

# Henry James and Incompleteness

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IT MIGHT, HENRY JAMES once speculated, be ‘as true of works of art as of men and women, that if the gods loved them they died young’.<sup>1</sup> The artwork which gave rise to this rich and strange postulation was William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Denis Duval*, an unfinished novel whose brilliant conception and untimely demise had captured James’s imagination in youth. At the time of Thackeray’s death from a stroke on Christmas Eve 1863, *Denis Duval* was already slated to appear in the *Cornhill Magazine*, and it was the *Cornhill*’s decision to serialise the incomplete manuscript which caused *Denis Duval* to appear to outlive its author-father by six months before coming to an abrupt end of its own in June 1864.<sup>2</sup> Thackeray had been 52 years old when he died. His sudden loss nevertheless struck James as possessing a pathos usually associated with the deaths of much younger men; this was due, in part, to the vibrancy of the truncated work he had left behind. At the tender age of 21, James had been one of many avid readers of ‘the cherished “Cornhill”’ to identify in *Denis Duval*’s opening chapters a fulfilment of the often dashed hope that ‘any new Thackeray’ might be a renewal of Thackeray, such that ‘even after “Lovel the Widower” and “Philip”’, a work might yet emerge from the novelist’s pen that would be ‘like’ his beloved “Esmond” (*EL*, p. 1290). John Sutherland found the incomplete novel animated by this same resurgent spirit, remarking that by far the most ‘astonishing feature of *Duval* is that there is nothing tired about

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it'; if anything, its opening 250 pages had seemed to announce Thackeray's miraculous 'recovery in age of the powers of youth'.<sup>3</sup> Apparently rejuvenised and, like his prematurely curtailed work, brimming with promise, Thackeray prompted admirers like the young James to wonder what masterpieces might have been produced had the great man only lived a little longer, as well as to muse on the more immediate issue of how *Denis Duval* would have turned out.

That James had expected great things of Thackeray's final novel emerges from his account of the 'thrill' that had accompanied his first encounter with the text (*EL*, p. 1290). Most compelling, however, appear to have been those speculations aroused in James about the unlived life of Duval, who might be said to have died young in the still more curious sense of having been left stranded in an eternal boyhood. Structured, like so many novels of the period, as a retrospective first-person narrative, *Denis Duval* sees the 'old battered, but considerably enriched, world-worn, but finely sharpened Denis loo[k] back upon a troubled life' (*EL*, p. 1291). Yet, in its extant form, the work covers only its hero's childhood, spent in the Cinque Port towns of Winchelsea and Rye. The intervening period of Duval's adolescence and maturity, although persistently hinted at 'in Thackeray's way', thus becomes what James calls 'an obliterated history': determinable only by working back from narrative outcomes removed both in time and in tenor from the lost years themselves (*EL*, pp. 1291, 1302).

Filling in this sizeable narrative gap is precisely what James declared that he wished to do upon returning to Thackeray's unfinished novel in an essay of 1899 – perhaps by locking up a resurrected William Makepeace in a 'little pavilion of inspiration' in Rye and 'not letting him out till he should quite have satisfied us'; or, failing that, through the operation of his own creative faculties (*EL*, p. 1303). First published in the January 1901 issue of *Scribner's Magazine*, 'Winchelsea, Rye, and "Denis Duval"' is part review, part travel piece, part autobiography, part quest for closure; although it is best described in Adrian Poole's terms as James's 'eloquent essay on incompleteness'.<sup>4</sup> As the references to his initial encounter with the novel reveal, James's relationship with *Denis Duval* was already

longstanding by the time he came to write the essay. Philip Horne notes that a witty allusion to the novel appears in a letter that James wrote to his friend T. S. Perry in March 1864, where the spectre of Thackeray's unfinished work had helped James express fears about the possible frustration of his own literary ambitions. James tells Perry that he is struggling to finish a story and, finding the text still to be incomplete, imagines himself in heaven, whence he narrates the lively dalliances he has had with Charles Lamb, Goethe, Shakespeare, and, very briefly, with Thackeray himself – although the author of *Denis Duval*, James tells Perry, has since been cast out by the angelic host for calling him a snob. The logic of this playful tableau, as Horne reveals, is 'neat. Thackeray being dead, Denis Duval must remain unfinished; James's story being unfinished, James must therefore die – or have died'.<sup>5</sup>

Given that James's interest in the lessons that an aspirant writer might learn from the fate of *Denis Duval* dates back at least as far as his Newport days, we might ask why it was that he should have felt moved to return to the novel in 1899. There is one obvious reason. In June 1898, James had moved from London to the rural idyll of Lamb House in Rye, East Sussex. He was now a resident of one of the Cinque Port towns in which Thackeray's hero had passed his youth, and had likewise become familiar with its neighbour, Winchelsea.

Another reason – more oblique, although far more provocative – appears to have been related to James's deep preoccupation in this period with both the implications of, and the manner of the human mind's response to, youthful or untimely demises. Even aside from his failed theatrical ventures, the 1890s had been a harrowing decade for James, peppered with the deaths of friends and relatives who had appeared to have much of life still left to live. March 1892 had seen the loss of his younger sister, Alice, from breast cancer at just 43; 1894 had been bookended by the deaths of Constance Fenimore Woolson, at the age of 53, from a suspected suicide in Venice, and of Robert Louis Stevenson, at 44, from a cerebral haemorrhage in Samoa. In March 1899, James received news that Josephine Kipling, daughter of Rudyard, had died at the age of 6 from pneumonia in New York, just as her famous father was

recovering from the same affliction. Josephine's death was widely reported in newspaper articles announcing to an expectant public Kipling's steady return to health: a fact that made her briefly, as Laurence Lerner notes, 'the most celebrated dead child in the world'.<sup>6</sup> A family friend, James had written promptly to Caroline Kipling to express his sympathy, recalling both how 'delightful' he had found the child, and the now treasured memories he had of meeting her the previous winter at Rottingdean.<sup>7</sup>

This letter of condolence to the Kipling family betrays the spectres of other young deaths that were stalking James's consciousness towards the end of the nineteenth century. An outburst of grief that overtakes him while writing – 'Dear little vanished delightful Josephine and dear little surrendered sacrificed soul!' – prompts James to beg forgiveness of the girl's mother for his 'incoherent expression'; yet by way of explanation he declares that he had 'only' been 'thinking of [Josephine] being worsted in the battle'.<sup>8</sup> The allusion might feel an unnatural one to bring to bear upon a female child whose death, while tragic, was neither violent nor glorious. But the inevitable reminder that the loss of any young and vibrant individual provided of the horror and heroism of the battlefield was, in James's own evocative phrase, 'a very old, – if I shouldn't perhaps rather say a very young' association, dating back to his adolescence during the American Civil War, when, though a non-combatant, he had witnessed the radical depletion of his peers.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, between the pages of the autobiographical works *A Small Boy and Others* (1913) and *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), one encounters a wealth of references to those among the young Jameses' circle who were 'worsted' during their nation's most traumatic years. These included their cousins William Temple and Gus Barker; Garth Wilkinson ('Wilky') James's best friend, Cabot Russell; as well as the family's New York neighbour, Eugene Norcom, the thought of whose death, though he would fight for the Confederacy, had shaken James in the aftermath of each skirmish, producing a 'dark but pitying vision' in his mind's eye.<sup>10</sup>

James would carry the scars of America's fratricidal conflict with him throughout his life. But there were contextual reasons

why this final decade of the nineteenth century was to prove particularly conducive to the recovery and reawakening of such memories. On 31 May 1897, Augustus Saint-Gaudens's monument commemorating the heroism of Major Robert Gould Shaw and the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts had been unveiled on Boston Common, in a ceremony during which William James had given a dedicatory speech. The Fifty-Fourth had been the regiment in which both Wilky James and Cabot Russell had served; and Henry, both thousands of miles away in London and conscious that he had neither shared in his younger brother's frontline experience nor been present when the troops had originally marched out of Boston on 28 May 1863, found himself entreating William that he be sent details of the day, and, if possible, a photograph of the monument.<sup>11</sup> The outbreak of the Spanish–American War in April 1898 also prompted a wave of strong recollections, although imagining a new generation of American boys being called upon to spill their blood ultimately left James in 'a vile' state of 'unrest', feeling, as he would write to his friend Frances Morse in Boston, both 'wretchedly nervous and overdarkened'.<sup>12</sup> Even the domestic success of securing the rental of his beloved Lamb House may have contributed to thoughts of violence and bloodshed during these years. Anxious to raise sufficient funds for the lease, James had leapt at an offer made by the London *Times* to write a regular article covering American publications for their new magazine, *Literature*.<sup>13</sup> As Tamara Follini has observed, publishing trends in the United States during the latter half of the century meant that reminiscences about the Civil War were comparatively scarce until 1880, when, thanks to the increased willingness of veterans to articulate long-repressed traumatic experiences, vast swathes of material had been released onto the market.<sup>14</sup> Reflecting this development – and, in all likelihood, his own intellectual curiosities – a substantial portion of the works James reviewed between March and July 1898 as part of *Literature*'s 'American Letters' series concerned Civil War experiences of one form or another. A collection of Ulysses S. Grant's correspondence, Colonel T. W. Higginson's memoir, and Walt Whitman's *The Wound Dresser*, a selection of vivid letters written by the poet

while volunteering in Washington hospitals, were among those volumes upon which he passed judgement.<sup>15</sup>

Nowhere in 'Winchelsea, Rye, and "Denis Duval"' is the American Civil War mentioned explicitly. Horne claims that it is possible to sense James's disapproval of the imperial ambitions which had precipitated the recent conflict between America and Spain in the comparison drawn between the former prestige that Winchelsea and Rye had enjoyed as targets of French invasion and their present status as provincial backwaters. Given that James concludes by evoking the Roman Campagna, a site Horne identifies as the 'grassy ruin of an ancient empire', the piece certainly seems mindful of the course of decline, ruination, unfulfilled plans, and scuppered ambitions that may accompany even the most ardent of imperial projects: a quality which no doubt added to its resonance with readers when it eventually found publication during the Boer War.<sup>16</sup> Yet if the American Civil War casts a long shadow over 'Winchelsea, Rye, and "Denis Duval"', then it is to be felt primarily in the way James's consciousness is exposed as acutely responsive to the 'after-sense' and long reverberations in time of 'hopes ... turned to bitterness' and 'boasts to lamentation': of projected long lives that have been reduced to 'short career[s]' and of imagined futures condemned never to come to fruition (*EL*, pp. 1292, 1298). It is this quality of frustrated promise that is identified as uniting the towns of Rye and Winchelsea with the novel fragment, forging deeper ties than those produced by the mere fact that Thackeray had chosen to set his final work in those particular coastal outposts. For just as the incomplete *Denis Duval* spoke evocatively to James of an artistic vision cruelly derailed, so did every quaint, diminutive street in Winchelsea remind him that Edward I's plan to expand the settlement into a great city, 'laid out on the most approved modern lines', had never come to pass, and Rye's 'big but stunted church' elicit a 'sigh' from his chest each time he considered 'what it might have been if, perfectly placed as it is, [its] tower ... had had the grace of a few more feet of stature' (*EL*, pp. 1299, 1304).

The lesson that that which has gone unlive or unenacted could both be registered by a receptive consciousness and

subject to reifying imaginative treatment was one that James appears to have learned many decades previously, while studying at Harvard during the Civil War. This was not wisdom James had picked up in a classroom or lecture theatre, but round the table of Miss Upham's boarding house, where he had spent mealtimes listening intently to the captivating talk of Professor F. J. Child, the future head of the university's English Department. Recalling his dining companion in *Notes of a Son and Brother*, James observes that:

Nothing more particularly touched me in him, I make out ... than the fashion after which he struck me as a fond grave guardian, not so much of the memory and the ashes yet awhile, as of the promise, in all its flower, of the sacrificial young men whom the University connection had passed through his hands and whom he looked out for with a tenderness of interest, a nursing pride, that was as contagious as I could possibly have wished it. ... Certain of them whom I had neither seen nor, as they fell in battle, was destined ever to see, have lived for me since just as communicated images, figures created by his tone about them – which, I admit, mightn't or needn't have mattered to me for all the years, yet which couldn't help so doing from the moment the right touch had handed them over to my restless claim.<sup>17</sup>

The elderly James remembers Professor Child as a 'fond grave guardian' not so much of memories pertaining to the dead of the Civil War as of their 'promise': of what these able students might have been and become in an age of peace. A subtle counterpoint to Harvard's Memorial Hall (famously visited by the Confederate veteran Basil Ransom in *The Bostonians* (1886)), Professor Child's mind, as James interprets it, appears to have dwelt less on the hard fact that his protégés were dying in the fight for the Union than upon the nature and quality of the lives they were to sacrifice for that cause. When one says that a soldier gave his or her life for their country, it is easy to overlook the extent to which a great deal of the life that was given was yet to be lived at the time that it was laid down in service.

Untimely death not only takes away the life already lived, but that to come: the promise that remains an integral part of an individual's value in the world. Speaking of his pupils, Professor Child succeeded in infecting his listener's imagination with 'communicated images', 'figures created by his tone about them', which, in containing the potential that their premature deaths would miscarry, made these young men more complete and more accomplished to James than they were ever to be in life. As this passage attests, James the memoir writer has in old age become the 'fond grave guardian' that he had been apprenticed as during those mealtimes at Miss Upham's. Yet it also communicates to us how, for an artist who would always understand being alive less as a physiological state than as a marker of receptivity to and potential for experience, these conversations were formative. In the communication between minds, the deployment of artful, evocative rhetoric, and in the play of the imagination, untimely deaths could, in a manner of speaking, be redeemed and their miscarried promise fulfilled. In learning to perceive the disparity between potential and actuality in the course or premature curtailment of any individual life, an aspiring artist could perhaps do a great deal of good.

'Winchelsea, Rye, and "Denis Duval"' is not only interested in these processes but itself a product of them. Knowing that he cannot get the answers he seeks about the plot of Thackeray's novel by locking up its long-dead author in a pavilion with a pen and inkpot, James must confine himself to those insights born of his own chiasmic logic, which professes that even if *Denis Duval* fails to tell him much about Winchelsea and Rye, Winchelsea and Rye might reveal something about *Denis Duval* (*EL*, p. 1289). What these incomplete, unfulfilled towns tell James is that it is indeed possible to 'work' oneself into 'a vision' of what is missing from the text. 'Rye and Winchelsea, and all the land about' are, as he notes, 'full of lurking hints and modest memories' (*EL*, p. 1303). Like those 'hints' that Thackeray deliberately inscribed into his hero's retrospective narrative, the present condition of the towns points to years of history that have been obliterated by the passage of time, leaving but the most provocative of traces (*EL*, p. 1291). Under James's gaze, they are also understood as sharing with the



unintentionally truncated novel the quality of gesturing towards developmental dreams and aspirations which, never having been set in stone, were debarred from becoming history of the solid, weighty sort that could be torn down. Feeling the draw of both orders of loss in these old Cinque Port towns persuades James that *Denis Duval's* richness and value lie in its incompleteness, and in the space that it gives for his speculative and imaginative faculties to construct and to create via an artistic vision that seems to mourn the demise of potential and actuality with equal sincerity, even as it moves to redeem them. After all, it was by virtue of its dying young that Thackeray's novel fragment had given rise to James's contemplative essay, as if in recognition of the fact that the economy of creation ultimately requires the frustration of potential, as well as the presence of those artists whose sensibilities equip them both to perceive and to attempt to fulfil it.

It is apt that just such an artist should lie at the heart of a work that James himself left tantalisingly incomplete: not on account of his death, but of having chosen to abandon the project. 'Hugh Merrow' is a short-story fragment dating from a similar period to James's essay on incompleteness (it was probably written during the summer of 1902), which concerns an unusual commission received by a portrait painter.<sup>18</sup> Like many of the visual artists in James's works, Merrow has a 'signal gift' for producing canvases that show their subjects 'blooming with life and promise'.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, these skills win him a reputation for being particularly adept at painting portraits of young children. At the point at which the story commences, he finds himself 'luckily hung' at a local exhibition thanks to the charm with which he has rendered Reggie Blyth, a boy of 6 years old. One consequence of possessing this talent is that Merrow is 'approached repeatedly' by bereaved parents who wish to commission him to paint their 'little dead' offspring. Often, they have 'photographs' from which he can work, or even 'some fatuous baby bust', and employ him to immortalise on canvas an impression of the extinguished young life (CN, p. 590). That he has succumbed on multiple occasions to the temptation of the easy money to be made from such couples is implied both by Merrow's slightly sinister gaze and what

George Bishop identifies as the 'sense of pervasive death' that seems to surround the painter.<sup>20</sup> It is there, too, in his material success, as well as in the resignation with which he welcomes his prospective clients, Captain and Mrs Archdean, into his studio, supposing them to be but the latest in this long line of pitiable figures.

The twist in James's tale comes from the fact that these Archdeans are actually anything but the same old clientele: as it turns out, they have presented themselves before Merrow not to commission a portrait of their 'little dead child', but of one who has never lived. Their highly eccentric request is that the artist construct a picture of 'such a [child] as [they] *might* have had', had Mrs Archdean been able to become pregnant (CN, p. 592). At the point at which the tale breaks off, the couple's struggles with conception are mirrored by Merrow's struggle with imaginative conception. Despite having found himself tired of photographs and baby busts, a situation in which he would have 'no data, no documents' at all to work with seems to have left Merrow at a loss as to how to proceed. 'It's worse', he comments to Mrs Archdean with more than a shade of crassness, 'even than if [your child] were dead' (CN, p. 593).

'Hugh Merrow' is often seen as an allegorical exploration of James's own creative process.<sup>21</sup> Such readings necessarily align the portrait painter's uncertainty over his next move with the author's, seeing it as only apt that James should have left incomplete a tale in which he had written himself into a rather compromising corner. After all, should he have had Merrow cheat by using a living or remembered child as his secret model, the plot would have mirrored too closely that of his earlier tale 'The Tone of Time' (1900), in which Mary Tredick manages to get round the problem of producing a portrait that is to represent an imaginary husband for her client by choosing to depict the man who jilted her several decades previously, only to discover, to her horror, that the woman he left her for is none other than the one who has commissioned the painting. But if James had let Merrow succeed, he would have risked depicting the 'serious' arts of painting and fiction as frivolous by implying that such works were subject to no more stringent constraints than the whims or imaginative predictions of their creators: an

offence against the calling of realism the gravity of which he had already outlined in the 1884 essay, 'The Art of Fiction'.<sup>22</sup>

There is an alternative reading of 'Hugh Merrow' which instead assigns its incompleteness to the uneasy ethical territory into which James's art of fiction is placed by the implication that this shady portrait painter might represent its ideal practitioner. As noted above, 'Hugh Merrow' commences with its artist making a snap judgement about his clients that is later exposed as inaccurate. Recalling, as they cross the threshold of his studio, that he has seen them before, Merrow begins by placing the Archdeans as the 'peerless' 'young couple' who, a mere three days previously, he noticed paying particular attention to his painting of little Reggie. Having successfully determined the identity of his visitors, the painter then turns his mind to why these respectable people should have found themselves 'most awfully struck' by the portrait (CN, pp. 589-90). An answer is quickly forthcoming:

it was a case of a young husband and a young wife deprived by death of a little boy of whom Reggie Blyth, extraordinarily handsome. . . too poignantly reminded them. Reggie, clearly, resembled their child, brought him back, opened their wound. . . their interest had been in *him*, not in Hugh Merrow . . . What they had been 'wondering', as the wife said, was, inevitably, whether they mightn't perhaps persuade him to paint their little dead boy. (CN, p. 590)

Momentarily leaving aside what we later discover about the factual inaccuracy of this account, some aspects of this passage seem to mark Merrow's assertions as trustworthy. Given that it is through a single momentous vision of her husband and Madame Merle that Isabel Archer at last apprehends their intimate history, and that Lambert Strether's eventual realisation that Chad and Madame de Vionnet are lovers will likewise arise from a telling glimpse of the couple boating in the French countryside, revelations born of intense and penetrating impressions do turn out to be accurate often enough in James's oeuvre for us to retain reasonable faith in their verity (even if the maniacal

vision of *The Turn of the Screw*'s governess might argue for a healthy scepticism). But the authoritative claim made by Merrow's 'guess' is also bolstered by the care with which James establishes that, in drawing the conclusions he does, the painter is guided by a wealth of experience. Since he has been approached 'frequently' by bereaved parents, he must have a fairly strong grasp of their type. Yet the attention Merrow appears to have paid to the emotional atmosphere surrounding this couple also implies that he has arrived at his impression from a precious order of experience close to that which James defines in 'The Art of Fiction' as 'an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness . . . catching every air-borne particle in its tissue'. Merrow, indeed, appeals to us as one who might well be in possession of the kind of miraculous mind that is so in tune with the world as to be capable of taking 'to itself the faintest hints of life' and 'convert[ing] the very pulses of the air into revelations' (*EL*, p. 52).

Confronted with this presentation of an artist who, having but glanced at a situation could, remarkably, have seen it all, the reader of 'Hugh Merrow' is likely to be reminded of James's anecdote about 'an English novelist, a woman of genius' which had featured in that same essay. Troubled by Walter Beasant's claim that novelists should confine themselves to subjects with which they are familiar, in 'The Art of Fiction' James recalls how a practitioner of his own acquaintance had been 'much commended for the impression she had managed to give in one of her tales of the nature and way of life of the French protestant youth', despite having experienced such people only by once having glimpsed, through an open door, a table around which a group of them were dining. The novelist in question – widely believed to have been Thackeray's own daughter, Anne Thackeray Ritchie – had known 'what youth was, and what Protestantism'; and had also 'had the advantage of having seen what it was to be French' (*EL*, p. 52). Like Merrow, her true talent appears to have been for using her imaginative and perceptive faculties in tandem so as both to overcome and to build a compelling 'reality' from the incompleteness of her vision. For, as James takes great pains to emphasise, what had really

marked Thackeray Ritchie out as a 'genius' was her ability to 'guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern' (*EL*, p. 53).

'Hugh Merrow' thus appears to have been constructed to ensure that its protagonist's false narrative has the requisite 'air of reality' about it, with the inevitable result that what is established subsequently as the Archdeans' true situation feels preposterous in comparison (*EL*, p. 53). Our enjoyment of this slight work doubtless gains much from the jolt solicited by this reminder that the truth might indeed be stranger than fiction. But James's reason for soliciting this jolt is at least in part because he wished to emphasise that, as fictions go, Merrow's mistaken tale about the Archdeans is a good one, aligning very closely with the sort of experience-driven literary realism that he had used Thackeray Ritchie's example to illustrate. It is for this reason that speaking of the painter's perception as a misapprehension or mistake (as I have done so far) is not perhaps the best reading to pursue. Emphasising the erroneous nature of Merrow's judgement overlooks the fact that it is not only ironic but also entirely apt that he should mistake the Archdeans for precisely what it is that they wish to appear: the bereaved parents of a dead child. It remains possible that this marks the painter less as a visionary than as a dupe who has merely fallen for an impeccable social performance. But his counterfactual narrative nonetheless fulfils James's stipulations for novelistic best practice by offering a realistic, compelling representation of the world as it appeals to a receptive, imaginative consciousness. In having downplayed (albeit perhaps entirely inadvertently) the pull exerted by cold hard facts in favour of picking up on consequential aspects of the couple's mental life, Merrow's account is revealed to have much in common with the increasingly pronounced psychological interest that James's own work had pursued over the course of the preceding decade. What survives as realism in this portrait painter's fiction is a compelling representation of the Archdeans' grief, their desires, and the flicker of that longed-for child they are attempting to will into being.

A further irony therefore emerges from the tale when we consider that, although Merrow is left struggling to produce a

portrait that will allow the couple to pass socially as bereaved parents, he has already conceived a fiction which shows them to the reader in just that light. Contrary to Norman E. Stafford's suggestion, then, it would seem that Merrow's difficulty with fulfilling his commission is not that he knows too little of the child he has been asked to paint,<sup>23</sup> but, on the contrary, that he now knows too much about its parents. It was essential to James's anecdote about Thackeray Ritchie and her French Protestants that all she had caught of them was a brief, evocative glimpse. Had she returned to their parlour the next day, engaged the men in conversation, and discovered that they were in fact Roman Catholics, it is doubtful whether any scenes inspired by the incident would have made it into her tale. In much the same vein, it appears that while Merrow's knowledge of Captain and Mrs Archdean is incomplete, their plaintive figures are subjects with which the artist's mind is free to work. It is only when he knows their whole story that the truth strikes Merrow as too heavy to overturn.

The creative predilections of James's portrait painter might then be said to find expression in his preference for working with little children, and, failing that, with those who had succumbed to an untimely death. Marked out for the remarkable manner in which his paintings succeed in expressing their subjects' as yet unfulfilled 'promise', Merrow appears to share with his creator a tendency to delight in the richness of unresolved narrative potential, as well as a talent for manipulating representational mediums so that such scarcely effable forces can achieve artistic expression. Seemingly underwriting both Merrow's success and James's convictions is the common belief that the creative imagination thrives most when allowed to treat those subjects around which a wealth of developmental possibility still circulates: to catch ideas in their slightest form before life has resolved their youthful promise into hard, resistant facts.

As this tale indicates, however, it is difficult to extricate such artistic preferences from consideration of those misfortunes that often underpin this sort of a creative economy: the untimely deaths, frustrated ambitions, and unfulfilled desires which find representation in 'Hugh Merrow' as the dead

children that this artist has made his name depicting. That Merrow's foremost attraction is, without doubt, to unfulfilled promise, not child death, might well excuse him in our eyes; just as it might have been a comfort to James as he read over his work in progress to know that at the heart of his hero's darkness lay nothing more sinister than a love of that narrative potential which, via a cruel quirk of fate, survives untimely death but is killed by long life. That said, it is possible to imagine James having been so unsettled by implications of this partial self-portrait as to abandon the tale, leaving it in a state that feels simultaneously like a renunciation and a declaration of solidarity with Merrow.<sup>24</sup> If this portrait painter is a version of the Jamesian artist, then he is one haunted by the self-knowledge nascent in 'Winchelsea, Rye, and "Denis Duval"'. There might have been ancient gods capable of loving men, women, or artworks so well as to kill them in infancy, but there were likewise artists who had come to love the untimely dead for the near-deific power that could be exercised over their miscarried potential.

'Hugh Merrow' was not published during James's lifetime, but its ideas did return in a later work that was to treat even more explicitly the intricacies of his creative process: the Preface to the *New York Edition of The Spoils of Poynton*. As he does in the majority of the Prefaces, James begins that to *Spoils* by outlining the compositional history of the work under discussion: a task which on this occasion required him to transport the reader back to a dinner party he had attended one Christmas Eve. On that fateful evening, the lady seated beside him, James notes, made 'one of those allusions that I have always found myself recognising on the spot as "germs" ... the germ of a "story"'. This 'casual hint' for what was to become *Spoils* had been 'dropped' altogether 'unwittingly', a fact that permitted it to enter James's imagination unencumbered by anything other than 'its mere fruitful essence'.<sup>25</sup> That a creative consciousness such as his own should work best when free to derive a 'subject' from 'the merest grain' is a point that James cannot stress enough. Having transfigured this germinating seedling into a pathogen, he goes on to liken his preference for the invasion of 'the novelist's imagination' to the scientific

premise behind Louis Pasteur's famed use of vaccination in 1885. As ever with James, the logic of the metaphor is as ingenious as it is compelling: just as too strong a dose of a virus would lead not to inoculation but illness, an overpowering dose of description concerning a possible conceit for a story, or a 'hint' given to the artist 'at all designedly', would quite 'spoil[] the operation' (*FW*, p. 1138).

This declared preference for creating works of fiction from snippets of experience, happened upon more often than they are sought, is not unusual in the context of James's critical writings – the parallels with Thackeray Ritchie's telling glimpse of her French Protestants are clear. The novel feature of the Preface to *Spoils* is therefore its rhetoric, and particularly what it reveals about those ethical complexities that James seemingly cannot help but bring to bear on his attraction to narrative potential destroyed by life but left uncorrupted by untimely death. A specific characterisation of life is underwriting these thoughts; indeed, in the context of this Preface, 'Life' has been anthropomorphised into a rival and rather inept artist, who, lacking any 'direct sense whatever for the subject' of those narratives it spins from human relations, consequently fails, time and again, to make the best of the material at hand (*FW*, p. 1139). Such ideas seem related to a deep-seated scepticism on James's part about the opportunities for fulfilment available in the world; in his experience, 'Life' very seldom gives remarkable individuals their due.

On account of Life's apparent incompetence, James prefers subjects for artistic treatment to have come to him in their slightest form, and like those treasured 'buried bone[s]' hunted for by enterprising 'dog[s]', to have been rubbed clean of all the cumbersome accretions and fleshy trappings associated with having lived long under its regime (*FW*, p. 1138). What this means in practical terms, as the Preface makes clear, is that James favours the inspiration provided by partial anecdotes over comprehensive narratives. If the latter is the order of the day, he would much rather remain ignorant of what actually happened beyond the point at which his initial interest was pricked. Hence the anger which he recalls having felt that Christmas Eve when his dinner companion had 'begun all



complacently and benightedly' to detail the subsequent development of the story destined to become *Spoils*:

one had been so perfectly qualified to say in advance: 'It's the perfect little workable thing, but she'll strangle it in the cradle, even while she pretends, all so cheeringly, to rock it; wherefore I'll stay her hand while yet there's time.' I didn't, of course, stay her hand – there never *is* in such cases 'time'; and I had once more the full demonstration of the fatal futility of Fact. The turn taken by the excellent situation – excellent, for development, if arrested in the right place, that is in the germ – had the full measure of the classic ineptitude; to which with the full measure of the artistic irony one could once more, and for the thousandth time, but take off one's hat. It was not, however, that this in the least mattered, once the seed had been transplanted to richer soil[.] (*FW*, p. 1140)

It is easy to see similarities between the situation described here and that of 'Hugh Merrow', where the idea that the painter originally seizes upon about his clients dies once he learns of the hand that Life has actually dealt them. That unfinished tale is also recalled in the metaphor of infant mortality through which James elects to hammer home the frequency with which 'clumsy Life' can be identified as having squandered the narrative potential of human situations (*FW*, p. 1140). James seems to court an element of interpretative risk through this act of rhetorical transfiguration, which sees 'the perfect little workable thing' that constitutes his idea become explicitly the human child which it perhaps always recalled. Although decipherable when subject to careful reading, the ethical integrity of the metaphor remains contingent upon a reader being able to keep hold of the difference between those sinister connotations being loaded upon a situation wherein a child of thought is strangled by explication, and the contrastingly 'excellent' situation produced if an anecdote is 'arrested in the right place, that is in the germ'. Too much knowledge of how the action unfolded in the real world could kill James's creative conception in its infancy. Yet the very logic that makes the metaphor so pertinent once again

suggests that a dead child whose life was arrested in youth might itself be an ideal Jamesian germ.

‘[L]uckily for us’, James had commented a little earlier in the Preface, ‘life’ is ‘capable ... of nothing but splendid waste. Hence’, indeed,

the opportunity for the sublime economy of art, which rescues, which saves, and hoards and ‘banks,’ investing and reinvesting these fruits of toil in wondrous useful ‘works’ and thus making up for us, desperate spendthrifts that we all naturally are, the most princely of incomes. (*FW*, p. 1139)

The ‘sublime economy’ driving Jamesian art resides in the fact that it makes a little go a long way, finding rich impressions in partial glimpses, and a wealth of inspiration in the slightest of anecdotes. But James’s words here also refer to the wider economic system within which his work participates through recycling the waste left by Life. This ‘splendid’ waste can be divided into two categories: the unfulfilled potential that remains when an individual or situation has not been permitted to develop in a manner truly representative of its promise despite having had ample time in which to do so; and that left behind when a life or a narrative has been curtailed prematurely. Such circumstances often take on the aspect of tragedy for those invested emotionally in their course, and much of the disquiet aroused by James’s words here relates to the good luck he cannot help but associate with Life’s propensity to lay ‘waste’. Impecunious spendthrifts by nature, artists are defined by James as opportunists who, like his own Hugh Merrow, delight in their ability to derive their ‘princely incomes’ from the reconstituted spoils of such fortunate misfortune. Yet, if such figures are unscrupulous ‘save[rs]’, in the playful vacillations of James’s language they are also saviours, ‘rescue[rs]’, and redeemers, committed to perceiving the latent value in unfulfilled promise and to making something beautiful of a loss that might otherwise be dismissed as meaningless.

Critics of James’s work have remarked on the unsettling implications of his attraction to the creative potential left in

play by an individual's untimely demise. Considering James's description of his doomed cousin Gus Barker in *A Small Boy and Others*, John Halperin has denounced as 'a sign of psychological or emotional instability or disturbance' the apparent satisfaction derived from considering 'the damage and ultimately the extinction of beauty and talent by the ugly or the commonplace'.<sup>26</sup> Yet by far its most vehement opponent has been Alfred Habegger, whose influential reading of James's relationship with another cousin, Minnie Temple, made much of what he diagnosed as the 'necrophiliac' or 'vampiristic [*sic*] nature of James's imagination'.<sup>27</sup> Minnie died from consumption in 1870 at the age of 24; central to Habegger's argument is the apparently exploitative manner in which her cousin proceeded to rewrite her: first, by using her as inspiration for a number of his heroines – most overtly, perhaps, in the cases of Isabel Archer and Milly Theale – and then by doctoring heavily those of her letters which he selected for inclusion in *Notes of a Son and Brother*.

Underpinning Habegger's reading is a psychologised portrait of James as a vindictive figure who, having been a reserved and physically weak youth, subsequently took great pleasure in 'mastering' those women who had both inspired and taunted him with their own talents (Sarah B. Daugherty's account of James's relationship with George Eliot is another version of this story).<sup>28</sup> The problem with such interpretations, however, is that by presupposing bitter motivations, they foreclose the possibility of seeing anything other than rank appropriation in acts which might be understood as attempts at redress, or simply as the best that a creative mind could do when faced with the spectacle of such a terrible waste.

That Habegger should have failed to consider Minnie's case in the light of those meditations on incompleteness in art and life found in 'Winchelsea, Rye, and "Denis Duval"' feels curious, especially given that his favourite accusation to level at James is the indecency of his having treated this young woman as 'an unfinished manuscript he could turn into a masterpiece'.<sup>29</sup> Yet another grave omission arises from the selective nature of those quotations he draws from a letter that James wrote to his brother William over 29/30 March 1870, shortly

after he first heard news of Minnie's death. Habegger is quick to identify what he calls an 'anomalous and disturbing' note of 'scarcely ashamed pleasure' animating James's observation that 'the more I think of [Minnie] the more perfectly satisfied I am to have her translated from this changing realm of fact to the steady realm of thought'.<sup>30</sup> He pays little heed to later sections of the same letter in which James declares himself far from immune to the pain of Minnie's death, but admits that he has found himself drawn to the one faculty which might be able to do something productive in the face of it: his imagination. Lamenting to William how 'While I sit spinning my sentences [Minnie] is dead', James acknowledges that 'it is partly to defend myself from too direct a sense of her death that I indulge in this fruitless attempt to transmute it from a hard fact into a soft idea'.<sup>31</sup> The terms 'hard' and 'soft' seem to refer here to the physical and metaphysical realms, to properties associated with the world and with the mind; but there is also a sense that James knows himself to be attempting (however 'fruitlessly') to transfigure Minnie's death from that which is difficult to bear into a soft, that is to say comforting, thought. Given his literary ambitions, it is likely that those soft ideas salvaged from the tragedy of Minnie's loss are such that James already senses might in time become malleable conceptions, ready to be remoulded into consoling works of art, like clay beneath a potter's hands.

Minnie had been dead twenty-one days by the time James wrote these words to William. Perhaps the most resounding counter to Habegger's reading arises from the *post facto* nature of such comments: James does not wish a living woman dead, but simply that a dead one's potential for life and for experience receive some consolatory justification through art. Another fact laid bare in this section of the letter is that, having been transmuted and remoulded, those soft ideas recovered from Minnie's death appear to exist separately in James's mind from those hard facts pertaining to the young woman herself. The two are no more synonymous, indeed, than the young French Protestants Thackeray Ritchie depicted in her tale had been with the men whose evening meal inspired her, or than James's playful imaginings about Denis Duval's after-years were with

the narrative intended originally by its author. James never lost sight of such crucial distinctions between circumstances out in the world and the reifying fictions they might inspire, answering an enquiry sent to him by his friend Grace Norton about the resemblance between Minnie Temple and Isabel Archer by observing,

I had her in mind & there is in the heroine a considerable infusion of my impression of her remarkable nature. But the thing is not a portrait. Poor Minny was essentially incomplete & I have attempted to make my young woman more rounded, more finished. In truth every one, in life, is incomplete, & it is the mark of art that in reproducing them one feels the desire to fill them out, to justify them, as it were.<sup>32</sup>

Dying at the age of 72 in the midst of a global conflict that was consuming young lives at a wholly unprecedented rate, James had many years to consider how well he had despatched the duties of a survivor of his own wartime generation. Many forces, both historical and psychological, brought such considerations to the forefront of his creative consciousness around the turn of the twentieth century, producing works that would lay bare the economy of Jamesian art in all its ambivalence. In *Notes of a Son and Brother*, James observed how his ‘memory and fancy’ were perpetually ‘wanting, never ceasing to want, to “do” something for’ the dead of the American Civil War.<sup>33</sup> But the legacy of that desire appears to have been an appreciation, developed over his writing life, for what it was that a creative disposition such as his own could ‘do’ with and for that wasted potential of which those narratives belonging to the untimely dead were the ultimate expression. Art could be a guardian of precious promise, as Professor Child’s evocative talk had been. Or it could redeem waste by creating something new from its remnants – perhaps even spinning a little opportunistic profit on the way. James’s art never sought to be that of the necromancer: beholden to the dictates of psychological realism, it would only go so far as to reaffirm the affective power that mis-carried potential, as perceived by a sensitive observer, could

continue to wield in the world. When commenting on the extensive use made of the rhetorical figure of apostrophe to 'confer life and presence' on the dead in late twentieth century 'Jamesian' novels by Alan Hollinghurst and Toby Litt, Denis Flannery has noted how such instances are nevertheless always underwritten by a characteristically Jamesian knowledge of 'the painfully fictive nature of that enterprise', 'the impossibility of a return on any levels other than those of the fictional and the rhetorical' – a stylistic move of which the author who had reread *Denis Duval* in the streets of Winchelsea and Rye would no doubt approve.<sup>34</sup> Henry James understood, more completely than most, that Life was no artist, and, as such, could not be relied upon to use its material wisely. As the most consummate of artists himself, he would mourn incompleteness and wasted promise while perceiving a space for his work to intervene in the world, and to hand out such aesthetic comfort as could be found in the creation of fiction and in the pursuit of form, fulfilment, and finish.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Henry James, 'Winchelsea, Rye, and "Denis Duval"', in *Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York, 1984), pp. 1289-1305: 1290; hereafter *EL*.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Horne, 'Henry James, Winchelsea, Rye, and Thackeray's *Denis Duval*', *The Henry James Review*, 38 (2017), 219-30: 220.

<sup>3</sup> John A. Sutherland, *Thackeray at Work* (1974), p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> Adrian Poole, 'Dying Before the End: The Reader in "The Portrait of a Lady"', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 26 (1996), 143-53: 152 n. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Horne, 'Winchelsea, Rye', p. 220.

<sup>6</sup> Laurence Lerner, *Angels and Absences: Child Deaths in the Nineteenth Century* (Nashville, 1997), pp. 28-9.

<sup>7</sup> James, letter to Caroline Kipling, quoted in Lerner, *Angels and Absences*, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> James, 'The Wings of the Dove', in *French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York, 1984), pp. 1287-1303: 1287; hereafter FW.

<sup>10</sup> James, *A Small Boy and Others*, in *Autobiographies*, ed. Philip Horne (New York, 2016), pp. 1-250: 154.

<sup>11</sup> James, letter to William James, 25 Feb. 1897, in *The Correspondence of William James*, ed. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley with the assistance of Bernice Grohskopf and Wilma Bradbeer, 12 vols. (Charlottesville, Va., 1992-2004), iii. 4-5: 5.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Life* (1996), p. 471.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 462.

<sup>14</sup> Tamara L. Follini, 'Speaking Monuments: Henry James, Walt Whitman, and the Civil War Statutes of Augustus Saint-Gaudens', *Journal of American Studies*, 48 (2014), 25-49: 34.

<sup>15</sup> These essays are collected in *EL*, pp. 651-702.

<sup>16</sup> Horne, 'Winchelsea, Rye', p. 225.

<sup>17</sup> James, *Notes of a Son and Brother*, in *Autobiographies*, pp. 251-570: 452.

<sup>18</sup> The tale appears to have originated from an idea, 'Gualdo's charming little subject of *The Child*', first recorded by James in a notebook entry of 22 September 1895 and developed further on 7 May 1898 and 11 September 1900. The diary of James's then typist, Mary Weld, dates work on a piece called 'The Beautiful Child' as having commenced on 11 July 1902. See N. H. Reeve, 'Introduction', in *The Jolly Corner and Other Tales*, ed. N. H. Reeve (Cambridge, 2017), pp. xxviii-civ: xxxv.

<sup>19</sup> James, 'Hugh Merrow', in *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (Oxford, 1987), pp. 589-96: 590; hereafter CN.

<sup>20</sup> George Bishop, *When the Master Relents: The Neglected Short Fictions of Henry James* (1988), pp. 87-8: 94.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Norman E. Stafford, 'Rediscovering Henry James's "Hugh Merrow"', *CEA Critic*, 56 (1994), 61-8: 67.

<sup>22</sup> James, 'The Art of Fiction', in *EL*, pp. 44-65: 45-6.

<sup>23</sup> Stafford, 'Rediscovering', p. 67.

<sup>24</sup> I am grateful to Tamara Follini for first bringing this possible reading to my attention.

<sup>25</sup> James, 'The Spoils of Poynton, A London Life, The Chaperon', in *FW*, pp. 1138-55: 1138.

<sup>26</sup> John Halperin, 'Henry James's Civil War', *The Henry James Review*, 17 (1996), 22-9: 23.

<sup>27</sup> Alfred Habegger, *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 143. Habegger spells Mary Temple's shortened name as 'Minnie', although in his letters James tended to use the spelling 'Minnie'. I have followed Habegger's lead for purposes of consistency.

<sup>28</sup> See Sarah B. Daugherty, 'Henry James and George Eliot: The Price of Mastery', *The Henry James Review*, 10 (1989), 153-66.

<sup>29</sup> Habegger, 'Woman Business', p. 148.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>31</sup> James, letter to William James, 29/30 Mar. 1870, in *The Complete Letters of Henry James, 1855-1872*, ed. Pierre A. Walker and Greg W. Zacharias, 2 vols. (Nebraska, 2006), ii. 341-7: 345.

<sup>32</sup> James, letter to Grace Norton, 28 Dec. 1880, in *The Complete Letters of Henry James, 1880-1883*, ed. Greg W. Zacharias and Michael Anesko, 2 vols. (Nebraska, 2016-17), i. 134-7: 135.

<sup>33</sup> *Autobiographies*, p. 404.

<sup>34</sup> Denis Flannery, 'The Powers of the Apostrophe and the Boundaries of Mourning: Henry James, Alan Hollinghurst, Toby Litt', *The Henry James Review*, 26 (2005), 293-305: 295-6.