Henry James, George Eliot, and the "Old-fashioned English Novel"

By Rachel Bryan, All Souls College, University of Oxford

Chapter five of The Middle Years (1917) sees Henry James recall the first time that he met "the great George Eliot" (Au 605). Introduced to one another in April 1869, the writers who exchanged niceties behind the closely "guarded portal" of North Bank were not yet the literary titans one encounters in the pages of F. R. Leavis's The Great Tradition (Au 605). Eliot was by then the author of works including Adam Bede (1859), The Mill on the Floss (1860), and Romola (1862-63), but could not yet add the accolades of Middlemarch (1871-72) or Daniel Deronda (1876) to her name; whilst in terms of fictional output, the twenty-six-year-old James could only lay claim to a few short stories: his first novel, Watch and Ward, would not appear for another two years.[i] When reappraising this formative encounter from the vantage point of the twentieth century, however, James nevertheless succeeds in implying that it was the youthful and invigorated acolyte who had come away with the upper hand. Not only does he revel in recounting the indispensable service he had provided in fetching a surgeon to attend G. H. Lewes's stricken son (609), but he accurately depicts the revered Eliot as having been stranded at that time in the midst of a creative dearth. In the spring of 1869, Felix Holt, the Radical (1866) was, after all, "upwards of three years old", with no subsequent novel having yet appeared; and what is more, that work had not been, as James poignantly recalls, "altogether genially greeted" (606-07).

This allusion to the lukewarm critical reception with which Felix Holt had been met helps draw attention to an aspect of his relationship with Eliot about which the recollecting James seems at once coy and insistent. For at twenty-six, he had not been a mere admirer of Eliot's work but well on his way to becoming one of its most prolific reviewers, having already published his thoughts on Felix Holt for the Nation, pieces on "The Spanish Gypsy" (1868) for both the Nation and the North American Review, as well as an appraisal of her novels to date

for the Atlantic Monthly. It is unclear whether Eliot would have been aware of this fact prior to their meeting. As James would note in 1885 when discussing J. W. Cross's biography of Eliot (with, one suspects, a full appreciation of the irony), G. H. Lewes had famously taken pains to "filte[r]" the critical "stream" to which his partner was exposed of all bad reviews, leaving her only "the clearer water" to peruse (EL 1008). That Eliot should have had only a partial sense of her reception seems nevertheless to have given the older James license to practice a form of selective amnesia with regard to his youthful review of Felix Holt. For whilst readers who confine themselves to The Middle Years might be forgiven for assuming that it had been unequivocally glowing, attention paid to the actual review reveals James to have felt deeply ambivalent about Eliot's fifth novel, sharing with the majority of contemporary reviewers a disappointment at its incoherent structure, while still pronouncing it to have had the markings of both an impressive and important work (GECH 26).

In F. R. Leavis's considered opinion, Henry James was and remained George Eliot's "most intelligently appreciative critic" (144). It is a claim that, as we shall see, might benefit from nuance; but it nonetheless serves as a helpful reminder that for all his repeatedly voiced frustrations about her failure to measure up to the compositional standards of Honoré de Balzac and the French realist school, there was a reason why James kept coming back to Eliot, both in person and in print. That James got a great deal out of confronting and critiquing Eliot's work is evidenced by the number of occasions on which he did so, as well as the enthusiasm with which he pursued such commissions – scarcely half of the installments of Middlemarch had appeared in Harper's Weekly when James had first written to the literary editor at the Nation to offer himself as its reviewer (HJL 217). Yet the substantial benefit that he derived from these intellectual encounters becomes most apparent when we read these early reviews for what they reveal about the influence that England's foremost psychological novelist had on the development of James's creative consciousness, particularly with regard to his emerging ambitions for the future of the English novel.

After all, by the time he met "Mrs. Lewes" in the spring of 1869, James had already found in the persistent "irritat[ion]" he experienced when reading the "final chapters" of her books a prompt to imagine a new type of work that might be written in the English tradition: a novel which sought not to depict human lives with the exhaustive detail of a historical chronicle, but to train its readers' imaginative faculties to transcend the terminal limits of the form, such that their aroused and sustained interest might be relied upon to construct both unlived lives and unarticulated psychological depths (EL 933). When considering the conclusion of Adam Bede in October 1866, James had noted his belief that "the continuance of the book" beyond Hetty Sorrel's reprieve had proved "fatal" to the stature Adam was permitted to enjoy as its protagonist. Although happy to concede that this young man might have come to "address himself to another woman" at some future point, James professed to see no reason why Eliot had felt compelled to detail a sentimentalized marriage to Dinah Morris, especially given that the reader would have experienced an altogether more compelling dénouement should Adam have simply "been left to his grief":

> I yet hold that it would be possible tacitly to foreshadow some such [future marriage] at the close of the tale … to make it the logical consequence of Adam's final state of mind. Of course circumstances would have much to do with bringing it to pass, and these circumstances could not be foreshadowed; but apart from the action of circumstances would stand the fact that, to begin with, the event was possible. The assurance of this possibility is what I should have desired the author to place the sympathetic reader at a stand-point to deduce for himself. In every novel the work is divided between the writer and the reader; but the writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters. When he makes him ill, that is, makes him indifferent, he does no work; the writer does all. When he makes him well, that is, makes him interested, then the reader does quite half the labor. In making such a deduction as I have just indicated, the reader would be doing but his share of the task; the grand point is to get him to make it. I hold that there

> is a way. It is perhaps a secret; but until it is found out, I think that the art of story-telling cannot be said to have approached perfection. (EL 921-22)

Central to James's notion of novelistic perfection is a particularly close, almost didactic, relationship that must be cultivated between writer and reader – albeit one of a different character to that embodied in the moralizing counsel of Eliot's narrators. The secret that he wishes to unlock is that of how a realistic novel might remake its readers so as to encourage them to commune with the world of possibility that exists beyond the representative limits of its text. Dissatisfied with Eliot's overly diffuse treatment and exhaustive detailing of her subjects' lives, the young James begins to imagine a narrative mode that is paradoxically reliant upon a great deal of what might be recounted by an author in fact being left unsaid. The trick, in short, would be to write novels in such a manner as would necessitate readers using both speculation and imagination in their pursuit of meaning: mental processes which would heighten their interest, whilst also replicating those feelings of indeterminism, contingency, and a provisionality of judgement which are themselves the hallmarks of participation in a boundless, rapidly developing world. At the heart of this visionary critique, then, is James's nascent sense of what it might be possible to do within the compositional remit of a more psychologically astute form of novel. And it is a vision which crucially arises from an appreciation of just how vital the imagination of possibility is both to acts of reading and to those consequential constituents of modern mental life that Eliot had seemed at such pains to represent.

Provocative and inspiring as they may be, such thoughts were little more than aspirations at the time of James's discussion of Adam Bede. He would, however, be prompted to return to them by the American publication of Middlemarch, which appeared as installments in Harper's Weekly between 16 December 1871 and 15 February 1873. James's review of the novel – which, to his great consternation, Wendell Phillips Garrison at the Nation sent on to Galaxy magazine for their March 1873 number instead of running it himself – was nominally of W. Blackwood & Sons' four volume edition of 1872; although he does also appear to have followed the progress

of its magazine publication (HJL 217). This would after all explain the sense of suspense that permeates the description of his initial encounter with Eliot's long, and at first glance highly promising, novel: a drawn-out reading process which seems to have given James ample opportunity to consider its clearly manifest yet ultimately unfulfilled potential. As the "earliest chapters unfolded themselves", he observes,

> how keenly we wondered … what turn in the way of form the story would take – that of an organized, moulded, balanced composition, gratifying the reader with a sense of design and construction, or a mere chain of episodes, broken into accidental lengths and unconscious of the influence of a plan. We expected the actual result, but for the sake of English imaginative literature which, in this line is rarely in need of examples, we hoped for the other. If it had come we should have had the pleasure of reading, what certainly would have seemed to us in the immediate glow of attention, the first of English novels. But that pleasure has still to hover between prospect and retrospect. (EL 958)

Although highlighting shortcomings similar to those noted in his previous reviews, James is deeply perceptive here about issues of design and cohesion unique to the compositional history of Middlemarch, which had in fact begun life not as a single entity, but as two separate projects called "Miss Brooke" and "Middlemarch" that were only stitched together by Eliot in early 1871 (Carroll xxii).[ii] Indeed, his observation about the apparently "accidental lengths" of the novel's episodes also implies that the finished text had suffered in his eyes as a consequence of the slightly unwieldy structure permitted by the unorthodox form of its original British publication. Middlemarch had been written specifically as eight half volume parts to be published at two-month intervals: a strategy which had been conceived of by G. H. Lewes in the hope that it might be more lucrative for Eliot, whilst also giving her freedom to deviate from the equally sized portions required for conventional magazine instalments and monthly serials (Carroll xxxv).[iii] As economically astute as Lewes's idea proved to be, it had nonetheless made Middlemarch vulnerable to concessions and structural reworkings which ran directly contrary to

James's own conviction that readers should be left to imagine unarticulated narrative courses for themselves. While still working on her manuscript, Eliot had had to respond to concerns raised both by Lewes and her publisher, John Blackwood, about the need for interest to be "pitch[ed] … forward" from one instalment to the next in order to maintain the current rate of sales (Lewes qtd. in Carroll xlii). And this anxiety, coupled with a related desire that none of the central stories be absent from any half volume part, meant that additional chapters were often appended to already lengthy sections as part of the attempt to ensure that such carefully cultivated readerly interest would not be tested by long periods of separation from their favorite characters (Carroll xlii).

As a general rule, James disliked serial publication; even if he would come to make substantial use of it over the course of his writing life and, like Eliot, gain appreciation of its financial benefits (Poole 143).[iv] Yet whilst James's aversion to the structural pressures exerted upon Middlemarch by the literary marketplace is hardly surprising, even less so is the imaginative turn that his 1873 review takes towards envisioning a superior version of the novel. By his own account, James's reading process had entailed him simultaneously entertaining Eliot's text, his rational expectation of its finished form, and a third work, a spectral counter-narrative we might describe as optative or subjunctive, produced not so much from an estimation of Middlemarch, as in accordance with his own sense of what might constitute "the first of English novels".

James was not alone in having been overtaken by this urge to identify the untapped compositional potential in Eliot's work. Long before F. R. Leavis had voiced his infamous desire to chop away the "bad half" of Daniel Deronda and remake it into a far better book called Gwendolen Harleth (97, 103), successive waves of critics had been suggesting that substantial revisions be made to her novels. Some had wished to do away with the final volume of The Mill on the Floss or that Romola could be reimagined without the historical background; even Leavis's partition of Daniel Deronda had plenty of nineteenth-century advocates (GECH 32). It would nonetheless be fair to say that this particular type of criticism-as-revision has come to be

seen as characteristically Jamesian, such that, in the Master's hands at least, it should not be interpreted as straightforwardly pejorative. What we can identify as James's marked appreciation of texts that provoke a vision of actuality and latent creative possibility would remain throughout his life, and as the revisions for the New York Edition (1907-09) attest, even extended to his own works. Writing to H. G. Wells in January 1900 shortly after having finished The Time Machine (1895), James would acknowledge how he had been struck with an urge to "re-write you, much, as I read": an impulse he was nevertheless quick to define as "the highest tribute my damned impertinence can pay an author" (LIV 133).

In the case of Wells, James's laudatory acts of imaginative revision were nevertheless underscored by misgivings about how the English novel might develop under the stewardship of such ideologically driven practitioners: concerns which had in fact seemed just as pressing to the young James as to the Master at seventy-one.[v] When reviewing Middlemarch back in 1873, he had drawn attention to the problem of Eliot's novel having "se[t] a limit, we think, to the development of the old-fashioned English novel. Its diffuseness, on which we have touched, makes it too copious a dose of pure fiction. If we write novels so, how shall we write History?" (EL 965-66). Assessing the character of Fred Vincy, James had concluded that "so far as the writer's design has been to reproduce the total sum of life in an English village forty years ago, this common-place young gentleman … has his proper place in the picture", yet "the author narrates his fortunes with a fulness of detail which the reader often finds irritating". More problematic still, however, was the fact that the wealth of extraneous information pertaining to the likes of young Vincy had prevented situations more amenable to "the imagination of the reader" from ever "expand[ing]" to "[their] full capacity". Chief amongst these stifled plots was the "tragedy" of Dorothea Brooke marrying "a man whom she fancies a great thinker" yet "who turns out to be but an arid pedant" (960).

As is hinted by the tautological "total sum of life" that he identified as governing the novel's design, James found lives overtreated in Middlemarch, as if Eliot were aspiring to a

degree of meticulous representation inhospitable to the flourishing of the work's more intriguing potentialities. To present one's readers with mountains of details pertaining to a wide cast of characters was ultimately to have privileged hard demonstrable facts over those more elusive and tricky forms of knowledge that can be made available when perception and imagination are forced to work in tandem. This, we must understand, is the line down which this 1873 review separates a written history and a novel: the division is that between an epistemology which aspires to the definite, and one concerned with the suggestive, provocative, and emotive. A "copious" "dose of pure fiction" can function in the vein of a "History" by pledging its aesthetic allegiance to totality and actuality. But in the imaginative realm, one can perhaps know too much to feel the play of other possibilities, sensations and orders of knowledge.

James's point, indeed, is one broadly similar to that which had underwritten his dissatisfaction with the conclusion of Adam Bede: that in dispensing with any need for the reader to exercise their speculative or imaginative faculties, Eliot's all too comprehensive novel had sacrificed its ability to represent the climate of uncertainty and possibility within which those human lives she was concerned with had taken shape. In 1866, James had still been seeking terms through which to articulate his sense of what was missing in Eliot's overcrowded art, although he has a word for it here. What readers actually desire from a novel, he declares, is "the great dramatic chiaroscuro", the play of light and shade, the events clearly seen and the depths of feeling imagined in the darkness (960). Eliot's oeuvre, it must be noted, both shared and was to a degree responsible for James's growing conviction that the greatest dramas of lived experience resided not in the material world, but in those innumerable and powerful effects it had on a character's inner life. The difficulty for Eliot, however, had been that of finding a discursive form sufficient to express what she called the "endless minutiae" of subtleties at play within the human mind. When, in chapter twenty of Middlemarch, the newly married Dorothea breaks down in tears during her trip to Rome with Casaubon, the narrator abandons the task of being "more particular" about the cause of this outpouring, noting that to render the complex web of

Dorothea's unconscious thoughts "would have been like trying to give a history of the lights and shadows" (194). The chiaroscuro effect that James demands novels find means of embodying seems heavily indebted to this passage, and to Eliot's timely admission that it is impossible to give "a history" of this vital but almost ineffable aspect of human experience. Yet if the lights and shadows of consciousness cannot find adequate expression in narratives aspiring to the specificity and clarity of historical accounts, then perhaps, James implies, it was that mode of representation which novelists should abandon, and not their desire to investigate the drama of mental life.

It is in the context of James's increasingly defined ambitions for the modern English novel that I wish to turn briefly to chapter eighty-six of Eliot's Middlemarch. Although never referenced explicitly in the Galaxy review, the transition between that chapter and the novel's coda has all the markings of a moment from which James's optative Middlemarch might well have figured forth. Chapter eighty-six breaks off in the midst of Fred Vincy and Mary Garth's re-engagement. Caleb Garth has told Mary of Harriet Bulstrode's desire that Fred take on the management of Stone Court Farm, a source of stable employment that will allow the once debt-ridden and irresponsible young man to marry. Sharing the news with Fred, Mary concedes that her joy at this turn of events is because she still "love[s] [him] best" and had always wished to be his wife when circumstances would allow it (830). Yet before any formal understanding can be uttered between them, the couple are interrupted by Mary's younger brother Ben, whose boisterous entreaty that they come in and join the family for cake is the final, unanswered utterance of the chapter.

We leave the lovers "linger[ing] on the door-step under the steep-roofed porch" of Caleb Garth's house (830), skirting on the edge of a narrative threshold that Eliot's novel seems reluctant to cross. "Marriage", as the narrator reminds us elsewhere, "has been the bourne of so many narratives" (832); and it seems to be almost in respect of the form-giving marriage plot, so prominent within the English tradition, that Eliot's narrator turns from Mary and Fred at the

point where courtship yields to matrimony, just as she had left Dorothea at the close of chapter eighty-four. Nevertheless, unlike Dorothea and Will Ladislaw, the young couple lingering on the doorstep have been engaged before, and it is this tension between redemption and repetition that makes the abrupt close of Middlemarch's final chapter such a bold and intriguing authorial choice. On the one hand, the arc of Fred's moral improvement under Caleb Garth's tutorage creates an expectation within the novel's moral economy that such reform should yield its just rewards: the happy marriage Fred has always wanted, and now finally deserves. Yet against this likelihood, the reader must entertain the possibility that a man once erring might err again. His personal history is after all as likely to be cyclical as it is to lead towards the bildungsroman's teleology of self-improvement. Fred might disappoint Mary once more and plunge his loved ones into debt for a second time; his narrative promise, like his pledge to his sweetheart, is something of an act of faith. The space, then, between chapter eighty-six and the novel's coda is one into which Eliot forces her readers to feel the play of possibility, speculation, and uncertainty in a manner very much in accordance with the young James's recommendation. It is a moment in which the limits established to "the art of story-telling" show their limitless potential, and narrative trajectories bring with them their alternatives.

"Finale", the telling title Eliot gives to her coda, commences with the narrator's recognition of the swarming creative potential solicited by any foreclosed narrative: "[e]very limit", she notes, "is a beginning as well as an ending" (832). Her point is that at such thresholds one would do as well to begin the story anew as to end it, especially as the play of human consciousness often finds itself unwilling to abandon those in whom it has found itself invested to an uncertain fate: "Who can quit young lives after being long in company with them, and not desire to know what befell them in their after-years?" (832). It is this "desire to know" that is at once the most problematic and creatively vital force Eliot must contend with. Can such readerly yearnings be harnessed as a productive force within art, or is it an author's responsibility to sate them? Robert Douglas-Fairhurst identifies Eliot as having been influenced on such matters by a

characteristically nineteenth-century anxiety about the indeterminate nature of one's future life. Many of Eliot's novels are accordingly situated in what he calls the "gap which is opened up between the future her characters imagine for themselves, and the one her narrative provides for them", such that her oeuvre constitutes "one of the period's most finely worked sets of literary experiments in the production of disappointment" (119). And yet this heightened receptivity to the disruptive potential of futurity also seems to have manifested in Eliot as a reluctance to leave her characters vulnerable to being taken up as the subjects of unauthorized sequels. As John M. Picker has remarked, it is telling that prior to the mid-1870s, Eliot appears very purposefully to have avoided writing the sort of novel that could provoke "imitations or questionable continuations" of the kind with which Charles Dickens had had to contend (365). All too mindful of her readers' likely difficulty in abandoning such cherished characters, Eliot seems to have remained cognizant of the fact that if unchecked by authorial instruction, this fervent desire for knowledge of future their lives might come in time to threaten her own authority.

The complicating factor, as the narratorial comments at the end of Middlemarch make clear, is that a partial experience of a life remains an insufficient basis for building an accurate picture of its development beyond the limits of our ken: "the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web: promises may not be kept, and an ardent outset may be followed by declension; latent powers may find their long-waited opportunity; a past error may urge a grand retrieval" (832). Addressing her first readers fourteen years after the publication of Charles Darwin's The Origin of Species, Eliot's narrator is speaking of indistinct futures with the knowledge that the comforting teleological progression once promised by the deific author-of-all-things has been replaced by a growing public acceptance of the likely arbitrariness of life courses existing at the mercy of near infinite factors. As William James would observe when musing on the difference between religious belief and "the present temper of the scientific imagination", "Nature", unlike the gods, appears to have "no one distinguishable ultimate tendency with which it is possible to feel a sympathy" (491-92). This terrible desire to know the

fate of young lives is not, then, merely a consequence of readers quitting their company at a point of transition, but of what has happened to narrative limits at a time of religious and epistemological doubt, when the possibilities at play within the realm of the uncertain had come to feel more numerous and unstable than at any prior point in living memory.

What Eliot would appear to have evoked in the opening paragraph of her coda, then, is a climate in which the reader's desire to discover the fate of her characters will lead them into a fraught, multifaceted, and decidedly unstable realm of speculation: a place where the courses of these continuing young lives will be accompanied by counter-narratives, those what-ifs and if-onlys that jostle for position alongside the elected belief. It is a situation like that we identified at the close of chapter eighty-six, although now broadened to embrace more possibilities for disaster than Fred's frivolous tendencies. And if, indeed, Eliot had left her novel there, the residents of Middlemarch might have been permitted to expand into such an imaginative realm; the bourne of marriage plots could have yielded to a limitless place of imaginative conjecture, and ultimately revealed those multiple worlds and lives that can be entertained within the depths of one glance. In short, Middlemarch might have been more Jamesian: a text in which a copious dose of detail had not stifled the insights available to a reader's imagination or placed a limit upon the development and representational capacity of the "old-fashioned English novel". As it is, however, Eliot's climate of uncertainty lasts no more than one hundred and ninety-four words. Having cultivated the play of possibility upon the breached limits of the novel-form, she quickly shuts it down and restates both narrative certainty and a stable end to utterance. The fourth paragraph of "Finale" sees the narrator assure the reader, in the manner of a provincial historian, that "[a]ll who have cared for Fred Vincy and Mary Garth will like to know that these two made no such failure, but achieved a solid mutual happiness" (832). We follow fate of these lovers up to their time of "white-haired placidity" (834), and the likes of Lydgate and Dorothea to their deaths and internment in "unvisited tombs" (835-38).

Considering the vision of "perfection" in the "art of story-telling" he had constructed whilst reading Adam Bede, it is easy to see why James would have been driven to pronounce Middlemarch "at once one of the strongest and one of the weakest of English novels" (EL 958). Eliot had come close to pursuing the sort of emboldened artistic vision which made rich and exacting demands upon her readers' imaginative faculties. But at the last, she had shown herself to have reverted again to "the old tradition", whose weight of cultural expectation James would summarize in the edict "that a serious story of manners shall close with the factitious happiness of a fairy-tale" (EL 933). Nevertheless, by her death in 1880, Eliot had written one novel whose ending had left her characters "en l'air" in that particular sense which had been demanded by her young critic in 1866 (CN 15). Daniel Deronda concludes with a widowed Gwendolen Harleth having been imbued with a new but ill-defined resolve to "live" and "be better", and Daniel and Mirah poised on the brink of their journey to the East (807). The manner of response that this ending solicited from readers and critics alike would, however, have done little to affirm for Eliot the benefits of having adopted this more enigmatic style. Daniel Deronda prompted at least two unauthorized sequels, both of which took Eliot's silence as leave to bundle a reformed Daniel back into Gwendolen's outstretched arms. And even Edwin P. Whipple, – whose review for the January 1877 number of the North American Review was, according to Lewes, the best evaluation of the novel he had read – would still pronounce "the chief defect in the story" to be the fact that "it suddenly stops rather than artistically ends". "[I]t appears to be the fate of this remarkable novelist", Whipple had informed his readers, "to raise expectation to the height only more or less to disappoint it, and to give an absorbing interest to characters, whom she abruptly leaves without condescending to gratify that natural curiosity … she has labored so successfully to excite" (qtd. in Picker 376-77).

As we shall see, James would come to be characterized in a remarkably similar manner by his friend W. D. Howells in the aftermath of the publication of another novel with an infamously open-ended conclusion, The Portrait of a Lady (1881): a work which is to form the

basis for discussion in what remains of this article. Considering The Portrait of a Lady in the context of James's interactions with George Eliot is a particularly loaded task given F. R. Leavis's contentious suggestion that Isabel Archer's tale is simply Gwendolen's Harleth's story rewritten from a male perspective (104).[vi] My aim here is not, however, to argue for the predominant influence of any individual novel of Eliot's upon the mature James's fictional output. Rather, I wish trace the development their "living and recorded relation" through to the twentieth century (Au 605), and in so doing, to argue for the role played by James's intellectual and aesthetic dissatisfaction with Eliot's works of psychological realism in development of the Jamesian novel: a decidedly modern artform in which the imagination of possibility, so essential to the course of human life, is both represented and felt.[vii] Placing renewed critical emphasis upon the importance of the Master's innovative style in the establishment of prose as a medium that could point beyond its own finite form and give expression to alternative, counterfactual narratives, the second half of this article will seek to position James as a novelist who pushed at, and eventually transcended, the formal and conceptual limits of the "old-fashioned English novel".

The section of The Middle Years with which we began saw an elderly James present a more generous view of the "great" George Eliot's novels than he had been able to muster in his early twenties. Sarah B. Daugherty has speculated that this shift in stance is indicative of more secure James, who, at relative peace with his own substantial achievements, could at last profess to have "shaken off the anxieties of circumspection and comparison" and regard his relationship with Eliot as "an attachment pure and simple" (Daugherty 153; Au 606). Certainly, it is beneath the gaze of retrospection that James seems most disposed to acknowledge the shared sensibility which had bound the two writers together, as well as the common struggles each had faced as a consequence. Consider, for example, the Preface to Volume One of the New York Edition (1907), where James recounts the genesis and composition of Roderick Hudson. Started in Florence almost exactly a year after his review of Middlemarch, the older James remembers this

novel as the work whose "idea … permitted [him] at last to put quite out to sea", after having spent many years "hug[ing] the shore … in the shallow waters and sandy coves of the 'short story'" (FW 1040). Casting off into the "blue southern sea" of composition had nevertheless revealed that the horizon glimpsed from the land was not a terminus but an ever-elapsing vista. James's realization, in short, was that which Eliot herself had stated as the essential problem for a novelist: the challenge of laying anchor when the ocean beckons you onwards. Certainly, this Preface sees James be far more upfront about the interminable difficulty of knowing "[w]here, for the complete expression of one's subject, does a particular relation stop – giving way to some other not concerned in that expression?" than in his youthful appraisals of Eliot's works:

> Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so. He is in the perpetual predicament that the continuity of things is the whole matter, for him, of comedy and tragedy; that this continuity is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken, and that, to do anything at all, he has at once intensely to consult and intensely to ignore it. All of which will perhaps pass but for a supersubtle way of pointing the plain moral that a young embroiderer of the canvas of life soon began to work in terror, fairly, of the vast expanse of that surface, of the boundless number of its distinct perforations for the needle, and of the tendency inherent in his many-coloured flowers and figures to cover and consume as many as possible of the little holes. The development of the flower, of the figure, involved thus an immense counting of holes and a careful selection among them. That would have been, it seemed to him, a brave enough process, were it not the very nature of the holes so to invite, to solicit, to persuade, to practise positively a thousand lures and deceits. The prime effect of so sustained a system, so prepared a surface, is to lead on and on; while the fascination of following resides, by the same token, in the presumability somewhere of a convenient, of a visibly-appointed stopping-place. Art would be easy indeed if, by a fond power

> disposed to "patronise" it, such conveniences, such simplifications, had been provided. We have, as the case stands, to invent and establish them, to arrive at them by a difficult, dire process of selection and comparison, of surrender and sacrifice. (1041)

When considering this famous section, Douglas-Fairhurst has drawn attention to the pertinence of its comments not only to issues of form, but of influence. Noting that "during the period which shaped and stirred James's imagination, close attention to 'influence' forms a significant part of the atmosphere of individual writers' minds, and an equally significant part of the pervasive atmosphere of cultural debate", he suggests that James's model of a near infinite nexus of possible relations serves to establish the role of a novel's form in guiding ethical questions about duties of care and the limits of an individual's capacity for concern (93-95). Like any responsible citizen, a novelist must seek to determine which external actions are relevant to the course taken by any given life, as well as to establish how remote an event need be in order to be judged too distant touch those circumstances under discussion.

Yet the issues of influence which James evokes here are not only ethical but aesthetic; and what they seem implicitly to address is the influence exerted upon James's fictional art by George Eliot's work. "Relations stop nowhere" feels like a decidedly Eliotesque pronouncement, poignantly echoing the narrator of Middlemarch's acknowledgement of the "tempting range of relevancies" that is "the universe" (141), whilst also nodding to that novel's broader concern with both the analogous patterns discernable between individual lots and the influence a person might exert over their surrounding society. As Darrell Mansell Jr. has shown, however, Eliot was also renowned for having placed relations at the heart of her notion of novelistic form, suggesting in her 1868 essay "Notes on Form in Art" that she preferred to allow the "outline" of a work to emerge naturally from those intrinsic internal connections forged between characters and scenes (Mansell 660-61; GESE 233-34). It is possible, then, to read James's pronouncements in the Preface to Roderick Hudson as a simultaneous acknowledgement and negotiation of his relationship with Eliot, in which the invocation of their shared sensibility is counteracted by the

rhetorical construction of James's own artist's circle: the formal boundary whose presence will ultimately distinguish both his philosophy and his novels from those more sprawling constructions of his forebear. As a pattern of appreciation and discrimination, this expression of influence simultaneously acknowledged and delimited is indeed very similar to that we saw at work in The Middle Years, a fact attested to by the poignant return of this Preface's imagery later in the fifth chapter of that unfinished autobiographical work. Defending Eliot's "circle of gorgeous creation" from those who found its picture to be "confound[ed]" by philosophical vocabulary, James concludes by professing to have found on "George Eliot's canvas" a "figured, coloured tapestry always vivid enough to brave no matter what complication of the stitch" (Au 616).

Further aspects of James's ongoing dialogue with Eliot emerge when one reads this Preface with an eye to how his ambition of "perfection" in "the art of story-telling" is achieved at the level of style. James's prose here offers a small-scale glimpse of the struggle to contain expression within compositional limits, with the opening sentence seeing the revelation that "relations stop nowhere" be quickly succeeded by a deluge of moderating clauses, which expand and develop the analogy before the thought is finally allowed "happily to appear" to conclude before the artificial yet essential terminus of a period. The "canvas of life", moreover, finds itself surveyed by what Hazel Hutchison calls James's syntax of double perception (11). This form of repetition sees an idea from the previous clause or sentence recycled – as in "the many coloured flowers and figures" whose "development" becomes the subject of the following sentence – in a manner that creates the effect of a delayed emphasis being placed on a phrase initially overlooked: an emphasis that succeeds in bringing forth latent semantic potential. There is, it seems, always more to be seen even within previously treated territory. James's style, then, is harnessed in the explanatory form of this Preface in order to illustrate how all acts of writing – fictional or non-fictional – have to wrestle with the challenge of bringing potentially infinite experience into a form in which it can be expressed and interpreted. And whilst he might be seen

barely to succeed in practicing the "process of selection" and refinement that he preaches, it is more important to appreciate how the drama of style – its proliferations against, yet within, formal models – allows the reader to feel the persuasive lure of a world of possibility that James is unable to treat in its entirety.

Despite the protestations of this Preface, however, one "visibly-appointed" stopping-place that an artist might eventually be forced to acknowledge is that provided by death: the incontrovertible boundary placed upon all human life. That James can write so eloquently of the manner in which "really, universally, relations stop nowhere" without so much as alluding to what we might call "the exquisite problem" of mortality certainly seems odd. What could be simpler to a writer seeking a convenient limit to the treatment of a literary subject than the conclusion of the mortal narrative, whose arc of beginning, middle, and end most fictional models echo? – especially given that deaths and marriages had served as suitable dénouements for many of the great works of realistic fiction produced during the nineteenth century, including, as we have seen, the "Finale" of Middlemarch. The fact that James feels no need to qualify his comments with reference to this particular constituent of the human condition might, however, tell us something important about how mortality and narrative are made to interact across his fiction; and why, as a consequence, it might be valuable to keep a close eye on those moments when the accepted formal properties of the "old tradition" are questioned and transcended in his work. For indeed, later on in the Preface to Roderick Hudson, James details how the "centre of interest" he chose to determine his compositional circle in that novel was not the course of a human life, but "Rowland Mallet's consciousness […] so the beauty of the constructional game was to preserve in everything its especial value for him" (FW 1050). The solution to Eliot's problem of the interminable continuity of things was not, then, the extinction of one's central consciousness in death, but the reconstitution of those relations that spark, create, and condition its interest. The eponymous Roderick might die near the end of James's

novel, but Mallet remains vital: a receptive witness to the shift in circumstances that the demise of his friend occasions.

One of the best illustrations in James's oeuvre of this coincidence between the ending of a life and the resurgence of narrative potential occurs in the penultimate chapter of The Portrait of a Lady. In 1873, James had found fault with Eliot for releasing Dorothea Brooke from the "arid pedant" she had married far too soon: a move which had restricted the reader's subsequent interest in her to the question "will she or will she not marry Will Ladislaw" (EL 961). But in chapter fifty-four of The Portrait of a Lady, we find a heroine who, in pronounced opposition to her all-too-vital husband's wishes, has left Rome and come to Gardencourt in the hope of seeing her cousin Ralph Touchett before he dies. And indeed when, on the third day of her bedside vigil, Isabel finally finds Ralph strong enough to speak with her, his words take the form of a pronouncement that, whilst she may resemble "the angel of death", she is herself a long way from the mortal blow:

> "You have been like an angel beside my bed. You know they talk about the angel of death. It's the most beautiful of all. You've been like that; as if you were waiting for me."
>
> "I was not waiting for your death; I was waiting for – for this. This is not death, dear Ralph."
>
> "Not for you – no. There is nothing makes us feel so much alive as to see others die. That's the sensation of life – the sense that we remain. I've had it – even I. But now I am of no use but to give it to others. With me it's all over." And then he paused. Isabel bowed her head further, till it rested on the two hands that were clasped upon his own. … "Isabel," he went on, suddenly, "I wish it were over for you." (553)

Many different conceptualizations of death are evoked in this brief exchange, and James pays close attention to the semantic refashioning that this most ineffable of experiences undergoes when it is made to function as a source of relation between people. Ralph's

comparison of Isabel with "the angel of death" sees him appraise his cousin as a herald of his own demise: the beautiful fatal figure awaiting him at the edge of life to usher him from the world. The angel is of death, within its jurisdiction, a realm in which Ralph likewise situates himself. Isabel's insistence that "This is not death" succeeds in recasting death as a state not yet upon them: a postulation that Ralph then moderates so as to make it apply to Isabel alone. The course of their conversation thus sees Ralph attempt to use the realization of their divergent perspectives as a means of extracting Isabel from her empathetic identification with his own plight. Suggesting that watching him die will make her feel alive, Ralph ultimately offers Isabel a definition of human vitality that has less to do with health than with what he calls "the sense that we remain". Being alive, in such terms, is not so much a physiological state as a point of view. It is the manner of vision afforded to a sensitive and receptive observer: one who can see their own unresolved potential for experience in comparison with another's irrevocable fate and recognize it as the stuff of life.

Even on his deathbed, Ralph struggles to conceive of what benefit the sensation of life might offer his cousin. James is never so reductive as to present continued existence as preferable on any terms; for those most responsive to the influence of those great things that constitute experience, to be conscious can itself be too much to bear. Ralph's wish that "it were over" for Isabel could conceivably allude to her life or to her marriage to Gilbert Osmond, but might well refer to the torture she is likely to suffer at the hands of her all-too-receptive mind – we are told that "[s]uffering, with Isabel, was an active condition; it was not a chill, a stupor, a despair; it was a passion of thought, of speculation, of response to every pressure" (410). Nevertheless, as an optative postulation, Ralph's wish has the function of re-affirming Isabel's opportunity for resurrection even in the act of disavowing the positive aspects of life being "her business for a long time to come" (540). Whatever "it" is, unlike Ralph's demise, it has not yet been fully determined; and as such can be interpreted and redeemed contrary to the dying man's fearful pronouncements. Thus when, a little later in their talk, Ralph asks whether "It is all over,

then, between you [and Osmond]?", his cousin answers with the voice not only of a woman resurgent, but one once again aware of the play of possible futures she is entitled to entertain, and over which her gaze can fall without certainty, intent or impetus:

> "Oh no; I don't think anything is over."
>
> "Are you going back to him?" Ralph stammered.
>
> "I don't know – I can't tell. I shall stay here as long as I may. I don't want to think – I needn't think." (555)

James's oeuvre, as Hutchison has noted, illustrates deep fascination with such moments of hesitation, pause, and restraint (26). Possessed of a stammer, James's speech often took the form of a careful and ponderous delivery; friends would have to grow used to what W. L. Phelps recalled as his tendency to "stop in the middle of a sentence, [and] fee[l] around in his mind for the right word" (qtd. in Hutchison 26). As we have already seen, the late style, which developed partly out of James's move towards composition via dictation, might be said to display something of an aesthetic commitment to the evocation of possibility and to unresolved semantic potential. The habit of delaying the elucidating verb until the very end of a sentence, building sense through a succession of moderating clauses, cultivating ambiguity of referent by using pronouns instead of names, and asserting via what Ian Watt terms "negative or near negativ[e]" forms (259), can all be seen as part of a desire to keep as many interpretive possibilities in play for as long as possible, and to force readers to arrive at the dominant meaning through the entertainment of various conjectures, perspectives, and potentialities.

That this dramatization of the process behind acts of comprehension should be played out in James's style feels fitting, considering the centrality of such theories to the work of his older brother.[viii] As Sanford Schwartz has neatly summarized, William James was part of a movement in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries that saw philosophers from "distinct and competing traditions" nevertheless converge in their shared concern about the correspondence between our conceptual systems (including language itself) and the external

reality they professed to elucidate. Like Henri Bergson, Friedrich Nietzsche, and F. H. Bradley, William's work claimed that reality in fact lay in the preconceptual flow of appearances and was therefore fundamentally irreducible to rational formulation. Our intellectual conceptions, it was postulated, do not represent a reality beyond this relentless sensory stream, but are in fact merely the most convenient devices that the mind can muster to organize it. All thinking, all utterances, and all conceptualizations are therefore to be seen as part of our necessary refinement of this flux and are the simplifying limits we place on reality in order to conceive of it (Schwartz 15-20).

Viewed collectively, an influential consequence of these theories was the challenge they posed to the belief that there was any essential form of reality behind this stream of sensation. But once one had accepted that reality was itself an infinite sensory stream, there were, in theory, as many aspects of reality as there were points of view through which to order experience (Schwartz 18). In William James's work, this belief was developed in his notion of our existing not in a universe but multiverse, whose plurality was attested to by the multiplicity of interpretations, sensations, and orders of feeling that a single phenomenon could provoke. If "the world", as he claimed, was "so complex" as to "consist of many interpenetrating spheres of reality", each conditioned by the interpreting consciousnesses engaged with it, then one could in theory "approach" these spheres "in alternation by using different conceptions and assuming different attitudes" (Varieties 122-23). Nevertheless, as the adoption of a single perspective ultimately amounted to a distortion of and abstraction from the infinite and multifaceted stream of sensation, it also was the job of figures like the philosopher and the artist to alert people to what consciousness loses in capitulating to a more limited, manageable worldview.

Henry James's palpable aesthetic commitments to hesitation, indeterminacy, and provisionality might then be seen as part of a desire to allow prose fiction to achieve a closer approximation of a reality both defined by and as this preconceptual state. As ordering mediums, language and narrative are manifestations of thought and decision; yet as we have seen, James's late style in particular achieves a means of soliciting and elongating those moments when

perception has not yet settled into its defined, and therefore limited, form. Millicent Bell has been highly influential in associating the Master's work with the pursuit of precisely this form of philosophically attuned realism, drawing attention to how, at the level of both style and plot, "a story or novel of James's arouses expectations in us, stimulates us to hypotheses of its further course, and seems to propose or cancel meanings at successive moments" (10). And if we return to the penultimate chapter of The Portrait of a Lady, we see James attempting to evoke a similar wealth of sensations at this significant juncture in Isabel's story. The realization on Ralph's deathbed that she doesn't in fact "think anything is over" instigates what we might interpret as Isabel's achievement of a point of view not unlike that produced for a reader when in the midst of a passage Jamesian prose. Not knowing, not being able to tell her course of action, Isabel begins to appreciate anew the freedom and mastery of indecision, of feeling the play of many options not yet resolved. She is conscious, but, as she tells Ralph, "needn't think": at least not in the sense of moving toward resolution or certainty (555).

Having been deprived of what Lambert Strether will call life's precious "illusion of freedom" by the revelation of Madame Merle's role in her marriage (Amb 135), Isabel's lack of vitality, her angelic deathliness in Ralph's eyes, had in some senses been tied to her knowing confinement within a pre-determined plot: a state that Kimberly Lamm refers to as Isabel's "doomed image of herself" (253). The passing of perspective that Ralph enacts when he gives his cousin the position of living observer of his irreversible fate is thus significant because it allows her to extricate herself from this feeling of having been spoken for. It is in this sense of 'not yet' and in the persistence of her own unimpeached consciousness that Isabel can access a feeling of rejuvenation, or as Ralph terms it, "grow young again" (556).

The penultimate chapter of a novel might seem a rather frustrating time for its heroine to gain this wave of undetermined narrative potential. Nevertheless, whilst James permits Isabel to revel momentarily in not having to decide whether she is "going back" to her husband (555), she does end The Portrait of a Lady having chosen and embarked on "a very straight path" into the

future (568). Both Isabel's decision and the manner of its presentation by James have nevertheless attracted a great deal of criticism. Since the first version of the novel appeared in 1881, it has been discussed in relation to its "infamously vague" and "unsatisfactory" conclusion (Lamm 256). We know from Henrietta Stackpole that this path leads Isabel back to Rome (PoL 569); but to what end and for how long we can only speculate. One option is that the shock of Caspar Goodwood's proposed adultery reminds Isabel of the rigid demands of marital duty: that she is returning to face Osmond's displeasure, which she knows "will not be the scene of a moment" but "a scene that will last always" (544). Another is that she goes back for Pansy, her vulnerable stepdaughter whose name is the implicit but unspoken answer to both Goodwood's and Lydia Touchett's crass observations about Isabel's fortunate childlessness (567, 558). Her flight might equally be yet another version of the "generous mistake" that first tied her to Osmond (556): proof that, contrary to the structuring principles of bildungsroman narratives, James's heroine has gained experience but learned little from it. And prior to its revisions for the New York Edition, the text also easily allowed the reader to assume – as another seasoned reviewer of George Eliot, R. H. Hutton, did in his November 1881 piece for The Spectator – that Isabel's straight path led to a future "liaison with her rejected lover" (HJCH 96). The novel's conclusion, after all, contains what looks a lot like Henrietta's knowing advice to Goodwood that in order to reunite with Isabel he need only bide his time: "'Look here, Mr. Goodwood,' she said; 'just you wait!' / On which he looked up at her" (569).[ix]

Like Middlemarch, The Portrait of a Lady was published originally in serial form, appearing in Britain's Macmillan's Magazine between October 1880 and November 1881, and in the Atlantic Monthly from November 1880 to December 1881. Given that readers on both sides of the Atlantic had spent over a year in successive bouts of expectation for the arrival of the next instalment, it is easy to see why the book's original conclusion had sparked such consternation. Many felt that they, like Goodwood, had merely been instructed to anticipate a resolution which ultimately never arrived.[x] And yet it is worth noting that James's decision to deny the reader

elucidating information about his heroine's future is in fact prefigured in a stylistic move enacted shortly before the novel's conclusion. This provocative moment immediately follows Goodwood's kiss: an affront which Isabel in the 1881 version experiences as "like a flash of lightning" (568), and whose insistent physical reality James makes more overt in the New York Edition of 1908, where his heroine finds herself contending with "each aggressive fact of [Goodwood's] face, his figure, his presence" (944):

> [W]hen it was dark again she was free. She never looked about her; she only darted away from the spot. There were lights in the windows of the house; they shone far across the lawn. In an extraordinarily short time – for the distance was considerable – she had moved through the darkness (for she saw nothing) and reached the door. Here only she paused. She looked all about her; she listened a little; then she put her hand on the latch. She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path. (568)

As Lamm has noted, The Portrait of a Lady is a novel that has, up to this moment, been "dense with visual detail" (256), yet here James's register appears to shift away from aggressive facts congruent with Goodwood's insistent and problematic presence. The darkness that permits and consumes Isabel's flight sets both her thoughts and her body "free". And as a narrative mode, we might suggest that it does the same for James. Indeed, this passage of description (if we can even call it that), is not so much an account of Isabel's journey across the lawn as an indication of the inability of language to express the true nature of the experience that she undergoes there. Isabel might have "moved through the darkness" (both literal and metaphorical) in "an extraordinarily short time", but James's reminder that "the distance" was nevertheless "considerable" alerts the reader to the fact that normal conceptual markers are scarcely able to account for what has gone on here. We are in the realm of the "extraordinar[y]", not the merely fathomable. Even the moment of Isabel's decision, of her transition between

"not knowing" and "knowing" where to turn, appears only in the form of the narrative breach indicated by James's semi colon: 'She had not known where to turn; but she knew now."

Despite the urgency with which we might interrogate James's prose, what precisely has occurred to Isabel on this darkened flight is something about which we can only speculate: it is a type of revelation, perhaps, that demands a broader, less limited form of thinking in order to be entertained. The semantic impetus of the passage does not, after all, seem to be drawing on a conceptual field that we can assign completely to the realistic conventions of nineteenth-century fiction, with its emphasis on plausible actions committed by wholly intelligible characters. The self-conscious cultivation of paradoxes, evasions, and lacunae James musters here appear to be asking readers to find room in Gardencourt's expansive, time-bending darkness for Isabel to have undergone a psychological experience less effable and more transformative than that which a linear-bound, reconciliatory, and rationalizing form of narrative could altogether express. What she appears to attain is a perspective out of time, at odds even with her own understanding of the causal process. It is an order of knowledge that does not seem to exist until it is known, and only exists somewhere within the very sensation of that knowing.

This knowledge does, significantly, yield a decision, and a forward trajectory on which our heroine can act; but when the darkness dissolves it is replaced only with the tantalizing images of a "straight path" and a threshold: symbols that indicate her choice has been made, but which cannot elucidate its nature. It is therefore as a determined woman pausing on the doorstep of Gardencourt that James leaves Isabel; at a point, we might recall, very similar to that at which Eliot had left Fred Vincy and Mary Garth, and declared that every limit was a beginning as well as an ending.[xi] I have myself lingered on the moment of Isabel's darkened dash across Gardencourt's lawns because I believe that it illuminates aspects of James's developing method that most critics ignore when puzzling out the implications of his decision to leave his heroine's fate unwritten after this point. What this concluding passage tells us, particularly when we note the New York Edition's increased emphasis upon the contrast between Isabel's flight and the

"fact" of Goodwood's presence, is that James is declaring himself to be interested in the ways in which novels could be made to construct and speak to those aspects of human experience that their explanatory and reductive tendencies would normally disavow. There may be more to life, more to consciousness, and more to reality, than the limited, limiting form of language can express, but this does not mean that a novel cannot strive to present this order of experience in other ways. James, indeed, offers us Isabel's extraordinary passage through darkness, and trusts that the necessary play of our imaginative speculation will take that indeterminate blankness closer to the psychological truth of her condition than straight explication ever could. And the same is true, I think, of the novel's silence on her likely future.

This appears to be what Tessa Hadley is suggesting when she acknowledges that by the end of the novel, Isabel has become one who "thinks and feels beyond the conventional", and that "life surges in her from somewhere deeper than the Victorian ideal [of femininity]". Such insights are however followed in Hadley's account by the less persuasive suggestion that James's decision not to write his heroine's future is therefore because he "cannot imagine it". In moving beyond acknowledged modes of decorum and expression, Isabel, according to Hadley, also moves beyond the conceptual capability of a James who has not yet "dreamed up Kate [Croy] or Mme de Vionnet or Charlotte [Stant]" (31-38). Leo Bersani likewise attributes the novel's want of resolution to a failure of imagination, yet his reading is made more nuanced by his insistence that the order of imagining that fails both Isabel and James is specifically that made available as a creative force within a realist novel:

> The technical premises of realistic fiction – the commitment to intelligible, "full" characters, to historical verisimilitude, to the revealing gesture or episode, to a closed temporal frame – already dooms any adventure in the stimulating improbabilities of behavior which would resist being "placed" and interpreted in a general psychological or formal structure. (It could be said … that the very nature of the novel she appears in determines Isabel's return to Osmond at the end of The Portrait of a Lady; her dream of

> freedom has been defeated by the limited range of possibilities for being free available to the realistic imagination. Isabel and James can no longer imagine to what concrete use her desire to be free might be put). (67)

In Bersani's terms, the end of The Portrait of a Lady is conditioned by James's defeat at the hands of the "technical premises of realistic fiction". His point is that because James had appeared to be writing a novel within the compositional prerequisites of the realist mode, he had no choice but to submit to their formal, limiting constraints. There is clearly a failure of imagination discernible within this reasoning, but we should perhaps question whether it is necessarily James's own. Bersani is markedly reluctant to see James's work as anything other than part of a tradition of nineteenth-century realism that began with Jane Austen (52), and as a consequence appears to have constructed a circular argument that presupposes "the very nature" of The Portrait of a Lady and then uses that same supposition to justify his reading. That he can speak of "Isabel's return to Osmond at the end [of the novel]" as if it were an irrefutable fact as opposed to one of many unspecified futures, illustrates the extent to which his expectation of formal resolution has taken the interpretive freedom provided by James's indeterminacy and used it to bring the novel in line with his own analytical sympathies. The irony, of course, is that The Portrait of Lady allows him to take such interpretive liberties precisely because it is devoid of the definitive conclusion that Bersani himself reinserts. It is the novel's solicitation of diverse but unfulfilled possibilities for its resolution that facilitates such a reading, at the same time as being the very force that would place the text outside the strict parameters by which he has just defined the realist mode.

What Bersani cannot help but overlook, then, is that in not offering us any degree of certainty within the novel as to Isabel's future, James succeeds in peeling away many of the imaginative constraints placed upon his heroine's dream of freedom by the technical premises of the realistic tradition. As that which remains unwritten, Isabel's fate is, by definition, irreducible to a single course, nor is it capable of "being 'placed' and interpreted in a general psychological

or formal structure". It remains in perpetual potential, in interpretive flux, for even if some outcomes might appear more likely to a "realistic imagination", none can attain the stature of certainty required to banish their competing alternatives irrevocably. What appears before a reader at the close of The Portrait of a Lady is therefore anything but a "dream of freedom [that] has been defeated". It is, rather, a glimpse into the dream of freedom itself: the state of living in a mode more expansive than convention, of existing in a stream of pure, unrestrained aspiration.

In his profile of "Henry James Jr." for the November 1882 edition of Century magazine, W. D. Howells offered a sympathetic, if on occasion slightly strained, defense of his friend's latest work:

> If we take him [James] at all we must take him on his own ground, for clearly he will not come to ours. We must make concessions to him, not in this respect only, but in several others, chief among which is the motive for reading fiction. By example, at least, he teaches that it is the pursuit and not the end which should give us pleasure; for he often prefers to leave us to our own conjectures in regard to the fate of the people in whom he has interested us. There is no question, of course, but he could tell the story of Isabel in The Portrait of a Lady to the end, yet he does not tell it. We must agree, then, to take what seems a fragment instead of a whole, and to find, when we can, a name for this new kind in fiction. Evidently it is the character, not the fate, of his people which occupies him; when he has fully developed their character he leaves them to what destiny the reader pleases. (HJCH 129)

Despite making no explicit reference to Middlemarch, it is hard to read Howells's appraisal without discerning the extent to which Eliot's capitulation in that novel's "Finale" had been at one with contemporary opinion about the duties of fiction. Nineteenth-century realism had created an expectation of verisimilitude, of the indicative incident, the knowable character, and the consolidating conclusion. And just as Whipple had declared of Eliot after reading Daniel Deronda, Howells here situates James as having passed beyond the compositional standards of

that epoch, arguing eloquently that his friend should no longer be held accountable to the motives for reading enshrined in that type of novel. Yet for all its good-naturedness, this appraisal is not quite accurate. James's writings might frustrate the expectations solicited by diffuse and over-treated works; but as we have seen, the effects that he aspired to produce ultimately required that his readership never quite relinquish their desire to know all and to envisage the end of a compelling narrative.

"[T]he fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web: promises may not be kept, and an ardent outset may be followed by declension. …" George Eliot had seen this 'truth' as justification for writing on and completing her story; for James, it seems, it became the reason to lay down his pen at the moment when everything, nothing, and a less-tangible something all seemed possible for his characters. Isabel Archer does not end The Portrait of a Lady with the same level of uncertainty as the reader; she embarks on "a very straight path" to Rome having both realized and chosen it. And this is significant, because it allows James to give direction, form, and a degree of artfulness to the play of speculation he has solicited. Indeed, as we encountered in Bersani's reading, by trying to discern Isabel's path, the reader will create routes for her future from those speculations they believe to be permissible. Their vision of her life to come may be multiple, contradictory, imaginative, and irresolvable, but it will be populated predominantly by suppositions that borrow the form and causal progression of narrative: that elapsing chain of relations that stops nowhere. This appears to be what James took from his early readings of Adam Bede and Middlemarch: the realization that the difficulty inherent in quitting young lives after being long in their company was not a psychological force condemned to transfigure the English novel into a form resembling a meticulously treated historical account. Nor need it necessarily produce an irrational, anarchic play of deconstructive imagination dangerous to the didactic agenda that George Eliot had so firmly believed in. In fact, what it offered was a means of incorporating other orders of experience and additional facets of mental life into the representational capacity of prose fiction. The novel, in James's hands, could

be made to speak to more than just the actual and the actualized: it could transfigure its finite form into that which solicited recognition of the infinite and the desired, the unlived and the possible, as they exist to the most receptive of minds.

Notes

[i] Watch and Ward was serialized in Atlantic Monthly between August and December 1871, but James's decision to revise the text extensively prior to its book publication meant that it did not appear in that form until 1878, after both Roderick Hudson (1875) and The American (1877). This complex publication history, coupled with Watch and Ward's exclusion from The New York Edition, perhaps explains why, in the Preface to Roderick Hudson, James claims that later work as his first "attempt at a novel, a long fiction with a 'complicated subject'" (FW 1040).

[ii] James was not the only reviewer to find the disjointed nature of Middlemarch's finished form problematic. A. C. Dicey, whose piece for The Nation had replaced James's own, pointed out that very little work would be required to "publish separately the history of Dorothea and Casaubon, of Lydgate and Rosamond, of Fred and Mary", having correctly surmised that "the author might originally have produced these stories as three separate tales of life in Middlemarch" (GECH 348).

[iii] W. Blackwood & Sons pursued this strategy until October 1872, and then elected to publish the final two parts of the novel in November and December respectively. This idea was another masterstroke of Lewes's, who had written to John Blackwood in July 1872 suggesting that it might be advantageous to have all volumes out in time for Christmas (Carroll xlix).

[iv] Adrian Poole cites Michael Anesko's calculations of James's literary income, which reveal that prior to 1900, he seldom earned more per year from book sales than from serial publication (Poole 143; Anesko 169).

[v] Much like Eliot herself, Wells conceived of his novels as instruments of social change, and it is telling that he would likewise attract criticism from James for prioritizing the transmission of his ideas over producing works with a coherent and well executed deign. James's mounting frustration with such digressive, politically minded novels would find public expression in "The New Novel" (1914): an essay that Wells saw as highly antagonistic.

[vi] Leavis's reductive reading of The Portrait of a Lady has already received a great deal of critical attention, with George Levine having helpfully noted the equally pronounced influence of Middlemarch on James's plot. The vast majority of criticism on the relationship between James and Eliot nevertheless still follows Leavis in choosing to

dwell upon similarities between the story of Isabel Archer and that of Gwendolen Harleth and/or Dorothea Brooke. See, for example, Levine, Daugherty, and Q. D. Leavis.

[vii] I am not alone in having perceived parallels between those ambitions laid out in the early appraisal of Adam Bede and James's subsequent development as an artist. In a brief aside, Sarah B. Daugherty noted that James's thoughts on Adam Bede's conclusion "foreshado[w] [his] later techniques – especially his creation of gaps in the text that invite the reader's imaginative participation" (156). This article seeks to develop and nuance such ideas by illustrating their prevalence throughout James's interactions with Eliot, whilst declining to follow Daugherty in aligning such innovations with James's attempt to lay "masculine insecurit[ies]" to rest and achieve "mastery over his female rival" (164, 156).

[viii] Ironically, William disliked the complexity of his brother's mature style, and after struggling to read The American Scene (1907) entreated him to revert back to his "older directer manner". See William James, "Letter to Henry James, Spring 1907" (Matthiessen 341).

[ix] The revisions that James undertook for the New York Edition can be seen as having weakened Hutton's interpretation. The 1908 version reads, "On which he looked up at her – but only to guess, from her face, with a revulsion, that she simply meant he was young. She stood shining at him with that cheap comfort, and it added, on the spot, thirty years to his life. She walked him away with her, however, as if she had given him now the key to patience" (PoL 944).

[x] James had in fact foreseen such readerly frustrations whilst planning the final stages of the novel in the winter of 1880/81: "The obvious criticism of course will be that it is not finished. … This is both true and false. The whole of anything is never told; … and the rest may be taken up or not, later" (CN 15). As it turned out, it would not be James who took up Isabel's story again but the Irish writer John Banville, whose sequel to The Portrait of a Lady, Mrs Osmond, was published in 2017.

[xi] That James should leave Isabel lingering on an architectural threshold is not the only echo of Eliot's work to be found in this section of the novel. As Daugherty has shown, it is possible to see a nod to the flood which drowns Mary Tulliver at the end of The Mill on the Floss in the "fathomless waters" Isabel finds herself immersed in by the prospect of Goodwood's offer (PoL 567). Nevertheless, the deluge which nearly destroys James's heroine is psychological rather than literal; and it is this distinction which both allows Isabel to survive the onslaught and James's novel to smilingly renounce the temptation of closure offered by Eliot's most melodramatic of conclusions (Daugherty 161).

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