is alluded to by Roger Fry in a later review of the painting where he pointed to what he saw as the flaw in Whistler's art, his concentration on the mere surface of things: "A few early drawings and etchings and one or two pictures, such as At the Piano and the Girl in White, betray something of the Pre-Raphaelite influence; but already they show a preoccupation with the surfaces of things rather than with their inner meaning" (Spencer, Whistler: A Retrospective 346). In these critical responses we can begin to sense some of the problems Whistler's "realist" image presented. We must now examine the painting itself in more detail, to determine the implications of its formal characteristics and see how its contradictions are articulated.

At the Piano depicts Whistler's half-sister Deborah Haden and her daughter Annie in the music room of the Haden's house at 62 Sloane Street, London. Deborah is dressed in a voluminous black gown and seated playing the piano. Her daughter, dressed in white, is positioned standing and leaning on the piano, listening to her mother play. The picture has several cut off areas, at the top where two large gold-framed pictures behind the piano are sliced horizontally by the edge of the canvas and at either side where the table on the left is cut in half horizontally and the piano's right extremity and third leg are omitted. The

bottom of the composition is not cropped, however, and both figures are depicted in their entirety. The cropping of the top and sides of the image focuses attention on the two figures who occupy the centre of the canvas. Deborah's gaze is fixed on the piano keys as she plays, while her daughter, although we do not see her eyes clearly, appears from the position of her face to be gazing at her mother quite intently. Beneath the piano are two instrument cases, one violin and one violoncello.

Much of At the Piano draws on earlier painting genres, particularly Dutch and Spanish interiors. In the late 1850s and early 1860s, "espagnolisme" was fashionable in Paris and the art of seventeenth century Holland, particularly Vermeer, was undergoing a revival in France. In several catalogues for various Dutch and Flemish museums, and articles on the relation of art to society, the critic Thore put forward his belief that the Dutch school of the seventeenth century was the historical precedent for a naturalistic modern art.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary French painting was, according to Thore, the heir to the great naturalistic masters of the past, Velasquez in Spain and the seventeenth century Dutch painters. Thore saw authentic French painting as that which escaped the influence of Italy by turning to the naturalistic art of Spain and Holland. For Thore, it was through a return to nature - that nature represented by Spanish and Dutch art - that art renewed itself. Seen in the context of these beliefs, Whistler's combination of elements that were seen as Spanish and Dutch reflects his attempt to insert his own work into a canon of contemporary French art that was then being given shape. Like Degas' Bellelli Family (1859) and Fantin-Latour's Two Sisters (1859), At the Piano was seen by contemporary

viewers as an homage to Vermeer.<sup>3</sup> Its subject matter then could be placed within a particular category of realist art production.

However, while similar in composition and coloration to Dutch interiors, At the Piano conveys a different mood and psychology. Whistler's work, like that of Fantin-Latour and Degas, focuses on the relationship of the figures to one another and to the artist/viewer. The interior space represented is important as a setting for, and emblem of, the psychological states of the figures within it. What is of particular interest in At the Piano is the connection between the standing girl and the woman seated at the piano. X-rays of the painting show that the initial composition included the figure at the piano, the picture frames but not the listening girl. The figure of Annie was added at a later stage.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that the painting was not meant to be an objective and detached study in formal harmony, as suggested by Broun for example, but a study in the psychology of consciousness.<sup>5</sup> I find the presence of the instrument cases under the piano to be interesting with respect to the painting's construction of psychological space. In many seventeenth century genre paintings, musical instruments carried much symbolic freight: symbols of love, signifiers of the vanity of human intellectual pursuits such as music, and also symbols of harmony.<sup>6</sup> The swelling form of stringed instruments such as the lute often represented the female body. If we see Whistler here as playing with these earlier iconographic conventions, then his representation of the instrument cases rather than the instruments themselves, and his compositional cutting of the instruments also contribute to the painting's divergence from earlier modes of realism and act as negations of the symbology attached to such objects.

Initially, one of the most compelling things about this image is the intensity of the girl's attention to her mother. Not only does she seem to be listening very carefully, she also seems to gaze directly at the older woman's face. Deborah's attention, in contrast, is focused on the piano keys. She looks down at her hands as she plays. What we are most aware of as viewers of the image is Annie's perceiving consciousness, her awareness of what she sees. Annie is depicted as being intensely absorbed in her awareness of another human being. I will return to the significance of "absorption" below but first I want to point out the compositional similarities between this painting and an early scene in James's Portrait. That this kind of evocation of perceiving subjectivity is what James was after in his characterisation of Isabel in the Portrait is indicated by my earlier quotation of James's intentions: "Without her sense of [things], her sense for them, as one may say, they are next to nothing at all; but isn't the beauty and the difficulty just in showing their mystic conversion by that sense" (AN 56). Just as Whistler gives us a representation of heightened consciousness in a scene that depicts an individual watching and listening to a woman playing the piano, so too does James in an important early scene.

In the first of the scenes he identifies in his preface as the most crucial in the novel, James's rendering of Isabel's initial encounter with Madame Merle creates a picture that recalls At the Piano:

Isabel was on the point of ringing to send an enquiry to her room, when her attention was taken by an unexpected sound - the sound of low music proceeding apparently from the drawing room . . . The drawing room at Gardencourt was a apartment of great distances, and as the piano was placed at the end of it furthest



removed from the door at which Isabel entered her arrival was not noticed by the person seated before the instrument . . . This person [was] a stranger to herself, although her back was presented to the door. This back - an ample and well-dressed one - Isabel contemplated for some moments in surprise . . . [She] had not yet divested herself of a youthful impression that each new acquaintance would exert some momentous influence upon her life. By the time she had made these reflections she became aware that the lady at the piano played remarkably well. She was playing something of Beethoven's - Isabel knew not what, but she recognised Beethoven - and she touched the piano softly and discreetly, but with evident skill. (149)

The novel's narrative stops while James asks us as readers to join Isabel in contemplating the picture he paints. Isabel stares uninterrupted at Madame Merle for a number of minutes, listening to her play. During this pause in the novel's narrative momentum, we are within Isabel's consciousness, aware of each thought replacing the previous one as she muses about this interesting stranger. In so doing, James makes us intensely aware of Isabel's interior life. She has, like Annie is represented to have, an intensely interesting interiority. Unlike the earlier realism of George Eliot, whose narrative voice constantly intrudes into the story pointing out the significance of characters' actions, James does not go on to tell us explicitly *what* the "momentous influence" Madame Merle will have on Isabel is. We are left with a limited, incomplete and eventually fallible individual consciousness or point of view. James's use of centre of consciousness narration here creates a compelling realistic effect: firstly, the distinction between us, as readers, and

Isabel is elided - we become Isabel, our view of the scene coinciding with hers, and secondly, we are persuaded that what we see is *really* what is. Isabel is absorbed in what she sees and so are we.

James's use of centre of consciousness narration here both represents a state of absorption (Isabel's) and creates on the reader's part a sense of absorption in the scene depicted. In the Portrait a new and innovative literary form - centre of consciousness - coexists with a conventional kind of nineteenth century realist narration that seeks to represent the world as if it simply existed "out there" independent of us. However, the representation of interiority or subjectivity given by the centre of consciousness technique coexists with an equally strong representation of exteriority or objectivity in James's evocation of the movement of a camera's eye over the scene being described. Parts of the scene are narrated as if a motion picture camera were showing Isabel's movements through the house. In these moments the story's narrative, like that of a film, magically unwinds apparently without any intervention. The cinematic world represents, in the words of Laura Mulvey, a "hermetically sealed world [which is] indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy" ("Visual Pleasure" 363). Viewers of this cinematic world are offered images of objectified individuals whose actions can be consumed without effort. Similarly, James's evocation of a camera's eye in parts of the scene serves to separate us from Isabel, to objectify her and to negate her independent interior consciousness. To see how this is the case, it is necessary to examine the way in which Isabel's moment of consciousness is framed in the text. I use the term "framed" deliberately here to draw attention to James's

use of a framing device like that of a camera to isolate and focus attention on Isabel as object.

Immediately prior to Isabel's coming upon Madame Merle at the piano we are taken inside her head and are aware of what she is thinking:

Isabel was on the point of ringing to send an inquiry to her room when her attention was taken by an unexpected sound - the sound of low music proceeding apparently from the drawing-room. She knew that her aunt never touched the piano, and the musician was therefore probably Ralph, who played for his own amusement. That he should have resorted to this recreation at the present time, indicated apparently that his anxiety about his father had been relieved . . . (148)

We muse along with Isabel, speculating about the possible identity of the musician. Then immediately we are outside Isabel and looking at her as she moves through the house: ". . . so that Isabel took her way to the drawing-room with much alertness" (148). Then abruptly the focus moves from Isabel to a representation of Gardencourt's interior as if a camera were panning around the room: "The drawing-room at Gardencourt was a apartment of great distances, and as the piano was placed at the end of it furthest removed from the door at which Isabel entered, her arrival was not noticed by the person seated before the instrument" (148-9). The remainder of the paragraph goes on to alternate between drawing us into Isabel's thoughts so that we experience her subjectivity and giving us descriptions of external actions so that we see her and her surroundings as objects.

In this scene the coexistence of absorption and distancing acts to both pull the reader into Isabel's consciousness and push her away to a place above and beyond the scene described, as if Isabel were merely one more object among many others. While James's literary representation of absorption acts to draw the viewer into the character's consciousness, as if the character and the reader have become a single entity, his use of a camera eye's perspective also and at the same time positions the reader outside and beyond the character's consciousness. James's narrative technique here both pulls the reader into the story and pushes her away. Unlike earlier realist narratives in which the author's omniscience informs all aspects of the story, pointing out the meaning and significance of its characters' actions, in James's narrative we are given a partial view or limited perspective through which we must absorb the story. At this early stage in the novel's narrative the problems inherent in the heroine's limited perspective are not readily apparent; they are only hinted at by the author. By the same token, the response evoked from the reader here is one of enjoyment tempered by curiosity. What will be the "momentous influence" alluded to in this scene? However, in the later of the two scenes I will be looking at, the inconsistency between the literary technique and the character's experience and the consequent tension evoked and dissatisfaction expressed by many contemporary readers with respect to the novel's ending clearly conveys the contradictions of its historical moment. However, before I go on to examine Isabel's "motionlessly seeing", I shall show how Whistler's technical innovations, and their thematic consequences, in At the Piano are like those in James's novelistic scene.

I have suggested that James's narrative techniques in his depiction of Isabel and her environment act to both pull the reader into and push her out of Isabel's consciousness. Similarly, Whistler's depiction of Annie and Deborah in At the Piano both negates the viewer and directly addresses him or her. It is the painting's depiction of absorption that negates the viewer by making the figures seem unconscious of or indifferent to the painting's viewers. The figures in the painting do not look out at a beholder. They do not in any way acknowledge a beholder. Instead, they are represented as being entirely absorbed in their own activities as if unseen by anyone. However, this representation of absorption, like that of James, prompts the viewer to identify with the consciousnesses of the figures depicted, acting to dissolve the distinction between representation and reality. This absorptive thematic has been examined in detail with respect to the painting of the 1860s by Michael Fried, whose observations are appropriate to both James's project and Whistler's At the Piano.<sup>7</sup> Fried argues that in French painting from the mid-eighteenth century on, the representation of absorption was paramount:

[In such paintings] the representation of absorption carried with it the implication that the figure or figures in question were wholly unaware of the presence before the canvas of the beholder; in this sense it was an antitheatrical device, one that was instrumental to attempts by successive generations of French painters to make pictures that would somehow negate or neutralize what I have called the primordial convention that paintings are made to be beheld . . . ("Manet in his Generation" 29)

While such visual representations of absorption are characteristic of French painting until 1860 or so, Fried postulates that a shift in aesthetics occurred at that time by virtue of which “the *excessiveness* in the depiction of absorption” (31) which had come to be seen by some critics as itself theatrical could be “recuperated as an artistically legitimate mode of *intensity*” (31). Fried argues that a desire for a new sort of pictorial intensity was manifested by including “effects of forcing and willing within an absorptive framework” (32). This new pictorial intensity was achieved by the representation of figures who are completely absorbed in what they are doing, feeling and thinking, which negate the viewer, combined with a use of shallow space, cropping and framing which directly *address* the viewer. Fried sees this new pictorial form as expressing a “double structure of *denial of* and *direct address to* the beholder” and claims that this double structure is “deeply characteristic of the painting (and not just the painting) of members of the generation of 1863” (33-4), in which generation he includes James McNeill Whistler.

This double structure of denial of and address to a painting’s viewer that Fried sees as characteristic of modern paintings is represented in At the Piano.<sup>8</sup> Firstly, Deborah is shown as completely absorbed in her piano-playing, so absorbed that she is unaware of Annie’s gaze and that of the beholder. Annie is also represented as being so absorbed in the intensity of her gaze at her mother that she too is unaware of anything else. At the Piano’s depiction of absorptive subjects was not seen as in any way conventional or posed. In many contemporary comments on the painting, the words “natural”, “delight” and “feeling” express the viewers’ appreciation of the painting’s effect. Such absorptive states seem always to have been seen as “ever-fresh, purely spontaneous” (Fried “Manet in his

Generation” 36), found objects rather than deliberately arranged compositions. The absorptive motifs Whistler uses suggest that these figures have an intense interior consciousness, that they are “real” people with real thoughts and feelings, a suggestion that works to suspend the distinction between representation and viewer. However, in addition to its representation of absorption, and hence negation of the viewer, At the Piano also includes those features which Fried has identified as directly addressing the viewer. The painting’s space is shallow. The wall behind the figures is flat and frontal, its frontality accentuated by the cropping of the two picture frames. Deborah’s black gown completely hides the piano stool or bench on which she must be sitting, thus further flattening the space. Both female figures are in profile, almost silhouette-like. All these elements serve to create the impression of a frontal orientation, one explicitly directed to the painting’s viewer. Hence, the orientation of the figures, which is to negate the viewer, contradicts or conflicts with the orientation of the rest of the painting’s elements. Contemporary commentary on At the Piano’s eccentricity, recklessness and uncouthness suggests that these two competing pictorial structures were registered by viewers even as they were unable to reconcile them. Whistler’s “bold manner” and “sketchiness of the wildest and roughest kind” forcefully command the viewer’s attention while at the same time his absorptive subjects negate that same viewer.

Whistler’s use of absorptive motifs contrasts with his execution of those motifs. Unlike the work of Fantin-Latour, for example, whose Woman Reading (1861) can be seen as the epitome of a representation of absorption that does not confront the viewer with the evidence of its own illusoriness, Whistler makes the image’s “madness”

strikingly apparent. The surface of the canvas is not given a smooth, brushstrokeless finish. The artist's brush strokes are evident, making it clear that the image is paint on canvas not a window onto reality. The roughness of the painted surface, the sketchiness of the handling, the chalkiness of the whites and dullness of the blacks, and the evident brushstrokes all point to the artificiality of the image. At the Piano is not simply a quasi-photographic record of a world "out-there"; it is a material object which compels the viewer's attention. While initially it is Annie's gaze that captures our attention and suggests her psychological depth, upon closer examination her figure seems flat and crudely painted negating that same suggestion of depth. Her profiled figure, meant to be an index of interiority, now seems more to be a flat silhouette that evokes not someone absorbed in what she sees but an opaque, uncommunicative cipher without psychological interiority of any kind. The opacity of both Annie and Deborah, their lack of psychological depth, makes them seem now to be, rather than fully-articulated subjects, two more objects in a room full of such objects. This dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity, negation of and direct address to a viewer, which is in At the Piano implicit will be more explicitly articulated in the later Music Room to be discussed below.

The double structure that I've described as existing in Portrait and in At the Piano is illustrative of the paradox of modern subjectivity. While making the individual's consciousness the putative subject of the works, James and Whistler also at the same time make the viewer aware of the individual as constrained by the environment which frames her. In At the Piano the sense of subjection is not yet fully developed but hinted at by the cropped, flattened, claustrophobic space within which the figures are positioned. In The



Music Room these features will become much more pronounced and the evocation of subjection much more extreme. Similarly, in the Portrait's early drawing-room scene, Isabel's consciousness is relatively unimpeded but the "momentous influence" that she perceives Madame Merle will exert on her life foreshadows the subjection to come, the details of which we find out during her "midnight vigil". The alteration in the nature of modern subjectivity which is beginning to be articulated in At the Piano and Isabel's early moment of consciousness will become more extreme in The Music Room and Isabel's "motionless seeing" and subsequent midnight vigil.

In The Music Room the contradictions of form and theme that had begun to be explored in At the Piano are more fully detailed. The contrast between absorptive motifs and innovations in form in the painting's representation of three female figures in a domestic space is very close to that James produces in his narrative of Isabel's "motionlessly seeing". Just as the Portrait's early drawing-room scene was much like that represented in At the Piano, so is the novel's later drawing-room scene, and Isabel's mediation on its implications, like that of The Music Room. Both representations focus on the consciousness of a perceiving subject who will discover herself to be (in the novel) and is depicted as (in the painting) subjected to her external circumstances. To show how this is the case, I will first describe The Music Room in some detail, pointing out its anomalies, then draw parallels between it and the scene narrated in chapter forty of the Portrait and finally show how each reveals the increasingly alienated nature of bourgeois female subjectivity.

### III

Harmony in Green and Rose: The Music Room (fig. 2), painted a year or two later, represents the same music room as At the Piano. In this work Whistler has again painted Deborah and Annie and has also included a third figure, that of Isabella Boott, a family friend.<sup>9</sup> Originally entitled The Morning Call, this picture, also a realist image of an interior setting, is ambiguous and unsettling. Although painted only a relatively short time later than At the Piano, The Music Room much more fully evokes the psychic-physical effects of modernity on women. Where At the Piano offers us entire bodies, The Music Room offers us fragments or ciphers; where the interior space of At the Piano is coherent, the space in The Music Room is incoherent and contradictory. Where At the Piano begins to act against the dissolution of the separation between representation and viewer evoked by absorptive motifs, The Music Room more emphatically emphasises the “madness” and objecthood of the image and encourages the separation of viewer from image by reminding us that it is a created thing not a window onto a real world. Lastly, while At the Piano could be relatively easily viewed, The Music Room moves us toward the paradigm of modernist aesthetic experience: tension and estrangement.

While the interior space in At the Piano is relatively straightforward - the figures are presented in profile against a continuous wall - the room represented in The Music Room is spatially disconcerting. All three figures are crammed into a small, congested corner of the room. Isabella Boott, wearing a black riding habit, stands on the right, her left hand resting on a curtain rod. Behind her, seated reading, is Annie, dressed again entirely in white. On the extreme left, her body vertically cropped by the edge of the canvas, Deborah appears as a reflection in the tall mirror.

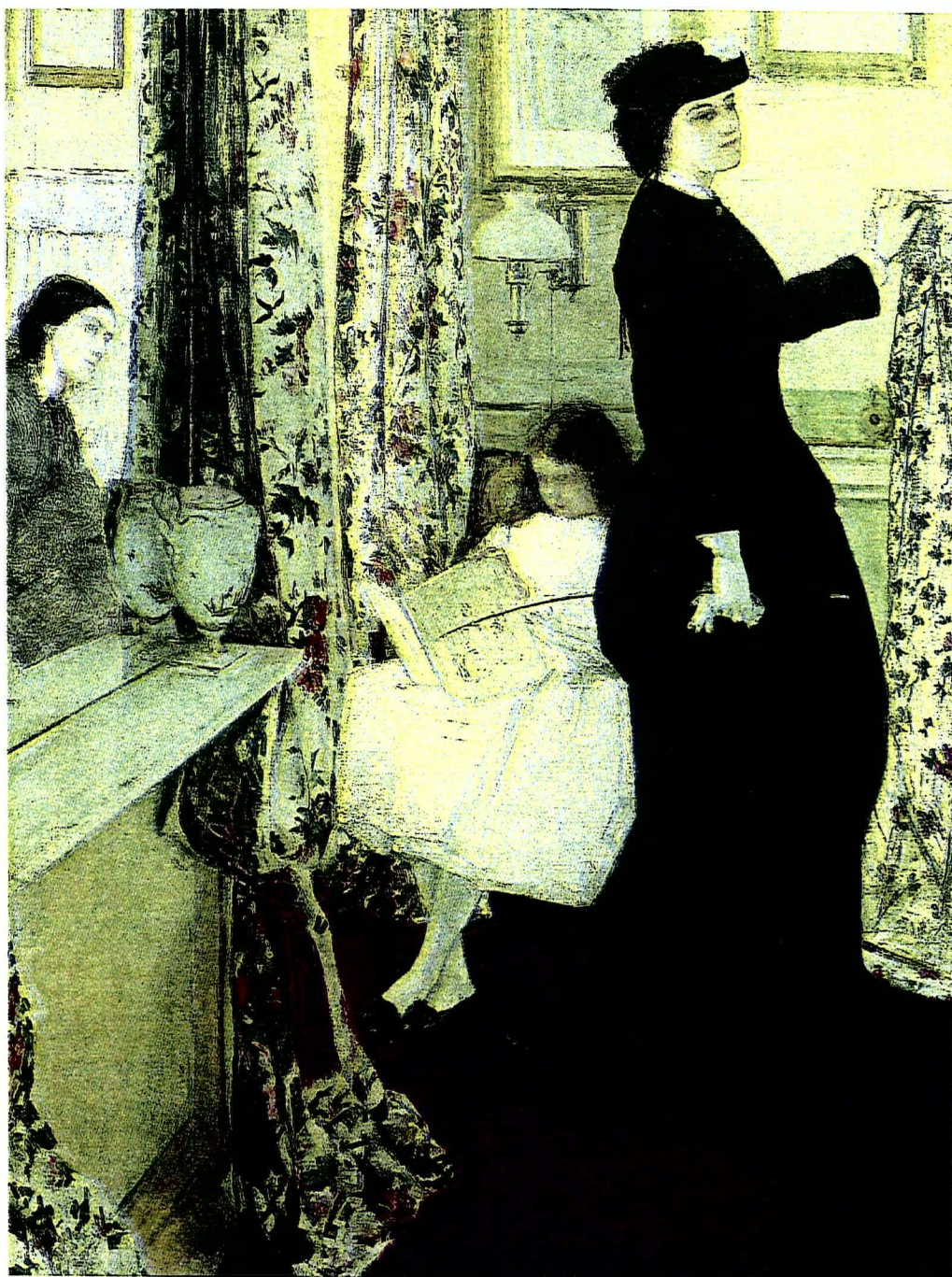


Figure 2 Harmony in Green and Rose:  
The Music Room (1860-61)

The left side of the image, showing part of a shelf with its mirror and vase, is painted as if from a high viewpoint. The shelf juts into the room at a sharp angle. The floor too seems to be tilted up at an angle rather than horizontal. Isabella's figure is positioned so that it obscures the corner of the niche where Annie is sitting. The colour of the wall to the right of the standing figure and the changes in level of the dado suggest spatial recession while the two picture frames on the wall behind appear to hang beside one another on a continuous wall negating that same recession. The lamp behind Annie's head floats in space. We know from a related etching Reading by Lamplight that the lamp was a standing one with a wide base but here there is no room for it to stand. The three figures are echoed by three picture frames whose tops, like those in At the Piano, are cut off, bringing the far wall closer to the foreground. The vertical format compresses the space in the room, contributing to its feeling of claustrophobia. As Curry has noted, the space here, although painted in a realist style, is "physically impossible" (102). Compared with Whistler's etching of The Music Room done around the same time, this painting is much more complex and innovative, both in style and in content. Indeed, Theodore Reff has noted that Whistler's spatial innovations in the painting predate Degas' experiments with the representation of interior space by several years.<sup>10</sup>

The Music Room is seen by critics today as "One of [Whistler's] most fascinating conceptions . . . Whistler's painting creates an impression of unrelated images, as if to say that even with three people in a room . . . no one really communicates with anyone else" (Prideaux 41). Anderson calls it a "curious painting", and "certainly the most ambiguous 'narrative' picture James would ever paint" (97). Broun, in comparing it with At the

Piano, comments that while the earlier painting was harmonious, this one is not: "The Morning Call shows this harmony shattered by a third figure of disproportionate size. The compressed space, jagged asymmetry, isolated gloved hand, play of mirror reflections . . . create a mood of claustrophobia and tension" (37-8). Although the painted interior appears to offer a legible narrative, no explicit meaning emerges from it. A feeling of anxiety, claustrophobia, strangeness - but nothing a contemporary audience would call an explicit narrative, like the narratives of earlier artists such as Hogarth for example. Like other advanced painters in the 1850s and 1860s, Whistler leaves the meaning of his image open. It resists any definite narrative closure. I will return to this point below with respect to its formal analogy with James's novel in its lack of closure and deferral of meaning.

For Whistler, a realist image was not simply the objective recording of the material world of which critics accused Courbet, it was a rendering of the psychology of human interaction. Just as he had done in At the Piano, Whistler here too combines contradictory representational devices. He presents us with an absorptive motif - the figure of Annie reading - that is meant to be an index of interior consciousness and techniques that negate that same suggestion of psychological depth. Rather than being a central focus, as for example the woman reading is in Fantin-Latour's Woman Reading, the figure of Annie is shoved to the background of the composition where she is partially eclipsed by Isabella Boott's gigantic frame. We are not able to be drawn into the contemplation of Annie's absorption because too many compositional devices prevent us from doing so. The interior space is highly congested with many jagged edges, interlocking planes and varieties of patterned surface. Rather than offering a coherent space in which we viewers can rest, our

eyes are forced to be active and drawn haphazardly around the canvas. While a relationship among the three figures is suggested - they are placed together in a small interior space - that relationship cannot be identified. In The Music Room, as in At the Piano, Whistler presents us with absorptive motifs which are executed in ways that act against any suggestion of psychological depth. The application of the paint, the complexity of the composition, the emphasis on the image's flatness, the silhouetted figures without any apparent depth all call the viewer's attention to the fact that the image is a material object constructed to be viewed rather than an unmediated window on a world. The contradictions between putative subject and execution that Whistler had experimented with in At the Piano are here more forcefully articulated and act more strongly to compel the viewer to see its figures as objects among other objects and indeed to acknowledge the painting's own objecthood. The sense of closure that viewers of absorptive images such as Fantin-Latour's would receive is absent in The Music Room. As a consequence, the aesthetic experience is one of tension, anxiety, dislocation as viewers try to derive a narrative from an image that resists any narrative closure.

One of the elements that contributes most strongly to The Music Room's ambiguity is the figure of Deborah. It is difficult to determine exactly what Deborah is doing in this painting. Her half-crouched position as reflected in the mirror may indicate that she is rising to greet Isabella or to see her out. Annie pays no attention to either woman and seems engrossed in her book. When exhibited in Baltimore, the painting was shown as Portrait of a Lady and Girl. However, there are two ladies in the image - why would the title refer to only one? If the "Lady" referred to is Isabella Boott, why include

the figure of Deborah in the mirror? Young speculates that Deborah's figure was possibly included as an afterthought, that the first compositional idea may have been to reflect the floral curtains in the mirror (13). One of the most interesting aspects of the image is the relationship of the reflected Deborah to the standing figure of Isabella. Again here, as he did with the figure of Annie in At the Piano, Whistler makes us aware of Deborah's perceiving subjectivity. Her physical appearance as a reflection makes reference to the mental act of reflection, of "motionlessly *seeing*", the activity that James will identify in the Portrait as the best thing in his book.

What, however, does Deborah see? In reality she would be facing Isabella Boott, and it would be her face Deborah would see. Here, the artist represents Deborah seeing the standing figure's back, as if she were coming upon a scene unawares. It has a voyeuristic quality, almost as if Deborah were wanting not to be seen herself. What is Deborah's connection to Isabella? And why is Annie ignoring them both? Are they alienated from one another or do they know one another so well that certain formalities may be dispensed with? Surely, if a family friend were entering or leaving the room, the young girl would greet her or acknowledge her in some way. That she does not suggests a degree of intimacy that is beyond that accorded to casual acquaintances or distant relatives. It is this intimacy that is revealed by their mutual positions in the image, an intimacy that, although different in kind, is like that Isabel imputes to Madame Merle and her husband in chapter forty of the Portrait. However, as we shall also see in the Portrait, while being represented as a conscious perceiving subject, Deborah is also at the same time represented as being very much trapped in a web of socio-historical constraints.



The position of Isabella Boott, the “amazone” in the black riding habit, suggests power and freedom from constraint.<sup>11</sup> Firstly and most obviously she stands while Annie and Deborah do not. Unlike theirs, we see her entire figure. She is dressed for riding and carrying a whip suggesting action, movement, freedom, the world beyond this small and confining space. She looks out of the picture, suggesting an orientation to the outer world, while the others do not. If Isabella suggests freedom, then Deborah’s reflected image suggests entrapment. The compositional space allotted to her is small and very compressed. We see only her face and part of her dress. No limbs are visible which would allow her to move beyond the rectangular box in which she is framed. The sharply-jutting shelf almost seems to sever her and her peculiar crouching position gives the effect that she is attempting to hang on to prevent being forced out of the image. Elizabeth Broun has suggested that this image “project[s] Whistler’s own interest in strategies for escape” (38), while David Park Curry hypothesises that Whistler was offering an allegory of choice in which Annie must choose between the freedom represented by Isabella Boott and the conventional and confining marriage of her mother.<sup>12</sup> Both of these are reasonable suggestions but focus attention on the seated girl who must choose or the standing figure who is free to leave. Instead, as I have suggested, the psychological interest of the painting seems to me to be in the figure of Deborah whose reflected image stares so intently at the back of the standing amazone. In Whistler’s representation of Deborah we see both subjectivity and subjection, just as we will see in James’s representation of Isabel’s moment of consciousness.



Isabel's "extraordinary meditative vigil", her "motionlessly *seeing*", is prompted by the sight of Madame Merle and Osmond "grouped unconsciously and familiarly" in the drawing-room. Coming in from a walk with Pansy, Isabel wanders into the house and has her attention arrested by a picture of her husband and her friend:

Just beyond the threshold of the drawing-room she stopped short, the reason for her doing so being that she had received an impression. The impression had, in strictness, nothing unprecedented; but she felt it as something new, and the soundlessness of her step gave her time to take in the scene before she interrupted it . . . Madame Merle was standing on the rug, a little way from the fire; Osmond was in a deep chair, leaning back and looking at her. Her head was erect, as usual, but her eyes were bent on his. What struck Isabel first was that he was sitting while Madame Merle stood; there was an anomaly in this that arrested her . . . but the thing made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light. Their relative position, their absorbed mutual gaze, struck her as something detected.

(357)

Framed by the doorway in front of which Isabel halts, Madame Merle is standing while Osmond is seated. They have reached a standstill in their conversation and "their dialogue had for the moment converted itself into a sort of familiar silence, from which she instantly perceived that her entrance would startle them" (357). Here rather than watching Isabel, we see what she sees. We are again aware of the movement of her thought, of the effect on her consciousness of what she sees.<sup>13</sup>

Isabel's reflection on this tableau in chapter forty-two is the imaginative centre of the novel. As she reflects on this picture during her midnight vigil, Isabel comes to realise that she has been used as a "dull un-reverenced tool" (484) by her husband and his former lover. At the very moment in which Isabel is most fully a subjective centre of consciousness, she also becomes aware that she has been made an object to be used by Osmond and Madame Merle.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the piano-watching scene I discussed earlier, the novel's narrative voice does not take us alternately inside and outside Isabel's consciousness in these two incidences. In these two extended scenes of seeing and reflecting on what is seen we remain completely within the consciousness of the perceiving subject. However, although the narrative techniques used are different, the effects of those techniques are the same: to emphasise the fact that Isabel is both subject and object of use to others. That Isabel's belief in her autonomous subjectivity, as signified by James's centre of consciousness narrative technique, is utterly inconsistent with the conditions of which she has become conscious will be made clear in chapter forty-two. Isabel's consciousness is described as "haunted with terrors which crowded to the foreground of thought as quickly as a place was made for them. What had suddenly set them into livelier motion she hardly knew, unless it were the strange impression she had received in the afternoon of her husband and Madame Merle being in more direct communication than she suspected" (371). During Isabel's meditation we are made aware of her realisation that, rather than being the free and independent entity she had assumed she was, she is, like Deborah is represented to be in The Music Room, trapped by circumstances which her own actions have also helped to shape.

Isabel's early belief in her own liberty and independence had been exemplified in her refusal to marry either Warburton or Goodwood and her assertion that "I can do what I choose - I belong quite to the independent class . . . I therefore am not bound to be timid and conventional . . . I don't wish to be a mere sheep in the flock; I wish to choose my fate and know something of human affairs beyond what other people think it compatible with propriety to tell me" (140). Although Isabel naively thinks that she's free, James has earlier alerted us to the characteristics that will contribute to her fall from innocence: "[She] had in the depths of her nature an even more unquenchable desire to please than [her sister] Edith" (28) and "Deep in her soul - it was the deepest thing there - lay a belief that if a certain light should dawn she could give herself completely" (44). James's identification in the Portrait of the effects of modernity on women that will be made evident in chapter forty-two - that although we experience ourselves as autonomous subjects we are subject to social and historical conditions - is prepared for relatively early on in the famous debate between Madame Merle and Isabel. Madame Merle insists on the interconnections between self and circumstances and asserts that the self is not isolated but rather formed by its environment:

When you have lived as long as I, you will see that every human being has his shell, and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There is no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we are each of us made up of a cluster of appurtenances. What do you call one's self? Where does it begin? Where does it end? (175)

Isabel, in contrast, adheres to a notion of an essential self, separate from and undefined by circumstances:

I think just the other way. I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; on the contrary, it's a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one.

(176)

In this debate, it is clear that we are meant to side with Isabel and indeed many of us see ourselves as Isabel does, as the heroes of our own narratives. True independence for the bourgeois subject is the entirely private possession of the self. When we rebel, as we see Isabel do, against the notion that we are completely identified by our instrumental presence in the world, and that there is nothing more to us than this, we establish an interior life and declare it to be our *real* life. Denis Donoghue has identified this construction of private selfhood - the self as private property - as particularly characteristic of nineteenth century American thought and reflected in its literature.<sup>15</sup> Such a notion encourages the individual to feel that his or her *true* life is one lived elsewhere, an elsewhere variously defined as in nature, in an aesthetic realm, in the consciousness or indeed anywhere other than in a here and now materially and historically constrained. However, Isabel's reflections in chapter forty-two will indicate that her condition is exactly the opposite. She is "ground in the [very] mill" of conventionality she hoped to avoid when she marries Osmond. Instead of the "infinite vista of a multiplied life" (371), her belief in the fiction of complete freedom and autonomy leads Isabel to a life of imprisonment in Osmond's "house of darkness, house of dumbness, house of suffocation"

(375).<sup>16</sup> Like Whistler's Deborah, Isabel is imprisoned within a well-decorated bourgeois palace in which she is helpless and hopeless.

Where Deborah's entrapment is visually explicit and immediately apparent, James's slow revelation of Isabel's actual material circumstances is only hinted at in the outset of the novel. The world of the Portrait opens in the late afternoon. Shadows are falling across the lawn of Gardencourt as three men have tea. The passage of time indicated here is a reminder of death and from this opening scene, the shadow of insufficiency and death is already hanging over this portrait.<sup>17</sup> As Isabel is drawn inexorably toward Osmond, her world gradually becomes darker and indeed after her marriage she feels as if "Osmond deliberately, almost malignantly, had put the lights out one by one" (372). Life with Osmond will be a kind of death, paving the way for the "great rest" to come:

[Isabel] envied Ralph his dying; for if one were thinking of rest, that was the most perfect of all . . . She had moments, indeed, in her journey from Rome, which were almost as good as being dead. She sat in her corner, so motionless, so passive, simply with the sense of being carried, so detached from hope and regret, that if her spirit was haunted with sudden pictures, it might have been the spirit disembarrassed of the flesh. (492)

In addition to his subtle evocation of the end to come, James also hints at Isabel's eventual fate with his descriptions of his characters' tendency to treat one another as objects rather than human beings. For example, Pansy is seen by Rosier as "a dresden-china shepherdess" (243) and Countess Gemini is a "bright shell, with a polished surface" (393). Osmond is of course the epitome of the commodifying aesthete, the dilettante and amateur

of Whistler's "Ten O'Clock" fulminations. He acquires Isabel as he would any other precious object and for the same purpose, to reflect his own exquisite taste:

What could be a happier gift in a companion than a quick, fanciful mind, which saved one repetitions and reflected one's thought upon a scintillating surface?

Osmond disliked to see his thought reproduced literally - that made it look stale and stupid; he preferred it to be brightened in the reproduction. His egotism, if egotism it was, had never taken the crude form of desiring a dull wife; this lady's intelligence was to be a silver plate, not an earthen one - a plate that he might heap up with ripe fruits, to which it would give a decorative value, so that conversation might become a sort of perpetual dessert. He found the silvery quality in perfection in Isabel; he could tap her imagination with his knuckle and make it ring. (306-7)

Osmond exemplifies the aesthetic connoisseur, an individual whom James mercilessly critiques in the Portrait but who will reappear, as I shall discuss in chapter seven, in the Golden Bowl as a fact of modern life.

James's narrative form in the Portrait reveals the historical emergence of the autonomous, centred bourgeois self as both lived reality and mirage. Isabel's textual moment of "becoming conscious" is the culmination and end point of her erroneous notions of her own independence and autonomy. That when we think ourselves to be most clearly autonomous beings we are most subject to historical processes is hinted in at both the Portrait and The Music Room.<sup>18</sup>

#### IV

I have argued that the realist work of both James and Whistler contains contradictory and conflicting aesthetic forms that reveal the effects on human subjectivity of modernity. Whistler's use of absorptive motifs which signify intensity of interior consciousness and techniques that act against that same suggestion of psychological depth is paralleled in James by his use of centre of consciousness narration to reveal objectification, subjection and alienation. In addition, as I mentioned earlier, all three works resist narrative closure and leave the question of their "meaning" open. In Whistler's paintings, the meaning of the work inheres in its form of representation: interesting compositional angles, complex surface patterning, fragmented forms, flattened shapes, opacity, indeterminacy. Rather than a coherent, easily understandable narrative, these paintings offer instead a world that is ultimately contradictory, incomplete and without any transcendent meaning. Similarly, James's novel is ambiguous, open-ended and lacking in narrative closure. In a world in which there no longer appear to be any transcendent truths, such aesthetic techniques more closely capture the actual reality of late nineteenth century life than the earlier realism of either Courbet or Eliot.

A comparison of James with Eliot will make the point here. In much nineteenth century English literature - Eliot can be seen as exemplary - individual characters have well-developed personalities that evolve through an interaction with a complex and recognizable social world. In Middlemarch, for example, the detail with which the social landscape is articulated, the number and complexity of the characters used to flesh out the world of the small English town, and the carefully described circumstances of town life serve to give authenticity to the struggles of Dorothea. The disparate elements of the plot

and the myriad of characters which might seem confusing and confused in the hands of a lesser writer are in Middlemarch all brought together seamlessly and make sense as they are shaped by Eliot's omniscient narrator. All diversity and divergence are revealed as commonality and convergence within the mind of the author, thus making the point that no matter how complicated are the circumstances of history and social life, they can be given an individual shape and meaning. Dorothea's education is thus a model which we as readers can learn from. The moral of the story is summarised in the novel's last paragraph:

[Dorothea's] finely-touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs. (838)

As articulated by Eliot's narrator, the collapse of Dorothea's grand schemes should not be seen as a failure; instead this collapse should be recognised as contributing to the good of the social system as a whole. Even though Dorothea's individual life was not what she hoped it would be, her actions contribute to the greater good of bourgeois society - "you and me".

Eliot's moral in Middlemarch is clear. Her novel offers a realistic representation of social circumstances and their effects on the individual. All loose ends are tied up and neatly summarised, allowing the reader to experience a moment of satisfying closure. In



contrast, The Portrait of a Lady offers neither explicit moral nor satisfaction nor closure. For many contemporary readers, James's refusal to give clearly-articulated moral pronouncements and conventionally satisfying endings was a source of anger and confusion. For example, R.H. Hutton writing in the Spectator asserted that James had given "no portrait at all" of Isabel and that "she remains shrouded in mist. Where the strongest light and the most definite impression should be, there is nothing but haze, nothing but a laborious riddle" (qtd. in Gard 94). Similarly, an unidentified reviewer for Blackwood's complained that "[Of] the heroine, upon whom the greatest pains have been expended, and to whom endless space is afforded for the setting forth of her characteristics, we have no portrait" (qtd. in Gard 101). Isabel is described by this same writer as a "most carefully dressed and posed figure, whose being is altogether mysterious, and of whom, notwithstanding the author's elaborate descriptions, we never penetrate the *fin mot*" (102). That these descriptions could apply equally well to Whistler's figures in The Music Room is evidenced by the earlier quoted commentary on the painting. Most of the contemporary reviewers praised James's powers of description but found the Portrait lacking in resolution, inconclusive, and overly analytical, lacking in "sentiment". The novel's ending was particularly singled out for its apparent arbitrariness and refusal to offer closure, as noted for example by Blackwood's: "[All] Mr. James's books . . . break off with a sharp cut of arbitrary conclusion, leaving all the questions they so skillfully raise unsolved . . ." (qtd. in Gard 102).

In these reviews we can see some of the problems that James's realism posed to readers. The Portrait, while maintaining on the surface some of the formal techniques

associated with the realist novel of Eliot - detailed description, a recognizable social landscape, carefully-delineated characters--does not conform to the expectations raised by its form. Rather than using an aloof authorial omniscience to point out the significance of his character's actions from a position outside them, James goes inside his main character's head to show us her fallibility and indeed how *reality itself* is contradictory, irresolvable and incomplete. In its acknowledgment of reality's complexity and contradictoriness, James's realism is thus more real than Eliot's - that is, a more accurate representation of the way things *really* are.

Moreover, James's realism is a more accurate description of modern subjectivity than Eliot's because it represents a world in which there is no transcendent god's-eye perspective within which all contradictions are reconciled. Rather than offering a vision of the world in which each of us, whether we are aware of it or not, contributes to the good of all, as Eliot does, James describes a world in which meaning is infinitely deferred or postponed. The arbitrariness and inconclusivity of the Portrait's ending exemplifies this deferral. Isabel's suspension on a train between London and Rome like a frozen figure on a Greek vase refuses to resolve itself into any clearly apparent meaning or moral message. Trapped in a fallen world in which "all that is solid melts into air", how can it be said that our lives are "really" the finished meaningful projects imagined by Eliot's Middlemarch?

At the Piano, The Music Room and The Portrait of a Lady each articulate some of the problems modernity presented to the bourgeois, especially female, subject. While each of these works is realist, its realism is one out of which new aesthetic forms are mutating. Each of these works, with its competing representational modes and contradictory images

of human subjectivity, represents a world in which classical notions of the harmony and unity of the human body and its environment are collapsing, to be replaced by the modernist reality of fragmentation, isolation and disharmony. Portrait of a Lady, At the Piano and Music Room are critical of modernity and its effects, commenting negatively on the increasing reification, commodification and unfreedom in a society for which modernity was supposed to bring liberation from all debilitating socio-historical constraints. James and Whistler use the most technically advanced means possible to reveal the tensions and contradictions of their particular moment. In the works addressed here we can see what Adorno has called “unresolved antagonisms in reality” appearing “in the guise of immanent problems of artistic form” (Aesthetic Theory 8). In the works I will examine in chapter five these unresolved antagonisms will appear in James’s and Whistler’s experiments with the technical and thematic possibilities derived from the low-cultural forms their own aesthetic theory had critiqued. And in so doing their work will articulate the ongoing struggle of high art with the products and processes of what Schulte-Sasse has called the “prevailing system of ideological and economic reproduction” (xxvii) in bourgeois society.

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<sup>1</sup> While there is no published evidence to confirm it, it is likely that James saw both of Whistler’s paintings before he wrote the Portrait. At the Piano was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1860 and at the Paris Salon in 1867 and James would almost certainly have seen it exhibited in one of those shows, if not both. The Music Room was exhibited under the title, interestingly enough, Portrait of a Lady and Child in Baltimore in 1876.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of the mid-century theoretical debates about realism, naturalism and their links to particular art historical schools, see Michael Fried, “Manet’s Sources: Aspects of his Art, 1859-1865”. Fried has revisited this early article in his most recent work Manet’s Modernism: Or, the Face of Painting in the 1860s.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of At the Piano’s possible relationship to Vermeer’s Concert, see John Sandberg, “‘Japonisme’ and Whistler”.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew McLaren Young et al, The Paintings of James McNeill Whistler, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Broun, “Thoughts That Began With The Gods: The Content of Whistler’s Art”, 37.

<sup>6</sup> For information on the symbolism of vanity paintings see Alberto Veca, Vanitas: Il Simbolismo de Tempo.

<sup>7</sup> See "Manet in His Generation: The Face of Painting in the 1860s". Fried began his investigation of the thematics of absorption and beholding in his earlier texts Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot and Courbet's Realism.

<sup>8</sup> In "Manet in His Generation", Fried devotes most of his attention to Manet and Alphonse Legros and mentions that Whistler's work should be seen in light of the "highly structured discursive field oriented to the issues of absorption and beholding" in place in from 1860 to 1865. He briefly addresses Whistler's 1862 painting The White Girl in terms of its evocation of the double structure of negation of and address to the beholder. See pp. 48 and 50. I have taken up his suggestion regarding Whistler's work in my analysis.

<sup>9</sup> Giving further impetus to my speculation that James saw Whistler's work before writing the Portrait is the fact that Isabella Boott was related to James's friend Francis Boott and his daughter and Elizabeth, the father and daughter whose life in Florence provided James with the inspiration for the characters of Osmond and Pansy in the Portrait. See The Complete Notebooks for James's discussion of the real-life inspiration for his novel.

<sup>10</sup> Theodore Reff, Degas: The Artist's Mind, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Whistler referred to this painting in a letter to Fantin-Latour as "Le tableau avec l'amazone" (qtd. in Young 13) when he was considering sending it to the 1864 Salon. It was not finished however and was not sent. For information about the characteristics of the amazon figure see David Park Curry, James McNeill Whistler at the Freer Gallery of Art, 102. In "Whistler's Early Relations with Britain and the Significance of Industry and Commerce for his Art. Part I" Robin Spencer speculates that this painting was meant to show Whistler's American and British connections to his mother, for whom the picture was made. In Spencer's view, Isabella's prominent standing figure indicates Whistler's American origins, while the music room, Deborah, and Annie all show the "new home and the family and professional connexions that brought [Whistler] to England" (214). While this may be the case, it certainly does not account for the complexities of the image.

<sup>12</sup> See David Park Curry, James McNeill Whistler at the Freer Gallery, 102.

<sup>13</sup> George Smith has argued that the "structural innovation and psychological depth - not to mention ideological complexity - that would advance to full and opulent maturity in the Major Phase can be traced back to this one scene" ("James, Degas, and the Emersonian Gaze" 374). While Smith argues that James's technical innovations here were influenced by Degas' techniques in the Bellelli Family, I argue that his innovations are thematically and technically more analogous to, and possibly derived from, Whistler's.

<sup>14</sup> In The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity Ross Posnock sees James's use of the centre of consciousness as evidence of James's modernity and his refusal of "identity thinking": "[Isabel's] structural centrality coincides negatively with her dawning sense that her centered consciousness is actually decentered . . . Just as James's form pushes her center stage, Isabel's proud belief in her pristine autonomy and mastery starts crumbling; as she feels 'haunted with terrors' and 'assailed by visions'" (92). Posnock's very suggestive comment is not expanded upon in his text.

<sup>15</sup> Denis Donoghue, Reading America: Essays on American Literature.

<sup>16</sup> Isabel's situation at the end of the novel was seen by some contemporary critics as a realistic representation of the actual conditions of life for women. For example, H.E. Scudder, writing in the Atlantic Monthly, pointed out that "[Isabel is] representative of womanly life today. The fine purpose of her freedom, the resolution with which she seeks to be the maker of her destiny, the subtle weakness into which all this betrays her, the apparent helplessness of her ultimate position, the conjectured escape only through patient forbearance - what are all these, if not attributes of womanly life expended under current conditions" (qtd. in Gard 109). For an analysis of James's representations of women, see Elizabeth Allen, A Woman's Place in the Novels of Henry James and Virginia C. Fowle). In The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James John Carlos Rowe points out that James's "feminism", his understanding of and sympathy with, the conditions of women was as advanced as it was possible for a male writer to be in the late nineteenth century. James's sympathetic portrayal of Isabel is certainly evidence of his "feminism". However, this sympathy coexists with, as I shall argue in chapter five, a fear of feminine unboundedness and irrationality and, as I have demonstrated in chapter one, a belief in women artists' inferiority (with the exception of George Eliot, of course).

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<sup>17</sup> For an interesting discussion of James's representation of lack, insufficiency and negation in the Portrait see William Veeder, "The Portrait of a Lack". In "Frail Vessels and Vast Designs" Beth Sharon Ash argues that the most important lack in the novel is Isabel's lack of a mother. She maintains that the novel is a picture of "female psychology under patriarchy . . . of the narcissistic and submissive tendencies typical of women trying to cope with a culture largely defined by the dominance of male desire" (124). Ash's comments, while suggestive, neglect to point out that Isabel's position is a historically specific one that arises out of modernity's material conditions.

<sup>18</sup> In The Political Unconscious Jameson suggests that to ignore the social determinants of our actions is in fact to reinforce the reification and privatisation of contemporary life under capitalism and contribute to our own subjection:

[The distinction between texts that are political and those that are not] reconfirms that structural, experiential, and conceptual gap between the public and the private, between the social and the psychological, or the political and the poetic, between history or society and the "individual", which - the tendential law of social life under capitalism - maims our existence as individual subjects and paralyzes our thinking about time and change just as surely as it alienates us from our speech itself. To imagine that, sheltered from the omnipotence of history and the implacable influence of the social, there already exists a realm of freedom - whether it be that of the microscopic experience of words in a text or the ecstasies and intensities of the various private religions - is only to strengthen the grip of Necessity over all such blind zones in which the individual subject seeks refuge, in pursuit of a purely individual, a merely psychological, project of salvation. (20)

Isabel's living death and Deborah's frozen reflection surely articulate the imaginary nature of bourgeois women's freedom in the nineteenth century.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### High and Low: The Tragic Muse and Purple and Gold: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks

As I have been arguing in the preceding chapters, autonomous or high art has a dialectical relationship with its socio-historical context. Unlike the products of mass or popular culture, autonomous art reveals the contradictions inherent in modernity.<sup>1</sup> While mass or popular culture reinforces the reified nature of modern society by giving us an illusion of harmony and wholeness, thereby effacing the suffering that lies beneath that illusion, autonomous art holds up a negative mirror to society, revealing in it “all that has been repressed by the established culture” (Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 27).<sup>2</sup> However, even though it stands against the products of mass culture, high art often uses those products to renew itself. In the early modernist period high art engages in what Thomas Crow has called in “Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts” a “mediated synthesis of possibilities derived from both the failures of existing artistic technique and a repertoire of potentially oppositional practices discovered in the world outside” (249). In its use of the techniques and materials of a low culture stigmatised as feminine the high art of artists such as Whistler and James represents the position of autonomous art in its contradiction. The task of this chapter will be to examine two works in which James and Whistler engage with low culture and show how this engagement articulates the effects of modernisation processes on autonomous art and on human consciousness.

In chapter four I discussed the competing representational modes evident in At the Piano, The Music Room and The Portrait of a Lady. I suggested that the deviations from an earlier mode of realism evident in these works were indicative of “unresolved

antagonisms of reality” (Adorno Aesthetic Theory 8) in society under modernity. Each of these works, with its competing representational modes and contradictory images of human subjectivity, represents a world in which the classical notions of harmony, unity, and totality are in the process of collapsing. This collapse is evident in the works’ representation of human beings as approaching the condition of mere objects, a condition inherent in the logic of nineteenth century capitalism and concealed by mass culture’s illusions. The work that I will examine in this chapter represents a later stage in this development than did the work looked at in chapter four. Whistler’s Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks (1863-4) and James’s The Tragic Muse (1889) represent human commodities; in the painting the figure represented is a decorative ornament surrounded by ornaments drawn from non high-art sources, and in the novel the heroine is an actress who is for James as she was for Baudelaire the epitome of modernity.<sup>3</sup> Drawn from the world of entertainment and commerce, the heroines of painting and novel serve both as images of commercial pleasure and as projects for an attempted modernist repudiation of the world of commodified vulgarity. In this chapter I will briefly discuss the early modernist engagement with low culture as it applies to James and Whistler and then identify the ways in which popular or low culture becomes raw material for their aesthetic transformations. I will argue that their works’ lack of unified organic wholeness, indicated in the incomplete transformation of their low cultural sources, reveals the psychic tensions and contradictions that mass cultural spectacles and popular images are designed to conceal.

In Tragic Muse (1890) and Whistler's Japanese-inspired painting of 1863-4 the artists deal with the encounter between true art - the novel and modernist painting - and popular or low culture. In the Tragic Muse popular culture is represented by the theatre and the figure of the actress. The vulgarity of the theatre, exemplified by the actress' excessive physicality and lack of intellect, is transformed through a process of education and subjection into the art of drama to be itself subsumed by the novel as the ultimate high art. Similarly, in Whistler's painting eastern popular art forms, which were then seen as lacking the qualities requisite for high art, are appropriated for a modernist meditation on cultural production. In their engagement with and appropriation of popular art, James and Whistler participated in the avant-garde invention and re-invention of itself by identifying with and transforming the products and materials of marginal, "non-artistic" or mass market expressions. Before beginning my discussion of the Tragic Muse and Lange Leizen I will outline some of the reasons for the avant-garde engagement with low culture in order to provide a context for James's and Whistler's experiments.

Why should the avant-garde in the nineteenth century have been so fascinated with these "other" cultural forms? In "Modernism and Mass Culture" Thomas Crow provides an answer that will offer a context within which to analyse James's and Whistler's works. Crow points out that an identification with the "social practices of mass diversion" (215) was a constant feature of modernist art production, whether uncritically reproduced, caricatured, or transformed. Using Manet's Olympia as an example, Crow notes the connections among mass cultural artifacts, the image of the modern city and modernist art practice:



Manet's "Olympia" offered a bewildered middle-class public the flattened pictorial economy of the cheap sign or carnival backdrop, the pose and allegories of contemporary pornography superimposed over those of Titian's "Venus of Urbino". For both Manet and Baudelaire, can we separate their invention of powerful models of modernist practice from the seductive and nauseating image the modern city seemed to be constructing for itself? Similarly, can we imagine the Impressionist invention of painting as a field of both particularized and diffuse sensual play separately from the new spaces of commercial pleasure the painters seem rarely to have left - spaces whose packaged diversions were themselves contrived in an analogous pattern? (215)

Modernist artists use low cultural forms as a way to upset or estrange the deadening orthodoxies of conventional or traditional art practice with the aim of then jettisoning them once the estrangement process has performed its function of clearing a space for new kinds of production. Crow notes that this view of the high art, low art dialectic was articulated as long ago as 1876 when Mallarmé said of Manet that the painter began with Parisian low-life subjects which were "[Something] long hidden, but suddenly revealed. Captivating and repulsive at the same time, eccentric, and new, such types as were needed in our ambient lives" (qtd. in Crow 216). Mallarmé regarded Manet's appropriation of the low to be merely a beginning stage in a trajectory that would culminate in a cool formalism which left behind any social referent. Modernism, having opposed the orthodoxies of the Academy and moralising narratives, must not now fall victim to yet another master, the marketplace of amusement and spectacle. For the avant-garde iconography drawn from

the world of spectacle and commodity was supposed to be a temporary measure by which it could attain a reinvigorated technically-advanced autonomous art. However, the avant-garde use of mass culture proves to be problematic. Crow describes the processes whereby the art market and the culture industry repackage these innovative forms for both an elite and subsequently a mass audience, showing how the avant-garde acts as a “research and development” arm of the very mass culture it thought itself beyond.

For the modernist, then, the forms and techniques of mass or popular culture could be appropriated to serve high-cultural ends. However, if high culture uses popular culture in this way, what is to distinguish high from low and prevent the high from being subsumed in the low? What is at stake here is what Crow calls a “material and social crisis which threatens the traditional forms of nineteenth-century culture with extinction” (221):

This crisis has resulted from the economic pressure of an industry devoted to the simulation of art in the form of reproducible cultural commodities, that is to say, the industry of mass culture. In search of raw material, mass culture strips traditional art of its marketable qualities, and leaves as the only remaining path to authenticity a ceaseless alertness against the stereotyped and pre-processed. The name of this path is modernism, which with every success is itself vulnerable to the same kind of appropriation . . . the formative theoretical moment in the history of modernism in the visual arts was inseparably an effort to come to terms with cultural production as a whole under late capitalism. (221)

As I have suggested in chapter two, Crow’s observation here is equally applicable to modernist literary production. Among the transformations that industrial capitalism had

brought to nineteenth century social life was expanded literacy, a distinct separation of leisure time from work time and commodities and activities designed specifically to fill that leisure time. Kitsch, or simulated culture, exists, as Crow notes, to fill a vacuum and kitsch products, whether tabloids, pulp novels, magazines, melodramas, or posters, consumed by the new clientele created by industrial capitalism mirror a subjectivity "trapped in the lifeless logic of mass production; imagining, thinking, feeling are all done by the machine long before the individual consumer encounters its products" (222). How, then, is a modernist high art form which uses the techniques and subjects of popular culture to remain uncontaminated by them?

Crow describes the high/low dialectic as one that serves both sides of the opposition. The dependence of the avant-garde on an elite audience, its attachment to the upper middle class by an "umbilical cord of gold" (qtd. in Crow 253), suggests that the avant-garde cultural products serve this audience's interests by "search[ing] out areas of social practice which retain some vivid life in an increasingly administered and rationalised society" (253). These experiences are then expressed through forms and subjects derived from low or popular culture which have been converted into high art objects - easel painting and the serious novel. The high art modernist products are then industrially repackaged with smoothed-out edges for consumption as chic and kitsch commodities. Thus, the avant-garde, as a "research and development" entity, remains intimately connected to that which it both appropriates and critiques.

Complicating the picture that Thomas Crow paints in his analysis of the high/low interaction is the persistent gendering of mass, popular and low culture as feminine. While

Crow, like Peter Burger, does not devote his attention to the categorisation of certain kinds of art work and writing as either “masculine” or “feminine”, Andreas Huyssen has examined this issue, an important one for any consideration of James and Whistler because of their appropriation of the feminine. In “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other” Huyssen argues that the “masculinist mystique” of modernism is dialectically related to the persistent gendering in the late nineteenth century of mass culture as feminine, inferior and threatening. In Huyssen’s view the autonomy of the modernist art work is always, to quote again the passage in my first chapter, “the result of a resistance, an abstention, and a suppression - resistance to the seductive lure of mass culture, abstention from the pleasure of trying to please a larger audience, suppression of everything that might be threatening to the rigorous demands of being modern and at the edge of time” (55). The modernist artist’s privileging of high art’s complexity, rigour and organic wholeness over mass culture’s dreams, delusions and desires depends upon an alignment of qualities culturally-coded as masculine with particular aesthetic styles. We have seen in chapters two and three that James and Whistler perform this task in their aesthetic theory. In order to maintain its purity and autonomy undefiled by the “seductive lures” of a mass culture coded as feminine, even while appropriating it, modern art must continually fortify its boundaries against the fluidity and waste of the pseudo-aesthetic. However, as I shall demonstrate below, James’s and Whistler’s modernist will to mastery is destabilised by their engagement with low culture and the feminine.

The question of the relation of high art to its low cultural other was of vital concern to artists such as James and Whistler. However, I will argue that it is the very lack

of organic wholeness of their work which appropriates low or popular culture that reveals high art's problematic status within modernity. In their inability to transcend or completely transform their low art sources, the Tragic Muse and Lange Leizen show the complexity of high art's dialogue with modernity and mass culture.

## II

For James in the later 1880s, the popular cultural form that most obsessed him was the theatre. In a letter to William James written four years after the Tragic Muse, he complained about the "humiliations and vulgarities and disgusts" he was subject to as an unsuccessful playwright: "The whole odiousness of the thing lies in the connection between the drama and the theatre. The one is admirable in its difficulty, the other loathsome in its conditions" (Edel, Letters III 452).<sup>4</sup> Although "loathsome in its conditions", the theatre was intensely interesting to James, an interest revealed in his many play reviews, his attempts to become a playwright and in the Tragic Muse, his only novel to focus on a theatrical subject.<sup>5</sup> In this section I shall analyse James's distaste for the London theatre, then in section III show how his notions about the theatre are linked to notions about femininity and the body of the actress held by other avant garde artists, and indicate how the new high art narrative form he derives from the theatre is itself destabilised by theatricality.

James saw the contemporary English theatre as vulgar. Its vulgarity was partially the result of its status as mass entertainment and its use of advertisement and publicity. However, the theatre also historically had a poor image as a site of vice and debauchery which it carried into the later nineteenth century. Many theatres were located in squalid

neighbourhoods, next to brothels on notorious streets where prostitutes roamed. James himself noted in 1880 that one of the disadvantages of the London theatre was the “repulsive character of many of the streets through which your aesthetic pilgrimage lies” (SA 136). The Argyle Rooms in London in the 1860s were described by Henry Mayhew in London Life and London Poor as a centre for prostitution and the music hall by D.J. Kirwan, London correspondent for the NY Times, as a scene of almost orgiastic display:

Women, dressed in costly silks and satins and velvets, the majority of them wearing rich jewels and gold ornaments, are lounging on the plush sofas in a free and easy way, conversing with men . . . While we are standing (looking at them) the room is darkened and a chemical light coloured flame irradiates the room like twilight at sea, and the entire female population rush to join in the last, wild, mad shadow-dance of the night. Around and around they go in each other’s arms, whirling in the dim uncertain graveyard light, these unclean things of the darkness, shouting and shrieking, totally lost to all shame - their gestures as wanton as the movements of an Egyptian Almee and as mad as the capers of a dancing dervish.  
(qtd. in Elsom 21)

The publicity of the music hall and the theatre stage and the extreme public exposure those sites provided conflicted with the conception of genteel Victorian womanhood as essentially private. Therefore, the professional actress (and actor) were stigmatised as immoral and unclean as is evident, for example, in this 1862 Saturday Review comment: “The objection to the theatre which most good people make is, that actors and actresses are not virtuous characters, or rather, although modesty and prudery may forbid them

saying so plainly, they do not much care about the men, but they think the women are bad” (qtd. in Baker 96). Actresses, like the women who frequented dance halls, were linked by the middle class with that other very public woman - the prostitute.<sup>6</sup> That the term “actress” was a widely used euphemism in Victorian police courts for “tart” and that prostitutes in trouble often referred to themselves as actresses did not help to make the profession respectable. Even as late as 1909 the theatre could still be described by G.B. Shaw, for example, as a site for illicit activities (“theatres have been used for centuries as markets by prostitutes”) and many London theatres were identified as being completely disreputable: “Some of the variety theatres still derive a revenue by selling admission to women who do not go to look at the performances and men who go to purchase or admire the women” (qtd. in Elsom 22). In the Tragic Muse James will have Miriam Rooth’s succinct description of acting acknowledge its problematic nature in the nineteenth century: “Doesn’t one have to be a [strange girl] to want to go and exhibit one’s self to a loathsome crowd, on a platform, with trumpets and a big drum, for money - to parade one’s body and one’s soul?” (VII 153). In these words acting is explicitly construed as prostitution. Both the actress and the prostitute occupy an ambiguous social position, embody artificiality, and are in constant circulation, commodities in motion which threaten private life and weaken public morality.

Even though, or perhaps especially because, the theatre and its denizens were seen as immoral and vice-ridden, London was throughout the century obsessed with things theatrical as James noted in his reviews. In an 1879 essay he described what he called

London's "histrionic mania" and identified some of the problems he believed it created in the English theatre:

The theatre just now is the fashion, just as "art" is the fashion and just as literature is not. The English stage has probably never been so bad as it is at present, and at the same time there probably has never been so much care about it. It almost seems to an observer of English customs that this interest in histrionic matters almost reaches the proportions of a mania. It pervades society - it breaks down barriers . . . the London world is apparently filled with stage-struck young persons whose relatives are holding them back from a dramatic career by the skirts of their garments. Plays and actors are perpetually talked about, private theatricals are incessant, and members of the dramatic profession are "received" without restriction. They appear in society, and the people of society appear on stage; it is as if the great gate which formerly divided the theatre from the world had been lifted off its hinges . . . the stage has become amateurish and the society has become professional . . . The world is being steadily democratized and vulgarized, and literature and art give their testimony to the fact. The fact is better for the world perhaps, but I question greatly whether it is better for art and literature; and therefore it is that I was careful to say just now that it is only superficially that one might expect to see the stage elevated by becoming what is called the fashion. (SA 119-20)

For James the breakdown of class barriers and the contamination of the private realm by theatrical spectacle and publicity threaten art. The intermingling of theatre and society is



detrimental to art because it reduces the “mystery” of the theatre. Adding to the loss of mystery is the publicity attendant on popular actors and actresses such as Sarah Bernhardt, the epitome of the modern actress as celebrity. To James, Bernhardt was not an artist but an advertising genius as he made clear in another 1879 review:

[She] is not, to my sense a celebrity because she is an artist. She is a celebrity because, apparently, she desires with an intensity that has rarely been equalled to be one . . . . She is a child of her age - of her moment - and she has known how to profit by the idiosyncrasies of the time . . . she has in a supreme degree . . . the advertising genius; she may indeed be called the muse of the newspaper. (SA 128-9)

Theatrical spectacle and publicity, as exemplified here by Sarah Bernhardt, were for James incompatible with art which was essentially private, concerned only with its own forms and techniques.

In his theatre reviews James constantly complained about the “spectacle” of the London theatre and the English lack of dramatic art and training, comparing it unfavourably with the Comedie Française. Where Paris has training and criticism, London has artless histrionics. Where Paris has a cultivated audience, London has one which is apparently interested only in the cult of personality. The English theatre lacks a “school, a discipline, a body of science” (SA 121) and “dramatic literature” (SA 123), all of which are vital to dramatic art.<sup>7</sup> The 1880s was a decade in which debates about the theatre filled the periodicals and the Tragic Muse was written in response to those debates as well as to popular novels about actresses.<sup>8</sup> That the issues of spectacle, vulgarity and publicity

continued to preoccupy James as he worked on the Tragic Muse is evident from his preface to the novel:

[One] of the most salient London “social” passions [is] the unappeasable curiosity for things of the theatre; for every one of them, that is, except the drama itself, and for the ‘personality’ of the performer (almost any performer quite sufficiently serving) in particular. (AN 81-2)

Society is interested in spectacle not art, in the “poor stage per se” rather than “‘art’ at large”. The London public is interested in everything *but* the art of the theatre, the “drama itself” which is for James the heart of the theatre. True art, unlike the theatre, does not publicise itself, James asserts in his preface, it is not “showily ‘big’”; “its only honours are those of contraction, concentration and a seemingly deplorable indifference to anything but itself” (AN 82, 83). As I have demonstrated in chapter two, James’s view of art is that it is a specialised field with its own rules and codes, not a public entertainment that panders to the lowest common denominator.

The English theatre is a lesser art, according to James, because it depends directly upon the masses for its survival. Unlike the novelist or painter, the dramatist is directly exposed to the contaminations of the modern mass audience. This view of the theatre as a contagion is articulated in the Tragic Muse by Gabriel Nash who deplores the fact that the dramatist is dependent upon

the omnium gatherum of the population of a big commercial city at the hour of the day when their taste is at its lowest, flocking out of the hideous hotels and restaurants, gorged with food, stultified with buying and selling and with all the

other sordid preoccupations of the age, squeezed together in a sweltering mass, disappointed in their seats, timing the author, timing the actor, wishing to get their money back on the spot - all before eleven o'clock. Fancy putting the exquisite before such a tribunal as that! There's not even a question of it. The dramatist wouldn't if he could, and in nine cases out of ten he couldn't if he would. He has to make the basest of concessions. One of his principal canons is that he must enable his spectators to catch the suburban trains, which stop at 11:30. What would you think of any other artist - the painter or novelist - whose governing forces should be the dinner and the suburban trains? . . . . What can you do with a character, with an idea, with a feeling, between dinner and the suburban trains? You can give a gross rough sketch of them, but how little you touch them, how bald you leave them! What crudity compared with what the novelist does! (VII 66-67)

Nash's words here echo James's own words in his essays. The contemporary theatre is imagined as a site of vulgar physicality, where sweltering mobs of people press together in sweaty overindulgence. Because the theatre is a spectacle dependent upon a vulgar public the dramatist occupies a low position in the hierarchy of the arts.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, the novelist occupies the highest position because he carries on his art in solitude, indifferent to everything else around him. The words James uses to describe the theatre are also those he used to describe popular, non-art literature: vulgar, excessive, superficial and without art. Linking both forms of popular art and contributing to the way in which they are received is the figure of woman.

As I have shown in chapter two, James feared that a flood of popular culture would swamp the aesthetic marketplace, drowning art in the process. That for James this flood which threatened art was a gendered one has been well documented by Alfred Habegger and William Veeder.<sup>10</sup> In his aligning of popular culture with woman James was not unique. On the contrary, many members of the cultural avant garde saw themselves as holding off the lures of a mass culture coded as feminine. Andreas Huyssen notes in "Mass Culture as Woman" that Nietzsche was emblematic in this regard. Huyssen argues that Nietzsche's ascription of feminine characteristics to the masses was always linked to his "aesthetic vision of the artist-philosopher-hero, the suffering loner who stands in irreconcilable opposition to modern democracy and its inauthentic culture" (51). As an example, Huyssen cites Nietzsche's polemic against Wagner who represents for the philosopher the paradigm of cultural effeminacy and decline.<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche argues that "The danger for artists, for geniuses . . . is woman: adoring women confront them with corruption. Hardly any of them have character enough not to be corrupted - or 'redeemed' - when they find themselves treated like gods: soon they condescend to the level of the women" (qtd. in Huyssen 51). Wagner, according to Nietzsche, succumbed to adoring women by transforming music into "mere spectacle, theatre, delusion" (51), which he, like James, sees as effeminate and inauthentic art. Like James, Nietzsche identifies true art as that which is done in solitude and "suffers no witness". Huyssen draws out the implications of Nietzsche's critique of Wagner as follows:

And then Wagner, the theatre, the mass, woman - all become a web of signification outside of, and in opposition to, true art: "No one brings along the finest senses of

his art to the theatre - solitude is lacking; whatever is perfect suffers no witnesses.

In the theatre one becomes people, herd, female, pharisee, voting cattle, patron, idiot - Wagnerian". (51)

In Nietzsche's attack on Wagner's feminisation of music, his "infinite melody", we can see how the threat that feminisation posed to the male artist is articulated: "one walks into the sea, gradually loses one's secure footing, and finally surrenders oneself to the elements without reservation" (qtd. in Huyssen 51). The sea symbolises for Nietzsche and James the feminine principle embodied in low, mass or popular culture in which the male artist is in danger of losing himself.

Mass culture - whether theatrical spectacle or popular novels - is linked with woman by both Nietzsche and James who see her and it as fluid and changeable, unbounded and capable of swamping the boundaries of others (both men and art). Nietzsche's fears of dissolution - "surrender[ing] oneself to the elements without reservation" in the effeminate sea of infinite melody - are expressed in similar terms to those used by James to describe the "feminine element" in literature - "[a] fatal gift of fluency". In an analysis of James's criticism of women novelists, Evan Carton writes that "James repeatedly describes the feminine style in terms of liquids, fluids, currents" and argues that James describes women's fluency as fatal because "it implies for him the effacement of the traceable self in a flood of irrationalism, an inescapable and ultimately incommunicable wave of private impulse".<sup>12</sup> Thus, for Nietzsche and for James, theatricality and mass culture are vulgar and feminine and consequently threatening.<sup>13</sup> However, they are also fascinating as James's Tragic Muse will reveal.

### III

In the Tragic Muse the theatre's "loathsome conditions" of vulgarity and spectacle are manifested in the body of James's heroine Miriam, who is the "slightly *bete*" (VII 190) product of a Jewish father and an English mother of dubious virtue. That it is the actress who is the epitome of inauthentic art is the result of the historical fact that the theatre, in bourgeois society, was one of the few spaces which allowed women an important position in the arts. This was so precisely because acting was seen as imitative and reproductive rather than creative and productive.<sup>14</sup> As such, the profession was seen as uniquely suited to women who were *by nature* incapable of originality.<sup>15</sup> Women's inability to be original was held to be a result of their body's biology, women's ability to reproduce precluding them from creative production. As a consequence, the actress' body, as a special subset of women's bodies in general, was regarded as both inferior to men's and threatening to social and artistic norms. That the actress' body is dangerous is evident in the Tragic Muse's characterisation of Miriam. Miriam's body is a source of fascination and danger to those around her because she appears to be mutable, uncontrolled, and unbounded. She is initially described by Bidy as almost "dangerous", a "tigress about to spring" (VII 26) while for Peter she is a fascinating enigma. Her face is "staring, expressionless" (VII 115), lacking "sentiment", containing only a "vacancy of awe and anguish" (VII 116). She is a blank, a void - "I don't know what is in her. Nothing, it would seem, from her persistent vacancy" (VII 126). Miriam is "something of a brute" (VII 144), containing an animalistic, instinctive power revealed in her early performance for Julia and the Dormers:

[She] flowed so copiously, keeping the floor and rejoicing visibly in her luck, that her host was mainly occupied with how he could make her leave off . . . . The space was too small, the cries, the convulsions and rushes of the dishevelled girl were too near . . . [she became] more spasmodic and more explosive. (VII 142-3)

Miriam's bodily excess, conceived of as a flood, is a source of terror and captivation to those observing her. Biddy is transfigured by her performance:

Poor Biddy was immensely struck; she grew flushed and absorbed in proportion as Miriam, at her best moments, became pale and fatal. It was she who spoke first, after it was agreed that they had better not fatigue her any more; she advanced a few steps, happening to be nearest - she murmured "Oh thank you so much. I never saw anything so beautiful, so grand". (VII 143)

Biddy is simultaneously fascinated and repulsed by Miriam, as is Peter who marvels at her multiplicity of forms:

This was another variation Peter thought; it differed from each of the attitudes in which he had previously seen her. It came over him suddenly that so far from there being any question of her having the histrionic nature she simply had it in such perfection that she was always acting; that her existence was a series of parts assumed for the moment, each changed for the next, before the perpetual mirror of some curiosity or wonder - some spectatorship she perceived or imagined in the people around her. (VII 188-89)

Peter finds this multiplicity "appalling" because it implies that she has no "real character", no stable, coherent, fixed ego boundaries:

It struck him abruptly that a woman whose only being was to 'make believe', to make believe she had any and every being you might like and that would serve a purpose and produce a certain effect, and whose identity resided in the continuity of her personations, so that she had no moral privacy, as he phrased it to himself, but lived in a high wind of exhibition, of figuration - such a woman was a kind of monster . . . (VII 189)

Miriam's monstrosity lies in her mutability and her inability to be contained within clearly-delineated boundaries. Because she is unbounded herself she threatens the boundaries of others with dissolution. Like Wagner's sea of infinite melody, Miriam's fluidity offers no secure footing to her observers. She is a huge, fantastically vulgar exhibitionist whose "art" is that of publicity. Her infinite capacity for change is revealed in the flexibility of her facial expressions and body. Peter sees her as a circus performer, a "gymnast", a "lady at the music-hall who is shot from the mouth of a canon" (VII 190). Her face is "an elastic substance, an element of gutta-percha" (VII 190), an instrument with which she turns her tricks: "She didn't literally hang by her heels from a trapeze, but she made the same use of her tongue, of her eyes, of the imitative trick, that her muscular sister made of leg and jaw" (VII 190). The actress' mutability and unboundedness threaten those around her with confusion and collapse as Nash notes when he describes Miriam's probable progress:

Gabriel brushed in a large bright picture of her progress through the time and around the world, round it and round it again, from continent to continent and clime to clime; with populations and deputations, reporters and photographers,



placards and interviews and banquets, steamers, railways, dollars, diamonds,  
speeches and artistic ruin all jumbled into her train. (VIII 197)

Just as Miriam herself resists stable classification, so too does she threaten the classification of objects and people around her. Her circulation is depicted in terms of confusion and the collapse of boundaries, a monstrous progression sweeping everything into her train in an undifferentiated mass of heterogeneous elements.

For James, the theatre's vulgarity is most excessively and spectacularly manifested in the body of the actress. And the problems he sees with theatricality are those he attributes to the female body.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, by a process of education and subjection, the excesses of this false art, represented in his actress-heroine's body, must by the end of the novel be transmuted into the true art of the drama. The Tragic Muse, as Litvak has argued, describes a progression from vulgarity to artistry by having Miriam distance herself from the vulgarity of her own lesser art. In order to accomplish this task Miriam will evolve from an "artlessly rough" (VII 130) and "rude" (VII 131) theatrical spectacle into an "exquisite" dramatic "revelation" (VIII 430) as Juliet by the end of the Tragic Muse.

In the Tragic Muse the fictional Miriam triumphs in the role of Juliet; she is hailed in the press as "sublime", a "revelation", "incarnation", an "exquisite image of young passion and despair, expressed in the truest divinest music that had ever poured from tragic lips" (VIII 430).<sup>17</sup> Miriam's base bodily nature is converted through the "pure exorcism of art" (VII 231) into a great dramatic revelation. No longer the vulgar circus performer or trapeze artist, Miriam has become a sublime dramatic artist. As such, she no

longer troubles Peter Sherringham who sees her triumph as a reward for his educational efforts on her behalf:

[Peter] Sherringham, though he saw but a fragment of the performance, read clear, at the last, in the intense light of genius with which this fragment was charged, that even so after all he had been rewarded for his formidable journey. The great trouble of his infatuation subsided, leaving behind it something appreciably deep and pure. (VIII 437-8)

Miriam's metamorphosis into a "genius", an authentic artist, means that her bodily excess has been subdued, controlled and restrained. She no longer threatens Peter because she is no longer unbounded but fixed in the category of "dramatic revelation".

Just as the content of the Tragic Muse describes an evolution from vulgarity to artistry in the education of Miriam, so too does its form. Even though its theatrical subject was vulgar - mere entertainment rather than art - James saw it as offering potential aesthetic inspiration for his own work. In his preface to the novel James acknowledges that his subject is vulgar but then takes pains to justify it as suitable for literary art:

The late R.L. Stevenson was to write me, I recall - and precisely on the occasion of "The Tragic Muse" - that he was at a loss to conceive how one could find an interest in anything so vulgar or to pretend to gather fruit in so scrubby an orchard; but the view of a creature of the stage, the view of the "histrionic temperament", as suggestive much less, verily, in respect to the poor stage per se than in respect to "art" at large, affected me in spite of that as justly tenable. (AN 91)

Both in its subject and in its aesthetic form, James will use the low material of the theatre and the actress to reinvigorate the novel, for him the epitome of high art at large. The vulgarity of the theatre is transformed into the “sublime economy” of novelistic art by using the dramatic analogy as a means of constructing the novel. James will use the example of the theatre to get his novel done in “dramatic, or at least scenic conditions” which “move in light of alternation” (AN 90).

In the Tragic Muse the “poor stage per se” is purified as “art at large” through the use of Miriam as an “objective” centre that brings together the two separate halves of the novel: “Miriam, a case herself, is the *link* between the other two cases” (AN 89). Miriam links the two separate stories of Nick Dormer and Peter Sherringham with which James began by being the opaque centre around which they revolve. She herself is not a “central consciousness” but serves as the screen on which the consciousnesses of Nick and Peter project themselves. Nick and Peter are “exposed subjectivit[ies]” (AN 89) who “go behind Miriam” (AN 91), while she is “absolutely objective” (AN 89). We are never given an opportunity to enter into Miriam’s consciousness as we were given with Isabel in the Portrait of a Lady. Unlike Isabel, Miriam is not depicted as having any interiority or subjectivity. As an actress she has no internal core of identity and as a narrative function she is only an object through which we learn about the subjectivity of others as they muse about her. Miriam, although the novel’s central character and the narrative’s formal centre, has no depth. She is a congealed, hollowed-out object, an aesthetic commodity.

In the Portrait, as I discussed in chapter four, James had experimented with a new centre of consciousness narrative form that revealed the paradox of modern subjectivity.

In the Tragic Muse Miriam's "absolute objectivity" makes her a material thing, a human commodity whose function is to impart authenticity to others. Just as the objects and entertainments of mass culture exist to answer our every desire and express our "individuality", so Miriam exists to answer Nick's and Peter's, and indeed James's own, desires and as a means of their realising their individuality. Through the character Miriam the men will come to understand themselves. And through the narrative function Miriam, James will purge the vulgarity of the theatre by incorporating it into the superior art of the novel. The theatre becomes subsumed in James's "scenic method" of novel-writing.

In his preface James describes how the scenic method works: "The first half of a fiction insists ever on figuring to me as the stage or theatre for the second half" (AN 86). By using the dramatic analogy as a means of constructing the novel, James hopes to attain a "mighty pictorial fusion", a "deep-breathing economy" and an "organic form" (AN 84). Miriam is both the inspiration for, and the means of making work, James's scenic method:

Miriam *is* central then to analysis, in spite of being objective; central in virtue of the fact that the whole thing has visibly, from the first, to get itself done in dramatic, or at least in scenic conditions - though scenic conditions which are as near an approach to the dramatic as the novel may permit itself and which have this in common with the latter, that they move in the light of *alternation*. (AN 89-90)

James's scenic method, like his centre of consciousness technique, represents an innovation in narrative form. This new form consists in remaining objective, removed from the narrative and refusing to "[go] behind" (AN 111) his characters, a technique of which James will assert in the preface to The Awkward Age "the thing 'done' artistically, is a

fusion, or it has not been done” (AN 116). James uses the low art form of the theatre to create this new high art literary form. Once the techniques of the theatre have acted as a means of reinvigorating James’s novelistic practice, the theatrical can be jettisoned as subject matter. However, just as James’s centre of consciousness technique reveals contradictions between his narrative technique and his subject matter, so does James’s scenic method here contradict his authorial intentions. In his preface James notes that his subsumption of the theatrical in the literary is not entirely successful:

[I] have in general given so much space to making the theatre propitious that my [novel’s] halves have too often proved strangely unequal. Thereby has arisen with grim regularity the question of artfully, of consummately masking the fault and conferring on the false quantity the brave appearance of the true. (AN 86)

Although he intends the scenic method to create a pictorial fusion that is organically whole; it does not. The halves of the novel are not the same size and the novel’s intended centre, Miriam, does not centre the novel’s form:

[Again] and again, perversely, incurably, the centre of my structure would insist on placing itself *not*, so to speak, in the middle . . . . In several of my compositions this displacement has so succeeded, at the crisis, in defying and resisting me . . . that I still turn upon them, in spite of the greater or less success of the final dissimulation, a rueful and wondering eye. (AN 85-6)

James uses the metaphor of the dishevelled female figure to describe how his novel has become a “maimed or slighted, disfigured or defeated, unlucky or unlikely child” (AN 81):

Time after time, then, has the precious waistband or girdle, studded and buckled and placed for brave outward show, practically worked itself, and in spite of desperate remonstrance, or in other words essential counterplotting, to a point perilously near the knees - perilously I mean for the freedom of these parts. (AN 86)

James's "monstrous" text, signified by the dishevelled female figure, enjoys an autonomy unregulated by the author's controlling consciousness. James's rhetorical extravagance in the preface describes both text and body as theatrical, showy, delighting in their own "bigness", contradicting his own dictates about what constitutes "true art". Miriam, the novel's centre, serves also as the force by which the novel is stretched out of place. This decentred centre acts to reveal the continuing threat that popular culture and the feminine pose to high art. James's inability to centre his composition in the Tragic Muse can be seen as low-cultural theatricality's revenge on the high art novel.

#### IV

Just as the theatre was an obsession for James and Londoners in general, so was Japanese popular art an obsession for Whistler and nineteenth century artists, critics and collectors. A taste for Japanese art became increasingly prevalent in Europe after 1854 when the ports of Japan were opened to the world. After two centuries of isolation, the West and Japan could make economic and cultural exchanges. Subsequently, Japanese art was displayed at the London world exposition in 1862 and by 1863 Whistler was a regular customer at the Porte Chinoise shop in Paris where many artists acquired their oriental goods. Whistler was not alone in his interest in Eastern art; many artists, critics and "men

of letters”, conservative as well as progressive, were captivated by this new aesthetic. However, while being intensely stimulating, Japanese art was seen as a lower cultural form than Western art. Like art by women, mass market novels and the theatre, Japanese art was theorised as popular, addressed to the body rather than the mind, and lacking in the intellect and rigour necessary for high art. In this section I shall describe how contemporary critics saw Japanese art and in the following section will argue that Whistler’s use of Japanese art is analogous to James’s use of the theatre. Just as James appropriates the low art form of the theatre to transform his literary practice, so will Whistler use the low art form of Japanese popular art to transform his artistic practice. Although the popular or low cultural forms he uses are not the same as James’s, they are linked by the figure of the actress appearing in Whistler’s image in the guise of an Oriental artisan. Whistler, like James, will seek to reinvigorate and transform his art by incorporating and subsuming these low art source objects and materials. However, this subsumption will not be entirely successful and the low source material will serve to destabilise the high art work.

While historians of modern art have agreed that Japanese art was a major influence on European modernism in the last half of the nineteenth century, what has been less remarked is how this influence was theorised by artists and their critic supporters. It is important to have some understanding of the way Japanese art was received by artists and critics in order to see how these assumptions are played with in Whistler’s painting Lange Leizen. Therefore, before moving on to an analysis of Whistler’s work, I would like to demonstrate, using the findings of Elisa Evett, that Japanese art, like western popular

culture, was indeed seen as a lesser form of aesthetic than western painting. In The Critical Reception of Japanese Art in Late Nineteenth Century Europe Evett analyses the critics' commentary and describes the remarkably similar views of Japanese art held among a very disparate group of aficionados. The critics' views were shaped by their confrontation with an art form that was in virtually all respects very different from western art and its underlying theoretical assumptions:

Almost any example of Japanese pictorial art was bound to depict totally unfamiliar and sometimes incomprehensible subjects, to follow different principles of spatial organization, to portray the human figure on the basis of a completely different set of canons, to engage color in a different way, and to ask line to perform a variety of functions. (Evett x-xi)

Confronted with these works, whose aesthetic was so different from their own, critics with a diversity of approach and background were concerned with a similar range of issues.

Evett notes that the most pervasive issue addressed by these critics was the Japanese attitude towards the representation of nature. All the critics were impressed by what they saw as the Japanese intensity of sympathy with nature. As evidence of this intense sympathy, the critics cited the Japanese' choice of subjects and their exceptional powers of observation. In discussing the Japanese approach to nature, Evett argues, the critics used "general Western perceptions of Japanese civilization and the spirit of the Japanese people" (xiii):

Long-standing myth, often reinforced by biased travelers' reports but nurtured mostly by an escapist longing for the opposite of advanced, complex Western



civilization, perpetuated a vision of the Japanese as simple, innocent, primitive people living in blissful harmony with gentle, nurturing, benign nature. The Japanese pictorial images of nature seemed in turn to confirm this picture, and an intricate set of intertwined observations and explanations of Japanese art and the people who created it produced a general view that the Japanese civilization had been arrested in permanent infancy. Unlike the West, it had not experienced progressive development and had remained fixed in its original state. That meant that the Japanese were like early man, living simply and in primitive, childlike rapport with nature. The quality of this relationship was expressed directly and graphically in their art, the most obvious indication being that their choice of subjects from the natural world was all-inclusive and non-hierarchical - the lowliest insect was equal to the mightiest mountain . . . The ability to observe nature in that fashion was believed to be a direct result of knowing nature intimately and fully.

(xiii)

Hence, critical commentary pointed out that the Japanese, as a “simpler”, more “primitive” people than Europeans, were closer to nature and able to depict this closeness in their art. However, while most critics emphasised the Japanese sympathy with nature, as revealed by their close observation and careful rendering, some critics noted with negative comment their use of conventions. While a conventional rendering of elements of nature did not seem to disturb the writers, the Japanese rendering of the human figure did.

As Evett analyses it, many critics found the Japanese way of depicting the figure and the illusion of space objectionable. Japanese figures did not conform to Western

notions of ideal beauty or anatomical accuracy. Rather than seeing Western perspective as a conventional system, and the Japanese conventions as simply another such system, most critics dismissed the Japanese as being ignorant of perspective and simply incorrect in their representations. Evett notes that the same rationale was used to account for the Japanese' undeveloped and faulty conventions as was used to account for their lifelike depictions of nature. The "primitive spirit" that was responsible for the positive aspects of the Japanese aesthetic was also held responsible for its negative aspects. "Just as primitive people could be seen as simple, innocent, pure, and in touch with nature, they could also be seen as simple, backward, unaware, and involved in a crippling attachment to nature that did not allow them the objective distance for analyzing and understanding it" (Evett xiv-v). Critics and artists could admire the apparent simplicity and purity of the "primitive" and "childlike" Japanese but their admiration was based on a firm assumption of the superiority of Western civilisation.

In addition to seeing Japanese art as revealing the primitive, childlike perception and intellect of the Japanese people, critics also saw Japanese art as merely decorative rather than ideally beautiful. For example, Paul Dalloz held that the Japanese were ignorant of the higher realm of the ideal or spiritual because they were unable to portray "ideal beauty" as it was represented in Western art. Dalloz differentiated between "mere prettiness" (qtd. in Evett 66), which spoke only to the eye, and real beauty, which spoke to the mind. The Japanese impulse to decoration, revealed in their use of patterning and non-naturalistic colour, was for Dalloz a "limited visual response in which the faculties of the mind and the stirrings of the soul do not figure" (qtd. in Evett 66). Evett argues that

most critics used “decorative” in this pejorative sense. Decoration was seen as something auxiliary, an element gratuitously added to an image only to please the eye and as such, unable to convey “ideas”.

In critical commentary, Japanese decorative art was specifically opposed to Western pictorial or expressive art. Eugene Veron, for example, in his Aesthetics (1879), asserted that decorative art “arises from an instructive and voluntary search for the pleasures of the eye . . . without any necessity for the intervention of idea or sentiment” (qtd. in Evett 71). Pictorial or expressive art, in contrast, must “[possess] evidence of an imaginative power and sensibility above the average” (qtd. in Evett 71). This category of art was a high fine art while the other was a low decorative art. Some critics such as Dalloz eliminated Japanese painting from the realm of the fine arts altogether, putting it instead in the realm of craft. Others, such as Louis Gonse, equated the Japanese artist with the European artist of the Middle Ages; both were artisans rather than artists. In addition, the lack of individuality implied by the Japanese use of conventions and aesthetic formulas went against the contemporary Western assumptions, detailed in chapter three, about the connection between originality, individual vision, and artistic style. The nineteenth century preoccupation with originality and its manifestation in individual style and technique worked to preclude Japanese art from being considered the expression of an original, unique artistic perspective.

Critics compared Japanese art with Western art and found it lacking. While Western art was concerned with the realm of the mind, Japanese art was only concerned with the realm of the eye. While Western art was the expression of a unique, individual

artistic subjectivity, Japanese art was the expression of an artisan. While Western art was focused on the ideally beautiful, Japanese art was preoccupied with the merely decorative. While Western art was a high art, Japanese art was a low form, designed to appeal to the “common people”.<sup>18</sup> Just as the theatre was characterised as a low cultural form lacking a body of theoretical knowledge to underpin it, so too was Japanese art. Even though Japanese art was largely seen as an inferior popular cultural product produced by a simple, primitive, “natural” people, its radical difference from Western aesthetic products made it useful to the avant-garde. By using the conventions of Japanese art, artists such as Whistler were able to reinvigorate their practice. In the paintings he made just after his initial exposure to Japanese art, Whistler began to incorporate Japanese motifs and forms into his work although not completely successfully. In this early encounter between East and West, their disparate aesthetics clash and contradict rather than coexist in a fully integrated manner. Just as James had been unable to create an “organic whole” from his fusion of theatrical and novelistic art, so too will Whistler’s fusion of east and west lack organic wholeness. However, it is this lack itself that articulates the tensions of the historical moment it reflects.

In Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks (fig. 3) Whistler depicts his mistress Jo Hiffernan dressed in an Oriental kimono sitting in a curio shop in the midst of various Chinese and Japanese objects. In a letter to Fantin-Latour Whistler identified the subject of the painting as a Chinese woman in the process of painting a pot. All of the Oriental paraphernalia came from Whistler’s own collection. The vases are Chinese porcelain called “Lange Leizen”, a Dutch collector’s term for the “lanky people” painted

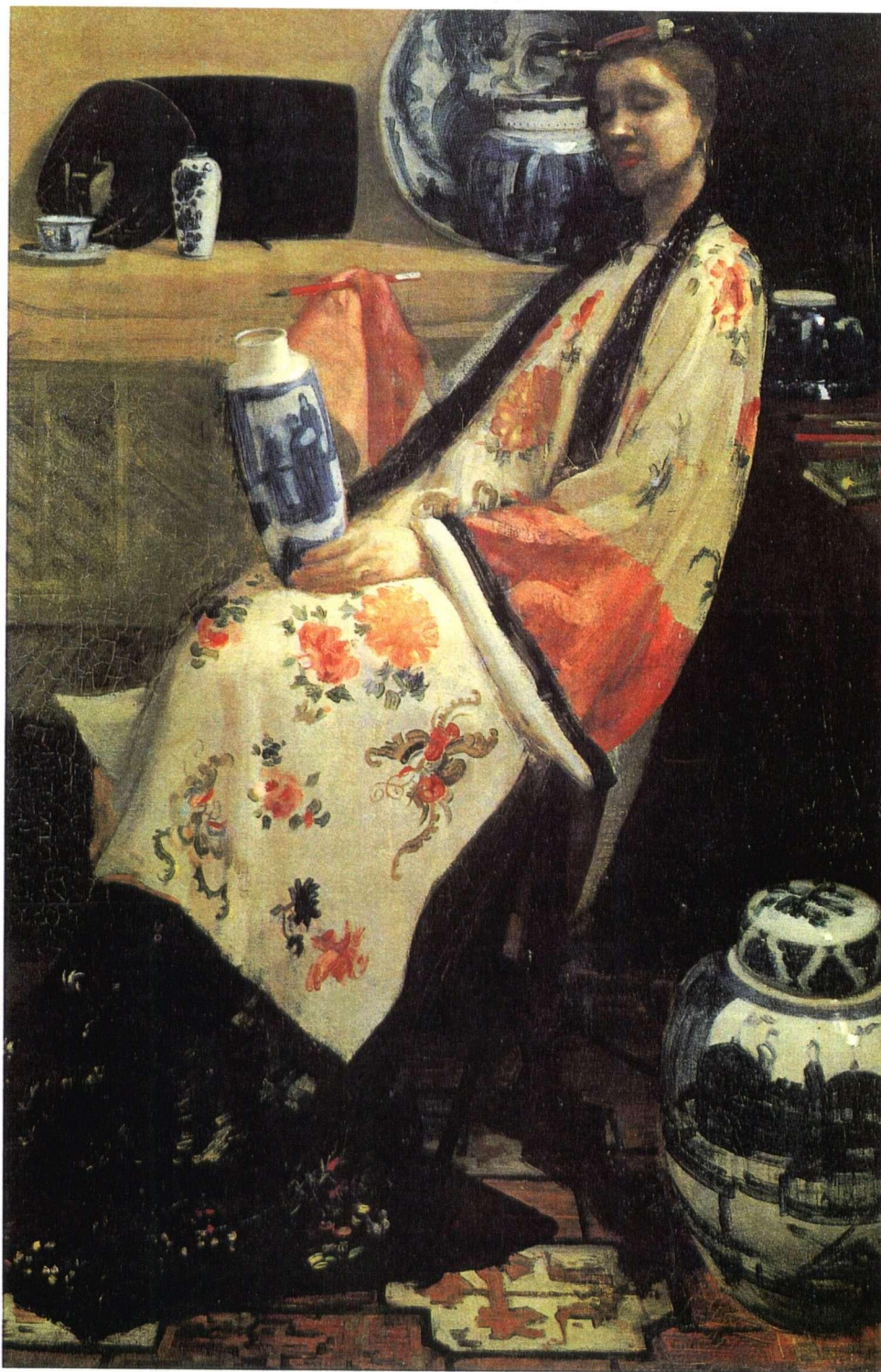


Figure 3 Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of  
the Six Marks (1863-4)

on the china. The fan and objects lying on the table are Japanese and a Scinde carpet covers the floor.<sup>19</sup> Whistler signed the painting with a vertical column of slanted letters in what looks like an imitation of Chinese calligraphy. The date appears on two oblong strips which could represent either Japanese cartouches or coloured-paper labels. The “six marks” of the painting’s title refers to the potter’s signature, found on the base of the pot and copied by Whistler onto the work’s frame.

Lange Leize was hung in the London Royal Academy in 1864 and received mixed reviews. William Rossetti called it “the most delightful piece of colour on the walls” and Leslie Stephens praised it as “among the finest pieces of colour in the exhibition” (qtd. in Fleming 106). The painting was hailed by the Morning Advertiser as “wonderfully truthful”, by the Evening News as being “decidedly original and [having a] feeling for character”, and by the Telegraph as “[having a] rich glow and tender brilliance . . . [without] rival” (qtd. in Fleming 107). While these contemporary comments focused favourably on Whistler’s use of colour and originality, others noted serious deficiencies in the work. The Builder decried the work as “careless in drawing and execution” (qtd. in Fleming 107); the Times noted Whistler’s “slovenliness of execution” (107) and asked rhetorically why he found it necessary to “win our attention by doing everything unlike other people?” (107). The Art Journal called the work a “singular and clever conceit” but wished Whistler would “bring his talent under the control of common sense” (107).

Virtually all reviews, both those written at the time and those written now, comment negatively on the fact that Whistler’s work was not a fully-evolved japonisme but an eclectic unresolved pastiche of japonaiserie. For example, Elisa Evett notes that

the term 'japonaiserie' refers to using Japanese objects as props for conjuring up fanciful visions of Japan. Several of Whistler's paintings of women dressed in kimonos, holding Japanese fans, and looking at Japanese prints in rooms decorated with various other Japanese objects represent 'japonaiserie'. 'Japonisme' involves the assimilation of certain stylistic approaches and design principles [such as] the simplification of form, the emphasis on silhouette, [and] the intensification of color. (viii)

Contemporary critical comment on the influence of the Japanese aesthetic on Western art disdained what they saw as japonaiserie's "unsynthesised application of certain superficial features of Japanese art to Western modes. They abhorred slavish, thoughtless imitation or unresolved, unintegrated pastiche" (Evelt 101). The Lange Leizen was criticised as the work of a decorator rather than an artist, a decorator using oriental objects as studio props and conventional Western interior space and an obviously Western model to create an unsuccessful imitation of Japanese *ukiyo-e prints*.<sup>20</sup> That twentieth century critics also abhor the "slavish, thoughtless imitation" and unintegrated pastiche of Lange Leizen is evident in the following sample of critical commentary:

This is one of the least satisfactory of [Whistler's] important pictures. It is cluttered with Japanese accessories, yet possesses very little of the Japanese spirit. (James Laver, Whistler, 1930, 114)

[This painting], in which the objects shown, as well as the carpet, belonged to the artist, betrays a certain Victorian frowstiness; as if we were being shown some old Curio Shop. (Denys Sutton, Nocturne, 1964, 48-9)

As many writers on Whistler have pointed out, in [it] Whistler was painting an unexceptional Victorian genre subject . . . There is no attempt at an Oriental pose or composition. (Young et al, The Paintings of James McNeill Whistler, I, 25)

As a summary of these views John Sandberg's 1964 essay is worth quoting in detail:

The subject of [Lange Leizen] is most unusual . . . . Stylistically, however, the picture is not at all revolutionary. The single female figure seated in the centre of a composition is a stock motif of nineteenth - century narrative art, as a glance at magazine illustrations will show. The brightly varied colours and the emphasis on precise detail also relate this painting to the Victorian genre tradition. Stylistically speaking, then, Whistler's Oriental composition is not Oriental at all; it is rather a Victorian genre scene with a few exotic accessories. It is even reactionary, for the artist had already transcended this pedestrian style in such unusual compositions as At the Piano and The Music Room of a few years before. The first shock of the discovery of the Orient has disrupted the otherwise steady flow of Whistler's artistic development. Reverting to a conservative style, he paints a curious paradox; a Victorian lady amidst a heterogeneous collection of Oriental accessories. (503-4)

In the contemporary and twentieth-century reactions to the painting, we can see some of the problems it posed. Lange Leizen is not an integrated coherent whole; like James's Tragic Muse it is not a "mighty pictorial fusion" but something "monstrous". It is stylistically "reactionary" because Whistler has been unable to make a "perfected whole" from the disparate elements he has yoked together.



In Lange Leizen the aesthetic possibilities derived from both an exhausted Victorian narrative painting and a novel Japanese art are combined. The interior space depicted in the painting uses perspectival conventions to create what appears to be a realistic setting. Unlike that of The Music Room, the room here is not spatially disconcerting. However, while using the conventions of Western perspective, Whistler subverts the implications of that scientific system by representing a figure within it whose patent unnaturalism and phoniness resist it. The perspective system used in Western art since the Renaissance represents a rational space in which each object has its appropriate place and the scene depicted is a total logical whole. In modernity, as I discussed in chapter one, this totality has become fragmented and disunified and thus the persistence of perspective in images such as Lange Leizen serves as an emblem of totality lost or forsaken. Placed anomalously within the scientific logic of the room's perspective, the figure's evident caricature of subjectivity displays the threats modernity's logic poses to humanness in its representation of a human being as a consciousnessless thing.

I have argued that Miriam, the Tragic Muse's central character, has no central core of identity. She is not represented as having any subjectivity or consciousness. She is instead a narrative device whose function is to allow the other characters to come to understand themselves. As a "creature of show" and an "object of public pleasure" (Baudelaire Painter 36), the actress attests to the power of illusion, spectacle and publicity to generate desire and, as such, she is an emblem of modernity. Similarly, the central figure of the Lange Leizen has no central core of identity. Like Miriam, the picture's single female figure is an actress. Where the figures represented in At the Piano and The Music

Room were portraits of real individuals who retain some sense of subjectivity and interiority in their depiction as being absorbed in some “real” activity, the woman represented in Lange Leizen is not. She is represented as acting out a role in a pictorial tableau whose illusoriness is obvious.

The identity of Whistler’s female figure is indeterminate. While she is dressed in a generic Oriental costume, Whistler has made no attempt to make her look “Oriental”. She is clearly Western and, as reviewers noted, a “stock figure” of Victorian genre painting and contemporary magazine illustration. She is represented as engaged in painting a pot, yet the pot she is supposedly working on is already finished and fired.<sup>21</sup> Whistler has made no effort to convince us that this is indeed a realistic image of an Oriental artisan at work. Instead, his image proclaims its own status as masquerade and mimicry. The figure’s stiffness makes her look unnatural - she is leaning back in her chair at an angle that is not conducive to the act of painting. Her posture looks uncomfortable and unconvincing. Rather than offering us a realistic image of someone absorbed in the creative process, Whistler’s work offers us a caricature of both the creative act *and* of subjectivity. In so doing, Whistler’s heroine is similar to James’s Miriam. Like The Tragic Muse, the painting’s subject is theatrical.

In his most recent work Manet’s Modernism Michael Fried has noted, with respect to Manet’s work, that the Japanese woodcuts avant-garde artists admired in the 1860s were themselves formally and thematically theatrical. Many of the *ukiyo-e* or “floating world” woodcuts portray actors, famous beauties, courtesans, wrestlers and others who occupy the “pleasure quarter” of eighteenth and nineteenth century Tokyo, a world that

was itself “quintessentially theatrical” (Manet’s Modernism 326). Fried describes these woodcuts as caricatural in their excessive theatricality:

Indeed in woodcuts by Sharaku and others of actors in their roles the already heightened theatricality of Kabuki is further intensified to a degree that in the West could only be described as caricatural. Inasmuch as theatricality implies awareness of being beheld, we might say that the exaggerated, grimacing facial expressions and elaborate surface patterning and detailing of the *ukiyo-e* woodblock and the sense of a pose being held in the conspicuously *inexpressive* and generally “inartistic” carte de visite photograph have something in common across the obvious differences between the two classes of artifacts. (326-7)

Fried draws an analogy between the painting techniques of Manet’s Olympia, its sharp, unmodulated contrasts of colour, its contrasts of light and dark and its graphic line quality, and both contemporary photography and Japanese woodblock prints. All three techniques - photography, Japanese woodblock, Manet’s painting style - evoke a sense, according to Fried, of strikingness, of impressing themselves immediately upon a viewer as reality itself does. With respect to the argument I am making here, the inherent theatricality of the Japanese print’s subject matter and form and its perceived similarities to photography would only have added to its being seen as a lesser art form than western painting. As an aesthetic form that was devoted to the depiction of not only the material world but that world at its most theatrical, Whistler can push the inherent theatricality of the Japanese print to its most striking conclusion in this representation of his Irish mistress acting the part of a Chinese vase painter.

I indicated earlier that in the Tragic Muse we are never given an opportunity to enter into Miriam's consciousness as we were given with Isabel in the Portrait of a Lady. Unlike Isabel, Miriam is not depicted as having any interiority or subjectivity. As an actress she has no internal core of identity. Similarly, Whistler's female figure here is a mimicry of absorption. Unlike in his realist works, Whistler does not ask us to see this figure as absorbed in her activity. Where the earlier works discussed in chapter four used the conventions of an absorptive mode to explore the contradictions inherent in subjectivity under modernity, Lange Leizen presents absorption as being an exhausted visual convention. This imitation of an artisan is a frozen, hollowed-out object, an aesthetic commodity like the commodities with which she is surrounded.

In "Whistler and the 'Lange Lijzen'" Linda Merrill makes the claim that Whistler's image is a "picture about painting" (685) in which the artist states his solidarity with the Japanese artist who created the pot the woman holds.<sup>22</sup> Merrill sees the painting as being "in the tradition of paintings of artists' studios" (684) and suggests that Whistler made it at a time when he was intent upon establishing his reputation as a painter rather than an etcher. If this is in fact the case then Lange Leizen testifies to the concrete situation of an avant-garde artist within capitalism's burgeoning mass culture. By using the objects of Japanese art to reinvigorate his practice, yet placing them within the visual context of an outmoded Victorian genre painting, the Oriental objects become chic commodities rather than objects of decorative art. The woman is then herself a maker and vender of these aesthetic commodities, a caricature of the avant-garde artist. This image in its unintegrated pastiche pictures a stage in the constant evolution of culture in which each subsequent

innovation of the avant-garde is reappropriated by mass culture and turned into fashionable commodities. Modernism's innovations, as Burger and Crow both point out, are in turn incorporated into a new academicism and then into "chic items of upscale consumption and glamorous facades for state and corporate powers" (Crow 223). In Whistler's image we see a stage in this ongoing process of cultural manufacture.

Lange Leizen represents a fascinating paradox, the position of the advanced artist under modernity. Firstly, the female model - Whistler's mistress Jo Hiffernan - is acting the part of an Oriental porcelain painter entirely unconvincingly. As a symbol of the artist, she is not particularly appropriate because as we have seen, the avant-garde was primarily a masculine affair and women were excluded from the discourse of cultural modernism. She is female and an actress representing an Oriental artisan. Whistler has combined the then-current theoretical thinking about the deficiencies of femininity, eastern art and decorative art into one image. Rather than executing a painting, the female model acting the part of an easterner is decorating a pot. She is obviously acting and depicted as being entirely unconscious; her eyes appear to be closed and she seems as if she's in a stupor. Secondly, rather than inhabiting an artist's studio, she inhabits a curio or gift or souvenir shop. She and the things that surround her are objects for the self-understanding of others. As luxury commodities designed to appeal to upscale consumers, both the objects painted, the painting itself and indeed the artist serve the social purpose of allowing an elite audience to realise itself in the experience of the aesthetic. That this experience is not entirely affirmative is as it should be. After all, the elite audience for whom the work was made,

the audience to whom Whistler is joined by “an umbilical cord of gold”, was often able to accept an oppositional art even as it could not accept opposition in other spheres of life.

Rather than effacing the contradictions inherent in a modern high art practice, the Tragic Muse and Lange Leizen put them on display. What could more clearly articulate the position of high art within commodity culture? Whistler’s pastiche of Victorian narrative painting, contemporary magazine illustration and pseudo-Japanese painting and James’s “scenic novel” with its coexistence of excessive rhetoricity, narrative objectivity and theatricality yoke together many of the competing cultural modes coexisting within modernity. Their “mediated syntheses of possibilities” derived from both the failures of existing artistic forms and from popular cultural forms do not achieve the perfected aesthetic wholes their authors desire. As a result, both Tragic Muse and Lange Leizen clearly represent the conflicted and contradictory position of autonomous art and the avant garde artist.

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I shall be distinguishing between high, or autonomous, art as identified in chapter one and low, mass or popular culture. I am using the terms “low”, “mass” and “popular” to designate those cultural forms which are opposed to high art and produced for entertainment or profit, as commodities for sale in response to mass taste. While popular art and mass culture are not “the same” they are both low forms which were strictly differentiated from high art such as easel painting and serious literature.

<sup>2</sup> The argument that I will be advancing here is indebted to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment; Philosophical Fragments. The authors argue that in modernity the very rationality that was to give human beings freedom from mythic powers brings about a return to myth and to new and more absolute forms of domination. The feature of enlightenment reason which accounts for this reversal is its connection of rationality and understanding with the subsumption of the particular under the universal - “identity thinking”. In so doing, subsumptive or instrumental rationality ignores properties which make things and people particular as it groups such particulars under universal concepts. All particulars then become exchangeable objects for the use of a subject. Mass cultural products epitomise identity thinking in their equation of cultural wares with their market value. Such wares are valuable not in themselves but for the profit they bring. In contrast, autonomous art is valuable in itself. For a clear and concise account of the role of art in the dialectic of enlightenment, see Jay Bernstein, “Art Against Enlightenment: Adorno’s Critique of Habermas”.

<sup>3</sup> In “The Painter of Modern Life” Baudelaire had described the actress as an emblem of modernity because she was a “creature of show, an object of public pleasure” (36) whose being attests to the power of illusion and publicity to generate desire. James was not the only writer to be interested in theatricality in the late nineteenth century. See Rachel Bowlby, Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola for an interesting discussion of the function of the theatrical stage in Dreiser’s Sister Carrie.

<sup>4</sup> James tried for years to become a playwright, a venture that culminated in the chorus of boos that greeted the opening of *Guy Domville* in 1895. For a discussion of the audience reaction to James's plays, see Miranda Seymour, *A Ring of Conspirators: Henry James and His Literary Circle 1895-1915*.

<sup>5</sup> James's theatre reviews are collected in *The Scenic Art: Notes on Acting and the Drama 1872-1901*.

<sup>6</sup> On the equation of the actress with the prostitute, see John Elsom, *Erotic Theatre*, esp. 14-35.

<sup>7</sup> As discussed in chapter two, these criticisms of the English theatre are similar to those James had levelled at English literature in his essays on the art of fiction.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of these debates and their impact on James's novel, see D.J. Gordon and John Stokes, "The Reference of the *Tragic Muse*", *The Air of Reality: New Essays on Henry James*. For a discussion of the *Tragic Muse*'s popular sources, see Marcia Jacobson, *Henry James and the Mass Market*.

<sup>9</sup> In the *Tragic Muse* the theatre is situated among other competing forms of representation - novelistic, pictorial, political. The theatre, while a lower art than both painting and literature, is still a higher form than politics. Gabriel Nash asserts this belief when he says: "I think the Theatre Francais a greater institution than the House of Commons" (VII 55). In my account of the *Tragic Muse* as describing a progression from vulgarity to artistry, I am indebted to Joseph Litvak's analysis of the novel in his study of theatricality and the nineteenth century novel. See *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the nineteenth century English Novel*.

<sup>10</sup> Alfred Habegger, *Henry James and the "Woman Business"* and William Veeder, *Henry James - The Lessons of the Master: Popular Fiction and Personal Style in the Nineteenth Century*.

<sup>11</sup> For Nietzsche's critiques of Wagner, see "The Case of Wagner" in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner* and *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*.

<sup>12</sup> Evan Carton, "Henry James the Critic", 132. Nineteenth century avant-garde male artists are not the only ones to see women in terms of threatening metaphors of liquidity and dissolution. For a fascinating and deeply troubling examination of twentieth century German men's fantasies about women, see Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Vol. I: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*.

<sup>13</sup> That the contemporary identification of women with the masses has political implications is pointed out by Huyssen who writes "Images of the raging mob as hysterical, of the engulfing floods of revolt and revolution, of the swamp of big city life, of the spreading ooze of massification, of the figure of the red whore at the barricades - all of these pervade the writing of the mainstream media . . . The fear of the masses in this age of declining liberalism is always also a fear of woman, a fear of nature out of control, a fear of the unconscious, of sexuality, of the loss of identity and stable ego boundaries in the mass" (52).

<sup>14</sup> Huyssen 51.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the late century conception of women as imitative and lacking the capacity to be original, see Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siecle Culture* and Kimberley Reynolds and Nicola Humble, *Victorian Heroines: Representations of Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Art*.

<sup>16</sup> James was certainly not alone in identifying the actress as an excessive and dangerous figure. In *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* Nina Auerbach argues that the actress was fascinating because she combined the attributes of divine angel and demonic femme fatale which haunted the Victorian imagination.

<sup>17</sup> I believe, contrary to Adeline R. Tintner's assertion in *The Museum World of Henry James* that James based his heroine on Mrs. Siddons, that James based his portrait of Miriam on the actress Ellen Terry. In many theatre reviews James enumerated what he saw as the actress' flaws, among them her lack of "dramatic art", her lack of acuteness and her amateurishness. These flaws are similar those those given Miriam prior to her aesthetic education. James remakes Ellen Terry as the actress she should have been in Miriam, using the faults he identifies in the real actress. For information of Ellen Terry see Nina Auerbach, *Ellen Terry: A Player in her Time*.

<sup>18</sup> The qualities nineteenth century critics and artists attributed to Japanese art were similar to those they attributed to women's art. Both kinds of art were characterised as revealing their producers' closer relation to nature, deficiency in intellect, lack of originality and superficiality, making them inferior products without the qualities necessary to be considered high art. On critics' views of women's art, see Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*.

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<sup>19</sup> For an inventory of the contents of the painting, see Whistler's mother's letter to Mr. Gamble dated 10 Feb. 1864 in Robin Spencer, ed., *Whistler: A Retrospective*, 72-3.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Broun, "Thoughts that Began with the Gods: The Content of Whistler's Art", 39.

<sup>21</sup> In "Whistler and the 'Lange Lijzen'" Linda Merrill notes this point, saying that "The cobalt oxide used for painting in underglaze blue appears grey until the porcelain is fired" (684).

<sup>22</sup> You will notice that here, with respect to Merrill's analysis, the artisan is identified as "Japanese". In critical commentary on the painting some critics see her as meant to be Chinese and others as Japanese. Whistler himself identified her as Chinese.



## CHAPTER SIX

### Modernity and Masculine Subjectivity: In Venice

Throughout this study I have been discussing some aspects of modernist high art's dialectical relationship with modernity. Thus far I have concentrated on James's and Whistler's critiques of modernity in their representations of reified subjectivity and attempted negations of popular culture. However, while modernity certainly had its negative aspects, it also offered the bourgeois male artist possibilities for the articulation of new and exciting experiences and subjectivities. In this chapter I shall argue that the work James and Whistler produced in and about Venice investigates the new possibilities for masculine subjectivity opened up by modernity, possibilities different from and opposed to those insisted on by the dominant ideology. These possibilities can be seen as the flipside of capitalism's commodification of individuals within the framework of the market. Modernity, in its "sealing off of the psyche", "division of labor of the mental faculties", and "fragmentation of the bodily and psychic sensorium" (Jameson, Political Unconscious 160) also allowed the opening up of whole new zones of experience and the production of new aesthetic forms and content to articulate those experiences. Although in chapter four I focused on James's and Whistler's representation of the negative effects of modernity on bourgeois female subjectivity, here I want to concentrate on the ways in which writer and artist experiment in Venice with the "delirious multiplication of the possibilities of the male self" (qtd. in Stephenson 275) that modernism allows. I will argue that both James and Whistler articulate an imaginary femininity that enables them to critique the compulsively masculinist values of nineteenth century Britain. In so doing,

both participated in British Aestheticism's project of expanding the conventional limits of masculinity within late nineteenth century Anglo-American culture. In James's fiction, this imaginary femininity takes the form of male heroes who are passive, receptive and/or impotent and, as discussed in chapter four, a sympathetic evocation of women's subjectivity and social conditions. However, that he presents us with sympathetic female characters within the fiction, and indeed in the Golden Bowl with a woman who triumphs in the end, does not mean that he completely embraced feminism or a feminine subject-position. His identification with the feminine was strategic. Similarly, Whistler's use of stylistic devices culturally-coded as feminine was also a deliberate strategy, designed to differentiate and distinguish himself from competitors. Both Whistler and James use an imaginary femininity as a critique while at the same time insisting on their own (masculine) acuity and perception. This complex identification/disavowal dialectic was necessary because imaginary femininity was also problematic; this was so because the feminine, as I have discussed in chapters two and five, was also constructed as inferior. This difficulty is dealt with by James and Whistler in the alignment of certain stylistic innovations with qualities culturally-coded as masculine: consciousness and superior acuity.

As I discussed in chapter one, under modernity the sphere of art, now separated from any specific social purposes, becomes a site for the investigation and display of the individual artist's subjectivity, detached, in Habermas' words, from "the constraints of routinized cognition and everyday action" ("Modernity" 10). The autonomy given to artists by art's separation from other spheres of activity offers the artist his or her own special subjects and objects and words, lines, colours and the like cease to serve primarily

the function of representing an objective “real world”, becoming instead the means of revealing the artist’s subjective response to the external world or indeed of creating the artist’s own world. The media and techniques of expression become themselves aesthetic objects that reveal the artist’s singular subjectivity. In so doing, modernism responded to modernity’s increased rationalisation and bureaucratisation. While modernity, in Weber’s words, represents the “disenchantment of the world” and the increasing dominance of instrumental rationality, modernism represents freedom from the “bureaucratic dominance of abstraction, rational cognition, and instrumentality that had disambiguated modern life in obedience to the Enlightenment (or Baconian) imperative of efficiency” (Posnock 56). For some male modernists, among them Oscar Wilde, James, and Whistler, modernism allowed an imagining of masculine identities which were alternatives to the mode of masculinity required by the dominant culture.<sup>1</sup> For Whistler and James, Venice, as a site which represented a contrast with and opposition to contemporary London, was therefore a place where alternative modes of being might be put into practice. As such, Venice provided the inspiration for their aestheticist and erotic imaginings.

During the nineteenth century Venice was an attractive tourist destination for its combination of culture, leisure, climate and civilised class relations.<sup>2</sup> Venice was a beautiful relic, both a reminder of empire lost and a preindustrial paradise unlike modern daily urban bourgeois existence.<sup>3</sup> The city represented a space of freedom from the usual constraints of life and work. Both James and Whistler found Venice fascinating, especially its decaying architecture and sensual inhabitants. After his bankruptcy in 1879 Whistler travelled to the city to produce a series of etchings which he hoped would rejuvenate his

career and bank account and the new aesthetic forms he experimented with in the Venetian works were a response to the exoticism of the setting and the eroticism of the people. For James too Venice was sensual and decadent, a suitable setting for fantasy and desire. Like Whistler, he experimented with form in his Venetian works, allowing the city's difference to influence both style and subject. The works I will examine in this chapter - James's Italian travel essays, "The Aspern Papers" and The Wings of the Dove and Whistler's Venice etchings - explore the possibilities which modernity opens up for bourgeois males, especially artists, to experiment with alternative modes of being articulated in innovative representational techniques. I shall first look at James's travel writings as expressing his enjoyment in the contemplation of the Italian male as object of desire, then at "The Aspern Papers" and The Wings of the Dove as explorations of passivity, powerlessness and exposure, qualities conventionally coded as feminine which James will appropriate for his male characters. Then I shall examine the new aesthetic Whistler articulates in the Venetian etchings, showing the ways in which these new visual forms are analogous to James's literary forms and explore, as James's did, alternative modes of masculine subjectivity.

## I

For many British and American artists Venice was a favoured destination and images of the Italian city proliferated in the nineteenth century cultural marketplace.<sup>4</sup> Both James and Whistler were concerned to distinguish themselves from the masses who flocked to Venice and their work from that of their competitors; for both an engagement with the "real" Venice meant travelling to places unvisited by tourists and immersing

themselves in the life of the Venetian back streets. The decay of contemporary Venice was to James represented by the tourist economy, an economy he characterised as vulgar and tasteless. Present-day Venice was a tomb through which crowds of tourists marched: "Nowhere else is the present so alien, so discontinuous, so like a crowd in a cemetery without garlands for the graves . . . the everlasting shuffle of these irresponsible visitors in the piazza is contemporary Venetian life" (GC 32). In order to experience the true Venice, the artist must "turn away from the purchasers and from the vendors of recordi" (GC 32) in St. Mark's Piazza and experience the life of the "bare-legged boatmen", the "brown plebeian faces looking out of the patchy miscellaneous houses" and the "simple folk" whose "decadence and ruin" is "more brilliant than any prosperity" (GC 48, 49). To James Italy was a source of endless inspiration, an inspiration centred on its people and transformed into the new aesthetic forms of his writing.

In his early Italian essays James describes himself as "sucking in the gladness of gaping" (OSG 100), "ignor[ing] the very dream of haste, walking everywhere slowly and very much at random" (CC 237) with that "aimless flanerrie which leaves you free to follow capriciously every hint of entertainment" (RH 149).<sup>5</sup> The essays in Italian Hours are full of references to the traveller who "roams and rambles", "strolls", "looks", "stares" and "wonders". James in Italy is the "fond appraiser, the infatuated alien" (AF 273) who "stare[s] into gateways", "lingering by . . . half-barbaric farmyards" and "feasts a foolish gaze" (RR 165) on the wonders of his surroundings. In letters describing these early travel experiences, James seems to have been overcome with the intensity of his impressions; he asserts that he has "received more impressions than [he] knows what to do with", that his

“brain swarms with pictures”, and that Italian sights and “details overwhelm” him.<sup>6</sup> In the early Italian essays James is the infatuated, wide-eyed, gaping observer who is overwhelmed by the impressions he receives. Here impressions are not simply visual but tactile as well. The visible world “impresses” itself on James, pressing itself in on him in an experience that is sensual, languid and rhapsodic. In this, James’s intense impressions are evidence of his heightened consciousness and unique subjectivity. As such, these intense impressions differentiate James’s experience from that of others.

In his essays James will emphasise the uniqueness and superiority of his particular experiences. He differentiates his impressions of Italy from those of other writers and artists, positioning his own vision as superior. For example, in an 1872 review of Hawthorne’s French and Italian Notebooks, James asserts that Hawthorne is unable to grasp the complexity of Italian life and culture:

The strangeness, the remoteness, the Italianism of manners and objects, seem to oppress and confound [Hawthorne]. He walks around bending a puzzled, ineffective gaze at things, full of a mild, genial desire to apprehend and penetrate, but with the light wings of fancy just touching the surface of the massive consistency of fact about him, and with an air of such good-humored confession that he is too simply an idle Yankee flaneur to conclude on such matters.<sup>7</sup>

To James, Hawthorne is too reserved, too shy and too detached to be an effective observer. His observations are “refined and gently suggestive” but are not “inflammable”. Just as Hawthorne was incapable of fully grasping Italy, so too was his compatriot William Dean Howells, whose Italian Journeys James reviewed in 1868. While Howells is one of

the “most satisfactory of American travellers” because he is able to “extract sweetness and profit” from his travel experiences, he is “simply an observer” with “nothing inflammable” in his observations. For James, Howells is too attached to the visible facts and the surface of things, while Hawthorne is only “half-descriptive”, too distant from the real world. True vision - James’s vision - requires both observation and imagination, both accuracy in individual detail and the ability to generalise and universalise. In his own Italian essays James insists that aesthetic vision must be the active apprehension and absorption of the world achieved by an intense consciousness. And the world which this consciousness absorbs is one full of intense sensual stimuli.

As Macdonald has pointed out, an analysis of James’s travel essays suggests that Italy so impresses itself on the writer’s mind that these impressions exceed his ability to articulate them. The glory of Italy is “more lovely than words can tell” (IR 108), its charm “is something that [he] hereby renounce[s] once for all the attempt to express” (V 55), and “there remains in all these deeply agreeable impressions something we can’t analyze” (OSG 99). For James, as I will discuss below, the “deeply agreeable impressions” seem to have been bound up with the erotic spectacle of the Italian male. While the official reasons given for Mediterranean travel were culture, health and religious pilgrimage, the unofficial reasons for homoerotic men such as James were more complex: the desire for erotic experiences and a relaxation of class boundaries impossible in the repressed climate of Victorian England certainly figured among them.<sup>8</sup>

In The Mediterranean Passion Pemble argues that an “elusive residuum of explanation” remained in the official explanations for the “lure of the south” (96). This

“residuum” was linked to the Mediterranean’s reputation as a home for those activities unsanctioned by polite Victorian society. For European literati the general conception of Italy was as an “exotic stage for aberrant passions”.<sup>9</sup> The Marquis de Sade, in Italy in 1775-76 and delighted with the country’s “most decadent race”, used Italy as the site for Juliette’s “journey of debauchery”. Pisanus Fraxi devoted thirty pages of Volume Three of his bibliography of pornographic literature to writings on Venice and Casanova’s Memoires and Stendahl’s Chroniques Italiennes also contributed to Italy’s characterisation as land of lust and debauchery. For many homoerotic men in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Grand Tour of Europe was also an erotic tour and a privileged stop on that tour was Venice.<sup>10</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Venice had a unique reputation as the place for “refined upper-class men to ‘disintegrate’ and give in to their suppressed homoerotic longings” (Moon 439). For homosexual and homoerotic men, Italy’s lack of rigid class hierarchies allowed the middle- and upper-class British male to cultivate relationships that would have been impossible in Britain, particularly after the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 had effectively outlawed all homosexual activity.<sup>11</sup> Pemble notes that it was easy for wealthy Englishmen in Italy to meet and carry on relationships with the Italian lower class men who populated the cities: “In the large cities and seaports of the South such intimacies were socially acceptable” (160). Pemble also remarks that most of the Englishmen who frequented those “‘strange places of the most varied description’ that enticed [J.A.] Symonds to Venice year after year will never be identified; but enough is now known about the lives of Edward Lear, Oscar Browning . . . Somerset Maugham, Norman Douglas and E.M. Forster to warrant the assumption that



they took advantage of such opportunities during their travels in the Mediterranean” (161).<sup>12</sup>

With respect to Henry James, Michael Moon argues in “Sexuality and Visual Terrorism in The Wings of the Dove” that the novelist could hardly have been unaware of the “trade” in gondoliers occurring around him or of the frequency with which men of his own class and station sought sex with the Venetian male working class (440). This knowledge is a subtext of James’s Venetian writings. In both “The Aspern Papers” and The Wings of the Dove the Italian male is represented as an available servant, a “knowing Venetian”, a “swindler” who, even when “too old to make love” has “an art still to make money” (Wings 258-9) and Venice is represented in Wings as a place of commercial and erotic transactions. Kate has sex with Densher as payment for services rendered and the “great Eugenio” is described as a “swindler finished to the fingertips” (258) whose hand fits Milly’s pocket “like a glove” (263) and whose words summarise Venetian life: “Pay enough money and leave the rest to me” (264). I would argue that James was aware of Venice’s reputation and that, although no direct biographical evidence exists, the evidence of his Venetian texts suggests that he was interested in the alternative models of masculinity that he could see exemplified in the homosexual subculture that flourished around him.

## II

James wrote four essays on Venice which span thirty years; “Venice: An Early Impression” (1872), “Venice” (1882), “The Grand Canal” (1892) and “Two Old Houses and Three Young Women” (1899). In the earliest essay James exclaims over the light in

Venice which he calls a “mighty magician” and the “greatest artist of them all” because it converts “dirt” and “decay” into beauty (VAEI 54). The gondolier is singled out as the preeminent light-drenched figure in the Venetian landscape: “Your brown-skinned, white-shirted gondolier, twisting himself in the light, seems to you, as you lie at contemplation beneath your awning, a perpetual symbol of the Venetian ‘effect’” (VAEI 54). For James, the Venetian canal and the gondolier are the elements that make the “impression”:

When I hear, when I see, the magical name I have written above these pages [Venice], it is not of the great square that I think, with its strange basilica and its high arcades, nor of the wide mouth of the Grand Canal, with the stately steps and the well-poised dome of the Salute; it is not of the low lagoon, nor the sweet Piazzetta, nor the dark chambers of St. Mark’s. I simply see a narrow canal in the heart of the city - a patch of green water and a surface of pink wall. The gondola moves slowly; it gives a great smooth swerve, passes under a bridge, and the gondolier’s cry, carried over the quiet water, makes a kind of splash in the stillness . . . It is very hot and still, the canal has a queer smell, and the whole place is enchanting. (V 13).

Here Venice is a world removed from the industrialised filth of modern London, its difference revealed in its beauty and stillness. The city itself and its citizens become light-drenched objects for the artist’s leisurely contemplation and his descriptions of them become the means of revealing his intense response to them.

In "Venice" the gondolier is described as an object of the artist/flaneur's analysis. James, as a connoisseur of gondoliers, frames the Italian male as an object of desire and his body as an erotic spectacle, available to the gaze of the discriminating viewer:

One may say as a general thing that there is something rather awkward in the movement even of the most graceful gondolier, and something graceful in the movement of the most awkward. In the graceful men of course the grace predominates, and nothing can be finer than the large, firm way in which, from their point of vantage, they throw themselves over their tremendous oar. It has the boldness of a plunging bird and the regularity of a pendulum. Sometimes, as you see this movement in profile, in a gondola that passes you - see, as you recline on your low cushions, the arching body of the gondolier lifted up against the sky - it has a kind of nobleness which suggests an image in a Greek frieze. The gondolier at Venice is your very good friend - if you choose him happily - and on the quality of the personage depends a good deal of your impressions. He is a part of your daily life, your double, your shadow, your complement. Most people, I think, either like their gondolier or hate him; and if they like him, like him very much . . . . More than the rest of the population, of course, they are the children of Venice; they are associated with its idiosyncrasies, with its essence, with its silence, with its melancholy . . . . the voice of the gondolier is in fact the dominant or rather the only note of Venice. There is scarcely another sound, and that indeed is part of the interest of the place . . . (V 15-16)

James's words frame the gondolier's body so that it can be contemplated at length. The erectness of the gondolier's body with its "freedom of movement" and "boldness" is contrasted with the reclining passivity of the observer prone on his low cushions. "Lifted up against the sky", James sees this body as a beautiful figure in a Greek frieze. In so doing, James reveals his links with a Paterian aestheticism which fetishised nude young men as paradigms of the body beautiful.<sup>13</sup> The "Greek", for Victorian homoerotic men, had become by this time a code word for what Sedgwick describes as an "imagined dissolving of the bar of prohibition against the enjoyed body, and its new gendering as indicatively male" (*Epistemology* 136).<sup>14</sup> Unlike the usual "phallocentric" image as characterised by Laura Mulvey for example in which women are exhibitionists "simultaneously looked at and displayed" (11), here the male gondolier occupies the position of erotic spectacle for a male viewer.<sup>15</sup> Here James's use of such signifiers as "Greek" indicates an erotic subtext to the knowledgeable reader of his essay.<sup>16</sup>

In "Venice" James articulates a masculine subjectivity that is contrary to that required by the dominant discourses of middle class manliness.<sup>17</sup> Instead of the active economic man of Anglo-American discourses, James's observer/narrator is a passive consumer of sensual stimuli. And, in addition to being a consumer rather than a producer, James's observer visually enjoys an object of the "wrong" gender. James's discussion of the gondolier is constructed in terms of class and gender - the gondolier is manly and virile; he is also sweet and childlike. But most of all, he is available. He is serviceable, and not just serviceable but happy in his servitude:

[He] adds to it [his agreeable speech] other graces which make him an agreeable feature in your life. The price he sets on his services is touchingly small, and he has the happy art of being obsequious without being, or at least without seeming, abject. For occasional liberalities he evinces an almost lyrical gratitude. In short he has delightfully good manners [and] a great desire to please and be pleased. (V 16-17)

Here it does not really matter whether the gondolier really is abject, just that he not “seem” abject, and thus disturb this agreeable fantasy of complaisant submission. In this essay and its predecessor James articulates an aestheticist vision of Venice and the Venetian male as beautiful objects for the aesthete’s knowledgeable contemplation. In so doing, James locates the source of his pleasure in a sphere of contemplation that combines the aesthetic and the erotic. The gondolier’s body is appreciated as an aesthetic, and erotic, object of sheerly sensual enjoyment, a commodity for the connoisseur’s enjoyment.

To James Venice’s fascination is particularly acute because of the city’s contrast with and opposition to contemporary urban London, its preindustrial paradisaical beauty making it unlike modern bourgeois existence. Where London was a grey and gloomy smog-filled metropolis, Venice was full of light and beauty. Where London was work, Venice is pleasure. In Venice the aestheticist valorisation of the “joys of sheer idleness” (Freedman 58) can be experienced as what Freedman calls the “passive perception of intense sense stimuli” (58). This emphasis on intensity of sense perception and experience is evident in James’s essays in his concentration on how the gondolier’s body makes him feel. That the spectator in James’s essays is a passive consumer of intense perceptual

stimuli is even more evident in "Two Old Houses and Three Young Women" (1899)

where he continues to celebrate the joys of gondola-riding:

The little closed cabin of this perfect vehicle, the movement, the darkness and the splash, the indistinguishable swerves and twists, all the things that you don't see and all the things you do feel - each dim recognition and obscure arrest is a possible throb of your sense of being floated to your doom, even when the truth is simply and sociably that you are going out to tea. Nowhere else is anything as innocent so mysterious, nor anything as mysterious so pleasantly deterrent to protest. These are the moments when you are most daringly Venetian . . . . It's so stately that what can come after? - it's so good in itself that what, upstairs, as we comparative vulgarians say, can be better? (65-6)

James's language here is highly erotic, although veiled - things felt but not seen, throbs, obscurities, mysteries. Enclosed in the darkened cabin, the rider is helpless - "floated" to his "doom" - this feeling of helpless eroticised confinement is the essence, for James, of Venice - it is then that "you are most daringly Venetian". In this passage James distances himself from this experience - the second tense is used rather than the first - implying that "you" will feel the same as he feels, or that anyone would feel as he does. James's reaction is thus positioned as a universal one, an understandable, "innocent" one, under the circumstances - that is, the darkness, the enclosure, the swerves and twists. For James, as revealed in these texts, Venice is the place in which "all Europe" has "asked for pleasure or for patience", a "refuge of endless strange secrets, broken fortunes and wounded hearts" (GC 69).

In James's Venetian essays the narrative voice exemplifies the Paterian aestheticist ideal of heightened or perfected acts of perception. The intense impressions spoken of are evidence of James's heightened consciousness and unique subjectivity and as such, these intense impressions differentiate James's experience from that of other, lesser observers. Like Pater in the conclusion to The Renaissance, James here privileges moments of vision experienced solely for themselves, visions that provoke a "quickened consciousness". This quickened consciousness is activated through intense forms of experience such as what Pater had described as "the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake" (WP, I: 238, 239) and what James identifies as the epitome of masculine beauty. Freedman argues in Professions of Taste that in their devotion to such moments of intense consciousness for its own sake James and Pater are alike: "[For] both James and Pater the moment at which consciousness exercises itself in heightened vision is valuable in and of itself - is the ultimate end, the perfect end" (163). Such moments of intense vision are for James perhaps the highest consummation possible.<sup>18</sup> In his travel writings James celebrates the joys of a passive voyeurism that takes the male body as its object of desire. Rather than celebrating the active doing agent of bourgeois ideology, James here celebrates a masculinity which is passive, relaxed and open to sensual stimuli.

### III

In my discussion so far I have concentrated on James's occupying of the position of observer for whom Venice and its people are objects of contemplation. Unlike his character Gilbert Osmond, whose aestheticising vision is criticised in the Portrait of a Lady, James's vision is sometimes the source of a profound connection with the world

around him. Rather than separating him from that world, his moments of intense consciousness bring him closer to the social world. Instead of representing the world around him as that of mute and alien objects to be coldly contemplated by an observer above and beyond those objects, James sometimes turns the gaze around upon the observing narrator himself. In two of his fictional works set in Venice James specularises the male narrator and makes him the helpless object of another's gaze. In "The Aspern Papers" (1888) and The Wings of the Dove (1902) the male gaze does not always carry with it the power of possession and action customarily ascribed to it.<sup>19</sup> Both texts feature male characters who are lacking in economic (or literary) means and are manipulated by phallicised women who are in possession of wealth or power. In "The Aspern Papers" the scopic gaze is turned back upon the male narrator who becomes aware of being himself objectified, and in The Wings of the Dove Densher is represented as subject to the gaze of both men and phallic women. Both works have as their heroes men who are feminised as objects of the gaze and thus offer an alternative model of masculinity to the dominant mode of compulsive manliness required by much nineteenth century ideology and represented in many of its cultural products.<sup>20</sup>

While for many theorists and male modernists scopophilia, the pleasure in looking, is the prerogative of a male subject for whom women exist as fantasy images, for James this is not necessarily the case as I shall discuss below. Lacan's theories can be seen as exemplary explanations of how scopophilia works. Lacan places women "outside discourse" where they exist as an image of wholeness that is both a product of male desire and necessary to prop up the male subject.<sup>21</sup> Masculine scopophilia is directed outwards at



the woman whose own desire to be looked at reinforces the male ego and reaffirms his self-consciousness:

Woman is repressed as subject and desired as object in order to efface the gaze of the Other, the gaze that would destroy the illusion of reciprocity and one-ness that the process of seeing usually supports. The female object does not look, does not have its own point of view; rather it is erected as an image of the phallus sustaining male desires. (Mykyta 54)

In James this customary binarism of male gaze/female object does not necessarily apply; he often repudiates the equation of the male gaze with power and dominance. This repudiation is particularly evident in "The Aspern Papers" where we are offered a hero who is powerless, unable to see and immobilised by the powerful gaze of a woman.<sup>22</sup> The feminisation of the narrator that James offers in this story is linked to what Rita Felski has described as a "destabilization of traditional models of male bourgeois identity" in the 1880s and 90s and the male artist's sense of "alienation from dominant social structures and his own class identity" (1094-5). James's alienation from dominant modes of Anglo-American bourgeois masculinity is expressed in his story of masculine powerlessness.

In "The Aspern Papers" it is the male narrator who is figuratively placed "outside discourse" in his inability to recover the papers he so desperately desires. The narrator is continually described as being figuratively blind, unable to see and thus lacking in power. For example, early on he despairs that he has "not been able to look into a single pair of eyes into which [Aspern's] had looked or to feel a transmitted contact in any aged hand that his had touched" (279). On meeting the poet's former lover Juliana the narrator notes

that she is wearing a mask that hides her eyes: “[We] were not really face to face, inasmuch as she had over her eyes a horrible green shade which, for her, served almost as a mask. I believed for an instant that she had put it on expressly, so that from underneath it she might scrutinise me without being scrutinised herself” (291). Here the narrator is in the position of being gazed at, while Juliana is active, gazing. Rather than occupying a position of power, he occupies an impotent position confirmed by being caught in her gaze. Throughout the story Juliana is able to look at the narrator, while he is unable to see her. Juliana’s green shade makes her “impenetrable”, while the narrator himself is penetrable: “[The] old woman remained impenetrable and her attitude bothered me by suggesting that she had a fuller vision of me than I had of her” (293). She always has the “same mystifying bandage over her eyes”, rendering her face “invisible” while she “saw [him] clearly” (324). The narrator’s own visibility makes his impotence clear. Rather than controlling the action through his gaze in typical masculinist fashion, he is subject to Juliana’s controlling vision. Juliana’s power over the narrator is reinforced by her external circumstances. Although the narrator stares at the windows of her house hoping to catch a glimpse of her secrets, their “motionless shutters became as expressive as eyes consciously closed [and] even though invisible themselves they saw [him] between the lashes” (306). He is unceremoniously shut out. As the object who is gazed at, the male narrator languishes outside discourse and is not privy to the secrets controlled by the two women.

The narrator’s final humiliation is expressed in “The Aspern Papers” in scopic terms. Searching for the papers in Miss Bordereau’s rooms, the narrator is caught in the act of burglary:

[As] I did so (it is embarrassing for me to relate it), I looked over my shoulder. It was a chance, an instinct, for I had not heard anything. I almost let my luminary drop and certainly I stepped back, straightening myself up at what I saw. Miss Bordereau stood there in her night-dress, in the doorway of her room, watching me; her hands were raised, she had lifted the everlasting curtain that covered half her face, the only time I beheld her extraordinary eyes. They glared at me, they made me horribly ashamed. (362)

Caught in the act of hovering around Juliana's bureau, the narrator is trapped by the intensity of the woman's gaze. He is feminised and symbolically emasculated, made to occupy the feminine position of to-be-looked-at. In fact, in James's revision of the work for the New York edition this sense of entrapment and powerlessness becomes even stronger: "[Juliana's] eyes were like the sudden drench, for a caught burglar, of a flood of gaslight".

As can be seen from these examples, for James's narrator masculinity does not always entail power; it often entails lack. Just as the gondolier was in James's travel essays, his male subject here is also insistently specularised, his visibility serving only to confirm his lack of power. In The Wings of the Dove this phenomenon will become even more prevalent in James's representation of Densher, a hero who finds himself subject to both knowing men and phallic women.

#### IV

In "The Aspern Papers" James uses Venice as a setting for a story of visual power exploring the conjunction of masculine passivity, powerlessness and exposure. In The

Wings of the Dove James again takes up the idea of visual power in a novel of phallic transactions enacted through the exchange of glances and gazes. And again it is not the conventional alignment of masculinity with the gaze and power that James offers us in this novel. The characters in Wings who are “phallicly empowered” are not restricted by gender. For most of the novel it is the female characters - Maud Lowder and Kate Croy - who are in command of the “phallic territory” in which the novel unfolds. The practice of what Michael Moon calls “visual terrorism”, the mastery of the gaze, rather than being exclusively the prerogative of the male, is in this novel the prerogative of anyone rich enough or powerful enough to command it.

In Wings Densher from the outset is powerless and marked by lack. He is a man without economic means, as Milly explicitly acknowledges to Susan: “He has no ‘private means’, and no prospect of any. He has no income, and no ability, according to Mrs. Condrip, to make one” (124). Densher is characterised by absence and impotence, descriptively awash in negatives. In contrast Kate Croy and Lord Mark, the “handsome girl” and the wealthy man, are “together in what they represented” (105). Both are phallicly empowered. Maud Lowder is also thereby empowered, as is evident in James’s early description of her: “[Spacious] because she was full, because she had something in common, even in repose, with a projectile, of great size, loaded and ready for use” (110). In addition, Maud is characterised by her niece as the “Britannia of the Marketplace” (37), a powerful woman whose money gives her a “manner of looking, hard and bright” (125) and the ability to “bite [one’s] head off any day, any day [she] really open[s] [her] mouth” as she says to Densher. The castrative implications of this statement should be obvious.

Like her aunt, Kate too is powerful. She controls Densher through her active return of his looks; she is not simply object but also subject, not just looked at but actively looking:

[Kate and Densher] had found themselves regarding each other straight, and for a longer time on end than was usual even at parties in galleries; but that in itself after all would have been a small affair for two such handsome persons. It wasn't, in a word, simply that their eyes had met; other conscious organs, faculties, feelers had met as well . . . (49)

Kate's power lies in her ability to control her appearances. Just as she impresses Densher, Kate is also able to make an impression on Milly and to regulate, as Juliana had done to the narrator of "The Aspern Papers", what Milly is able to see. To Milly Kate is "prodigious" and "literally in control of the scene" (177). Just as Kate controls Milly, so too does she control Densher, who rages at Kate's manipulation of him.

In Wings James again links masculine powerlessness with exposure and visibility. Densher does as he is bidden but feels exposed by his "queer" and anomalous position. His instinct is of "a man somehow aware that if he let go at one place he should let go everywhere. If he took off his hand, the hand that at least helped to hold it together, the whole queer fabric that built him in would fall away in a minute and admit the light" (280). Kate has "perched him" on a "high ridge" and her "management of him" infuriates Densher: "There glowed for him a kind of rage at what he wasn't having; an exasperation, a resentment, begotten truly by the very impatience of desire, in respect to his postponed and relegated, his so extremely manipulated state" (182). He is "bent to her will". Instead

of controlling the action with his gaze, Densher is controlled by being the object of Kate's active manipulations.

Upsetting the conventional state of affairs in which women are objects circulated in an economy of desire, in Wings Densher is a masculine object circulated among the women.<sup>23</sup> Each of the three women - Kate, Maud Lowder and Susan Stringham - all want Densher to marry Milly. Densher sees himself as stuck in the middle of a "circle of petticoats", an "asinine position" of which he is glad there is no "male witness" (299). Here Densher becomes an object of exchange among the women who surround him, a position so anomalous that he is glad no male sees it. Densher's impotent situation is signified by his visibility just as was that of the narrator of "The Aspern Papers" and the gondolier of James's travel essays. James's continual specularisation of his male subject functions to make the narrator aware of his own lack of power.<sup>24</sup> As he had done with his Venetian travel essays and "The Aspern Papers", in Wings James also gives us a man who is feminised as the object of the gaze and thus offers us an alternative model of masculinity. Repudiating the equation of masculinity with mastery and control, James instead represents an alternative way of being, one that longs for new and different intensities of experience. And these alternative experiences will in Wings be articulated as passivity, receptivity and exposure.

The possibilities opened up for Densher by passivity, receptivity and exposure are mused about in a strange passage where he worries about being seen by other men in a "circle of petticoats":

She wanted, Susan Shepherd then, as appeared, the same thing Kate wanted, only wanted it as still further appeared, in so different a way and from a motive so different, even though scarce less deep. Then Mrs. Lowder wanted, by so odd an evolution of her exuberance, exactly what each of the others did; and he was between them all, he was in the midst. Such perceptions made occasions - well, occasions for fairly wondering if it mightn't be best just to consent, luxuriously, to *be* the ass the whole thing involved. Trying not to be and yet keeping it in was of the two things the more asinine. He was glad there was no male witness; it was a circle of petticoats; he shouldn't have liked a man to see him. He had only for a moment a sharp thought of Sir Luke Street, the great master of the knife . . . He had a vision of great London surgeons - if this one was a surgeon - as incisive all round; so that he should perhaps after all not wholly escape the ironic attention of his own sex. The most he might be able to do was not to care; while he was trying not to he could take that in . . . Lord Mark had caught him twice in the fact - the fact of his absurd posture; and that made a second male. (299)

The ostensible thing that the women want, although it is not clearly spelled out, is for Densher to marry Milly. However, the language here is extraordinarily vague, circuitous and lacking in referent, typical of James's late style.

While unclear and convoluted, Densher's musings here do represent what seems to be an evocative "impression" of his own consciousness, including the chaotic tumble of his thoughts. Rather than realistically representing the external world, James, in this and many other passages, represents his characters' own subjective responses to that world and

records the impressions the world makes on them. In this case, while Densher appears to deny it, the references to “ass”, “asinine”, “absurd posture”, the “sharp thought” of the “incisive” Dr. Luke and the being act by Lord Mark suggest instead that the male witness is just what Densher is thinking of here.<sup>25</sup> This passage is a meditation on exposure, of being caught in a compromising act by two men.

In addition to being the object of men’s gazes and women’s exchanges, Densher is also caught in the act by Eugenio, who has seen through his wooing of Milly. Densher is visible to Eugenio, just as the narrator was to Juliana in “The Aspern Papers”, a visibility that, like his imagined exposure to Luke and Mark, has an erotic subtext:

It was his own fault if the vulgar view, the view that might have been taken of an inferior man, happened so incorrigibly to fit him. He apparently wasn’t so different from inferior men as that came to. If therefore, in fine, Eugenio figured to him as ‘my friend’ because he was conscious of his seeing so much of him, what made him see on the same lines in the course of their present interview was ever so much more. (325)

This “more” is that both Eugenio and Densher are in the same relation to Milly, both after her money, although Eugenio’s pursuit is overt and explicit and Densher’s covert and implicit. The subtext to the “more” is Densher’s erotic attraction to this man and other men, an attraction that cannot be explicitly articulated or acknowledged but that can be read between the lines. As Densher interacts with Eugenio his physical surroundings illustrate his turbulent mental state:



This manner, while they stood a long minute facing each other over all they didn't say, played a part as well in the sudden jar to Densher's protected state. It was a Venice all of evil that had broken out for them alike, so that they were together in their anxiety, if they really could have met on it; a Venice of cold lashing rain from a low black sky, of wicked wind raging through narrow passes, of general arrest and interruption . . . Our young man's mute exchange with his friend contained meanwhile such a depth of reference that, had the pressure been but slightly prolonged, they might have reached a point at which they were equally weak.

(325)

In "Sexuality and Visual Terrorism" Michael Moon has argued that the "Venetian climax" of the novel encodes a homoerotic thematic in a "highly fragmented form" (438).<sup>26</sup> Occurring in what James himself called the "false and deformed half" (AN 302) of the novel, this homoerotic subtext remains largely hidden by the overtly heterosexual thematics of the transfer of Densher's allegiance from Kate to the dead Milly. However, while the homoerotics of these texts may be implicit, what is explicit is James's interest in and imagining of alternative modes of masculine subjectivity experienced in Venice. The Wings of the Dove and "The Aspern Papers" allow James to imagine being penetrated by a mastering gaze and the Italian travel essays are a culturally-sanctioned vehicle with which to rhapsodise about masculine physical beauty from a position of cultural and class power.

James's plots and stylistic innovations in these works, particularly in Wings, can be seen as part of the British Aesthetic movement's feminisation of literature. With its specific intersection of decadence, femininity, a "self-consciously decorative and anti-realist aesthetic" (Felski 1095) and a hero who exists outside the realm of bourgeois masculine production, Wings imagines an alternative masculine subjectivity. James's feminised males, like those of Wilde and Huysmans, cultivates traits which the dominant ideology of the period identified as decadent: passivity, love of ornamentation and design, vanity, hyper-developed sensitivity. Such features were seen by detractors as symptoms of "degeneration and hysteria" and by supporters as "rejecting middle-class ideals of reason, progress, and industrious masculinity" (Felski 1098).<sup>27</sup> For critics of decadent aestheticism the term "effeminate" could cover all these manifestations. James's aesthetic innovations in the later work were seen by contemporary readers as unmanly and suspect. It was probably passages such as those quoted above - of which the late works are full - that prompted James's unsympathetic critics to rail against his mature literary style. For example, F.M. Colby, writing "The Queerness of Henry James" in the Bookman in 1902, called James's later style a "fig-leaf" that disguises "how shocking he really was" (qtd. in Gard 335). Colby asserts that it has been "a long time since the public knew what Henry James was up to behind that verbal hedge of his, although half-suspecting that he meant no good, because a style like that seemed just the place for guilty secrets" (335). Colby goes on to argue that "In a literature so well policed as ours, the position of Henry James is anomalous. He is the only writer of the day whose moral notions do not seem to matter. His dissolute and complicated Muse may say just what she chooses. This may be because

it would be so difficult to expose him. Never did so much vice go with so much sheltering vagueness" (337). Other contemporary critics responded to James's late style by calling it effeminate and identifying his subject matter as lacking in intellectual seriousness. For example, J.P. Mowbray characterised James's subjects as "the foibles and fashions of mere intellectual coquetry" and saw his interest in the "boudoir side of life" as more appropriate for "the other sex" (qtd. in Gard 331).

These critics' comments are fascinating in their identification of James's style as too vague, effeminate and dissolute. James's inability, in these accounts, to just say something straight out was held to be evidence of his works' morbid interest in vice and sexuality. James's refusal to be clear and definite and determinate represented to these critics a perversity illustrated by his ambiguity and indeterminacy, his embrace of what one could call a veil of suggestion, that was analogous to his supposed sexual perversity. His language is evocative and suggestive rather than fixed and descriptive. It suggests possibilities and reveals a consciousness open to otherness. Such an open receptive approach to the world stands against the "cult of order" (Posnock 5) enforced by a masculinist bourgeois culture under modernity. In Italy the Jamesian self finds what Ross Posnock identifies as "the space to improvise new forms of identity and pleasure, including those found in exhilarating, isolating experiences of passion and exposure" (5). In his analysis of Henry and William James's responses to modernity Posnock has argued that Henry's response was to embrace openness and indeterminacy, to allow the shocks impressed on him by urban modernity to destabilise his identity.<sup>28</sup> Posnock argues that in the latter part of his career James attempted to create a "certain vertiginous blurring that

would make the self and social arrangements more flexible and thus more tolerant of a range of behaviours beyond conventional norms” (22). While Posnock confines his attention to James’s experiences in the urban centres of modern America, his comments are equally applicable to James’s experiences in non-urban, non-industrialised Italy.

In the works discussed above James explores alternative possibilities for masculine subjectivity. Through the embrace of openness and indeterminacy James frees himself and his fictional creations from the tyranny of the fixed self and experiments with options for other modes of being. The two primary alternatives experimented with in these works are implicitly feminine: the observer/voyeur who “suck[s] in the gladness of gaping” and the passive, receptive subject who is exposed to the penetrating gaze of others. In Whistler’s Venetian work we will see a similar experimentation with alternative modes of subjectivity which appropriate qualities culturally-defined as feminine.

## VI

In my discussion of Whistler’s Venetian aestheticism the link I want to make is the following: critique of materialism, femininity or alternative masculinities, and avant-garde art forms. As a site inherently opposed to instrumental, materialistic Britain Venice offers itself as suitable to an avant-garde appropriation of the feminine. For Whistler as for James Venice represented a world which was apparently removed from the instrumental rationality which characterised Britain and existed simply as a beautiful object of aesthetic contemplation. Venice and the feminine are linked with the realm of culture because they are all characterised by feeling rather than action, spiritual sympathies rather than grossly physical ones, and, as we shall see in Whistler’s etchings, interiority.<sup>29</sup> Venice, the

feminine and culture dwell in a space separated from what Marcuse calls “the factual world of the daily struggle for existence” (“Affirmative” 95). Venice, the feminine and culture all represent an unbounded world of imaginative freedom which is unlike daily bourgeois life. The uncomfortable awareness of labour and its misery that would confront Whistler in London and that he represented in earlier etchings was absent in Venice. And in labour’s absence, Beauty appears.

That Whistler saw Venice as a beautiful object apparently existing solely to be appropriated by the artist is apparent from one of his letters to his mother:

After all, though, this evening the weather softened slightly and perhaps tomorrow may be fine - and then Venice will be simply glorious, as now and then I have seen it - after the wet, the colours upon the walls and their reflections in the canals are more glorious than ever - and with sun shining upon the polished marble mingled with rich toned bricks and plaster, [this] amazing city of palaces becomes really one fairy land - created one would think especially for the painter. The people with their gay gowns and handkerchiefs - and the many tinted buildings for them to lounge against or pose before, seem to exist especially for one’s pictures and to have no other reason for being! (qtd. in Lochnan 248)

In this passage Whistler articulates precisely the appeal of Venice. It is one lovely vision laid out for the artist’s consumption. The Venetian people do not exist in themselves but, like the city itself, as objects to serve the artist’s imagination. In this letter Whistler suppresses his knowledge of the city’s actual status as tourist centre and its inhabitants as labourers in a tourist economy. In order to represent Venice as a beautiful aesthetic object,

Whistler must, as James did in his writings, find aesthetic forms and subjects which are not linked to the city's tourist economy. By eliminating explicit images of Venice's tourist economy and focusing instead on areas of the city which were not usually seen or represented by artists, Whistler will, paradoxically, increase the market value of his own images of the city by offering views of Venice which are "original" and different. Whistler announced his project to one of the directors of the Fine Arts Society which had commissioned twelve etchings in just these terms:

Venice, my dear Huish, will be superb - and you may double your bets all round . . . the mine of wealth for both you and me in this place . . . I have learned to know a Venice in Venice that others never seem to have perceived, and which, if I bring back with me as I propose will far more than compensate for all annoyances and delays and vituperations of spirit . . . The etchings themselves are far more delicate in execution, more beautiful in subject, and more important in interpretation than any of the old set. (qtd. in Lochnan 246)

Similarly in a letter to Howell, his old business partner, Whistler wrote "I tell you old chap that I am bound to turn everything I touch into gold - I can't help it - the work I do is lovely and these other fellows have no distant idea of what I see with certainty" (qtd. in Lochnan 246). Just as James had done with his literary competitors, Whistler asserts the superiority of his vision of Venice and identifies his own work as more important than theirs, and indeed more important than his own earlier etchings, the Thames and French sets.

Whistler's Venice etchings can be divided into two types: panoramas and enclosed spaces. In the first he represents the city as a distant horizontal band with an empty foreground. In the second he focuses on doorways and tunnels. In both types we are made aware of the artist's perceiving consciousness constructing the scenes. Whistler is not interested in representing the reality of Venice - he is interested in exploring the city as a "fairy land" for the artist. His etchings, like James's writings, are suggestive rather than descriptive, evocative, ambiguous and delicate. Whistler's Venetian aesthetic is one of "delicacy" and in etching this meant the use of the "finest possible point", a dentist's tool rather than an etching needle, and small plates.<sup>30</sup> While his artistic vocabulary was similar to James's literary one in its use of delicacy and suggestion, Whistler, unlike James, was not homoerotic and he was not particularly fascinated by masculine beauty. However, like James, he does explore a new kind of masculine subjectivity in the Venetian etchings, one that, in its fascination with delicacy, indeterminacy, and interiority, appropriates the feminine.

Where James had explored passivity, powerlessness and exposure in his work, Whistler articulates the "delicacy of expression, cultivation of exquisite sensations and evocations of feminine experience" (Sinfield 88) all opposed to the masculinity identified with "action, enterprise and progress - with the realms of business, industry, science, and law" (Huyssen 45). These new kinds of experience are expressed in new aesthetic forms. Unlike his earlier Thames Set etchings of 1859-60, for example Black Lion Wharf (1859) (fig. 4), in which all areas of the image are delineated in equally sharp detail with clear and precise lines in what Michael Fried calls an "impossibly clear, precise, and spatially



Figure 4 Black Lion Wharf (1859)



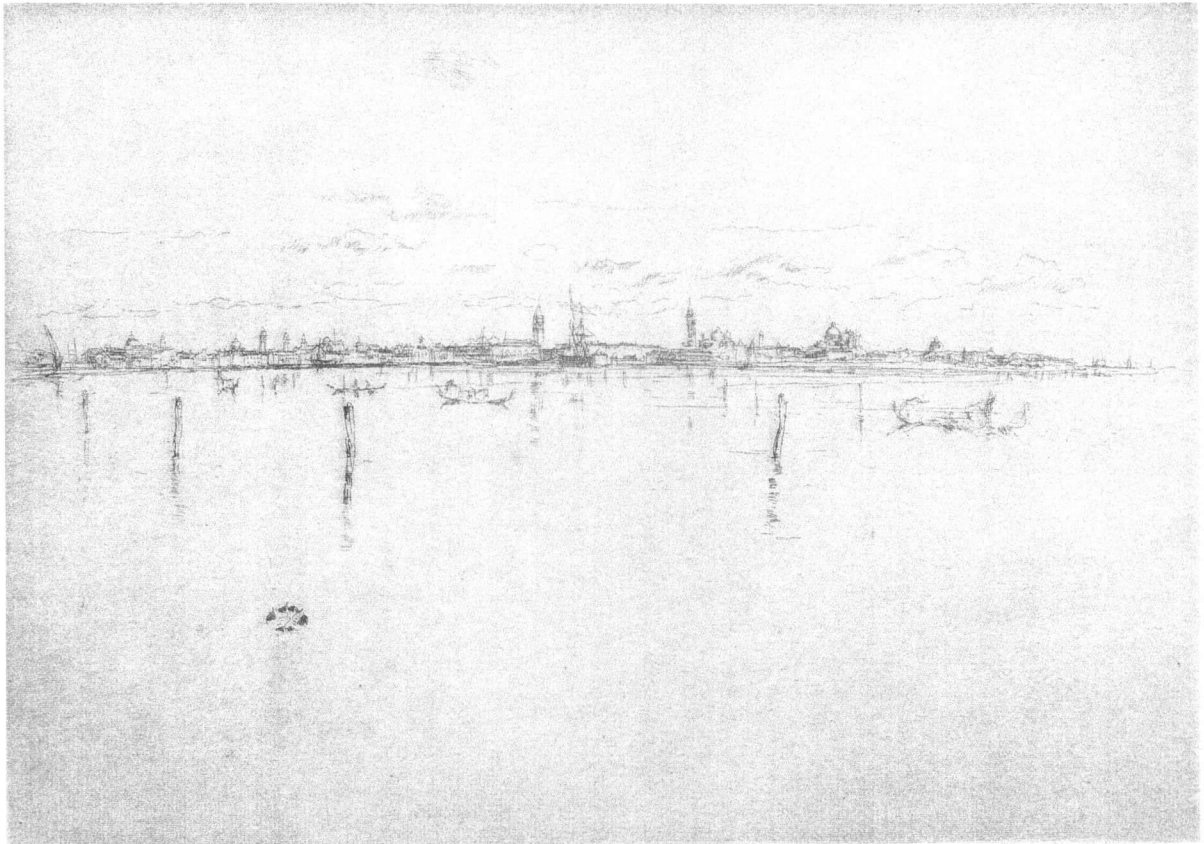


Figure 5 Little Venice (1879-80)

comprehensive act of seeing" ("Between Realisms" 29), Little Venice (fig. 5) is lacking in detail and rendered with delicate, spidery lines and cross-hatchings that emphasise the artist's consciousness of the scene, the impression it makes on his mind, rather than any quasi-photographic depiction of it. In Little Venice (1879-80) the Venetian landscape from the Public Gardens to Santa Maria della Salute is depicted from a point across the lagoon. The familiar landmarks of Venice - the campanile and the dome of San Giorgio Maggiore - have no more visual importance than the posts which appear in the open expanse of water comprising the bottom two-thirds of the image. The tiny strip of lines which delineate the city do not extend to the edges of the image but rather peter out as they approach the edges. A few lines appear in the sky to suggest tiny clouds and a few lines in the open space below the city indicate gentle waves in the lagoon's surface. In the bottom left of the blank space below the city Whistler's trademark butterfly is prominently displayed and is as large as any of the buildings he represents in the image. Little Venice is divided into three horizontal bands: the sky, the thin strip of cityscape, and the water. Indeed, in terms of strength, detail, and clarity, the most clearly rendered item in the image is Whistler's butterfly, reinforcing the fact that it is as much the artist's unique sensibility that is being represented as the exterior world itself.

In addition to using delicate line work and lack of detail as a means of emphasising the unique consciousness of the perceiver, Whistler also experimented for the first time in these works with what was called "artistic printing". Artistic printing meant that rather than wiping the undrawn areas of the plate completely free of ink before printing as he had earlier done, here Whistler experimented with wiping so that a greater or lesser amount of

ink was left on the surface of the plate. This “plate tone” allowed Whistler to vary the image without changing the etched lines themselves. By using a greater or lesser amount of plate tone, making the image darker or lighter in different ideas, the same etching could appear to represent different times of day and night. Rather than creating an edition of etchings in which each impression is the same as the others, Whistler thus varied his impressions by printing them differently.<sup>31</sup> In so doing, Whistler enhanced the value of each of the impressions as they could be seen as “original” rather than as mere reproductions of his first, and finished, creative thought. Rather than being simply mechanical grunt work, printing for Whistler became an extension of the creative process. We as viewers are made aware of Whistler’s creative choices as evidenced by the films of ink on the surface of the image, made aware once again of his animating artistic sensibility.

Supporting my view that the point of the image is primarily to represent the artist’s own aesthetic sensibilities is the etching’s use of vignetting and focus. In the Venetian works Whistler developed a means of composition that used what he called a method of focusing or “secret of drawing” (qtd. in Anderson 234). Whistler described this compositional approach to his disciples Walter Sickert and Mortimer Menpes:

I began first of all by seizing upon the chief point of interest. Perhaps it might have been the extreme distance, - and the little palaces and the shipping beneath the bridge. If so, I would begin drawing that distance in elaborately, and then would expand from it until I came to the bridge, which I would draw in one broad sweep. If by chance I did not see the whole of the bridge, I would not put it in. In this way the picture must necessarily be a perfect thing from start to finish. Even if one were

to be arrested in the middle of it, it would still be a fine and complete picture. (qtd. in Anderson 234)

This use of vignetting means that images such as Little Venice are more fully elaborately in their centres than their edges. The image is concentrated in the interior space of the plate rather than being evenly distributed over the entire surface as in Whistler's earlier realist etchings. In Whistler's earlier etchings of the Thames, for example, the clarity and detail of each element extends to all parts of the image. As a result, the image gives the illusion that the world represented extends beyond the borders of the picture and that what is represented is a small section of a larger reality. In Little Venice, in contrast, Whistler's use of focusing, combined with his delicate line work and flattened space, emphasise his interest in the expressive rather than representational possibilities of form. And what these elements express is not what Whistler himself, referring to the Thames etchings, called the "crude and hard detail of the beginner" (Thorpe 120) but the delicacy of the "Artist".

In chapter three I outlined Whistler's aesthetic theory and showed how Whistler differentiated his work from competing cultural forms. You will recall that for Whistler the individual who merely paints the surface he sees before him is a "poor kind of creature" (Thorp 52), an imitator not an artist. Repudiating realism, including his own earlier realist productions, Whistler expresses in his etchings that "power of creation" given to the artist "chosen by the Gods" to go "beyond the slovenly suggestion of nature" (Thorp 82, 83). Hard clarity and excess of detail are not art - these qualities according to Whistler belong to the "amateur" and the "tradesman". Art is refined, delicate, opposed to the crude materialism of the manufacturer and the huckster. Such an aesthetic is implicitly feminine

and valorises “culture against brutality, the spirit against the system, style against purpose, personal emotion against compulsion” (Sinfield 86).

For Whistler, as it was for James, the artist’s consciousness is both the agency through which his unique vision is transmitted and the subtext of the work’s subject-matter. In order to evoke the heightened sensitivity of that “refined essence” of “Godly” thought Whistler held true art to be, no bodily labour must be apparent in the finished product. Unlike his French Set etchings in which many of the images show evidence of “foul-biting”, Little Venice shows evidence of scraper work to eliminate any trace of such marks which would indicate Whistler’s own laborious processes. Foul-biting occurs when the coated metal plate has been handled too much or carelessly and the protective coating is removed by the artist’s finger or palm prints. When removed, the acid will eat away the metal in those spots, leaving impressions of finger prints and other marks etched into the plate. Michael Fried has suggested that the prevalence of foul-biting in the French Set indicates that in those works Whistler saw the etching plate as an extension of his own body and parts of the image consequently took on an appearance of bodily organs.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, in the Venetian work Whistler apparently worked to remove the possibility of any evidence of the artist’s bodily labour left on the etching plate and subsequent printed impression. As I indicated in chapter three, Whistler’s aesthetic theories placed a premium on the artist’s mind work or imagination rather than on his bodily labour. His creativity, and the value of his works, were to be measured by his ability to “instantaneously” deliver an aesthetic concept directly from his mind to the canvas or plate. While etching is a labour-intensive procedure, Whistler manages to convey the impression that his images are

unlaboured. Indeed, in one of his pronouncements on “finish” in pictures, Whistler makes it clear that, while labour is necessary to create art, art must appear to be unlaboured. If evidence of labour remains in the image, then the picture remains incomplete:

A picture is finished when all trace of the means used to bring about the end has disappeared. To say of a picture, as is often said in its praise, that it shows great and earnest labour, is to say that it is incomplete and unfit for view. Industry in art is a necessity - not a virtue - and any evidence of the same, in the production, is a blemish, not a quality; a proof, not of achievement, but of absolutely insufficient work, for work alone will efface the footsteps of work. The work of the Master reeks not of the sweat of the brow - suggests no effort - and is finished from its beginning. (Thorp 78)

For the aesthete Beauty is not laboured over; it magically appears through the artist's creative alchemy.

While Little Venice shows Whistler's emphasis on delicacy and suggestion to evoke an impression of Venice, Nocturne (1879-80) (fig. 6) pushes the emphasis on evocation of mood even further through Whistler's use of veiling. Where Henry James had made use of veiling and suggestion in his evocative language, Whistler uses visual veils to render his impressions of Venice's lagoon. This nocturne was one of several in which Whistler manipulated plate tone to create what Lochnan calls “dramatic reflections on the water, and veils of darkness of mist over the subject” (253). Like Little Venice, this panorama offers a thin horizontal expanse of city located about two-thirds of the way up the plate and a large expanse of open space to indicate the ocean. In this print Whistler has

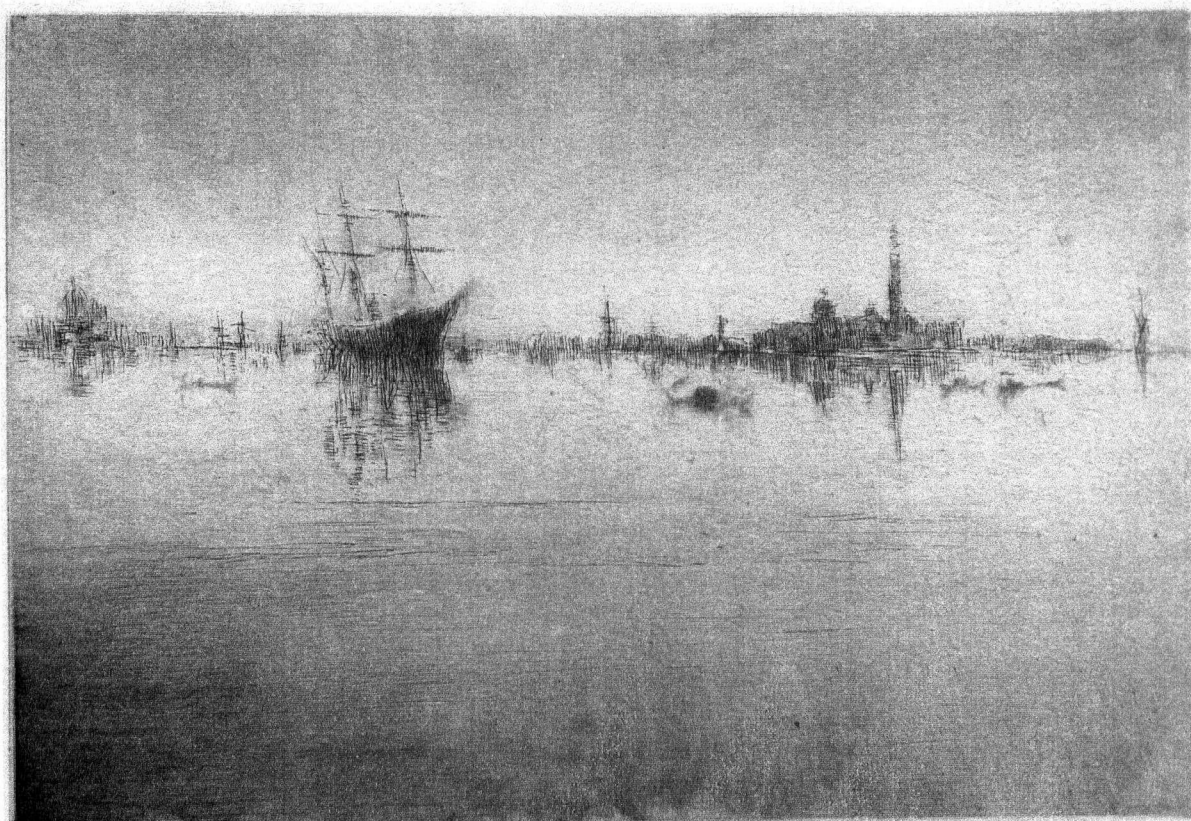


Figure 6 Nocturne (1879-80)

added a three masted ship at anchor in front of the horizon to the left of centre. In several of the darker versions of this print, the ship appears about to enter into a circular central void left clean during the wiping process. The ink left on the plate's surface creates a halo effect in which the edges of the image are dark and the centre light. Nothing in this picture is explicit; like the late style of James, Whistler's style here is subtle, evocative, indefinite, misty. Forms are not clear but dissolve into one another. No objects are clearly delineated - each seems to meld into the next. For Whistler as for James beauty lay in suggestion and delicacy not in a crude explicitness, in an implicitly feminine aesthetic.

Just as the panoramas articulate Whistler's appropriation of a feminine aesthetic, so too does the second major group of Venetian subjects with which he engaged, the enclosed spaces. Doorway or tunnel motifs which suggest a gynocentric aesthetic figure prominently among Whistler's Venetian subjects. In these images - Two Doorways (1879-80) (fig. 7) is an example - Whistler represents figures silhouetted in doorways or at the entrance to tunnels. Sometimes the figures are light and the doorways dark; in others a dark figure stands in a light-filled interior.<sup>33</sup> The composition of these images is always frontal as if the motif were being looked at straight on. In many the doorway or tunnel motif is placed in the centre of the composition and, as in the panoramas, the centre of the composition is the most detailed and the picture becomes progressively less fully-elaborated as it moves towards the edges of the image. The effect of these compositional elements is, in Nocturne: Furnace (1880) (fig. 8) for example, to situate the tiny figure of the glass maker in the forge in a small square pool of light surrounded by a void of darkness. Unlike two earlier realist versions of a similar subject, The Lime-burner (1859)



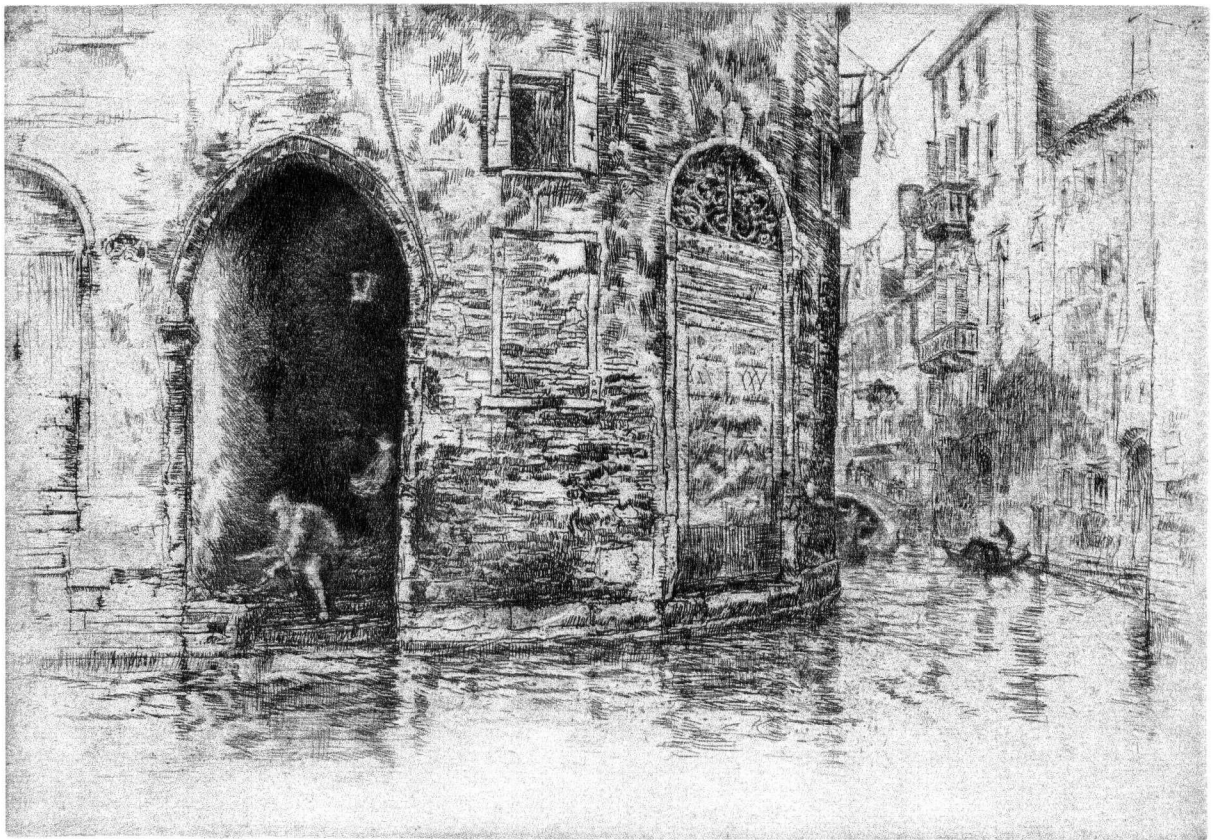


Figure 7 Two Doorways (1879-80)

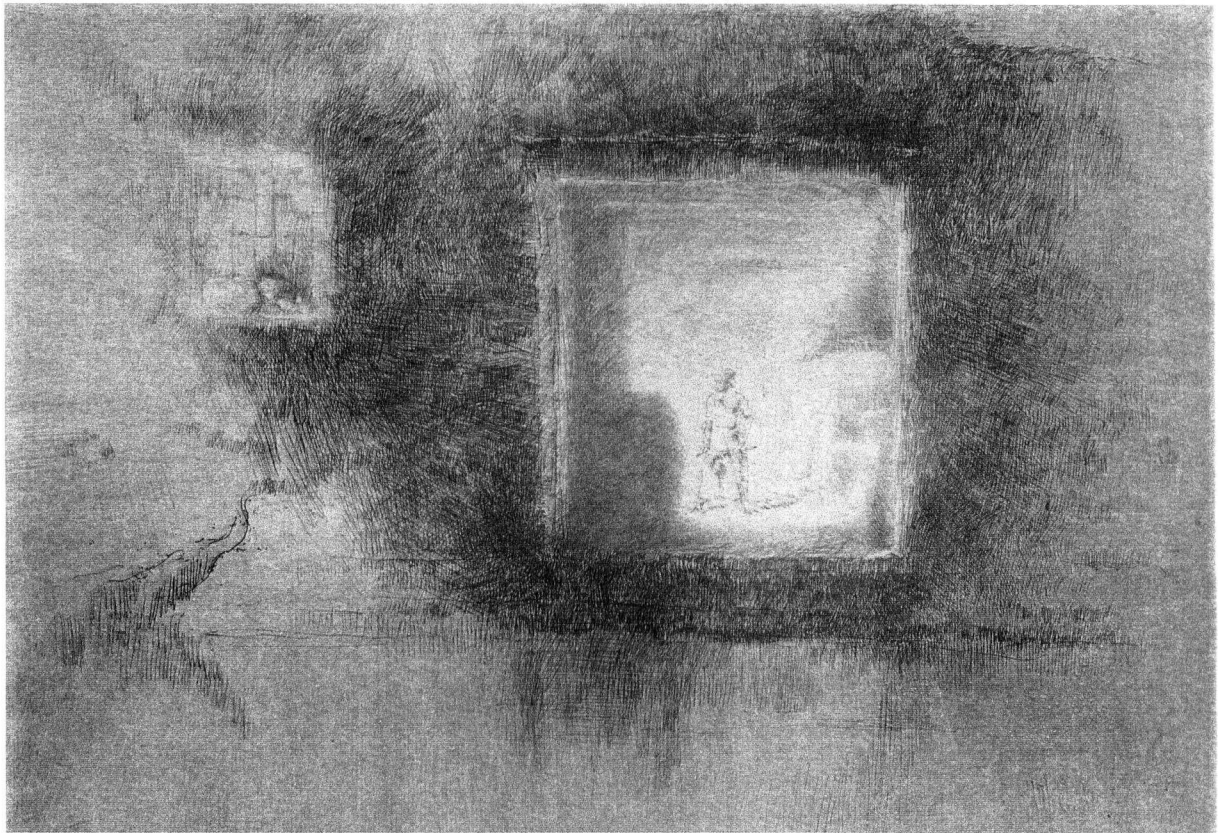


Figure 8 Nocturne: Furnace (1880)

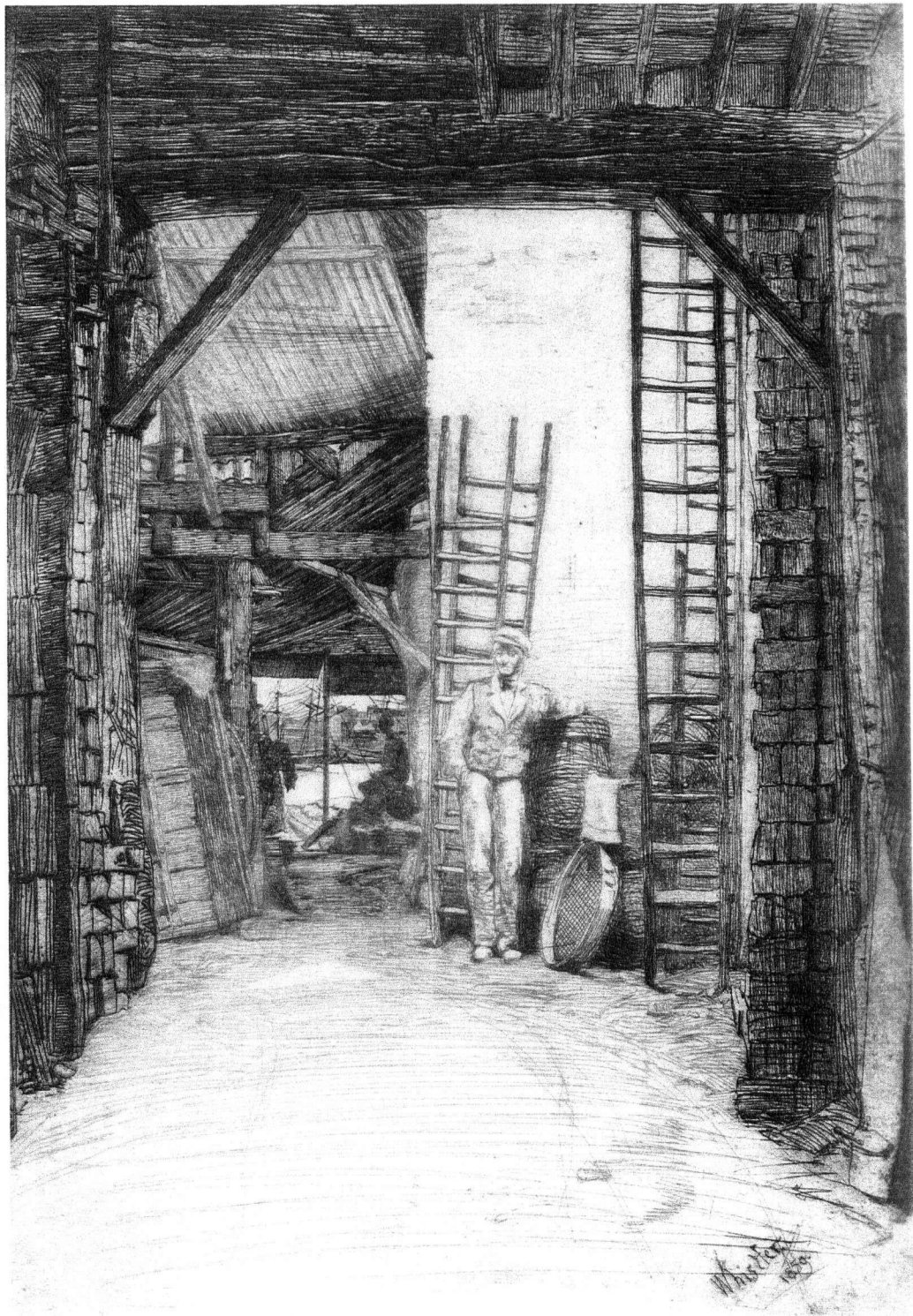


Figure 9 The Lime-burner (1859)

(fig. 9) and The Forge (1861), which were detailed portraits of lower class labourers at work, the subject of Nocturne: Furnace is not the portrait of a labouring body but the evocation of a mysterious dark void through which we view the small figure as if through a keyhole. This keyhole view is, like James's narrative stance in the essays, voyeuristic. The darkness is rendered with many, many small delicate etched lines and cross-hatching, lines which seem to vibrate with a delicate motion as if being lightly breathed upon. Here as in Little Venice and Nocturne we are aware of the perceiving consciousness, the artist's mind through which we experience this scene.

I have suggested above that Whistler's aesthetic in the "enclosed spaces" etchings is gynocentric. By this I mean that Whistler represented motifs that are associated with the feminine in a style that is also feminine. The doorway/tunnel prints can be seen as analogous to the caves, crevices and grottoes that in landscape paintings are often seen as vaginal entrances into nature's uterus.<sup>34</sup> Caves, crevices and grottoes are seen as symbols of the hidden, the mysterious and the longing for a security which the return to the womb offers. Like these natural representations of feminine interiority, many of Whistler's doorway/tunnel prints also represent a movement inward into darkness and mystery. In them we can see a fascination with dark vaginal-like openings and womb-like enclosures. The space within the doorways are spaces of retreat and refuge to which Whistler was clearly drawn. In addition to the representation of a mysterious interiority, some of these etchings also symbolise a potentiality or passivity, both states more closely aligned with the feminine than the masculine.<sup>35</sup>

Many of the doorway/tunnel prints, such as The Doorway (1879-80), The Dryer (1880), Garden (1880), The Traghetto, No. 2 (1879-80), and early states of Doorway and Vine (1880), with their figures placed at thresholds of doorways or tunnels, describe the condition of liminality, an in-between or border state in which the figures are poised between one side and the other. The figures are suspended in a space where anything is still possible, nothing has been ruled out. Rather than describing action, they articulate a suspension of action. This threshold state has been perceptively analysed by Mary Ann Caws in a way that sheds light on Whistler's aesthetic here. She argues that

Our longing for liminality, for that stage between, where everything remains uncertain, our very passion for the topics revolving around borders, our very dwelling on the threshold of the notion of threshold, are these not indicative at once of a desire for going where we would stay, and staying in just that going stage? ("Architecture and Conversation" 230)

In terms of the argument that this chapter is advancing, I suggest that the border states Whistler explores express alternative possibilities for masculine subjectivity. Rather than the either/or of hard edges, clear boundaries and distinct divisions associated by the dominant cultural discourse with masculinity, Whistler visually investigates states of in-betweenness and openness.<sup>36</sup> In so doing, his images are analogous to James's late stylistic voice with its indirectness, vagueness and ambiguity. Just as many sections of Wings are suggestive rather than explicit and refuse specificity, so too are Whistler's images.<sup>37</sup>

Just as alternative subjectivities in James are revealed in his technical innovations such as use of ambiguity, suggestion and indeterminacy, so too are they articulated in

Whistler's analogous visual forms. Rather than the hard-edged, clear, self-contained aesthetic which was and is associated with the "red-blooded" masculinity of a Degas, Whistler experiments with softness, indeterminacy, delicacy, ambiguity and open-endedness. In these images of enclosed spaces Whistler uses motifs that were conventionally designated as the sphere of women: private, interior and domestic spaces. And just as James repudiated in "The Aspern Papers" and Wings the customary binarism of male gaze/female object and the equation of the male gaze with power and dominance, so too does Whistler here. His spatial devices in Nocturne: Furnace and Two Doorways, for example, articulate not a mastering relation to the space and its occupants but one that is tentative, open and fluid, qualities customarily attributed to a feminine vision.<sup>38</sup> Instead of expressing a mastering vision in which everything is clearly available to the artist's cold reifying eye, Whistler offers in his doorway and tunnel motifs partial glimpses of intimate interior spaces which are mysterious and either dark or vaguely defined, hinting at the unseen and unknowable elements beyond the depicted threshold. Whistler's Venetian aesthetic is not the vigilant, masterful gaze but the tentative glimpse.

## VII

Like James's stylistic innovations, Whistler's delicate line work was seen by many contemporary viewers as enervated and effeminate and his experimental wiping methods as merely messy rather than richly evocative. For example, in a review of the first exhibition of the Venice etchings in London in 1882, a reviewer deplored Nocturne's understatement and lack of finish:

“Nocturne” . . . can hardly be called, as it stands, an etching: the bones as it were of the picture have been etched, which bones consists of some shipping and distant objects, and then over the whole of the plate ink has been smeared. We have seen a great many representations of Venetian skies, but never saw one before consisting of brown smoke with clots of ink in diagonal lines. (qtd. in Fine 133)

The critic for the Daily News said that “Mr. Whistler has attempted to convey impressions by lines far too few for his purpose” and complained the Nocturne depended not on etched lines but on printing for its visual effects (qtd. in Lochnan 260). While the critic for The Globe enjoyed Whistler’s unusual subject-matter, the St. James Gazette reviewer called Whistler’s new style “no improvement upon that which helped him to win his fame in this field of art” (qtd. in Lochnan 260). One of the many who preferred Whistler’s French and Thames Sets, this same critic noted that unlike the Venice etchings, Whistler’s earlier productions “used to be remarkable for the clearness, decision, and unerring precision of their drawing, as well as for the power they displayed” (qtd. in Lochnan 260). Like James’s late style, Whistler’s was associated with the feminine, with over-subtlety, and with lightness and grace, all in the nineteenth century terms used to describe what was considered an inferior form of art, whether women’s art or that of the Japanese.

In the contrast between Degas and Whistler deployed by nineteenth and twentieth century critics, we can see what Andrew Stephenson has identified as “two conspicuous, divergent and competing representations of artistic masculinity readily available” (270) to the English intelligentsia.<sup>39</sup> One form, the butterfly or effeminate intellectual, was associated with Whistler, Wilde and British Aestheticism. The other, the ox, or “tough

guy”, was allied to what Stephenson calls “the racy fantasies of metropolitan bohemian sub-cultures and was conspicuously embodied in its most virulent Parisian misogynist and genophobic form by Degas” (270). Leaving aside the question of the truth of Stephenson’s characterisation of Degas, we may acknowledge the truth of his observation that these two opposed and competing modes of masculine subjectivity were and are central to any account of nineteenth century avant-garde artistic practice. Reviewing an exhibition catalogue devoted to the work of Walter Sickert who was for a time an associate of Whistler, Stephenson notes that it is Sickert’s connections with Degas’ “red-blooded masculine mystique” that are emphasised, while Whistler is “sidelined as an ‘effeminate’, less ‘virilizing’ model” (271). In the ongoing association of particular stylistic devices with gendered characteristics, Whistler’s delicacy was and continues to be characterised as effeminate and places him outside the main trajectory of modernism.<sup>40</sup>

James’s and Whistler’s explorations of alternative masculine subjectivities was a part of a larger late nineteenth century avant-garde imaginary femininity. This imaginary femininity was historically created and can be seen as a response to the increasingly marginal position of serious literature and art in a society where masculinity was identified with the public sphere of “action, enterprise and progress” (Huyssen 45). This avant-garde identification with femininity was, however, problematic and unstable because the feminine was also seen as inferior. In order to get beyond this problem James, as we have seen in chapter two, aligns his production with the gendered category of “consciousness”, positioning his new stylistic innovations as exemplary manifestations of a superior mind. Similarly, Whistler constructs his own newly-inflected category of aesthetic delicacy as the



result of mental superiority and opposes it to the crudeness and vulgarity of “Birmingham and Manchester” (Thorp 84). In so doing, both James and Whistler participated in Aestheticism’s project of expanding the conventional limits of masculinity within late nineteenth century Anglo-American culture by linking the male body and beauty, homoeroticism and cultural production, privileging the realm of the aesthetic over utilitarianism, political economy, trade and empire, and valorising the consumption of intense visual stimuli over bodily labour. In the Venetian work James and Whistler explore the alternative masculinities made possible in the new zones of experience opened up by the wider transformations of social, political and sexual relationships in the late nineteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup> Critics are beginning to turn their attention to issues of masculinity, sexuality and representation with respect to modernist art production. On homoerotic desire and representation in Oscar Wilde see Ed Cohen, “Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation”. See also Alan Sinfield, The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment and Jonathan Dollimore, Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault, esp. 64-78. On masculine “homosociality” and the profession of writing see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire. For a discussion of the links between Victorian Aestheticism and an attempt to reimagine masculinity at the margins of conventional middle-class notions of manliness, see Thais E. Morgan, “Reimagining Masculinity in Victorian Criticism: Swinburne and Pater”. Recently some critics have begun to look at Henry James’s work in terms of the issues of sexuality and gender. For example, in her article “The Beast in the Closet: James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic” from The Epistemology of the Closet Eve Sedgwick argues that James’s short story “The Beast in the Jungle” articulates the male narrator’s desire for another man and fear of that desire. Recent works examining James’s constructions of masculinity include Kelly Cannon, Henry James and Masculinity: The Man at the Margins; Leland S. Person, Jr., “Henry James, George Sand, and the Suspense of Masculinity”; and Kaja Silverman, “Too Early/Too Late: Subjectivity and the Primal Scene in Henry James”. So far, no work has been done on these issues with respect to Whistler. This chapter represents a beginning.

<sup>2</sup> For contemporary accounts of the appeal of Venice see James Jackson Jarves, Italian Rambles: Studies of Life and Manners in New and Old Italy; John Ruskin, The Stones of Venice; and Arthur Symonds, Cities of Italy. For a recent analysis of nineteenth century responses to Italy and Venice in particular see John Pemble, The Mediterranean Passion: Victorians and Edwardians in the South.

<sup>3</sup> John Ruskin saw Venice as a reminder of empire lost and an instructive lesson for the British Empire. In The Stones of Venice he describes Venice’s history as a reenactment of the primal fall of humanity and offers Venice as a negative example to modern Britain: “Since first the dominion of man was asserted over the ocean, three thrones, of mark beyond all others, have been set upon its sands: the thrones of Tyre, Venice, and England. Of the First of these great powers only the memory remains; of the Second the ruin; the Third, which inherits their greatness, if it forget their example, may be led through prouder eminence to less pitied destruction” (9:17).

<sup>4</sup> For nineteenth century images of Venice see Margaretta M. Lovell, Venice: The American View, 1860-1920 and Donna M. Seldin, Americans in Venice: 1879-1913.

<sup>5</sup> James's Italian essays are compiled in Italian Hours. In this chapter I have abbreviated the titles of James's essays as follows: V "Venice: An Early Impression", OSG "The Old Saint-Gothard", RH "A Roman Holiday", GC "The Grand Canal", RR "Roman Rides" and AF "The Autumn in Florence". The essays are all included in Italian Hours. For a discussion of James's "phenomenological vision" in the Italian essays, see Bonney Macdonald, Henry James's Italian Hours: Revelatory and Resistant Impressions.

<sup>6</sup> To John Lafarge 21 Sept. 1869 (Edel, Letters I, 134); to William James 25 Sept. 1869 (Edel, Letters I, 142); to Henry James, Sr., 14 Jan. 1870 (Edel, Letters I, 191).

<sup>7</sup> "Hawthorne's French and Italian Journals", 172-3.

<sup>8</sup> See Pemble, Mediterranean Passion, 96-110. See also Phyllis Grosskurth, John Addington Symonds: A Biography, chapter ten for a discussion of Symonds' and his colleagues' motivations for Italian travel. See note 13 below for James's relationship with Symonds.

<sup>9</sup> Armando Marchi, "Obscene literature in Eighteenth-Century Italy: An Historical and Bibliographical Note", 'Tis Nature's Fault': Unauthorized Sexuality During the Enlightenment, ed. Robert Purks MacCubbin, 244. In his world survey of homosexual behaviour Sir Richard Burton asserted that such behaviour occurred under certain climatic conditions in the so-called "sodadic zone". See Love, War and Fancy: The Customs and Manners of the East from Writings on The Arabian Nights. In "London's Sodomites: Homosexual Behaviour and Western Culture in the Eighteenth Century", Randolph Trumbach notes that Italy rivalled Turkey as the "home of sodomy" and that the English believed that Italians were accustomed to considerable tolerance of homosexual subcultures in their large cities (3). And the eighteenth century popular belief was, according to Trumbach, that sodomy could only have appeared in England as a consequence of being transplanted from the "hotter climes" (12).

<sup>10</sup> See G.S. Rousseau, "The Pursuit of Homosexuality in the Eighteenth Century: 'Utterly Confused Category' and/or Rich Repository?" in MacCubbin, 'Tis Nature's Fault.

<sup>11</sup> On the Criminal Law Amendment Act and its affects on homosexuals see Jeffrey Weeks, Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800 and Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain From the Nineteenth Century to the Present.

<sup>12</sup> In "The Pursuit of Homosexuality" Rousseau calls the Renaissance historian J.A. Symonds a "homosexual exile" who fled from England to Italy where he could "satisfy his need for men of other social classes. There he became the archetype of the romantic homosexual exile, managing an international clearinghouse that coordinated correspondence and kept people in touch" (159). Symonds had been an acquaintance of James's for years and the "donnee" for "The Author of Beltraffio" was provided by rumours of Symonds' troubled marriage. Symonds was for years the lover of a Venetian gondolier named Angelo Fusato. As Michael Moon discusses in "Sexuality and Visual Terrorism" male homosexual tourists commonly sought out men of Venice's large lower-class population of sailors and gondoliers, some of whom engaged in prostitution. That Henry James was aware of Symonds' double life is apparent from his response to Symonds' privately printed pamphlet on homosexuality, "A Problem in Modern Ethics" (1891), which was given to him by Edmund Gosse. After reading it, James wrote the following to Gosse: "It was very kind of you yesterday, to supply - or rather to remedy - the injury of fate by bringing me those marvellous outpourings . . . JAS is truly, I gather, a candid and consistent creature, and the exhibition is infinitely remarkable . . . But I don't wonder that some of his friends and relations are haunted with a vague malaise. I think one ought to wish him more *humour* - it really *is* the saving salt" (Edel, Letters III 398). When asked to write a posthumous appreciation of Symonds, James declined saying that the difficulty of the job would be "insurmountable" because there was an entire side of Symonds' life that was "strangely morbid and hysterical and which towards the end of his life coloured all his work and utterance. To write of him without dealing with it, or at least looking at it, would be an affectation; and yet to deal with it either ironically or explicitly would be a Problem - a problem beyond me" (qtd. in Edel Henry James: The Treacherous Years 128). For a discussion of James's connection with Symonds see Leon Edel, Henry James: 1895-1901 The Treacherous Years, 121-30 and Phyllis Grosskurth, John Addington Symonds, 270, 282, 321-23.

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<sup>13</sup> For Pater's views on the aesthetic, androgyny and classical sculpture see "Diaphaneite", 215-22 and The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry. On James's responses to Pater see Jonathan Freedman, Professions of Taste.

<sup>14</sup> In his 1873 pamphlet "A Problem in Greek Ethics" J.A. Symonds made a distinction between casual sex and the idealised "comradeship" of the Greeks which was mainly, athleticised and "natural". For Symonds, Plato's Symposium was the exemplary text of male/male love and both his Studies of the Greek Poets and "The Dantesque and Platonic Ideals of Love" included an exegesis on homosexuality. Symonds was not the only Victorian man of letters to associate Greece with homosexuality. In the 1860s Carl Heinrich Ulrichs had coined the term "Urning" - taken from Plato's Uranos of the Symposium - to describe homosexuals. For a discussion of the "cult of Greece", Victorian aestheticism and homoerotic desire see Richard Dellamora, Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism and Thais E. Morgan, "Reimagining Masculinity".

<sup>15</sup> In his analysis of the gondolier's attributes James articulates an upper-middle-class fascination with crossing the boundaries of class, a fascination that was as true for homoerotic men in the nineteenth century as it was for heterosexual men. For discussions of such cross-class attractions see Jeffrey Weeks, "Inverts, Perverts, and Mary-Annes: Male Prostitution and the Regulation of Homosexuality in England in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries", Reclaiming the Past: The New Social History of Homosexuality, eds. Martin Bauml Duberman et al. See also Leonore Davidoff, "Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick" for an example of the heterosexual version of this attraction.

<sup>16</sup> James's text can be seen as addressed to, in addition to a majority heterosexual audience, a minority audience of homoerotic men who would particularly appreciate his descriptions of beautiful Italian men. On the addressing of such minority audiences by Pater and Swinburne within the discourse of Aestheticism see Thais E. Morgan, "Reimagining Masculinity". On homosexual minoritising discourse in Wilde's writings, see Ed Cohen, "Writing Gone Wilde".

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of "manliness" and its importance to bourgeois ideology see Michael Roper and John Tosh, eds., Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain Since 1800 and J.A. Mangan and James Walvin, eds., Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940.

<sup>18</sup> That James did not act on his homoerotic desires is assumed by all critical discourse that addresses this topic. James's celibacy is assumed for example by Harold Bloom. In his introduction to Henry James: Modern Critical Views, Harold Bloom notes the similarities between James and Walt Whitman with respect to their sexuality: "I suspect that Henry James in his psychosexual orientation resembled Walt Whitman more strongly than he did anyone else in literary history. Like Whitman, his desires were essentially homoerotic, and, again, like Whitman, he appears to have evaded any merely actual fulfilment of those desires . . . His striking originality as a novelist, nearly akin to Whitman's as a poet, has a still obscure but vital relation to his warding-off of mere sexuality" (11-12).

<sup>19</sup> For the classic statement of the characteristics of the male gaze see Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema".

<sup>20</sup> James always felt alienated from the dominant modes of American bourgeois masculinity which he identified as "down-town" or business. In the preface to volume XV of the New York edition James describes his own restricted experience and notes that the world down-town is one for which he was "unprepared and uneducated" (AN 272). Excluded from the sphere of the "supremely applied money-passion" which was "inexorably closed to him", James describes himself as being trapped "up-town", "alone . . . with the music-masters and French pastry-cooks, the ladies and children [who are] immensely present and immensely numerous" (AN 273). This feminised field is marked by the "extraordinary absence . . . of a serious male interest" (AN 273). James's choice of occupation and his expatriation can be seen as ways of dealing with his socially anomalous position. For a discussion of James's immersion in and sympathy with the feminine sphere of domesticity and the aesthetic see Elizabeth Allen, A Woman's Place in the Novels of Henry James.

<sup>21</sup> See Jacques Lacan, Écrits: A Selection. See also the discussion by Larysa Mykyta in "Lacan, Literature and the Look: Woman in the Eye of Psychoanalysis". In the Lacanian account women who speak, who

have power, who actively gaze, do so in the phallic mode. The phallic position is the one of power and authority.

<sup>22</sup> John Carlos Rowe sees "The Aspern Papers" as a feminist text, the central act of which - Tita's burning of the papers - is "at once one of the most powerful artistic acts in James's writings and one of the most revolutionary in the cause of the legitimation of the rights of woman" (105). See The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James, 104-18. While Rowe concentrates on James's empowering of women, I concentrate on his emasculating of men in this text.

<sup>23</sup> For the classic argument about the exchange of women in kinship and the significance of that exchange see Claude Levi-Strauss, The Elementary Structure of Kinship. For Levi-Strauss the exchange of women between men is the foundation of society. Men - husbands, brothers, fathers - are the active parties who exchange the women among themselves, thereby cementing their social connections. Women are merely the passive objects of exchange. See also Elizabeth Cowie, "Woman as Sign" who draws on the work of Levi-Strauss to show how "woman" is produced as an object of exchange in cultural products. In Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire Eve Sedgwick follows up on the work of Levi-Strauss to argue that in much nineteenth century literature women are "exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men" (25-26). In Wings, in contrast, a man is represented as exchangeable property.

<sup>24</sup> In its specularisation of the male subject James's novel is like the films of Rainer Fassbinder as analysed by Kaja Silverman in Male Subjectivity at the Margins. Silverman argues that "the insistent specularization of the male subject in Fassbinder's cinema functions not only to desubstantialize him, but to prevent any possibility of mistaking his penis for the phallus" (135). In her discussion of the film Ali: Fear Eats the Soul Silverman describes the way in which the black man is de-phallicised by being subjected to women's gazes and by becoming an object of exchange among the women. Densher is dephallicised in similar ways.

<sup>25</sup> Densher's fantasy of surgeons with sharp knives calls up a well-known nineteenth century visual text that features just such an individual, Thomas Eakins' The Gross Clinic (1875). For an in-depth analysis of Eakins' picture and its homoerotic subtext see Michael Fried, Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane.

<sup>26</sup> Moon supports his argument by mapping out the exchanges of looks between Kate and Densher, between Densher and Lord Mark and Sir Luke Strett, and between Densher and Eugenio. He suggests that the exchanges between Eugenio and Densher are equivalent to those between Kate and Densher: "Eugenio's clear perception of Densher's 'consciousness' in this matter is constitutive of the same kind of relationship between them as has been said to exist between Densher and Kate Croy at the inception of their intimacy . . . also like Densher and Kate Croy in their early days, Densher and Eugenio indulge in reciprocal gazing fraught with emotional weight, and this gazing eventuates in a distribution of power (an unequal one) between the 'confronted' pair" (436).

<sup>27</sup> Max Nordau's Degeneration, perhaps the most conspicuous contemporary critique of aestheticism, was couched in terms of degeneracy and race-suicide.

<sup>28</sup> Ross Posnock, The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity.

<sup>29</sup> My observations here on the gendered nature of the cultural sphere are indebted to Kathy Alexis Psomiades, "Beauty's Body: Gender Ideology and British Aestheticism". Psomiades notes that the realm of culture "might just as easily be the domestic realm, in which the purposeless and beautiful - middle-class women who do not work and are ornamental - are placed in an interior - the home - and preside over the cultural values of the bourgeoisie" (43).

<sup>30</sup> Otto Bacher wrote of Whistler that "All of the theory Whistler hinted at was delicacy of biting, and of drypoint. Delicacy seemed to him the keynote of everything, carrying more fully than anything else his use of the suggestion of tenderness, neatness and nicety" (With Whistler in Venice 103). Whistler drafted his etching aesthetics into Propositions which are reproduced in Lochnan 294-5.

<sup>31</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Whistler's technical innovations in the Venice etchings see Katharine A. Lochnan, Whistler's Etchings and the Sources of His Etching Style 1855-1880, chapter 20.

<sup>32</sup> In "Between Realisms: From Derrida to Manet", Fried argues that the differences in technique evident between the French Set and the slightly later Thames Set of etchings describe a progression from what he calls a bodily realism to an ocular one which was a precursor of Impressionism.

<sup>33</sup> The first group includes Two Doorways, The Beggars, The Balcony, Garden, The Dyer, Stable and Bead Stringers. The second includes Nocturne: Furnace. For a detailed description and chronology of Whistler's Venice work see Robert H. Getscher, "Whistler and Venice". Reproductions and technical information on the etchings can be found in Ruth E. Fine, Drawing Near: Whistler Etchings from the Zelman Collection; Betsy G. Fryberger, Whistler: Themes and Variations and Carol McNamara and John Siewert, Whistler: Prosaic Views, Poetic Vision. Contemporary information on Whistler's etching practice in Venice from artists who worked with him there in Otto Bacher, With Whistler in Venice and Mortimer Menpes, Whistler as I Knew Him.

<sup>34</sup> For examples of such descriptions see Michael Fried, Courbet's Realism, 209-212.

<sup>35</sup> As I have outlined above, passivity is always opposed to the activity constructed as masculine. Potentiality can be seen as an attribute of the feminine in that women are seen, as I have discussed in chapter five, as flowing, as unbounded, and therefore as potential threats. In Whistler's etchings, as I shall discuss, potentiality is not represented as threatening but as a positive attribute.

<sup>36</sup> James was also interested in states of in-betweenness, in those who inhabited the ambiguous space between culturally defined femininity and masculinity. This is indicated, for example, in his discussion of the French writer St. Beuve:

There is something feminine in his tact, his penetration, his subtlety and pliability, his rapidity of transition, his magical divinations, his sympathies and antipathies, his marvelous art of insinuation, of expressing himself by fine touches and of adding touch to touch. But all this side of the feminine genius was re-inforced by faculties of quite another order. Faculties of the masculine stamp; the completeness, the solid sense, the constant reason, the moderation, the copious knowledge, the passion for exactitude and for general consideration. (Art of Criticism 27)

Similarly, James remarked that Turgenev combined a "magnificent manhood" with a "mild", "soft" and "singular sweetness" that were feminine (Art of Criticism 140). See Leland S. Person, Jr., "Henry James, George Sand, and the Suspense of Masculinity" for a discussion of James's gender and literary "inbetweenness".

<sup>37</sup> In Henry James and Masculinity Kelly Cannon argues that James's language was a form of social protest; in its refusal to specify James's art is "subversive because it undermines [the cultural expectation of] clarity" (102). Just as James's writing style is subversive, so too is Whistler's aesthetic of delicacy because it subverts contemporary notions of masculine expression.

<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of the differences between a masculine mastering gaze and a feminine gaze in the work of Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot, see Griselda Pollock, Vision and Difference, 62-66.

<sup>39</sup> For example, in "The Butterfly and the Old Ox" Theodore Reff contrasts Whistler and Degas in terms which have a gender subtext. Where Whistler is a theatrical dandy who craves public attention, Degas shies away from the spotlight. While Whistler is described as being "generally more innovative than Degas" in the early 1860s when he was experimenting with realism, Whistler's increasing subtlety, attenuation and melancholy in the later work represent for Reff an unfortunate degeneration from the "vital Naturalist tradition of Degas" (32).

<sup>40</sup> Writing in 1908 German historian Julius Meier-Graefe was one of the first critics to attack Whistler on the grounds of his effeminacy, here coded as lack of creativity:

Indulgent critics of the future will no doubt bracket Whistler with Fantin. They were both very similar powers of a totally different kind. Both stand aloof from the great artistic achievements of the nineteenth century, the one deliberately, the other involuntarily. Neither was a creator, both transformed inherited materials, and the results of their activity were not indispensable to modern art-development. (Spencer, Whistler: A Retrospective 370)

The same point was made by the English critic Charles Marriott in 1920:

Whistler stood for that impossible thing, a cosmopolitan art . . . it is art divorced from life and depending entirely upon culture . . . lacking the imagination, or perhaps the courage, to translate

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the facts of nature boldly into terms of his medium, he waited for or reinvented conditions in which the facts would not be too obvious, and made them "decorative" by arrangements that were entirely lacking in the logic of design. (Spencer, Whistler: A Retrospective 370-71)

Citing Whistler's contribution to decoration and design as his strong suit, the English costume historian James Laver asserted that Whistler's painting made no contribution to modernism:

[Whistler] was too personal and too sophisticated. The neo-primitives of the modern studios, the admirers of negro art, the "strong" painters of today can have little use for an artist whose canvases were the epitome of all that is refined, civilized and reticent. The later Impressionists with the "treble" palettes are the complete antitheses of Whistlerian twilight, and it is from them that modern painting derives its colour. (Spencer, Whistler: A Retrospective 371)

Finally, in a telling comment, Whistler's former disciple Walter Sickert repudiated his master with the assertion that Whistler was "too tasteful" and "too feminine" (qtd in Bendix 252). Whistler's aesthetic of delicacy and suggestion, like James's stylistic innovations and focus on women's experience, was seen as lacking in masculine prowess and evidence of effeminacy.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Aestheticism and Commodification: A Problematic Resolution

The fully-achieved aestheticism of Whistler's nocturnes of the 1870s and portraits of the 1880s and James's late novel The Golden Bowl represents the culmination of their respective careers and resolution to the problems of modernity with which they were engaged. While in chapter six I concentrated on James's and Whistler's explorations of alternative masculine subjectivities and their expression in new aesthetic forms, here I will focus on the relation of these new forms to modernity's culture of consumption. In this chapter I shall examine The Golden Bowl and demonstrate its formal and thematic parallels with Whistler's London nocturnes, painted in the 1870s, and his portraits of Lady Meux and Theodore Duret, painted in 1881 and 1882-84. I will argue that James and Whistler resolve the problems dealt with in their earlier work by at the same time internalising the commodification of culture and asserting that it is the aesthetic that is the ultimate source of value. While, as I demonstrated in chapters two and three, James and Whistler both argued for the aesthetic as a transcendent autonomous realm of value above and beyond the social world and its mass cultural commodities, their own work demonstrates the enmeshment of the aesthetic in that which it purports to stand above. And it is particularly in the aestheticist work to be examined here that this problematic is articulated. In his nocturnes and 1880s portraits, Whistler appropriates for high art the techniques of advertising and industry with the result that his works become confused with "mere fashion". And in The Golden Bowl, his last novel, James describes a world in which people treat one another like commodities but whose narrative of objectification is

redeemed by being molded into the static perfection of a smooth, symmetrical golden bowl.

The task of this chapter will be to detail Whistler's technical innovations and argue that, while he asserted their difference from other aesthetic commodities in their evidence of "brain work", his use of commercial and industrial advertising and display techniques made them for many indistinguishable from the commodities he critiqued. In so being, Whistler's work articulates the contradictory nature of autonomous art under modernity. Similarly, I shall show how James's Golden Bowl reveals the intertwining of the aesthetic and commodity culture in his representation of a completely aestheticised and commodified world of manipulation and deceit. Both artists' works document the dialectical dance of the aesthetic and the commodity. With the separation of the sphere of the aesthetic from other spheres of activity, as I have outlined in chapter one, cultural products become autonomous, that is, not beholden to religious or state patronage and control. However, with this freedom comes subjection to the open marketplace in which cultural products and their creators are commodities for sale like any other commodity. This situation is inherent in the logic of capitalist modernisation. Modernism, as an aesthetic phenomenon, cannot be outside of the processes which affect every other aspect of modern life. By internalising the inevitable - commodification - and critiquing it from within, so to speak, James and Whistler reveal the imperatives and problems of modernity.

## I

In their late work both Whistler and James can be situated under the sign of British Aestheticism which reached its apotheosis as a movement in the latter half of the



nineteenth century. By the 1870s and 1880s, the British Aesthetic movement appeared to have influenced all aspects of society as Whistler was to note in his "Ten O'Clock"

lecture:

Art is upon the Town! - to be chucked under the chin, by the passing gallant! - to be enticed within the gates of the householder - to be coaxed into company, as a proof of culture and refinement! . . . The people have been harassed with Art in every guise - and vexed with many methods as to its endurance - they have been told how they shall love Art! and live with it - their homes have been invaded - their walls covered with paper - their very dress taken to task . . . (Thorp 80)

The movement included designers, architects, graphic artists, and illustrators, as well as painters such as Whistler and Burne-Jones, all of whom were in competition for clientele and cultural legitimacy. As noted by Robin Spencer, the Aesthetic movement was not created by a select few nor addressed to only a small elite audience but included theories and objects produced by many competing artists and designers and consumed by many levels of society:

If you were rich and 'enlightened' or on the fringe of certain artistic circles, you might live in a Norman Shaw house, commission William Morris to design original furniture, and own paintings by Whistler; but if this was not within reach, a fabric from Liberty's, a Japanese screen and an armful of peacock feathers would do just as well and were more easily obtained. (Aesthetic Movement 7)

In 1880 when Henry James arrived in London to finish the Portrait of a Lady and Whistler was at work on his portrait of Lady Meux the aesthetic craze was at its height. Three plays

brought aestheticism to the attention of the theatre-going public, including most importantly Gilbert and Sullivan's Patience which caricatured both Whistler and Oscar Wilde. In addition, each week saw George Du Maurier's satirical lampoons in Punch spoofing the movement and aesthetes such as Wilde and Whistler in particular. The terms of these spoofs were similar. As Freedman observes in Professions of Taste, satires of aestheticism focused obsessively on a limited number of themes. The Punch aesthete was, above all, indolent, languid, weary, enervated, bored, inactive. He preferred stylish decay to vulgar health. He was content to be rather than to do, to simply "exist beautifully" in the words of Du Maurier's aesthete Maudle (Wilde). The Punch aesthete was a creature of inexplicable and possibly perverse enthusiasms and eccentric tastes. And finally the aesthete was, according to Punch, a phony and a fraud whose motives for his behaviour were self-promotion and self-aggrandisement. While Du Maurier and Gilbert and Sullivan caricatured Whistler as one of these parvenu aesthetes, as I have demonstrated in chapter three, Whistler strictly if not entirely successfully differentiated himself and his project from the false prophets of aestheticism, the Dilettante, the Aesthete, and the Amateur. And this difference was most clearly to be seen in his nocturnes.

Whistler's London nocturnes, begun in 1871, represent the culmination of his aesthetic and express his distance from British competitors such as Edward Burne-Jones. In these images London and the Thames become a poetic fantasy, a projection of the artist's consciousness rather than the dirty industrialised reality experienced by its inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> Not just a significant geographical landmark, during the Victorian period the Thames was also a "site of social and moral significance" (27), as Anne Koval points out.

The river was associated with “low-life, murder, suicide and prostitution” (Koval 27), as well as industry, pollution and poverty. Nathaniel Hawthorne, in A Series of English Sketches published in 1863, reflected on the filthiness and degradation of the river:

It seems, indeed, as if the heart of London has been cleft open for the mere purpose of showing how rotten and drearily mean it has become . . . And the muddy tide of the Thames, reflecting nothing, and hiding a million of unclean secrets within its breast - a sort of guilty conscience, as it were, unwholesome with the rivulets of sin that constantly flow into it - is just the dismal stream to glide by such a city. (qtd. in Koval 27)

Whistler had represented this river of industry and “unclean secrets” in his earlier realist work.<sup>2</sup> However, Whistler’s aestheticist images of the Thames and London defy conventional perception, making them objects, like Venice, of beauty and mystery.

Acknowledged then and now as Whistler’s most important contributions, his nocturnes represent late nineteenth century London as an artist’s “fairy land”. In Nocturne in Blue and Silver (1871) (fig. 10) and Nocturne: Blue and Gold - Old Battersea Bridge (1872-3) (fig. 11) Whistler offers delicate twilight visions of the Thames in shades of blue with hints of silver and gold. Like many of his other nocturnes these two represent evening scenes of still soft river spaces seen as if through a veil. As pointed out by virtually all commentators on Whistler’s work, his nocturnes are also a departure from what the French Impressionists were doing at the same moment. Pierre Cabanne, for example, observes that “Whistler’s is not an art of broad daylight. At a time when the Impressionists were recording dazzling sunlight, he opted for shadows, dusk, and nighttime . . .”

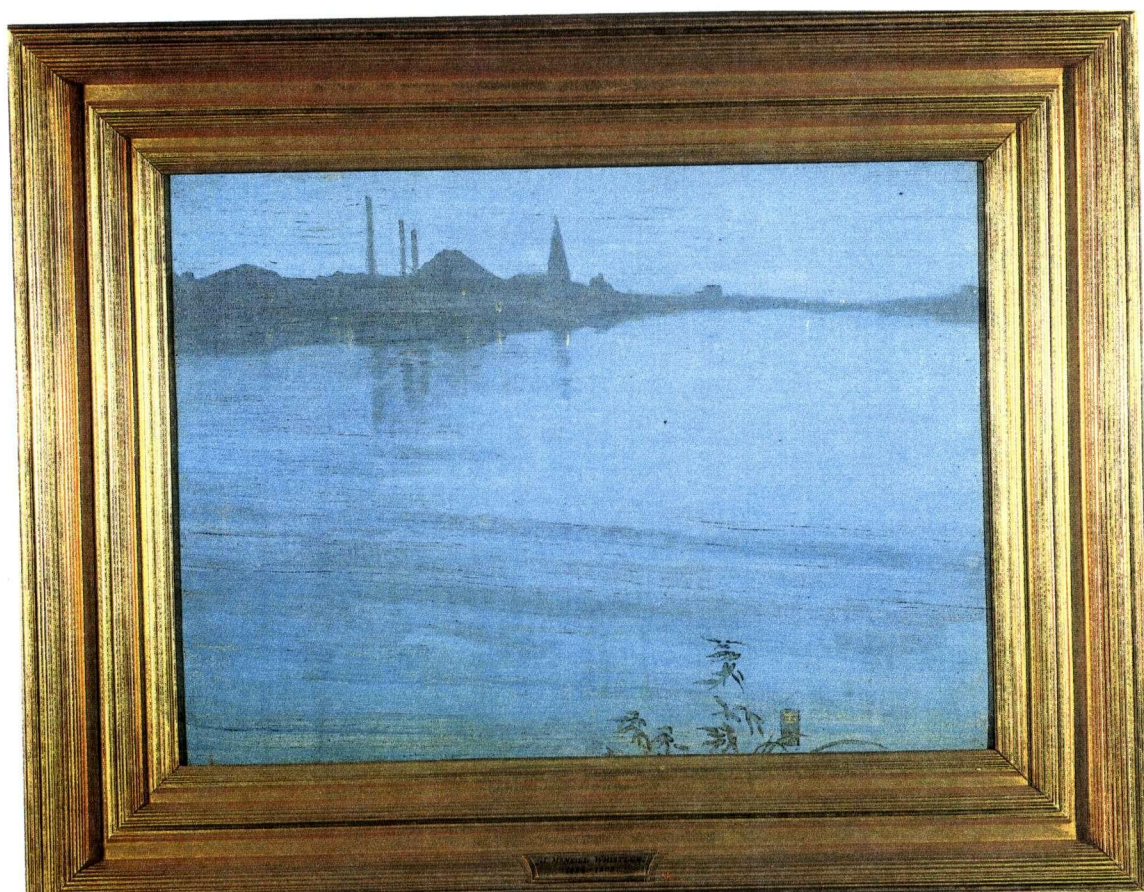


Figure 10 Nocturne in Blue and Silver (1871)





Figure 11 Nocturne: Blue and Gold - Old Battersea  
Bridge (1872-3)

(Whistler 75). Similarly, Ron Johnson notes that Whistler “painted evening scenes of deep, still spaces whereas the Impressionists explored light and color in active, broken touches representing daylight” (“Whistler’s Musical Modes” 169). That these works were meant to be different from Whistler’s Impressionist colleagues’ was no doubt intentional because, as I have argued in chapter three, “originality” was an obsession with Whistler.

For Whistler, an original aesthetic depended upon two things: the artist’s individual consciousness and innovative technical methods, both of which are emphasised in the nocturnes. While contemporary critical discourse held that the Impressionists were attempting to record as accurately as possible the fall of light on objects at a random moment, Whistler’s intention was to reveal his own consciousness of the world. Where Impressionism was seen as an objective recording of fleeting effects, Whistler’s nocturnes were subjective, an attempt to go beyond what he would call in the “Ten O’Clock” the “slovenly suggestion of nature” (Thorp 83). The nocturne was produced not simply by the artist’s eye but by his brain, which, for Whistler as it was for James, was the artist’s most important resource. Given that it was not the scene itself but the artist’s consciousness of the scene that was to be evoked in the nocturnes, how does Whistler represent consciousness in them?

That we now see these works as representative of the artist’s unique subjectivity is certainly partially the result of Whistler’s own efforts to theorise his practice. As we have seen in chapters three and six Whistler’s adept formulations of his own artistic theory and his alignment of an aesthetic of delicacy with superior mental acuity construct his late work primarily as evidence of his singular and unique vision. In all his public theoretical

statements Whistler repudiated his early realist work as that of an amateur, insisting that it was his late work that encapsulated the “refined essence of that thought which began with the Gods” (Thorp 86). Whistler’s evocation of a heightened aesthetic consciousness in Nocturne: Blue and Gold - Old Battersea Bridge can be seen when this painting is compared with his earlier realist image of the bridge. While the 1859 Old Battersea Bridge shows the bridge as it was, an old, heavy wooden structure, the later Nocturne transforms the bridge into an attenuated, delicately curved structure seen from a low vantage point. Where the earlier image was rendered in thick, impastoed paint, the Nocturne uses thin transparent layers of paint laid over one another to create veils of delicate colour. Old Battersea Bridge used what were for Whistler bright colour juxtapositions which he would later repudiate when rejecting Courbet’s influence. Old Battersea Bridge is an example of what Whistler would call in his 1867 letter to Fantin-Latour “that damned realism” in which colour was “a cocky bastard” (qtd. in Anderson 169, 170). Nocturne, in contrast, uses a limited number of harmonising colour tones probably derived from the Eastern art that interested Whistler.<sup>3</sup>

Most commentators on Whistler’s nocturnes suggest that in them Whistler managed to put together a fully-achieved japonisme rather than the eclectic japonaiserie of his earlier Lange Leizen. ‘Japonisme’, you will recall from my discussion in chapter five, involves “the assimilation of certain [Japanese] stylistic approaches and design principles [such as] the simplification of form [and] the emphasis on silhouette” (Evelt viii). Contemporary critical comment on the influence of the Japanese aesthetic on Western art disdained what they saw as japonaiserie’s “unsynthesized application of certain superficial

features of Japanese art to Western modes” (Evelt 101). Where the Lange Leizen had been criticised as an unresolved, unintegrated pastiche of oriental props to create an unsuccessful imitation of a *ukiyo-e* print, Nocturne: Blue and Gold demonstrated Whistler’s knowledge of and surpassing of its eastern source material. Whereas Japanese art was theorised as primitive and child-like, merely decorative rather than ideally beautiful, and speaking only to the eye and not the mind, Whistler’s nocturne goes beyond its oriental stylistic influence to offer a work that Whistler insisted “surpasse[d] in perfection” all the Gods have “contrived in what is called Nature” (Thorp 86).

Just as Whistler’s nocturnes are seen as surpassing their Japanese precedents, so too do they, as I have demonstrated in chapter three, go beyond and oppose the then-favourable Victorian narrative painting. Where Victorian narrative painting articulated an aesthetic of “finish” and manual labour, Whistler’s Nocturne rejects that paradigm as retrograde. Instead of maintaining what Freedman has called a “production-oriented, labor-centered, nostalgia-ridden tradition” (Professions of Taste 64) in which the value of art lies in its expression of the manual labour of the artist creating it, Whistler asserts the modernist view that art is a record of the individual artist’s unique perceptions, the world filtered through the transforming mind of the producer. Whistler’s creativity, his genius, was to be measured not in the number of hours spent labouring on a painting but on his ability to transmit an aesthetic concept directly from his mind to the canvas. This direct, apparently unmediated transformation of thought into material object is represented in Nocturne. No evidence of the artist’s physical labour was to remain in the completed painting. Unlike realism, in which the trace of the artist’s hand is visible in the brush



strokes left on the canvas, in Nocturne all trace of Whistler's hand is removed. Rather than being applied with a brush, here the thin, transparent layers of paint look as though they were poured onto the canvas. Indeed, Whistler's paint was so thin that he took to calling it a "sauce" which in some cases he poured directly on.<sup>4</sup> This method of paint application, and the thinness of the medium itself, contribute to Whistler's evocation of "brain work" because the less of the material medium there was, the more "spiritual" the image would be. The painting then is not the result of a craftsman's labour but of an artist's heightened sensibility.

That these paintings should have been called "nocturnes", a musical term, was for Whistler a perfect illustration of his aesthetic. Originally designated "moonlights", Whistler's nighttime images of London were later called nocturnes after a suggestion by his patron Frederick Leyland, who was a Chopin aficionado. Whistler wrote to Leyland in 1872 thanking him for the name:

I say I can't thank you too much for the name "Nocturne" as a title for my moonlights! You have no idea what an irritation it proves to the critics and consequent pleasure to me - besides it is really so charming and does so poetically say all that I want to say and no more than I wish! (qtd. in Anderson 186)

As all Whistler critics have observed, this naming system allowed Whistler to remove all narrative subject matter from his paintings and emphasise instead their formal properties, especially the colour harmonies which were indicated in the works' subtitles. Further, by linking his work to music, Whistler again emphasised the distance between his own work and that of competitors such as Burne-Jones and the Impressionists. Music was often

considered the most spiritual of the arts precisely because it was the least material and the most suggestive.<sup>5</sup> By having his paintings approach the condition of music in their suggestiveness and lack of what Victorian viewers would have seen as specific subject, Whistler differentiates his work from the narrative specificity and labour-intensity of Victorian academic painting as well as the objectivity and “eye-work” of the French Impressionists. Thus the nocturnes can stand alone as the products of a unique, original creative genius as Whistler lost no time in pointing out.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the Nocturne’s innovations in materials and paint application, Whistler also distinguished his work from that of the Impressionists in his use of “memory-painting”. Rather than executing the painting *en pleine air* in front of the actual motif as the Impressionists did, Whistler utilised a method of memory training which he had learned about in the 1860s from Fantin-Latour and Alphonse Legros. This way of working was taught to the French artists by Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran, one of the most influential teachers in Paris in the mid-century. Believing that one’s visual memory could be trained, Lecoq de Boisbaudran advocated a method in which the artist progressed from observing and then rendering simple objects to being able to study intently and record in detail increasingly complex scenes. The artist was to observe with undivided attention each and every aspect of a scene on site and, through a process of minute mental notation, then recall all elements to be painted later in the studio. Whistler used this method of memory-painting in his nocturnes. Instead of recording the elements of a scene to be painted in a sketchbook, Whistler simply looked at the motif for several minutes and then painted it later from memory. In his use of this compositional method Whistler was able to

eliminate unnecessary detail and record only the essential elements of his own impression of the riverscape. In so doing, the resulting picture then represents an expression of the artist's heightened consciousness.

In his nocturnes Whistler engages in the "deliberate project" of autonomous art, the celebration of the individual artist's unique cognitive experiences detached from the everyday world of labour and materiality. As an individual "chosen by the Gods" for his intense perceptions and heightened sensitivity, Whistler will express this superior sensibility in works that transform nature's inadequacies into the "harmony worth a picture" (Thorp 85). In his nocturnes Whistler's muted and harmonious delicacy is specifically opposed to the insensitive, crude vulgarity of industrial London. Rather than the ugly "blaring sun" of late nineteenth century London, Whistler represents the city as having a beauty of suggestion and subtlety. Such beauty appears only when the reality of the filthiness and squalor of the Thames is effaced by evening's veil. This veiling was described in the "Ten O'Clock" as creating the beauty that only the true artist can appreciate:

The desire to see, for the sake of seeing, is, with the mass, alone the one to be gratified - hence the delight in detail - and when the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil - and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky - and the tall chimneys become campanile - and the warehouses are palaces in the night - and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and faireyland is before us . . . Nature, who for once has sung in tune, sings her exquisite song to the Artist alone . . . (Thorp 85).

Whistler's delicacy, subtlety and exquisiteness, all on view in the nocturnes, are specifically opposed to the material world of industry and commerce. Against the unspiritual prosaic nature of life under industrial capitalism he positions beauty and aesthetic sensibility. Against the waste and filth of modern industrial London Whistler asserts the sovereign power of the artistic consciousness to remake the world in its own image. All the values - taste, beauty, sensitivity - that are ignored or repulsed in reality can in art be affirmed.

In his nocturnes Whistler uses the "discrimination and selection" that Henry James had identified as the artist's means of transforming the "inclusion and confusion" (AN 120) of life into the perfection of art. As well as opposing his aesthetic of delicacy to the ugliness of the material world of the Thames, Whistler also opposed his artistic creations to "the tawdry", "the common", "the gewgaw" of the manufacturer and the huckster of pseudo-aesthetic commodities. However, as I indicated in chapter three, although Whistler strictly differentiated himself from the makers and sellers of mass cultural and industrial products, he used their strategies of advertising and display to present his own work to its best advantage. His nocturnes were, in addition to evocations of the heightened artistic consciousness, material objects whose aesthetic qualities extended into their framing, exhibition and promotion. As a consequence, while Whistler wanted, on the one hand, to separate himself from the culture of the commodity by emphasising his works' representation of artistic consciousness, he also, on the other, fully participated in the commodification of art in his attention to the material conditions of his paintings and his utilisation of the selling strategies of mass culture and industry.

Paintings such as Nocturne: Blue and Gold and Nocturne in Blue and Silver with their carefully-crafted gold wood frames are beautiful objects whose status as “furniture or decoration” was noted by Henry James in an 1878 review of a Grosvenor Gallery exhibition. Written when James was still enamored of Burne-Jones, his comments on Whistler’s work nevertheless point to the difficulties many had with the artist’s production in the 1870s and 1880s:

Mr. Whistler’s productions are pleasant things to have about, so long as one regards them as simple objects - as incidents of furniture or decoration. The spectator’s quarrel with them begins when he feels it to be expected of him to regard them as pictures. (Painter’s Eye 165)

Later, as I indicated at the beginning of chapter three, James would come to appreciate Whistler’s work as “one of the finest of all distillations of the artistic intelligence” (Painter’s Eye 258), but in 1878 Whistler’s aesthetic experiments were beyond the capacity of many of his audience to understand. However, although James and others may not have initially understood his painting experiments, they did appreciate the novelty of his productions, a novelty also evident in his framing and display techniques. Whistler’s concern with Beauty and Harmony went beyond the painting’s canvas into its frame, which he often designed and painted himself. As quoted in chapter three, Whistler was adamant that these framing innovations originated with him alone, not with any “clever little Frenchmen”.<sup>7</sup> The colours and painted designs used in the frames were intended to complement and enhance the painting rather than compete with or overwhelm it.<sup>8</sup> Whistler used particular colours for particular kinds of works; nocturnes were always framed in a

blue-gold, etchings and lithographs in white, and other works in frames that harmonised with their colours.<sup>9</sup> In addition, after 1873 the frames also included Whistler's butterfly motif placed so that it complemented his signature and balanced with the painted composition. Having ensured that all aspects of the painting's material presence conveyed his ideas about colour harmony, Whistler then took great pains to ensure that the works were exhibited in a way that would add to their beauty rather than detract from it.

David Park Curry notes that many of today's familiar exhibition techniques were introduced to nineteenth century London by Whistler. These include indirect lighting, colour-coordinated walls, uniform framing, works properly spaced and positioned so that they can be clearly seen, wall banners, specially designed exhibition catalogues, photographic reproductions of the works, colour-cued invitation cards, evening openings and admission charges. For his first solo exhibition, in 1874, Whistler created what one reviewer called a "pleasant 'artist's studio' appearance" with special seating, colour-coordinated framing and careful attention to placement and lighting of the works (qtd. in Curry "Total Control" 69). Completely different from the Royal Academy exhibitions with which his audience was familiar, in which hundreds of works covered entire wall surfaces, some hung so high that they couldn't be seen, Whistler's innovations were quickly noticed by the art community. For example, a Dr. Fisher remarked that at Whistler's show there was none of the "crowded copal atmosphere" of the Royal Academy which reminded him of a "great pot of boiling varnish" (qtd. in Curry 70). And Henry Blackburn, reviewing the exhibition for Pictorial World called it "a harmony of colour agreeable to the eye" (qtd. in Curry 70). Similarly, an unidentified critic observed that "Colour and tone have been

everywhere harmonised and subdued under the artist's sensitive eye, and the intrusion of such a thing as a canvas painted up to the usual exhibition pitch would be felt by everyone as an incongruity of a serious kind" (qtd. in Curry 70). In later exhibitions Whistler relied on draperies to modify the existing space, an innovation which as Curry notes was probably derived from Liberty's of London, a fabric retailer, whose employees were often asked to transform ugly public buildings in which charity bazaars were held into more pleasant spaces through the use of draperies and fabric tents.

In creating a congenial environment for his works and maintaining control over how they would be seen, Whistler was using the same techniques of elegant packaging to sell his aesthetic as were used to sell other kinds of expensive commodities. His invitation cards and catalogues were not unlike contemporary advertising flyers and the catalogues, often including critics' quotations on his work taken out of context, were generally hot sellers.<sup>10</sup> One critic commented on his 1883 exhibition of Venice etchings that "another comic element in the show is that [Mr. Whistler] expects you to pay to see it" (qtd. in Curry "Total Control" 78). In addition, beginning in the 1870s, Whistler's butterfly motif was added to his promotional material and substituted for the artist's signature on the works themselves. This butterfly became, as Curry has observed, "an instantly recognizable logo, not unlike current advertising symbols used to attract public attention in magazines or on television" ("Total Control" 76).

Curry insists that, even with his mastery of the techniques of advertising and commercial display, Whistler should never be considered a designer or "decorator in the conventional sense" (71). Bendix, in contrast, asserts that Whistler was "above all, a

master designer” (1). Bendix speculates that it was his exhibitions’ short duration and lack of photographic documentation that led to Whistler’s contributions as a decorator being largely unacknowledged and unexamined by critics. Against this, I would argue that it is because Whistler himself and his critics have insisted on his status as a high art producer that his design innovations have received comparatively little attention. Design, like decoration and craft, occupied a lower position in the hierarchy of the arts in the nineteenth (and twentieth) centuries than did high art painting. Consequently, to characterise Whistler as primarily or even equally a designer would be to lower his status as an artist within the orthodox canon of nineteenth century art. In addition, the similarities between Whistler’s art and other aesthetic commodities, as I shall discuss below, and Whistler’s own adept use of the advertising and packaging techniques of industry, are perhaps too great for critical comfort in an age where (then as now) art is the “human essence” made visible and commodities are not. However, whether we consider him primarily a high art producer, a designer or a decorator, it is clear that Whistler’s aesthetic innovations contributed to the increasing inability of his audience to distinguish between a high art object and the industrial or aesthetic commodities they increasingly resembled. In his overview of the British aesthetic movement Robin Spencer notes that the public of the 1870s and 1880s was unable to differentiate among the true Aestheticism of a Whistler, the satires of aestheticism by Gilbert and Sullivan, the “philistinism” of mass manufacturing, and aesthetic commodities such as Morris wallpaper and blue and white china proliferating in the marketplace:



In the early 1880s, Whistler was the source of a great deal of Aesthetic public confusion, in America as well as in England, as D'Oyly Carte's opera Patience had shown. Aestheticism, as opposed to Philistinism, had almost become part of the tradition; and the public, at first expecting to scorn the antics of the Aesthetes, was soon won over by Patience's superficial artistry, with its liberty costumes and extravagant sentiments. To add to the muddle of an Aesthete's personal identity, Wilde, with his references to Keats, the art of Greece and Japan, Morris and Whistler, must, at times, have left in his listeners' minds little more than a confused blur.

In 1878 Whistler had challenged the English art world to accept his offer of enjoying the aesthetic sensation of a particularly original form of art. It had not been accepted. When, in 1885, the guarantee of acceptable modernity was the ownership of Art Furniture, peacock feathers, William Morris wallpaper and listening to Oscar Wilde, it was time for Whistler to make another stand.

(Aesthetic Movement 100-1)

This "other stand" was stated in Whistler's "Ten O'Clock" and consisted, as we have seen, of the artist's attempt to distance and distinguish himself from all other competing aesthetic and commodity forms. However, as Spencer also incidentally points out, with regret, Whistler was not entirely successful in this project: "By the 1880s, 'Art' could be bought for the price of a sunflower or a peacock's feather; and the style of painting which Whistler had established in fifteen years of serious aesthetic endeavour was being steadily undermined and identified with the whim of mere fashion" (Aesthetic Movement 76).

Whistler's one-time pupil Walter Sickert, as Bendix notes in Diabolical Designs, would have concurred with Spencer's comment, identifying this confusion as due to the artist's own actions. Sickert felt that Whistler's "advertisement" of his aesthetic ideas and exhibition strategies had backfired "in the form of a 'plague of "Whistler for the million"'. That is, cheap copies made for a public primed to accept anything enveloped in the context of a chic anti-establishment exhibition with press coverage - à la Whistler" (Bendix 14). Sickert's complaints were published in an 1889 article that went on to say that artists copying Whistler's methods could use his strategies to bamboozle a philistine audience who could not distinguish between the original and inferior copies:

[Whistler] has allowed his work . . . to be presented in certain quaint garbs, and accompanied by certain external flourishes that could easily be imitated, and he has invited rather than discouraged the familiarity with it of a joyous five o'clock tea throng, whom the carpet and the crush of the exhibition room "passioned", and who would hardly notice the substitution on the walls of something cheaper, in queerer frames for his "Notes, Harmonies, Nocturnes". . . . the public that he had called in with the big drum forgot before "a hint in apple-green", . . . the painter of Carlyle and Sarasate. (qtd. in Bendix 14-15)

In the "Ten O'Clock" Whistler himself had condemned the public's inability to differentiate between true art and cheap aesthetic commodity. However, that Whistler's art could be confused with "mere fashion" is not just attributable to his public's lack of knowledge but inevitable in the logic of capitalist modernity.

Whistler's nocturnes represent the end point of autonomous art's conversion of content into form. For Whistler art was to be a harmonious, delicate, well-designed aesthetic object which existed solely to be beautiful and give aesthetic pleasure in its visual consumption. In so being, art opposed the lack of beauty and harmony in modern reality. However, as I discussed in chapters one and three, the autonomy and beauty of Whistler's nocturnes result in two separate but interrelated problems. Firstly, the ability of images of beauty and reconciliation to offer a social critique is at best limited. That images of a reconciled life, one in which individual and social world are in harmony, are false makes the art created by Whistler and other aestheticist artists such as the Symbolists the last avant-garde works to be able to thus represent Beauty. After the moment of late nineteenth century aestheticism avant-garde artists could no longer create beautiful images because, in the words of Richard Wolin, "in the face of the manifestly unreconciled character of social life in this century, the idea of providing a false semblance of reconciliation becomes increasingly insupportable" ("De-Aestheticization of Art" 107). For the artists who would follow Whistler the ideal of representing beauty "becomes flatly incompatible with the congealed fabric of social life as the network of commodity relations becomes all-dominant" (Wolin 107).

The nature of social life under capitalism leads to the second problem with the beautiful and harmonious art object, hinted at in the comments of Spencer quoted above. Beauty is above all in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the province of the commodity and mass culture. Products of what Adorno and Horkheimer called the "culture industry" use beauty and harmony as a means of keeping their consumers happy

and passive.<sup>11</sup> Such products, especially popular art and literature, advertising, and in the twentieth century mass market film, entertain without challenging and encourage conformity to the status quo. In order for the culture industry to achieve the mass conformity it requires, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, it must create homogeneous goods which are inoffensive and easily consumed. Popular art and film, for example, must be harmonious and give the viewer a pleasurable experience. In so doing, such work reconfirms the necessity and rightness of the status quo. In contrast, authentic art in the post-aestheticist era must be de-aestheticised - ugly. For much modernist work after Whistler his ideal of beautiful and harmonious art works becomes retrograde and, in the work of Schoenberg and Beckett for example, disharmony and manifestations of cultural decline are embraced as the only things able to express the actual conditions of humanity in late capitalism.

However, the de-aestheticisation of art that would come after Whistler was at his moment unthought. For Whistler the contradictions of the advanced artist under modernity could not be dealt with by the embrace of ugliness and disharmony. Such an aesthetic would have been inconceivable to him. In the late nineteenth century Britain of Whistler an art of delicate beauty and suggestiveness was the most advanced possible, and, as I have discussed in chapter three, such art was in the 1870s beyond the capacity of his audience to understand. That in the 1880s Whistler's work should have been for many indistinguishable from "mere fashion" clearly articulates the uneasy and contradictory position of high art and the artist under modernity. These contradictions are equally on

view in Whistler's portraiture. Just as the nocturnes are themselves like the aesthetic and industrial commodities against which Whistler railed, so too are his portraits of the 1880s.

## II

In portraits such as Harmony in Pink and Grey: Valerie, Lady Meux (1881) (fig. 12) and Arrangement in Flesh Color and Black: Theodore Duret (1882-4) (fig. 13) human beings become objects for Whistler's aesthetic experimentation in colour harmonies and tonalities. Only incidentally representations of actual individuals, Whistler's portraits depict figures which, like his London riverscapes, are aestheticised and commodified, 'human furniture' (Golden Bowl 544) for Whistler's aesthetic experiments. Indeed, Henry James's description of Maggie Verver and her husband the Prince near the end of The Golden Bowl could just as easily serve to describe the subjects of Whistler's portraits:

Mrs. Verver and the Prince fairly 'placed' themselves, however unwittingly, as high expressions of the kind of human furniture required, aesthetically, by such a scene. The fusion of their presence with the decorative elements, their contribution to the triumph of selection, was complete and admirable; though, to a lingering view, a view more penetrating than the occasion really demanded, they also might have figured as concrete attestations of a rare power of purchase. (541)

The description that James gives here of human aesthetic commodities is echoed in Whistler's 1880s portraits.

Whistler made portraits most of his career and most were of friends and family. Although he aspired to financial success as a society portraitist like Sargent, Whistler's respectable clients of the 1870s - the Leylands, Huths and Alexanders - disappeared after

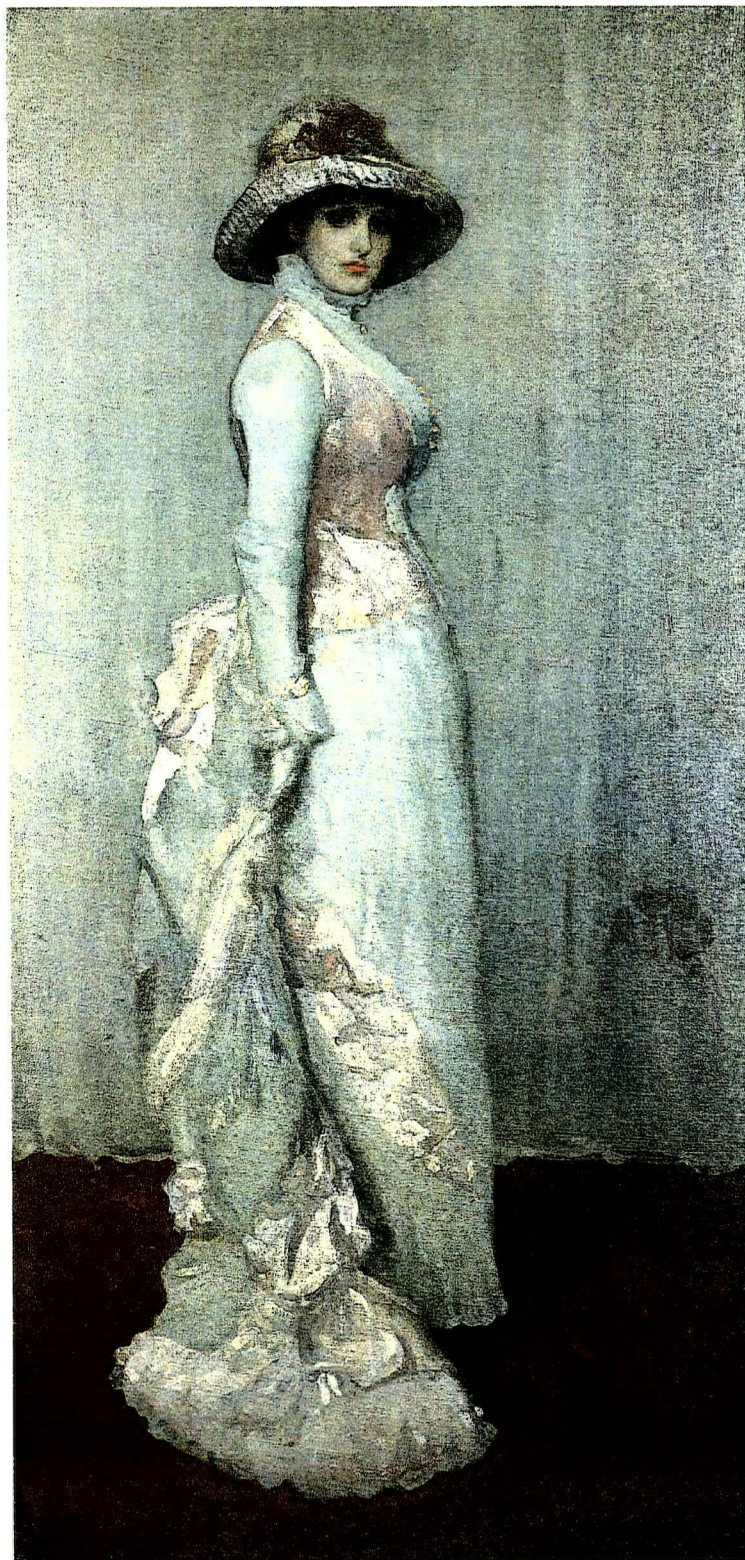


Figure 12 Harmony in Pink and Grey: Valerie, Lady Meux (1881)





Figure 13 Arrangement in Flesh Color and Black:  
Theodore Duret (1882-4)

the Ruskin trial and the artist's subsequent bankruptcy. While he continued to receive commissions from various people for portraits, many of them were individuals without social status. Because they were lacking in status, people such as Lady Meux, Lily Langtry and Lady Colin Campbell were willing to be painted by the notorious Whistler and, in addition, their lack of social position gave Whistler the freedom to experiment with costume, pose and gesture (Dorment and MacDonald 201).

Critical response to Whistler's portraiture was and is mixed. Some, such as his recent biographer Ronald Anderson, see Whistler's portraits as "the most complex aspect of his oeuvre and the most intriguing" (fig. 11); others, such as Roger Fry, think them mostly superficial, "preoccup[ied] with the surfaces of things rather than with their inner meaning" (Spencer, Whistler 346). However, I believe that they are both superficial and complex, their very superficiality indicating their complexity. The works' concentration on the surface of things is entirely appropriate given the attention devoted to appearance within the late nineteenth century society of the spectacle. What could be more likely to make something, even a human thing, more desirable than a beautiful, alluring surface?

Portraiture was never easy for Whistler and he was obsessive and meticulous in his portrait work. He lacked Sargent's flashy technique and gift for flattery and was also a driven perfectionist whose work had to meet his own exacting standards. Often he was unable to satisfactorily complete his portraits, even though he drove his sitters crazy with innumerable sittings, and refused to give the completed portrait to its owner. However, although his works required such an expenditure of physical and mental energy, that expenditure must not under any circumstances appear on the finished canvas. After all, to



quote again from Whistler's own pronouncements on aesthetic theory, "a picture is finished [only] when all trace of the means used to bring about the end has disappeared" (Thorp 78). Like the aesthetic commodities they resemble, the Art furniture, peacock feathers and wallpaper, Whistler's portraits must have surfaces so smooth and effortless-looking that they seem not to have been laboured over but simply to have emerged fully-formed from the artist's mind.

Harmony in Pink and Grey and Arrangement in Flesh Color and Black are both images of full-length standing figures who are placed within an indeterminate environment. Both stand in front of soft and delicate draperies, pink-toned in the first and greyish in the second. The figures stand alone. No furnishing or other props are included which would indicate the sitter's status or interests. As in the nocturnes in these works too all extraneous detail is eliminated so that the attention of the viewer is not distracted by any irrelevant information. Compared with Whistler's 1871 Symphony in Flesh Colour and Pink in which a decorative rug and flowers sprays are included with the figure of Frances Leyland, the portrait of Lady Meux is pared down in the extreme. With her body in profile and her slightly haughty face looking directly out at the viewer, Lady Meux holds onto the train of her dress with her gloved right hand, bringing it forward in a cascade of ruffles. She wears a rather large pink hat beneath the brim of which her eyes are large and luminous. To the right of the figure Whistler's butterfly monogram appears on the curtain behind her. The overall effect of the painting is one of coolness and control, both on the part of the sitter and that of the artist.

Arrangement in Flesh Color and Black is similarly pared down. It depicts the French art critic and Whistler supporter Theodore Duret in black evening dress, carrying a woman's pink domino cape and a closed red fan in his gloved left hand and a top hat in his right. Like Lady Meux, Duret is depicted standing in front of delicately tinted draperies. The colours of the fan and cape harmonise with the colours of Duret's face which is pink and reddish. As revealed in Duret's account of the portrait's painting, Whistler had decided on all the elements of the picture before he began and took ten stabs at painting and repainting it before the portrait was satisfactorily completed.<sup>12</sup> The pink cape, borrowed from a theatrical costume supplier, is draped over Duret's arm and, falling almost to his feet, performs the same function as did Lady Meux's dress ruffles. It works to soften the edges of the figure and modulate the colour harmonies of the picture. As is the case in Lady Meux's portrait, here too Whistler's butterfly floats in front of the drapery to the right of Duret's figure a little less than half-way up the body.

These works are orchestrated in much the same way as were Whistler's exhibitions. Just as Whistler had used techniques of draping derived from commercial practices to modify his exhibition spaces and make them more congenial to the display of his artistic wares, in these works too the artist uses draperies and dress fabric to create an appealing environment in which to situate his portrait subjects. Whistler uses the same techniques to display his "human furniture" to its best advantage as he had the nocturnes in his exhibition designs. In order to see how environment and design work in Whistler's portraits, it is useful to take another look at the contemporary reviews of his innovative exhibition interiors. Writing in The Hour in 1874 an unidentified critic expressed his

awareness of the artist's intention to display his works at their best: "[Whistler], feeling, probably, that his works were not seen to advantage when placed in juxtaposition with those of an essentially different kind, has determined to have an exhibition of his own, where no discordant elements should distract the spectator's attention" (qtd. in Curry, "Total Control" 71). Similarly a New York Daily News critic observed of a 1883 exhibition in the United States that "[Whistler's] pictures, from which your attention is distracted by no irrelevant or discordant accessories, show for all they are worth" (qtd. in Curry 71). And, as the reviewer for The Nation noted of an 1899 exhibition utilising Whistler's innovations, "While the first impression at the Academy is appalling, the first sight of this place is inviting and delightful, while one takes some time to find out that there are good works at Burlington House, one admits only slowly and reluctantly that there are bad pictures at the International" (qtd. in Curry 71). Just as Whistler's exhibitions were designed to show his work in its best light, so do his painted environments exhibit his figures to their best advantage.

Like commercial advertising, display and packaging techniques, Whistler's exhibition design and his painted portrait environments highlight the aspects of the image he wants an audience to see, while effacing those which are less desirable or well-constructed. Whistler's use of pleasing and subtle colour harmonies and treatment of drapes and fabrics work to turn the viewer's eyes away from the fact that he is not a particularly good draftsman. Whistler did not draw figures very well, as can be seen most clearly in his black and white lithographic work where no colour harmonies deflect one's attention from his figures' awkwardness.<sup>13</sup> Often the figures' limbs are out of proportion

and clumsily handled, as in the treatment of Duret's left arm, which, partially hidden beneath the domino he carries, is actually too short for the rest of the figure. Similarly, Whistler was not a good drawer of hands and in many of his portraits, such as these two, hands are either gloved or hidden. However, although imperfectly drawn, his paintings' delicate coloration, simplicity and restraint, their attention to design and packaging, represent most clearly not the sitters themselves but the artist's own taste.

These portraits offer Whistler an opportunity to demonstrate his taste and heightened sensibility. They also exhibit the contradictory nature of autonomous art under modernity. In these works, as in the nocturnes, Whistler's aesthetic theories find their purest expression *and* their most problematic status. The contradictions between subject matter and form evident in Whistler's earlier realist and japoneseque work are in the nocturnes and 1880s portraits resolved by internalising commodity culture. In so doing, the nocturnes and portraits express the problems of modernist art and the avant-garde artist in the late nineteenth century and beyond. Whistler's self-promotion as aestheticist critic of a materialistic, instrumental society is premised on an autonomous aesthetic sphere above and beyond the social world. However, the enmeshment of the aesthetic in commodity culture that Whistler denounces in his aesthetic theory is in his own practice revealed. This paradoxical situation will also be articulated by James in his last completed novel The Golden Bowl (1904).

### III

In order to see how The Golden Bowl represents the problematic culmination of James's aesthetic it is worth noticing how he reworks his earlier concerns in this novel.

Just as Whistler had resolved the concerns of earlier work in the works discussed here, so too does James in The Golden Bowl. While James's realist novel The Portrait of a Lady had offered its readers conflicting and contradictory aesthetic forms in coexistence and narrative openness in its story of a sympathetic heroine and her entrapment by negative social conditions, The Golden Bowl gives us a work so aesthetically unified and windlessly sealed that it is for many readers oppressive. Where the Portrait had critiqued the negative aesthete Osmond and his reifying vision, The Golden Bowl gives us a world which is completely aestheticised and commodified. In The Golden Bowl James transforms the tragic Isabel into the magnificent Maggie Verver who succeeds where the earlier woman had failed. In this brave new world the heroine triumphs by manipulating her appearance and ultimately controls her husband as she does her "other objects" - "the sofas, the chairs, the tables, the cabinets, the 'important' pieces" (541), of which Amerigo is the most important. Where Isabel had been treated as an object, an "unreverenced tool" by her husband and his lover, Maggie treats Amerigo and his lover as objects in order to triumph over them.

Just as James transforms Isabel into Maggie, he also transforms the actress Miriam Rooth into his triumphant American heroine. Maggie's final triumph is achieved through her abilities as an actress and in this she uses Miriam's acting skills not for the self-understanding of others but for her own self-fulfillment. Rather than being a narrative device for James's technical experimentations as Miriam was, Maggie is the author's surrogate who manipulates others for her own satisfaction. Finally, while James had thought both the Tragic Muse and the Wings of the Dove to be failures in formal terms

because of their lack of symmetry, The Golden Bowl is formally a masterpiece of symmetry comprising two equal halves which create in James's words a "handsome wholeness of effect" (AN 329). This technical perfection is devoted to a "great prose fable" of deception and entrapment. I will also argue that in this tale of manipulation and deceit, rather than critiquing his characters' behaviour, as he had done in The Portrait of a Lady, James fetishises and aestheticises such behaviour with his narrative technique. The perfect unity of subject and form achieved in The Golden Bowl represents, as Whistler's work had done, the aesthetic as a transcendent autonomous realm of value above and beyond the degraded social world and its mass cultural commodities, while at the same time illustrating the enmeshment of the aesthetic in that which it purports to stand beyond.

Written at a moment which was "coextensive with the emergence of a consumer culture", The Golden Bowl is, as articulated by Jean-Christophe Agnew, the "first fully achieved literary expression of an American culture of consumption" ("Consuming Vision" 73, 91).<sup>14</sup> This novel represents the culmination of the processes we first saw recorded in The Portrait of a Lady and continued in The Tragic Muse. In The Golden Bowl the world is one in which all transactions are market transactions and all relations commodified. Golden Bowl's reified world is one in which people and objects are interchangeable and all relations are relations between objectified "things" rather than autonomous subjects. Adam sees the Prince as a "representative precious object" (121) whose magnificence satisfies his avid collector's heart:

Representative precious objects, great ancient pictures and other works of art, fine eminent 'pieces' in gold, in silver, in enamel, majolica, ivory, bronze, had for a

number of years so multiplied themselves round him and, as a general challenge to acquisition and appreciation, so engaged all the faculties of his mind, that the instinct, the particular sharpened appetite of the collector, had fairly served as a basis for his acceptance of the Prince's suit. (121)

Adam's conjunction of "acquisition and appreciation" is particularly acute and it is because the Prince is such a rare find that Adam accepts him as a son-in-law. Amerigo has the "high authenticit[y]" Adam requires in all his acquisitions and expresses the American connoisseur's perfect taste and lack of vulgarity (121). Maggie is not immune from the reifying bug. She sees the Prince as a "rarity, an object of beauty, an object of price . . . a morceau de musee" (35), part of her father's collection of such objects. Indeed, the Prince sees himself the same way: "It was as if he had been some old embossed coin, of a purity of gold no longer used, stamped with glorious arms, medieval, wonderful . . . a possession" (43).

Just as the Prince is a "cluster of attributes" for Maggie and her father, so too does Charlotte occupy the same position for him; "He saw her in her light: that immediate, exclusive address to their friend was like a lamp she was holding aloft for his benefit and his pleasure. It showed him everything - above all her presence in the world, so closely, so irretrievably contemporaneous with his own" (58). She is an object of "appreciation"; Amerigo admires the "perfect working of all her main attachments, that of some wonderful finished instrument, something intently made for exhibition, for a prize" (59). Adam also sees Charlotte as a commodity, "by becoming for him a domestic resource" she becomes "practically a new person" (163). Charlotte's appeal lies in her beauty and in her

usefulness to Adam, like the new domestic appliances James would comment on in The American Scene.<sup>15</sup> And, with human beings treated like appliances and commodities, it is not surprising that in The Golden Bowl, as Whistler did in his painting compositions and exhibition designs, James uses the techniques of advertising to describe how his characters interact with one another.

In The Golden Bowl life is a spectacle in front of which James's characters are positioned, as if with their noses pressed to the plate glass window of a department store. This life is a "succession of moments that [are] watchable still" (306) as Maggie notes. In this watching space the discourse of advertising determines how the characters see one another. Like any other commodity for sale, the Prince has come with his accessories, all of which make him desirable to a potential consumer. Maggie asserts the importance that the Prince's attributes have in her desire for him: "What was it else . . . that made me originally think of you? It wasn't - as I should suppose you must have seen - what you call your unknown quality, your particular self. It was . . . your archives, annals, infamies [your] name . . . crowned with glory" (33). Indeed, Maggie desires the Prince most intensely when, as with a rare object, she sees others desire him:

[She] never admired him so much, or so found him heart-breakingly handsome, clever, irresistible, in the very degree in which he had originally and fatally dawned upon her, as when she saw other women reduced to the same passive pulp that had then begun, once for all to constitute her substance. The spectacle of him with hated rivals would . . . suffice to bring her round. (138-9)



Like a commodity in an advertisement, the Prince becomes much more desirable when others seem to be enjoying him. Similarly, the Prince says to Fanny that he wants to see through her eyes because through her eyes he will see what he is : "Through them I wish to look . . . . that's what I shall always trust you for - to tell me what I am" (47-8). The world of The Golden Bowl, like the world of advertisements, is all spectacle and projected images. The real is "the real", James's quotation marks indicating the ironic bracketing of reality, as, for example, in Adam's musing about Charlotte: "[With her] the luxurious side of his personal existence was now again furnished, socially speaking, with the thing classed and stamped as 'real'" (159). In a world of commodities in circulation, of spectacular and proliferating images, the difficulty for human beings is to distinguish the real from the simulated. Adam's acknowledgment of the interchangeability of reality and simulation indicates the pervasiveness of image, spectacle and simulacrum within a commodity culture.<sup>16</sup> Given this pervasiveness, what could be more appropriate than the arts which can make use of manipulation and deceit?

In the new world of the modern marketplace represented by James and Whistler both people and objects are, in the words of Ian Bell, "freshly revealed as belonging to a world of manufacture, design and alterability" (Henry James and the Past 13). The flipside of "manufacture, design and alterability" is of course manipulation and deceit. In such a world the ability to manipulate appearances, the ability of the advertising executive, the actress or indeed the artist, is the ability needed for success. And it is this manipulative ability that allows Maggie her eventual triumph over Charlotte. Maggie is the consummate actress, a figure who combines exquisite taste, a sense of design, and intense

consciousness, each of which will help her as she arranges appearances to preserve the “precious equilibrium” (311) of their lives.

The Golden Bowl is composed of a series of confrontational scenes which, like the scenes in a play, are constructed for and acted out in front of an audience. Each of the characters is engaged in a performance in which his or her identity is created anew with each performance. Fanny is “covered and surrounded with ‘things’, which were frankly toys and shams, a part of the amusement with which she rejoiced to supply her friends [who] were in the game” (50). Similarly Bob plays a “military game” in which “bad words . . . could represent battalions, squadrons, tremendous cannonades and glorious charges of cavalry” (70). Adam engages in the “*imitation* of depravity” (112). The Prince periodically puts himself on display for his public audience: “His look itself, at such times, suggested an image - that of some very noble personage who . . . had gaily and gallantly come to show himself; always moreover less in his own interest than in that of spectators and subjects whose need to admire, even to gape, was periodically to be considered” (56). While all the characters are actors, it is Maggie who is the most adept at this important art.

Maggie sees her entire life as taking place on a stage. She “reminded herself of an actress who had been studying a part . . . [but then] had begun to improvise” (322). Her daily life consists of a “succession of moments that were watchable still; almost in the manner of the different things done during a scene on the stage” (306). In The Golden Bowl’s commodified world the heroine triumphs by manipulating her own appearances. Like Miriam Rooth, Maggie’s final triumph is achieved through her abilities as an actress but, unlike Miriam, she is not an opaque cipher but an entirely conscious entity whose

performances are for her own self-fulfillment. She learns to be a “mistress of shades” (396), a “young woman of the theatre” (439) who controls her situation and environment. At Fawns Maggie’s abilities as actress are tested and found to be up to the task of deceiving the others as to what she knows. Observing her husband, father and his wife playing cards Maggie realises that they “might have been figures rehearsing some play of which she herself was the author” (458). The great house is itself a stage set for her performances:

[The] drawing-room, lighted also, but empty now, [seemed] to speak the more, in its own voice, of all the possibilities she controlled. Spacious and splendid, like a stage again awaiting a drama, it was a scene she might people, by the press of her spring, either with serenities and dignities and decencies, or with terrors and shames and ruins . . . (458).

Maggie’s performances rearrange the “funny” relationships of adultery and implicit incest into the more “natural” configuration of marriage through her stagecraft. In the end Maggie and Charlotte have exchanged places; the Prince and Maggie are “arranged together” while Charlotte is exiled to America with Adam. In the “watching space” that constitutes social life in The Golden Bowl we are at all times aware of the subject watching him/herself being watched.<sup>17</sup> In its foregrounding of such self-consciousness the Golden Bowl takes the theatricality of the Tragic Muse to its logical conclusion. Theatricality is not just the attribute of the actress, it is the condition of modern life. In modernity’s world of simulation, spectacle and advertisement identity becomes

performance or rather there appears to be no real character lying underneath the fictitious one.<sup>18</sup>

In The Tragic Muse James, speaking through his character Peter Sherringham, had condemned Miriam for having an identity that “resided in the continuity of her personations”, calling her a “monster”. However, while Miriam was condemned for her ability to assume a “series of parts” before the “perpetual mirror” of “some spectatorship she perceived or imagined in the people around her” (Tragic Muse VII 189), Maggie is not. And instead of criticising such lack of authentic identity or personality as he had done with Miriam, here James remains silent on any moral implications that might be derived from his characters’ behaviour. This lack of narrative commentary on the characters’ manipulative and deceitful behaviour indicates the distance James has travelled from The Portrait of a Lady. Similarly, rather than critiquing the characters’ conflation or confusion of aesthesis and commodity consumption, as he had done with Osmond in The Portrait of a Lady, here James simply describes such behaviour as a fact of modern life. This changed perspective is evident, for example, in the novel’s narrative voice which, on occasions in which characters are described as precious objects, refuses to intrude to point out the “moral” of its own observation: “Nothing perhaps might affect us as queerer, had we time to look into it, than this application of the same measure of value to such different pieces of property as old Persian carpets, say, and new human acquisitions . . .” (160). Where the narrator of Portrait had criticised Osmond for his sterile and poisonous aestheticism, here the narrator leaves us to draw our own conclusions.

The conflation of aesthesis and commodity consumption that the Golden Bowl records can be seen as an accurate portrayal of social life under modernity. James's revelation of the equivalences between "old Persian carpets" and "new human acquisitions" shows the extent to which exchange value has come to dominate modern society. Rather than being unique, particular human subjects, James's characters are the "same as" material objects. And the relations between these pieces of "human furniture" are ones of domination and control. As a description of the material conditions of modernity, the Golden Bowl uncannily illustrates the human consequences of the development of high capitalism as theorised, for example, by Theodor Adorno.<sup>19</sup> Adorno argues that the domination of society by exchange value, inherent in human nature's drive for self-preservation itself, becomes in the modern period all-encompassing. From the necessary use of instrumental reason as a tool for human self-preservation comes the condition in which all spheres of life are eventually determined by relations of domination. Just as the natural world becomes fodder for human projects, appreciated only for its usefulness as raw material, so inner human nature becomes raw material for the exploitation of manufactured standardised desires necessary for capitalism's continuation. Without delving too deeply into the complexities of Adorno's critique of capitalist society, we may still use his insights into the way in which modern society is dominated by exchange value and relationships of power to shed light on James's project in the Golden Bowl.

James's representation of manipulation and deceit and lack of explicit authorial condemnation of such activities in the Golden Bowl has disturbed many. James's narrative

silence at moments in which he is describing his main characters as commodifying aesthetes has in particular troubled many critics, both contemporary and twentieth century. Writing in the Nation in 1905, an unnamed reviewer commented on the players in James's "bitter" drama in terms of their "moral corruption":

Mr. Verver, a person so rich that his nationality may be taken for granted, buys for his daughter Maggie a husband, a Roman Prince, with whom she has fallen in love because he is beautiful and charming and because the history of his ancestors' follies and crimes is recorded in many volumes neatly ranged on a shelf in the British Museum . . . . the appalling power for moral disintegration, if not corruption, implied in the possession of immense wealth could hardly be more impressively illustrated than it is in The Golden Bowl. (qtd. in Gard 385-7)

The Golden Bowl was singled out by contemporary critics as "decadent", "undermining public morals", full of "revolting things" hidden by a "shimmering mist of verbal cleverness", a "tissue of hideous and nameless complications" (qtd. in Gard 435). I shall return to this issue below; here I want to note that James's Golden Bowl registers with uncanny accuracy the same intertwining of the aesthetic and commodity culture as does Whistler's work.

That the relations between the characters in the Golden Bowl are relations between things, and that these relations are ones of domination and power, clearly demonstrates the extent to which James has internalised commodity culture. This internalisation is particularly evident in the character of Maggie. Unlike her predecessor Isabel, who is educated out of her reifying tendencies and suffers from the acquisitive aestheticism of her

loathsome husband, Maggie is as great an aesthete as both Osmond and her father Adam with as great a will to power. Her power is perhaps even greater because it masquerades as mildness. Analysing the novel from a Foucauldian perspective, Seltzer argues that in The Golden Bowl a “balanced economy of freedom and supervision - an immanent policing so thoroughly inscribed in the most ordinary social practices that it is finally indistinguishable from manners, cooperation and care, constitutes . . . both the subject and the mode” of the novel (Henry James and the Art of Power 61). Power and love are not antithetical in the novel but rather different names for the same thing.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in his analysis of Maggie as a decadent femme fatale, Freedman suggests that cruelty and beauty are equivalent in the Golden Bowl. For example, Maggie’s sadistic treatment of Charlotte is described by the narrator as being an aspect of her magnificence:

In one of the novel’s most famous and most problematical passages, [Maggie] employs her preternaturally acute senses to hear Charlotte’s silent cry of agony at the equally silent betrayal of Amerigo, and at her inability ever to confront her lover or his wife with her knowledge of that betrayal. But Maggie will not relent, nor is there any condemnation in the novel of her for this refusal. (237-8)

With respect to the argument I am advancing here, the insights of both Seltzer and Freedman support my view that James has accurately registered the complex relations of power and equivalence which dominate modern social life. The Golden Bowl is not a moral polemic; it is descriptive rather than prescriptive. As a description of relations of power and domination, the enmeshment of aesthetic in the culture of consumption, and of the aesthete as exquisitely sensitive as well as intensely acquisitive, James’s novel is a

work of almost perfect formal symmetry. Indeed, Jean-Christophe Agnew has argued that “the social and moral resolutions of the narrative blend imperceptibly with the aesthetic resolutions of the form” (“Consuming Vision” 91-2).

In its perfection of aesthetic form, its symmetry, its perfect correspondence between form and subject matter, James’s Golden Bowl is analogous to Whistler’s nocturnes and 1880s portraits. However, just as Whistler’s work was seen as immoral and devoted to theatrical display, so was The Golden Bowl. Now, I have argued that James does not explicitly criticise his characters for their behaviour in the Golden Bowl as he had in the Portrait. And this failure has been the source of much critical commentary. However, James’s ironic, distanced stance from the objects of his narrative may suggest an implicit critique. That any critique which may be derived from his narrator’s off-hand observations is immanent rather than transcendent indicates James’s own position inside the conditions he observes. He cannot stand outside and above the social world he describes because he is enmeshed in it. And his enmeshment in a world of aestheticised commodification is also apparent in the novel’s most important formal attribute, its language.

As I indicated earlier in this chapter, The Golden Bowl was seen by contemporary reviewers as a decadent “tissue of hideous and nameless complications” hidden by a “shimmering mist of verbal cleverness” (qtd. in Gard 435). James’s labyrinthine late style added to readers’ discomfort with the subject matter of his novel. William James can be seen as exemplary in this regard. William begged his brother to “say a thing in one sentence as straight and explicit as it can be made, and then drop it forever . . . Say it *out*,



for God's sake, and have done with it!" (qtd. in Edel, Henry James 5:301). James's inability or unwillingness to just say it out can be seen as a deliberate strategy.<sup>21</sup> Instead of a means of communicating facts, language in the Golden Bowl is fetishised, played with for its own sake. Language becomes itself an object of beauty or fascination to be consumed and enjoyed for author and reader alike. Words become raw material for James's artistic manipulations. Like Whistler's paintings, James's linguistic experimentations are engaged in for the aesthetic enjoyment they provide. The condition of James's language in this novel reinforces the text's subject matter - that the world it describes is aestheticised and commodified.

James's novelistic world in the late work is, like the London of Whistler's nocturnes, hazy, oblique, shimmering. His sentences are snakelike, sinuously winding around and around a subject, making it at times almost impossible to detect the subject of the discourse. The text suggests, as Whistler's do, a wealth of information but explicitly confirms nothing. Rather than being the realistic representation of an external world required by readers accustomed to clearly-articulated stories, The Golden Bowl places us, as Whistler's works had, inside the authorial consciousness. In so doing, James makes it difficult for the reader to distinguish between different characters and between interior thought and exterior description. Mindsapes and external landscapes become indistinguishable and inseparable, submerged in the mind of the authorial persona.<sup>22</sup> The melding of separate voices and separate visions that results from this indistinguishability means that each of his characters speaks with the author's voice and becomes his surrogate. James himself had argued that in his later work he was able to efface the

contradictions between maintaining a differentiation of each characters' voice and control over the narrative form through the organic totality of the novelistic whole: "The thing 'done', artistically, is a fusion . . . you can't disintegrate my synthesis; you can't resolve the elements of my whole into different responsible agents or find your way at all . . . My mixture has only to be perfect literally to bewilder you. You are lost in the tangle of the forest" (AN 116). The tangle of the narrative's forest is added to by its discursive sluggishness.

James's use of language in the Golden Bowl makes the novel approach the condition of painting. Rather than moving steadily forward, the novel's narrative approaches the condition of stasis, of a solidified immobility. Perhaps the most striking instance of this linguistic congealing process is James's "pagoda", the amazing symbolic creation with which Volume II opens. James's pictorial evocation of Maggie's situation acts as a substitute for narrative commentary and provides an image of remarkable intensity with which to render her circumstances:

This situation had been occupying, for months and months, the very centre of the garden of her life, but it had reared itself there like some strange, tall tower of ivory, or perhaps rather some wonderful, beautiful, but outlandish pagoda, a structure plait with hard bright porcelain, coloured and figured and adorned, at the overhanging eaves, with silver bells that tinkled, ever so charmingly, when stirred by chance airs . . . Though her raised eyes seemed to distinguish places that must serve, from within, and especially from aloft, as apertures and outlooks, no door

appears to give access from her convenient garden level. The great decorated surface had remained consistently impenetrable and inscrutable. (301)

The congealing of the narrative form that the pagoda exemplifies, and the tangle of the novel's narrative forest, is so complete in the Golden Bowl that the condition of the novel's language itself echoes the condition of the characters within the story. Just as the characters see themselves and treat others as beautiful objects to be acquired for their own self-understanding, so too does James's narrative discourse itself reflect that impulse. Hence, in both aesthetic form and subject matter the Golden Bowl is an exemplary manifestation of the internalisation of commodity culture.

Although attacked by critics then and now for its focus on the amoral plutocracy and apparent lack of social conscience, The Golden Bowl perfectly articulates its cultural moment. In that moment, 1904, the aesthetic was seen by James as the only ground of human value in a degraded and materialistic world. From this perspective Golden Bowl's characters' human frailties are redeemed by the novel's formal aesthetic perfection. Seen from a socio-historical perspective, The Golden Bowl, with its valorisation of the aesthetic, rebels against the "increasingly unspiritual, prosaic nature of life under capitalism in its entrepreneurial phase, a life with which the 'beautiful soul' will tolerate no intercourse" (Wolin 106). In the realm of the aesthetic the sovereign power of the individual artistic consciousness is affirmed and the positive values unrealised in life can be realised in art. Maggie and James himself both succeed in transforming the untidiness and insufficiencies of life into the static perfection of the novel's master trope, the golden bowl. At the novel's conclusion the golden bowl as it "was to have been . . . with all the

happiness in it" (445) is restored to Maggie in the form of the Prince. The broken bowl of betrayal and bitterness that is the temporal world is redeemed in James's atemporal and eternal golden bowl of art.

Whistler's nocturnes and portraits and James's Golden Bowl celebrate the individual artistic consciousness and its ability to transform life's ugliness, formlessness, and waste into art's beauty and formal integrity. These works perform modernism's project of reimagining the world; as I have outlined in chapter one, they glorify the values of individual subjectivity, of beauty, of art for its own sake, and in so doing they stand in opposition to the lack of those same values in the "life-world". However, as a revelation of the enmeshment of aesthetic in the culture of consumption and of the aesthete as intensely acquisitive, James's novel registers with uncanny accuracy the connections between aestheticism, with its valorisation of intense states of perception and beauty, and commodity culture, with its transformation of the aesthetic into consumable commodity. Similarly, Whistler's nocturnes and 1880s portraits, with their articulation of beauty and technical experimentation embodied in objects which were for many indistinguishable from "mere fashion", record the problematic ability of modern consumer culture to transform critiques of itself into objects of consumption themselves. While, as I demonstrated in chapters two and three, James and Whistler both argued for the aesthetic as a transcendent autonomous realm of value above and beyond the social world and its commodities, it is especially in their aestheticist work that the *inability* of the aesthetic to transcend the social is articulated.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of a variety of different nineteenth century images of the Thames, including Whistler's and Monet's, see John House, "The Impressionist View of London".

<sup>2</sup> Whistler's Thames set etchings of 1860 focused on images of commerce, industry and men at work. In his painting Wapping (1862-4) he took up the subject of "working women" in and around the river with a picture of a prostitute's assignation featuring his mistress Jo Hiffennan and Alphonse Legros and an unidentified man at the Angel Inn in Rotherhithe.

<sup>3</sup> Some critics have suggested that Hiroshige's woodcut Kyobashi Bridge from "One Hundred Views of Edo" c. 1857 was Whistler's inspiration for Nocturne: Blue and Gold. See Koval 45.

<sup>4</sup> Whistler's sauce was a mixture of copal, turpentine and linseed oil brushed on over previously-applied ground. For details of Whistler's painting techniques in the nocturnes, see Pennell 164-5 and Koval 46-47.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of Whistler's use of musical terminology, and his links with French symbolist poets and artists, see Ron Johnson, "Whistler's Musical Modes: Numinous Nocturnes".

<sup>6</sup> As I indicated in chapter three Whistler constantly asserted his originality to other artists and critics. With respect to the nocturnes he wrote to his pupil Walter Greaves of his invention of "moonlights": "Now look suppose you were to see any other fellow doing my moonlights - how vexed you would be - You see I *invented* them - never in the history of art have they been done -" (qtd. in Anderson 486, note 34).

<sup>7</sup> As Anderson and others have noted, Whistler is overstating his "originality" here, ignoring the Pre-Raphaelites' earlier use of decorative frames. In an 1873 letter to Lucas Whistler alludes to earlier frame decoration but insists that those artists didn't know what they were doing and, unlike him, had no "science of art" within which to place their practice: "Though many have painted on their frames but never with real purpose or knowledge - in short never in this way or anything at all like it - This I have so thoroughly established here that no one would dare to put any colour whatever (excepting the old black and white and that quite out of place probably) on their frames without feeling that they would be pointed out as forgers or imitators . . ." (Thorp 48).

<sup>8</sup> For a general discussion of Whistler's frames, see Ira M. Horowitz, "Whistler's Frames".

<sup>9</sup> David Park Curry notes in "Total Control: Whistler at an Exhibition" that when one of Whistler's pastels was reframed by Charles Lang Freer in a reddish-gold frame it completely altered (for the worse) the work's balances and tonality (71). For a detailed discussion of Whistler's exhibition designs, in addition to Curry's article, see Deanna Marohn Bendix, Diabolical Designs: Paintings, Interiors, and Exhibitions of James McNeill Whistler, 205-68. Bendix is primarily interested in Whistler as a designer, arguing that he was supremely confident only as an interior designer: "There are numerous reports of [Whistler's] troubled struggle to satisfy his own criteria for his pictures, but no such tales of doubt survive in regard to his designs to galleries and domestic spaces" (2). Diabolical Designs chronicles Whistler's contributions to the design reform movement in Britain.

<sup>10</sup> For the second exhibition of his Venetian prints, Whistler produced the first of his brown paper catalogues in which he mocked the critics by excerpting their most scathing critiques of his past work, occasionally taking the comments out of context, and placing these quotes under the titles of his etchings. About the catalogue, whose introductory phrase was "Out of their own mouths shall ye judge them", Whistler wrote to the American artist Waldo Story to say "And such a catalogue! The last inspiration! Sublime simply: never such a thing thought of - I take my dear Waldo, all that I have collected of the silly drivel of the wise fools who write, and I pepper and salt it about the catalogue under the different etchings I exhibit - in short I put their nose to the grindstone and turn the wheel with a whirr! I just let it spin! . . . I give 'em Hell! . . . The whole thing is a joy - and indeed a masterpiece of mischief. (qtd. in Bendix 225).

<sup>11</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", Dialectic of Enlightenment; Philosophical Fragments, 120-67.

<sup>12</sup> Theodore Duret, History of James McNeill Whistler and his Work, 99-102, 104-5. See Robin Spencer, "Whistler, Manet, and the Tradition of the Avant-Garde" for a discussion of the circumstances surrounding the painting of the portrait and its differences from Manet's earlier version.

<sup>13</sup> For examples of such works see Carole McNamara and John Siewert, Whistler: Prosaic Views, Poetic Vision.

<sup>14</sup> On the development of a consumer society in the late nineteenth century, see Rachel Bowlby, Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola; Daniel Horowitz, The Morality of Spending;

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Attitudes Toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940; R.W. Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History 1880-1980 and Alan Trachtenberg, The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age.

<sup>15</sup> In his observations on turn of the century America James notes that American women are like "a new human convenience, not unlike . . . stoves, refrigerators, sewing machines, typewriters, cash registers, that have done so much in the household and the place of business, for the American name" (Scene 347).

<sup>16</sup> Ian Bell in Henry James and the Past argues that James's achievement is to recognise the "tensile relation between the prison and the liberation of the spectacle" (13). Bell suggests that James shows how, if character is purely simulated and not "real", it is possible to easily change one's character into one more desirable or useful for whatever occasion.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of this "participant-observer" see Carolyn Porter, Seeing and Being: The Plight of the "Participant Observer" in Emerson, James, Adams, and Faulkner. For an analysis of the role of vision and "seeing the self" in the Golden Bowl, see Susan M. Griffin, The Historical Eye: The Texture of the Visual in Late James.

<sup>18</sup> For an interesting and not yet dated discussion of James's lack of psychological depth and emphasis on surface, see Leo Bersani, "The Jamesian Lie", A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature. James's emphasis on the connection between identity and performance in the Golden Bowl predates recent feminist analyses that proceed along similar lines. For a recent account that argues that identity is not biologically determined but created through one's actions or performances, see Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, esp. 134-41.

<sup>19</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, Negative Dialectics. See also the essays contained in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds., The Essential Frankfurt School Reader. For an interesting discussion of Adorno and his circle, see Susan Buck-Morss, The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute.

<sup>20</sup> Criticism of The Golden Bowl has diverged sharply, depending upon whether the Ververs are read as innocents - embodying love - or exploiters - embodying power. See Lawrence Holland, The Expense of Vision: Essays on the Craft of Henry James for the first interpretation and Sallie Sears, The Negative Imagination: Form and Perspective in the Novels of Henry James for the second. Seltzer argues that readings of the novel that enforce a distinction between love and power "might be said to repeat the very normalizing procedure that the novel itself at once names and secures. To rectify and to normalize, all in the name of love: this is to exercise power in the very act of disowning power, and it is this ideology of power that The Golden Bowl enacts and that these readings of the novel consistently reenact" (95). That modern social relations are ones of power and domination is one of James's insights in the Golden Bowl.

<sup>21</sup> Kelly Cannon has suggested that James's use of language in the late work is transgressive and an attempt to escape censorship: "One might assume therefore that mastery of language for James meant the ability to clearly communicate information. Do not people who have mastered the language of a particular community 'say what they mean'? On the contrary, James's language moves beyond the informative function to become instead a medium rich in evocation. Indeed, at the height of his abilities, James appears to have resisted the informative function of language to the point of confusion. One could say that he transgressed common assumptions about the reasons people speak and write" (99). I agree that James's use of language transgresses gendered assumptions of what language should do and be. It also fetishises language and turns it into an object of desire itself.

<sup>22</sup> The "omnipresence" of James in his own works has been remarked on by both contemporary and twentieth century critics. For example, writing in 1902 J.P. Mowbray saw James's authorial presence as an aesthetic flaw: "[In his work we] meet the accomplished fixity of Mr. James. We cannot well get on for the cunning barricades of him . . . He is continually present suggesting deeper and more perplexing chasms of Henry James, [a] finite omnipresence that insists upon filling the stage, and not only pouring its asides into every ear but demands that every mortal soul of them shall use his patois and adopt his idiosyncrasies . . . not only to the utter discomfiture of differences but to the unique accomplishment of an edulcorated uniformity" (qtd. in Gard 327). On James's late style and authorial technique see R.B.J. Wilson, Henry James's Ultimate Narrative: The Golden Bowl; Nicola Bradbury, Henry James: The Later

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Novels (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979) and the chapter entitled "Language" in Kelly Cannon, Henry James and Masculinity, 99-124.

## CONCLUSION

In their response to the complex social and cultural transformations of late nineteenth century society, their articulation of technically innovative aesthetic forms, and their representations of the anxieties and dreams of the bourgeoisie, James and Whistler were the first American artists to be avant-garde analysts of modernity. From their position as outsiders within the world of late nineteenth century Europe, writer and painter engaged in a competitive struggle for cultural legitimacy with their peers and with other cultural products. And both used the position of avant-garde outsider as one from which to express their disgust for and alienation from the bad aspects of modernity and to celebrate the good. As a social formation and a state of mind, modernity and its effects are dealt with throughout their parallel careers.

From their early realist works, in which the problems of modernity appear as contradictions in aesthetic form, through their interaction with popular culture and the feminine, to their culminating aestheticist work in which commodity culture and the aesthetic are so closely intertwined as to become inseparable, James and Whistler chart the progress of modernity's effects on human subjectivity and autonomous art. With the complex changes modernisation brought to the nineteenth century bourgeois social landscape came the elaboration of a realm of purely individual and private subjective freedom we see articulated in James's and Whistler's work. Both artists celebrate the heightened individual consciousness and its ability to transform life's ugliness, formlessness, and waste into art's beauty and formal integrity. In so doing, they perform modernism's project of reimagining the world, glorifying the values of individual



subjectivity, of beauty, of art for its own sake and standing in opposition to the lack of those same values in the "life-world".

However, as we have seen, as aesthetic professionals James and Whistler stand both in opposition to and within the culture of the commodity. The more the industrialisation of culture makes the artist an entrepreneur or businessperson, the more the aesthetic value of the work is seen as absolutely incommensurable with its economic value. And the more that high art becomes socially marginal, the more the artist as constructed by Whistler and James becomes imaginatively and symbolically central. Against the commodity and its machine creator stands the art object, whose formal integrity and beauty contrasts with the "shapelessness of human life subject to production-rationality" (Crow 250). Even when, however, or especially when repudiating them, the modernist artist is deeply involved in the processes and pressures of industrialisation and modernisation. Given the ability of a fully-developed consumer society to transform everything, including criticisms of itself, into objects of consumption themselves, we have seen that James and Whistler were inevitably a part of that which they purported to stand beyond.

In the introduction I suggested that James and Whistler can provide mirrors in which late twentieth century artists and critics may see their own similarly conflicted careers. The conditions which they both describe and helped to create have not diminished; they have only become more extreme. Modernity's promises of liberation from all debilitating socio-historical constraints have become increasingly hollow and for the vast majority of the world are unfulfilled and without foreseeable hope of fulfillment.

Industrial capitalism's progress "through the time and around the world, round it and round it again, from continent to continent and clime to clime; with populations and deputations, reporters and photographers, placards and interviews and banquets, steamers, railways, dollars, diamonds, speeches and artistic ruin all jumbled" (Tragic Muse VIII 197) chews up everything it encounters. As this examination of James and Whistler has shown, the place of a critical art within modernity or our current post-modernity is exceedingly unstable and conflicted. Avant-garde art is an elite activity and the audience to whom it matters is small. In addition, the ability of a critical avant-garde art to sustain its critique is limited. Perhaps, following the example of Henry James and James McNeill Whistler, the best we can hope for is to remain conscious of the conditions within which we explore our own subjectivities. After all, consciousness, even of negative conditions, is always better than unconsciousness.

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HENRY JAMES



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