HENRY JAMES IN THE PALACE OF ART: A SURVEY AND EVALUATION OF JAMES' AESTHETIC CRITERIA AS SHOWN IN HIS CRITICISM OF NINETEENTH CENTURY PAINTING

by

AUDREY GRACE THOMAS

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Department of **English**

The University of British Columbia, Vancouver 8, Canada.

Date **May 24, 1963**
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a general introduction to the study of James' art criticism, to establish his aesthetic criteria and to indicate the relationship between his theory of art and the themes of his fiction. First, I have included an analysis of three stories concerning the artist and his craft: "The Madonna of the Future," "The Liar," and "The Real Thing." Drawing certain conclusions as to James' view of the nature of art and the nature and function of the artist, I have then proceeded to examine his most important statements on nineteenth century painting. Although this is only a small portion of his many comments on not only the art of painting but all the Fine Arts, I have limited my discussion to painting for the sake of brevity and clarity, and to the nineteenth century because James is a nineteenth century novelist. I have attempted to show his amazing perception of the various aesthetic movements of his time and his sympathetic attitude towards the many pitfalls into which the artists of the nineteenth century fell. I have also tried to indicate briefly where James differed from the major art critics of the time, such as Ruskin, Pater and Baudelaire.

I feel that certain conclusions can be drawn from a study of James' art criticism: one, that it is important to any serious study of his novels; two, that it is closely linked to certain twentieth century attitudes towards the nature of art; and three, that the aesthetic theory out of which James is working has a direct relation to
both the form and content of his novels. His characters are acting out his own struggle for a compromise between the Real and the Ideal, and his theory of art and theory of life being one and the same, he feels that one should, in a certain sense, make of one's life a work of art.
I have never been able to convince myself that James had any deep feeling for the art of painting. His taste—he liked Sargent—was that of the upper-class gentleman of his time, class-bound, rather unimaginative. His enthusiasm was confined largely to the traditionally accepted...and he was often unable to separate whatever genuine taste he had from his merely social prejudices.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1875 Henry James remarked that "in the Palace of Art there are many mansions."\(^1\) Three decades later, in his now famous preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, he asserted that "the house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million...."\(^2\) To even the most casual reader of James, for whom, as for Nick Dormer in *The Tragic Muse*, "all art...is one,"\(^3\) it is obvious that the Palace of Art and the house of fiction are so closely related as to be nearly inseparable, or rather that they are built (at least), from the same set of blueprints. And from James' letters, his travel sketches, his art criticism and his novels themselves, it is equally obvious that the "master" felt himself to be as comfortably at home in one as in the other. The superficial reasons for this are many and well-known: his early trips abroad when he and young William roamed the great galleries of Europe receiving in their infant consciousnesses what Henry was to remember as "a general sense of glory;" his brother's and his own Newport friendship with the American painters William Hunt and John LaFarge; the influence and guidance of Charles Eliot Norton, a professor of Fine Arts at Harvard and life-long friend of John Ruskin; his work as an art critic for the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *North American Review*; all of these factors played a part in his initiation into, and early awareness of, the fascinating world of the plastic arts, the delight of the "pictorial."
But there are other, more subtly psychological reasons for James' attraction to the Fine Arts, and particularly to the art of painting. James seems to have been born with a "sense of the past" which is almost unique among modern American novelists. The lessons of the old masters were as important to him as they are to T.S. Eliot, and for similar reasons. The thin air of the American cultural scene, which made it so difficult for artists like James and Eliot to breathe was the result of a lack of tradition, the absence of a "past" in any sense of the word. And James, like Eliot, had a deep-seated belief that a lack of tradition and cultural continuity, be it social, ethical or aesthetic, would lead to psychic sterility and spiritual stagnation. The Palace of Art was one place where James could find tradition, could meet it face to face, and where he could, while bowing with a delighted sense of recognition "among the Titians," exercise a faint hope that some day the Titians might incline slightly towards him. The Old Masters were as much his spiritual fathers as were Balzac and Turgenev. From the art of painting as well as the art of the novel the young James learned the importance of composition, of style and of the significant gesture. He examined portraits, discovering in the best of them that there was a vast difference between a good likeness or a pretty compliment and that painting which truly deserved the title of portrait. From landscape he may have learned the importance of perspective and the value of accidents of light and shade. In Italian Hours, written late in life, he continually expresses his predilection for Mannerist painters like Bronzino
and Tintoretto, and it may be that from these men he learned the secret of foreshortening and dramatic irony. The novel, after all, was a comparatively new and undeveloped art form, whereas the great panorama of painting stretched back to the earliest history of man. The art of painting had within itself a sense of the past which the art of the novel did not have. However that may be, his observations were not in vain and we come away from his greatest novels with, among other things, a series of unforgettable portraits, luminous landscapes and genre figures: Christina Light advancing along the paths of the Borghese Gardens with her terrible American mother and the very Italian Cavaliere; Isabel Archer framed in the doorway at Gardencourt or surveying her shattered life among the savage splendors of the Roman ruins; titian-haired Milly Theale resplendent in white and pearls at her first and final party in Venice; Lambert Strether himself or Lambert Strether watching Chad and Mme. de Vionnet boating in the French countryside; Mrs Brook seated in state at her salon—the "catalogue" seems endless.

There is yet another reason why James may have been attracted to the plastic arts as sources of inspiration as well as imagery. A painting is much more of a "public" thing than a book. It has a closer relationship to society, to individuals in contact with one another, a point to which we shall return below. One isolates oneself to read a book; one goes out to see a painting. A painting can also be seen in relationship to other paintings; an entire exhibition can be seen in one afternoon. It is not possible, on the
other hand, to read ten or twenty novels at more or less the same
time, and it takes much longer to get a general impression of a
writer's work than a painter's. To James, who had chosen a more iso-
lated art form, the art of painting must have had a force and direct-
ness about it which he could not help but envy. As if some psycho-
logical compensation were at work, we find not only his novels but
his literary criticism abounding with technical terms which he has
borrowed from the studios: "tone," "value," "composition," "plasticity."

Therefore, if only because James makes constant use of the
techniques and language of the Fine Arts in his writings, his
formal art criticism would deserve more attention than it has here-
tofoe received. But James also seems to imply in his fiction,
although he never actually expressed such a view in fact, that the
man who does not understand or appreciate the principles of art can
not completely grasp the principles of life, and since an awareness
and appreciation of the one involves, for him, an awareness and
appreciation of the other, his comments on painters and paintings
and the creative process in general may be of more than passing
interest to the serious student of his novels and tales.

Nevertheless an examination of his comments on specific
painters and specific paintings can be of real value only if the
reader remembers to place James' art criticism within its historical
context. For in order to understand his likes and dislikes it is
necessary to have some awareness of both the nation and the century
into which he was born and from whose influence, for good or ill, he could never entirely escape. James was only too well aware that it was a "complex fate" to be a nineteenth century American, and that the American artist, whatever his medium, must somehow place himself in relation to not only his own country but to the highly complex continent of Europe. As he pointed out to Howells, being an American had certain advantages. An American, lacking a tradition of his own, was free to pick and choose from the best that had been said and done, but being an American had serious disadvantages at the same time.

No European writer is called upon to assume that terrible burden [to choose between America and Europe] and it seems hard that I should be. The burden is necessarily greater for an American—for he must deal, more or less, even if only by implication, with Europe; whereas no European is obliged to deal in the least with America. No one dreams of calling him less complete for not doing so.  

James was not, of course, the first to realize that the artist must deal with Europe, but he was one of the first to understand the difficulties of this obligation. Many American artists, both painters and writers, had crossed the Atlantic in search of inspiration as well as guidance. Yet the American artist who went to London or Paris or Rome tended either to turn his back completely on his own country and become an expatriate or else rush quickly home with only a vague sense of Europe's beauty and a much sharper sense of its corruption. William Wetmore Story was the lion of a flourishing artist colony in Rome in the 1860's. The American painter Benjamin West established a studio in London which became a kind of artistic American Express
for young hopefuls from his native land. Eventually West himself went on to become President of the Royal Academy. Even LaFarge and Sargent appeared to James to be more European than American. Indeed nineteenth century American art appears to have been divided into two quite distinct camps: those who remained in America and tried to discover the aesthetic and symbolic potentiality of their own country—realists such as Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins; the other camp, often labeled "the aesthetes" by those who stayed at home, was made up of artists like Mary Cassatt and John Singer Sargent who either would not or could not grapple with the American scene as it was then.

What James really wished to do was not to choose but to synthesize—realism with aestheticism, America with Europe. He wished to become cosmopolitan both in outlook and in fact. James was well aware that cosmopolitanism as he conceived of it was not a particularly outstanding attribute of the American writer, however much it may have been developed in painters such as John LaFarge. That men like Hawthorne and Emerson could not appreciate European art, for example, seemed to James to be indicative of their limitations as artists. James is kinder to Hawthorne than he is to Emerson in this respect, but in his review of Hawthorne's Italian and French journals he admits that Hawthorne's judgements on art provoke in him "a respectful smile."5

James, observing that nine times out of ten Hawthorne chooses the contemporary, and usually little known contemporary American artist over the Old Master, feels that he reacted most strongly to "the primal freshness and brightness of paint and varnish, and—not to put too fine a point upon it—the new gilding of the frame."6
James notes that Hawthorne also "remains unreconciled to the nudity of the marbles" and that as a result of his inescapable New England background sculpture remained a "closed book" to him. James quotes a passage from the Italian notebook which "seems to explain his [Hawthorne's] indifference by the Cis-Alpine remoteness of his point of view."

'I do not altogether see the necessity of our sculpturing another nakedness. Man is no longer a naked animal; his clothes are to him as his skin, and we have no more right to undress him than to flay him.'

That Hawthorne's desire for drapery was not peculiar to New England alone can be seen by a comment of James' in William Wetmore Story and His Friends. Maintaining that Story "was not, with the last intensity a sculptor," James objects to his continued draping of his monumental figures. He says that Story's use of drapery "bears on the question of what, in relation to the public, was possible...." He feels that there was a "felt demand" for drapery in mid-Victorian times, just as there was a similar demand for the novel of romance, since a draped figure is romantic, anecdotal, while a nude is not. Thus Hawthorne, like his sculptor-contemporary Story, was unable or unwilling to accept reality unless it were suitably clothed in the garb of romance. Reality unclothed was not nude, but "naked". But James takes pains to point out that Hawthorne did have a certain amount of aesthetic awareness whereas in his essay on Emerson he points out that Emerson had virtually no appreciation of art at all. For Emerson, not only sculpture but the entire world of the visual arts
was a "closed book". Hawthorne's remarks on art may have had a "strong national flavour," or have been limited by his age and environment, but Ralph Waldo Emerson was not only impervious to "Shelley, Aristophanes, Don Quixote, Miss Austen and Dickens," but also to the great masterpieces of the Vatican and the Louvre. James recalls having accompanied Emerson on a tour of these galleries in 1872 and of having been "struck with the anomaly of a man so refined and intelligent being so little spoken to by works of art. It would be more exact to say that certain chords were wholly absent, the tune was played, the tune of life and literature altogether on those that remained."

But in James' own family there also seems to have been a lack of any deep appreciation of the fine arts—nowhere in his recollections of his early trips abroad do we find a reference to either of his parents accompanying him or William to an art gallery. If they weren't taken by a governess or a tutor, they appear to have gone alone. Were the elder Jameses, like their friend Emerson, deficient in "certain chords"? In Washington Square an Italian canvas by Mr. Cole, "the American Turner," hung in the front parlour, and a marble 'Bacchante,' again done by an American artist, in "the corresponding room behind." There was also a large 'View in Tuscany' by Lefèvre above the sofa, a painting which the small boy heard subjected to what he was to remember afterwards as "restrictive criticism." Again we have both biographical and autobiographical evidence that the elder Jameses did take the boys downtown to see
such currently popular works as Leutze's 'Washington crossing the Delaware' and to a collection of Italian "primitives" which subsequently turned out to be fakes. And when William decided to be a painter the family rushed away from Europe and back to America so that he could study under an American painter. James was to remark in his formal art criticism, albeit not in his memoirs, that Hunt was a painter with only a "delicate talent." In spite of this yearning for the European scene the senior Henry appears to have felt that American art and artists had qualities which could not be found in Europe. And Henry Jr., in his memoirs and his criticism, seems to imply that the American art which his father admired was not of a first-rate quality. It would appear then, that William and the younger Henry derived their fascination for the pictorial arts from extra-familial, rather than familial, influences, and this in itself, as James himself might say, is a "singularly interesting" hypothesis.

Can a child, born into a family that may have had essentially bourgeois tastes in art, become, through frequent exposure to good art, completely free of the influence of parental taste? Or was Henry simply born with a unique capacity for appreciation?

However that may be, if the older but still young Henry James frequented the galleries for the aesthetic nourishment which he could not find in "his father's house," be it Washington Square or America as a whole, he also loved the galleries because they contained not merely paintings but people looking at paintings. As John L. Sweeney points out,
The social aspect of gallery visits, painting prattle and acquaintance with the handsome spoils of inheritance, was... an important part of his communion with painters and painting and patrons.16

Here, in the gallery, James could achieve several aims at once—he could observe a Titian or a Burne-Jones and at the same time observe other spectators' reactions to the paintings. He could make mental notes on dress and discussion, on what was favoured and what was not, and come to some highly amused and amusing conclusions about the spectators as well as the paintings themselves. We might mention just two examples of this. In 1877, talking about the "importunately narrative" quality of much of English contemporary art, he points out that the love of the narrative, the anecdotal, is "illustrated in the spectators as much as in the pictures."

I remember a remark made as I stood looking at a very prettily painted scene by Mr. Marcus Stone, representing a young lady in a pink satin dress, solemnly burning up a letter, while an old woman sits weeping in the background. Two ladies stood near me, entranced. For a long time they were silent. At last—'Her mother was a widow!' one of them breathed. Then they looked a little while longer and departed.17

At the Academy exhibition of the following year, the crowd around Frith's 'Road to Ruin' incites him to once again make ironic comment on the taste of the British public.

In one of the rooms at the Academy there is a dense crowd of people pressing closely together, under the rigid surveillance of a policeman who incites them to 'move on' in tones which resound the livelong day. Is it, then, so difficult to detach oneself from the work of Mr. Frith, after one has caught a happy glimpse of it?18

Both The American (1877) and The Tragic Muse (1890) open in
a French gallery, the former in the Salon Carré of the Louvre, the latter in the Palais de l'Industrie. Christopher Newman's bewilderment at what James was to call in his autobiography the "general sense of glory" of the Louvre and Nick Dormer's keen appreciation of the contemporary sculpture of the Palais (and Nick's appreciation as contrasted to his mother's and older sister's obvious and very English distrust and deprecation) tell us certain important facts about the two heroes before the action of the story is underway. It is also in the galleries of the Louvre that Christopher first meets Noémie, and in the Palais that Nick sees Miriam Rooth for the first time. Many of James' other novels depend upon family galleries or even isolated works of art for part of their dramatic impact: *Roderick Hudson*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Spoils of Poynton*, *The Sacred Fount*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*. The hero's or the heroine's reaction to art, his ability or inability to "appreciate," is often directly connected to his ultimate victory or defeat. In the case of Americans like Christopher Newman, Isabel Archer and Maggie Verver, it is their ever-increasing awareness of the implications of art, of the necessity for establishing certain criteria, that leads to their eventual awareness of the complexity of Europe and from there to some sort of resolution and independence. When Maggie finally understands the symbolic significance of the golden bowl, when Isabel realizes that Gilbert treats people as works of art and that he "collects" more out of a desire for status than out of any real aesthetic or moral appreciation of his "collections,"
when Christopher Newman realizes that he has been "taken in," first by the brightness of the varnish on Noemie's canvasses and later by the Cintres' own peculiar brand of aestheticism, then, and only then, are they able to cope with what is left of their lives. On the negative side, Roderick Hudson's productions themselves are symbolic of his rapid decline, Milly Theale's recognition of her semblable in the Bronzino portrait symbolizes her approaching death, and Fleda Vetch's self-sacrifice is rewarded with not only a psychological, but also a real, cross—the Maltese Cross which she had "appreciated" so well.

Art, and people looking at art--this motif runs through most of James' major novels and some of his finest tales: "The Madonna of the Future," "The Liar," "The Beldonald Holbein," "The Tone of Time," "The Real Thing." Sometimes the interest lies in the artist himself, as in Roderick Hudson, "The Madonna of the Future" or The Tragic Muse; sometimes the interest lies in the nature of art itself, as in "The Liar" and "The Real Thing;" but always, for James, the real interest rests with the viewing consciousness itself, be it that of producer, or merely spectator, of art. The works of art are important only insofar as they affect the consciousness—they have little or no importance as isolated objects.

It might be argued that most of James' fiction centers around the ultimate problem of illusion and reality—even "ghostly" tales like "The Turn of the Screw"—and he shows us in his novels and tales
that there are as many kinds of illusion as there are of reality.

"In the Palace of Art there are many mansions;" "in the house of fiction there is not one window, but a million." And in *A Small Boy and Others* he states that even as a child of twelve he was aware that art and life were somehow, for him, inextricably mixed.

I have dim reminiscences of permitted independent visits, uncorrectedly juvenile though I might still be, during which the house of life and the palace of art became so mixed and interchangeable—the Louvre being the most peopled of scenes as well as the most hushed of all temples—that an excursion to look at pictures would have but half expressed my afternoon.¹⁹

Palace of art, house of fiction, house of life: the house of fiction—the house that James built—seems to have a direct relation to both of the others. And James' fiction, like works of art and like life itself, may turn out to rest on the same dual foundation of illusion and reality.

...  

But the fact that James' fiction deals with the very problems which are essential to art would not, in itself, be enough to justify the inclusion of his art criticism as important to an understanding of his novels and tales. It would make this criticism interesting perhaps, but still nothing more than "a significant tributary of his talent," a phrase which John L. Sweeney uses in his introduction to *The Painter's Eve*. I would nevertheless like to suggest that if one can establish certain of James' aesthetic criteria, if one can "get behind" James himself as it were, and watch him as he does in reality what his heroes and heroines do in the fiction, then one
is well on the way to understanding not only James' theory of art but his theory of fiction and also, perhaps, his theory of life. What he does in his essays and reviews on the visual arts is to take us by the hand and lead us through the great exhibitions of England and France, and, by so doing, reveal to us how he looks at a work of art. We can then turn or return to his novels and tales with a heightened awareness, not only of his techniques, but also of his own aesthetic standards. If we then measure his characters' standards against his own we can better understand both their strengths and weaknesses as human beings. We can also, I feel, come away with a greater understanding not only of the vast complexity of nineteenth century art, but of how the art itself reflected the terribly complex age in which it was produced. In a century where neo-classic idealism and scientific materialism, the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, Camelot and Camden Town, romantic sentimentality and hard-headed practicality, the factory and the gallery, maintained an uneasy marriage, it is no wonder that James' heroes and heroines find themselves up against problems which seem both insurmountable and curiously modern. And as James writes about contemporary people in contemporary settings, his comments on contemporary art are, to this critic at least, extremely important. In his essay on Emerson James said that "we know a man imperfectly until we know his society, and we but half know a society until we know its manners." We might add that we but half know a society until we know its art, not only its literature but its music, architecture, sculpture and painting.
And we should also know not only what is accepted (this is part of a society's "manners"), but what is not. In James we have an eye-witness to art history in the making, and being the kind of critic he was he gives us, in his essays and reviews on art, an eye-witness account of social history as well.

"Criticism," said Henry James, "is the gateway to appreciation, just as appreciation is, in regard to a work of art, the only gate of enjoyment." In James' conception of criticism he implies that the function of the critic is to help people towards this necessary appreciation, for, as he had said many years earlier, "though art is an asylum, it is a sort of moated stronghold, hardly approachable save by some slender bridge-work of primary culture...." The critic, like the ficelle in many of James' novels, can help to provide this "slender bridge-work" if necessary, and, if not, can increase the appreciation of those who, through their own efforts, are already within the stronghold.

Yet James never overestimated the value of criticism and the role of the critic, and he made many statements, not only on criticism in general, but on problems concerned specifically with criticism of the fine arts. In 1875 he writes:

Even an indifferent picture is generally worth more than a good criticism, but we approve of criticism nevertheless....It talks a good deal of nonsense but even its nonsense is a useful force. It keeps the question of art before the world, insists upon its importance, and makes it always in order."
Nevertheless he was aware that a littérature, even a littérature "whose sole relation to pictures was a disposition to enjoy them," often approached a work of art from a literary, rather than the painterly, point of view. He points out that painters "have a strong sense of the difference between the literary point of view and the pictorial and they inveterately suspect critics of confounding them." Therefore, although James says in "The Art of Fiction" (1884) that "the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is...complete," he was aware that the painter's eye and the novelist's eye are not looking for the same things. He recognized something which has become one of the basic tenets of twentieth century art—that the primary function of the plastic artist was not to tell a story but to create a composition. He knew that both painter and novelist are concerned with the representation of reality but that the painter's conception of how this reality is to be expressed is, or should be, different from the novelist's conception of the same thing. The difference of media involved necessitated a difference of conception, and a refusal to accept this led to bizarre effects. It was art seen from the literary point of view alone, as well as too "literary" a style, which made James turn on his "adorable Fromentin" in 1876, accusing him of trying to see too much in certain paintings as well as of being guilty of super-subtlety and "web-spinning." In 1875 he had remarked that "we have invented, side by side, the arts of picturesque writing and of erudite painting," but he admitted that, considering the kind of painting which was going on
at the time, "it will not be amiss to excuse us for sometimes attempting to motive our impressions, as the French say, on consider-
ations not exclusively pictorial. Some of the most brilliant paint-
ers of our day indeed, are themselves more literary than their most erratic critics...." In his essay on Fromentin he also makes an objection to overly technical criticism of the fine arts.

He [Fromentin] enters too much, in our opinion, into the technical side, and he expects his readers to care much more than should be expected even of a very ardent art lover, for the mysteries of the process by which the picture was made. There is a certain sort of talk which should be confined to manuals and notebooks and studio records....It is narrow and unimaginative not to understand that a very deep and intelligent enjoyment of pictures is consistent with a lively indifference to the 'inside view' of them. It has too much in common with the reverse of a tapestry, and suggests that a man may be extremely fond of good concerts and yet have no relish for the tuning of fiddles.

Thus James tries to avoid both "literary" and "technical" art criticism in his own essays and is content merely to record his impressions and make a few general comments and conclusions. What he does try to do is to point out which paintings have appealed to him, and why, which have not appealed to him, and why not. He states that all he asks of a painting is "that some force and charm have worked." His essays are essentially impressionistic, the impressions often clothed in beautiful or witty metaphor, and his judgements, if one can call them that, are essentially pragmatic. However, the "force and charm" of which he speaks in Italian Hours are based on certain factors which are fairly constant: style, colour, sincerity of
There are a few other important factors involved in any discussion of James' formal art criticism. In evaluating his remarks we must keep in mind that James wrote very little art criticism after 1882, his very last article being an essay on DuMaurier in Harper's Magazine, September, 1897. Thus his art criticism ceases before he enters his "major phase". Sweeney suggests that by the 1880's James was too absorbed in his own art to have time for any articles on the visual arts, and he regrets that the novelist "wrote so little about the pictorial arts after 1882." However, in a letter to Charles Eliot Norton in 1892 James admitted that he had "ceased to feel it painting very much," 30 so perhaps it is just as well that he had ceased to write about it formally. In Italian Hours (1909) he returns to a discussion of the Old Masters rather than the new, to Titian, Tintoretto, Coreggio, Raphael. As E.P. Richardson has said, "the eye is a conservative organ," 31 and one assumes that it becomes more and more conservative with age. And as an artist feels himself further and further removed from the present it is understandable that he should feel more and more at home with art which has already upon it the "tone of time," the sense of the eternal—particularly, as in James' case, when the art is in a medium which is not his own.

James' life and career spanned an era of tremendous variety and change in the whole conception of art, from Delacroix and Géricault to the Fauves and Cubists. That he was unable to make the
structural leap into the twentieth century is evident in his novels, where he still relies on traditional syntax, for example, even when he is presenting themes and psychological problems which are terrifyingly "modern." The stream of consciousness novel, like the work of Tolstoi and Dostoievsky, would probably have appeared to him like a "fluid pudding," for it seems safe to assume that his concept of form involved a very traditional concept of structure as well. Although he has certain affinities with artists like Cézanne, Picasso and Henry Moore, whether he would have been able to accept some of the more abstract twentieth century art is debatable. An ironist like James relies upon the disparity between external and psychological reality, and one doubts very much if James, for all his insistence upon the difference between the painter's and the novelist's point of view, could have readily accepted an art whose relationship to outer reality is often tenuous.

There is one further point to be mentioned. One of the chief stumbling blocks to any appreciation of James' criticism involves his peculiar use of the word "moral." What does he mean when he says that Tintoretto never drew a line which was not a moral line, or when he says that Lely's impurity of colouring denotes "moral turpitude on the part of the artist"? In "The Art of Fiction" he stresses the fact that "we must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his donné; our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it." Therefore, morality in art must have nothing to do with the choice of subject, all subjects being potential grist for the
artist's mill; it may therefore be assumed that it has something to do with execution, with "what he makes" of his subject. In his preface to The Portrait of a Lady James takes up the question of art and morality and gives at least part of his answer to our question.

One had, from an early time for that matter, the instinct of the right estimate of such values and of its reducing to the inane the dull dispute over the "immoral" subject and the moral. Recognizing so promptly the one measure of the worth of a given subject, the question about it that, rightly answered, disposes of all others—is it valid, in a word, is it genuine, is it sincere, the result of some direct impression or perception of life?35

Elsewhere in the same preface he states that he recognizes "the perfect dependence of the 'moral' sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it."36

The morality or immorality of a work of art, then, rests not in the subject but in the viewing consciousness of the artist. By an extension of terms we can say that for James morality is equated with sincerity, whereas immorality is often equated with what he calls "cleverness," a word James never uses without some pejorative connotations. In his review of Baudelaire's Fleurs du Mal he laughs at the aesthetes' constant denunciation of moral values in art and says that this shows a decided naivete on the part of the disciples of l'art pour l'art. Using an image from the studios, he emphasizes that morality is not something which the artist can keep in a bottle and put in or leave out of his works at will. "It has nothing to do with the artistic process; it has everything to do with the artistic effect."37 James does not, therefore, seem to fall into the Victorian
trap of confusing moral and aesthetic criteria. For him, the two are one and the same. The artist himself determines the moral quality of his art, and the subject which he chooses and his manner of treating this subject, his use of colour, line, composition, will be as moral as he is. The English critic Herbert Read says that

"The Greeks were wiser than we, and their belief, which always seems so childish to us, that beauty is moral goodness, is really a simple truth. The only sin is ugliness, and if we believe this with all our being, all other activities of the human spirit could be left to take care of themselves. Art is the direct measure of a man's spiritual vision."

Whether we believe this or not is irrelevant. The point is that James appears to have believed it "with all his being," as Read puts it. To him, a sordid or clinical view of life can produce a sordid work of art. There can be no confusion of moral and aesthetic criteria. To separate them, to have one set of criteria for society and another for art, is provincial, or even worse. And in his novels and tales James tried to show that there must be art in life just as there must be life in art, and that a sense of beauty in all of its aspects is essential to a sense of humanity. And as I feel that he exemplifies in his fiction the principles which he works out in his criticism, it might be well to begin our discussion of James' sojourn in the Palace of Art with an examination of three of his short tales dealing specifically with art and the artist. I have somewhat arbitrarily chosen "The Madonna of the Future"(1873), "The Liar"(1888) and "The Real Thing"(1893) because they not only span the period during which he wrote his formal art criticism, but also give the reader a
sense of James' growing awareness of the complexity of the whole subject of appearance and reality, art and illusion.
FOOTNOTES

1 "On Some Pictures Lately Exhibited" [originally published in the Atlantic Monthly, November, 1874] in The Painter's Eye: Notes and Essays on the Pictorial Arts by Henry James, ed. John L. Sweeney (London, 1956), p.97. Unless otherwise stated, all further references to James' formal art criticism will be to this volume, henceforth designated as P.E. Original date of publication has been incorporated into the text wherever possible. Sweeney has included all the original dates, titles and places in his table of contents.


6 Ibid., p.8.

7 Ibid.

8 Vol. II (Boston, 1903), p.80.

9 Ibid.


11 Ibid., p.74.

12 Henry James: Autobiography, ed. Frederick W. Dupee (New York, 1956), p.152. A Small Boy and Others, the section of the autobiography from which these recollections were taken, was published by Scribners in 1913.


14 The young James was bored by the exhibit even while accepting the work as genuine, and in A Small Boy and Others he states that "it made me begin badly with Christian art." (Autobiography, p.152.)
15 "Pictures by William Morris Hunt, Gérôme and Others" (1872), P.E., p.50.
16 P.E., p.11.
17 "The Picture Season in London," P.E., p.150
20 American Essays, p.53.
22 "The Wallace Collection in Bethnal Green" (1873), P.E., p.67.
23 "On Some Pictures Lately Exhibited," P.E., p.88
24 "The Letters of Eugène Delacroix" (1880), P.E., p.183.
25 "An English Critic of French Painting" (1868), P.E., p.35.
26 The Future of the Novel, p.5.
28 "Pictures Lately Exhibited" (1875), P.E., p.90.
29 P.E., p.118
32 James makes this remark in Italian Hours (London, 1909), p.82.
33 Here James is speaking of Nicholas Maas' portrait of the Duchess of Mazarin. "The 1871 Purchase" (1872), P.E., p.57.
34 The Future of the Novel, p.17.
35 The Art of the Novel, p.45.
36 Ibid.
37 French Poets and Novelists (London, 1908), p.65. This review originally appeared in the Nation, April 27, 1876.

CHAPTER I

JAMES' PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

In "The Madonna of the Future" (1873) James has created not merely a cautionary tale for transcendental genius, an object lesson for those who, like M. Theobold, take out their talent "in talk, in study, in plans and promises, in visions," but has already begun to hint at certain attitudes towards art which were to become a part of his criteria for evaluating the many paintings he was to examine in both his public and his private capacity—as observer and critic.

M. Theobold, the artist who yearns to paint another, a modern 'Madonna of the Chair,' is an idealist, and he sets forth his philosophy quite early on in the story.

No one so loves and respects the rich reality of nature as the artist whose imagination intensifies them. He knows what a fact may hold...but his fancy hovers over it as Ariel in the play hovers over the sleeping prince.

James as artist, and James as narrator of the tale, has no real quarrel with this. But what he objects to is the fact that the old man has become so wrapped up in his vision of the ideal that his Madonna exists nowhere but in his own imagination and he dies a failure, leaving behind him only the pathetic legacy of a blank canvas.

There is, however, another artist in the story, and for the
purpose of this paper he is of equal, if not greater, importance than poor Theobold. This is the nameless Italian who models clever little statuettes of monkeys and cats, caricatures of men and women in different attitudes of the game of love. This character is interesting, not only because he prefigures Gloriani in *Roderick Hudson* (just as Theobold, in his concept of art at least, is a precursor of Roderick himself), but because he stands as a foil to Theobold—realist versus idealist. "Cats and monkeys, monkeys and cats—all human life is there!" The words of the ingenious little artist come back to haunt the young narrator as he wanders through the "triumphant ruins of Rome," trying to blot out the memory of "Theobold's transcendent illusions and deplorable failure." The young man's utter disgust at the cynical attitude of the clever little Italian is very powerful, and yet he knows that Theobold was equally wrong or misguided in his obsession with Ideal reality. Which is better—to produce something superficial or to produce nothing at all? The narrator is left with no answer to his unspoken question, but it is obvious that his sympathies, and those of James himself, lie with the transcendental failure. Theobold had, at least, what James was later to call "the sense of the ideal," and the old artist, just before his death, suggests that his life has not been entirely in vain.

"Our visions...have a way of being brilliant, and a man has not lived in vain who has seen the things I've seen!"3

And he adds: "I need only the hand of Raphael. His brain I already have....I'm the half of a genius! Where in the world is my other half?"
His other half is the man who has the energy and will to put his aesthetic theory into practice, who has a sense of the real as well as the ideal. Although the clever little Italian is the only other artist in the story, and this leads one to suppose that a synthesis of the two men should produce the ideal artist, such a conclusion would be only partially true. The little sculptor has talent, he has the hand, but he has no heart, and his "realism" is limited to naturalism. Theobold has the heart and the talent, but it is not really a hand which keeps him from producing, it is a misconception of the artistic process. As a man he is not a complete failure, as an artist he is. Part of the answer comes twenty years later, in 1893, when the dying Dencombe of "The Middle Years" (finally realizing that there is no second chance for an artist), accepts the fact that an artist, like any other man, can never hope to reach perfection, and that he must rest content with the fact that he will never totally realize his "ideal."

"We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art." 4

Dencombe has realized that the artist has, by his very nature as man, only a limited knowledge of the ideal and the eternal. This is what Theobold refused to recognize until too late. And in James' notebooks we see him time and time again cautioning himself not to get too wrapped up in his ideal conception of a novel or tale, to take his "germ" of an idea and "begin."

It could be argued that the most perfect work of art is that
which is still in the conceptual stage, existing only in the con-
sciousness of the artist. But this is perfection in a void. To James,
whose own capacity for hard work was phenomenal, the word "art" im-
plied realization as well as conception. The artist must have one
foot firmly planted in the world of the humanly possible, however
much he aspires to move up to the heaven of the ideally desirable.
The artist, like Janus, must look in both directions at once. If the
artist becomes so enmeshed in the imperfection of this world that he
can see men only as monkeys or cats and never as anything else but
monkeys or cats, if the slice of life is always a dark and dirty
slice (an objection James levelled at the creations of the Goncourt
brothers and the school of naturalism in general), then he is as mis-
taken in his aesthetic theory as the man who sees nothing but seraphim
and cherubim. Without the concept of the ideal there can be no great
art; without an awareness of reality there can be no great art. It is
the balance between the two that the artist must seek, and it is evi-
dence of this balance that James looks for when he reviews the paint-
ings of the nineteenth century. That he did not find it, with one or
two exceptions, we shall see. The French, he felt, were obsessed with
reality to the point where they had become cynical towards the human
scene, and this resulted in superficiality and hardness in their
paintings. The English had retreated from reality and had accepted
a kind of debased idealism—the picturesque, the pseudo-historical
and the literary. The Americans were naive, hypocritical, or deriv-
ative. To compromise without losing one's integrity appeared to be
a difficult task in the nineteenth century, and there were few, if any, who succeeded.

In "The Liar" James once again deals with the function of the artist, but he expands the theme to include the nature and function of art. Although the editors of James' notebooks, F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth Murdock, have suggested that this is primarily a story about a woman whose consciousness is eventually corrupted by that of her husband, a compulsive liar, it seems to me that it is possible to interpret the story in another way.

Oliver Lyon, whose very name suggests not only the rigid Puritanism of Oliver Cromwell but also the word "lying", goes to the country estate of wealthy Sir David Ashmore in order to paint his portrait. There is a house party in progress when he arrives, and among the guests are the sweetheart of his student days in Germany, Everina Brant, and her husband, Colonel Capadoce. First to Oliver's amusement and then to his horror, he discovers that not only is the Colonel a compulsive liar, but that Everina is aware of his lies, and will even "cover up" for them. As he paints Sir David's portrait he becomes more and more interested in the Colonel and what effect his dishonesty is having on the woman whom he had always considered the most "straight" of all women. The plot centers around Oliver's increasingly bold attempts to find out "for sure" if Everina is completely aware of her husband's immoral character and the artist's hope that she will realize she has married, if not the wrong, at least
the more inferior, man. But in reality it is not Everina who has become corrupted, nor is it the Colonel who is the liar referred to in the title, but rather it is Oliver. The story involves the familiar Jamesian ambiguity, for we have not only two kinds of liars but two kinds of artists, as well as three different portraits, the latter marking, I think, Oliver's regression from artist to something worse than caricaturist, from a man who sees people as individuals to a man who sees nothing but the surface of things, who renders types.

To James, fascinated by the human scene, be it American, English, French or Italian, it appeared self-evident, as he says in his essay on Sargent, that "there is no greater work of art than a great portrait." And in 1872 he had bemoaned the fact that the nineteenth century had produced no really great portrait painters.

We are inclined to think that our modern degenerescence—sic—we assume it to be incontestable—is less a loss of skill than a defect of original vision. We know more about human character, and we have less respect for human graces. We take more liberties with those that are offered us; we analyze and theorize and rub the bloom off their mystery....

Lyon is guilty of taking too many liberties and of subjecting his sitter not only to too much, but to the wrong kind of analysis, and he thus stands convicted, not only as man but as artist.

The three portraits themselves stand as objective correlative for the rapid decline of Oliver's consciousness, and it is interesting that little or no attention has been paid to this fact. The first portrait (of Sir David Ashmore) is, we can safely assume, everything
that a portrait should be, although Oliver, who has already become pretty cynical by the end of his visit at Stayes, wonders if it can be really good when those two social "types," Arthur Ashmore and his wife, are so extremely pleased with the portrait.

While spending the mornings closeted with Sir David, Oliver learns a great deal about his future sitter and romantic rival, Clement Capadose. Sir David is the first to acknowledge that the Colonel is a master at the art of story-telling, but he never actually calls him a liar and is very quick to point out that his "lies" are completely disinterested.

It's a natural peculiarity—as you might limp or stutter or be left-handed. At this stage of the story Oliver, who sees lying as "the most contemptible and least heroic of vices," can nevertheless still maintain a generous view towards the liar himself.

He's the liar platonic... it's art for art—he's prompted by some love of beauty... He has an inner vision of what might have been, of what ought to be, and he helps on the good cause by the simple substitution of a shade. He lays on colours, as it were... And Oliver recognizes that in a sense they are fellow-artists.

However, the fact that he cannot trap Everina into any admission of guilt or regret about the moral dishonesty of her husband leads to Oliver's rapid moral and aesthetic collapse. While he is painting Amy, the Capadoses' daughter, he fails to observe the charm of the child because he is too busy being "darkly amused" by the possibility of her following in her father's footsteps. Thus he finds
it very difficult to paint the child, because he sees her only as an extension of her father and he is too anxious to begin that portrait which will be a revenge on Everina, a "masterpiece of fine characterization, of legitimate treachery;" and besides,

He had dreamed for years of some work that should show the master of the deep vision as well as the mere reporter of the items and here was his subject.

What he does not realize is that his vision is becoming not deeper, but more shallow, and that his portrait of the Colonel will be anything but a portrait of the "Inner Man." The very title which he wishes he could give the portrait and which he feels he cannot in all sense of decency (!) give—'The Liar'—indicates that he has moved from a painter of substance, an interpreter of the whole man, to a recorder of surface—from a connoisseur of the individual to a collector of types. He can render nothing but the "liar side" of the Colonel because, for him, there is no longer another side.

And so he finishes the major portion of the work very quickly, "astonishingly faster, in spite of its much greater 'importance' than the simple faced little girl's." The implication here is very clear. Having lost his artistic integrity he has lost the ability to capture the child's innocence on canvas.

In the end Everina (who has finally gone with the Colonel to have a secret look at the portrait) is absolutely and justifiably horrified at what Lyon has done, and seeing her anguish her husband—out of love for her, since he does not really understand—slashes
the picture. Lyon, who has secretly witnessed the scene, allows the picture to be destroyed because he has seen what he wanted to see—he has visible "proof" that Everina knows her husband is a liar. Keeping the fact of his knowledge hidden and maintaining to the Cadoses that the portrait was destroyed by an unknown vandal, he has his final crushing defeat when Everina backs up her husband in his declaration that a transient cockney girl who was "out to get him" must have destroyed the portrait. Oliver's final comment is that Everina's husband "had trained her well." So, satisfied that she is completely corrupted, and unaware that it was he who was the liar, inferior both as man and artist to the kind-hearted Colonel, he goes on his cynical way.

Appearance, reality, portraits and likenesses, the artist as liar, and the nature of moral judgements, all these themes return again and again in James' novels and stories, and they are problems which were central in his theory of art and life.

In "The Real Thing," written twenty years after "The Madonna of the Future," James is still dealing with the problems of art and artists and the relationship between art and reality, only here the questions are dealt with in a much more complex manner. Major and Mrs. Monarch are the real social thing, they have rubbed shoulders with the best people, they have spent lazy afternoons at garden parties and enjoyed, suitably dressed to the tips of their toes, lush morning walks across the moors. They look like the ideal models for
illustrations for the complete edition of a writer who wrote society novels. Yet for the young artist, whose very future is at stake if he does not do well at this assignment, they are useless. They are the real thing, but "always the same thing." Mrs. Monarch is the perfect lady, the major the perfect gentleman, yet they are always the same lady and the same gentleman. This is why they photograph so well—for the photograph of the nineties depended for its success upon: the absolute immobility of the subject. And James emphasizes the fact that the Monarchs themselves are like their photographs by having the Major confide to the young artist that when he married Mrs. Monarch she "was known as the Beautiful Statue,"\textsuperscript{13} that is, cold and immobile.

Set against the Major and his wife are Miss Churm, a cockney with abundant vitality and no social graces, and Oronte, the penniless Italian with a gift for mimicry. These two are obviously not the real social thing, but they are the real thing so far as art is concerned. They have the necessary plastic quality; they are "round" rather than "flat," and because they are round they can be looked at from more than one angle. Thus in the end Miss Churm, who has, from the outset, recognized the flatness of the Monarchs and has realized that they are inferior models because they cannot, as she puts it, "turn round," gets the job of posing for the illustrations. Oronte, the penniless Italian, becomes her male counterpart. The Monarchs are sent away by the artist, for he knows that he will destroy his aesthetic sensibilities if he continues to use them as models, or even to pity
them too much. The meaning of this story is very clear. James be-
lieves that to create a work of art the artist must be an alchemist;
he must take the dross of one kind of reality and turn it into the
gold of another—the gold of art. It is impossible for the artist to
"get behind" models like the Monarchs because they are essentially
flat and already "finished" works of art. Mr. Monarch will do for the
footman because a footman has no reality. (In "Brooksmith" the main
character who is a valet cum butler cum footman ceases to exist when
his master dies because he tries to step out of his role as flat
color and become something which he is incapable of becoming.)
A footman is not supposed to have any personality, and thus the Major
makes a perfect footman.

James appears to be making another point here, a point which
he was to stress in his prefaces. Mr. and Mrs. Monarch are universals
rather than particulars. They "stand for" lady and gentleman rather
than any particular lady and gentleman. The artist, however, must
begin with the particular, the individual, and then raise him, if
possible, to a universal type. Art is an inductive process and the
artist cannot work the other way around if he is to produce good art.
James felt that this was one of the major flaws in The American, since
he had conceived of his hero as an American type before he had con-
ceived of him as Christopher Newman. Some of his genre figures are
types, Henrietta Stackpole for instance, or Fanny Assingham, but as
in the case of the footman, James would see nothing wrong with a
minor figure being a type.
Oronte's gift of mimicry is also important to James' theory of art. Art is a form of mimicry and the artist, in a certain sense, is mimicking reality rather than reproducing it. The idea of art as imitation is as old as Plato, and James feels strongly that there is a world of difference between the letter of exactitude, one form of imitation, and the spirit of Truth—the other, higher form of the imagination. Thus Miss Churm and Oronte are also artists in their own way. They can take their real selves and transform them, through mime, into a prince or a princess, a countess or a count. This is something the Monarchs cannot understand.

"Do you think she looks like a Russian princess?" Major Monarch asked with lurking alarm. "When I make her, yes." "Oh, if you have to make her--!" he reasoned, not without point. "That's the most you can ask. There are so many who are not makeable."14

So the Monarchs are not "makeable" because they are unreal—they are walking photographs, essentially flat, basically characterless—and therefore they will not do except for genre pictures. Miss Churm and Oronte are, paradoxically, the real lady and gentleman for aesthetic purposes because they are round and basically vital. Thus art does not "hold a mirror" up to nature but a filter, and this filter is the viewing consciousness of the artist. Art is a transformation, a revelation, rather than a faithful reproduction.

This brings us to the last point in our discussion of the three stories. Not only has James very clearly defined some, at least, of his aesthetic criteria—imagination, sincerity, an awareness of both real and ideal—and made a statement about the nature
and function of the artist, in "The Real Thing" he has shown us another quality which he feels is necessary to the great artist, and that is pity. Terribly aware as he is that "the real thing" just will not do for the purposes of art, the young artist nevertheless has pity on the Monarchs as people rather than models. He sympathizes with their bleak, humiliating situation, and this is why he cannot accept their presence in his studio as valet and chambermaid and he sends them away. Unless the artist has pity, has a capacity for kindness towards the imperfections of his fellow men, he is doomed.

Having made a very cursory examination of James' concepts of art and artist as seen in the world of his fiction, we must now turn to an examination of the art criticism itself. Here we shall find James reiterating the same views: that the nature of art is based on some sort of compromise between the real and the ideal; that sincerity is a necessary part of the artist's aesthetic equipment; that the purpose of art is not to copy but to arrange and transform; that the greatest artists have an awareness of human suffering and of the futility of making absolute moral judgements on any subject. The three stories which have been discussed in this chapter are only three out of many, and some of the others, "The Tone of Time" (1900) or "The Beldonald Holbein" (1901) for example, might have served our purpose equally well. In the New York edition of his novels and tales the stories dealing with the problems of art and the artist run over into two volumes. I have limited myself to three stories dealing with
painters rather than writers since this essay deals only with James' criticism of painting. To get a complete picture of James' "portrait of the artist" one should, of course, read all of the stories dealing specifically with this theme.
FOOTNOTES


3 Ibid., p.48.


5 "John S. Sargent" (1893), P.E., p.227.


8 Ibid., p.153.

9 Ibid., p.154.

10 Ibid., p.158.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., p.163.

13 "The Real Thing" in Stories of Writers and Artists, p.172.

14 Ibid., p.177.

15 Of course we come to James' portrait of the true artist only through inference, as he never wrote a novel or tale dealing with such a man. One assumes that for a psychological novelist like James the real success is not good material. Happy artists, like George Eliot's "happy women," have no "histories."
CHAPTER II

JAMES IN THE LAND OF THE PHILISTINES

English painting interests me chiefly, not as painting, but as English....It throws a light which is to me always fresh, always abundant, always fortunate, on the turn of the English mind. ("London Pictures"—1882)

By 1837 and Victoria's accession to the throne, the age which was to be remembered by the succeeding century as the high-water mark in bad taste and banality was well under way. The stately homes were still there (and even more stately than ever thanks to the renewed interest in classical "line"), but the merchant-prince was firmly established in the national counting-house, and having made his fortune and a bit to spare he was now eager to have a stately home of his own and to buy the necessary cultural trappings which would tone down some of his appearance of being a newly-minted coin in the social currency of the times. Naked he may have come into the world, but by Jove, by George, by Jingo, he was going to see that all traces of his nakedness had disappeared before he left. Thus he turned to art-collecting, not only as an escape from the smoky reality of the Industrial Revolution but also as a convenient means of covering up his social insecurity. In his desire to purchase a link with the old aristocratic traditions which he publicly despised and privately envied he inaugurated one of the most incredible periods of picture-
buying and picture-selling that the world has ever seen. For after all, the absence of an "h" here or there might not seem such a handicap if an "R.A." or two or three were prominently displayed upon the drawing room wall. This in itself would not have been a bad thing—one's basic lack of culture is no indication of one's potentiality in that direction—but the nouveaux riches had very definite ideas as to what was to go inside the elaborate gilt frame besides the necessary initials in the lower right-hand corner. This was a public which knew what it wanted and got it—got it with a vengeance. What made it so amazing to the spectator who came into this tight little island from the outside was the fact that the artists who produced this ready-made culture did not seem to notice, or perhaps did not seem to care, that the sound of so much gold exchanging hands might prove to be the death-rattle of British art. The artist was adored and lionized to the point where he might have all the appearances of a "lucky stockbroker," but art itself was being debased.

In the way in which everything is painted down to the level of a vulgar Philistinism there is something signal¬nally depressing. And this painting down, as I call it, seems to go on without a struggle, without a protest on the part of the domesticated muse, with a strange smug complacency on the part of the artists.¹

This is, of course, James speaking, but it might easily have been Arnold or Ruskin or, if pitched in a slightly higher key, Whistler. For into this gay, glittering world of the London of the seventies James had come to report on the English aesthetic scene for the folks back home (the "folks" being limited, of course, to
the readers of the Atlantic, the Nation and the North American Review. He came, he saw, and he criticized. He, who was acquainted with the aims, ideals and results of the old masters (admittedly, few of them had sprung from Anglo-Saxon soil), had now come face to face with the new, and he saw reflected above and below the "line" not only the sterility and smugness of a society whose aesthetic sensibilities had been debased, but also a blatant rebuttal of all that he had ever thought or written about the nature and function of art. As Whistler was to say, art was "on the town," and certainly it must be so for, with a few qualified exceptions, she had certainly not been frequenting the galleries. Where was style? Where was the old nobility of concept? Where, in the name of Titian and Tintoretto, was Art? The thin cultural air of America, of which James had complained so bitterly, was perhaps, on second thought, a far better thing than the thick fog of English Philistinism. He could have become didactic, an American Ruskin, and hammered away at the stray sheep in order to bring them back into the fold. But this he did not do. He could have embraced the doctrines of Pater and turned away from society towards l'art pour l'art. But this again he did not do. Instead, he sees the irony of the whole thing and remains not only to criticize but to smile. And after his initial shock he begins to shape his impressions into beautiful, nearly faultless essays and notes which are fascinating, not only to the student of James, but to anyone interested in the social history of art. He watches the spectators as closely as he observes the paintings, and while he is
taking mental notes for his articles he is storing away notes of another sort, anecdotes, vignettes, character sketches—which he will later use in his own art, the art of fiction.

James quickly recognized that most of nineteenth century British art fell into two categories—the anecdotal and the pseudo-historical. In 1877 he writes, in a review of "The Picture Season in London:"

That the people he lives among are not artistic, is, for the contemplative stranger, one of the foremost lessons of English life; and the exhibition of the Academy sets the official seal upon this admonition....The pictures ... are "subjects," they belong to what the French call the anecdotal class. You immediately perceive, moreover, that they are subjects addressed to a particularly unimaginative and unesthetic order—to the taste of the British merchant and paterfamilias and his excellently regulated family. What this taste appears to demand of a picture is that it shall have a taking title, like a three-volume novel or an article in a magazine; that it shall embody in its lower flights some comfortable incident of the daily life of our period, suggestive more especially of its gentilities and proprieties and familiar moralities, and in its loftier scope some picturesque episode of history or fiction which may be substantiated by a long explanatory extract in the catalogue.  

I have quoted this passage at some length because in slightly less than two hundred words James has very accurately described both the prevailing "schools" of, and prevailing attitudes towards, Victorian art. The lesser academicians such as Marcus Stone made money hand over fist depicting "some comfortable incident of the daily life of our period" with such "taking titles" as 'Il y en a toujours un Autre,' while the real Olympians, Leighton and Poynter, provided such picturesque episodes from history or mythology as 'Daphnephoria,'
'The Garden of the Hesperides,' or 'Israel in Egypt.' The Pre-Raphaelites provided picturesque episodes from fiction and often accompanied them by little sonnets or explanations which were posted next to the picture. James agreed with Taine that British painting was

only in a secondary sense plastic; that the plastic quality is not what English spectators look for in a picture, or what the artist has taken the precaution of putting into it.\(^5\)

The "plastic" quality, by which James meant the organic quality, the sense of forms as conceived in space and in relationship to one another, the sense that the artist had "gone behind" the surface of things, was conspicuous chiefly by its absence. Even of Frederic Leighton, one of the few British artists whom he thought worthy of the name of artist, James can say that

more than any English painter he devotes himself to the plastic, but his efforts remain strongly and brilliantly superficial.\(^6\)

And elsewhere, again commenting on Leighton:

In this plasticism there is something vague and conciliatory; it is as if he thought that to be more plastic than that would be not quite gentlemanly.\(^7\)

Leighton was considered by many to be the perfect gentleman, embodying both physically and mentally all the ideals of the classical age—the golden age which the Victorians tried to imitate and deluded themselves into thinking they had reproduced. Both the man and his painting stood for the "grand manner," the "ideal type," the "perfection of form" which so appealed to the English temperament.
As John L. Sweeney points out, Leighton was the prototype for James' Lord Mellefont in "The Private Life" (1892), a man who had no personal, but only a public, reality. James feels that Leighton's creations are similar to their creator, for although he had "an exquisite sense of form,"8 "infallible taste and discretion,"9 a "great sense of beauty,"10 there remained about his work a sense of "so much beauty and so little passion, so much seeking and so little finding,"11 which resulted in his painting being finally recognized by James, if by no one else, as essentially superficial. Yet to the British public Leighton, while he was alive, was the very archetype of the artist prince, a man whose sense of what was done and what was not done was absolutely infallible. James therefore sees as a terrible indication of the fickleness of an artist's public that when the sisters of Lord Leighton had offered his beautiful home "as a memorial to the nation if the nation would subscribe to buy it, the nation, scarce up from its genuflections at St. Pauls, buttoned its pockets without so much as scratching its head."12

Yet Leighton and Poynter (who was Leighton's disciple and for whom James had a certain qualified regard) did not distress him so much as the lesser academicians such as Stone, Richmond, Alma-Tadema, Pettie and Fieldes. Richmond's portrait of Gladstone, exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1882, incites James to his early "tomahawk wielding" method, and his comment would doubtless have been applauded by the barbed butterfly of London society, Whistler himself.

I cannot leave the Grosvenor without saying a word about
Mr. W.B. Richmond's extraordinary portrait of Mr. Gladstone, in a crimson gown and in his most uplifted mood. ...There has lately been more than one portrait of Mr. Gladstone from the theological point of view, but it was reserved for Mr. Richmond to depict him as of African blood, of distracted intellect, and of the Methodist persuasion....It is the last word of Philistinism—a character in which it must be confessed that it has many formidable competitors.13

James is no respector of academies and perhaps it is just as well that his articles were not appearing in the English magazines, for William Gaunt reports that

When, in the course of a House of Commons debate, the Sir Robert Peel of the time jibed at R.A.'s as 'people of no very good taste,' Leighton, in superb anger, consulted Lord Redesdale as to 'calling out' Peel and defending Academic taste with the duelling pistol.14

Of course Leighton was President of the Academy at that time and perhaps felt that something above and beyond the call of duty had to be done in his official capacity as Lord of Olympus. But what would have occurred if Watts (whom James had at one time considered the greatest living British portrait painter) had read this?

Mr. Watts has sometimes risen very high; he has had the great thing, he has had 'style'—and this leads us to draw the curtain of silence over this ill-starred performance which, we should imagine, would expose its author to the penalties attached to that misdemeanor known to English law as 'threatening the Royal Family'?15

One has a certain relish in the idea of James going the round of the galleries impeccably dressed, beautifully spoken, outwardly paying all the necessary homage to the necessary people, while inwardly he was composing paragraphs like the above.

But if James had little stomach for the Academicians he was equally dubious of the majority of the work produced by the "enemy
camp," the Pre-Raphaelites. He admits that the painting of this curious group falls into the class of "erudite painting" and he agrees that when the critics say

'Painting is a direct rendering of something seen in the world we live in and look at, we love and admire,'...in that sense there is certainly no painting here.16

Yet there is one member of this "morbidly ingenious" school whose works never fail to fascinate him—Edward Burne-Jones, a man who was not only a great colourist (and most modern critics would agree with James here) but who also possessed the shaping spirit of the imagination. James says that the art of the entire Brotherhood is

the art of culture, of reflection, of aesthetic refinement, of people who look at the world and life not directly, as it were, and in all its accidental reality, but in the reflection and ornamental portrait of it furnished by art itself in other manifestations...literature, history, erudition.17

Nevertheless he still admires their ability to create compositions, and complex relationships. Unlike Ruskin, whose championship of the Pre-Raphaelites was based on his own didactic theory of art, which included "an unswerving fidelity to the facts of nature, an enthusiasm for things medieval, and the importance of a pronounced Christian colouring," James excuses the Pre-Raphaelites for these "faults" and admires their colour, their sincerity (misplaced though it might be), and, above all, their imagination. He allows that all of Burne-Jones' work is open to the kind of criticism which it received: charges of unreality of subject matter, monotonous type of figure and artificial treatment of theme, but he adds that,

while the brilliantly suggestive side of his work holds
a perpetual revel of its own, the strictly plastic side never really lapses.18

Burne-Jones had a sense of form, a conceptual imagination, and for this reason James places him at the head of modern English painters and "very high among all the painters of this degenerate time." To emphasize and clarify this point we might examine his distinction between the figures in Millais' 'Bride of Lammermoor' and those in paintings by Burne-Jones.

Millais makes figures of them and nothing more; he does not make pictures in the sense that Mr. Burne-Jones does. The figures are lighted anyhow or not at all; they are not seen in relation to the rest of the canvas....19

Since James felt that most British art was not concerned with the plastic quality, when he finds it, whether it appears in Leighton or Burne-Jones, Classical Idealist or Ideal Medievalist, he is eager to praise and quick to excuse other, more venial weaknesses in the painters who are capable of producing it. In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. James did not believe in retreating from reality, or perhaps we should say he did not accept the sort of retreat which was offered by the Academy or the Brotherhood. If Camden Town were here and now, then one made the best of it and did not look backwards in an attempt to re-create a Corinth or a Camelot. A link with tradition did not mean for James an artificially contrived facsimile of tradition itself. It is a far cry from James' "sense of the past" to the British artists' aim for a reproduction of the past. One is a dynamic, the other a fundamentally static, view of life.
James saw the Victorian Age as a century in which the aims of art had been reduced, with the tacit consent of the artist, to a desire for an image which had before anything else to tell a story...to appeal to the sense of the romantic and the anecdotic, the supposedly historic, the explicitly pathetic. Would it not then seem logical and excusable if he should be attracted to an aesthetic theory which did away with the public altogether—the doctrine of l'art pour l'art? In 1897 he writes,

What would become of any individual who should directly challenge the British public with the vulgarity and ignorance that is the effect of so many of the acres of canvas in question to nail upon it with a positive frenzy of the hammer?

But such a challenge had been flung down long before this by Pater in the sixties and seventies, and later by Whistler and Wilde. These three, with varying degrees of sincerity, had turned away from the idea that anything could be done with or for the "British paterfamilias and his excellently regulated family" and had taken up the French attitude that the Palace of Art was a select club to which only the elect, those who gave proof of heightened sensibilities, could belong. This Palace had no windows opening out on to "the human scene;" indeed it was carefully sealed off from any possible draughts of cold reality, and turned a blank and windowless face to the world outside. The new Jerusalem of Art was built on a foundation of sensuous appreciation of colour, light, shade, and harmony. Subject matter had nothing to do with painting, nor did history. Beauty was a value in itself, having no social aim, but only a direct appeal to the
individual. In place of the old democracy of vulgarity, the aesthetes, the antiliteralists, the poets, philosophers and painters such as Swinburne, Pater and Whistler, established a new aristocracy of taste.

If Ruskin had turned the Palace of Art into an assize court, a point to which we shall return below, and the public had turned it into a market place, the aesthetes attempted to remodel it along the lines of an Eastern temple, mysterious, secret, known only to a few initiates who tiptoed noiselessly to the nave and deposited exquisitely wrought offerings dedicated to the only true religion—Art. It was an appealing doctrine. Not only did it offer an escape from the ugliness of the "real" world and do away with the fickle public upon which the artist in the real world had to depend, it also, by eliminating society from its field of vision, did away with such boring social problems as the question of morality or immorality in art. James had said that the question of morality did not enter into art. He had also implied that the expanding consciousness should grow and grow until it became beautifully AWARE. Was Lambert Strether's "Live, live all you can," to become a rephrasing of Pater's "burn always with a hard gem-like flame"? James has certainly been considered an aesthete in the pejorative sense by many critics, and in Boon, The Mind of the Race, Wells' hero compares the novels of Henry James to an empty, though beautiful cathedral, but adds that the cathedral has been dedicated to nothing of any social significance—a broken egg shell, a dead kitten, a piece of string.
But there is a basic difference between Pater's exhortation and Strether's remark which is not, perhaps, immediately apparent when the two statements are taken out of context. In Pater's scheme of things the emphasis is chiefly on art; in Strether's philosophy, the accent is placed on life. Louis Kronenberger in his introduction to the Mentor edition of *The Renaissance* agrees with Edward Thomas' statement that Pater was a man whose "conception of art excludes that bolder type of it which deals confidently...with life, conflict, evil."24 James' conception of art, like his conception of life, insists upon the viewing consciousness's awareness of life, conflict and evil. And to be aware of these things one must be aware of the existence of other consciousnesses, of people in relationship to one another as well as to art. James may believe that one should base one's life on certain aesthetic principles, but this is not the same thing as basing one's life on "aestheticism." He might agree with Wilde that life should imitate art, but he would add that without direct reference to life, art is nothing.

However that may be, it is interesting to observe that style and arrangement are not enough for James, and to see that the basic insincerity of the aesthetes was far worse, to him, than the misguided sincerity of the Academy or the Pre-Raphaelite movement. And since the self-appointed leader of the aesthetic movement in English painting was a Frenchified American, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, it would be well to examine James' scattered comments on the man whom London Society called "The Butterfly."
In 1878 James reviewed an exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery, a gallery opened by Sir Coutts Lindsay in the same year, on the theory, according to James, that

there is a demand for a place of exhibition exempted both from the exclusiveness and the promiscuity of Burlington House, in which painters may communicate with the public more directly than under the academic dispensation, and in which the more "peculiar" ones in especial may have a chance to get popular.26

There were no restrictions on who had the right to exhibit at the Grosvenor, but naturally the more "peculiar" painters such as Holman Hunt, Ford Madox Brown, Burne-Jones and Whistler made up the majority of the exhibitors. This was not a Salon des Refusés, and painters might be seen both at the Grosvenor and the Academy in the same "Season," but some of the painters, who either despised the Academy or were despised by it, embraced the opportunity so munificently presented. Whistler, arch-enemy of Academic art, was always much in evidence. He was never the "lion of the exhibition"—that honour was assigned, by James at any rate, to Burne-Jones—but his work never failed to interest his fellow American, and James' comments on Whistler are crucial not only because they reflect his attitude towards the aesthetic movement, but also because they show how James could change or modify his opinion of a painter without feeling any need for apology or any sense of a loss of "face." Thus in 1877 he writes:

I will not speak of Mr. Whistler's 'Nocturnes in Black and Gold' and in 'Blue and Silver,' of his 'Arrangements,' 'Harmonies,' and 'Impressions,' because I frankly confess they do not amuse me....It may be a narrow point of view,
but to be interesting it seems to me that a picture should have some relation to life as well as to painting. Mr. Whistler's experiments have no relation whatever to life; they have only a relation to painting.  

And a year later he holds much the same opinion:

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.... His manner is very much that of the 'French Impressionists,' and, like them, he suggests the rejoinder that a picture is not an impression but an expression—just as a poem or a piece of music is.

But by 1882 the essential charm of Whistler's painting is beginning to affect James' own "aesthetic sensibilities" and he can admit that Mr. Whistler is a votary of 'tone;' his manner of painting is to breathe upon the canvas. It is not too much to say that he has to a certain point, the creative afflatus.

Yet he still prefers Whistler's portrait of his mother, which had been previously exhibited in France and which was, in that year, on exhibition in New York. He sees it "a masterpiece of tone, of feeling, of the power to render life," although of course Whistler would have argued that it was never intended to "render life" and that his mother was just a stage-prop in the total arrangement, of equal aesthetic value with a piece of artistically arranged "blue" or the line of a door. And in 1897, at an exhibition of Dramatic and Musical Art, he says that to turn from Whistler's portrait of Henry Irving as Philip of "Queen Mary" to the rest of the exhibition is to drop from the world of distinction, of perception, of beauty and mystery and perpetuity, into—well, a very ordinary place.

His wonder is "reintensified at the attitude of a stupid generation
toward an art and a taste so rare." James is still viewing Whistler's paintings in which humans appear as "portraits," and is therefore contradicting the spirit in which they were produced, but he is perceptive enough to realize that Whistler's work has a charm which, in all fairness, he is unable to ignore.

The "portrait" of Henry Irving is perhaps one of the most famous nineteenth century paintings, not because it is now considered to be a great work of art—none of Whistler's work can really lay claim to that distinction—but because it figured in one of the two most astonishing court cases ever to appear on the statutes of British law-books. The first was the Whistler-Ruskin trial in 1878, the second, the better-known and much less amusing ordeal of Oscar Wilde. Any discussion of nineteenth century art and aesthetics must take into account these two trials, but it is with the first that we are primarily concerned in this essay.

In 1877 Ruskin's peculiar periodical *Fors Clavigera* (through which he hoped to light a few candles in the wilderness of the British working-class mind) contained a passing reference to one of Whistler's nocturnes which was then on exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery. Ruskin accused Whistler of ridiculing the British public by daring to exhibit and, what is more, daring to put a price on, such a mockery of art.

'I have seen and heard much of cockney impudence before now, but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask 200 guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face.'
Whistler took Ruskin to trial and asked £1,000 damages. James was in London at the time and he recorded his impressions of the affair in an article to the Nation. The first thing that came home to him was how well the trial served to illustrate that peculiar turn of the English mind which thought that questions of art could be decided by law.

If it [the trial] had taken place in some Western American town, it would have been called provincial and barbarous....Beneath the stately towers of Westminster it scarcely wore a higher aspect.33

To James who saw art not only as a "refuge" but, as has been mentioned before, as a sort of moated stronghold which can only be crossed over by a slender bridgework of elementary culture, the idea that a jury of "ordinary tax-payers" were asked to decide, under oath, the question of whether Whistler's painting was really art, high art, and therefore worth two hundred guineas, was incredible. But decide the jury did, or that is they did and they did not, for although Whistler won, he received only nominal damages of one farthing. The second point which interests James is the question of what Whistler ought to have done. Admittedly Ruskin's comments were libelous and James takes a certain delight in seeing him "brought up as a disorderly character,"34 but he also knew that the trial had done more harm than good, and that Whistler was mistaken if he thought that either criticism or art could really be brought to trial. Ruskin was at fault: he had become, in James' opinion, a "chartered libertine" and a "general scold."35 But Whistler had reduced art to a laughing stock and this was a dangerous thing to do.
An interesting question raises its critical head at this point. To what extent did James recognize that this was a trial between the anti-literalists and the literalists, the dispute between Whistler and Ruskin merely having brought to a head the widening gap between these two opposing "schools"? It is a gap which has never been closed, and as this was also a trial between aestheticism and those who believed that art had a duty towards society, the split between art and society was also observed to widen from this time on. For really, Whistler won. Ruskin threw up his hands at this blow to the liberty of free speech and resigned his Slade Professorship at Oxford.36 From this point on the aesthetes had it their way and the Whistler-Ruskin trial merely served as a convenient launching pad for the real era of l'art pour l'art which was to continue in a blaze of glory until 1895 when the British public, enraged by the dirty tricks which had been played on it in the name of Art, shook its powerful head and advancing swiftly and methodically devoured not only Wilde, the unfortunate scapegoat, but the whole aesthetic movement. The middle class had gained control again—or so they thought.

Thus James found little to praise and much to blame in English contemporary art. If the public was to blame so also was the artist for allowing himself to be either dictated to by the Philistines or self-deluded into believing that one could successfully deal with the problems of art by retreating from the problems of life, the problems of the here and now. Painting was neither history nor literature nor religion, and what he saw on the walls of Burlington House or
the Grosvenor Gallery made him decide, rather regretfully, that Art, as he conceived of it, could not be found in England. If I have dealt at some length with the Whistler-Ruskin trial, it is because James' account of it establishes certain rather important truths about his attitudes towards artists and art criticism in general. We have seen that when it is a question of the voice of the artist as against the voice of the critic James comes down heavily and sympathetically on the side of the artist, even when, as is the case with Whistler, he does not really care for the artist's productions. It also indicates that James believes that destructive criticism is essentially a bad thing and that the purpose of criticism is to enlighten the public and not to destroy the artist. In criticism, as in society itself, there are certain limits of decency beyond which one must not venture. Thus pity, in its widest sense, becomes the mark of a good critic as well as one of the attributes of a good artist.
FOOTNOTES

1 "Picture Season in London" (1877), P.E., p.148.

2 In his famous "Ten O'Clock" lecture first delivered in St. James Hall, Piccadilly, 1885.

3 P.E., p.148.

4 cf. William Gaunt, Victorian Olympus (New York, 1952) for an amusing description of the Olympians, both major and minor.

5 "The Royal Academy" (1878), P.E., pp.167-68.

6 "London Pictures" (1882), P.E., p.214.


8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 "Royal Academy," P.E., p.168.

11 "Lord Leighton and Ford Madox Brown" (1897), P.E., p.249.

12 Ibid., p.248.


14 Victorian Olympus, p.158.


17 Ibid., p.144.

18 Ibid., p.145.


Ibid.


Ibid., p.258.

Quoted by James in his article "On Whistler and Ruskin" (1878), P.E., p.172

Ibid., p.173.

Ibid., p.174.

Ibid.

CHAPTER III

JAMES IN THE LAND OF SCIENCE AND STYLE

"The French don't care what they do, so long as they pronounce it properly."--Professor Henry Higgins.

A discussion of Whistler leads one naturally to Paris and an examination of James' views on French art. The "Butterfly" and the writer George Moore were two of the earliest advocates of l'art pour l'art and flitted back and forth across the channel proclaiming to the English artists that the flowers of aestheticism could be cultivated even in the barren soil of England. Moreover, James saw a definite link between the Impressionist Movement and Whistler's paintings, although in fact Whistler, like Degas, was more interested in arrangement and harmony of pictorial elements than he was in accidents of light and shade. James' attitude towards all contemporary art seems to have been influenced by how much, or how little, of France he could find in it. For although he felt that the French were capable of painting, and writing, with great "style," a quality which the English, with the exception of Leighton, Millais and Burne-Jones, so obviously lacked, James recognized, on the whole, that they were incapable of painting with sincerity. With one or two exceptions, then, we find that his opinion of French art and artists was decidedly negative.
The Pre-Raphaelites may have been "pedants," but the Frenchmen were "cynics," and the first was a minor fault when compared with the second. Yet James must have been aware that the French artist had far more excuse for his cynicism than the English artist had for his pedantry or blatant Philistinism. For sixty-three years France had been racked with revolution and counter-revolution until, as William Gaunt points out, all that was left was a tight-fisted bourgeoisie, the unfit and the disenchanted. What was to happen to the American and English artist after the 1914-18 War had happened in France much earlier. Revolt became the norm, and cynicism, first adopted as a defense mechanism, became an accepted, even admired, attitude of mind, at least by the middle of the nineteenth century. Political revolution, the questioning of the Establishment, led to aesthetic revolution and the questioning of the Academy. Painting moved away from Greece and Rome (and the accepted academic neoclassicism of David and his followers) and into the open air, and thence onward into the very center of France, the great city of Paris herself—her boulevards, her cafes, her opera houses, her railway stations. During this time England underwent a bloodless revolution which established a new class, as had happened in France, but without so much suffering, so many lost illusions. Consequently the relation between artist and society was not, at least until the 1880's, based on quite the same mutual contempt as that between the artist and society in France. The citizen-kings of England wanted culture at any price; the citizen-kings of France would not touch it—at any price.
Thus while the artist in England rubbed shoulders with the great and nearly-great, the French artist was held up as an object of ridicule, a useless and obsolete anachronism. Perhaps James, being at bottom an American, however much he roamed through the great glittering gallery that was Europe, was not quite able to understand the psychology of French art, for mutual suffering brings knowledge of a far more vivid kind than is brought about by the desire to "appreciate," no matter how much empathetic sincerity goes along with it. The Frenchman could no longer trust his ears or even his inherited values, so he turned more and more towards science and the testimony of his eyes. Zola, Flaubert, the brothers Goncourt, were all participants in the general movement towards science, which deals with the "real" and the known, and away from idealism and the unknowable. And it would appear that James, concerned as he was with his own craft, the craft of fiction, was, when it comes to his judgements on the plastic arts of France, a victim of "influences," of pre-conceived prejudices and dislikes. Observe how he draws analogies between French art and literature in the following statements:

On Gérôme:

His pictures are for art what the novels of M. Gustave Flaubert are for literature, only decidedly inferior.³

On Decamps:

A painting by Decamps seems to us to bear about the same relation to probable fact as some first-rate titbit of Edgar Poe or Charles Baudelaire.⁴

On Daubigny:

It is, perhaps, as a whole, a little blank and thin;
but it is indefinably honnête. It reminds us of one of George Sand's rural novels—Francois le Champi or the Petite Fadette.5

On the other hand Delacroix, of whom he was "intensely fond,"6 appears to him as "a fragment from Shelley."7

Yet it is not fair to say that James is completely blind to what was happening in France because of his psychological or literary limitations and prejudices. Having observed in our examination of the three stories that James does not believe that it is the function of the artist to be literal nor the purpose of art to "hold a mirror up to nature," be it human or external, it follows that he will have to reject the Realists and Naturalists on aesthetic grounds. To him this sort of realism can result only in superficiality, and no amount of science or skill can cover up for the lack of imagination which goes into such works. It produces cold, static, and terrifyingly perfect productions which are absolutely empty of feeling or imagination. We have seen that Major and Mrs. Monarch are the "real thing" in socio-scientific terms and that the few illustrations which the painter does of them are supposed to have hindered his art from that time on. Oliver Lyon sets out to make a pathological study of a liar, and what he ends up with is a scientific document which is neither "true" to Colonel Capadose nor to the fundamental principles of art. The Italian sculptor in "The Madonna of the Future" creates realistic monkeys and cats in grotesque parodies of human intercourse and declares that "all human life is there." Yet the young James turns away in disgust. The work of Gérôme, one of the leading members of the
Realist school in the seventies is particularly distasteful to James. In a comment on the 'Combat de Coqs' he says that this painting

is a capital example of the master, and presents in remarkably convenient shape the substance of his talent—the indefinable hardness of his work....There is a total lack of what we may call moral atmosphere, of sentimental redundancy or emotional by-play."

James feels that the artist in question, having no interest in humanity as anything more than a convenient means of showing his skill, has painted an immoral picture—immoral because it is insincere as well as ugly.

However, of the first of the three great revolutionaries in French art, Eugène Delacroix (1799-1863), James cannot say enough. Although he felt Delacroix to be an imperfect draughtsman (and modern art critics and historians all seem to agree with this), he also felt that Delacroix' depth of imagination was so great that his merits far outweighed his defects. A rebel from the academic art of his day, Delacroix ignored the "classical" emphasis on line and artificial modelling and simply exploded his pictures on to the canvas. He is considered to be the father of Romanticism in painting, and although James admits that he saw his subjects "in a ray of that light that never was on land and sea," he is delighted to find that "here is a man who not only sees, but reflects as well as sees."

James also sees that Delacroix has grasped the principle of form, that he "saw his subject as a whole, not as the portrait of a group of selected and isolated objects...." He appeals not to the
fancy but to the imagination and the "burden of his message to it is always grave." And to the hypothetical critic who might suggest that art should carry no message, certainly not a grave one, James suggests that if Delacroix is being unfaithful to his duty as a painter, "the *raison d'être* of these gentry being, constructively, the beautifying of existence, the conservation of enjoyment," he cannot help but point out that not only is there "plenty of beauty" in him, but he likes him in part for this very quality which others might see as a fault—his psychological insight, his sense of the complexity and mystery of all human existence, his "moral tone." Gérôme paints the surface of things, Delacroix the substance, and James, as a consequence, finds the Romantic more real than the Realist. Perfect craftsmanship is not enough, for James is in the Palace of Art, not the laboratory.

Delacroix also discovered the law of complementary colours (James constantly refers to the magnificence of his colouring), and this discovery, along with the invention of the camera and the new interest in the science of optics, paved the way and had a profound influence on the third group of nineteenth century French rebels, the Impressionists. And here we are brought up short. At last we have caught the old master with his aesthetic shirt-tails showing. He did not like the Impressionists?—how terribly bourgeois, how typically Victorian. Now we have discovered his Achilles heel and we take great pleasure in the fact that he did not have a consciousness capable of the infinite expansion necessary in order to make the
imaginative leap from traditional to modern art. But yet he has been hailed as an Impressionist himself. What are we going to do about that? The question is an interesting one.

In 1876 James viewed the second exhibition of the little band of rebels who had been scornfully labelled by the Parisian critic Louis Leroy as "Impressionists," and his short but scathing review of the work exhibited must form the basis for our discussion of his views. There are those, of course, who claim that James' Tribune letters were "made to order" and that they cannot be admitted as any concrete indication of his stand on Impressionism. However, to anyone who has read James' letter to Whitelaw Reid, the editor of the New York Tribune, it is obvious that it was the very fact that James could not make articles "to order" which caused his eventual rupture with the paper.

Therefore, assuming that whatever else he may have been, he was always sincere when writing for publication, we must try to discover the meaning behind his attack, not that his was the first or the worst. E.H. Gombrich quotes a "respected critic" who reported on the 1876 exhibition in these words:

'An exhibition has just been opened at Durand-Ruel which allegedly contains paintings....Five or six lunatics, among them a woman, have joined together and exhibited their works....These would-be artists call themselves revolutionaries, "Impressionists." They take a piece of canvas, colour and brush, daub a few patches of colour on them at random, and sign the whole thing with their name. It is a delusion of the same kind as if the inmates of Bedlam picked up stones from the wayside and imagined they had found diamonds.'

James' comment that
The 'Impressionist' doctrines strike me as incompatible, in an artist's mind, with the existence of first-rate talent. To embrace them you must be provided with a plentiful absence of imagination.

seems rather mild compared to the above. But the general opinion of the two critics appears to be the same.

Why did James react in this way? Was it because he was so terribly reactionary and class-bound in his tastes? Was it because his eye, albeit a "painter's eye," had been so firmly fixed in the traditional modes of seeing that it could not accept or assimilate this new visual experience? Perhaps part of the answer lies in the section quoted above. James finds the Impressionist doctrines incompatible with art.

Impressionism was a true child of nineteenth century France. It not only grew out of the increasing split between the academic, artificial way of looking at nature, but also out of certain new discoveries in the field of optics, the science that deals with light and vision. Whether the Impressionists actually knew of the discoveries in the laboratory or whether they arrived at the same conclusions through independent experiment with colour is not important. The fact is that they prided themselves on their "scientific method" and demonstrated in their paintings that optical mixtures of colour were more intense than colour already mixed in the tube—that red and yellow placed side by side for example and "mixed" only by the eye would produce a more brilliant orange than any which could be produced by orange paint itself—and that white contains within itself
all the colours of the rainbow, demonstrations which were corroborated by such men as Chevreul and Rood. The Impressionists also wished to be scientific in their attitude as well as their method, for they felt that in order to render nature faithfully an artist must trust only his eyes, his visual experience, and must record, as quickly and dispassionately as possible, every accident of light or shade. In theory at least the artist was not to arrange or select, but only to record everything which came within his particular field of vision. In actual fact the best of the Impressionists did not adhere to this part of the theory and went on selecting, arranging and composing just as though they were not eyes but intellects as well. This is what Cezanne meant when he said that "Monet is only an eye—but what an eye!"19

James appears to have heard of their aims before he went to the exhibition, and having got the cart before the horse, he confuses aim with result and ends up in the paradoxical position of saying the wrong thing for the right reasons. Not only do many modern critics proclaim that the Impressionist movement was short-lived and misguided, they also stress another of James' views in which he says that

A painting is not an 'Impression' but an expression--just as a poem or a piece of music is.20

Gombrich, for example, stresses the fact that expressionism involves selection, and that without selection there is no art.21 And Eric Newton states the same criticism in a slightly different way when
he compares the Impressionists with the artists who came after

Monet and Degas snatched at visual experience; Cézanne
and Picasso construct and reconstruct on a basis of
visual experience. In doing so they are far closer to
the main tradition of art than their predecessors.22

This absence of selection, this cultivated, dispassionate objectivity
where one "snatched at...experience" would be as distasteful to James
as it was to Cézanne who, while admiring the Impressionists' facility,
could nevertheless feel that form, order and arrangement had to be
brought back into art before modern art could make any permanent con-
tribution to the world.

But having partially exonerated James from the charge of con-
ventionalism we must also point out that part of his judgement of
this "little group of Irreconcilables"23 was based on his nineteenth
century aesthetic education. He had been so long in the Louvre and
the Pitti Palace that his eyes had become too accustomed to the Old
Masters' way of visualizing. He did not see that the Impressionist
attempt to render Nature as she actually appeared was the aim of all
the artists of the past. However, the artists of the past had injected
their own world-view into their art, while a camera had no world-view
because it had no soul. Impressionism, ironically enough, for all its
obsession with optics, was to turn out to be as much of a blind alley
as the Pre-Raphaelite doctrine that sophisticated men of one age can
participate in the Zeitgeist of another.

It is interesting that John Rewald, champion of Impressionism,
uses James' 1876 letter in his revised edition of The History of
Impressionism to typify the bourgeois attitude of the times. There are things about this letter which are "typical" such as his lumping together of the Impressionists as a type (and as Sweeney points out, for once James is guilty of not naming names in a critical review) and his use of the phrase "those good old rules." This is a pretty dangerous way of expressing himself for a man who really did not believe in rules of art, who did not maintain, as P.G. Hamerton did, that "the learned application of art criticism was simply a series of tests." Sweeney maintains that James modified his views on Impressionism as the years went on, until in The American Scene he can speak quite highly of works by Manet, Degas, Monet and Whistler. We are inclined to disagree and to feel that Mr. Sweeney is not quite at home among these particular "nightingales." James never modified his opinion of the Impressionist theory. What he did perceive was that in the best works of the Impressionist school, the theory was, to a great extent, disregarded. There is, for example, the evidence of a conscious and very obvious selection in the works of Monet. In his essay on John Singer Sargent James makes his position quite clear.

To render the impression of an object may be a very fruitful effort, but it is not necessarily so; that will depend upon what...the impression may have been. And what the impression may have been will depend in turn on the man who receives and reproduces it. If he does this mechanically, dispassionately, with no awareness of the depth and richness of life, if he makes of it merely a technical problem, then his impression will not be worthwhile. The head of a cabbage and the head of a child may
be of equal value for technical experiment, but to the man who is at all interested in life they can never be the same. That is, of course, unless one should feel deeply, as the little masters of Holland and Flanders did, about cabbages.

One further point is worth considering. In James' concept of creative activity the viewing consciousness stands behind a window; it gets closest to nature by standing slightly apart from it, by being, with the aid of the window or "the light of the mind," both within and without. To a man who believes this, the idea of taking art out of the studio and into the open air must have seemed very odd indeed. One must step back from experience, from life, just as,ironically enough, one must step back from an Impressionist painting, before one is able to see the parts in any relation to the whole.

Therefore, although James as a small boy received his first real acquaintance with art in the Louvre, his criticism of the French art of his time is the least satisfactory part of his art criticism as a whole. I have tried to indicate the reasons for this: his attitude towards French literature, his too-cursory glance at the paintings at Durand-Ruel's, his fairly rigid belief that all French art exhibited cynicism or a tendency towards cynicism. His criticism of French art is important, however, because it demonstrates that certain of his aesthetic criteria—style and finish, for example—are definitely accidental or secondary attributes of a work of art. If it seems to James that sincerity is lacking, he may reject the painting out of hand.
FOOTNOTES

1 cf. "The Impressionists" (1876), P.E., p.115.


3 "An English Critic of French Painting" (1868), P.E., p.42. This is an unsigned review of P.G. Hamerton's Contemporary French Painters.

4 "French Pictures in Boston" (1872), P.E., p.47.

5 Ibid., p.44.

6 Ibid., p.48.

7 Ibid., p.47.

8 "Pictures by William Morris Hunt, Gérôme and Others" (1872), P.E., p.51.

9 He continues: "...which is simply the light of the mind." French Pictures in Boston," P.E., p.47.

10 "The Letters of Delacroix" (1880), P.E., p.184.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., p.185

15 At the first exhibition in 1874 Monet had shown his now famous 'Impression: Sunrise' from which Leroy coined the term Impressionistes, in his Le Charevari review.

16 Reid had suggested that James' articles and reviews were "too good" for the Tribune, and were more suitable for magazine than newspaper publication. James replies: "I am afraid I can't assent to your proposal that I should try and write otherwise." cf. The Selected Letters of Henry James, ed. Leon Edel (New York, 1960), p.64.


19 The Story of Art, p.405.

21 The Story of Art, p.380. He goes on to say that "where there is no choice, there is no expression." However, he points out that in certain stages in the history of art, the Egyptian or the Romanesque periods for example, the rules and conventions of art were so severe that what was produced cannot be called 'expressionistic' (in the sense in which James is using the term).


24 Ibid.


26 P.E., p.217.
CHAPTER IV

JAMES IN THE BRAVE NEW WORLD

This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed home, this little piggy had roast beef, this little piggy had none.

Tom Appleton said, sarcastically, that all good Americans go to Paris when they die. But Paris, being as she was the dynamic center of aesthetic movements in the nineteenth century, attracted a good many Americans while they were still alive. Paris meant Europe, and Europe was the place where the newly-minted nation could buy up culture and transplant it into a finer, more virgin soil. But it was not only the rich Americans, like Christopher Newman and Adam Verver, who flocked to Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. There were also many well-to-do young would-be artists who hurried from the trains at the Gare St. Lazare convinced that in Paris they would acquire a "varnish" for their paintings which they could never find at home. There was the grand tour for artists as well as for men who owned mills back home in Massachusetts or Nebraska. One might go on to Rome or Florence or Baden-Baden, but Paris was the first watering place in their search for the cure to the lack of tradition and a certain creakiness in the aesthetic joints. One went to London to acquire manners (or clothes—which amounted to the same thing); one went to Paris to acquire technique. As James says in 1893,
When today we look for 'American art' we find it mainly in Paris. When we find it out of Paris, we at least find a great deal of Paris in it.¹

There was a "great deal of Paris" (as well as Japan) in Whistler, and there was more than a little in James' young friend John Singer Sargent, the American artist who was elected to the Royal Academy at the age of twenty-four and became the most sought-after portrait painter in London in the nineties, and to whom Clifton Fadiman can only afford a parenthetical statement today. In fact Fadiman, as we have seen, uses James' apparent admiration of Sargent as "proof" that his aesthetic sensibilities were rather crude. "He liked Sargent." But did he? If we examine his comments on Sargent we find that this liking was at most a qualified thing and that his fear of the traps into which the young painter might fall "proves," if anything, how perceptive James was on the subject of art.

In 1893 James wrote a rather lengthy article on Sargent for *Harper's Magazine* (one of the few he wrote concerning a single artist—the essay on Daumier is another). In this essay he indicates that he likes Sargent's work thus far but is uneasy for his future. Sargent "has...on the face of it, this great symptom of American origin, that in the line of his art he might easily be mistaken for a Frenchman."² Sargent has another more "admirable peculiarity," in that "perception with him is already a kind of execution."³ His perception, in other words, seems to have become just another technique, and a technique which is employed, rather than felt, by the artist. James goes into the fact that Sargent had been "hailed as
a recruit of high value to the camp of the Impressionists," but he adds that "Mr. Sargent's impressions happen to be worthy of record." He simplifies richly, and "with style."

Today it is generally agreed among critics and painters that the work of Sargent's early period is far superior to the work of his later years and that James' fear that he knows so much about the art of painting that he perhaps does not fear emergencies quite enough and that having knowledge to spare he may be tempted to play with it and waste it, was confirmed by the superficial portraits of his "peak" period. It was quite natural that James, who felt that "there is no finer work of art than a fine portrait", would be drawn to this talented young portrait painter from America. But even in his comments on Sargent's painting 'Mrs. Carl Meyer and her children' he sees already that Sargent is rendering "manners...aspects...types and textures." Oliver Lyon descended from a portrait of Sir David Ashmore to a parody of the art of portraiture, 'The Liar,' and we have seen what James thought of him! Sargent is rendering types rather than individuals, and this is, in the Jamesian aesthetic canon, a denial of the principles of portraiture. To those who have seen Sargent's work, and are still convinced of James' excess of praise for the painter, may we refer them to the novelist's "aside" on page 222 of The Painter's Eye. James is discussing the 'Daughters of Edward D. Boit,' a painting which is notable for its charm and grace and perfect understanding of "the happy play-world of a family of charming children." Yet,
in the midst of his praise occurs a rather ominous parenthesis—"When was the pinafore ever painted with such poetic power?" In the paintings of Sargent's "major phase" the modern observer feels that this tendency to render pinafores with poetic power became the last word in sloppy sentimentality, in giving the purchaser the kind of calendar art which would please him and which would ensure his patronage. In this particular painting it works; the "poetic power" extends to the portrait and the arrangement of the children themselves. In later paintings it appears to stop at "pinafores."

But there were also the painters who stayed at home, who for private or pecuniary reasons never crossed the wide moat separating the kingdom of the counting house from the (to the majority of Americans, at least) Palace of Art. One of these, a now forgotten painter named Moran, comes in for his share of Jamesian wit in a review of the Academy exhibition in 1875. Moran had painted a picture of "certain geological eccentricities in Utah," and James exhibits his usual wit in his remarks on the dubious merits of the work.

The cliffs there [in Utah], it appears, are orange and pink, emerald green and cerulean blue; they look at a distance as if, in emulation of the vulgar liberties taken with the exposed strata in the suburbs of New York, they had been densely covered with bill-posters of every colour of the rainbow. Mr. Moran's picture is, in the literal sense of the word, a brilliant production. We confess it gives a rather uncomfortable wrench to our prosy pre-conceptions of the conduct and complexion of rocks, even in their more fantastic moods; but we remember that all this is in Utah, and that Utah is terribly far away. Yet to imply that James did not think American scenery was pictorial
would be unfair. He most certainly thought it was rather stark and
naked, but he loved, for instance, the beauty of New England in all
her moods, and he even goes so far, in Roderick Hudson, to paint a
"view" of an actual town, Northampton, Massachusetts, which is rather
lovely. It is the inhabitants who are treated ironically, not the
landscape. And this is equally true of his remarks on Moran's painting.
James suspects the artist who created the picture had little knowledge
of landscape and how to paint it. He is really quarrelling with the
execution, not, in spite of the witty manner in which the comments are
phrased, the choice of locale. His remarks on Winslow Homer, for ex-
ample, show that he can appreciate, albeit grudgingly, the potentiality
in the field of native landscape and genre. And we must also mention
here that it is chiefly Homer's rendering of people which James finds
objectionable to say the least. He admits that he "frankly detests his
subjects...his dull pictorial vision...his perfect realism...barbaric
simplicity...pie-nurtured maidens...calico sunbonnets...want of grace
...lack of intellectual detail...and absence of reflected light."9
Yet James is forced to admit that he likes Homer, and the reasons that
he gives are extremely interesting.

He has chosen the least pictorial features of the least
pictorial range of scenery and civilization; he has
resolutely treated them as if they were pictorial...and,
to reward his audacity, he has incontestably succeeded.
...If his masses were only sometimes a trifle more broken,
and his brush a good deal richer...he would be, with his
vigorous way of looking and seeing, even if fancy in the
matter were the same dead blank, an almost distinguished
painter.10

To James, Homer's main defect was that his painting was so "damnably
ugly." And what James means when he says that Homer's painting is "ugly," when he ridicules the "flat-breasted maidens" and the "straight-haired Yankee urchins," is that all this is too naturalistic, too purely physical, too "doggedly literal." It lacks imagination, the fusion of intellect and sense, shadow and substance. It reflects the viewing consciousness of an honest, but limited, man. This concept of the beautiful is a point to which I shall return in my conclusion.

But James was interested not only in American painters. He was amused and distressed by the attitudes of the picture-loving, picture-buying American public. Pictures which were "made in Europe," be they the work of old or new masters, brought a high price in the aesthetic market-places of America. Just as the American showed a still-prevalent tendency to regard what is "the latest thing" and what is the most expensive thing, as "the best thing," so he, paradoxically enough, was an ardent admirer of what was old, particularly if it came from that cultural warehouse (where else could it come from?) of European art. When a collection of the Duke of Montpensier's pictures was placed on view in the Boston Athenaeum in 1874, the sight of the hushed, reverent attitude of the spectators filled James with ironic amusement and not a little distress. After an appreciative analysis of the merits and defects of the pictures exhibited, he feels a certain necessity to point out to America that there are things made in Europe and there are things made in Europe, and that they had been somewhat too reverent in their attitude towards this particular collection.
Applauding the significance of the fact that a European collection has been exhibited in America and that there is now "no reason in the essence of things why a roomfull of old masters should not be walked into from an American street," he nevertheless advises the "walkers-in" that while it may not be socially correct to look a gift horse in the mouth, it is aesthetically necessary if one is to learn to discriminate between the first- and second-rate.

We are the Duke of Montpensier's debtors, and we cordially acknowledge it. This obligation is weighty, but it is of still more importance that people in general in this part of the world should not form an untruthful estimate of the works now at the Athenaeum. Immaturity and provincialism are incontestable facts, but people should never freely assent to being treated as children and provincials.

That such a warning was necessary is evident by the unfortunate experience of Christopher Newman in the Louvre.

James would never deny either the power or the potential of the rich financial resources of America. But the use to which such resources were put, particularly when it came to the question of picture buying, was often questionable. When, in 1876, Mr. A.T. Stewart of New York paid $76,000 for a representation of 'Friedland' by Meissonier, a painter whom James admired for his skill but criticized for his lack of depth, James again feels called upon to say a few words about the American aesthetic scene. In a most ironic metaphor he states that the purchase gave him "an acute satisfaction in seeing America stretch out her long arm and rake in, across the green cloth of the wide Atlantic, the highest prizes of the game of civilization." Nevertheless he wonders if the prize was really worth the expenditure of all
that vast amount of money. He reflects that in spite of all the science and skill that went into it, the picture seems "dear" at $76,000. Yet he recognizes the viewers' aesthetic susceptibility to the knowledge that the price was so high.

If a certain number of persons have been found to agree that such and such an enormous sum is a proper valuation of a picture, a book, or a song at a concert, it is very hard not to be rather touched with awe and to see a certain golden reflect in the performance. Indeed, if you do not see it, the object in question becomes perhaps still more impressive—a something too elevated and exquisite for your dull comprehension.15

The last sentence has, in retrospect, an almost prophetic ring when one considers the attitude of many twentieth century critics and viewers to so-called Modern Art.

Thus James found much food for thought in his wanderings through the American art world of the late nineteenth century. What he discovered most of all was the basic insecurity of both artists and public in matters concerning art. They, like the English merchant-princes, desperately wanted culture, and because of this insecurity they tended to reject their native land and search for works of art which they knew were "the real thing" because they were European and because it was in Europe that one found "the real thing." Even the majority of American painters sought "real" inspiration in Paris rather than New York. Was there a possibility of uniting brave new world with old? This was a problem which obsessed him as the years went on, and in the triumphant reconciliation of Maggie Verwer, daughter of an American Adam, with Prince Amerigo, latest in a line which stretched back into the dim and occasionally spotted pages of European history, we
see his final answer to this question. But few critics have seen it worthwhile to note that the synthesis which they achieve is a synthesis built on Maggie's new awareness of the underlying principle of art—and that is, of course, Form.
FOOTNOTES

1 "John S. Sargent," P.E., p.216.

2 Ibid. Keeping in mind our examination of the previous chapter, we can recognize that this remark is anything but complimentary.

3 Ibid., p.217.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., pp.223-24.

6 "The Guildhall and the Royal Academy" (1897), P.E., p.257.


8 "On Some Pictures Lately Exhibited" (1875), P.E., p.100.

9 Ibid., p.96.

10 Ibid., p.97.

11 Ibid.


13 Ibid., p.86.


15 Ibid.
CHAPTER V

A SMALL VOICE AND OTHERS

If one examines James' art criticism in isolation, without specific reference to other nineteenth century art critics, it may seem to assume an air of importance which it certainly did not have at the time. James' voice was merely a "small voice" when compared to that of Ruskin or Pater, or even to the voice of Charles Baudelaire, whose reviews of the French Salons now read, for one critic at least, "like notes for the new chapter of modern art,"¹ and which hardly went unnoticed even if the notice was uncomplimentary. Today Pater, Ruskin and Baudelaire are recognized as major figures in the history of art criticism, while James' essays and reviews are rarely, if ever, noticed by anyone who is not a student of James. If he is mentioned by art critics or art historians, he is mentioned only to illustrate how even such a perceptive man as Henry James misinterpreted and misunderstood the art of his own time. E.P. Richardson, in his history of painting in America, does go so far as to say that James was a "perceptive critic of painting,"² but then uses James' remarks on Winslow Homer to emphasize that even perceptive people failed to understand what Homer was trying to do. Rewald, in his history of Impressionism, uses James' essay as one example of the total lack of sympathy of the critics of the times.³ Yet few art historians bother
to point out that Pater did not even attempt to understand contemporary visual art and that Ruskin limited himself, with the exception of his defence of Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites, to destructive criticism of the art of his contemporaries. James, at least, did try to understand and interpret the art of his own century, and this in itself is to his credit.

In *The Tenth Muse* Herbert Read divides art criticism into four categories: professional, historical, aesthetical ("or philosophical") and "that which might be called simply art criticism." Professional criticism should be used by the teachers and "with its technicalities and jargon it should be confined to its proper sphere, the studio or the school of art." By historical criticism Read says that he means "the delineation of movements and groups, the description of styles, the analysis of techniques and materials—in general, the post-mortem attitude to art." On the question of "aesthetical" art criticism Mr. Read is not as clear as one might wish him to be. But he appears to view aesthetics as a philosophical discipline and, as such, this type of criticism is highly specialized and is really a philosophical activity. But it is with the fourth category, art criticism *per se*, that he and we are most concerned. While setting forth his views on this kind of criticism and its function, Read explains his conception of the "ideal" art critic.

Stating that this type of criticism should be "actively addressed, not to a professional minority of any kind, but to the general
body of educated opinion," he goes on to say that

Such a criticism will be either informative or interpretive. It will not assume that everyone has seen the work of art the critic is talking about. On the contrary, it will try to give everyone a vivid image of the object in question. Having done this, the critic will proceed to interpret the artist's intention, and in the end he may express his own view of the artist's achievement, and this view need not necessarily be favourable.7

Chastizing the modern art critic for his failure to practice this form of art criticism, and believing strongly that "the critic ought to be capable of giving an exact verbal description of the object which has caused him pleasure or displeasure,"8 he cites Pater, Baudelaire and Ruskin as examples of consummate masters of the art of art criticism. He might have included Henry James as well. For it is a curious fact that James, although never seriously considered as an art critic, either before or since his death, deserves to go down in art history as one of the most perceptive art critics of the nineteenth century. This does not mean to imply that all of his judgements have stood the test of time or that he had an intuitive knowledge of what would be classified as great art in the years to come. One cannot retrospectively keep score on a critic who is observing and analysing the art of his contemporaries. Perhaps the reason for his perceptive appreciation of painting lies in the fact that he was able to achieve more objectivity when examining works in a genre which was not technically speaking his own. Perhaps it lies in the fact that he was always, in part, a frustrated painter himself.9 Whatever the cause, he failed to fall into many of the traps which engulfed the profession-
al nineteenth century art critics, and his major articles and essays fulfill all the qualifications of Read's 'ideal' art criticism. Thus, before we come to any conclusion about the relationship between James' aesthetic theory and his novels themselves it might be well to come to certain conclusions about the correspondences and differences between his art criticism and that of the three critics who are more widely known for their views on art—John Ruskin, Walter Pater and Charles Baudelaire.

Walter Pater

In his preface to The Renaissance (1873) Pater stated that "Beauty, like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative..."

To define beauty, not in the most abstract but in the most concrete terms possible, to find not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it, is the aim of the true student of Aesthetics.10

With the first part of this statement James would have no quarrel, for in both his works and his criticism we find him always stressing the importance of the particular rather than the universal, the type. And throughout The Painter's Eye we hear him repeating again and again the phrase "In the Palace of Art there are many mansions." James shrank from any rigid code of aesthetics just as he shrank from any codification of moral values. Thus he is able to find beauty in the "humble masterpieces" of Holland and Flanders as well as in the highly imaginative and exciting canvases of Géricault and Delacroix. Both contain for James a particular and special manifestation of beauty. But the
last part of the quotation deserves some attention, for one doubts very much if James would have agreed to being called "a true student of Aesthetics." It was this sort of language which was to cause Pater (and Pater's ghost) so much trouble, and to lead to Pater's being declared the English father of l'art pour l'art.

Aesthetics is a dangerous word, and the misinterpretation of this word led, in the end, to a situation where Oscar Wilde did more damage to the role of the artist than the industrial revolution and the whole of the middle class put together. As we have seen, Pater's concept of life as art—the aesthete burning always with "a hard, gem-like flame," is very close to James' concept of the expanding consciousness and Strether's cry "Live, live all you can." The difference is merely linguistic, but the words chosen indicate a basic difference between James' and Pater's points of view. To the middle class, aesthetics is a dirty word—it smacks of young men in ivory towers burning incense to false gods—it smacks, even, of perversion. And certainly it seemed to oppose a different and sinister set of criteria to those of the accepted moral code. Yet whatever their differences, both Pater and James felt that in the totally integrated society, just as in the totally integrated individual, there can be no confusion of aesthetic and moral criteria, for the two are one and the same. But Pater had a limitation which James did not have—he lacked a tragic vision of life. James knew that the inevitable result of this flame-like dedication to the beautiful could result only in disaster, self-destruction, or death, either one's own or someone else's. Pater never
followed his doctrine through to its logical conclusion, but James was aware that the expanding consciousness, Icarus-like, must inevitably fall into the sea.

In 1894 James makes an interesting comment in a letter to Edmund Gosse, who had sent James his essay on Pater, now included in Critical Kit-kats:

Faint, pale, embarrassed, exquisite Pater! He reminds me, in the disturbed midnight of our actual literature, of one of those lucent match-boxes which you place, on going to bed, near the candle, to show you in the darkness where you can strike a light; he shines in the uneasy gloom—vaguely, and has a phosphorescence, not a flame. But I quite agree with you that he is not of the little day—but of the longer time.12

Thus, unconscious disciple though he may have been, James certainly did not feel himself akin, except in sympathy, to the "exquisite Pater." The truth is that it was precisely because his Conclusion to The Renaissance was clothed in the vagueness of an ambiguous metaphor, an ambiguity of which he was only too aware when he suppressed the Conclusion from the second edition of the book, that the decadents gobbled him up, misinterpreted him, and made it possible for someone like Wilde to insist that The Renaissance was "the very flower of decadence; the last trumpet should have sounded when it was written."13

Yet Pater was no more an amoral hedonist than James was a prude. To both of these men the expanding consciousness was everything, the ultimate aim of such expansion to be the same as that of the artist—but to James the aim involved an ethical result, and eventually the consciousness would have to place itself in relationship with the rest
Herbert Read suggests that interpretive art criticism (by which I take him to mean subjective, impressionistic art criticism) began with Pater and his "prose poems." Pater gives us not only a perfectly conveyed description of the painting, so that we can visualize it although we may never have seen the original...but at the same time an interpretation of its meaning or significance; and all done without any of the machinery of analysis. And it is beautiful to read and to listen to; it is criticism raised in itself to an art, the art of prose, the least appreciated but most essential of all human arts, for it is the daily bread of communication.

"And all done without the machinery of analysis," or, as James calls it, "the language of the studios." The essays in The Painter's Eye resemble, stylistically, Pater's essays in The Renaissance. Here we find no technical jargon, unless used ironically, and here too we find beautiful prose and striking metaphor. Compare a portion of Pater's description of one of Leonardo's sketches with a comment by James on Murillo:

i) Note...the curves on the head of the child, following the little skull within, thin and fine as some sea-shell worn by the wind.

ii) Murillo believes as women do, with never a dream of doubt; and the fact that his Virgins are hard-handed peasant women makes his inspiration seem more sacred, rather than less so....The baby's head, with its big, blue eyes and its little helpless backward fall, is delightfully painted; there are few divine infants in the range of sacred art on whom divinity sits so easily.

Both James and Pater here manage to capture virtue (Pater's term for "personality," or the unique quality of a given work of art or a given
artist), the one, of the work of art itself, the other, of the artist. One was published in 1873, the other in 1874. One was part of a work which was to achieve world-wide notoriety, the other, a remark made in an unsigned, virtually unnoticed review.

Ruskin

Although Herbert Read mentions Pater as the father of descriptive and interpretive art criticism, he also cites Ruskin and Baudelaire as masters of "the literature of art." With Read's opinion of Ruskin, however, James disagrees. He seems to have had from the beginning an almost instinctual dislike of the man himself, writing to his mother in 1869,

Ruskin himself is a very simple matter. In face, in manner, in talk, in mind, he is weakness pure and simple. I use the word not invidiously but scientifically. He has the beauties of his defects but to see him only confirms the impression given by his writing, that he has been scared back by the grim face of reality into the world of unreason and illusion, and that he wanders there without a compass and a guide --or any light except the fitful flashes of his beautiful genius.13

Granted that this was written by a young man of twenty-six, giddy from the experience of meeting the great and near-great of London society for the first time; yet James never changed his opinion of Ruskin in spite of the fact that Ruskin's prose charmed him, or that many of the great critic's opinions agreed with his own. Therefore it might be well to examine certain of Ruskin's comments in order to see why James felt that the work as well as the man exhibited signs of "weakness pure and simple."
In *Modern Painters* (1843) Ruskin states that the qualities necessary to great art are the same as those necessary to a great man: moral awareness, love of beauty, grasp of truth and great imagination. In "The Art of Fiction" James would say that "no great art can proceed from a superficial mind," and this corresponds to Ruskin's position in *Modern Painters*. (After 1860, however, Ruskin appears to have set himself up as sole judge of who possessed and who did not possess the necessary qualities, and his views became increasingly narrow and arbitrary, a kind of critical atrophy which did not hit James until he was a relatively old man.) In the same section of *Modern Painters* (III, part IV), Ruskin warns the critic against rigid classification of works of art:

> For it will have been observed that the various qualities which form greatness are partly inconsistent with each other...and partly independent of each other; and the fact is, that artists differ not more by mere capacity, each possessing in very different proportions the several attributes of greatness; so that classed by one kind of merit, as, for instance, purity of expression, Angelico will stand highest. Classed by another, love of beauty, Leonardo will stand highest; and so on; hence arise continual disputes and misunderstandings among those who think that high art must always be one and the same, and that great artists ought to unite all great attributes in equal degree.19

James certainly shares this view, and we see it in operation, for example, in his comments on Ingres and Rubens: James feels that Ingres is the embodiment of the classical "idea" which "will never become extinct, in as much as men of the classical temperament will constantly arise to keep it alive,"20 and yet he recognizes the limitations of this "refined but shallow" genius.
He looked at natural objects in a partial, incomplete manner. He recognized in Nature only one class of objects worthy of study—the naked human figure; and in art only one method of reproduction—drawing. In his field then—the drawing of the naked human figure—Ingres may be classified as a great master. But by other standards, and against painters who recognized the existence of other fields, he cannot compete.

In the case of Rubens, James felt that he was essentially a "coarse" painter, but in this category he reigned "with magnificent supremacy." Yet Ruskin did not really practice what he preached. To him there was but one God—J.M.W. Turner—and Ruskin was his prophet—at least insofar as nineteenth century art was concerned. He admired the Pre-Raphaelites—yes; but his championship of them (not in his letters to the Times but in his 1851 essay, "Pre-Raphaelitism"), was really, as Robert L. Peters points out, "more an explanation of his beloved Turner than a defense of the painters." Modern Painters was written around Turner, and to the end of his days Ruskin believed that Turner was the only real light on the darkling artistic plain. All other painters were "immoral" because they did not follow the precepts of Turner and of Ruskin.

Yet in spite of his didacticism, his almost fanatical obsession with the moral function of art, which was somehow separate from the aesthetic value of art, Ruskin made many perceptive comments about art in general. And finding no stability around him, he found his stability, as the young James suggests in his letter, in a retreat from
reality. Ruskin's comments on modern landscape help to clarify this point.

We find that whereas all the pleasure of the medieval was in stability, definiteness, and luminousness, we are expected to rejoice in darkness, and triumph in mutability; to lay the foundations of happiness in things that momentarily change or fade; and to expect the utmost satisfaction and instruction from what it is impossible to arrest, and difficult to comprehend.25

Ruskin's attitude here is definitely Pre-Raphaelite—he wants to go back to the closed world of the Middle Ages and reject the consequences of living in an infinite universe. He is refusing to expand his consciousness because he does not wish to pay the price involved in such expansion. Terribly aware of the physical ugliness and moral chaos of his own century, his only solution is to replace the bourgeois Goddess-of-Getting-On with a gothic saint—static, stable, and reassuring. He cannot accept the here and now, he can only criticize it. In fact, although one hesitates to quarrel with the opinion of so eminent a critic as Read, his inclusion of Ruskin in an article devoted to the establishment of certain basic principles of good art criticism is questionable. For although *Modern Painters* contains much that is admirable, it also exhibits signs of the impassioned fanaticism which was to make the later volumes, as well as his writings on social and ethical problems, so one-sidedly didactic. Yet his isolated comments are excellent, for example:

i) The demand for perfection is always a misunderstanding of the ends of art.27

ii) Demand no refinement of execution where there is no thought, for that is slave's work, unredeemed.28
iii) In politics, religion is now a name; in art, a hypocrisy, or affectation.29

But too often we find him sacrificing common sense for rather obscure metaphysical notions, and the painter's eye for the prophet's tongue. As a social critic Ruskin has had great and lasting influence; as a writer of beautiful, albeit often purple prose, he was virtually unequalled; as an art historian he was excellent, but as a sympathetic critic of nineteenth century art he was a fish out of water. One would like to imagine the young James resolving, as he begins his art criticism, not to commit the errors of the staid Professor, and to approach the art of his century with a somewhat more philosophic eye.

In 1878, when James reviewed Ruskin's collection of drawings by Turner, the famous critic was dangerously ill. At the end of the article James mentions the fact that the crisis of his illness had passed, and adds:

There are few persons who will not be interested in hearing of the recovery of a writer whose eccentricities of judgement have been numerous, but for whom, at least, it can be claimed that he is the author of some of the most splendid pages in our language, and that he has spent his life, his large capacity for emotion, and his fortune in a passionate—æ too passionate—endeavour to avert, in many different lines, what he believed to be the wrong and to establish his rigid conception of the right.30

James knew, and Pater knew as well, that there could be no "rigid conceptions" in life, any more than there could be rigid conceptions in art.
Baudelaire

If James' aesthetic had a great deal in common with that of Pater, and little in common with that of Ruskin, it also had certain curious affinities with another nineteenth century art critic—Charles Baudelaire. It is only within the last ten years that Baudelaire's comments on art have been available in English, and this may account for the fact that no one appears to have noticed the remarkable correspondence between the Frenchman's attitude towards nineteenth century art and that of Henry James.

In his review of the Salon of 1846 Baudelaire says:

I sincerely believe that the best criticism is that which is both amusing and poetic: not a cold mathematical criticism which, on the pretext of explaining everything, has neither love nor hate, and voluntarily strips itself of every shred of temperament. But, seeing that a fine picture is nature reflected by the artist, the criticism which I approve will be that picture reflected by an intelligent and sensitive mind. Thus the best account of a picture may be a sonnet or an elegy.

And he adds that the broadest point of view which the critic can have will be "an orderly individualism—that is, to require of the artist the quality of naivété and the sincere expression of his temperament, aided by every means which his technique provides." We have seen demonstrated in the preceding chapters the fact that James, too, believed that criticism could be, and should be, "amusing and poetic," and written from the broadest possible point of view. To James,

Art is really but a point of view and genius a way of looking at things.

But the point of view, whether of artist or critic, must be, at all times, critical.
But not only do James and Baudelaire fundamentally agree on the nature of art criticism, their tastes in art were almost identical. Compare Baudelaire's comment on Decamps with that of James:

**Baudelaire** (1846)

He was too much concerned with the material execution of objects; his houses were made of true plaster and true wood, his walls were made of true lime-mortar; and in front of these masterpieces, the heart was often saddened by a painful idea of the time and trouble which had been devoted to their making. How much finer they would have been if executed less artfully!34

**James** (1872)

A more subtle piece of painting we have seldom beheld [*'The Centurion'*]—a work in which skill and science and experience offer a more effective substitute for that quality which is so strongly embodied in that least clever, the small Delacroix which hangs near it. In refinement of taste, in delicacy of invention, in nice calculation of effect, it is incomparably fine...but it lacks the frank good faith of the best masters.35

It is interesting to note that Baudelaire, in his review, also compares Decamps unfavourably with Delacroix, a painter to whom we shall return below.

Disliking the realism practiced by such painters as Decamps, they also agreed on the difference between a work of art that is complete and a work that is merely finished. Baudelaire held that

In general, what is **complete** is not **finished**, and that a thing that is highly **finished** need not be complete at all...A work of genius (or if you prefer, a work of the soul), in which every element is well seen, well observed, well understood and well imagined, will always be very well executed when it is **sufficiently so**.36

Thus he disliked the highly finished pictures of such artists as Meissonier and Gérôme, which were incomplete because they lacked what
Baudelaire called naïveté and James called "moral spontaneity." To Baudelaire, Gerome was "the first of the pointus," who painted flat marionettes and "coldly warmed up his subjects"—a craftsman without a soul, and Meissonier was "a Fleming, minus the fantasy, the charm, the colour, the naïveté—and the pipe!" 

To James, both Meissonier and Gérôme were "heartless," and although they both painted "with incomparable precision and skill," Gérôme, like Meissonier, "paints at best a sort of elaborate immobility." James sums up the difference between these two highly finished painters and Delacroix or Millet by suggesting that "it is a difference like the difference to the eye between plate glass and gushing water." The "picturesqueness" of a limited painter like Décamps was better than the sterile perfection of these two puppeteers. And both Baudelaire and James used Delacroix as a supreme example of the artist who managed to achieve a synthesis between technique and naïvete or moral spontaneity.

Following on from this, Baudelaire in his essay "On the Ideal and the Model," makes some comments which might equally have been made by James—or by Pater. His contention that a portrait is "a model complicated by the artist" is analogous to the theme of "The Real Thing" and to Pater's conception of the "personality" of a great work of art. Baudelaire, like Pater and James, holds that "the absolute ideal is a piece of nonsense." What makes a great artist is his awareness of the ideal, but it is his own ideal and no one else's.
This is what James means when he says that Delacroix "had, with the highest degree of spontaneity, the ideal," and what Delacroix himself meant when he said that what is worse than being without the ideal, "is to have that second-hand ideal which...people go to school to acquire, and which would make us hate our very models." It was, of course, a belief in another kind of ideal, the absolute ideal, which led to the blank canvas of poor M. Theobold (and, one feels, to the paradoxical and didactic art criticism of Ruskin).

Another correspondence between James and Baudelaire lies in their recognition of the importance of colour. Throughout The Mirror of Art and The Painter's Eye we find Baudelaire and James searching always for a great colourist and always, it should be added, returning to Delacroix as the supreme example of such an artist, who not only coloured, but coloured imaginatively. Baudelaire in "The Salon of 1846," referring to Delacroix, remarks that

> for colourists, who seek to imitate the eternal throbbings of nature, lines are never anything but the intimate fusion of two colours, as in the rainbow.

James stands in awe before Delacroix' "extraordinary harmony of colour," and cites him as "a singularly powerful and various colourist." Conversely, as noted before, a portrait by Nicholas Maas "has a poverty and impurity of colouring which almost denotes moral turpitude in the painter."

It would be interesting to speculate on James' and Baudelaire's obsession with colour. It played a major part in the imaginative works of both men and may simply be an example of the painter's eye at work.
How much did the fact that they were littérateurs, whose job was, at its most literal, the placing of certain black marks on a white ground, have to do with this obsession? It took a Rimbaud to imagine vowels as being within themselves pigmented. Colour seems to have had a moral quality for James and Baudelaire, and it would take a great deal of "keen analysis" to understand why Baudelaire says in 1859 that "It is Imagination that first taught men the moral meaning of colour..." It is easy to see that, to these men, an indifferent colourist was a man with limited imagination, but this is, one feels, only part of the answer.

To sum up the curious affinity between James and Baudelaire and to show how it was evident, not only in their reactions to specific painters, but in their general conception of art, it might be well to examine a statement made by Baudelaire in his essay on "The Governance of the Imagination:"

It is clear that the vast family of artists—that is to say, of men who have devoted themselves to artistic expression—can be divided into two quite distinct camps. There are those who call themselves "realists"—a word with a double meaning, whose sense has not been properly defined, and so in order the better to characterize their error, I propose to call them "positivists;" and they say, "I want to represent things as they are, or rather as they would be, supposing that I did not exist." In other words, the universe without man. The others however—the "imaginative"—say, "I want to illumine things with my mind, and to project their reflection on other minds."

Baudelaire mentions, as well, a third class of painters, a "very boring class" in which he includes "the false amateurs of the antique, the false amateurs of style—in short, all those men who by their
impotence have elevated the 'poncif' to the honours of the grand style." In the preceding pages we have seen that James, like Baudelaire, comes down heavily on the side of the "imaginatives" and relegates the "positivists" and the "false amateurs of style" to a decidedly inferior place.

The "exquisite" Pater, the "too passionate" Ruskin, and the Satanic Baudelaire: a stranger triumvirate cannot be imagined. Yet all three were writers of impassioned prose which concerned itself with the Palace of Art, and we can find certain resemblances to all three in James' criticism of art. Like Pater, James believed strongly in the here and now, which he knew, as Pater knew, was "the essence of classical feeling." Like Ruskin, he believed in craftsmanship and simplicity, whether applied to poetry or painting. Like Baudelaire, he had no time for the kind of "realism" which he observed in so many of the novels and canvases of the nineteenth century. Nor did he believe in "a universe without man." And like all three, he expressed his concept—one can hardly call it a doctrine—of art in some of the most highly imaginative literature on art which has ever been written. He was more receptive to new movements in art than Clifton Fadiman or even John L. Sweeney have supposed—his understanding of both the strengths and weaknesses of the Pre-Raphaelites is just one example of his sympathetic approach to a school with which he could not fundamentally agree. And yet, above all, what he creates in his scattered comments on nineteenth century art is a social history of the paradoxical age in which he lived. He was as aware as Ruskin that a nation's
art reflects the zeitgeist of the nation and so, in his reviews and essays, one can see the whole panorama of the previous century spread out before one's eyes. The bustle of the London Season, the sentimentality of Victorian aesthetics, the technically brilliant but essentially shallow realism of the French, the strange, awkward, groping, but nevertheless sincere desire of the nineteenth century Americans who wished to purchase culture from a world which they had rejected, and all nations, all artists, looking for some escape from the break-up of the old, safe, secure ways of looking at things. James saw "the skull beneath the skin," and in his own aesthetic he tries to work a way out of a labyrinth from which he knew there was no escape—except through the individual imagination. This is what Pater means, this is what Strether realizes, and this is what Maggie Verver, James' only successful heroine, manages to achieve once she has realized that to make of one's life a work of art can be an exciting and moral experience.

A great art critic then, is one who can sympathize, criticize, and respond to the art of his time, not by considering criticism as the application of a set of tests, but by considering it to be the middle-man between two worlds which should, ideally, need no such middle-man—the "real" world and the world of art. Yet the art critic must never see himself as anything but a middle-man; if he does, he will commit Ruskin's error, and become a fanatic. "Art is one of the necessities of life" says James. And Pater, Ruskin and Baudelaire would all agree. But, as we have seen, he goes on to say: "even the
critics themselves would probably not assert that criticism is anything more than an agreeable luxury—something like printed talk." Thus, in any consideration of James as artist, his art criticism must take second place. But it is nevertheless a very vital second place and one which should, I feel, put James on an equal par with those other three literary men who had, to a greater or lesser degree, "the painter's eye"—Baudelaire, Ruskin and Pater.
FOOTNOTES


2 Painting in America, p.316.

3 The History of Impressionism, rev. ed. (New York, 1961), p.370. Rewald says that James' review was an "unexpected echo" of the show, but he does not elaborate on his reasons for thinking it unexpected. And on p.376 he goes on to say that James' essay was based on Fro­mentin's deprecation of plein air in painting, but he does not give any evidence for his conclusion.


5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p.6.

8 Ibid., p.7.

9 Edel's monumental biography of James leaves one with the im­pression that James was far more intimate with the many artists of his acquaintance than he was with his fellow-writers, Howells ex­cepted. Beginning with his elder brother, whose facility with the pencil was envied by the young Henry, and with his own "illustrations" to the plays he wrote as a child, James' reaction to the world of the plastic artist appears to have been first a desire to emulate, and later a tremendous appreciation of the difficulties of what had looked so easy—an appreciation based on envy as well as awe.

10 New American Library ed. (New York, 1959), xii.

11 I am, of course, taking the liberty of equating Strether with James himself.

12 Selected Letters, p.142.


15 Ibid.

16 The Renaissance, p.84.
17 "The Duke of Montpensier's Pictures in Boston," P.E., p.82.


21 Ibid.


24 Two Canadian painters have said that Ruskin destroyed Turner's last paintings because they deviated from Ruskin's own conception of painting, but I have been unable to substantiate what may be merely a legend.

25 English Prose of the Victorian Era, p.844. (This and the following extracts are all taken from Modern Painters.)


28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.


32 Ibid.


34 The Mirror of Art, p.78.


36 The Mirror of Art, p.29.
37 The Mirror of Art, p. 254.
38 Ibid., p. 28.
41 "Meissonier's 'Friedland'," P.E., p. 110.
42 The Mirror of Art, p. 85.
43 Ibid., p. 84.
45 Ibid.
46 The Mirror of Art, p. 61.
48 Ibid.
49 cf. Introduction, n. 33.
50 The Mirror of Art, p. 233.
51 Ibid., p. 239.
52 Ibid., p. 240
54 "On Art Criticism and Whistler" (1879), P.E., p. 177.
CONCLUSION

THE JAMESIAN AESTHETIC

Go and Catch a Falling Star,
Get with Child a Mandrake Root....

Style, simplicity, sincerity, composition, craftsmanship, colouring, charm; an awareness of but not a slavish devotion to the ideal, and a passionate belief in the importance of art: these, then, are James' aesthetic criteria. But they are not absolutes, and the presence of one or more elements may compensate for the absence of others. James realized that an aesthetic reaction is primarily subjective—that pleasure as well as pain is a personal thing. It cannot be defined, it can only be experienced. To look for a standard set of measurements with which to evaluate a work of art is not only ludicrous, but also self-destructive. It destroyed Ruskin, who turned the Palace of Art into

a sort of assize court in perpetual session...where the gulf between truth and error is forever yawning at his feet and where the pains of this error are advertised in apocalyptic terminology, upon a thousand sign posts, and the rash intruder soon begins to look back with infinite longing to the lost paradise of the artless.¹

James adds: "A truce to all rigidities is the law of the place; the only thing absolute there is that some force and charm have worked."²

This is what he means when he says, in defence of Delacroix,

Art is really but a point of view and genius but a way
of looking at things. The wiser the artist and the finer
the genius, the more easy will it be to conceive of other
points of view, other ways of looking at things, than
one's own.3

Before a work which calls out to our aesthetic sensibilities, all
absolutes vanish, and we are only aware that "some force and charm
have worked."

Therefore, James is not being inconsistent when he shows a
predelection, for instance, for the "little masters" of Belgium and
Holland, while he rejects the nineteenth century French and English
schools of Realism. The sixteenth and seventeenth century realists
were "masters of the microscopic,"4 artists who were not only dogged­
ly literal, concerned with the real thing (and often even the same
thing), but who lacked any imagination at all. Yet

The Dutchman...feels that, unless he is faithful he is
nothing. He must confer a charm as well as borrow one
...and his little picture, therefore, lives and speaks
and tells of perfection.5

The humbler masters have charm, and their charm rests on their serene
belief that the head of a cabbage is as interesting as the head of a
Madonna, and that the scrubbed floors and polished tiles of Amsterdam
or Bruges are more than merely media for the display of technical
skill, they are reflections of a way of life. The Palace of Art may
have been reduced (by the Protestant Reformation) to a kitchen, but
they still believed that a kitchen could be a clean, well-lighted
place where sunlight streamed across the face of the young wife pour­
ing milk from a blue pitcher into a yellow bowl. They trusted their
eyes, and their eyes only, but they believed with all their hearts
that what they saw was beautiful and worth preserving, stroke by lab-
orous stroke, for all posterity to see. When Realism became didactic,
when the artist believed he must be a realist first and a painter
second, when he became, in effect, a preacher rather than a painter,
his work became hard and superficial and cold. Thus James is not
merely being quaint when he cries, before a painting by the nineteenth
century Fleming, Tissot, "Is there then, to be no more delightful
realism?" Delight had turned to dogmatism. "Half the battle of art
is won in the artist's consciousness." There was plenty of science
and skill in the work of the new realists, and sometimes the skill is
so great that it can make James admit that the clever trompe d'oeil
has succeeded in convincing him that the trick was worth applauding,
but most of the time he finds it as mechanical and "posed" as the set
smile and stiff attitudes of the Daguerrotypes. To James, the great-
est artist is an alchemist, not a photographer.

Yet the English, who turned their backs squarely on reality
and retreated to Corinth or Camelot, were also regarded by Henry James
as mistaken. That the Palace of Art had been replaced by the factory
was unfortunate, it was true. But that the factory should be disguised
by Grecian drapery and Gothic arch was slightly less than ludicrous.
Ruskin himself deplored that fact that his "back to the Middle Ages"
campaign had produced such grotesque results, and his famous address
to the citizens of Bradford, in Yorkshire, on the function of archi-
tecture and the interdependence between the form of architecture in
a given period and the philosophy of the people who created it, shows
But Ruskin tried to replace the Englishman's worship of the "Goddess-of-getting-on" by elevating in her place a gothic saint (he himself becoming at the same time a medieval guild master), and his solution was no solution at all. James always accepts the here and now and uses it as a basis upon which to create a new synthesis of what is (Realism) and what ought to be (Romantic Idealism). The fact that he felt such a synthesis was necessary is a point to which we have referred in the Introduction.

Romantic idealism appears to this critic as a valid way of describing one aspect of James' aesthetic theory, if theory it can be called. And it is this aspect which results in the inclusion of colour, passion, and "a sense of the ideal" among his criteria. It is what attracted him to the Romantic painters of England and France, Turner for example, and Delacroix. He quotes a letter of Delacroix in which the artist says, writing to a friend about the academic preoccupation with line and drawing,

"Yes, Rubens draws—yes, Correggio draws; but neither of these men had any quarrel with the ideal. Without the ideal there is neither painting, nor drawing, nor colours...."9

And James comments, "Delacroix had, with the highest degree of spontaneity, the ideal."10 The inclusion of the word "spontaneity" indicates once again that James refuses to admit that the Ideal, once it becomes an academic discipline, has any validity. The unfortunate M. Theobold turned the quest for the Ideal into blank canvas. Henry James Sr. and the American Transcendentalists turned the Ideal into
a philosophic discipline and again ended up with great principles
and small production. Delacroix's Idealism combined, in his best works,
- a grand conception with a great passion, and as a result we get not
- just the surface, but the substance of things. He may represent imagined types rather than exact copies, either from nature (Realism) or
- statues (Neo-Classicism), but his types are his own; they are his
- subjective vision of what the Ideal would be. Thus when we observe the
- split between Classicism (what was), Realism (what is) and Romantic
- Idealism (what ought to be), it would seem that James comes down
- heavily on the side of the Romantics. This may appear to be a contra-
- diction of what I have said above. But this is only one side of his
- critical coin. The other side is his own brand of Realism—pragmatism.

A system based on results rather than aims can hardly be called
- a philosophy because it denies the existence of underlying principles;
- Beauty ceases to be an absolute towards which to strive, Truth is
- merely a relative matter, yet it can be used as such in comparing
- it to philosophical idealism. Pragmatism stresses the individual
- rather than the type and paradoxically reduces Beauty, Truth, Hope
- and Faith to common nouns, to generals rather than to particulars.
We have seen that James' comment on a particular work of art usually
- involves a pragmatic judgement. "The only absolute is that some force
- and charm have worked." And yet, at the same time, he is always
- searching for the artist like Delacroix, the man who has a sense of
- the ideal. Thus he falls between two stools, and the critic who tries
- to fit James into a rigid philosophical category will come away
annoyed and disappointed. Poor Henry. It is as though Henry Sr., in
the armour of Transcendentalism, were announcing to him in one ear,
"Hamlet, I am thy father's ghost," while William, in the robes of
Polonius/Pragmatism, is whispering in the other, "This above all, to
thine own self be true." Was the Palace of Art to be constructed along
ideal lines, however shadowy the blueprints, or was it to be erected
helter-skelter on the principle that so long as it stood up it would
serve? But James was also an ironist—he saw the gulf between what man
says he is and what he is, between what he is and what he ought to be.
So also did he see the difference between what art had been, and what
it was in the nineteenth century. He found it ironic that what the
Philistines wanted was Culture, and that what they got was themselves
in fancy dress. But instead of elevating his taste, as Ruskin was try­
ing so vehemently to do, James knew that it could only be elevated
from within, so he left the Philistines to discover, if they could,
the aesthetic principles. Expanding one's consciousness can only be
accomplished by oneself, and the taste of a society could only be
raised by the society itself.

Matthew Arnold saw the importance of the harmony between poet
and moment, but James felt that no such harmony could ever again ex­
ist. Indeed, the plastic artists whom he most admires are those who
felt, not only the gulf between the real and the ideal, but the gap
between the microcosm and the macrocosm—artists like Tintoretto,
Rembrandt, Velasquez, Delacroix—because they felt passionately about
life. Rubens and Leighton were both men who accepted and delighted in
the cultural milieu of their times, and the former appears "coarse" to James, the latter "brilliantly superficial." Imagination is at its highest pitch when "the times are out of joint," and it is imagination, combined with a sense of the past, with tradition, which creates not only new points of view, but great art.

Of what value, then, is James' art criticism to the student of James the artist? Is it merely a "significant tributary of his talent," as Sweeney suggests, or is it something more than this? I have attempted briefly to indicate not only what opinions James held about the leading aesthetic movements of his time, but also why he held these opinions. I have also tried to suggest in what ways he is different from the major art critics of his day, and in what ways he is similar. I also believe that James' art criticism can help us to a greater appreciation of his novels. If it can, then it is an important contribution to any discussion of, not only the meaning of many of his works, but also the style in which they are written.

I think that it is also interesting to point out the definite link between James' theory of art and the work of the best modern artists. When Cézanne revolted against impressionistic theory in his attempt to "paint Poussin from nature,"12 rather than content himself with mere representations of colour and light, he turned to an analysis of forms. He was concerned, not only with an investigation into the nature of solids, the roundness of an apple, for instance, but with composition and the relationship between one form and another.
In order to give a true rendering of objects he used deliberate distortion and foreshortening, and thus his painting often appears strange and "unreal" to the eye accustomed to photographic rather than synthetic reality. Picasso too became interested in form, overlapping many points of view at once to give the impression of a solid form rather than a flat photographic reproduction. In sculpture Henry Moore has shown how the material limits the form, how the sculpture is there in the stone or the block of marble, and one need only suggest the "subject" to attain a dynamic work of art. Having denied all absolutes and traditional ways of looking at things, aware of the many points of view from which we see objects, artists such as these have attempted to impose an order on this chaos through an awareness of Form. Now this is very close to the sort of thing the most fully aware characters in James' novels do, and also very close to what James himself was attempting to do in the exercise of his craft. Once one recognizes the possibility of many points of view, "of other ways of looking at things than one's own," one must attempt some sort of synthesis or end up in psychic collapse. Hyacinth Robinson could not achieve this synthesis, Maggie Verver could. One must make of one's life a work of art, and that is why James' ideal society, and the ideal society of all serious twentieth century artists, is, as Arnold Hauser says, a society made up "of real or potential artists, of artistic natures for whom reality is merely the substratum of aesthetic experience."

The modern artist, now completely divorced from society, has turned the Palace of Art into a Chapel Perilous towards which he rides
on a disenchanted yet desperate quest for Beauty, the Grail in which he no longer believes. Thus James could not rid himself of a concept of the ideal, and this aesthetic unrest, this conflict between pragmatic self and Romantic soul, occurs in all of his major novels and makes the reading of them an experience similar to overhearing a man's conversations with himself. That a synthesis was possible he showed in *The Golden Bowl*. That it was unlikely he showed in *The Ambassadors*. A tragic vision of life can result in personal tragedy, but Strether's exhortation to Little Bingham to "Live, live all you can" is James' method of saying that one must keep one's eye on his ideal conception of himself or he will discover, too late, that he cannot achieve a full life.

Many great writers of the nineteenth and twentieth century are ironists—or so it seems to me. Their symbol of the Ideal may be the "golden bowl as it was to have been," a green light at the end of a Long Island dock, a fight with a monster whale or a light glowing dimly on a ship off the coast of Siam. That their heroes cannot achieve this ideal is not so much the fault of their creators' imaginations, but a fault of the age in which they live. The price we pay for knowledge is knowing too much. And so the artist drinks or he uses drugs or he becomes so obsessed with Method—all of these narcotics to the chaos of the age—that he ceases to expand his aesthetic awareness and ceases to be.

In "Sensibility and Technique (Preface to a Critique)" David
Daiches maintains that James' moral sense is "wholly dependent upon his sense of aesthetic significance," although James himself would probably not express it in these terms.

For to James, as to so many "modern" novelists who avoid both the terms "moral" and "aesthetic," what has aesthetic significance possesses moral significance automatically.

James does not, of course, completely avoid the terms "moral" and "aesthetic," but we have seen that his use of "moral" is limited to the execution of a work of art, to the amount of "felt life" which the artist has managed to instill in it. Thus it would seem that Daiches' statement is correct, and that morality, for James, is inseparable from aesthetics. If a painter has approached his subject clinically (Gerôme or Meissonier) or half-heartedly (Leighton), James' reaction to the finished work is a moral as well as an aesthetic reaction. Imagination combined with sensitivity equals sensibility, which is, in itself, for James at least, a fusion of aesthetics and morality. For him the art of painting, and the plastic arts in general, offer not a retreat from life but a way of approaching it, an "outward and visible sign" of what the imaginative viewing consciousness can do with the amorphous and often terrifying external world of nature.

But the artists whom James most admires are those who are not content with merely imposing order upon external or visual reality, but those who also reflect in their work an imagination which transcends the spatio-temporal world and becomes one with a higher, almost Platonic, reality. Yet James is no Platonist, for he believes that
this higher reality is basically an illusion and rests no higher than the human heart. As Daiches says, "Art...tends towards the ideal, but without ever quite transcending the imagination from which it sprang." Imagination, Baudelaire's "Queen of the faculties," is the keystone upon which the Jamesian aesthetic is based. Life, if viewed with imagination, becomes an aesthetic as well as a moral challenge to impose form and order on our essentially formless and disordered existence. James can imagine a universe without God but, like Baudelaire, he cannot imagine a universe without man. Man creates his own heaven and his own hell, and, incidentally, his own concept of the ideal. As the consciousness expands, the ideal may have to be changed or even completely discarded, just as the concept of the real may undergo change. Viola Hopkins states that

Undoubtedly an artist's perceptions of reality, of which his way of seeing things is an important part, shape his method of expression: when inherited techniques are inadequate to express the new vision, new techniques must be created.

James would assert that this applies not only to artists but to all sensitive men and women. In the novels and tales we see his Americans equipped with "inherited techniques" which are inadequate for an expression of their new reactions. If they learn to change their techniques, to look at the world with a painter's rather than a puritan's eye, then they will acquire the plastic vision which is necessary for a satisfactory aesthetic/moral relationship between themselves and the world around them. If they do not acquire this vision, they are doomed. The ability to see things in the round,
to understand "other points of view than one's own" is necessary if their lives, like that of their creator, are to be an aesthetic adventure.
FOOTNOTES

1 James, *Italian Hours*, p.130. (My italics)

2 Ibid.

3 See above Chapter V, n.33.

4 "The Metropolitan Museum's 1871 Purchase," *P.E.*, p.64.

5 Ibid., p.65.


8 This was the lecture called "Traffic." See above Chapter V, n.26. Ruskin in *Stones of Venice* said that he was forced to leave his present home because "it is surrounded everywhere by the accursed Frankenstein monsters of, indirectly, my own making." (Quoted by Robert L. Peters in *Victorians on Literature and Art*.)


10 Ibid.


12 As quoted in *Modern French Painting*, p.79. What Cézanne appears to have meant is that he wanted to create something more permanent than the Impressionists' accidents of light and shade.


15 Ibid., p.576.

16 Ibid., p.577.

17 Baudelaire devotes an entire section of the "Salon of 1859" to Imagination, and he entitles it thus. cf. *The Mirror of Art*, pp.231-35.

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