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I

Fiction and History: James's Early Theory of the Novel

> IT IS impossible to imagine what a novelist takes himself to be unless he regard himself as an historian and his narrative as a history. It is only as an historian that he has the smallest *locus standi.* As a narrator of fictitious events he is nowhere; to insert into his attempt a backbone of logic, he must relate events that are assumed to be real.
>
> (LCi. 1343)

THE ANALOGY between the novel and history, put forward so uncompromisingly in these lines from the essay 'Anthony Trollope' (1883), dominated James's early theory of fiction. Implicit in his constant calls for fiction to represent life, James's tendency to define the novel in terms of history was strengthened by the increasing commitment to realism in his theory and criticism of the 1870s and 1880s. A historiographical model for the novel had been outlined explicitly as early as his 1867 review of the historical novelist Anne Manning, and was most famously stated in 'The Art of Fiction' (1884), in which James claimed that 'the novel is history. That is the only general description (which does it justice) that we may give of the novel' *(LC* i. 46).

What is so striking about the passages in 'Anthony Trollope' and 'The Art of Fiction' that discuss the novel as history is the extreme and defensive language used. Alternatives to the historiographical model are 'impossible to imagine' *(LC* i. 1343), infringements of it 'a terrible crime' (i. 46); it is offered as the 'only' way to do 'justice' to the novel (i. 46) or to gain for it even 'the smallest *locus standi'* (i. 1343). Yet this theory of fiction proposed by a working novelist involves an extraordinary act of self-erasure, for it states that 'As a narrator of fictitious events he is nowhere' (i. 1343).

The defensive tone and sense of limited options are explained in 'The Art of Fiction', in which James contextualizes his theoretical model as a response to a deep, if 'dissimulated' *(LC* i. 46), cultural contempt for and distrust of fiction. Claiming historical status for the novel is seen as the 'only effectual way to lay . . . to rest' (i. 46) the lingering suspicion of fiction in English culture. James wrote: 'The old superstition about fiction being "wicked" has doubtless died out in England; but the spirit of it lingers in a certain oblique regard directed toward any story which does not more or less admit that it is only a joke' (i. 45). According to James, the reception of fiction in nineteenth-century England was either hostile or dismissive. Distrust or outright antagonism were legacies of the 'old evangelical hostility to the novel' (i. 45) which, on the grounds that a record of imaginary events was not literally true, had condemned fictional narrative for providing false pictures of life which were deceptive and dangerous to the reader. James believed that residual distrust of this kind still operated in Victorian culture, and might be allayed only if the novel were to 'renounce the pretension of attempting really to represent life', admitting that it was 'only a "make-believe" ' (i. 45). If it made no claim to represent life, the novel could not be accused of misleading its readers, but this meant that it could escape hostility only by giving up the right to serious consideration. James felt that in England the novel was expected to be 'in some degree apologetic' (i. 45), to 'make itself humble in order to be forgiven' (i. 46). Above all, it must never seek serious consideration on artistic grounds, for:

> 'Art,' in our Protestant communities, where so many things have got so strangely twisted about, is supposed in certain circles to have some vaguely injurious effect upon those who make it an important consideration, who let it weigh in the balance. It is assumed to be opposed in some mysterious manner to morality, to amusement, to instruction, (i. 47)

In nineteenth-century England, the evangelical distrust of fiction merged with the philistine distrust of art in general, and hostile and non-serious responses towards the novel were inextricably linked in a complex of negative attitudes which the writer of fiction would, James argued, find almost impossible to negotiate. Moral distrust might be deflected with a pose of jocularity, but

even this would 'not always succeed in passing for orthodoxy', and in renouncing any serious cultural pretensions, the novel might fall victim to 'the weight of the proscription that was formerly directed against literary levity' (i. 45). Given these attitudes, the identification of the novel with history seemed the only way of asserting its capacity to represent life truly and of justifying a serious attitude towards it. The novel, James argued, 'must take itself seriously for the public to take it so' (i. 45), and therefore 'it must speak with assurance, with the tone of the historian' (i. 46).

Why did James put forward the analogy between history and the novel with such urgency and intensity, offering it as a theoretical contribution to what he hoped was a new 'era of discussion' *(LC* i. 44) about fiction, when what he was proposing was essentially the same technical manoeuvre used by Defoe and countless other early novelists in their attempts to circumvent a widespread cultural distrust of fiction? His insistence on aligning the novel with history seems at first both culturally anachronistic and technically redundant. Victorian culture recognized the novel as its major literary form. As a reviewer of Trollope's novels wrote in 1858:

> The present age is the age of novels. There is no department of literature which has by the existing generation of writers been more successfully cultivated, none which has been more in favour with the existing generation of readers, than that of prose fiction.[1]

It is difficult to reconcile such testimony with James's description, nearly thirty years later, of the novel as a form barely tolerated in English culture. Moreover, the idea of non-fictionality advocated by James was already implied in the narrative conventions of the realist novel, as narrators were commonly presented as historians, biographers, or witnesses, and the verbs of narration often borrowed from the evidential procedures of historiography and law. Meanwhile, an analogy with history was a staple element in Victorian theories of fiction, giving rise to some of the most characteristic questions of Victorian novel criticism: is the narrative true to life? is it a reliable report on the world? The idea of history was entrenched in Victorian

[1] [Percy Greg], 'Mr. Trollope's Novels', *National Review*, 7 (1858), 416.

thinking about the novel, and the novel was entrenched in Victorian culture.

James's writings on realism and censorship show that he considered both these commonly held views to be hollow propositions. His strong sense of living in a culture hostile to fiction is dramatized in 'The Author of Beltraffio', a short story about the domestic relations of a modern novelist, which was serialized a few months before 'The Art of Fiction' and published in book form the following year. The titular 'author', Mark Ambient, is a spokesman for 'the gospel of art' (CTv. 303); his wife combines the puritan's traditional hostility to the novel with the philistine's distrust of art in general. Mrs Ambient's fears focus on a perennial topic in anti-fiction polemics—the effect of novels on the young—but her conflict with her husband over his possible influence on their child provides the occasion for a broader articulation of two opposed sets of views on fiction generally. Ambient's artistic credo is truth to life (v. 331), an interest in all aspects of human energy, and a 'passion for form' (v. 3x3); he is so seriously committed to art that he regards bad writing as a social as well as an aesthetic offence (v. 333). Mrs Ambient, 'the angel of propriety' whose only passion is for philistinism (v. 336-7), finds 'his writings immoral and his influence pernicious' (v. 3Z9), for to her, the only acceptable novel is one in which life is 'blinked and blinded', 'dodged and disfigured' (v. 336). Their irreconcilable views lead to tragedy, and when their child is sacrificed, not to fiction but to the fear of fiction, James makes an extreme point about the destructive energies of hostility to the novel. Ambient warns the narrator that, as a novice writer, he should know about the 'hatred' of art and literature still to be found in modern culture (v. 336), and the tale as a whole is an allegory on this theme. Although her actions are melodramatic, Mrs Ambient's opinions are no more extreme than many of those expressed in the debates on realism and censorship which raged in England in the 1880s and 1890s, and the domestic drama embodies the violent feeling with which the right of the novelist to 'represent life' was contested in England at this time.

The melodrama of 'The Author of Beltraffio' is the counterpart, in plot, to the linguistic excess that erupts into James's usually urbane critical idiom when the historical analogy is discussed in 'The Art of Fiction' and 'Anthony Trollope'. In each case, the resort to an extreme and emotional form of expression reflects how inflammatory an issue in Victorian culture was the question of whether novels should be free to represent all aspects of life. The emotion generated by this debate brought to the surface the distrust of fiction latent in Victorian culture and exposed the hollowness of the loose analogy with history which was inscribed, with bland conventionality, in most novel theory and criticism of the period, but which failed to guarantee for the novelist the historian's freedom from censorship. The historical analogy was a dead—or dormant—metaphor in English criticism, which had to be revitalized if any serious attempt were to be made at gaining for the novelist the right to represent life.

James sought to give the conventional analogy between history and the novel a new force by bringing it up to date with changes in historiographical practice over the century. He was attracted to the new 'scientific' historiography of the later nineteenth century as offering a narrative model of great cultural prestige, based on an epistemological authority associated with a set of technical manoeuvres which were available for imitation by the novelist. Reference to the nineteenth-century project of scientific historiography allowed him to invest the old historiographical analogy with a new significance as the basis of his attempt to prove that the novel 'is at once as free and as serious a branch of literature as any other' *(LC* i. 49). The cultural politics and technical implications of James's idea of the novel as history were produced by the intersection of a new discourse on history with an old discourse on fiction, and the term 'history', as it appears in his early theory and criticism, must be glossed by contemporary developments in historiography, as well as by the English tradition of hostility to the novel.

HOSTILITY TO FICTION

A correspondent to the *Christian Observer* in 1815 declared: 'Were I called upon to name at once the most fruitful source both of individual and national vice, and the most convincing evidence of both, I should name novels, as at once cause and

effect.'[2] The 'old evangelical hostility to the novel' *(LC* i. 45) was at its height in the second half of the eighteenth and the first quarter of the nineteenth centuries, and was part of a broader complex of antagonistic attitudes towards the novel at a time when the huge popularity of this relatively new genre appeared to many as a threat to moral, social, and literary values.[3] Religious attacks on the novel drew on charges and rhetoric inherited from earlier traditions of hostility to other fictional genres such as stage plays and romances,[4] and were reinforced by utilitarian objections to fiction, which expressed a pattern in Western thought traceable to Plato's attacks on poetry for falsehood and inutility.[5] When the distrust of imaginative literature became focused on the novel in the eighteenth century, anti-fiction diatribes confirmed the categories established in the rhetoric against poetry and stage plays: contrasted with history, which was considered serious and useful, fiction was characterized as frivolous or pernicious, the province of jokes and lies.

While fiction was largely denied serious critical attention during this period—novels were labelled light literature and consigned by critics to a kind of literary junk culture[6]—it attracted a significant body of moral commentary. Opponents of the novel

[1] 'A.A.', 'On the Practice of Novel-Reading', (letter), *Christian Observer,* 14 (1815), 513.

[3] Overviews of hostility to the novel during this period are found in John Tinnon Taylor, *Early Opposition to the English Novel: The Popular Reaction from* 1760 *to 1830* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1943); and W. F. Gallaway, Jr., 'The Conservative Attitude toward Fiction, 1770-1830', *PMLA,* 55 (1940), 1041-59. American attitudes resembled those of the English: see G. Harrison Orians, 'Censure of Fiction in American Romances and Magazines, 1789-1810', *PMLA,* 52 (1937), 195-2.14-

[4] See e.g. Stephen Gosson, *The School of Abuse, Containing a Pleasant Invective against Poets, Pipers, Players, Jesters, &c,* first pub. 1579 (London: Shakespeare Society, 1841). A similar attack on stage plays is combined with opposition to novel-reading in John Kendall, *Remarks on the Prevailing Custom of Attending Stage Entertainments; Also on the Present Taste for Reading Romances and Novels; and on Some Other Customs,* 3rd edn. (London, 1801).

[5] Plato, Book 2, *Republic, The Dialogues of Plato,* trans. B. Jowett, 4th edn., vol. ii (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), *2.2.1.* Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian objections to imaginative literature are quoted in C. K. Ogden, *Bentham's Theory of Fictions* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1932.), p. xciii.

Taylor, *Early Opposition,* 11-20. Typical disparagements of fiction in comparison with poetry are found in S. T. Coleridge, *Seven Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton,* ed. with introd. by J. Payne Collier (London: Chapman 8c Hall, 1856), 3; 'Mr. Colburn's List', *Athenaeum,* 47 (1828), 735-6; and 'Antiquus' [J. S. Mill], 'What is Poetry?', *Monthly Repository,* NS 7 (1833), 61-2.

claimed that its focus on romantic love (attended by adventure and intrigue) encouraged readers to become dissatisfied with their own lives and to crave fictional excitements. The correspondent to the *Christian Observer,* 'A.A.', analysed the process by which this effect on the reader was achieved:

> The imagination, once deceived, becomes itself the deceiver; and instead of embellishing life, as it is falsely represented to do, it heightens only imaginary and unattainable enjoyments, and transforms life itself into a dream, the realities of which are all made painful and disgusting, from our false expectations and erroneous notions of happiness.[7]

The novel was condemned as a false mode of knowledge about the world, declared educationally invalid on the grounds that it is impossible to teach by feigned example or to argue from fictitious premises. Hugh Murray argued in 1805 that 'no good purpose can be answered by an attempt to draw inferences from imaginary events',[8] while 'A.A.' claimed that because their subject matter was invented, novels could never give 'a true knowledge of ourselves and of the world', only 'a fictitious acquaintance with both'.[9] Bentham's utilitarian objections to the poet's 'false morals, fictitious nature' coincide with the evangelicals' claim that the aesthetic qualities of a novel could do nothing to redeem a genre which was simply epistemologically 'wrong': 'The foundation of the building is radically wrong, and the superstructure and ornaments are of little consequence.'[10] However, the false nature attributed to the novel was as much a question of ideology as epistemology; the views of life offered in fiction were often labelled 'false' not because they represented unrealities or impossibilities, but because they were sexually, domestically, socially, or politically subversive. Such sliding between epistemological and socially constructed categories of the 'false' was an important part of anti-fiction rhetoric, both in its early, explicit, narrow expressions, and in later, more subtle, Victorian manifestations.

[7] 'A.A.', 'On the Practice of Novel-Reading', 513.

H. Murray, *Morality of Fiction; Or, an Inquiry into the Tendency of Fictitious Narratives, with Observations on Some of the Most Eminent* (Edinburgh, 1805), 10.

[9] 'A.A.', 'On the Practice of Novel-Reading', 514.

Ogden, *Bentham's Theory of Fictions,* p. xciii; 'A.A.', 'On the Practice of Novel-Reading', 516.

Outright hostility to the novel became less common after the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The author most often credited with changing critical and public perceptions was Scott; according to Trollope he precipitated a 'revolution' in attitudes to the novel, making it both aesthetically and morally respectable and causing the 'embargo' placed on it in many circles to be lifted.[11] The ever-increasing importance of fiction in English life and literature was summed up by Edmund Gosse in 1892: 'Since the memorable year 1837 the novel has reigned in English literature; and its tyranny was never more irresistible than it is to-day. The Victorian has been peculiarly the age of the triumph of fiction.'[11] Central to this sense of the novel's importance was a general acceptance that it exercised a profound influence over the lives of its readers. The character Baldwin in Vernon Lee's 'A Dialogue on Novels' (1885) speaks for the educated middle class:

I believe that were the majority of us, educated and sensitive men and women, able to analyze what we consider our almost inborn, nay, automatic, views of life, character, and feeling; that could we scientifically assign its origin to each and trace its modifications; I believe that, were this possible, we should find that a good third of what we take to be instinctive knowledge, or knowledge vaguely acquired from personal experience, is really obtained from the novels which we or our friends have read.[13]

Trollope went further, claiming that 'Novels are in the hands of us all; from the Prime Minister down to the last-appointed scullery-maid',[14] and arguing that fiction had become 'the former of our morals, the code by which we rule ourselves, the mirror in which we dress ourselves, the *index expurgatorius* of things held to be allowable in the ordinary affairs of life'.[15] This description of the novel as an *'index expurgatorius'* cleverly expresses Trollope's sense of the increased power of fiction: he reverses the

Anthony Trollope, 'On English Prose Fiction as a Rational Amusement' (1870), in *Four Lectures*, ed. Morris L. Parrish (London: Constable, 1938), 114. See also Taylor, *Early Opposition*, 97, and Richard Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England 1850-1870* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959), 7.

Edmund Gosse, 'The Tyranny of the Novel', *National Review* (Apr. 1892); reprinted in *Questions at Issue* (London: Heinemann, 1893), 7.

[13] Vernon Lee [Violet Paget], 'A Dialogue on Novels', *Contemporary Review*, 48 (1885), 390.

[14] Trollope, 'Prose Fiction', 108.

[15] Id., 'Novel-Reading', *Nineteenth Century*, 5 (1879), 26.

former proscribed position of the novel to represent it as a new censoring authority which dictates what may be considered 'allowable in the ordinary affairs of life'. Yet it was precisely this sense of the novel's powerful influence over its readers that made the critic W. R. Greg call it 'that branch of the intellectual activity of a nation which a far-seeing moralist would watch with the most vigilant concern, and supervise with the most anxious and unceasing care'.[16] For as Trollope himself frequently testified, 'still there remains something of the bad character which for years has been attached to the art'.[17] Similarly, Walter Besant, whose paper on 'The Art of Fiction' prompted James's essay of the same title, launched his defence of the art of novel-writing in the face of a general tendency to 'regard the story-teller with a sort of contempt':

The general—the Philistine—view of the Profession, is, first of all, that it is not one which a scholar and a man of serious views should take up: the telling of stories is inconsistent with a well-balanced mind; to be a teller of stories disqualifies one from a hearing on important subjects.[1]

Despite its popularity, the cultural status of the novel was by no means secure, and its influence over readers was more often than not conceived of in negative rather than positive terms. The power of novels was undeniable, but surprisingly few attempts were made to harness that power for educational or social ends. When in 1888, writing on 'The Profitable Reading of Fiction', Thomas Hardy drew attention to 'the humanizing education found in fictitious narrative' and 'the aesthetic training' imparted by a well-constructed novel, he conceded that his argument was unusual: 'To profit of this kind, from this especial source, very little attention has hitherto been paid.'[19] Fiction had no place in

[W. R. Greg], 'False Morality of Lady Novelists', *National Review*, 8 (1859), 145.

[17] Trollope, 'Novel-Reading', 27. See also id., 'Prose Fiction', 94; and id., *An Autobiography*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1883), i. 195.

Walter Besant, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Chatto &c Windus, 1884), 6.

[19] Thomas Hardy, 'The Profitable Reading of Fiction', *Forum* (Mar. 1888); reprinted in *Life and Art: Essays, Notes and Letters*, ed. with introd. by Ernest Brennecke, Jr. (New York: Greenberg, 1925), 68. For a rare defence of the educative value of fiction, see [Anne Mozley], 'On Fiction as an Educator', *Blackwood's Magazine*, 108 (1870), 449-59. In 'The Rhetorical Use and Abuse of Fiction: Eating Books in Late Nineteenth-Century America', *Boundary* 2, 17 (1990), 133-57, Steven Mailloux discusses nineteenth-century American attempts to harness the reading of fiction to disciplinary or reformatory social programmes.

the Arnoldian construction of literature as a 'humanizing' or 'civilizing' subject which underwrote the rise of English studies in higher education at the end of the century;[20] indeed, an article in *Punch* in 1895 satirizing the introduction of modern fiction studies at Yale confirms James's sense that the novel was still regarded, intellectually, as 'only a joke' *(LC* i. 45)." Victorian schools tended to follow either classical or utilitarian educational programmes, neither of which esteemed novels.[11] When fiction did feature in Victorian discussions of education, the popularity of novel-reading was almost invariably seen as a force not to be exploited for intellectual or ideological ends, but curbed. This is clearly seen in the campaigns to ban fiction from philanthropically or publicly funded libraries, on the grounds that the presence of novels was either irrelevant or positively detrimental to educational enterprises.[23]

These campaigns reflect the enormous cultural energy channelled by the Victorians into attempts to control the harmful effects of novel-reading. The question at issue in the debates centred on Mechanics' Institutes libraries in the 1840s and public libraries in the 1890s—the question of the relation, or lack of one, between novel-reading and education—was part of the much larger 'fiction question' that, with its roots in the old evangelical and utilitarian hostility to the novel, surfaced again and again in various forms throughout the nineteenth century. Despite the range of concerns it embraced and the variety of occasions which prompted it, the debate about fiction remained essentially the same: how was novel-reading to be kept safe, and prevented from levying grave personal, domestic, and social costs through the immoral and subversive forces it constantly threatened to unleash? Richard Altick has presented the 'fiction question' as largely a matter of middle-class anxiety over working-class reading, and he demonstrates the political fears behind the desire

Victorian fiction is conspicuously absent from Chris Baldick's discussion of the Arnoldian project in *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1848-1932* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

'A Novel Education', *Punch,* 109 (1895), 255.

See the discussion of Victorian philosophies of education in Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 141-87.

[13] Ibid. 195-8, 231-3; Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel* 1S7J-1914 (London: Seeker & Warburg, 1989), 414.

to keep that reading 'safe'.[14] However, as I wish to show, these issues were part of a much broader network of concerns about the reading of fiction which also involved gender politics, domestic authority, social ideology, and personal morality, and which affected all social classes and all levels of literary culture.

The fiction question focused on various centres of debate. The question of the desirability of allowing free circulation of novels throughout society was at the heart of discussions about the control of access to fiction by libraries or by law. Advocates of some form of censorship were particularly concerned with the representation of violence and sexuality in fiction, and this concern was expressed in discussion of the 'penny dreadfuls' produced for a working-class audience (and held to be especially dangerous for the young), the sensation novels popular with middle-class readers in the 1860s (to the effects of which women were considered especially vulnerable), the feminist 'New Woman' fiction of the 1890s, and, more generally, the 'realism' of subject matter associated with French fiction and English experimental novelists. Through all these debates a similarity of concern is evident, which reflects the old fear of the novel as a destabilizing social force. Penny fiction was blamed for inciting its readers to criminal or at least anti-social behaviour; even in its less violent forms it was held to promote subversive attitudes and a lack of respect for authority.[15] The sensation novel, similarly, was accused of encouraging crime and sympathy with crime, and of generally producing 'an impatience of old restraints, and a craving for some fundamental change in the working of society', for it 'willingly and designedly draws a picture of life which shall make reality insipid and the routine of ordinary existence intolerable to the imagination'.[16] The sexuality implied in sensation novels was explicitly expressed in feminist and avant-garde fiction of the 1890s, provoking anxieties about sexual subversion which were linked to political fears. An article written

[14] Altick, *English Common Reader,* 64-5, 76.

[15] [Francis Hitchman], 'Penny Fiction', *Quarterly Review,* 171 (1890), 152-3, 170; Hugh Chisholm, 'How to Counteract the "Penny Dreadful" ', *fortnightly Review,* NS 58 (1895), 765; A. Strahan, 'Bad Literature for the Young', *Contemporary Review,* 26 (1875), 985-6.

'Our Female Sensation Novelists', *Christian Remembrancer,* NS 46 (1863), 210.

by Hugh Stutfield in 1895 addresses problems of modernity in terms of traditional fears about fiction: 'Along with its diseased imaginings—its passion for the abnormal, the morbid, and the unnatural—the anarchical spirit broods over all literature of the decadent and "revolting" type. It is rebellion all along the line.'[17]

The continuity of concern between Victorian debates on fiction and the evangelical tradition of hostility to the novel was reinforced by a continuity of rhetoric. The Victorian discourse on novels drew on traditional imagery of fiction as confectionery, narcotic, or poison, which presented the effects of novel-reading in terms of bodily health or disease. The idea of the 'morbidity' of the novel-reader, always a favourite charge of anti-fiction rhetoricians, was placed on a supposedly scientific basis at the end of the century by Max Nordau's influential analysis of cultural degeneration.[28] The traditional *exempla* and *topoi* of anti-fiction rhetoric—the stories of seduced maidens and disobedient daughters, the images of domestic work left undone by wives and servants buried in novels—were recycled for new purposes: as Altick observes, the tales of the evil effects of fiction used at the end of the century to discredit public libraries were 'well established in national legend' and could easily have dated from the 1830s or even the 1790s/[9]

Victorian debates on fiction did not engage in wholesale denunciations of all fiction, but attacked particular kinds of novels in the hands of particular kinds of readers—most often, sensational, politically subversive, avant-garde, or foreign fiction in the hands of women, the working class, or the young. Constructions of the vulnerability of readers in terms of class or gender could be used as a means of social control, allowing the manipulation of certain sections of society by controlling their access to fiction.[30] Such constructions were also part of the way in

[17] Hugh E. M. Stutfield, 'Tommyrotics', *Blackwood's Magazine,* 157 (1895), 837-8.

[28] Max Nordau, *Degeneration,* trans, from the 2nd German edn. (London: Heinemann, 1895).

[29] Altick, *English Common Reader,* 232.

[3o] See ibid. 65 and Anne T. Margolis, *Henry James and the Problem of Audience: An International Act* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1985), 70. As Kate Flint comments about the 'New Woman' fiction of the 1890s, 'the contemporary debate *about* the woman reader sets up, above all, the figure of the anxious and threatened *male* reader'; 'Reading the New Woman', *Browning Society Notes,* 17 (1987-8), 62.

which Victorian culture constantly displaced its anxiety about its most important literary form on to various defined groups of readers and writers of fiction; the 'unsafe' nature of fiction could thereby be marginalized and controlled. The threat of fiction was often presented as in some sense external to 'mainstream' English culture: the idea of an unknown mass public and its potentially dangerous reading practices drew on fears of a working class dangerously empowered by literacy to threaten middle-class culture,[31] while the belief that dangerous theories were being imported via French realist and naturalist works played on English insularity and xenophobia, which had led to the conventional inscription of French fiction as the immoral 'other' to the English novel in critical rhetoric.[32] The 'fiction question' was thus continually being exported to the margins of culture—either the subliterary or the avant-garde—and was focused on groups of readers considered to be educationally or physiologically disabled from dealing with the dangers of fiction. Studies (carried out by figures of cultural authority) of what was read by the young, or by women or the working class, emphasized the otherness of these reading cultures and presupposed a norm of 'safe' reading practices against which their deviations might be measured.[33] This established a distinction between responsible and irresponsible readers (those who could determine their own consumption, and those whose consumption needed to be controlled from above) which tended to correlate with a distinction not only between the safe and the unsafe, but between the highbrow and lowbrow in fiction. This was evident in the debates on

[31] As Keating, *Haunted Study,* points out (401-4), writers such as Wilkie Collins and James Payn saw the 'unknown public' as a huge potential book-buying market, and believed the gulf between mainstream novelists and mass consumers could be bridged either by educating the taste of readers (Collins) or by learning to meet their demands (Payn). However, articles on penny fiction such as those by Strahan and Hitchman present the unknown public as the source not of commercial hopes but of grave political fears.

[32] See e.g. the views of Mrs Blake in Lee's 'Dialogue'.

[33] An assumption of otherness underwrites Edward Salmon's analyses of separate reading cultures, 'What the Working Classes Read', *Nineteenth Century,* 20 (1886), 108-17 and 'What Girls Read', *Nineteenth Century,* 20 (1886), 515-29. In 'What Do the Masses Read?', *Economic Review,* 14 (1904), 166-77, J°hn Garrett Leigh emphasizes the difficulty of finding out about reading that is 'of a class which rarely or indeed never comes under the notice of the person of average culture' (166).

fiction in education and public libraries, in which the distinction was increasingly made between 'good literature' and 'trash'.[34]

However, attempts to displace anxiety about fiction onto the margins of culture were constantly undermined by a sense of shared reading practices throughout society. The sensation literature read by the middle classes was often acknowledged to be a refinement of the fiction provided for the working class in penny dreadfuls, and many critics in the 1860s and 1870s expressed alarm at the movement up the social scale of fictional modes designed for the masses.[35] Later in the century, Hugh Chisholm did not assign origins, but noted parallel developments at either pole of society, linking public interest in the effects of the penny dreadful on working-class readers with 'the exposure of the abominable immoralities of an accomplished producer of non-moral literature for the upper circles of the reading world', an allusion to the trial of Oscar Wilde.[36] In 1898 a critic in *Blackwood's Magazine* went further, arguing that:

> The penny stories are wretched things enough, absolutely speaking. But it is infinitely better that the wives and sisters and daughters of our shopmen and our mechanics should spend their spare coppers upon them than that, like their 'betters', they should dabble in, and profess to admire, the pedantic obscenities of an Ibsen, the unintelligible nonsense of a Maeterlinck, or the dubious rodomontade of a Ruskin.[37]

This attitude corroborated Max Nordau's argument, received with much interest in England in 1895, that corruption was spreading downwards through society having originated in the culture of the upper classes.[38] The same anxieties about fiction embraced the subliterary culture of 'the unknown public' and 'the upper circles of the reading world', producing an anti-fiction discourse which affected all aspects of literary culture. For most of the century, the Victorians' suspicion of their most important literary form was, to use James's term, 'dissimulated' as a localized concern about particular kinds of novels and readers. But

[34] Keating, *Haunted Study,* 418-19.

[35] [H. L. Mansel], 'Sensation Novels', *Quarterly Review,* 113 (1863), 505-6; [W. F. Rae], 'Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon', *North British Review,* 43 (1865), 204; Strahan, 'Bad Literature for the Young', 986.

[3] Chisholm, 'How to Counteract the "Penny Dreadful" ', 765.

[37] [J. H. Millar], 'Penny Fiction', *Blackwood's Magazine,* 164 (1898), 811.

[3] Nordau, *Degeneration,* 7; see also Stutfield, 'Tommyrotics', 844.

behind these local debates lay a much more general fear of fiction.

Only a deep anxiety about the novel can account for the formidable apparatus of literary surveillance and censorship that pervaded all aspects of Victorian literary culture. In its most public and visible aspect, this system could be enforced by law, and the prosecution of Henry Vizetelly in 1888-9 f°r publishing translations of Zola's works, like the Wilde trial of 1895 (indirectly a literary trial), was the focus of intense public debate about the role of the law in defining and mediating between public morality and literary value.[39] But the periodic eruptions of anxiety about fiction into legal prosecutions were only the more obvious expressions of the fact that fiction was always on trial in the nineteenth-century culture that produced, distributed, consumed, and criticized it, even in the institutions and discourses most closely allied with it. The principle of 'selection' exercised by the great circulating libraries of Edwin Mudie and W H. Smith (which effectively controlled production and consumption of novels through most of the Victorian period) was an important form of censorship and showed how powerfully evangelical and philistine prejudices against fiction could operate even in the service of a system which had done much to extend the 'tyranny' of the novel over the lives and minds of the British

[39] The Vizetelly case and its effects on English fiction are discussed in Keating, *Haunted Study,* 241-84. In the debates on censorship that followed the trial, defences of the status quo were made by Walter Besant in 'Candour in English Fiction', *New Review,* 2 (1890), 6-9, and George Saintsbury in his preface to *Essays on French Novelists* (London: Percival, 1891), pp. ix-x. The case for greater tolerance for 'realism' and the need to curb the censoring powers of the circulating libraries, which had been made by George Moore in *Literature at Nurse or Circulating Morals* (London: Vizetelly, 1885), was taken up in the articles by E. Lynn Linton and Thomas Hardy on 'Candour in English Fiction', *New Review,* 2 (1890), 10-21. The development of the controversy is surveyed in William C. Frierson, 'The English Controversy over Realism in Fiction 1885-1895', *PMLA,* 43 (1928), 533-50. In *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), 414-25, Richard Ellmann shows how art and morality were both put on trial with Wilde. The Wilde trial features with varying degrees of explicitness in several analyses of fiction published in 1895, which were also influenced by the English publication of Nordau's *Degeneration* in the same year: see Stutfield, 'Tommyrotics'; Janet E. Hogarth, 'Literary Degenerates', *Fortnightly Review,* NS 57 (1895), 586-92; James Ashcroft Noble, 'The Fiction of Sexuality', *Contemporary Review,* 67 (1895), 49°-8; and Harry Quilter, 'The Gospel of Intensity', *Contemporary Review,* 67 (1895), 761-82.

public.[40] Censorship at a domestic level was also encouraged: in 1863 a reviewer urged fathers and husbands 'to look about them and scrutinize the parcel that arrives from Mudie's' before the female members of their household could learn to contrast their lives with the excitements of sensation fiction,[41] while in 1890 'the locked bookcase' was advocated as a means of protecting young people from the unwholesome influence of modern fiction.[42] Journal articles and conduct manuals advised readers of all classes on the choice of books, encouraging an internalization of the principle of censorship through readerly self-regulation. Operating at a more subtle level were the censoring powers of cultural convention (which identified the English novel, as opposed to the French, with 'reticence') and, finally, the regulatory power of critical judgement.

Attacking the flagships of this system of censorship, George Moore condemned the circulating libraries for producing 'a literature of bandboxes' and, displacing the function of 'authorship' from the creative individual to the controlling institution, wrote: 'I judge Messrs. Mudie and Smith by what they have produced; for they, not the ladies and gentlemen who place their names on the title pages, are the authors of our fiction.'[43] Moore's image of a literature 'authored' by a system of censorship is applicable, not just to the effects of the circulating libraries, but to the impact of the whole range of regulatory forces discussed above. The 'fiction question' was the permanent background to the writing of novels in the nineteenth century, and moral and sociological debate about reading was intimately connected with the development of novel criticism and theories of fiction. The sustained debate at all cultural levels about the value

[40] For an extended discussion of Mudie's influence on Victorian fiction, see Guinevere L. Griest, *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970).

'Our Female Sensation Novelists', 234.

[42] Linton, 'Candour in English Fiction', 14.

[43] George Moore, preface to *Piping Hot! (Pot-Bouille): A Realistic Novel*, by Emile Zola, trans, from the 63rd French edn. (London: Vizetelly, 1885), p. xvi. Moore's notion of 'authorship' suggests Foucault's interrogation of the 'author function' in our culture, whereby the question 'Who really spoke?' is replaced by 'What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself?' See 'What is an Author?', trans. Josue V. Harari, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 119-20.

and dangers of fiction affected the ways in which authors conducted and perceived their profession, influencing both the kinds of novels written and the kinds of things said about them. Despite the attempts of many writers to get away from moralistic criticism, commentary on fiction in the nineteenth century was saturated with a concern with the effects of books on readers or, conversely, with the effects of readers on books. In the debates on realism and cultural degeneracy in the 1880s and 1890s, the literary productions of high culture were discussed in the same terms as the fictions of popular culture, as potential agents of subversion or demoralization. It is impossible to separate the nineteenth century's critical discourse on novels from its moral and sociological discourse on fiction: the two were continuous, 'authored' by the same concern with censorship that controlled Victorian literary institutions. Chris Baldick has argued that literary criticism, with its metaphors of judgement and evaluation, has always been linked to censorship,[44] and this link is particularly striking in the case of Victorian novel criticism.

Criticism operated most effectively in the cause of censorship through its manipulation of the terms 'true' and 'false' as a means of judging the value of novels. In the second half of the century, condemnation of the novel simply because of its fictional status was rare, although Trollope still felt the need to refute charges on this count in i870.[45] However, although the novel was rarely attacked for its fictionality *per se,* its fictionality made it susceptible to censorious criticism, because it allowed critics to disguise ideological objections as epistemological objections. This tactic is very clearly displayed in a well-known review by W. F. Rae of Braddon's sensational novels in 1865. Rae argues:

> A novel is a picture of life, and as such ought to be faithful. The fault of these novels is that they contain pictures of daily life, wherein there are scenes so grossly untrue to nature, that we can hardly pardon the authoress if she drew them in ignorance, and cannot condemn her too strongly if, knowing their falseness, she introduced them for the sake of effect.

Because of Braddon's infidelity to nature, Rae argues, 'the impartial critic is compelled, as it were, to unite with the moralist' in condemning her fiction as 'one of the abominations of the

[44] Baldick, *Social Mission,* 9.

[45] Trollope,'Prose Fiction', 112-13.

age'.[46] But the problem with Braddon's pictures of women's sexuality and subversive energy, to which Rae objects, is not that they are 'untrue to nature' but that they are untrue to a middle-class ideology of gender: in suggesting dissatisfactions and corruptions at the heart of Victorian domesticity, Braddon has not been unfaithful to life, but exposed an unacknowledged reality. The reviewer is able to present this as an affront to the real by conflating outrages to nature with outrages to social convention. Criticism thus paid lip-service to the idea that novels 'ought to be faithful' to life, but in practice worked with ideological constructions of the true and the false. The same critical manoeuvre used to discredit sensation fiction in the 1860s was used to discredit realist and naturalist works in the 1880s and 1890s. Writing in 1890 to support the present system of censorship, Walter Besant argued that ungoverned passion must inevitably lead to social breakdown, and that to represent the first without the second was to depict an impossibility; censorship was demanded, therefore, not by 'Average Opinion, but by Art herself, who will not allow the creation of impossible figures moving in an unnatural atmosphere'.[47] Similarly, in 1895 James Ashcroft Noble attacked the modern 'fiction of sexuality' by testing it against a 'mirror' theory of representation; the novels to which he objected failed this test because they laid disproportionate emphasis on one appetite, and were therefore not 'convincing'.[48]

The late nineteenth-century battle over the novelist's right to represent life was an ideological battle fought in epistemological terms. In condemning novels which were politically or socially threatening, conservative critics were able to draw on the terms of an established tradition of opposition to fiction as a false mode of knowledge about the world, and could apply this epistemological objection not only when fiction proposed dangerous alternatives to the status quo, but also when it exposed uncomfortable realities. Conservative criticism thus appeared to base its verdicts on the analogy with history loosely inscribed in nineteenth-century novel theory. But in fact, such criticism did not speak in the name of history; rather, it appealed to social

[Rae], 'Sensation Novelists', 203.
Besant, 'Candour in English Fiction', 9.
Noble, 'The Fiction of Sexuality', 493.

constructions of what was 'natural' or 'true'. In effecting a censorship of 'the real' by an appeal to 'the true', conservative criticism was actually drawing on the epistemology of the pre-novelistic romance, in which the theory of 'vraisemblance' authorized a displacement of physical or circumstantial fact by an idealized 'truth'.[49] This disjunction between 'truth' and 'reality' was contested in the censorship debates of the 1880s and 1890s by novelists who pleaded their right to represent the real in terms of the 'candour' of their enterprise. For James, the realignment of 'truth' with 'reality' was to be achieved by appealing to the cultural prestige of modern historiography. Novelists had always sought to obviate distrust of fiction by appropriating the good name of the historian, but now a more precise alignment with the historian's rights and duties presented itself as a way of freeing the novel from the forces of censorship. But this was only made possible by an important shift in understanding, during the nineteenth century, of what was meant by the term 'history'.

THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL MODEL

In 1842 Philip Harwood wrote: 'We know now how much it takes to make a written or printed book a *history*—a true and full picture of what men have been and done—a genuine transcript of an era or event.'[50] Harwood's article on 'The Modern Art and Science of History' is filled with this sense of a radical break with earlier historiographical standards, as he enthuses about the process of 'historical reform', based on a closer attention to facts, which pointed the way to a new ideal of history as a science.[51] Half a century later, Harwood's language of reform

[45] Barthes writes: 'The whole of classical culture was for centuries nourished by the idea that there could be no contamination of the "vraisemblable" by the real. . . . what is "vraisemblable" is never other than the thinkable: it is entirely subject to (public) opinion'; see 'The Reality Effect' in *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov, trans. R. Carter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 15. Lennard J. Davis discusses the romance epistemology of 'vraisemblance' as a 'censoring device' in *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 33.

5° [Philip Harwood], 'The Modern Art and Science of History', *Westminster Review*, 38 (1842), 357.

[51] Ibid. 356.

was replaced by the language of revolution when Lord Acton, in his inaugural lecture as Professor of Modern History at Cambridge in 1895, summed up the changes in historiographical practice over the century. Judging that 'the accession of the critic' in place of the compiler, artist or advocate, 'amounts to a transfer of government, to a change of dynasty, in the historic realm', he declared that 'in the second quarter of this century, a new era began for historians'.[$z]

This new era was based on a transfer of scientific methods to historiography,[53] which had three main aspects: a theory of epistemology, a theory of causation, and a theory of representation. First, the 'scientific' historian was committed to a new rigour in testing the grounds of knowledge, based on scientific and legal conceptions of evidence. 'We are better skilled than our fathers', wrote Harwood, 'in the science both of doubting and of believing.'[54] The old deference to documentary authorities was replaced by a new spirit of scepticism: the narratives of scientific historiography were to be produced not, as in earlier practice, by conflating different accounts, but by testing them against each other; not by merely amassing material, but by judging its value as evidence.[55] As Harwood saw, the faculty of doubt enhanced the faculty of belief: evidence which passed the test of criticism acquired a scientific authority, and the attitude of suspicion on which the new historiography was founded was also the basis of its epistemological confidence.

The project of scientific historiography aimed not only to establish a record of past events, but also to discover the laws of cause and effect governing those events. As W. S. Lilly noted in writing on 'The New Spirit in History' in 1895, whereas the ancient historians had 'no true philosophy of causation', the scientific model of knowledge adopted by modern historians demanded that they 'proceed from facts to laws' and examine

[51] John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, 'Inaugural Lecture on the Study of History', *Lectures on Modern History*, ed. with introd. by John Neville Figgis and Reginald Vere Laurence, first pub. 1906 (London: Macmillan; New York: St Martin's Press, i960), 15, 14.

[53] Ibid. 21; W. S. Lilly, 'The New Spirit in History', *Nineteenth Century*, 38 (1895), 621.

[54] [Harwood], 'The Modern Art and Science of History', 357.

[55] Dalberg-Acton, 'Inaugural Lecture', 15-16; J. H. Round, 'Historical Research', *Nineteenth Century*, 44 (1898), 1010-11.

the underlying causes of events.[56] Indeed, in 1857 the most enthusiastic and notorious advocate of a science of history, Henry Thomas Buckle, had suggested the possibility of gaining so complete an understanding of the laws governing historical experience that historians would be able to predict and control future events.[57] This theory was attacked, as much for the anti-theological bias of its determinism as for the sheer impossibility of amassing the necessary quantities of evidence,[58] but in fact Buckle merely represented an extreme version of the widespread commitment to inductive reasoning in nineteenth-century historiography which was one of its most important debts to scientific method. The inductive model of knowledge, which required a reasoning from effects to causes, was linked to an interest in new kinds of evidence, as historians no longer relied merely on political documents for information, but engaged in minute 'circumstantial researches' based on physical, statistical, and literary evidence, in order to trace not only the psychological, but the social, economic, institutional, and geographical causes of events.[59]

The third 'scientific' element of the new historiography was its theory of representation, based on the impartiality and, as far as possible, the effacement of the narrator. The ideal was embodied in Ranke, as described by Acton: 'He decided effectually to repress the poet, the patriot, the religious or political partisan, to sustain no cause, to banish himself from his books, and to write nothing that would gratify his own feelings or disclose his private convictions.'[60] By suppressing the personality of the narrator, scientific historiography sought to create the illusion that events were somehow speaking for themselves. Acton approvingly

[5] Lilly, 'The New Spirit in History', 620.

[57] Henry Thomas Buckle, 'General Introduction', *History of Civilization in England*, 2nd edn., vol. i (London: Parker, 1858), 17-18.

s[8] See William T. Thornton, 'History, and its Scientific Pretensions', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 8 (1863), *5~35; and James Anthony Froude, 'The Science of History', *Short Studies on Great Subjects*, vol. i (London: Longmans, Green, 1867), 1-36.

[59] Buckle, 'General Introduction', 2.

Dalberg-Acton, 'Inaugural Lecture', 19. In *The Clothing of Clio: A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 13, Stephen Bann points out that English historians ignored the poetic and dramatic elements in Ranke's writing in order to make a connection between a supposedly plain style and a faithful representation of facts.

quoted the historian de Coulanges, who told his audience: 'Do not imagine you are listening to me; it is history itself that speaks.'[61] The use of a plain style helped to render the narrator invisible, and to give the impression of a reality unmediated by discursive elements, untainted by the traces of fiction historians were expected to detect and expose in their sources. The effacement of the apparatus of narration helped to hide the historian's ideological investment in the particular narrative mode or perspective adopted, and enhanced the idea that history worked in the interests, not of the historian, but of truth itself.

By the end of the century, the project of scientific historiography had become the academic orthodoxy in England—an orthodoxy as yet largely untouched by the crisis in historiographical practice gathering in Europe. However, popular conceptions of history rarely matched specialist ones, and even within the profession competition between scientific history and the older idea of literary history persisted throughout the century.*[1] It is therefore impossible to generalize about the extent to which changes in historiographical theory and practice affected the use of the term 'history' in other cultural fields such as literary theory and criticism: the meaning of each usage depends on the writer's level of exposure to and sympathy with the changes in historiography.

That James was aware of and interested in new trends in historiography is evident from his scathing judgements of two of the most eminent exponents of 'literary' history, Froude and Kingsley, in which he clearly aligned himself with the cause of scientific historiography *(LC* i. 1014-17, 1103-4). In his 1867 review of Manning's historical novels he named Niebuhr, Mommsen, Guizot, and Buckle—'writers of a purely scientific turn of mind' *(LC* i. n 54)—as the great historians of the day, and it was to these writers that he looked for a narrative model for the modern novelist. Comparing his list of scientific historians with a popular novelist, Trollope, James admitted: 'It is hard to imagine minds of these dissimilar types uniting their forces; or, rather, it is hard to imagine a mind in which their distinctive elements and sympathies should be combined' (i. 1154). But it is precisely this sense of the modern difficulty of uniting the interests of novelist and historian that animates James's idea of the novel as history, and distinguishes it from earlier conceptions which drew on a very different model of historical discourse. Fielding, for example, had referred his decision to call *Tom Jones* a history rather than a romance to a desire to evade

> that universal Contempt, which the World, who always denominate the Whole from the Majority, have cast on all historical Writers, who do not draw their Materials from Records. And it is the Apprehension of this Contempt, that hath made us so cautiously avoid the Term Romance, a Name with which we might otherwise have been well enough contented. [3]

For Fielding, the choice of generic label has a cultural, but not a technical, significance; at a time when historiography was practised largely as an exercise in rhetoric, more concerned with conceptual frameworks than factual reconstruction, appropriation of the name 'history' did not bind the novelist to any very precise or alien set of technical practices.[64] In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, James was aware that the tasks of the novelist and the historian had greatly diverged since Walter Scott wrote his great historical novels: 'Both history and romance are so much more disinterested at the present moment than they were during Scott's lifetime, that it will take a strong hand to force either of them to look upon the other with the cold glance of the speculator' *(LC* i. n 54).

Nineteenth-century historiography, increasingly defining itself through its opposition to rhetoric and fiction, had made Fielding's cavalier interchange of generic labels impossible. In attempting to revitalize the idea of the 'historical novel' (meaning

Dalberg-Acton, 'Inaugural Lecture', 12.

[62] The competition between 'literary' and 'scientific' history, which was often between amateur and increasingly professional historians, is discussed by Rosemary Jann in *The Art and Science of Victorian History* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985). Within the profession, the question was epitomized by the competing conceptions of the historian's role offered by Freeman and Froude; see Herbert A. L. Fisher, 'Modern Historians and their Methods', *Fortnightly Review,* NS 56 (1894), 805-9.

[3] Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling,* first pub. 1749, ed. Fredson Bowers with introd. by Martin Battestin, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), i. 489.

[4] Davis, *Factual Fictions,* 31; Leo Braudy, *Narrative Form in History and Fiction: Hume, Fielding and Gibbon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 8-10.

not just 'works of fiction which deal exclusively with the past' but the idea of the novelist as 'historian of contemporary manners', historian of 'the *moment*[1] (i. 1155)), James was aware of bringing together disparate things, crossing what had become a significant gap. The distinct streams of fiction and history had now to be 'forced into confluence' (i. 1154), and James's repeated use of the language of force conveys both the aggressive nature of this project and his sense of its difficulty.

In essays and reviews of the 1860s to the 1880s, James suggested ways in which the technical attributes of historical narrative could be used to enhance the realism and cultural standing of fiction. The question of evidence was central to nineteenth-century historiography, and James placed it at the heart of his comparison of the roles of novelist and historian in 'The Art of Fiction':

> To represent and illustrate the past, the actions of men, is the task of either writer, and the only difference that I can see is, in proportion as he succeeds, to the honour of the novelist, consisting as it does in his having more difficulty in collecting his evidence, which is so far from being purely literary. *(LC* i. 47)

The new historiography prided itself on what Acton called its 'heroic study of records'; tales of the enormous quantities of original research undertaken by historians such as Ranke became matter for professional legend, evincing a moral as well as intellectual commitment to the extension of knowledge/[5] In a bold move, James argued that the work of the novelist in collecting evidence is even more difficult, and therefore deserves even greater cultural 'honour'. However, his claim that this increased difficulty is 'the only difference' between novelist and historian is rather disingenuous: a more fundamental difference is that while a novel may refer to things in the world outside it, it also refers to a great many imaginary things, and these imagined characters, objects, and events are generated by the act of narration, whereas in historical narrative the act of narration comes after the things to which it refers. James's effort in delineating the task of the novelist as historian (and indeed, the

[5] Dalberg-Acton, 'Inaugural Lecture', 7. In partially reclaiming Froude for the scientific tradition, Fisher emphasized his massive work of original documentary research ('Modern Historians and their Methods', 806).

effort of realism in general) is to make the relation between story and narrative appear to follow the same order in fiction as it does in history—to reverse it, making the fictional narrative appear to be reporting events that have already taken place. Rhetorically, this can be achieved by manipulating historiographical codes of practice for the handling of evidence; by professing a commitment to these codes, James is able to create the illusion that the 'evidence' with which he deals is real, found not made.

Novelists had always imitated the historian's documentary apparatus as a way of enhancing the effect of realism; now the growing interest of historians in circumstantial evidence strengthened the epistemological authority of the novel's traditional circumstantial mode of narration. In 1888 James observed: 'The effort of our time has been, as we know, to disinter the details of history, to see the celebrities of the past, and even the obscure persons, in the small facts as well as in the big facts of their lives' (LC ii. 42.2.). As Harwood wrote in 1842, 'nothing is too lowly to furnish data for historic science', for 'Modern history knows the historical value of the little facts that make the common life of little men.'[6]* A similar capacity to use the evidence of 'small facts' could give a work of fiction historical authority. According to James, it is Stevenson's 'talent for seeing the familiar in the heroic, and reducing the extravagant to plausible detail' that allows some passages in *Kidnapped* to 'read like a series of inspired footnotes on some historic page' (LC i. 1254), while on the other hand, the 'historical colouring' of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is weak because it offers 'little elaboration of detail, of the modern realism of research' (LC i. 404). In the novel, 'small facts' play a dual role, acting not just as significant details which provide evidence of character or circumstance within the novel, but also as 'evidence' of the novel's referentiality. James described Turgenev's tales as 'a magazine of small facts, of anecdotes, of descriptive traits, taken, as the phrase is, *sur le vif (LC* ii. 969). Of one of Turgenev's delineations of character, James wrote: 'These lines seem to carry a kind of historical weight. It is the Princess R——and no one else. We feel as if the author could show us documents and relics; as if he had

[Harwood], 'The Modern Art and Science of History', 365, 366.

her portrait, a dozen letters, some of her old trinkets' (ii. 970). Turgenev's use of significant detail not only adds depth to the characterization of the Princess R——, but acts as circumstantial evidence for the claim that the author is reporting on a real person. The denser the tissue of 'small facts' provided, the greater the impression that the narrative is referring to objects external to, and independent of, itself. In 'The Art of Fiction', James equates 'the air of reality' with 'solidity of specification' (LC i. 53), and this formulation may be traced to his admiration for Balzac's use of density of detail. 'Balzac is always definite; you can say Yes or No to him as you go on; the story bristles with references that must be verified' (LC ii. 38). James explains that this is one reason why Balzac's novels can never be classed as 'light literature'; demanding from the reader the kind of serious attention usually given to history rather than novels, the multiplicity of references makes Balzac's works sometimes 'as hard reading in the way of entertainment as Hallam or Guizot' (ii. 38).

The cultural value attached to 'hard reading' helps to promote Balzac to the rank of historian, but his constant appeal to the reader to verify references also operates in a more complex way to confer on his novels the status of history. By putting into his narratives a great many 'small facts' such as descriptions of material objects and details of quotidian existence, which appeal to and satisfy the reader's power of verification, Balzac creates in the reader a readiness to accept as 'true' other larger 'facts' on which the narrative depends—the fictional assertions about characters and events, which cannot possibly be verified because they have no existence outside the text. James felt that Balzac sometimes 'sins by extravagance' in giving too many material details: 'He has his necessary houses and his superfluous houses: often when in a story the action is running thin he stops up your mouth against complaint, as it were, by a choking dose of brick and mortar' (LC ii. 50). However, more importantly than simply filling out lulls in the action, this surplus of 'small facts' acts as a guarantee for the major assertions of the novel. Barthes has demonstrated the function of excessive denotation and apparently useless details as 'reality effects' in narrative, arguing that the model for this is history, with its assumption that 'the *having-been-there* of things is a sufficient reason for speaking

of them'.[67] In fiction, a surplus of references to things which exist in the world creates a surplus of goodwill on the part of the reader to accept the reality of things which do not exist outside the language of the novel. Balzac's 'superfluous houses' create an 'air of reality' through which we view his fictional characters and events.

The use of circumstantial evidence was associated with the inductive methods at the heart of the historian's new 'scientific' philosophy of causation—a philosophy which James urged the novelist to adopt. In his review of Manning's historical novels James noted that the novelist begins with a cause, which he may trace to whatever effects he chooses, while the historian begins with an effect, the 'final manifestations of conduct', beyond which his imagination must not go; all his effort is devoted to a search for causes and relations beneath the 'vast fabric of impenetrable fact [that] is stretched over his head' *(LC* i. n54). The images of the novelist and historian used here conform to cultural stereotypes of 'light' and 'heavy' literature (i. n53): over the novelist 'spreads the unobstructed sky, with nothing to hinder the flight of fancy', whereas the historian is associated with hard labour: 'He works in the dark, with a contracted forehead and downcast eyes, on his hands and knees, as men work in coal-mines' (i. 1154). But there is no reason, James argues,

> why the novelist should not subject himself, as regards the treatment of his subject, to certain of the obligations of the historian; why he should not imprison his imagination, for the time, in a circle of incidents from which there is no arbitrary issue, and apply his ingenuity to the study of a problem to which there is but a single solution, (i. ri55>

According to this model, given certain premises (such as psychological data about the characters), the story must unfold as these premises dictate, and must not be affected by external constraints such as the reader's expectations, the author's sentimental allegiances, or the exigencies of the production process. In assuming the constraints that bind the historian, the novelist also gains the historian's freedom, because adherence to a historical standard of causation demands that the novelist defy the forces of censorship.

Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', 15.

Submission to certain 'obligations of the historian' is thus one way of casting off the burden of being 'light' literature which, as James noted in 'The Art of Fiction', purchased the novel's freedom of fancy at the price of its freedom to write seriously about life, and was thus 'only an attempt to stifle it disguised in the form of generosity' (LC i. 45).

James's idea of the novelist as historian also attempted to defy censorship by drawing on historiographical standards of representation, particularly the idea of full and impartial disclosure associated with 'scientific' history. In his 1867 review of Froude, James criticized this famous practitioner of 'literary' history for his lack of proper objectivity, accusing him of a 'readiness to make vague moral epithets stand in lieu of real psychological facts' (LC i. 1015) and of a tendency to grow maudlin over some characters, 'a kind of psychological exercise which is essentially at variance with the true historical and critical spirit' (i. 1017). James believed that moral judgements distort historical accounts because history does not teach moral lessons—'What strikes an attentive student of the past is the indifference of events to man's moral worth or worthlessness' (i. 1014-15)—and he criticized Kingsley and Carlyle, as well as Froude, for attempting to read moral patterns into history (i. 1113). Froude's attempts to shape his histories according to his own moral prejudices led not only to personal intrusions upon the narrative, but to a decision to suppress evidence that was 'too bad to print'; such censorship of the historical record affronted James's scientific conception of the historian's obligation to 'effect a dispassionate logical synthesis of the material at hand' (i. 1017). In keeping with this historiographical model, James found the 'poetic reticence' practised by Scott inappropriate to the modern historical novelist, whose task was 'not to invest, but to divest the past' (i. 1Z03). Scientific historiography demanded a record of the past divested, not only of inaccuracies and pruderies, but of unnecessary rhetorical elaborations, and James used this austere standard of representation to criticize Hardy's 'verbose and redundant style' in *Far from the Madding Crowd,* reminding him that 'a novelist is after all but a historian, thoroughly possessed of certain facts, and bound in some way or other to impart them' (i. 1045). In this case, James draws upon a historiographical model of representation primarily to call attention to the virtues of compression,

but his comment also suggests, again, his wish to place the novelist beyond the reach of censorship by claiming the responsibilities of the historian: whereas the novelist was constantly required to withhold information, the historian was morally 'bound ... to impart' all he knew. At the same time, this appeal to the obligations of the historian helps to construct the very referential illusion on which the claim of historical status rests. The image of the historian used here is a Rankean one, and James's remark that the novelist is 'but a historian' is reminiscent of Ranke's famous statement that he wished 'only' to represent the past 'as it really was'. In both cases, the apparent modesty of the statement (a disclaimer of higher analytical or rhetorical aims) masks the enormity of the claim being made: in the historian's case, the claim that the facts really can be recovered and represented just as they happened,[68] and in the novelist's case, the even greater claim that he is dealing with real 'facts' at all.

James's early novel theory constantly borrowed from historiographical practice in order to maintain this illusion that the novel is a report on independent, pre-existing data. In an early review he recommended the novelist Harriet Prescott to study the method of Balzac, who 'set down things in black and white,. . . in prose, scientifically, as they stood'. James stressed the word *'scientifically''* as the key to the lesson, suggesting the historiographical enterprise which was also based on an ability to 'transcribe facts' in their original order (LC i. 609). Nearly twenty years later, James made the same point in 'The Art of Fiction':

> Catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life, that is the attempt whose strenuous force keeps Fiction upon her feet. In proportion as in what she offers us we see life *without* rearrangement do we feel that we are touching the truth; in proportion as we see it *with* rearrangement do we feel that we are being put off with a substitute, a compromise and convention. *{LC* i. 58)

Turgenev's work satisfied this condition of historical veracity: ' "It is life itself," we murmur as we read, "and not this or that or the other story-teller's more or less clever 'arrangement' of life" ' *(LC* ii. 976). Such injunctions against 'rearrangement'

Bann's gloss on Ranke's dictum *(The Clothing of Clio,* 8-14) reveals the slipperiness of the historian's apparently straightforward language and 'the daring of the (understated) claim' (n).

make sense only when the idea has already been established that the author is reporting a reality that preceded his own narrative. To some extent, of course, he may do so, for example by including historical events in his narrative, or giving topographical descriptions of real places; however, when discussing the events of a fictional story (which have had no existence outside their arrangement in the text), critical statements contrasting 'truth to life' with 'rearrangement' do not make literal sense. Rather, their rhetoric, borrowed from historiography, both depends on and helps to establish the fiction that the story preceded the narrative made about it: stressing the importance of keeping the narrative true to the story helps to create the belief that the story itself is true. This was achieved in Balzac's works, as James realized: 'At bottom, his incidents and character *[sic]* were as fictitious as those of Spenser's "Fairy Queen;" yet he was as averse from taking liberties with them as we are bound to conceive Mr. Motley, for instance, to be from taking liberties with the history of Holland' *{LC* i. 1155)-

James's interpretation of Balzac's narrative technique shows how complex was his notion of the novel as history: the events of Balzac's narratives are known to be fictitious, yet assumed to be real. This response on the part of a reader is achieved by a repertoire of formal devices which work to turn modes of attention into forms of belief: verifiable facts stand guarantee for unverifiable fictional assertions; the impartiality of the narrator underwrites the truth of his reports; the fidelity of the narrative to the story presupposes—or constructs—the reality of the story itself. All these techniques suggest the referentiality of the narrative, but ultimately the idea of fiction as history is a matter of contract between author and reader. In drawing an analogy between Balzac, the model of the novelist as historian, and the actors Garrick and Kemble (LC i. 1343), James reveals that the notion of historical narrative is an artificial, constructed thing. He knew that we cannot read 'history', only 'histories' *(LC* i. 1015)—our access to the historical real is always discursively mediated, always plural. But the rules of the genre mean that we are 'bound to conceive' of the historian as committed to the truth; similarly, when an author such as Balzac engages to behave like a historian, respecting the integrity of his material and keeping it free from external manipulation and arbitrary intervention,

the reader in turn must behave like a reader of history, and credit the story with reality. By establishing a consensus about the conventions borrowed from the writing and reading of history, a contract is established between author and reader which enables the idea of the novel as history to operate.

When he sees this contract being fulfilled, as in Balzac's case, James provides a sophisticated analysis of its technical basis; it is when he sees (as he believes) the contract broken—as in the case of Trollope—that the insecurities and contradictions in his own theoretical position become apparent. This is the effect of his famous attack on Trollope in 'The Art of Fiction':

> In a digression, a parenthesis or an aside, he concedes to the reader that he and this trusting friend are only 'making believe.' He admits that the events he narrates have not really happened, and that he can give his narrative any turn the reader may like best. Such a betrayal of a sacred office seems to me, I confess, a terrible crime; it is what I mean by the attitude of apology, and it shocks me every whit as much in Trollope as it would have shocked me in Gibbon or Macaulay. *(LC* i. 46)

Similarly, in his 1883 essay on Trollope he wrote of the novelist's 'suicidal satisfaction in reminding the reader that the story he was telling was only, after all, a make-believe' and declared that 'when Trollope suddenly winks at us and reminds us that he is telling us an arbitrary thing, we are startled and shocked in quite the same way as if Macaulay or Motley were to drop the historic mask and intimate that William of Orange was a myth or the Duke of Alva an invention' (LC i. 1343). Trollope's breaking of the fictional frame is presented as an affront to historiographical practice, betraying an 'ambiguity of mind as to what constitutes evidence' (i. 1343). Many twentieth-century critics have accused James of misreading the effects of Trollope's intrusions,[6'] but

[9] Several accusations that James misrepresented Trollope are cited by Vivien Jones in 'James and Trollope', *Review of English Studies*, NS 33 (1982), 278-94. Jones argues that James's 'inappropriate reaction' (294) to Trollope's intrusions reveals his own uncertainties about his relation to his audience and about the basis of the realist illusion. In *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James* (London: Methuen, 1984), 58-83, John Carlos Rowe argues that an 'anxiety of influence' leads James to construct a version of Trollope which minimizes his contributions to the kind of realism James himself wanted to pioneer. Defending the narrative tradition of 'telling' against the privilege accorded to 'showing' by such theorists as Percy Lubbock, Wayne Booth maintains in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) that Trollope's intrusions

James's verdict is in keeping with the widely held principle in nineteenth-century criticism that any authorial commentary, not just intrusions which specifically admitted the fictional nature of the work, diminished the realism of a novel.[70] However, the important question is not whether James was right to construe Trollope's comments as a confession of fictionality, but why the idea of a novelist revealing the fictionality of his enterprise disturbed him so deeply and provoked so violent a response. The answer lies, of course, in the continuing force of hostility to fiction, which James's model of the 'historical novel' was designed to obviate. But in attacking Trollope for breaking the historian's contract with the reader, James expresses exactly those negative attitudes towards fiction that the historical model for the novel was designed to overcome.

There is a deep contradiction in James's response to Trollope. Trollope's 'terrible crime' is that he fails to disclaim the fictionality of his work, and therefore fails to take his work as seriously as it deserves; it seems that in order to take fiction seriously, it is necessary to deny that it is fiction.[71] In admitting that his work is 'only "making believe" ', Trollope is, according to James, guilty of an 'attitude of apology' towards his work. But James's warning that the novel must not 'give itself away' itself expresses an 'attitude of apology' towards the whole enterprise of novel-writing *(LC* i. 46). Calling the failure to deny fictionality a 'crime' is a displaced expression of the old attitude, 'as explicit as it was narrow' (i. 45), that labelled fiction itself a crime. James called 'The Art of Fiction' 'simply a plea for liberty' *(Letters* iii. 58), and his appeal to a historiographical model for the novel is here, as elsewhere in his early theory and criticism, part of an

suggest only his control over how events are narrated, not over the events themselves (2.05-6). In his attack on Ian Watt's theory of authorial effacement, Mark Spilka claims that James's reading of Trollope has itself been misread to support arguments against intrusion: see 'Ian Watt on Intrusive Authors, or the Future of an Illusion', *Hebrew University Studies in Literature,* 1 (1973), 23.

[70] Stang, *Theory of the Novel,* 91-107; Kenneth Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel 1865-1900* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), IZI-8. A reviewer of *Barchester Towers* in 1858 anticipated James's criticism of Trollope's intrusions; see [Percy Greg], 'Mr. Trollope's Novels', 4Z5. Trollope himself made a similar criticism of Thackeray's intrusions: see *Thackeray* (London: Macmillan, 1879), 201.

[71] J. Hillis Miller makes this point in 'Narrative and History', *Journal of English Literary History,* 41 (1974), 457.

attempt to free the novelist from the cultural distrust of fiction expressed in both institutional censorship and prescriptive criticism. However, this technical manoeuvre fails to move outside the terms of a critical discourse imbued with prejudices against fiction. In choosing to defend the novel on the grounds of truth rather than value, James ties his theorizing to the primitive epistemology of evangelical and utilitarian hostility to fiction, an epistemology which recognized only history and lies, failing to acknowledge that fiction is intentionally and effectively distinct from either. Ideas that transcend the fixed categories of true and false—jokes, games of self-conscious make-believe, the paradox of truth reached through lies—are erased from the critical discussion. In James's most extreme statements, such as his criticism of Trollope, history comprehensively displaces fiction—fiction on its own terms has not 'the smallest *locus standi',* and the 'narrator of fictitious events' is 'nowhere' *(LC* i. 1343). Censoring not only some aspect of the content of fiction, but its very fictionality, James's theory shows itself to be produced by and complicit with the culture of censorship he deplored. To use James's terms, 'traces (dissimulated though they may be)' *(LC* i. 46) of suspicion of fiction lie at the very heart of his defence of the novel as history, turning 'The Art of Fiction' into a self-contradictory document, expressive of the very attitudes against which it rebels.

This fundamental contradiction in James's thinking about fiction and history is reinforced by other conflicts arising from his attempts to promote incompatible novelistic values. As his reviews of Goncourt's *La Fille Elisa* and Eliot's *Middlemarch* show, the lack of selection exercised in French naturalism and English realism raised problems of subject-matter and form respectively, which the early James could confront only by arguing against the value of the historiographical model he advocated so strenuously elsewhere (LC ii. 404, i. 965-6). More significant for his later development was the difficulty of reconciling a historiographical model with his strengthening belief that 'A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life' (LC i. 50). Impressionism is, of course, a form of realism, and a shift in concern from objectively defined to subjectively defined notions of experience is not incompatible with an idea of the novelist as historian; after all, it was through the figure of James as 'the historian of fine consciences' that Conrad made a direct link

between the nineteenth-century project of fiction as history and the modernist project of exploring the subjectivity of experience.[71] However, James's recognition of the subjectivity of experience was incompatible with the particular narrative model provided by nineteenth-century scientific historiography, which sought to produce a purely objective record. In his 1883 essay on Daudet James asserted that 'the main object of the novel is to represent life', but proceeded to qualify this, saying: 'I am perfectly aware that to say the object of a novel is to represent life does not bring the question to a point so fine as to be uncomfortable for any one. .. . For, after all, may not people differ infinitely as to what constitutes life—what constitutes representation?' *(LC* ii. 242). Scientific historiography was based on the assumption that people would not 'differ infinitely' about what constituted reality or its representation, assuming that both would be objectively or, at least, consensually defined.[73] In contrast, James's critical writings of the 1880s constantly interrogate objective or consensual definitions of 'experience' or 'reality', destabilizing the fixed notions on which his historiographical model depended.[74]

It is a short step from 'a personal, a direct impression of life' which calls into question objective definitions of experience, to the personal fiction which actively contests the collectively defined real. James's interest in the subjective nature of experience would lead him increasingly to explore the contestatory nature of the imagination, bringing him into even greater conflict with his own commitment to a historiographical model of narrative. The conflict is potentially already present in 'The Art of Fiction', in the ambiguity of James's statement that the novelist 'competes with life' (LC i. 53).[7S] The phrase holds in tension two quite different conceptions of the novel as, on the one hand, a

[71] Joseph Conrad, 'The Historian of Fine Consciences' (1905), in *The Question of Henry Jatnes: A Collection of Critical Essays,* ed. F. W. Dupee (London: Allan Wingate, 1947), 62.

[73] See e.g. Fisher's assumption that 'the views of sensible men as to what is good evidence and what is bad, do not differ very appreciably', and that therefore 'As the evidence accumulates the margin of doubt contracts in history as well as in other branches of study' ('Modern Historians and their Methods', 811).

[74] James agreed with Maupassant that 'it is . . . absurd to say that there is, for the novelist's use, only one reality of things' (LC ii. 523); see also his comments in 'The Art of Fiction' on the subjectivity and plurality of experience (LC i. 51-2).

[75] The original version of 'The Art of Fiction' contained several more references to the idea of competing with life (see *Longman's Magazine,* 4 (1884), 503); James omitted these from the version printed in *Partial Portraits* in response to Robert Louis Stevenson's objections that art could not compete with the breadth and complexity of life ('A Humble Remonstrance', *Longman's Magazine* (Dec. 1884); reprinted in *Memories and Portraits* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1887), 281-3). The 'troublesome presence' of the idea of competition, suggesting more radical formulations of the relations between art and life that would emerge later in James's career, is discussed by Mark Spilka in 'Henry James and Walter Besant: "The Art of Fiction" Controversy', in *Towards a Poetics of Fiction,* ed. Spilka (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 207.

representational discourse, claiming to reproduce life in its intensity, variety, and totality, and on the other hand, an oppositional discourse offering new ways of imagining experience and formulating alternatives to the status quo. While the first meaning upholds the novel's claim to historical status, the second undermines it and suggests exactly the qualities feared by opponents of fiction—its subversive reformulations of experience, and its refusal to be governed by the authority of the socially constituted real. James's declaration that the novel must compete with life is intended to align it with the representational discourse of history, but also suggests (however undesignedly) its complicity with the oppositional discourses of jokes, lies, and romances.

The ambiguity of the phrase 'competes with life' epitomizes the multivalency of 'The Art of Fiction', in which the historical model coexists uneasily with other, incompatible ideas of fiction. Such conflicts were important in determining the plots and narrative methods of James's early fiction. In particular, I am interested in two theoretical stress-points in 'The Art of Fiction' which undermine the analogy between novel and history: the attack on Trollope, which shows that James can uphold the historiographical model only by collaborating with cultural forces hostile to fiction, and the idea of competition with life, in which the contestatory nature of fiction (neutralized by its alignment with history) is allowed to reveal itself. These theoretical tensions are expressed technically, structurally, and dramatically in the early novels, where romantic, idealistic, subjective, and oppositional forms of narrative compete with the model of history for the power to determine the events and form of the novel. From the energies of competition and contradiction in these works emerge new narrative techniques and new theories of fiction which lead the later novels into radical departures from James's early commitment to history.

4

The Ambassadors and the Fictional Contract

THE 'DEEP taste of change' *(Amb.* 4) pervades the opening chapters of *The Ambassadors,* as Lambert Strether begins his encounter with Europe. The first stage of this encounter is described in terms which markedly draw attention to the idea that the novel is leaving behind the imaginative world of James's experimental phase, to enter new territory in its exploration of the relations between fiction and history. In this novel about questioning, 'Strether's first question' (3) is addressed to 'the young woman in the glass cage' (4), who gives him the answer in the form of a telegram from an old American friend; turning away, he meets Maria Gostrey, who becomes his first guide to 'Europe', and who helps him to find new ways of approaching the multifarious questions posed by his European experience. Walking away with his new friend, 'Strether had a rueful glance for the lady in the glass cage. It was as if this personage had seen herself instantly superseded' *(6).* In placing Strether so clearly outside the cage, James signals that the terms on which the earlier works had conducted their exploration of imaginative narrative have also been 'superseded'. Unlike the telegraphist, the governess, and the narrator of *The Sacred Fount,* whose plots are fundamentally unable to engage with reality or with the perceptions of others, Strether's imagination is set at liberty in the world, defined from the beginning as a mode of encounter rather than of retreat.

Through Strether's imaginative adventures, *The Ambassadors* explores fiction as a category of thought for addressing problems in social and moral life. The diplomatic encounters between the various ambassadors in the novel are largely conducted by means of a dialogue between historical and fictional propositions. Reviving James's 'international theme', the novel places great

emphasis on questions of location and jurisdiction, and this leads to a highly developed concept of fictional space and its relation to the world outside it. Many of the characters' negotiations with each other involve a testing of the uses of jokes and lies, which explores the value of definitions of fictional discourse that were rejected in 'The Art of Fiction'. When the American hero comes to terms with European ideas and experience, it is by means of fictional contracts which, displacing the idea of the historical contract expounded in James's early novel theory, reflexively define the relation between author and reader in the novel as a whole.

Europe—even as represented by Liverpool, Chester, and London—offers Strether a sense of 'personal freedom', of being given over to 'the immediate and the sensible' (4). The quotation marks which so often enclose the word 'Europe' mimic its nature as a preconceived territory of the mind, set apart from the responsibilities of real life at home. As James had written in his 'Paris Revisited' (1875): 'We most of us transact our moral and spiritual affairs in our own country, and it is not cynical to say that for most of us the transaction is rather rapidly conducted. We wander about Europe on a sensuous and esthetic basis' *{PS* 5). The distinction James makes here was much more crudely enshrined in Anglo-American literary convention as 'the dreadful little old tradition . . . that people's moral scheme *does* break down in Paris' *{LC* ii. 1312). This view of Europe recalls, and shares a common puritanical origin with, the mapping of fictional space as definitively separate from the morally serious region of historical narrative; Strether's response to Anglo-American assumptions about 'Europe' will also involve a response to his culture's assumptions about the relative value of fiction and history.

At the beginning of the novel, Strether shares the popular American view of Europe. He does not doubt that Chad, the prodigal son he has been commissioned to reclaim for his mother, Mrs Newsome, has fallen victim to immoral influences in Paris. For himself, although he has come to Europe with work to do, it is someone else's work, which he intends to carry out using a set of imported cultural assumptions, and which he does not anticipate will involve his own 'moral and spiritual affairs'. Moreover, he hopes it will be rapidly completed, allowing him simply

to enjoy Europe as a place where he can escape from his own work and personal problems. Yet he finds that his two aims—to settle Mrs Newsome's business for her, and to enjoy Europe for himself—are almost immediately in conflict. His success as an ambassador depends on his moral authority, and he senses that 'almost any acceptance of Paris might give one's authority away' *{67).* Strether does not share the ability of Mrs Newsome's second ambassador, her daughter Sarah, to have 'a good time' (163) while maintaining an unshakable faith in her own preconceived convictions and demands. Rather, he finds that any attempt to 'wander about Europe on a sensuous and esthetic basis' *(PS* 5), even so mild an attempt as a walk on the walls of Chester with his new friend, Miss Gostrey, involves 'what he would have called collapses' *(Amb.* 28), all of which, taken together, may amount in the end to the failure of his mission, and the collapse of the moral scheme which dictated the terms of that mission.

The task Strether has been given involves a combination of historical reconstruction and didactic intervention: he is to find out what Chad has been doing in Paris, and then, denouncing this way of life, he is to persuade Chad to return to Woollett in order to take up the moral responsibilities (and business opportunities) that await him there. As Chad's family sees it, the process of reconstruction is a question of details only, as they have already decided that, in broad outline, Chad's story will be found to be a version of the 'dreadful little old tradition': they believe he has fallen victim to a 'Particular Person' (67) who has dragged him, morally, into the gutter. Both the retrospective and the prospective arms of the scenario with which Mrs Newsome has equipped Strether reflect the epistemological and moral monism of her environment: the people of Woollett (Strether initially included) pride themselves on 'the faculty of seeing things as they were' (88), and believe that in every situation there is one 'real right thing' (113) that must be pursued. The principal representative of the voice of Woollett is Mrs Newsome, personally absent from Paris, but powerfully present to Strether through memory and through her letters; in Paris his friend Waymarsh, a native not of Woollett, Massachusetts, but of Milrose, Connecticut, sounds, if anything, an even purer note of the New England conscience. This note has a certain grandeur, as Strether never ceases to

acknowledge—'the very voice of Milrose' is 'a plea for the purest veracity' (21)—but it is increasingly revealed to be inadequate to the kinds of attitudes and experiences with which Strether finds he has to negotiate.

The terms of Strether's mission as dictated by Mrs Newsome are first challenged by Maria Gostrey. An American who lives in Paris, Miss Gostrey is a sort of honorary European, who describes herself as 'a general guide—to "Europe," don't you know?' (14). 'Europe', in Miss Gostrey's hands, becomes a playground for an endless game of analysis and interpretation, in which 'the elements of Appearance' (7) are extremely important. Strether initially sees his interpretative mission as a matter of stripping away appearances to reveal the truth, but on his visit with Miss Gostrey to the theatre in London he learns how appearances may 'carry and complicate' one's vision, as the red velvet band around her neck becomes 'a starting-point for fresh backward, fresh forward, fresh lateral flights' (38), initiating an impressionistic play which disrupts received ideas and widens the range of possible responses. Maria Gostrey combines an openness to the effects of appearance with a knowledge of 'types' (39): as the narrator puns, 'she pigeon-holed her fellow-mortals with a hand as free as that of a compositor scattering type' (8) and when it is time to compose the histories of these people, the type is all in its proper cases in her mind. For her, historical reconstruction involves a great deal of composition, and she is vague about sources and the exactness of report: 'she admitted when a little pressed that she was never quite sure of what she heard as distinguished from things .. . she only extravagantly guessed' (41). Whatever possibilities of error this may involve, Strether very soon comes to rely on her 'free handling of the subject to which his own imagination of it already owed so much' (51). The 'fun' of going over things with her, of seeing his own situation as 'a *case'* ('he was now so interested, quite so privately agog, about it' (102)), gives him an amused detachment from his affairs—without diminishing their importance—which topples the distinction between business and pleasure on which his visit to Europe has been predicated.

In his attempt to reconstruct the narrative of Chad's life in Paris, Strether has two audiences who are also competing muses. Mrs Newsome demands and receives a serial report in the form

of Strether's letters to her; these make up a whole epistolary narrative referred to in, but absent from, the novel. This lost narrative, the source of increasing problems for Strether as he finds himself unable to make his report conform to the version of events worked out in advance by Mrs Newsome, is later discredited when he identifies it with the meaningless rhetoric of journalism: 'Wouldn't the pages he still so frequently despatched by the American post have been worthy of a showy journalist, some master of the great new science of beating the sense out of words?' (2.47). Strether uses this image to express the insincerities that his narrative has come to acquire under the pressure of new realities which it cannot incorporate, but a much earlier use of related imagery reveals the inherent meanness in the range of interpretations of which Woollen is capable:

> This echo—as distinct over there, in the dry, thin air, as some shrill 'heading' above a column of print—seemed to reach him even as he wrote. 'He says there's no woman,' he could hear Mrs. Newsome report, in capitals almost of newspaper size, to Mrs. Pocock; and he could focus in Mrs. Pocock the response of the reader of the journal. (123)[1]

The fact that none of his communications to or from Mrs Newsome is quoted in the novel is important, because it places this whole reconstructive narrative at a disadvantage in relation to its competitor, the dialogic narrative formed by Strether's confabulations with Maria Gostrey. Many events are presented to us as reports from Strether to Miss Gostrey, and much information is filtered through the medium of their conversations; the communications inspired by Miss Gostrey are privileged above those inspired by Mrs Newsome, as they define the narrative mode of significant portions of the novel.

Playful, sometimes tentative, and sometimes extravagant, this talk is dominated by Maria's injunction to 'Guess!' (12.5), foreshadowing the 'find out for yourself theme of *The Golden Bowl.* It also owes much to the typical Jamesian conversational game of

[1] James vehemently objected to the use of headings in the pieces he sent to the *New York Tribune* in 1875-6, as Edel and Lind recount in their introduction to *Parisian Sketches* (pp. xxiv-xxv). Thirty years later he recorded the same dislike in his response to American newspapers and 'the idea of expression' embodied in 'vociferous "headings," with letterings, with black eruptions of print, that we seem to measure by feet rather than by inches, and that affect us positively as the roar of some myriad-faced monster' *(QS* 43).

suspended references and missing referents, a device which combines an uneasy epistemological uncertainty with an exploratory freedom and the creative potential to make—through error—new relations and interpretative leaps.[1] Nevertheless, beneath the playful surface may lie a surprising accuracy. Miss Gostrey's ability to reconstruct Mrs Newsome from the information Strether gives her, down to the details of how she wears her hair, displays an accuracy for which the Woollett mind, despite its standards of veracity, is unprepared: 'He blushed for her realism, but he gaped at her truth' (50). Such successes give a certain force to Miss Gostrey's proposal of alternative scenarios for Chad's experience to the single melodramatic plot conceived of in Woollett. She offers possible accounts of Chad's behaviour which subvert Woollett's values as well as its version of events. She suggests that Chad may have felt tainted by the immoral sources of his family's wealth, or by the vulgarity of business, and have sought the life of a gentleman in Paris (46); he may have been 'refined' rather than 'brutalised' in Paris (52); the woman with whom he is involved may be 'charming' rather than, as Strether believes, 'base, venal—out of the streets' (41). There is never any evidence to support the first of these hypotheses, and Chad's interest in advertising at the end of the novel rather seems to disprove it. However, when Strether meets Chad for the first time in Paris and finds him utterly transformed, 'refined', as Maria had suggested, rather than 'brutalised', her second proposition is vindicated, and this makes the truth of the third one undeniably possible. Strether's task of reconstruction now becomes detective work, for Miss Gostrey maintains that the miracle of Chad's transformation can only be explained as the work of a woman, and that in finding the woman Strether will find the key to Chad's situation (125).

Strether's attempts to find this woman are frustrated by the evasive answers he is repeatedly given when he asks for

Referential ambiguity of pronouns as a technique placing demands on the attention of James's readers is discussed by Vernon Lee in *The Handling of Words and Other Studies in Literary Psychology* (London: John Lane, Bodley Head, 1923), 244; and by Seymour Chatman in *The Later Style of Henry James* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972.), 57-8. See Ralf Norrman, *The Insecure World of Henry James's Fiction: Intensity and Ambiguity* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 6-65 for an extended analysis of the technique as a means of dramatizing the relations between characters in *The Golden Bowl.*

her identity. Chad assures him that he is not being kept in Paris by a woman, but asks Strether to meet his 'particular friends' (133), a mother and daughter with whom he has become close. Chad's friend, little Bilham, gives Strether the image of Chad as a revised edition of an old book, but when Strether asks straight out 'who's the editor?' (132), he does not answer; instead he offers the information that Chad, although technically 'free', is kept in Paris by 'a virtuous attachment' (133). To Strether, this answer seems to have 'settled the question' (133) of Chad's transformation.

> Nothing, certainly, on all the indications, could have been a greater change for him than a virtuous attachment, and since they had been in search of the 'word,' as the French called it, of that change, little Bilham's announcement—though so long and so oddly delayed—would serve as well as another. (134)

Tact (or pride) prevents Strether from asking the identity of the object of the attachment, and so his quest seems to have turned into an extended version of the common Jamesian hunt for a missing referent, the attempt to put a name to an unspecified 'she'. However, when he realizes that the object of the attachment is not the most obvious candidate, little Jeanne, but her mother, Madame de Vionnet, the nature of his quest changes. Little Bilham has characterized the attachment as 'virtuous'; this supports Miss Gostrey's intuition that the woman behind Chad's transformation must be 'good', indeed 'excellent' (12.5), and is itself corroborated by Chad who, in response to Strether's question, 'Is she bad?', assures him that her life is 'without reproach. A beautiful life. *Allez done voir!'* (176).

Strether accepts the invitation to see for himself. As he turns his attention to discovering ways in which Madame de Vionnet, against all the prejudices of Woollett, may be 'good' and her attachment to Chad 'virtuous', Strether's experience anticipates William James's pragmatic critique of 'solving names' (such as 'God' or 'the Absolute') as answers to philosophical questions. William James wrote:

> But if you follow the pragmatic method, you cannot look on any such word as closing your quest. You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience. It appears less as a solution, then, than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be *changed}*

As Strether discovers, the 'word' of little Bilham's formula is not a solution to his problem, but a programme for more work. He must not accept these terms 'good' and 'virtuous' as 'solving names', but set them at work in experience and find what 'cash-value' (in happiness or moral worth) they yield. The term 'virtuous attachment' implies a certain version of past events which Strether, in his process of reconstruction, agrees to accept as a kind of working hypothesis, which must be tested in experience.

The hypothesis is tested against several opposing perspectives and disconcerting pieces of information. Waymarsh's disapprobation is a constant challenge to Strether's point of view, and the discovery that Jeanne is to be subjected to an arranged marriage taxes his belief in Madame de Vionnet's nobility of character. However, Strether's faith surmounts these tests, as well as the attack on his position from Mrs Newsome's second ambassadorial delegation, the Pococks. Strether hopes that a recognition on their part of how Chad has changed for the better might provide a basis on which 'they might, as it were, have embraced and begun to work together' (270); however, the Pococks do not notice any change in Chad—or at least any change that is not 'hideous' (365)—and this blindness offers the same kind of challenge to his theory as Mrs Grose's blindness offers to the governess's theory of the ghosts in *The Turn of the Screw,* and as Mrs Brissenden's obtuseness offers to the narrator's vampire theory in *The Sacred Fount.* In wondering if he were 'utterly deluded and extravagant', Strether's doubts recall similar self-questioning by those earlier supersubtle readers of experience:

[3] William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking,* and id., *The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to* Pragmatism, first pub. 1907, 1909 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 31-2. After reading *Pragmatism* when it appeared in 1907, Henry James gave complete assent to his brother's theory *(Letters* iv. 466). The most thorough examination of the relation between the works of the two brothers is made by Richard A. Hocks in *Henry James and Pragmatistic Thought: A Study in the Relationship between the Philosophy of William James and the Literary Art of Henry James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974). Hocks maintains that William James 'names' processes which Henry James dramatizes in his fiction and embodies in his prose style (6), and that *The Ambassadors* is a 'textbook illustration' of this embodiment of pragmatist thought (152.). See also J. N. Sharma, 'Humanism as Vision and Technique in *The Ambassadors',* in *The Magic Circle of Henry James,* ed. Singh and Paniker, 146-59.

Was he, on this question of Chad's improvement, fantastic and away from the truth? Did he live in a false world, a rank world that he had grown simply to suit him, and was his present slight irritation . . . but the alarm of the vain thing menaced by the touch of the real? Was this contribution of the real possibly the mission of the Pococks? Had they come to make the work of observation as *he* had practised observation crack and crumble, and to reduce Chad to the plain terms in which honest minds could deal with him? Had they come, in short, to be sane where Strether was destined to feel that he himself had only been silly? (271)

Reflection that his point of view has been corroborated by little Bilham, Madame de Vionnet, Jeanne, and Chad himself soon reassures him that his position is tenable: 'Wouldn't it be found to have made more for reality to be silly with these persons than sane with Sarah and Jim?' (271). Nevertheless, Sarah's continued resistance to both his methods and his conclusions helps to define for Strether the course he has chosen. Sarah avoids any challenge to her preconceived ideas by accepting 'no version of her movements or plans from any other lips' (282). Strether has accepted from Chad and Madame de Vionnet another version of his own plans (their idea that he is in Paris to 'let [himself] go' (282)) as well as another version of their history, and the combined frivolity and immorality of this involve him, for Sarah, in 'the performance of "Europe" ' (289), in which she has no intention of participating. Sarah wishes to return to Woollett with only 'so much producible history . . . in her pocket' (284), and no new perspectives on matters as to which she has already made up her mind. From her point of view, Strether's idea that Madame de Vionnet could be a 'revelation' to her is insulting (363), and his own attitude preposterous. Nevertheless, Strether articulates it, in pragmatist terms: Madame de Vionnet's 'life' is his business, 'only so far as Chad's own life is affected by it; and what has happened—don't you see?—is that Chad's has been affected so beautifully. The proof of the pudding's in the eating' (364).

For support of his position Strether turns, increasingly, not to the evidence of Chad's transformation, but to its origin in Madame de Vionnet herself. It is his vision of her charm and variety which first, at Chad's party, allows him to articulate his moral view of her—a view which tallies with the character references he has been given by her Parisian friends. 'I couldn't, without my own impression, realise. . . . I understand what a relation with

such a woman—what such a high, fine friendship—may be. It can't be vulgar or coarse, anyway—and that's the point' (207). This statement shows how Madame de Vionnet has 'taken all his categories by surprise' (201), including the categorization that separates moral and spiritual affairs from sensuous and aesthetic ones; here he suggests what he later explicitly admits, that his faith in the idea of the 'virtuous attachment' has an aesthetic motive.

This confusion of categories provides a complementary aspect to his early fears of being placed in a false position by allowing pleasure to erode his moral authority; in his European experience, work dissolves into idleness, but now play becomes serious. As well as testing the hypothesis of the 'virtuous attachment', Strether's experience also tests this broader idea, that one's moral and spiritual affairs may be conducted not in opposition to, but upon, a sensuous and aesthetic basis. In two important scenes, in Notre Dame and on Strether's visit to the country, exploration of this idea leads to the development of new relations between fiction and life. On each occasion, Strether seeks to escape from the problems of reconstruction and interpretation by finding sanctuary in a framed locus where the irresponsible pleasures of art are separated from the world of risk and judgement. However, both times authorial contrivance introduces a coincidence which turns the episode into a recognition scene forcing Strether to re-encounter the world and re-evaluate his activity in it.

Strether's impulse to visit Notre Dame is a passive, escapist one, 'the impulse to let things be, to give them time to justify themselves, or at least to pass' (216). He has found there before 'a refuge from the obsession of his problem' (215), and is conscious of the nature of its appeal for him. 'He was aware of having no errand in such a place but the desire not to be, for the hour, in certain other places; a sense of safety, of simplification, which, each time he yielded to it, he amused himself by thinking of as a private concession to cowardice' (216). It is a place where he is able 'to drop his problem at the door very much as if it had been the copper piece that he deposited, on the threshold, in the receptacle of the inveterate blind beggar' (216). Interpretative responsibility gives way to imaginative freedom as he feels how 'within the precinct, for the real refugee, the things of the world could fall into abeyance. .. . Justice was outside, in the hard

light, and injustice too; but one was as absent as the other from the air of the long aisles and the brightness of the many altars' (216-17).

This sense of Notre Dame as a sanctuary owes much to Victor Hugo's use of the cathedral as a place of asylum in *Notre-Dame of Paris.* Indeed, the debt is made explicit when Strether later reveals that his imaginative response to the cathedral was greatly influenced by 'the great romancer and the great rqrnance' (220). In Hugo's novel, the hunchback Quasimodo, himself an outcast who has found sanctuary and an alternative world within the portals of Notre Dame, rescues the gypsy Esmeralda from the authorities executing judgment upon her, and claims asylum for her within the cathedral: 'Within the precincts of Notre-Dame, the condemned girl was indeed inviolable. The cathedral was a place of refuge. All human justice expired on its threshold.'[4] For Strether, too, the claims of human justice expire on the threshold of Notre Dame: he leaves behind him the competing claims of Mrs Newsome's a-priori principles and his own developing sense of the need to do justice to unfolding experience; he also leaves behind the demands of truth and conscience, always potentially in conflict and each continually being redefined. Immunity from the need to judge and be judged according to these shifting, conflicting standards is purchased with a coin given to the beggar at the door. Thus, the precincts of the cathedral define an imaginative zone which can be contrasted with the city around it, much as Europe and Woollett offer contrasting imaginative worlds. Europe is first seen as a region in which holidays may be taken from the strict laws of the New England conscience, although its very invitation to flout the rule of literal facts and preconceived beliefs makes it a more problematic region, epistemologically and morally, to inhabit. Seeking refuge from these problems in Notre Dame, Strether feels that here at last he can take 'the holiday he had earned' (216) in a region where neither the claims of history nor the risks of plotting can interfere with the freedom of pure imaginative play.

Notre Dame, as Strether responds to it, is a perfect instance of the 'playground' defined in Huizinga's theory of play—a space marked off from the rules and responsibilities of ordinary life, in

[4] Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame of Paris,* first pub. 1831, trans. John Sturrock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 351.

which 'a certain "imagination" of reality' can take place as a superfluous and disinterested activity.[5] Inside the cathedral Strether feels free to indulge in observation as a 'pastime' (217), without the responsibility that has attended his role as Mrs Newsome's deputed observer in Paris, or the risk that is involved in the interpretative observation taught him by Miss Gostrey. He plays a private game of supplying histories for people he observes in the cathedral; it is a game which he considers frivolous, but innocent—they are safe in their anonymity, as he is in his, and his imaginings are therefore without issue or effect in the world outside. His musings are 'vague and fanciful', and cast a romantic glow about their objects, whom he sees as 'figures of mystery and anxiety', 'those who were fleeing from justice' (217). His own temporary flight from justice he also treats indulgently, as harmless frivolity, believing that 'his own oblivions were too brief, too vain, to hurt anyone but himself (217).

However, an implied authorial perspective and direct authorial commentary suggest a possible harsher judgement of Strether's activity, both for its frivolity and for its possible issue in error. Strether's attempt 'to reconstitute a past' for the cathedral is, we are told, carried out 'in the museum mood' and is an attempt to reduce that past to 'the convenient terms of Victor Hugo' (218), whose works he has just purchased in a magnificent edition of seventy volumes. Will his task of reconstruction regarding Chad and Madame de Vionnet be carried out in a similar way, seduced by the conveniently simplifying terms of romance? Would such a solution to his problem turn out to be 'a miracle of cheapness' (218), like his purchase of the Hugo romances which inspired it? In describing these volumes, great emphasis is placed on their binding, suggesting superficiality and lack of penetration, but also drawing attention to the idea of enclosure, the setting of boundaries which define the arena for narrative games but are impossible to set in the real world. The implied criticisms of ludic and romantic narrative-making come together with a rhetorical question: 'Were seventy volumes in red-and-gold to be perhaps what he should most substantially have to show at Woollett as the fruit of his mission?' (218). Suggesting that the Hugo

[5] J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture,* trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge &*C* Kegan Paul, 1949), 4, 8-9.

romances may either replace or represent the achievement of his mission, this question implies two common charges made by opponents of fiction—that in choosing books over life one misses out on real experience, or that in trying to live through romantic fictions one's judgement is hopelessly led astray. The possibility is raised that Strether will either surrender to the charms of Victor Hugo and, failing to complete his mission at all, retire from the active world to a precinct of complete narrative immunity where irresponsible fictions are consumed and produced; or, that he will try to solve his problem by reducing it to the 'convenient' terms of a romantic plot and, judging it from a deluded perspective, produce an erroneous solution.

It is exactly as this question is asked—by Strether as well as by the narrator—that Madame de Vionnet approaches. Her appearance not only signifies the breaking of Strether's charmed circle of imaginative immunity and his relocation in the world of his 'problem', but raises the question of the relation between the two regions. For Strether realizes that Madame de Vionnet is one of the 'figures of mystery and anxiety' for whom he has been trying to invent a story. As an anonymous figure, she had 'reminded our friend ... of some fine, firm, concentrated heroine of an old story, something he had heard, read, something that, had he had a hand for drama, he might himself have written, renewing her courage, renewing her clearness, in splendidly protected meditation' (217-18). The fact that Strether's activity is more compositional than reconstructive (something 'he might himself have written') is harmless enough while his subject is anonymous, but it has repercussions once he realizes who she is, especially as, we are told directly, Strether lacks the experience of her cultural milieu to understand what her presence in the cathedral may mean—his 'reading of such matters was, it must be owned, confused' (218).

Strether's discovery that the object of his interest is in fact Madame de Vionnet confirms his romantic sense of the identity between the real and the imagined woman, although an alternative ironic sense of the gap between the two is suggested by the context of implied authorial criticism of Strether's susceptibility to romance. 'She was romantic for him far beyond what she could have guessed' (2.19), and this sense of romance, together with Strether's 'confused' reading of the significance of her presence in

the church, will have important effects on the way in which he readdresses the problems he left outside the precinct. His Protestant background gives him a naive logic to argue his case for taking his romantic vision of Madame de Vionnet as evidence for her virtue. 'Unassailably innocent was a relation that could make one of the parties to it so carry herself. If it wasn't innocent, why did she haunt the churches?—into which, given the woman he could believe he made out, she would never have come to flaunt an insolence of guilt' (220). The Woollett mind's use of exclusive categories—innocent or guilty, true or false—will later be exposed as inadequate to experience, but in the mean time Strether's romantic vision sustains his argument. His response to the anonymous woman confirms the opinion he has already formed about Madame de Vionnet's relation to Chad. The attitude of the heroine before the altar

> fitted admirably into the stand he had privately taken about her connection with Chad on the last occasion of his seeing them together. It helped him to stick fast at the point he had then reached; it was there, he had resolved, that he *would* stick, and at no moment since had it seemed as easy to do so. (220)

As Strether's view of the virtue of his friends' attachment still includes the mistaken belief that theirs is not a sexual relationship, his idle narrative play in the cathedral seems to have confirmed him in a deluded reading of the situation he is required once more to face. When the scene is read in these terms, the coincidence of Strether's meeting with Madame de Vionnet seems designed to show the dangers of allowing romance to flourish outside the jurisdiction of the real, and especially of attempting to read the real in terms of romance. The scene seems to be just another case of the author, as historian, inviting the reader to share his ironic perspective on the character's plot. Yet a very different reading is possible, which breaks away from this familiar model.

In the cathedral Strether is 'called upon to play his part in an encounter that deeply stirred his imagination' (217). This suggests both the idea of the calls of responsible involvement, and the idea that the author requires Strether to 'play' a 'part' which Strether might not have envisaged: in fact, it combines the two, equating the demands of the real world with those of the author.

However, it expresses both these demands in the language of artifice, and the requirement that Strether should play a certain part reminds us of the author's role, not as historian, but as a dramatist or fabulist, able to direct rather than just record his characters' actions. The model of fiction as history relied on the author having a more privileged access to the facts than his characters, but remaining passively faithful to those facts; however, the author's contrivance of coincidence at this point reveals not only privileged access to, but control over, the facts. This highlights the similarity between the author's activity and Strether's desire to recast experience imaginatively. Moreover, the engineering of a coincidence at this point forcing Strether to yield 'pastime' to 'encounter' (217) is a development with which Strether wholly concurs. Having had his vision of Madame de Vionnet inside the cathedral, he is extremely eager to leave the precinct and carry on their relationship in the world outside, using this vision as a basis. 'He had made up his mind and was impatient to get into the air; for his purpose was a purpose to be uttered outside' (220). This purpose is the decision to 'stick' to the idea of supporting her that his imaginative vision has encouraged; that vision was a product of the imaginative sanctuary, sheltered from the hard outer light of actual experience, but it is only in the outer air that it can have any value in experience. His decision to act upon it is presented not as a romantic delusion, but as a considered response to circumstances:

> What had come over him as he recognised her in the nave of the church was that holding off could be but a losing game from the instant she was worked for not only by her subtlety, but by the hand of fate itself. If all the accidents were to fight on her side—and by the actual showing they loomed large—he could only give himself up. (223)

In earlier James novels, individual 'subtlety' and impersonal 'fate' had tended to be opposed. Here, 'fate' and 'accidents' (the author's control of events) fight on the side of Madame de Vionnet's plans and encourage Strether's imaginative tendencies. Strether takes the meeting as an invitation to intervene (author-like) in events. In asking Madame de Vionnet to breakfast and pledging his support for her, Strether has moved from reconstruction to intervention, capable of producing rather than merely responding to facts.

For his position now is less one of delusion than a self-conscious use of the elasticity provided by the absence of full knowledge. His relation to Madame de Vionnet is now defined by a contract which is strongly fictional in nature, the complex conditions of which are expressed obliquely through the reference point of 'the convenient terms of Victor Hugo' (218):

> While she rose, as he would have called it, to the question of Victor Hugo, her voice itself, the light, low quaver of her deference to the solemnity about them, seemed to make her words mean something that they didn't mean openly. Help, strength, peace, a sublime support—she had not found so much of these things as that the amount wouldn't be sensibly greater for any scrap his appearance of faith in her might enable her to feel in her hand. (221)

Strether signals his willingness to meet this need:

> The sign would be that—though it was her own affair—he understood; the sign would be that—though it was her own affair—she was free to clutch. Since she took him for a firm object—much as he might to his own sense appear at times to rock—he would do his best to *be* one. (221)

He is able to muster this appearance of faith in her, to be the firm object she takes him for, because he has had, under the influence of 'the great romancer and the great romance' (220), a vision of her as a 'fine, firm, concentrated heroine' (217). Strether and Madame de Vionnet are not swapping delusions, but extending imaginative credit to each other, setting up a circular system of fictions which can intervene creatively in reality: if he believes she is a fine heroine, he can stand firm for her; with his support, she can be the heroine he sees in her. (It is exactly this kind of credit that Robert Acton was unwilling to extend to Eugenia in *The Europeans,* unable to believe that 'a finer degree of confidence in this charming woman would be its own reward' *(TE* ii. 108).) The imperfect grasp of fact in this contract—for example, Strether's equation of church-going with innocence—gives it a certain instability, which may simply result in error, but which also gives it a provisional, exploratory character. Strether has already had the experience of making a statement—that he would 'save' Madame de Vionnet—and then having to wait to find out what he meant by it (225). His renewal of his pledge still has something of this prospective quality, although he is yet to realize how much; the meaning of his decision to support Madame de

Vionnet will only unfold through experience, together with the unfolding meanings of the terms 'innocent' and 'virtuous attachment'.

Inside Notre Dame, Strether, struggling to understand an alien form of religion, remembers the concept of indulgence. 'He knew but dimly what indulgence, in such a place, might mean; yet he had, as with a soft sweep, a vision of how it might indeed add to the zest of active rites' (zi8). His indulgence in idle imaginings about anonymous figures has a potential value in the world of 'active rites', as his 'vague and fanciful kindness' (Z17) for these figures could be channelled into an active imaginative sympathy for similar figures in the world outside. More particularly, when pastime yields to encounter and he puts his vision of Madame de Vionnet to work in experience, a direct link is made between his idle game of making up stories, and what, in pragmatist terms, is the discovery of truth. Dropping his problem at the threshold of the church, he sees it as an act of cowardice to 'dodge' the things of the world in this way, 'to beg the question, not to deal with it in the hard outer light' (217); when he picks up his problem again on leaving, he has emerged with a means of facing it. In the 'indulgence' of the precinct, he has discovered how to use fiction as a mode of problem-solving. Such uses of fiction are serious play, a concept foreign to Strether, with his New England dichotomies, but familiar to Madame de Vionnet, who, once again, has taken all his categories by surprise:

> The thing that most moved him was really that she was so deeply serious. She had none of the portentous forms of it, but he had never come in contact, it struck him, with a spirit whose lightest throbs were so full. Mrs. Newsome, goodness knew, was serious; but it was nothing to this. (119)

Strether now bases his relationship to Madame de Vionnet, and his exploration of the meanings of the 'virtuous attachment', on a form of fictional play more serious than the 'portentous forms' of historical reconstruction he was originally commissioned to undertake.

Strether's experience in Notre Dame suggests how the reading of fiction could also be transformed from an apparently escapist activity into a serious confrontation of life. A reader may pick up a novel, as Strether enters the cathedral, under 'the impulse to let

things be, to give them time to justify themselves, or at least to pass' (216); in an article of 1897 James recorded such a motive for plunging into a series of novels:

> It was a supreme opportunity to test the spell of the magician, for one felt one was saved if a fictive world would open. I knocked in this way at a dozen doors, I read a succession of novels; with the effect perhaps of feeling more than ever before my individual liability in our great general debt to the novelists. The great thing to say for them is surely that at any given moment they offer us another world, another consciousness, an experience that, as effective as the dentist's ether, muffles the ache of the actual and, by helping us to an interval, tides us over and makes us face, in the return to the inevitable, a combination that may at least have changed. (LCi. 1399-^400)

This tribute to 'the great anodyne of art' *(LC* i. 1399) draws on a tradition of 'opiate' imagery used in both attacks on and defences of the novel, which emphasized the escapist value of fiction.[6] But Strether's attempt to escape his own problems by entering imaginatively into the lives of others—as novel-readers do—not only leads him to experience imaginative sympathy, the benefit of novel-reading most frequently cited in Victorian defences of fiction,[7] but radically affects his conduct of his own moral and social concerns. The use Strether makes of his 'reading' (218) of Madame de Vionnet as a romantic heroine suggests that fiction may not simply keep one occupied while waiting for reality to change, but may itself be the bridge to that changed reality: the game of fiction may have serious, practical results. Vernon Lee raised this idea in 'A Dialogue on Novels' in 1885:

> Emotional and scientific art, or rather emotional and scientific play . . . trains us to feel and comprehend—that is to say, to live. It trains us well or ill; and, the thing done as mere play becoming thus connected with

Stang, *The Theory of the Novel,* comments on Scott's use of opiate imagery for the novel (8). Stevenson wrote: 'The slightest novels are a blessing to those in distress, not chloroform itself a greater': see 'The Morality of the Profession of Letters', *Fortnightly Review* (Apr. 1881); reprinted in *Essays in the Art of Writing* (London: Chatto &C Windus, 1905), *69.* In contrast, in his essay 'On the Choice of Books', Frederic Harrison warned against the narcotic uses of literature *(Fortnightly Review,* NS 25 (1879), 510).

[7] See Stang, *The Theory of the Novel, 65-7.* The most eloquent exponent of the novel's duty to encourage imaginative sympathy was George Eliot: see e.g. *Adam Bede,* 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1859), ii. 3-9; and 'The Natural History of German Life', *Westminster Review* (July 1856); reprinted in *Essays of George Eliot,* ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 270-1.

practical matters, it is evident that it must submit to the exigencies of practical matters. From this passive acquiescence in the interests of our lives to an active influence therein is but one step; for the mere play desires receive a strange additional strength from the half-conscious sense that the play has practical results: it is the difference, in point of excitement, between gambling with markers and gambling with money.

In investing the anonymous woman in the cathedral with the qualities of a 'fine, firm, concentrated heroine' (217), Strether is gambling with markers; in making the same imaginative and moral investment in Madame de Vionnet, he is, so to speak, gambling with money. The process and results of his gamble have important implications for James's developing theory of fiction.

The motive for Strether's excursion to the country is slightly different from that which led him to visit Notre Dame—then he had been desperately seeking an escape from his problem, whereas now, already enjoying a much greater confidence in his handling of it, he is celebrating the feeling of freedom that Sarah's departure from Paris has given him. The trip to the country is an even more extravagant and less apologetic expression of indulgence in the holiday spirit and of retreat to a zone of imaginative play. In the cathedral Strether had played the game of inventing stories for anonymous people; in the country, his game is to find and explore a landscape which matches a Lambinet painting he had once wished to buy in Boston. Strether presents his exploration of the Lambinet landscape (which he easily finds) as a game of reconstruction, a question of finding an original, but what he seems to be doing rather is turning a natural landscape into a work of art—the game seems to be based, not on the idea of a 'restoration to nature', but on the conceit of actually entering a painting and, miraculously, 'freely walking about in it' (398). 'The oblong gilt frame disposed its enclosing lines', and within it, the elements of the scene 'fell into a composition, full of felicity'; Strether finds himself 'boring so deep into his impression and his idleness that he might fairly have got through them again and reached the maroon-coloured wall' on which he had first seen the picture hanging (398). His fanciful attitude to his day also involves a literary element; if the scene is a picture by Lambinet, the events (as he anticipates them) are a story by Maupassant (399).

Lee, 'Dialogue', 388.

The sense of idleness and freedom prevails, and yet, in contrast to his state of mind inside Notre Dame, Strether does not feel detached from his problem; rather, building on his experience in the cathedral which merged 'pastime' and 'encounter', he has reconciled it with, and involved it in, his indulgence in leisure. Besides being 'amused' (402) by his outing, 'he had never yet struck himself as so engaged with others, so in midstream of his drama. ... He had but had to be at last well out of it to feel it, oddly enough, still going on' (402-3). An expression of this sense of involvement is the time he spends thinking over his relationship with Madame de Vionnet, and the new terms, since Notre Dame and especially since the departure of Sarah, on which it is based. Once again, Victor Hugo serves as a pretext or point of reference for renegotiations of this relationship. In Notre Dame Strether had felt that Madame de Vionnet's talk of 'the great romancer' really signified a plea for an appearance of faith from him, to which he had responded with his proposed fictional contract. This is now taken even further when, in recalled or imagined conversations, Strether uses a discussion of 'the difference between Victor Hugo and the English poets'[9] to communicate his own appeal:

> Yet it had served all the purpose of his appearing to have said to her: 'Don't like me, if it's a question of liking me, for anything obvious and clumsy that I've, as they call it, "done" for you; like me—well, like me, hang it, for anything else you choose. So, by the same propriety, don't be for me simply the person I've come to know through my awkward connection with Chad ... Be for me, please, with all your admirable tact and trust, just whatever I may show you it's a present pleasure to me to think you.' (401-2)

This imaginative 'propriety' seems to be the result of the idea learnt in Notre Dame, that indulgence may help the performance of active rites: Strether now plots his relationship to Madame de Vionnet through the same kind of narrative-making games in which he had indulged in the cathedral, and prefers that she treat him likewise. His experience now in the country, where his game of finding the Lambinet landscape seems to be turning out so successfully, encourages the premise of this 'propriety': that life can indeed yield the fruits of indulgence.

[9] In the *New York Edition*, the reference to Victor Hugo is replaced by 'Shakespeare and the musical glasses' *(NYE* xxii. 251).

Yet there is something ominous, too good to be true, in the way that everything 'really and truly' (399) falls into place for him. When he admits that, if he were to see the actual Lambinet painting again, he might suffer 'a drop or a shock' (397), we may wonder if likewise, any disappointment or crisis will attend this exercise of restoring it to nature. So far, all that he has found has fitted within the frame, which 'had drawn itself out for him as much as you please; but that was just his luck' (40Z). Strether's luck, however, is generally bad luck, or so he has always felt.[10] Is the elasticity of the frame just a means of luring him into a trap? Perhaps Strether is in danger of being trapped inside this frame, and will only escape with its destruction, thereby losing the terms of indulgence which it offers him. Most blatant of all, in suggesting an imminent crash, is the comment that his drama is nearly finished, 'its catastrophe all but reached' (403). There is a double perspective in this statement; Strether's confidence that he has all but resolved his problem is undermined by the implicit authorial suggestion that a catastrophe, moral as well as formal, still awaits him.

Fact—the fact of the sexual intimacy between Chad and Madame de Vionnet—intrudes on his world of fancy as 'exactly the right thing' that his picture requires (407). The conflict between morality and aesthetics expressed in the tension between different meanings of the word 'right' indicates the problem with the imaginative 'propriety' (again both a moral and an aesthetic term) through which Strether has been operating. Aesthetic matters have their own rules which are independent of moral concerns, but an attempt to conduct moral concerns on an aesthetic basis is always potentially liable to a conflict of interests. This conflict now brings into relief the changes in Strether's values over the course of the novel. Initially, he had regularly tried to precipitate a crisis in order to hasten the resolution of his business; however, the delaying tactics of the Parisians averted this, and his exposure to pleasure which these delays entailed brought about the collapse of his old moral scheme and thei.creation of a new one. According to this new one, Strether does not even want to mention his 'awkward connection with Chad' (401), much less bring about a crisis in it. However, the imposition of this crisis upon him recalls him to some of his old attitudes.

See e.g. 263, 2.81, 351.

The river scene may be read as the most masterly of James's ironic reversals in the tradition of the author's history defeating the character's plot. Strether's 'theory . . . had bountifully been that the facts were, specifically, none of his business, and were, over and above, so far as one had to do with them, intrinsically beautiful' (410). The evidence of sexual intimacy seems not only to explode the substance of this 'theory', but to throw into disrepute the means by which he had reached this position. He had, 'bountifully', extended an imaginative credit to Chad and Madame de Vionnet, basing his opinion of them on the fruits of narrative play rather than on a reconstruction of facts. Now that the facts can no longer be ignored, the values of play, idleness, and make-believe, all celebrated in his ramble through the countryside, turn sharply sour. The 'idle play' of the boat's oars are 'the aid to the full impression' (404-5) it makes—that full impression being a blast of disillusionment. Madame de Vionnet's parasol which makes 'so fine a pink point in the shining scene' (407) is, aesthetically, exactly the right thing for focusing the elements of the composition, functioning as does Miss Gostrey's red ribbon at the dinner in London (38), or the *omelette aux tomates* at the breakfast by the Seine (2.23). But, instead of being the starting-point for fresh flights of sensuous and aesthetic play, the parasol acts as an agent of deception, 'shifting as if to hide [the lady's] face' (407). Such a pretence 'out there in the eye of nature' (408) is an affront to old standards of veracity, and the 'violence' of this particular deception is averted only by other insincerities. Strether forces the others to recognize him by giving 'large play' (407) to the signs of joyful recognition, to which they respond with an equally face-saving 'performance' (411) to perpetuate the pretence that they are not lovers. While 'the amount of explanation called into play' makes the situation again elastic (408), play is no longer innocent and disinterested; as a means of making an awkward situation workable again, it is no longer free from the intention to deceive. Strether's unease throughout the evening crystallizes with the benefit of retrospective analysis: 'He kept making of it that there had been simply a *lie* in the charming affair—a lie on which one could now, detached and deliberate, perfectly put one's finger' (411).

In this frame of mind the conventions of fiction, explored in Notre Dame, now come to seem rather shabby. Where Madame

de Vionnet had been, in the cathedral, the 'fine, firm, concentrated heroine of an old story' (217), Chad is now 'the coatless hero of the idyl' (407), a figure from melodrama or cheap romance. The complex blend of ironic awareness with suspension of disbelief inherent in the fictional contract has been reduced to a gentlemen's agreement not to give away a lady's deceptions:

> It was as if [Chad] had humoured her to the extent of letting her lie without correction—almost as if, really, he would be coming round in the morning to set the matter, as between Strether and himself, right. Of course he couldn't quite come; it was a case in which a man was obliged to accept the woman's version, even when fantastic. (412)

The word 'fiction' is drawn into disrepute and used as another term for lying: 'fiction and fable *were*, inevitably, in the air, and not as a simple term of comparison, but as a result of things said' (410). Strether's moral difficulty is in having to swallow, not just 'the central fact itself (413), but the fictions used to try to cover it up. 'It was the quantity of make-believe involved, and so vividly exemplified, that most disagreed with his spiritual stomach' (413). The equation of fiction with lies, and the dishonourable associations of play and make-believe, recall the familiar language of hostility to fiction, and the attitudes to which 'The Art of Fiction' responded with its defence of fiction as history.

That theory of fiction had led to a particular narrative practice: the presentation of the narrator as historian, the insistence on a moral and epistemological difference between the narrative-making activities of the characters and those of the author, and the defeat of the characters' plots by facts to which the narrator is faithful but for which he is not responsible. But in this scene, in which the intrusion of fact brings Strether's imaginative world crashing down around him, stress on improbability and coincidence combines with a dense network of reflexive images to foreground the way in which the narrative has been manipulated to achieve this effect. Manipulation of the narrative contrives the collapse of Strether's framed artistic world, but the framing devices emphasize the artfulness of the author's intervention.

Hints about the author's intentions are scattered throughout the chapter. The aside that Strether's motive for going to the country is 'artless enough, no doubt' (397) is a not particularly artless clue to the artfulness of the author's intentions. The insistence on the arbitrariness of Strether's decision to leave the train where he does highlights the improbability of his meeting his friends—even perhaps insists on its being more improbable than it really is. The remark that Strether 'threw himself on the general amiability of the day for the hint of where to alight' (398) raises the question of the 'amiability' of the author's plans for him in placing the lost Lambinet and the found lovers in the same apparently randomly chosen spot in the French countryside: 'the train pulled up at just the right spot, and he found himself getting out as securely as if to keep an appointment' (398). His appointment is with fate or, to put it less melodramatically, with facts—both of which, in novelistic terms, mean the author's intentions for him. The narrator suggests—and in so doing sets up a confidential relation with the reader which makes Strether the butt of patronizing irony—that it 'will be felt of him that he could amuse himself, at his age, with very small things if it be again noted that his appointment was only with a faded Boston enthusiasm' (398); it is also an appointment with 'Boston "reallys" ' (153), absolute facts, for which Strether's enthusiasm has indeed faded. His meeting with the lovers is called a 'marvel' (407), 'too prodigious, a chance in a million' (407), 'the mere miracle of the encounter' (408). Not only general exclamations of surprise, but more specific literary terms, are called upon to describe the coincidence—it is 'as queer as fiction, as farce' (407), an occasion marked by its *'invraisemblance'* (408). The characters play up 'the prodigy of their convergence' (410) as a way of covering up the awkwardness of their situation—they 'could so much better, at last, on either side, treat it as a wild fable than as anything else' (408)—and through them the narrator is also able to draw our attention markedly to the coincidence, even perhaps to make more of it than the circumstance really warrants. As the scene is focalized through Strether's consciousness, and much of it is narrated in free indirect discourse, it is sometimes difficult to attribute responsibility for the language used; some of the language of coincidence and romance may have been actually spoken by the characters, some may be Strether's way of describing the situation to himself or summarizing the substance of their conversation, and some may be the narrator's way of rendering the conversation and Strether's thought about the situation. In any case, the characters' need to emphasize the coincidence to pass off their

awkwardness allows the narrator to press his own point about the artificiality of the plotting to which they have been subjected. Previously, Strether had noticed that one wall of the inn is 'painted the most improbable shade. That was part of the amusement—as if to show that the fun was harmless' (403). The piece of plotting which brings him together with his friends at this inn is equally improbable, although the *invraisemblance* is used in this case to show that the fun—of attempting to conduct his moral affairs on a sensuous and aesthetic basis—is not harmless at all. Strether worries that the others might secretly suspect him of 'having plotted this coincidence' (408), but the language in which the whole scene is narrated emphasizes the author's responsibility for the plot: fiction and fable are in the air, not just as a 'term of comparison'—as in reflexive references—but literally, 'as a result of things said' (410), of the nature of the events narrated.

The author hands his characters a situation so awkward that, 'arrange it as they would' (408), they can make nothing of it; the only way they can make it at all workable is to 'treat it as a wild fable' (408) which is, we realize, exactly what it is. The author arranges events to show the power of undeniable, 'natural' facts, but at the same time reveals that the 'facts' of his own narrative are not 'natural' but contrived. With the one piece of blatantly artificial plotting the author gives both his characters and himself away. He has done what, in 'The Art of Fiction', James accused Trollope of doing—committed the unpardonable sin of revealing that he is not a historian, but a fabulist capable of giving events any turn he likes best. In exposing the flaws in Strether's plotting of his situation, the author has torn off his own 'historic mask' *(LC* i. 1343). The conventions of fiction as history required verisimilitude and plausibility of narrative; that the plot of *The Ambassadors* at this point displays neither of these qualities is positively forced upon our attention. This means that the river scene differs significantly from ironic reversals in James's earlier novels, where the author's role as a historian was insisted upon, and we may ask if it really has the function of a complete reversal, forcing the hero to give up the plot that it has plotted to expose.

The river scene disproves Strether's theory that a 'virtuous attachment' must be sexually innocent, and in having held this

theory he is shown to have been deceived and self-deceived. However, over the course of the novel, Strether has gradually been discovering that there are other ways in which an attachment may be virtuous, discoveries which have been linked to romantic ideas such as his vision of Madame de Vionnet in Notre Dame. In testing these ideas against fact, the encounter at the river tests whether Strether's moral vision has developed far enough for him to leave behind his original equation of virtue with sexual propriety (a Woollen equation) while still sustaining the moral implications of the imaginative superstructure built on that foundation. Drawing on James's famous definitions of the real and the romantic in the preface to *The American*, we may read the river scene as the intrusion of 'the things we cannot possibly *not* know, sooner or later, in one way or another' into an imaginative world created 'through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire' *(LC* ii. 1063). The 'possibly scandalous case' of romance *(LC* ii. 1058) is subjected to awkward questions, but this interrogation of the romantic by the real does not necessarily signify the negation of Strether's imaginings.[11] In looking back over the events of the day, Strether turns his thoughts from the quantity of so distasteful 'make-believe' in the lovers' actions to 'the other feature of the show, the deep, deep truth of the intimacy revealed' (413). The 'show' put on by Chad and Madame de Vionnet teaches Strether a 'deep, deep truth', for the fact of their intimacy is revealed by the very expertness with which the lovers silently communicate to each other how best to sustain their 'make-believe'. At the same time, the 'show' of the author's artifice has been employed to force Strether, not to abandon his theory, but to make it take account of facts. The intrusion of historical truth (through the vehicle of

My reading is opposed to the view put forward by Robert E. Garis in 'The Two Lambert Strethers: A New Reading of *The Ambassadors', Modern Fiction Studies,* 7 (1961-2.), 305-16. Garis argues that the river scene simply exposes Strether's delusions, demolishes his imaginative constructions, and demonstrates that he has learnt nothing in Paris—a view extended by David McWhirter in *Desire and Love in Henry James: A Study of the Late Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 67-81, as part of an argument that Strether's imagination is incapable of engaging with reality. Rather, I agree with Paul B. Armstrong that the river scene shows Strether achieving a 'postcritical faith' through a 'dialectic of faith and suspicion': see *The Challenge of Bewilderment: Understanding and Representation in James, Conrad, and Ford* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 90.

deception and artifice) into his imaginative world does not lead to a merely passive consumption of literal, vulgar fact. Rather, it suggests William James's 'view of "reality," as something resisting, yet malleable, which controls our thinking as an energy that must be taken "account" of incessantly (tho *[sic]* not necessarily merely copied)'.[11] Strether's way of dealing with the outbreak of fact is to begin 'supposing' its various meanings: for it may mean (in the first edition) 'everything' (413), or (in the *New York Edition)* 'innumerable and wonderful things' *(NYE* xxii. 266), which temper, but do not disqualify, his attitude towards Chad and Madame de Vionnet and the virtue of their attachment.

The novel does not end with the ironic reversal of the eleventh book; a whole further book is devoted to the question of what Strether will make of the information he has been forced to take in. This is an important departure from the pattern of earlier works such as *In the Cage* where, in the face of new information, the heroine speedily capitulates to the superior force of the facts of the real world, and the story ends as soon as she has made an irrevocable commitment to these; even in *The Portrait of a Lady,* where Isabel's reverses of fortune occur in the middle of the novel, there is no respite from their effects in the second half, and true enlightenment does not come until near the end of the novel. In *The Ambassadors,* the initiative for defining the meaning of his own experience, and possibly intervening in the experience of others, passes back to Strether as he at last finds out what he meant by pledging to support Madame de Vionnet. As he indulges in some final pieces of retrospective and prospective plotting, two opposed perspectives on his activity are intertwined.

Although he decides to stand by both the substance and form of the resolutions he had arrived at before the encounter by the river, Strether does suffer something of 'a revulsion in favour of the principles of Woollett' (436). This interaction of the values of the old and the new morality places terms such as 'play', 'joke', 'lie', and 'appearance' in an ambivalent light, as the language of hostility to fiction is often used to narrate Strether's renewed commitment to the uses of fiction in understanding and directing experience. Most of this rhetoric is attributable to Strether rather than to the narrator, and his resolution of his problem is not

[11] William James, *Pragmatism,* 124.

made the object of any detached authorial evaluation. This means that the mixture of irony towards, and belief in, the powers of fiction is part of a single complex of attitudes, and is not separable into opposed authorial and heroic perspectives as in James's earlier works. The events of *The Ambassadors,* combined with its mode of narration, have led to a new set of attitudes towards fiction being formed.

Strether is recalled to his 'awkward connection with Chad' (401) by a telegram from Madame de Vionnet, requesting a meeting at which it is inevitable that she will ask him what stand he has taken on the affair, given the events of the day before. The possibility of not seeing her, but giving up the whole affair, holds a 'sharp' appeal for him (418), which is overcome not so much by a conviction of responsibility as by the atmosphere of the Postes et Telegraphes in which he writes his reply. The description of this place recalls not only the physical setting of *In the Cage,* but its world of false reports and misinterpretation, its view of the collective conduct of a huge, frivolous, pernicious narrative, and its use of the rhetoric of the argument that fiction is 'wicked'. Here we find again

> the something in the air of these establishments . . . the influence of the types, the performers, concocting their messages; the little prompt Paris women arranging, pretexting goodness knew what, driving the dreadful needle-pointed public pen at the dreadful sand-strewn public table: implements that symbolised for Strether's too interpretative innocence something more acute in manner, more sinister in morals, more fierce in the national life. (418)

Here, Strether seems to have re-entered the world of *In the Cage,* so pointedly left behind in the first chapter of the novel when 'the lady in the glass cage' is 'superseded' by Maria Gostrey (6). Writing his telegram now, he identifies himself with 'the fierce, the sinister, the acute' and becomes 'mixed up with the typical tale of Paris' (418)—that dreadful little drama chronicling the breakdown of one's moral scheme. Yet Strether accepts this compromise of his innocence with a new humility and a new compassion for his countless anonymous partners in crime. 'They were no worse than he, in short, and he no worse than they—if, queerly enough, no better' (418). However, this more cynical version of the 'vague and fanciful kindness' (217) he had felt for

his fellow fugitives in Notre Dame is followed by an immediate revulsion from the idea of indulgence in imaginative pleasures. It would be a pleasure to see Madame de Vionnet again in her beautiful, old apartments, but (he asks himself) 'what, precisely, was he doing with shades of pleasure now, and why hadn't he, properly and logically, compelled her to commit herself to whatever of disadvantage and penalty the situation might throw up?' (419). Strether now wants to reverse the 'propriety' (401) by which he had formerly wished to define his relationship with Madame de Vionnet: he feels he should meet her, not in a privileged zone of imaginative irresponsibility, but in a place bound by the ordinary discipline of the real and the right; rather than avoiding awkwardness, an ache for old spiritual standards makes him positively seek it, for only in 'awkwardness', 'danger', 'inconvenience', and 'sternness' can he avoid those 'shades of pleasure' connected with an indulgence and immunity which is now 'sinister' (419). He needs to feel 'that somebody was paying something somewhere and somehow, that they were at least not all floating together on the silver stream of impunity' (419).

This return to puritan morality is, however, more rhetorical than actual; filling in the day 'idling, lounging' (42.0), Strether finds that 'if he lived on thus with the sinister from hour to hour, it proved an easier thing than one might have supposed in advance' (419). He reflects that if the Pococks had unexpectedly returned and seen him now, they would have cause for scandal, but 'fate failed to administer even *that* sternness' (420). The author contrives no more coincidental recognition scenes to arrest the course of Strether's development, but leaves him to float on 'the silver stream of impunity', and see where it carries him.

It carries him to a decision to continue his support for Madame de Vionnet. In the terms that he attributes to her, his own impunity and his continuing support for her are entwined: 'Didn't she just wish to assure him that *she* now took it all [his ordeal] and so kept it; that he was absolutely not to worry any more, was only to rest on his laurels and continue generously to help her?' (420). The construction is logical in terms of her own morality, wherein the 'only safe thing is to give. It's what plays you least false' (427). It is questionable how innocent, how truly disinterested, is that use of the word 'play', but the game of giving she proposes falls in with the game (or contract) of the appearance of

faith which Strether had felt she implicitly proposed in Notre Dame. Behind the appearance of faith lies the possibility of real faith, for the decision 'generously to help her' is underwritten by the reinstatement of the seemingly discredited theory which 'had bountifully been that the facts were, specifically, none of his business, and were, over and above, so far as one had to do with them, intrinsically beautiful' (410). As Strether later explains to Miss Gostrey, 'so much of it was none of my business—as I saw my business. It isn't even now' (440); while for the intrinsic beauty of the facts 'there was much to be said' (439). He is now able to explain and defend little Bilham's gentlemanly lie, under the influence of which he first rethought his attitude towards the relationship. He declares that

> it was but a technical lie—he classed the attachment as virtuous. That was a view for which there was much to be said—and the virtue came out for me hugely. There was, of course, a great deal. I got it full in the face, and I haven't, you see, done with it yet. (439)

At the river Strether had received 'full in the face' facts which might have undermined his belief in the lovers, but here he makes clear that his overriding impression has been of the value of the relationship. In exploring the meaning of the term 'virtuous attachment', Strether has also explored new bases for knowledge and morality. The context in which little Bilham had spoken of the 'virtuous attachment' was one of humane scepticism and stoic acceptance: 'What more than a vain appearance does the wisest of us know? I commend you . . . the vain appearance' (150). Strether now defends the virtue of the attachment in the full ironic knowledge that he may be doing no more than clinging to a vain appearance. There are still elements of both the 'grandly vague' and the 'grandly cynical' (439) in his present stand: both attitudes have brought him out at the same point, a position in which irony and romance meet.

In testing the value of a 'vain appearance' as the basis of committed action, the novel anticipates many aspects of the theory of truth William James called 'pragmatism', which may also be read as a theory of fiction. Like Mr Wentworth in *The Europeans*, Strether is subjected to the attempts of his foreign (or expatriate) friends to 'beguile him into assent to doubtful inductions' *(TE* ii. 223)—a dangerous power which was often ascribed

to the novel as well. He gives provisional assent to Bilham's proposition, because it offers a means of orienting himself in the flux of experience, providing an intelligible point of reference in the midst of new things for which he has as yet neither names nor terms of judgement. Little Bilham seems to realize what William James later argued, that an *'outree* explanation, violating all our preconceptions, would never pass for a true account of a novelty. . . . New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity.'[13] As Strether enters more deeply into the lives of his friends, the conservative term, 'virtuous attachment', is stretched by new experience until it yields a radically new meaning, a new truth: that virtue is more generously and variously defined than a strict puritanical morality would allow.[14] Little Bilham's words, which at first have the status of a 'vain appearance', come to satisfy William James's requirements for truth as 'any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part', an opinion which 'gratifies the individual's desire to assimilate the novel in his experience to his beliefs in stock'.[15] Although the use of the term 'virtuous attachment' at first misleads Strether, with his increased experience his own use of the term shifts from error to fiction, as he is no longer duped by it but comes to understand its provisional, exploratory quality. Thus, when he is faced with information which would have contradicted his original understanding of the term, his new understanding of it is not disqualified. Rather, having gained 'the richest intimacy with facts',[16] his theory is able to survive as a means of understanding and possibly changing reality. The fictional nature of this is defined by a complex mixture of ironic detachment and willing suspension of disbelief.

[13] William James, *Pragmatism,* 35.

[14] The use of conservative terms to accommodate new intentions is also an important aspect of the working of legal fictions; see Lon L. Fuller, *Legal Fictions* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1967), 15, 56-65. Fuller points out that scientific fictions also work on the same principle, whereby 'a new situation is made "thinkable" by converting it into familiar terms' (72). William James found in science a model for his own thinking about the employment of useful, although not necessarily true, formulations to bring old and new ideas together *(Pragmatism,* 33, 39).

;* ibid. 34,36.

Ibid. 23.

Strether has finally understood the language game played by his Parisian friends.[17] In calling the affair 'virtuous', little Bilham was, effectively, asking him 'what happens if we regard it as virtuous?' Maria Gostrey had played a similar game of 'what if?' when Strether first arrived in Paris—what if Chad is refined and not brutalized? what if the woman who has changed him is good? Strether's participation in this game suggests the possible results of imaginative participation in a work of fiction. Strether discovers two answers to the question behind little Bilham's statement. The first is that if he credits the relationship with value, he will gain a new perspective on an existing situation, bringing out aspects of it which he would otherwise not have been able to see. Long before he articulated his theory of pragmatism, William James had written that 'philosophic study means the habit of always seeing an alternative, of not taking the usual for granted, of making conventionalities fluid again, of imagining foreign states of mind'.[18] The reading (and writing) of fiction could mean the same thing; the habit of 'imagining foreign states of mind' is, of course, foregrounded in a literal sense by James's international theme, but any fiction requires the reader to enter imaginatively into some kind of alien experience. Strether's assent to little Bilham's description of the affair carries him from a conservative to a radical understanding of the term 'virtuous', and shows him how the apparently false description is really true. But there is another sense in which the proposition has an educative value, independently of its truth, and this is the second answer to little Bilham's implicit question. For Strether, imaginative sympathy leads to a whole new moral scheme, and there is a sense in which it becomes irrelevant whether Chad's and Madame de Vionnet's relationship really is virtuous or not: the point is that Strether believes that such a relationship could be virtuous, and this belief is part of a new approach to experience which he will continue to hold even if he doubts the degree to which the lovers—especially Chad—justify it. Like James's exercises in operative irony, little Bilham's formula 'implies and projects the possible other case,

[17] My interpretation of this expands on the view put forward by Ruth Bernard Yeazell of Parisian talk which, through its ambiguity, prevents Strether from drawing hasty conclusions: see *Language and Knowledge in the Late Novels of Henry James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 71-6.

William James, 'The Teaching of Philosophy in Our Colleges', *Nation,* 23 (1876), 178.

the case rich and edifying' which, regardless of whether he can give 'chapter and verse' for it, is justified by 'the sincerities, the lucidities, the utilities that stand behind it' *{LC* ii. 1229).[19] The power of the artist 'to *create* the record, in default of any other enjoyment of it' was defended by James as 'the high and helpful public and, as it were, civic use of the imagination' (ii. 12.30), for 'where is the work of the intelligent painter of life if not precisely in some such aid given to true meanings to be born?' (ii. 1231). Fiction asks us to entertain new possibilities, and makes novel situations thinkable, simply by requiring the reader, at least for the duration of the reading process, to think them. Once the idea of a virtuous attachment outside the bounds of conventional morality becomes thinkable to Strether, he can set about helping to make it workable, by encouraging Madame de Vionnet to hold firm and trying to persuade Chad to keep faith with her. Arguing the virtue of the attachment becomes the basis of Strether's final diplomatic mission, the attempt to keep Chad in Paris. As he becomes an ambassador for Madame de Vionnet instead of Mrs Newsome, the changed terms of Strether's mission reflect the comments made by Sidney in his defence of poetry: 'And therefore, as in history, looking for truth, they may go away full fraught with falsehood, so in poesy, looking but for fiction, they shall use the narration but as an imaginative ground-plot of a profitable invention.'[10]

The theory of fiction that forms the basis of Strether's moral education in *The Ambassadors* is repeatedly tested against resistant facts and ironic perspectives, and this process continues to the end of the novel, becoming particularly intense in Strether's final meeting with Chad. Having made up his mind about Chad's situation in Paris, Strether now attempts to intervene directly in it. He tells Chad that he will be 'guilty of the last infamy' (445) if he leaves Madame de Vionnet, and he announces his intention of informing Sarah that he will not only be advising Chad not to leave Paris, but, if possible, 'absolutely preventing' him from even

[19] Hocks also notes the similarities between operative irony and William James's pragmatist, pluralistic thought *{Henry James and Pragmatistic Thought,* 98-102).

Sir Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry* (1595), reprinted in *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney,* ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan Van Dorsten (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 103.

thinking of it (447). Chad meets this direct injunction with apparent insincerity and a jokey indirection. He throws in the topic of his new-found enthusiasm for advertising, which sits oddly with his protestations that he intends to stay in Paris and forgo the chance to run the advertising for his family's business. The way in which he describes his interest is a succinct but ghastly parody of Strether's whole experience in Paris: 'He appeared at all events to have been looking into the question and had encountered a revelation' (449-50). Chad continues to expound the seriousness of this new 'art', 'as if for the joke of it—almost as if his friend's face amused him' (450). When Strether uneasily asks why he speaks of a subject which is now irrelevant, Chad assures him that his 'interest's purely platonic' (450)—another ghastly parody, this time of the assurances Strether was given as to the virtue of his attachment to Madame de Vionnet. Is this assurance, too, a 'technical lie' (439) of which Strether is again to be the dupe? In Chad's hands, jokes and lies have become menacing quantities again, and his flippancy undermines the concept of serious play that has been developed through the novel. When he seems, to Strether, to dance 'an irrelevant hornpipe or jig' (451), Chad seems to have joined the ranks of those whom he had formerly accused of merely playing at life (260), his own family at Woollett. One feels sure that Chad is lying about his intention to stay in Paris, and the forms of his lies are both sinister and frivolous. This puts the whole story of his commitment to Madame de Vionnet in the light of a treacherous fiction, which finds its image in one of the many pleasing objects Chad had earlier put in Strether's way to seduce him into supporting his way of life. Once before when waiting for Chad at his apartment, Strether had found everything disposed for his convenience, including 'the novel half uncut, the novel lemon-coloured and tender, with the ivory knife athwart it like a dagger in a contadina's hair' (367). The fiction Chad makes available to Strether in Paris is just such an enticing mixture of beauty and excitement, offering both a chance to recover his lost youth (for it is like one of the 'lemon-coloured volumes' he kept as souvenirs of his youthful trip to Paris (64)), and a sense of potentiality (it is only 'half uncut'). But like a *contadina* with a dagger in her hair, Chad's fiction is also possibly dangerous and treacherous; having been seduced, Strether may yet be betrayed by it.

The open ending of the novel leaves unanswered the question of whether Strether will be betrayed by this particular fiction: we cannot conclusively say whether Strether has been right in defending the relationship as virtuous or successful in helping to preserve it. What is evident, however, is the deep change in Strether's thinking as he abandons a-priori principles for flexible encounters with experience on an imaginative basis. Strether's commitment to the moral and problem-solving value of the fictive imagination is challenged by Chad's association with the negative aspects of jokes, lies, and fictions, and by the revival of puritan attitudes in the description of the Postes et Telegraphes. Nevertheless, this challenge is not a disqualification, but simply emphasizes that motive and use define the value of fictions in the world. Strether is sceptical about his own narrative imagination and about the nature and uses of fiction in Chad's social circle, but he is not so sceptical as to believe that only arbitrary choices are to be made between available fictions. Rather, he discriminates on moral, practical, and aesthetic grounds, pragmatically limiting his scepticism to endorse fictions which may operate, at least, as a 'tribute to the ideal',[11] and at best may turn out to be practically workable revisions of experience.

The role of the author in guiding Strether's progress from delusion to fictional competence is highly emphasized. Authorial intervention in Notre Dame encourages Strether to encounter the world on the basis of his 'pastime' of imaginative play; in the river scene, coincidence forces him to take a closer account of facts. In engineering these encounters which teach Strether to balance freedom from and responsibility to facts, the author gives himself away as being implicated in the business of creatively shaping, rather than just passively recording, experience.[21] Ironic

This phrase is used repeatedly in the novel, in many contexts: see e.g. 21, 49, 3i|-i5-

The debate over authorial intrusion in *The Ambassadors* is of only limited relevance to this. The survey of comments by the first-person narrator in John E. Tilford, Jr., 'James the Old Intruder', *Modern Fiction Studies,* 4 (1958), 157-64, usefully corrects the overstatement of the silencing of the narrating voice made by Percy Lubbock in *The Craft of Fiction* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1921), 147. However, both Tilford's argument and William B. Thomas's objections to it in 'The Author's Voice in *The Ambassadors', Journal of Narrative Technique,* 1 (1971), 108-21, are concerned with narrative method rather than with the fictional status of the text, with how events are narrated rather than with whether these events are shown to be fictitious.

perspectives on Strether's activity both rebound on the author and are shared by Strether himself, whose final view of his own narrative-making games reflects his propensity for 'sad ironic play' (287). The narrative model in which the author's 'history' is differentiated from the character's 'plot' has at last been abandoned, and the similarities between the projects of hero and author are revealed. This raises the idea of fiction not as a transcript of reality, but as a mode of encountering it, setting up a contract or game which calls for the reader's enlightened complicity, rather than attempting to delude the reader as to its historical status.[13] Lacking the intention to deceive, this activity cannot be classed with 'lies', for the fiction declares its fictionally. Like Strether, the reader is encouraged, not to measure the fiction against an a-priori standard of reality (as the model of historical narrative required), but to lend his or her provisional assent to the arrangement or interpretation of reality it offers. The novel provides an exploratory, imaginative space, into which we may enter in order to test new extensions of, new perspectives on, and new ways of orienting ourselves within, experience. Fiction, as a means of proposing new readings of experience, does not need to hide the fact that it is conducting its serious moral affairs on the basis of aesthetic play. The dichotomies of truth and fiction, seriousness and play, have been overcome, and with them the need for fiction to wear the mask of history.

[13] On fictional games and contracts, see Martin Price, *Forms of Life: Character and Moral Imagination in the Novel* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983), 1-24, and Karlheinz Stierle, 'The Reading of Fictional Texts', trans. Inge Crosman and Thekla Zachrau, in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation,* ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 83-105.