Henry James's "The Middle Years" (1893) and Its Vergilian Undercurrents

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In a number of Henry James's shorter fictions of the 1880s and 1890s, he betrays--through the portrayal of writers, their artistic processes, and their critics--his recognition of, and anxieties about, the necessarily symbiotic relationship between the author of a text and its reader.[1] This relationship is poignantly probed and teased apart by James through the bond established between the writer-protagonist and his newly befriended admirer in "The Middle Years," in which "the birth of the reader [is] achieved quite literally at the cost of the death of the author" (Sullivan 63; cf. Barthes 148). Dencombe, the protagonist--in certain aspects an avatar of his creator, so prone to reworking his own writings--is given to detailed revises of his texts and is reluctant to yield hermeneutic authority to his readers. He sets about the revision of his newly published writings, insisting on an imminent (but unattainable) actualization of his completed work, and, in so doing, seeks to maintain interpretive control and displays "a preference for future over past time, for the text-to-come rather than the one achieved" (Sullivan 33). In this respect, the portrayal of the Jamesian Dencombe prefigures the more thorough-going and experimental habits of revision among the future-oriented high modernists.[2]

It is the contention of this essay that, in characterizing his protagonist's compositional processes and his literary aspirations, James deploys lexis and imagery used by Vergil in the Georgics to describe his own creative exertions and to articulate his intended future progress as a writer; James's familiarity with the biographical tradition associated with Vergil may also be discerned.[3] Given, moreover, that Dencombe is often thought of as reflecting several aspects of his creator's character and concerns, his Vergilian portrayal has ramifications for how we think about James's fashioning of his own authorial persona, his trajectory as a writer, and his hope that his literary career will amount to something significant.[4] James's eclectic schooling notwithstanding, it is clear that he shared the detailed knowledge of Vergil common to contemporary men of his class in the United States, the United Kingdom, and continental Europe: he had read the great poet's works while at school, and a knowledge of all of them was required for admission to Harvard, where James was briefly a student.[5] In a study on James's exploitation of Greek tragic models, Lerner and Cargill claim that he, though conspicuously and willingly engaging in classical allusion in his letters, "deliberately suppressed [it] in the bulk of his fiction, feeling perhaps that it was inappropriate to the contemporary tone he wished to give his writing" (316–17). Be that as it may, they seem rightly to suggest that where James flaunts his classical

learning--by (mis)quoting, for example, an aphorism from the Georgics in Latin in "The Middle Years"--he does so in a calculated manner, encouraging his reader to scout out and to pursue further intertextual traces in his work.[6] A further Vergilian trace of this sort appears in James's story in the use of the image of a temple and its figurative erection to speak of a prospective literary undertaking; I discuss this at greater length later.

As "The Middle Years" opens, the author Dencombe has been convalescing after an illness in Bournemouth following the completion of what turns out--to his mind and to that of his admirer, Doctor Hugh--to be his finest work yet.[7] It is also to be his very last, as he relapses into illness and dies at the end of James's short story.

> It was a single volume; he preferred single volumes and aimed at a rare compression. He began to read, and little by little, in this occupation, he was pacified and reassured. Everything came back to him, but came back with a wonder, came back, above all, with a high and magnificent beauty. He read his own prose, he turned his own leaves, and had, as he sat there with the spring sunshine on the page, an emotion peculiar and intense. His career was over, no doubt, but it was over, after all, with that. (171)[8]

In the passage quoted above, Dencombe begins to read his work after a period of considerable anxiety and trepidation: he had, in the light of his illness, not only "forgotten what his book was about" (170) but "had chiefly forgotten . . . that it was extraordinarily good" (171). He had had the sense that he "had done all that he should ever do, and yet had not done what he wanted." As he begins to read, however, he realizes that, although his imminent mortality is to bring his career to an end, it will end with something with which he can be pleased: "it was over, after all, with _that_" (171).

His work engrosses him, and, in James's classicizing idiom, Dencombe "was drawn down, as by a siren's hand" and found himself "in the dim underworld of fiction"; he "surrendered to his talent." Though the mention of a helping hand from a siren evokes the attractive quality of Dencombe's prose as it draws him in, it is also suggestive of death. It was the beauty of the sirens' song that had drawn many sailors to their destruction and that Odysseus famously escaped in one of the Homeric epics (_Odyssey_ 12.192-200): even as Dencombe feels himself rallying, the specter of his mortality nevertheless remains, and he receives a figurative foretaste of the underworld. In giving himself up to his talent, James tells us, the author acknowledges that it had never, "such as it was, been so fine" (_AU_ 171). The understated qualification--"such as it was"--is made by the narrator but seems to belong to Dencombe himself: it places a limit, of which he is aware,

on his considerable talent. This recognition of his limitations persists in causing the protagonist to be affected by a disquiet over his achievements, even though he is pleased with the success of his recently completed work and has hopes of future undertakings.

Dencombe, we are told, was able to discern in his text the "difficulties" through which he had worked to achieve his literary triumph, as well as the "art" that had "surmounted them." This art "had not come to him easily"; "he had struggled and suffered for it, making sacrifices not to be counted" (171–72). Indeed, he wonders whether, since his abilities have only just reached maturity in his recent work, there may be "a glimpse of a possible reprieve"; he hopes that his art will not "cease to yield" (172). He sets his eyes firmly on his future and on the literary undertakings that he imagines taking shape as a result of the artful toil that he intends to bring to bear on his putative materials. Dencombe feels delightedly sure "that diligence vincit omnia," that diligence conquers all things.

The Latin collocation that James uses to express Dencombe's seeming optimism has its origins in Vergil's poetry. In his tenth Eclogue, Vergil has the dying elegiac poet par excellence, Gallus, end his speech with the words omnia uincit Amor: et nos cedamus Amori ("Love conquers all things: let us also yield to Love" [10.69]). This verse is usually held to be the source of James's Latin, and one may be

inclined to think, in the light of the gentle hints in the direction of the pastoral landscape of the Eclogues found earlier in "The Middle Years" (which I discuss later), that there is good reason for thinking this is the case.[9] Indeed, Vergil's hexameter, and the first three words in particular, had long since acquired the status of a sententious aphorism after being recast on several occasions by Ovid in the decades following the dissemination of the Eclogues.[10] In the general prologue to The Canterbury Tales, for example, Chaucer writes that the Prioress had a golden brooch "on which ther was first write a crowned A, / and after Amor vincit omnia" (161–62), and in the first amatory poem of the thirteenth-century Codex Buranus, introducing an almost uninterrupted run of more than a hundred love lyrics, the programmatic refrain reads uincit Amor omnia, / regit Amor omnia ("Love conquers all things, Love rules all things" [Carmen Buranum 56]).[11] There seems, however, to be little intertextual force to the idea of "love" (amor) lurking behind James's "diligence," even if one chooses to see a knowingly learned etymological play on the relationship between the noun and the verb diligere, which can mean "to love." It may prove more fruitful to consider another Vergilian passage that is, perhaps, less familiar and in which the Roman poet himself recast the idea that love conquers all things.

In the first book of his Georgics, Vergil describes the conclusion of the Golden Age and writes that, for mankind,

"damn hard work has overcome all things" (labor omnia uicit / improbus 1.145–46);[12] the effortless existence of that halcyon earlier age is at an end and people must toil to survive.[13] This seems to be the thought that underlies James's "diligence vincit omnia": Dencombe has had "difficulties" in executing his work, but he has overcome them in order to produce a masterpiece; his "achievement" may be "real", but the "process had been manful enough" and had required considerable exertion (172).[14] Vergilian labor plays a conspicuous and varied role in the Georgics: it can carry a positive or a negative connotation in its relation to mankind depending on its context and is also used to refer to the poet's literary efforts in composing his work, thereby aligning Vergil's lucubration with the exertions of the farmer.[15] In the fourth book of his Georgics, the poet says that, in giving apicultural guidance, his work focuses on slight things (in tenui labor [4.6]),[16] and he later notes that he would have written more about horticulture were his literary work not coming to an end (4.116–19).[17] Vergil's use of labor to refer to the process and effort of literary composition and thus to set his own work against the toil of his farmer allows James, in turn, to take the liberty of usurping Vergil's comment on the state of human existence and to deploy it to comment on the exertions required by a writer.

Indeed, in describing the means by which Dencombe achieved the completion of his masterpiece, James turns to the

language of agriculture. It was as if the protagonist "had planted his genius, had trusted his method, and they had grown up and flowered with real sweetness" (172).[18] Dencombe takes the view, however, that he has not yet had the opportunity to produce his best work and that "a first existence was too short--long enough only to collect material; so that to fructify, to use the material, one must have a second age, an extension." This georgic lexis chimes with the author's hope, voiced earlier, that his art will not "cease to yield" (172); it is recalled, moreover, by the notion that Dencombe "had ripened too late," which is answered by Doctor Hugh's gallantly admiring assertion: "'I prefer your flowers . . . to other people's fruit, and your mistakes to other people's successes'" (186). The creative process is characterized as beginning with the planting of genius; one works on this, and it grows and eventually blossoms; the fruits of one's labors follow (even if this is not to be the case for Dencombe, who will die before he has the opportunity to gather the harvest, a harvest that is for the reader not the author).[19]

The author in "The Middle Years" comes to realize, as he reads his masterpiece, that he had reached the height of his powers too late: "[h]is development had been abnormally slow, almost grotesquely gradual . . . art had come, but it had come after everything else" (172). The eventual development of this writer's art, of his literary skill, finds a parallel in the Georgics too. Following the end of the Golden Age, man has to

evolve new and varied skills (uarias . . . artis) little by little through experience (usus) and thought (meditando),[20] and so it is that Vergil claims, before asserting that "damn hard work has overcome all things," that man's "various skills have arrived" (uariae uenere artes [1.145]). Furthermore, just as the poet of the Georgics uses labor to refer to his own literary undertaking and thus to juxtapose himself with a laboring man, so too he uses ars of his poetic skill (2.174), thereby aligning the toil of the writer with that of the farmer who is no longer able to rely on the abundance of the Golden Age. Dencombe's art had eventually come too, but it was only "at the very last" that he had "come into possession" (172): he was never to know the ideal state of literary perfection. For the author in "The Middle Years," the writerly Golden Age--the "better chance" he wishes he could have as he flicks through the final pages of his book (173)--is an impossible ideal future, rather than the idealized past that Vergil recalls for his farmer. Dencombe's masterly book may be an "achievement" that is "real" (172), but in striving to reach beyond it, in wishing he could write a still better work, he is forced to enter into an illusory state.

The unreal future for which Dencombe hopes, "the dreamworld of the future in which he will greatly surpass" his own efforts, takes shape as he sits and reads his existing work; it is fueled by his recognition of a tangible achievement (Hagberg 224). As he contemplates this idealized

fantasy, the author in "The Middle Years" is seated on "a convenient bench that he knew of, a safe recess in the cliff. It looked to the south, to the tinted walls of the Island, and was protected behind by the sloping shoulder of the down" (167); the bench was "on a sheltered ledge" (173), and Dencombe "liked the sandy cliffs and the clustered pines" of his surroundings (167). The setting that James evokes is one of idyllic pastoral, a locus amoenus of the sort familiar from Vergil's Eclogues. Dencombe's vantage point above the beach in Bournemouth, looking across the sea to the Isle of Wight, resembles the idealized landscapes in which the Roman poet places his herdsmen as they sit and listen to each other's performances, landscapes characterized by the shade and shelter provided by cliffs and trees,[21] places suited to literary composition.[22] The name of James's protagonist, indeed, is itself evocative of such a locus, as "den" and "combe" (= "coomb") can both refer to places into which one may retreat, and it is on a clement spring day, perhaps suggestive of a new beginning, that Dencombe makes his way to his "safe recess."[23]

The exploitation of the pastoral landscape by James throughout his corpus has been insightfully discussed by Howard Pearce, but without reference to "The Middle Years." He draws attention to the ways in which the pastoral locus provides "a substantial image of the ideal place," "a world of order, beauty, and peace" which sets the deliberately

idealized against the actual (834). James's pastoral settings, like those of Vergil in his Eclogues, are fragile, illusory constructs that are susceptible to external forces, to "the unhappy intrusion of 'death and destruction' as [an] undeniable reality" (Pearce 835). Underlying the Jamesian treatment of the pastoral, Pearce suggests, is an "enchantment with the ideal and the requisite correction by the real" (Pearce 835).[24] A tension of this sort, between an unwanted reality and an imagined happier situation, is present throughout "The Middle Years" and is adumbrated in the first sentence. On a lovely spring day, "poor Dencombe, happy in the conceit of reasserted strength, stood in the garden of the hotel, comparing, with a deliberation in which, however, there was still something of languor, the attractions of easy strolls" (167). The protagonist, frequently described throughout the work as "poor," is to be pitied by the reader: he is happy, but only because of the imagined conceit of his convalescence, a desired irreality of the sort proper to pastoral. The weariness, lethargy, and stagnation caused by his ailment still affect him as external circumstances, threatening his idealized, healthy state; the languor that hangs over him strains his powers of deliberation, dulls the acuity of his mind. The fragility of his situation, moreover, is emphasized by the impermanence of the actual location in which he finds himself: he is staying at a hotel during his recovery. The threat of "death and destruction," which Pearce

identifies as an integral aspect of the Jamesian pastoral landscape, is realized literally for Dencombe, whose ideal future of continued literary production is jeopardized by an ailment which he is unable to overcome.

It is in his <u>locus amoenus</u> that the author in "The Middle Years" first encounters his avid admirer, Doctor Hugh. The medical man initially believes Dencombe to be a reviewer of the book of which he too has an advance copy and lavishes praise upon the writer to whom he does not realize he is speaking. The hope of future literary composition had been entertained by the protagonist before his acceptance that "an extension," "a better chance," was not available to him (172–73); Doctor Hugh, however, oblivious of the author's ill health, looks to the future with his opening words to him: "it's the best thing he has done yet!" (176). Dencombe laughs in response: he is all too aware of the reality of his situation. As James's narrator notes, "'Done yet' was so amusing to him, made such a grand avenue of the future" (177), but such an acceptance of a lack of future prospects does not last long for the author. In the course of their conversation, Doctor Hugh "speedily became . . . a remarkable, a delightful apparition" for the author in "The Middle Years" and is reckoned by him to be a possible source of a cure for his illness (177–78). The doctor inspires Dencombe with the hope that all possible literary combinations were not "exhausted," as the latter "had tried for renunciation's sake to believe"

(178). Their exchange comes to a sudden end, however, when Dencombe loses his senses altogether and relapses into illness (182) after Doctor Hugh has noticed that the protagonist had been annotating and correcting his book (I discuss this later). The illusory hope given to the author by the idyllic situation in which he finds himself, and by his interaction with his admiring companion, fades away, and Dencombe comes to feel that his transient circumstances "had combined to play him a trick" (182). Where previously the author had been "drawn down, as by a siren's hand" (171) into his work and had entertained the possibility of a second chance, here he finds himself "stretching out a hand" to the apparitional Doctor Hugh in the hope that the latter will aid him as the external threat of his illness closes in around him (182).[25]

Dencombe starts to come around on the way back to his hotel, but, the reader is told, Doctor Hugh's appearance remains "a vague recollection" (182); indeed, it was to be the case that this "vagueness . . . justified itself by dreams, dozing anxieties" (183). In contrast, the protagonist knows full well that he has "seen his doctor, the real one," who has been treating him for some time (182). The author's young admirer was, as he would later muse, "an apparition" skilled in "a magic that was not of this world," that existed only "in the fairy-tales of science": he came to be the subject of Dencombe's "morbid fancy" (188). The illusory hope that is nourished by Doctor Hugh's admiration of the author's work and

manifested in the latter's desire that the medical man find some cure for him is grounded in the idea of the artistic fellowship that has been descried in a number of James's works and shown to be integral to his exploitation of the pastoral world as a <u>locus</u> for the unattainable ideal. A number of the artists portrayed by James, such as Mark Ambient in "The Author of <u>Beltraffio</u>" and Dencombe in "The Middle Years," while inhabiting and moving in fragile pastoral landscapes, are "obsessed by the idea and image of death" and "struggle to ensure the permanent existence of an ideal" (Pearce 836). Pearce has suggested that this struggle is realized in James's works through the tribute paid by an admiring figure to an author in a mode similar to that of the pastoral elegy familiar from Vergil's <u>Eclogues</u> (Pearce *passim*).

The comparandum that Pearce uses is Vergil's fifth <u>Eclogue</u>, in which Mopsus and Menalcas praise and revere the songs of the deceased Daphnis, while also acknowledging one another's abilities as poets. It might be more suitable, however, to consider Doctor Hugh's admiration of Dencombe against the background of <u>Eclogues</u> 9 and 10, in both of which the literary honorand is still alive--as the protagonist of "The Middle Years" is--though his world is threatened. In <u>Eclogue</u> 9, Vergil has Moeris and Lycidas complain of land redistribution and the destruction of the pastoral landscape in which they have been accustomed to sing (9.2–4, 9, 60–61): the two herdsmen recall the solace that Menalcas' song used to

give them as he sustained the pastoral landscape that they inhabit (9.17–20), while they also comment on their own failing powers as singers. The tenth and final poem in Vergil's collection honors the amatory poet, Gallus, and tells of him as he pines away with unrequited love. In this Eclogue, the literary world in which Gallus has lived and loved is coming to an end as he approaches his death, and the first-person narrative voice of the poem aligns Vergil, to some degree, with the goatherd who bemoans the decease of a literary master whose achievements he admires. In both of these closural Eclogues, then, the idealized landscape and livelihoods of those inhabiting the pastoral world are threatened by destruction of some sort or other, just as the future hoped for by Dencombe and seemingly proffered by Doctor Hugh is denied by the circumstances of the former's illness, even if such an existence seems possible when the author in "The Middle Years" believes himself secure in his own, inevitably illusory, pastoral locus amoenus. We may note, moreover, that James develops the idea represented by Vergilian herdsmen appreciating their own songs as they revere another's, such that it is not only that there is a Moeris or a Lycidas recalling with admiration the music of a masterly Menalcas, but the masterful Dencombe himself, well regarded as he is by Doctor Hugh, also betrays an awareness of his own talent and looks to an unattainable ideal future of even greater literary renown. It is not only the admiring medical

man but the authorial protagonist of James's work who has "the basic human need to deny death or an insufferable actuality," the desire for an ideal existence that serves as a "response to the shock of recognizing a literal or figurative 'death'" (Pearce 845-46).[26]

The ability to deny the looming specter of his death is desired by Dencombe in the hope that he will secure "the very citadel, as it would prove, of his reputation" by the completion of a work in "a certain splendid 'last manner'" (190). This thought is attributed to the protagonist while he again sat with Doctor Hugh in the sunny locus amoenus in which they had met. Indeed, the illusion provided by the pastoral landscape in which Dencombe finds himself receives its most vivid expression in the hour he spends in his admirer's company musing, in Vergilian terms, on his intended future undertaking. The literary citadel of his reputation is to be "a stronghold into which his real treasure would be gathered": he is to toil in the mines of literary composition, and, alongside the precious metals he unearths, he will hang "jewels rare, strings of pearls . . . between the columns of his temple" (190). An elaborate ekphrastic description of a temple that represents a future literary work famously opens the third book of Vergil's Georgics, where the poet writes, "and I shall erect a temple of marble on the green field / by the waters [of the Mincius]" (3.13-14).[27] The temple represents the Aeneid: it is to have Caesar (= Augustus) at its center

watching the laureate poet's own victory procession;[28] its doors will depict battles in which the future emperor has already triumphed (notably at Actium in 31 BC) and conquests which he is imagined as going on to make;[29] and it has lifelike depictions of the founding fathers of Troy and their descendants, part of whose story Vergil's epic recounts. This proem to the third Georgic is one of the most important moments in the poet's fashioning of his literary career and, like Dencombe's richly ornate temple, points to a future writerly undertaking of greater significance for each of the author's respective reputations than their present works offer.[30]

The seeming reality of Dencombe's treasure--the "real treasure" to be gathered into his citadel--is, of course, a fantastical part of his idealized and illusory future: he is "haunted by that happy notion of an organised rescue" by Doctor Hugh, who proffers a "guarantee that his profession would hold itself responsible" for the author's future (190). Such a rescue, however, is to remain merely a spectral fantasy. After Doctor Hugh briefly takes his leave, indeed, Dencombe is "recalled to the actual" by the appearance of Miss Vernham, who explains why it is incumbent on the author to do without his new admirer for the sake of the latter's prospects (191–92). The protagonist resigns himself to this fate, and, immediately following the lady's departure, James's narrator notes that "Dencombe was certainly very ill" (192); his health

was not to rally again. Doctor Hugh may still be able to dream of a "golden age" for his own future career (189), but, in contrast, the author in "The Middle Years" was to have no such opportunity.

While the medical man had sat together with Dencombe in the idyllic pastoral landscape in which they had first met, the author's health and spirits had seemed to rally and he believed himself to be "soaring again a little on the weak wings of convalescence," to be capable of a return to literary production (190). Mention of flight here recalls the realization that the protagonist had had after the collapse he suffered during his initial meeting with Doctor Hugh: only with his most recent work "had he taken his flight," only by revisiting it had he "had a revelation of his range," his ability (184). I would suggest that this language also looks to the proem of Vergil's third Georgic, in which the poet hopes that by undertaking the literary journey before him--by writing the Aeneid--he will be able to lift himself from the ground and fly, triumphant, from the tongues of men; he will able to secure, that is to say, his reputation.[31] Dencombe "dreaded . . . the idea that his reputation should stand on the unfinished"; it should be concerned "with his future," not the relatively speaking imperfect past (184). While expressing this programmatic intention and seemingly recalling Vergil's adumbration of his future literary undertakings in Georgics 3, James puts a particular emphasis on the contingent nature of

Dencombe's imagined work: the latter hopes to be able to complete his imagined masterpiece, but has to live long enough to do so. This notion is one to which the Roman poet also draws attention. He acknowledges, albeit rather more succinctly than in James's work, that his own mortality may come to limit any future effort: he will lead the Muses into his own country, he writes, "as long as his life lasts" (modo uita supersit [Georgics 3.10]). It so happens that the anxiety about his own lifespan betrayed by Vergil proved to be well-founded, as he died before putting the final touches to his Aeneid. The idea that Vergil had been concerned about the imperfect state of his work developed early on in antiquity, and he was famously thought to have requested that his epic poem, lacking its author's finishing touches, be burned.[32] It is likely that as well-read an individual as James would have been familiar with these aspects of Vergilian biography, preserved for posterity in the ancient lives and commentaries. The portrayal of Dencombe's idealized future career and the concerns that he has about it thus bring to mind what has been treated by many as the paradigmatic authorial cursus (see note 3), and appear to have been influenced by the associated ancient biographical traditions: James seems to depict his protagonist's hopes by riffing off Vergil's construction of his own development as a writer and on the antique accounts of his life.

At this juncture, it may be instructive to compare the fictional Dencombe with James himself (see, for example, Wegelin 639–40), while not supposing that Dencombe is meant, per se, to represent his creator. Such a comparison is encouraged by the title of the short story, "The Middle Years," which is shared with that of its protagonist's final creation. It is also the name James gave to the incomplete third instalment of his autobiography, which he left off from writing in late 1914, a couple of years before he died.[33] Though the respective periods of James's and Dencombe's lives explored in these texts are different (the autobiographical work is concerned with the former's mid-twenties, not his last days), both are concerned with an author's development from a retrospective vantage-point, and the re-appropriation of the title may, for readers at least, align and juxtapose the protagonists of the texts.[34] The third-person narration of James's short story, moreover, is focalized through Dencombe--when he is unconscious the action is suspended--thereby aligning the outlook of the authorial voice (if not the author himself) of the text with the perspective of his protagonist. In 1893, James's short story was the only work that he--in his fiftieth year—published; it was, in Leon Edel's words, "as if it had to stand alone as a kind of half-century manifesto" (Edel 41). This may only seem reasonably to be the case with hindsight, but it is far from implausible to imagine a situation in which an author conceives of a particular moment

in their literary career as central and programmatic at the time of writing. It is from our readerly viewpoint, indeed, that Vergil's Georgics seems to be his middle work, the pivot between aspects of his Eclogues and his Aeneid, but he himself encodes this moment in his poem. He points the reader forward to his epic in the proem of the third book of the Georgics, and, in the final verses of this poem, looks back to his Eclogues, drawing together the ten poems of his pastoral work with his four-book agricultural treatise: they are, it seems to be implied, to be set apart from the epic to follow.[35] In his characterization of Dencombe's hope for future artistic success, James seems to draw on the sense of progression and ascent so integral to the articulation of the Vergilian literary career, and it is, as we have seen, the language, imagery, and themes of Vergil's pivotal middle work on which he relies, in part, for his expression of his protagonist's hope.

We may also note that throughout James's career his assertions about his own literary trajectory look to ideas of ascent and onward progression too. He speaks of his "step by step evolution" in a letter to his brother William,[36] and, in another, also of 1878, he opines that once he has completed a number of articles and the like that he owes, he will turn himself more fully to fictional works, and his "real career will begin."[37] As he writes to his mother in the same year, "[i]t is time I should rend the veil from the ferocious

ambition which has always couvé beneath a tranquil exterior . . . and which is perfectly capable of accomplishing considerable things."[38] In an 1881 letter to T. S. Perry, he writes of The Portrait of a Lady that "the story contains the best writing of which I have hitherto been capable. But I mean to surpass it, de beaucoup."[39] For James, there seems to have been a desire to progress and to look, like Dencombe, to the future. After a roughly six-month sojourn in Italy in 1886–87, James writes to his brother William, "I hope during the next ten years to do some things of certain importance . . . I ought [. . .] to produce better stuff than ever before"; "I am able to work better, and more, than I have ever been in my life before."[40] To his considerable frustration and disappointment, however, James was to have to confront "the poor success of [his] recent books" in an exchange of letters with Frederick Macmillan in 1890 and in the rejection of The Pupil from the Atlantic by Horace Scudder in the same year.[41] These upsets were followed closely by the mixed reception, in London, of his adaptation of The American for the stage after more successful runs in provincial towns, and by the considerable anxieties that befell him on account of this "invalid--the ill-starred play."[42] James's efforts in writing the second of his plays to reach the stage, Guy Domville, on which he was working as "The Middle Years," was published in May 1893, were also trying, as his contemporary letter to Edward Compton, who he hoped would produce the play, shows.[43]

The nature of his dramatical tribulations in these years was, in all likelihood, exacerbated for James by dint of the fact that he had, when turning his hand to playwriting, felt "as if [he] had at last found [his] form--[his] real one--that for which pale fiction is an ineffectual substitute."[44] Indeed, the importance of his continuing theatrical experiments to the ongoing development of his novelistic writing is noteworthy.[45]

It is amidst such trying circumstances of his own, in the early years of the 1890s, that James has his protagonist sigh "for another go . . . for a better chance" (173); he wants "an extension" (187) to his career as a writer. Dencombe recognizes his achievement but is able to see immediately how it could be improved. Indeed, the hopeful author in "The Middle Years" sees this so lucidly, while sitting in his dreamlike locus amoenus before encountering Doctor Hugh for the first time, that he begins editing his most recent literary effort as soon as he has started reading it. The convalescent author is "a passionate corrector, a fingerer of style; the last thing he ever arrived at was a form final for himself. His ideal would have been to publish secretly, and then, on the published text, treat himself to the terrified revise, sacrificing always a first edition and beginning for posterity and even for the collectors, poor dears, with a second" (181). The close attention to minutiae and style with which Dencombe intends to revisit his work recalls what Michael Anesko has referred to as James's "apparently

unceasing dedication to craft and detail" (Generous 1; see also Monopolizing 4-17). Indeed, the similarity, in this respect, between Dencombe and his creator is something to which James himself implicitly points in the preface that he appended to the sixteenth volume of the New York Edition. On recollecting the compositional process of "The Middle Years," James writes that he "mainly and most promptly associates with it the number of times [he] had to do it over to make sure of it": his "struggle to keep compression rich" in this short story, indeed, is not dissimilar to the diligent efforts that Dencombe had originally expended on his work (AU v).[46] This prefatory paratext encourages a reader of "The Middle Years" further to recognize the similarities between Dencombe and James, and it is not difficult to imagine the latter, in revisiting his works for the New York Edition, discerning in himself something of the protagonist of his short story from 1893 and seeking to draw attention to this likeness. That being said, it seems highly probable that James--to some degree intentionally--embedded aspects of his own authorial persona into the character of Dencombe at the time of the original composition of the work. In so doing, he acknowledged his penchant for revisiting his own texts and looked forward to the passionate correcting and meticulous fingering of style that he would eventually undertake in preparing the New York Edition.[47] It was, of course, the case, though, that James already engaged in frequent revisions, in part, because, like

Dencombe, he seems to have been concerned about ceding to his readers interpretive control over his works, just as tradition maintains that Vergil was unwilling to let his imperfect Aeneid reach his readers' hands. The anxieties surrounding James's literary undertakings in the early 1890s, moreover, may be thought to have driven him to meditate on the respective relationships between a text and its author and reader, as played out in the tensions surrounding ownership of Dencombe's story in "The Middle Years."

The extraordinary editorial feat of the New York Edition--an author's reworking of his own corpus to create a "definitive edition" of the "fiction that he desires perpetuated" (The Book Buyer 32, at 212)--has come to serve as a "magisterial assertion of authorial power" that fueled and corroborated the idea of James as "Master" (Anesko, Generous 1). Subsequent appreciation of James as a writer has been strongly influenced by his careful construction of his own authorial persona through his editorial work. Such a construal of James's authorship is also mediated through his many reflections--notably in his short stories--on the artist, on the artistic life, and on an artist's relationship to their work, as well as to the reader. Writing on the illusory hope that Dencombe harbors of a future literary undertaking that surpasses all else he has written presented the troubled James of 1893 with an opportunity to engage with the familiar literary career modeled by the magisterial Vergil and to

position himself as a Dencombe-like writer who has grown uncertain about his hopes for ascent to mastery, from his Georgics, as it were, to his Aeneid. Unlike his protagonist, who was not, on account of his death, to have a chance to seek to exert hermeneutic control over his story by continuing to rework it into the magisterial piece he hoped it could become, James eventually overcame some of the anxieties relating to his direction of travel as a writer in the early 1890s and had the opportunity, through his editorial efforts, to attempt to guide his readers' critical engagement with his oeuvre through the remainder of his career, culminating in the New York Edition.

NOTES

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[1]See Chapman, who notes that, in his fiction, James dramatized "the necessary ideal of convergence between the genius of the writer and that of the critic-as-ideal-reader"; the "critic-reader becomes an imaginative collaborator of the writer, and in this role he is absolutely essential to the writer's success" (17–18).

[2]On the modernists and revision, see Sullivan; see 62–100 on Jamesian approaches to revision.

[3]A weaker form of the argument advanced here might be to suggest that James draws on a familiarity with writerly modes of articulating one's literary career that are paradigmatically encapsulated in the figure of Vergil. An engagement with Vergil's cursus--his ascent from pastoral Eclogues, through his didactic Georgics, to his epic Aeneid--is thus discernible in James's presentation of Dencombe, though one may not wish to impute to James an intentional engagement with Vergil and the tradition surrounding him in "The Middle Years". For the considerable influence of Vergil's literary career (the so-called rota Vergiliana) on the construction of authorial trajectories in antiquity and beyond, see Hardie and Moore.

[4]I discuss some aspects of James's articulation of his own literary ambitions later.

[5]In his autobiographical work, James notes that he "worried out Virgil and Tite-Live [Livy] with M. Verchère" while in Geneva as a boy (NSB 7–8), and, in the notes of James's life-long family friend, T. S. Perry, quoted in Lubbock's edition of James's letters (LHJ 6–9), one reads that "in his books [James] speaks without enthusiasm of his school studies, but he and I read together at Mr. Leverett's school a very fair amount of Latin literature. Like Shakespeare, he had less Greek" (8). In the autumn of 1862, James was admitted to

Harvard Law School, where, among other texts, the complete works of Vergil were examined for entrance; see Block (154) and Wright. Scrapbooks held by the Harvard Law School Library (Historical and Special Collections) contain admissions papers from the 1880s that still required knowledge of Vergil (e.g., Scrapbook 1, seq. 129). James also quotes Vergil, Aeneid 1.203 in a letter to his brother William dated 21 April 1884 (HJL2 40).

[6]Cf. the discussion of James's familiarity with, and treatment of, nineteenth-century poetry in Horne (75): "[w]hat arrested me was realizing how intimately for him as a writer the words of poetry--of particular passages, particular poems--were present when he was composing."

[7]Bournemouth will have presented itself to James as a suitable place to imagine a convalescent writer in the light of the period that he spent there in 1885 because of his sister's ill health. He passed a considerable amount of time in the company of the poorly Robert Louis Stevenson while at the seaside resort. In a letter dated 5 May 1885 to Frederick Macmillan, James wrote: "in the day I work, walk a little and look after my sister, who is very feeble but tending to improve, and in the PM I go to see Robert Louis Stevenson, who lives here, consumptive and shut up to the house, but singularly delightful" (HJL2 80); see also a letter to Grace Norton dated 9 May 1885 (HJL2 83).

[8]The text of "The Middle Years" is quoted throughout from the reissue in _Terminations_ (London, 1895); it was originally published in _Scribner's Magazine_ (May 1893) and appeared in the sixteenth volume of the New York Edition in 1909 (_AU_).

[9]By way of example, though with no attempt at explaining the possible relevance of a Vergilian intertext, see the note on the text in Michael Gorra's 2014 edition (_AP_ 341).

[10]Note Ovid, _Amores_ 3.2.46 and 3.11b.34, as well as _Heroides_ 9.26; in his _Remedia amoris_, in which Ovid offers ways of escaping from love, he asserts that "every love is conquered by a new one" (_successore nouo uincitur omnis amor_ [462]).

[11]The text of _Carmen Buranum_ 56 is cited from Benedikt Vollmann's 2011 edition. The refrain quoted here belongs only to the fourth and fifth stanzas of _CB_ 56; the first three stanzas have the similar refrain _Amor cuncta superat,_ / _Amor dura terebrat_ ("Love overcomes everything, Love bores through the unyielding").

[12]It may well be that James was prompted to recast this particular Vergilian phrase in the context of writerly diligence on account of its being used in such a context--in a form slightly adapted to its situation--by Anthony Trollope in _Barchester Towers_. Trollope is speaking of an author's difficulty in producing an accurate portrait of an individual as he comes to introduce Francis Arabin to his reader in chapter twenty. He writes: "Labor omnia vincit improbus [damn

hard work overcomes all things]. Such should be the chosen motto of every labourer, and it may be that labour, if adequately enduring, may suffice at last to produce even some not untrue resemblance of the Rev. Francis Arabin" (144). James had revisited Trollope's Barsetshire novels in the decade before he wrote "The Middle Years" in preparing his sketch of that author and his works in 1883, to be reissued in Partial Portraits in 1888.

[13]The precise force of Georgics 1.145–46 has been the subject of considerable scholarly discussion; an overview and useful summary may be found in Jenkyns (678–84). What Jenkyns refers to as the "progressive" interpretation seems to align with how James read the passage, and it is in this way that I have translated the Latin here.

[14]It is generally agreed that, in the Georgics, the perfect form uicit ("it has overcome") should be preferred to the present-tense uincit ("it overcomes"), which is transmitted in a handful of manuscripts and in quotations of this line by, for example, Macrobius (Saturnalia 5.16.7) and Erasmus (Adagia 2.2.53). James may have misremembered the tense of the verb or changed it so that it could refer to Dencombe's potential future diligence, as well as his past efforts; he may also have been prompted by Trollope's use of the present tense in place of the perfect (see note 12).

[15]On the polyvalence of Vergilian labor, see Gale (143–95; note 185–95 on poetic labor).

[16]"My work is on slight things." This compressed phrase carries considerable metaliterary weight: it is not only the bees of which Vergil speaks that are slight (tenuis); the adjective is also used to refer to a poetic refinement that was sought after, and frequently remarked on, by Vergil and his contemporaries.

[17]"If I were not already approaching the furthest end of my work, about to furl the sails and hastening to turn my ship's prow to the land, . . . I should sing of . . ." (extremo ni iam sub fine laborum / uela traham et terris festinem aduertere proram / . . . / . . . canerem). The metaphor of a ship's journey was commonly used in Latin didactic poetry to denote the progress of the literary work; see Volk (21-22).

[18]The sweetness with which Dencombe's work appears to him to have flowered may also recall the description of the Muses as sweet in the Georgics (2.475) and the suggestion that sweet Parthenope--that is, Naples--nourished Vergil's literary talent (4.564-65).

[19]Though James uses the language of vegetal growth to characterize the literary process elsewhere, the density of the imagery in this short story seems noteworthy.

[20]Georgics 1.133-34: ut uarias usus meditando extunderet artis / paulatim, "so that experience, by taking thought, may devise various skills little by little."

[21]For the Vergilian *locus amoenus* as a place sheltered by rock formations, see *Eclogues* 1.56 and 83; for trees, consider *Eclogues* 1.38–39, *ipsae te, Tityre, pinus* / . . . *uocabant* ("the very pines used to call for you, Tityrus"); 7.1, *Forte sub arguta consederat ilice Daphnis* ("Daphnis, by chance, had sat down under a whispering holm oak"); and 5.1–3, *Cur non, Mopse, boni quoniam conuenimus ambo,* / *tu calamos inflare leuis, ego dicere uersus,* / *hic corylis mixtas inter consedimus ulmos?* ("Why, Mopsus, since the two of us have met, both talented men, you at filling the light reeds with air, I at singing, don't we sit here among the hazels mixed with elms?"). The fifth *Eclogue* also mentions a recess--an *antrum*--in which the herdsmen perform (5.14).

[22]For the *locus amoenus* as a place suited to literary composition in ancient texts, see Kambylis. Other significant ancient *loci amoeni* in which writerly inspiration is found are the openings of Hesiod's *Theogony* and Plato's *Phaedrus*, Theocritus' programmatic seventh *Idyll*, Callimachus' *Hymn to Apollo*, Propertius 3.3, and the first poem of Ovid's third book of *Amores*.

[23]"Dencombe" may also nod to the name of the beach to the east of the pier in Bournemouth--Honeycombe Beach--from which the protagonist of "The Middle Years" would have had a clear view of the Isle of Wight.

[24]Pearce points to the land confiscations of the first *Eclogue* as indicative of the external threat to Vergil's

pastoral landscape; more important, perhaps, is Eclogue 9, in which the theme of land expropriation is revisited and it is strongly implied that the resultant fragmentation of the pastoral landscape causes the herdsmen to be deprived of the ability to sing as they had before; this is discussed later.

[25]As Doctor Hugh takes his leave of Dencombe, after seeing him safely back to the hotel, James recalls the motif of the hand, writing that the medical man "held his hand, hanging over him, and poor Dencombe, weakly aware of this living pressure, simply lay there and accepted his devotion" (183).

[26]The concern with an imminent death that James represents in "The Middle Years" may have been prompted, in part, by the considerable number of deaths of near relations and close friends that had occurred in James's life in the years preceding 1893, among them his sister Alice (1892), James Russell Lowell (1891), his aunt Kate (1889), Lizzie Boott (1888), his brother Wilky (1883), and his father (1882); his concern about the posterity afforded to the latter may be of particular relevance in his creation of Dencombe (cf. James's letter to his brother William dated 9 October 1885 [HJL2 102]).

[27][E]t uiridi in campo templum de marmore ponam / propter aquam. The earliest known instances of the metapoetic use of a building in Greek and Latin thought to have influenced Vergil are found in Pindar's victory odes, though in these cases the image of an edifice refers to the work at hand, not a future

work: Pythian 6 speaks of a treasure-house of songs that is immune to the onslaught of stormy weather (6.5–14), and Olympian 6 describes the poet's erection of the columns of a palace (6.1–6).

[28]Augustus features in the so-called parade of heroes toward the end of Aeneid 6 at the midpoint of the epic (6.791–93) and appears at the center of Aeneas' shield in the ekphrasis in Book 8, where he presides over the procession of his own triple triumph from the precincts of Apollo's temple (8.720).

[29]The Battle of Actium is depicted on Aeneas' Shield in Book 8 (675–713), and some of those over whom Augustus is said to have triumphed evoke future expeditions (8.724–28).

[30]On the idea of a literary cursus at Rome, see Farrell.

[31]Georgics 3.8–9: temptanda uia est, qua me quoque possim / tollere humo uictorque uirum uolitare per ora ("a path is to be attempted, by which I too may be able to raise myself from the ground and to fly, as a victor, from the tongues of men"). The flight of a poet and his reputation (as characterized here by Vergil) has its origins in Latin in the epitaph that Ennius penned for himself (nemo me lacrimis decoret nec funera fletu / faxit. cur? uolito uiuos per ora uirum, "let no one honor me with tears nor undertake my funerary rites with weeping. Why? I fly, living, from the tongues of men" [Variae 17–18 (Vahlen)]), which was likewise drawn on, inter alios, by Horace in Odes 2.20 and Propertius in the first elegy of his

third book. These two poets, no doubt, had the proem to Georgics 3 in mind too.

[32]On the incomplete state of the Aeneid and Vergil's wish that it be burned, see the Suetonian-Donatan Life of Vergil (37–41). Ovid, as an act of homage to his predecessor and with a view to raising his Metamorphoses to the same literary status as the Aeneid, claims, in Tristia 1.7, to have attempted to burn his fifteen-volume hexameter poem because his work on it had been interrupted by his relegation. This claim was penned a little over two decades after Vergil's death and is the earliest extant re-appropriation of an idea that was to become a trope in literary biography.

[33]The third part of his autobiography began with events in 1869. The fragment was published posthumously under Percy Lubbock's editorship (see Dupee ix–x).

[34]Sullivan (71–73) offers a suggestive reading of James's exploitation of the idea of one's middle years to point to "a Yeatsian vision of the balance between life and death" (72). I am unpersuaded by the suggestion that James uses the notion of "the middle years" to represent "the years between birth and death, the years of one's life," as posited by Babin (514).

[35]Georgics 4.566: Tityre, te patulae cecini sub tegmine fagi ("Tityrus, of you have I sung in the shade of the broad-spreading beech") recasts the opening of the first Eclogue: Tityre, tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi / siluestrem tenui Musam meditaris auena ("Tityrus, as you recline in the

shade of a broad-spreading beech, you practice a woodland tune on your slender reed"). The ring composition produced by this recollection unites these two works and marks them out as belonging to a time before the Aeneid: note the change in tense from the present meditaris ("you practice") to the closural perfect cecini ("I have sung").

[36]Dated 14 Nov. 1878 (HJL1 193–94).

[37]Dated 28 Jan. 1878 (HJL1 150–51).

[38]Dated 17 Feb. 1878 (HJL1 156).

[39]Dated 24 Jan. 1881 (HJL1 335); cf. his remarks to Grace Norton on The Bostonians in a letter dated 19 January 1884 (HJL2 21).

[40]Dated 1 Oct. 1887 (HJL2 201). The amelioration of circumstances of which James speaks may suggest an improvement in his health but could also refer to his belief that his abilities as a writer have developed, prompted in part by the growth of his store of "observations of the world etc."

[41]To Frederick Macmillan dated 28 Mar. 1890 (HJL2 275); on The Pupil, a letter to Scudder dated 10 Nov. 1890 (HJL2 307).

[42]To his brother William dated 10 Oct. 1891 (HJL2 358–59); cf. his letter to Robert Louis Stevenson dated 30 Oct. 1891 (HJL2 361).

[43]To Edward Compton dated 2 May 1893 (HJL2 410–13).

[44]To Robert Louis Stevenson dated 18 February 1891 (HJL2 336–37); cf. a letter to his brother William dated 6 February 1891 (HJL2 329).

[45]On the impact of James's theatrical interests and efforts on his novels, see, e.g., Greenwood, Tredy.

[46]On the pursuit of brevity in his writing of short stories, see also James's letter to Robert Louis Stevenson dated 30 Oct. 1891 (HJL2 360).

[47]Compare the announcement of the New York Edition in Scribner's The Book Buyer 32, at 212–13, which notes that "James has devoted many months to the most careful and scrupulous revision of all the novels and tales, particularly the earlier ones. Those written many years ago, the first fruits of his genius, have thus been brought into alignment of style, color, and general literary presentment with the work of his maturity."

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