ACTOR, PAINTER, AUDIENCE: REFRAMING 'ART AND "THE WORLD"' IN HENRY JAMES'S *THE TRAGIC MUSE*

The Tragic Muse (1890) was published at a crossroads in Henry James's career. The commercial failings of *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima* (both 1886) were still fresh in his mind. Worse, fiction no longer seemed to pay: his publishers offered only a £70 advance for the novel, compared with £500 for *The Bostonians* and £400 for *The Princess*, on the grounds of his unprofitability.[1] The late-Victorian theatre, meanwhile, was booming. Spying a gilded opportunity, James left fiction behind and dedicated himself to the drama. At the same time, he ceased his practice as a regular art critic, publishing only three short pieces between 1888-97 (after having published more than 50 articles between 1872-87). It is fitting, then, that *The Tragic Muse*—his last published novel before an ill-fated theatrical excursion—foregrounds both painting and drama, and deals more generally with artistic relations.

James would later describe the novel as a conflict between 'art and "the world"'.[2] The 'world' here is specifically the world of politics: Nick Dormer must choose between becoming a painter or becoming an MP, which is also the choice between marrying or remaining a bachelor; likewise, Miriam Rooth must choose between a career on the stage and marriage to an aspiring diplomat, Peter Sherringham. Critics have tended to take up James's dichotomy, focusing only on the relation between art and "the world" as represented by politics. In doing so, they do not question the relations outlined in the text between art and "the world" *beyond* politics—that is, they fail to identify the connections in the text between artist and audience, producer and consumer. In fact, the novel insists that, in the words of Pierre Bourdieu, 'the mode of expression characteristic of a cultural production always depends on the laws of the market in which it is offered'.[3]

[1] James, *Muse*, ed. Horne, xii.
[2] James, *Literary Criticism 2*, ed. Edel and Wilson, 1103.
[3] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, trans. Nice, xv.

James's anxiety about the place of literature in the marketplace has long been recognised.[4] However, it has not been sufficiently acknowledged in *The Tragic Muse*, nor has it been adequately linked to James's quarrel with aestheticism. As Regenia Gagnier puts it, aestheticism sought to 'negate the means-end rationality of bourgeois everyday life by theorizing art as an autonomous, "useless" realm,' in part by establishing artistic production and reception as individual rather than collective.[5] James's novel, however, challenges this aestheticist position by refusing to divorce art from the pressures of the market, thereby reaffirming the collective nature of artistic production and reception. In this way, the text calls attention to the fact that the 'autonomous, "useless"' art object may not have a use-value, but it does have an exchange value. Although the text repeatedly regrets this fact, it also manifests a hope: instead of catering to the market—code, throughout my argument, for the dreaded but vaguely defined middle classes—one can instead attempt to enforce one's own taste. In February, 1890, while *The Tragic Muse* was still being serialised, the novelist decried the desires of the public to his sometime-confidante Mrs Hugh Bell, but offered something of a solution: 'Give them what one wants oneself,' he declared, 'it's the only way'.[6]

In the process, *The Tragic Muse* constructs a hierarchy of the arts which depends precisely on the extent to which the artist is subject to their audience—that is, in relation to the market. For example, painting is seen to be higher than drama because the painter has more autonomy. This is broadly in keeping with the hierarchy described by Bourdieu. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, a hierarchy within the literary field was established which figured the prestige of a form as inversely related to its economic rewards.[7] In other words, the more money one could earn from a medium, the less likely one was to be considered a "serious" artist by one's peers, if not by one's audience. Poetry was both the most prestigious form and the least well remunerated; theatre was the least prestigious because of its mass audience and thus enormous potential economic profit;

[4] See especially Anesko, *Authorship*.
[5] Gagnier, *Idylls*, 6.
[6] Quoted in James, *Muse*, ed. Horne, xvi.
[7] Bourdieu, *Les règles*, especially 196-204.

the novel, meanwhile, served as an intermediate and intermediary form. James sought to challenge this hierarchy. Specifically, he wanted to place the novel at the top of the hierarchy of the arts.

Between dinner and the suburban trains

Miriam Rooth's performative nature—her being an actor *par excellence*—is represented through a variety of different artistic mediums or lenses. She appears on or near the stage, on or near the painter's canvas, and in photographs. For critics like William Storm, James uses these different artistic lenses to stage a debate concerning the novel's 'own methods of representation—narrative description, dramatic and theatrical scene, and oil portraiture—with actress Miriam Rooth standing as the central subject, and indeed the focal point, in this exchange'.[8] But throughout the novel, the central distinction between the arts is not their means of representation but their implied audience. For example, Miriam argues that painting has the advantage over acting because the painter can do as he pleases 'in patient obscurity' while the actor is 'pitchforked into the *mêlée*'.[9] On its surface, this is a comment about the relative immediacy of theatre. But it also highlights the way in which the actor is constrained by the desires of the public, is forced to cater to their dreary (or merely repetitive) wishes: 'I think I'm disgusting,' Miriam says, 'with my successful crudities'. The success of these 'crudities' inspires fear in the artist. Miriam is afraid to play Juliet because, if she succeeds, the audience will then 'want Juliet forever, instead of my present part' (1226). Thus, the '*mêlée*' constrains Miriam to the will of the audience, both in the character of her individual performances and in the repertoire to which she is restricted: 'I foresee that I shall be condemned for the greater part of the rest of my days (do you see that?) to play the stuff I'm acting now' (1226). This throws into ironic relief the novel's concluding remarks, in which Miriam's 'triumph' as Juliet is described

[8] Storm, "Performance," 74.
[9] James, *Novels 1886-1890*, ed. Fogel, 1226. All further references are to this edition and are given in parentheses within the text.

as marking 'an era in contemporary art' (1248). In other words, Miriam's fears become reality: she is 'condemned' nightly to resume her 'triumph' as Juliet, 'forever'. However great the representation, the artist is bound to, and by, her era.

This contrasts with Nick who, in Miriam's mind, has the privilege of 'unsociable pegging away,' the very unsociability of which gives him the freedom to 'do as many things' as he likes (1225-6). The painter can patiently innovate in relative obscurity, while the actor must perform for an audience with perennially narrow desires, or so Miriam believes. In this account of things, the theatre is a public art in the public sphere, and therefore subject to the public's desires. Painting, on the other hand, is a private affair, at least as far as the painter is concerned. But Miriam's argument is predicated on Nick becoming a sort of gentleman-painter, a figure who is not necessarily successful in the art market but who does not depend on commissions or illustrations to make his living. Her youth blighted by penury, she is mistaken in her conception of Nick's position.

In the nineteenth century, actors were often associated with Jews (as well as, more pervasively, prostitutes).[10] And in *The Tragic Muse*, the Jewishness of Miriam's father, it is implied, plays a key role in determining Miriam's career: 'the Hebraic Mr. Rooth, with his love of old pots and Christian altar-cloths, had supplied in the girl's composition the aesthetic element, the sense of colour and form' (854). Mr Rooth's position as consumer and collector, then—his being on the other side of the art market, as it were—provides Miriam with the 'aesthetic element' required to be an artist. Following the racial logic of the text, this convergence of 'Jewish art and Jewish commerce' dictates, in Joseph Litvak's words, Miriam's 'professional itinerary'.[11] But Mr Rooth's 'old pots' do not compare, in Miriam's mind, to the opulence in which Nick was raised.

In fact, one of the key aspects of Nick's narrative is his relative poverty in relation to other

[10] See, for example, the Jewish actors in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), or Sibyl Vane's Jewish theatre-manager in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). For more on the topic see Barish, *Prejudice*, 464-9. On the link between all three subjects—Jewishness, theatricality, and prostitution—see Gallagher, "Question," in *Sex, Politics, and Science*, ed. Yeazell.
[11] Litvak, "Actor, Monster, Novelist," 162.

members of the political class. Regardless of which form of representation he chooses—painting or politics—he must rely on patronage: Nick needs Julia Dallow's support to run for parliament, and he requires the fortune he will inherit from his long-time benefactor, Mr Carteret, to guarantee his political career. But he will win this inheritance only on the condition that he marry Julia and remain an MP. In this way, his fortune depends on his remaining loyal to his class-heritage and to the institutions of marriage and parliamentary politics.

To Nick's mother, Lady Agnes, there is no real choice in the matter. She is stark about the role of money in public life: she considers Nick's borough as belonging to Julia (868), and describes money bluntly as 'an instrument of power' (872). This is because, to Lady Agnes, 'Julia was money, Mr. Carteret was money, and everything else was poverty' (1083), especially an artistic career. This contrasts with Miriam's situation. For Mrs Rooth, art is an escape from a different kind of relative poverty: 'it's to escape from' being a governess that Miriam chooses to become an actor (783). For Lady Agnes, Miriam's pursuit of art is permissible because of her class and ethnic position. Nick, however, has a higher calling owing to his higher class. But Lady Agnes's view is dictated by what Nick calls a 'queer old superstition': 'that art is pardonable only so long as it's bad—so long as it's done at odd hours, for a little distraction, like a game of tennis or of whist' (714). That is, so long as it is a gentleman's avocation rather than a professional pursuit. As Mr Carteret puts it, 'the pencil' and 'the brush' are not 'the weapons of a gentleman' (1073). Similarly, Sherringham wonders whether he can marry Miriam, a mere '*fille de théâtre*' (920), because of his higher class. In this way, different classes are associated with appropriate occupations. Invariably, though, art is no career for a respectable bourgeois or aristocrat. Miriam herself recognises this. Indeed, it is the very perversity of Nick's choice that gives her a thrill: 'M.P. in the corner of a picture is delightful,' she says (1101). But she is quick to add that 'the artistic life, when you can lead another—if you have any alternative, however modest—is a very poor business' (1101). This is in keeping with the narrative of aestheticism advanced by Jonathan Freedman, in which aestheticism emerges in part

in opposition to the commodification of art.[12]

In the end, Nick chooses painting over politics. His decision is figured through the art of painting itself: his last testament to the political life is a painting of Julia, a 'noble portrait of a lady which was the final outcome of that arrangement' (1255)—that is, his 'arrangement' with Julia and thus his career in parliament. For Miriam, painting grants Nick the twin advantages of unsociability and obscurity, which in turns guarantee artistic freedom. However, maintaining his independence as a painter will prove difficult, as the aesthete Gabriel Nash points out: Nash praises Nick's 'disinterestedness,' though warns him that he might 'paint the bishops and become a social institution. That is, you will if you don't take great care' (1230, 1233). Painting too proves a secular affair, even when one paints the clergy. In this way, Nick is subject to pressures comparable to those he suffered in political life. Because the painter is required to convince or move their audiences, he is, as D. J. Gordon and John Stokes put it, 'possessed by his audience,' and the politician is faced with the same issue: he also 'depends on possession (money and property),' and is also dependent on convincing and moving his audience.[13] In painting, Nick may become a 'social institution'; in politics, he was subject to the demands of Julia and Mr Carteret, parliament and matrimony.

Both Nash and Miriam praise a version of disinterestedness as a means by which to detach the artist from their audience—that is, a kind of Kantian disinterestedness which places the artist above or apart from the sensuous masses. Such disinterestedness is, according to Bourdieu, one of the principal ways in which the literary field established its autonomy in the nineteenth century.[14] This process produced a rupture between two forms of art, one which chiefly accrued symbolic capital by catering to a restricted audience, the other serving a more general public.[15] This divide introduced the conflict between a 'popular "aesthetic"' and its 'negative opposite,' 'the Kantian

[12] See Freedman, *Taste*.
[13] Gordon and Stokes, "The Reference," in *Reality*, ed. Goode, 158.
[14] Bourdieu, *Les règles*, especially 185-91.
[15] Ibid., 204.

aesthetic'—that is, an opposition between disinterestedness ('the sole guarantee of the specifically aesthetic quality of contemplation') as against 'the interest of the senses' (associated with popular art).[16] *The Tragic Muse* makes clear that such a notion of disinterestedness can only be attained through financial security: both Nash and Miriam agree that disinterestedness is abandoned when the artist must court an audience to win their living. For Nash, this degrades art to an intolerable degree, as we shall see. But Miriam recognises that if she wants to survive in the marketplace, she must live to please.

The Tragic Muse intervened in two debates active in the 1880s, the first concerning aestheticism, the second about the nature of the theatre. The two come together in an extended discussion between Nash and Sherringham about drama. The theatre splits in two here: 'Sherringham's concern is for *acting*, Nash's for what the actor has to work with'—that is, the audience.[17] Sherringham argues that the drama is a cultivation of taste, while for Nash, the theatre is 'the lowest of the arts' because it is most subject to the desires of the public (740). In other words, it is impossible to cultivate the audience's taste when the artist is obliged to give the crowd what they want. Nash's view sees the prestige of a form—its potential 'symbolic profit'—as inversely related to its economic rewards.[18] He seeks to support this hierarchy by nominally basing his claims on the formal qualities of a given medium. But his argument in fact considers the formal characteristics of the drama only insofar as they reflect the desires of the 'modern audience,' the '*omnium gatherum* of the population of a big commercial city' (747). He imagines this audience

> at the hour of the day when their taste is at its lowest, flocking out of hideous hotels and restaurants, gorged with food, stultified with buying and selling, and with all the other sordid speculations of the day, squeezed together in a sweltering mass, disappointed in their seats,

[16] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, trans. Nice, 33.
[17] Gordon and Stokes, "The Reference," in *Reality*, ed. Goode, 94.
[18] Bourdieu, *Les règles,* 196-204.

> timing the author, timing the actor, wishing to get their money back on the spot, before eleven o'clock (747-8).

This vision of the 'sweltering mass' collapses distinct class positions: the audience is the "middle class" *tout court*, without further socio-economic distinction, nor a suggestion of what kind of theatrical event this group is attending—they could be 'timing the actor' at a vaudeville performance, or 'timing the author' of *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892). Tellingly, Nash frames the 'taste' of the 'modern audience' in sensual and affective terms. They are 'squeezed' and 'flocking' like an animal mass, affectively 'stultified' and 'disappointed'—distant, that is, from the disinterestedness of the intellect—and 'gorged,' thereby equating the taste of the body with a nominally "low" taste in the arts. Moreover, these verbs all pertain to the audience's actions: the dramatist is subject to the audience, whose actions affect the author and the actor, as opposed to the other way around. Ultimately, this jeremiad looks back to Ruskin's rhetoric ('hideous hotels and restaurants,' 'stultified with buying and selling'), looks forward to high modernist articulations of artistic corruption wrought by the market, and is in keeping with a broadly aestheticist position.

Like many an aesthete, then, Nash targets the apparently retrograde influence of the middle classes. His attack on these classes and their values is equated with their sensuality and is refracted through the effect they have on artistic production: 'What would you think of any other artist—the painter or the novelist—whose governing forces should be the dinner and the suburban trains?' (748), he asks. That is, the train, the dinner (the bodily appetite), the 'big commercial city'—bywords for industrial modernity—destroy the conditions in which one might patiently appreciate a work of art, and consequently degrade the work of art itself:

> What can you do with a character, with an idea, with a feeling, between dinner and the suburban trains? You can give a gross, rough sketch of them, but how little you touch them, how bald you leave them! What crudity compared with what the novelist does! (748)

The relation between the "middle classes" and the world of art is again described through sensual, affective language ('gross,' touch,' 'crudity'). It is this sensuality which, much to Nash's disdain, prevents them from attaining a disinterested view of the work of art. The constraints imposed on the artist by the public—'dinner and the suburban trains'—lead Nash to produce a hierarchy of the arts which locates fiction at the top ('What crudity compared with what the novelist does!'). Following Nash's argument, the most private act of artistic experience—reading—offers the ideal antidote to the contemporary drama. Such a hierarchy is in keeping with a broader model of artistic relations outlined by James himself.

The link between Nash and James has long been debated. Nash is typically presented as a figure of fun within the text, an unmoored and amoral aesthete who provides the novel with topical interest and offers James a target for his anti-aestheticist ire. For example, Nash advocates a Paterian conscious intensity (974), argues that one must ignore the 'ugly' and 'encourage the beautiful' (724), and praises Miriam not for what she does but for what she is (994), thereby employing what Richard Salmon has shown to be a classic aestheticist opposition.[19] Indeed, one critic has called Nash 'Walter Pater as interpreted by Oscar Wilde,' a chimerical arch-aesthete patently opposed to James himself.[20] Michèle Mendelssohn, on the other hand, suggests that Nash 'stands for Aestheticism's identity-crisis and represents the very confusion the movement was subject to in the late 1880s and early 1890s,' which plausibly accounts for Nash's complexity.[21] I argue, however, that Nash's tirades represent a sophisticated form of irony: Nash is so clearly a caricature, so evidently an intervention into the debate concerning aestheticism, that James's own views pass almost unnoticed in Nash's mouth.

[19] Salmon, "Aestheticism," in *Translating Life*, ed. Chew and Stead, 289.
[20] Quoted in Lyons, "Intelligence," 113, n. 21; Izzo, "Afterwords," in *Aestheticist Movement*, ed. Izzo, 229.
[21] Mendelssohn, *Culture*, 117.

Nash's anxiety about the detrimental effect of the audience is echoed in James's contemporary correspondence. In February, 1890, while *The Tragic Muse* was still being serialised, the novelist complained to Mrs Hugh Bell about the desires of the public. They want, he wrote,

> simply bottomless *niaiserie* - look at Mr. Smith's bookstalls & you'll see. Give them what one wants oneself - it's the only way: *follow* them & they lead one by a straight grand highway to abysses of vulgarity.[22]

In this account, the artist's desires are explicitly in conflict with those of his audience—just as Nash and Miriam suggest—thanks to the effects of mass culture, the 'abysses of vulgarity' which James identifies with W. H. Smith (bookstores, as it happens, that serviced a readership who spent a good deal of time on the suburban trains). This cultural pessimism is shared by Sherringham, who comes to believe that **'**the actor's art, in general, is going down and down, descending a slope with abysses of vulgarity at its foot**'** (779). James opposed this mass culture to an art which conforms to his own desires, to 'what one wants oneself'. Nash similarly argues that one ought to write for oneself. But he is comfortable with the idea of a restricted audience: 'If some one likes it here and there, if you give a little impression of solidity, that's your reward; besides, of course, the pleasure for yourself' (820). If Nash and James ought not to be simply united, it is clear, at least, that Nash is not, as Steven Jobe has claimed, 'decidedly un-Jamesian'.[23] Indeed, the distancing between artist and public advocated by Nash is typical of James's approach to authorship later in his career, and it is reiterated in his preface to *The Tragic Muse*.

In the preface, James sets the private artist against the consuming public: 'under the rule of its [art's] sincerity, its only honours are those of contraction, concentration and a seemingly deplorable indifference to everything but itself' (1106). That is, the artist betrays art itself if he produces work

[22] Quoted in James, *Muse*, ed. Horne, xvi.
[23] Jobe, "Representation," 35.

which accords too readily with the public's desires. Throughout the preface, James continues to speak of the public in dismissive terms: 'I must long have carried in my head the notion of a young man who should amid difficulty—the difficulties being the story—have abandoned "public life" for the zealous pursuit of some supposedly minor craft' (1105). Here, public life is treated as a nebulous concept hardly deserving its quotation marks, and the same irony underwrites the presentation of painting as 'some supposedly minor craft'.

This attack on the public is sustained through an analysis of celebrity. James suggests that he sought in his novel to dramatize 'the most salient London "social" passions, the unappeasable curiosity for the things of the theatre; for every one of them, that is, except the drama itself, and for the "personality" of the performer (almost any performer quite sufficiently serving) in particular' (1105). In other words, the audience cares little for the delights of dramatic form but instead focuses on the person of the actor. In his professed wariness to submit to the 'vulgarity' of the (imagined, middle-class) public, James's views bear a striking resemblance to those of Nash, even if he does not deploy the same wicked rhetoric.

Despite the novelist's professed hostility to the public, however, *The Tragic Muse* was also an attempt to extend his audience at a time when his readership had proportionally contracted, deterred by his 'increasingly unconventional style and dissolved in the rising flood of newer, cheaper periodicals and their crop of lowbrow popular serials'.[24] This helps to explain the topical nature of Nash the aesthete and Miriam the actor: they recalled respectively aestheticism and its famous figures like Wilde, along with actors such as Rachel Félix (1821-1858) and Mary Anderson (1859-1940), and might have helped to extend James's readership. Anderson was notable for igniting a debate about the desirability and limitations of a naturalistic acting style, which was framed in terms of Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (translated in the 1880s and discussed throughout the decade, though originally published in French in 1830). This is mirrored by the

[24] Lowenstein, "Serial," 140.

way in which Miriam confuses her first audiences due to her lack of formal training. Félix was, like Miriam, recognised both for her charisma and her Jewishness. (Though Miriam could, as Litvak puts it, 'degenerate into that other, presumably "great" Jewish precursor, Sarah Bernhardt,' whom James described as having 'the advertising genius; she may, indeed, be called the muse of the newspaper'.[25]) In this way, the novel was designed to speak to its moment. But it failed to win James his coveted—and despised—audience, despite his attempt to give this audience what 'one wants oneself'.

Nash argues that the dramatist 'shows us so little, is so hampered by his audience, is restricted to so poor an analysis' (747), in a large part thanks to the narrow desires of the viewing public. He prophesies that, with success, Miriam will 'draw forth the modernness of the age,' the 'vulgarity' of which 'would rise to the grand style, like that of a London railway station' (1091). Again, he connects theatre's degeneration with the modern, industrial landscape and its transport links which gave the middle classes (apparently unwelcome) mobility. And again, Sherringham shares this desperate view of the actor's future: 'Every one speaks as he likes, and audiences never notice; it's the last thing they think of' (841). In the end, Sherringham believes that it is 'the death of an actor to play to big populations that don't understand his language' (843). Thus, his critique of the theatre is linked specifically to its modernity. The young diplomat and the aging aesthete agree here: it is the 'big population' of the modern city that degrades, it is the audience that destroys the art of the theatre. But by succumbing to the desires of the 'big population,' by giving the audience what they want, the artist is herself complicit.

Miriam, too, comes to regard the drama as 'a very poor business. It comes last in dignity' (1101), because of the extent to which it is subject to the desires of the public. Last in dignity: like the other characters and James himself, Miriam accepts a hierarchy of the arts which places theatre at the bottom in terms of prestige precisely because of its relation to a mass audience. Miriam's

[25] Litvak, "Actor, Monster, Novelist," 152; quoted in ibid., 152.

anxiety accords with the facts, in that the theatre won the largest share of the literary market in the period, despite the variety of 'fragmented and specialised forms' of drama on offer.[26] In this way, she accepts the same hierarchy described by Bourdieu. Restricted by her audience and thus her medium, the dramatist and the actor are willing participants in modernity's tawdry pageant. For this reason, they come last in dignity in the hierarchy of the arts. The painter, on the other hand, seems relatively free to resist the modern audience. But the text reveals this apparent freedom to be an illusion, too, thanks, in part, to painting's relation to the theatre.

Painting, theatre, and the public

In his preface to *The Tragic Muse*, James suggests that, despite having a 'mortal horror of two stories, two pictures, in one,' he sought in his novel 'complete pictorial fusion, some such common interest between my first two notions as would, in spite of their birth under quite different stars, do them no violence at all'.[27] He refers to Tintoretto's 1565 *Crucifixion* as a model for this kind of 'pictorial fusion'. In that painting, Christ is figured aloft on the cross, at the top of the canvas, his heavenly light illuminating the thronging varied crowd below, all of whom are spaced and posed to send the gaze back to Christ. In this 'sublime' image (as the novelist called it), the figures are united in a 'common interest,' the narrative of the crucifixion. But in *The Tragic Muse*, Nick and Miriam are indeed separated, are 'born under quite different stars,' insofar as they come from different backgrounds and practise different art forms. But they have two clear common interests. First, their flight towards art and away from competing institutions such as politics and marriage. Second, their pursuit of excellence in their chosen field. However, James's preface ignores or elides the way

[26] Perry, *Flirtations*, 4.
[27] James, *Literary Criticism 2*, ed. Edel and Wilson, 1107-8. The 'two notions' are, of course, Nick and Miriam.

in which the two arts might be connected—that is, the way in which painting and the theatre mutually inform and reinforce each other.

In the late-eighteenth century, the theatrical or "celebrity" portrait began to feature prominently in public exhibitions (beginning at least with the inception of the Royal Academy show in 1769). This tradition of painters representing famous actors continued throughout the nineteenth century. Such portraits engaged the exhibition viewer in what Gill Perry has called 'an interactive form of spectatorship, matching "performances" in paint with "exhibitions" on stage'.[28] At the same time, actors were routinely enjoined to 'study the works of the most eminent painters and sculptors' (as one actor-critic suggested), so that they might learn more about their own art. In this way, actors were encouraged to view the stage as 'a kind of tableau which can be styled and art-directed'.[29] Miriam follows this advice, visiting exhibitions in search of inspiration: '"I could look just like that, if I tried"' she says, 'under the suggestion of antique marbles or when she stood before a Titian or a Bronzino' (858).

Painting and drama had a close, practical relation, then, and the title of James's novel reinforces this pact. In the first instance, it calls to mind Joshua Reynolds's *Mrs Siddons as The Tragic Muse* (1784), though the painting itself is never alluded to within the text (Nash does, however, suggest that Nick is in danger of becoming 'another Sir Joshua, a mere P. R. A.!'—though only in *The New York Edition*).[30] It also invites comparison with Jean-Léon Gérôme's 1861 depiction of Rachel Félix as the same mythical figure, which is alluded to in the text though not described: Miriam looks at 'Gérôme's fine portrait of the pale Rachel, invested with the antique attributes of tragedy' (950). Alongside these pictorial representations of famous actors, there may also be echoes of John Singer Sargent's *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth*, which James saw in November 1889 while *The Tragic Muse* was in serialisation, and which testified to the continued relation between painting and the theatre

[28] Perry, *Flirtations*, 19, 20.
[29] Quoted in ibid., 20. For Perry's gloss see also ibid., 20.
[30] James, *Muse*, ed. Horne, 350 (Horne uses the text of *The New York Edition*). In the original three-volume Macmillan edition from which quotations in this chapter are drawn (as reproduced in *Novels 1886-1890*), Nash says that Nick will 'become a fashionable painter, a P. R. A!' (1089).

later in the century.[31] Superficially, the allusion to Gérôme's painting and the shadow of Reynolds's canvas reflects the artistic, political, and social divisions between Britain and France dramatized within the text. But it also highlights the cooperation between portraiture and drama, twin spectacles which can serve to mutually reinforce each other's status, power, and allure, while at the same time helping to construct the 'publicly perceived identities' of the actress: as 'flirt,' as 'whore, comic coquette' or 'tragic heroine'.[32] Miriam, in the end, is made to play all these roles.

Such cooperation between the arts manifests itself in the novel through Miriam's construction as a theatrical performer. Conspicuously, she is not presented in the act of performance on stage, even though she is 'always acting' (1100). When, for example, Sherringham observes her in the theatre, Sherringham's reaction to her acting is foreground, and the text abstains from an ekphrasis of the performance itself. Significantly, however, Miriam is often depicted as an actor through another art, that of painting. In this way, Miriam has, like the novel's title, little to do with the mythic model of Melpomene, the muse of tragedy. Rather, she is figured within the broader context of artistic models borrowed from disparate mediums and united in James's fiction. This makes *The Tragic Muse* a 'privileged place for observing the confrontation between the two modes' of the dramatic and pictorial, as William Goetz has put it, with Miriam serving as the nexus between the two 'modes'.[33] Goetz, however, privileges the 'confrontation' between the two modes and their disparate representational strategies. This is at the expense of what unites them, or at least what the text claims unites them—that is, both arts being subject to the demands of the market, and their attendant mutual role in increasing the value of the other.

The intricacy of the relation between the two arts can be seen in James's treatment of Gérôme's portrait of Rachel Félix. Miriam is compared directly to Rachel, in part thanks to her Jewish heritage (741); in the *Comédie-Française*, where the portrait hangs, Sherringham looks from Miriam 'to the vivid image of the dead actress' and thinks that 'his companion suffered little by the

[31] See James, *A Life*, ed. Horne, 216.
[32] Perry, *Flirtations*, 8.
[33] Quoted in Storm, "Spectatorship," 78. See Goetz, "Allegory," 158.

juxtaposition' (951); and Miriam herself desires to become 'the English Rachel' (843). The comparison with Gérôme's portrait seeks to endow Miriam with the authority of Rachel's celebrity. At the same time, it reinforces Miriam's links with the French theatrical tradition. (She begins to act in Paris before moving to London, after Sherringham convinces her to perform 'in the language of Shakespeare' [789]). But the comparison also makes Miriam into a spectacle, a 'vivid' aesthetic 'image' comparable to, even reminiscent of a portrait. This produces a distancing effect: she is compared to the portrait of an actor portraying a mythical figure—that is, there are several stages or levels of representation (myth, acting, painting) which ensure that the "real" Rachel remains obscure, while obfuscating any notion of Miriam's "real" character. Perry notes that the 'theatrical portrait in role is itself a representation of a staged or pseudo event,' and is thus 'twice removed from the "real" person, substituting the painted reconstruction for the masquerade on stage'; at the same time, it is an attempt to 'reveal a recognisable individual with a lived history and presence'.[34] In comparing Miriam to this representation of representations, then, the novel's tragic muse is subject to a *mise en abyme* of mediation, becoming a figure of pure performance, which transforms her 'lived history' into just another act. This is echoed by descriptions of Miriam's private character: her role as daughter, friend, or lover are called the 'fictions and shadows; the representation was the deep substance' (1038). Crucially, all this occurs without the use of ekphrasis: Gérôme's portrait is not described, in part, I think, to keep Nick's portrait of Miriam as the ekphrastic centre of her representation.

Nick's portrait of Miriam establishes the young man as a talented painter and figures the young woman as an actor on the cusp of a spectacular career. As with Miriam's performances on stage, however, the text at first seems to demur from representing the image itself. Sherringham's impression of the portrait comes first: 'it was strong, brilliant and vivid and had already the look of life and the air of an original thing. Sherringham was startled, he was strangely affected—he had

[34] Perry, *Flirtations*, 21.

no idea Nick moved with that stride' (1034). But then, unlike Gérôme's Rachel, the narrative voice describes Nick's Miriam:

> Miriam was represented in three-quarters, seated, almost down to her feet. She leaned forward, with one of her legs crossed over the other, her arms extended and foreshortened, her hands locked together round her knee. Her beautiful head was bent a little, broodingly, and her splendid face seemed to look down at life. She had a grand appearance of being raised aloft, with a wide regard, from a height of intelligence, for the great field of the artist, all the figures and passions he may represent (1035).

Miriam's pose is 'original' in that it differs from that of both Sarah Siddons and Rachel Félix in their respective representations. The description of James's actor communicates her distance from these figures and from the other characters, but also from 'life,' which 'she seemed to look down at' from the vantage point of art. Similarly, her being raised aloft is akin to her being on a (figurative or literal) stage, but also suggests her being raised aloft by the artistic 'intelligence' (through her own dramatic capacity and through Nick's representational power). This is proper to the 'great field of the artist,' who may represent 'all' that he or she so chooses; Sherringham, meanwhile, can only gape and gasp 'at the composition of the thing, at the drawing of the moulded arms' (1035). He remains a mere consumer, cut off from the producer's privileged point of view. But he is capable, nonetheless, of recognising the strange cleavage in Miriam's character as she appears on stage: she is a 'beautiful, actual, fictive, impossible young woman, […] who was exalted and heroic beyond all human convenience, and who yet was irresistibly real and related to one's own affairs' (1180). She is simultaneously a living contemporary ('actual,' 'irresistibly real') and a figure representative of art itself ('fictive,' 'exalted and heroic'), a divide which Nick's portrait at once registers and enacts.

It is worth dwelling on the fact that the direction of Miriam's gaze in the portrait remains ambiguous. This can be read in relation to Nick's first encounter with Miriam, in which he declares that he "'should like to paint her portrait; she's made for that". Nick imagines Miriam as 'made' for representation, for being an object of aesthetic attention—put simply, for being looked at or watched. But he says this 'partly because he was struck with the girl's capacity as a model, partly to mitigate the crudity of inexpressive spectatorship' (783). That is, his 'inexpressive spectatorship' is crude only because Miriam is not yet a portrait: once she has been represented, transformed into an art object, the act of looking loses its crudity, becomes assimilated into purely aesthetic pleasure. This reveals an implicit distinction between what Bourdieu calls common or profane perception, which is often sexualised, as against the perception of the studio [*perception de l'atelier*], which neutralises the sexual charge of the female figure.[35] Indeed, throughout the text, sexual force is dissolved through the practice of art. For example, as Philip Horne has pointed out, when Julia arrives at Nick's studio to find Miriam 'intimately installed with him,' the scene is 'not what the cliché of farce makes it appear, a discovery of painter and actress in flagrant post-coital *déshabille;* what is flagrant is that Nick and Miriam are absorbed together in the practice of art'.[36] The absence of an ekphrasis of Miriam's gaze, then, disarms a possibly sexualised reading of her portrait, and consequently reinforces the economy of exchanges between theatre and painting in the text: Miriam is 'made' to be an art object—actor, model, whatever—who will provide a specifically aesthetic pleasure to the viewer. However, Nick's gaze negates or denies Miriam's sexuality only in the act of painting her.

Miriam's business partner, the actor Basil Dashwood, is acutely aware of the exchange between theatre and painting. Although he praises Nick's portrait, he criticises it for 'not yet being finished and its not having gone into that year's Academy' (1218). That is, the value of the painting will only be established once it has been sent to the proving ground of the Academy, and this act will

[35] Bourdieu, *Manet*, 136.
[36] James, *Muse*, ed. Horne, XXVII.

help to consolidate Miriam's celebrity. Dashwood is one of a range of 'patrons, mentors, and family members' who, in the words of Sara Lyons, 'stage-manage' Nick and Miriam, leaving them open to becoming 'exploitable as slick commodities'.[37] Dashwood's attitude to Nick's portrait seems to confirm this image of Miriam as commodity, as does Miriam's view of the 'dignity' of her own art, discussed above. But if Miriam truly suffers this fate, it is only with the aid of Nick's painting: in this exchange, the painter simultaneously commodifies the actor's celebrity to increase the value of his own work, while also taking advantage of the existing commodity status of the celebrity. Indeed, Nick's sending a portrait of a famous actor to the Academy would secure his status as painter—that is, it would grant him the institutional imprimatur which would confirm his position as professional artist as opposed to amateur dauber. Ultimately, then, Nick's portrait of Miriam is the coproduction of a commodity, a coproduction to which the actor has long been prepared to contribute (Nash states that in the act of performance Miriam becomes simply 'the visible image, the picture on the wall' [994]).

The relation between painting and drama in the text throws in to relief the fact that 'James is very careful not to commit either the narrator or Nick to a theoretical positon about painting'.[38] Neither to a theoretical position nor to a style: we never learn what *kind* of painter Nick is, nor, more generally, how he handles his craft (except for the fact that his portrait has 'the air of an original thing,' as Sherringham puts it—in other words, that it is an 'original' and therefore pleasing portrait). Even when his painting is at centre-stage, so to speak, its illusionistic, representational power is foregrounded—that is, it is Miriam's pose which takes precedence, rather than the composition or even the palette of Nick's portrait. This highlights the contribution the model makes to the construction of the image: as we shall see with Nick's portrait of Nash, *The Tragic Muse* suggests that the painter requires a suitably stimulating model to produce a compelling image. Moreover, this emphasis on illusionism is broadly in keeping with the way in which James presents

[37] Lyons, "Intelligence," 126.
[38] Gordon and Stokes, 'The Reference,' in *Reality*, ed. Goode, 144.

portraiture in his art criticism, in which he offers a resolutely literary analysis of the art of painting (what Bourdieu has called 'the painting as pretext to literary dissertation').[39] James dedicates much of his profile of Sargent, for example, to an ekphrasis of the dress and comportment of the figures in *The Lady with the Rose* and *El Jaleo* (both 1882), referring only briefly to the painter's craft (and in vague terms such as 'broadness and boldness').[40] In the case of *The Tragic Muse*, aside from the initial verb 'represented,' Miriam's portrait is described precisely as though it were the actor's double, a perfect illusion created using only a few painter's tricks, such as foreshortening. In this way, Nick's art both cooperates with the theatre and, in a sense, serves as an auxiliary to the theatrical figure *par excellence*, Miriam Rooth.

The text's consciousness of the commodity-status of paintings—its implication in a system of producers and consumers—is reiterated through Nick's portrait of Nash. Nick commences his portrait by seeing 'all sorts of pleasant and paintable things' in Nash, but is soon disturbed to discover that 'he had never *seen*' his friend before, that he could only recognise 'the indefinite and the elusive' in his model (1234). This image of Nash is a literalised version of what Rachel Teukolsky describes as the 'detached aesthetic spectator, an abstract and rather ghostly individual'.[41] The problem with Nick's portrait is that it draws this 'abstract,' disinterested aesthete into explicit relation with the concrete workings of the market: 'From being outside the universe he was suddenly brought into it, and from the position of a free commentator and critic, a sort of amateurish editor of the whole affair, reduced to that of humble ingredient and contributor' (1235). On the surface, Nick's painting constrains the previously free-floating Nash to being a mere representation, a fixed figure in the human comedy, and therefore just another character in James's drama. But it is telling that, in describing the portrait, Nash is no longer 'free,' loses his 'amateurish' quality: Nash is fixed in the form of the painting-as-commodity, the status of which had been established through Miriam's celebrity portrait. Consequently, he cannot maintain his disinterested

[39] Bourdieu, *Manet*, 131.
[40] James, *Art*, ed. Collister, 418-22.
[41] Teukolsky, *Eye*, 135.

pose, which is destroyed both by the act of representation and by the implicit value of that representation. In other words, by implicating him in the art-market, Nick's representation annihilates Nash's pretention to disinterestedness. This is paralleled by the way in which the relation between painting and the theatre, along with a reliance on their respective audiences, destroys Nick and Miriam's claims to artistic disinterestedness.

The logic of this relation is carried over into the debate between painting and politics articulated in the novel. Nick begins by placing the representation afforded by politics at the top of the hierarchy. At the National Gallery, he calls painting into question:

> Its weakness, its narrowness appeared to him; tacitly blaspheming he looked at several world-famous performances with a lustreless eye. That is he blasphemed if it were blasphemy to say to himself that, with all respect, they were a poor business, only well enough in their small way. The force that produced them was not one of the greatest forces in human affairs; their place was inferior and their connection with the life of man casual and slight (1137-8).

Nick seeks to prove that painting is 'inferior' to politics, thereby justifying his own entry into the what he calls the 'clumsy system' (1138). The notion of blasphemy is apt: Nick responds to the aestheticist drive to turn art into a kind of religious practice by reversing the usual dichotomy between the sacred of art and the secular of politics. He desacralizes art by seeing it, like Miriam, as a 'poor business'. This suggests both the relative poverty of painting and calls to mind the profit and loss inherent in the world of business, and especially the relation between producer and consumer, supply and demand. There is a greater force in 'human affairs'—political representation—and Nick resolves at this point to pursue politics wholeheartedly.

On a second visit to the National Gallery, however, Nick's scepticism is surmounted and the hierarchy is reversed. The 'great portraits of the past' are no longer a 'poor business'. Instead, as Nick 'stood before' them,

> the perfection of their survival struck him as the supreme eloquence, the reason that included all others, thanks to the language of art, the richest and most universal. Empires and systems and conquests had rolled over the globe and every kind of greatness had risen and passed away; but the beauty of the great pictures had known nothing of death or change, and the ages had only sweetened their freshness. The same faces, the same figures looked out at different centuries, knowing a deal the century didn't, and when they joined hands they made the indestructible thread on which the pearls of history were strung (1222).

In terms reminiscent of Pater's portrait of the *Mona Lisa*, 'the great pictures' triumph over empires and 'systems and conquests' precisely because they do not experience 'death or change'. In other words, political systems are doomed to transience, while art triumphs by sheer duration. In this way, art records change but does not partake of it: it achieves a transcendence ('knowing a deal the century didn't') while at the same time recording the passing of history (the 'thread on which the pearls of history were strung'). This is the only instance in the novel in which the artist is no longer subject to the whims of any specific audience. But such freedom is only won through posterity—the living artist must live with, though not necessarily for, the market.

After Nash's departure, Nick imagines that his portrait of the aesthete 'had a singular air of gradually fading from the canvas,' and he sees in this an echo of Hawthorne's magic-picture narratives such as *Edward Randolph's Portrait* or *Prophetic Pictures* (both 1837). For Nick, 'the moral of the Hawthorne tale would be that this personage would come back on the day when the last adumbration should have vanished' (1236). However, this fading might also be a subtle indication of Nick's artistic talent, a canny way of revealing just how valuable an artist he might prove. Nick sees the master-paintings in the National Gallery as 'the things that were the most inspiring, in the sense that they were the things that, while generations, while worlds had come and gone, seemed most to survive and testify' (1222). But faced with his own attempt, Nick 'recalled with a certain

fanciful awe the unusual seriousness with which he [Nash] had ranked himself among imperishable things' (1236). In this way, the fading canvas can be read as a testament to both Nash and Nick's artistic impermanence (as well as a comment on Nash's arrogance). Though this might be an oblique criticism of Nick's ability, he is nonetheless redeemed by his willingness to pursue painting all the same. In Nash's case, the condemnation is clear: he can indeed escape from the market, but only at the price of disavowing art altogether. Given James's famous faith in the power of art—in for example, his famous letter to H. G. Wells: 'It is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance'[42]—he would no doubt disapprove of Nash's decision. Instead of giving up on art because of the constraints of the market, the artist must instead give the *omnium gatherum* 'what one wants oneself'.

Novel reflections

One of the striking things in a text which discourses 'much and admirably on art, dramatic, pictorial, and general' (as a contemporary critic put it in October, 1890) is the relative absence of discussion concerning the art of fiction.[43] This might be attributed to external factors such as James's growing interest in the theatre, or his move away from professional art criticism. Indeed, *The Tragic Muse* can be considered as a kind of preparation for the theatrical turn: prior to dedicating himself to drama, James set about describing and discussing its merits, its demands, and its constraints in the form he knew best—the novel. But, I argue, the absence of reflection on the art of fiction in the text is itself revealing. The elaborate discussions concerning a hierarchy of the arts conspicuously leave the place of fiction unaddressed. This naturally poses the question: what is the place of the novel in all this? Such curiosity is only reinforced by the material fact of the book—

[42] James, *A Life*, ed. Horne, 555.
[43] Kevin J. Hayes (ed.), *Contemporary Reviews*, 239.

that is, while the characters debate the relative merits of the theatre and painting, the reader remains, book in hand. *The Tragic Muse*, then, treats the place of the novel precisely by its absence: by considering the relative merits and limitations of painting and drama, the novel also reflects on the art of fiction and its own relation to the marketplace, as well as its place within the hierarchy of the arts.

The text suggests that the novel can accommodate other art forms via ekphrasis or through borrowed techniques. In the preface James argues that he conceived of *The Tragic Muse* in 'scenic conditions'—that is, in scenes which alternate from one aspect or strand of the narrative to another—'which are as near an approach to the dramatic as the novel may permit itself' (1112). Likewise, he claimed to seek 'the successfully *foreshortened* thing' (1110), thereby appropriating the language of painting to describe his literary technique (he later figures foreshortening as 'compactness' [1110]). Such comparisons are present in the novel, too. One of Miriam's plays, for example, mirrors the action of the text: 'The curtain was rising on the tragic climax of the play' (1253), a phrase which occurs towards the close of the narrative. Elsewhere, Lady Agnes leaves Nick standing 'in the middle of the Place de la Concorde, the grand composition of which Nick, as she looked back, appeared to have paused to admire' (752). In this way, the text assimilates terms and suggests techniques from other arts, redeploying them for its own purposes. Although the novel does on occasion self-consciously signal or consider its own construction—the narrator, for example, suggests that the reader might be able to learn more about Miriam 'if it were open to us to regard this young lady through some other medium than the mind of her friends' (986)—for the most part, as we have seen, the text reflects implicitly on the art of fiction by explicitly considering the other arts. In this way, the absence of discourse concerning the art of fiction in the text underwrites its higher position within the hierarchy of the arts: fiction comprehends the other arts, and unites them for its own purposes.

This is allied to a more general, theoretical point: as Bourdieu puts it, by making persistent reference to other works of art, the text 'asks to be referred not to an external referent, the

represented or designated "reality," but to the universe of past and present works of art'.[44] In *The Tragic Muse*, the text thus asks to be compared to theatre and painting, both in terms of form and implied value. Theatre and painting are shown to be dependent on each other and on their audiences, and thus to have comparatively low levels of artistic autonomy. But the admission of these failures does not, in Alison Byerly's phrase, 'render the novelist's own art more suspect': quite the contrary, 'like the informant who fingers a fellow criminal, the novelist accommodates our sophisticated doubts about representation by forcing someone else to take the fall'.[45] In this way, by pointing out the shortcomings of these other arts, *The Tragic Muse* lowers the status of painting and theatre within the hierarchy of the arts; at the same time, it places the novel above these arts by implying that fiction does not suffer from these failures, can perhaps transcend them.

A similar logic to the one outlined by Bourdieu and Byerly underwrites the novel's talk of 'the world'. We have already seen the ways in which the world of politics is equated with other forms of representation in the text. But the effect of such an equation is heightened when politics—or "the world" more generally—is compared directly to drama or painting. Sherringham, for example, hopes to convince Miriam to marry him by promising her adventures in 'the world,' offering 'realities' instead of 'fables':

> The stage is great, no doubt, but the world is greater. It's a bigger theatre than any of those places in the Strand. We'll go in for realities instead of fables, and you'll do them far better than you do the fables (1189).

Here Sherringham is close to articulating a version of "all the world's a stage." But he apparently fails to take the lesson: he believes that there is a strict division between "the world" and drama, and that the acting ends once one leaves the theatre; Miriam's relentless performance counters this

[44] Bourdieu, *Distinction* xxvii.
[45] Byerly, *Realism*, 7.

naïve vision of Jaque's claim in *As You Like It*. She also counters Sherringham's gendered logic—that Miriam ought to give up her career in favour of his—by suggesting that the terms can be reversed: 'Stay on *my* stage,' she says, 'come off your own' (1190). But here the discussion also reflects on the novel itself. These conversations have a metafictional effect in that, by calling attention to the stage *qua* representation or 'fable,' they equate the world of the text with the world beyond the text—that is, Sherringham's 'realities' are put on the same plane as the reality inhabited by the reader. The corollary is that the novel, too, becomes 'a bigger theatre' than 'those places in the Strand': with its vast stage and range of players, fiction is positioned as superior to drama because of its capacity to contain a wider, greater reality than the mere 'fables' of the theatre. Moreover, the fact that Miriam will 'do' these 'realities' 'far better' than she "does" the 'fables' suggests that the 'realities' themselves have a fictional quality, that they are themselves a kind of performance. This reinforces the argument the novel makes concerning politics, which, as we saw above, is subject to the same pressures as the theatre, and requires a similar gift for performance. Ultimately, this further conflates such 'realities' with reality itself. In doing so, the text makes a wider claim for the representational capacity of the novel over and above that of the theatre (and, by implication, painting, considering the close relations between the arts maintained in the text).

This logic is carried over into other metafictional moments such as when Nick accuses Nash of talking 'like an American novel' (1089). Though a seemingly straightforward metafictional device—one that calls attention to the text as text—it is revealing when compared with other instances of artistic reference within *The Tragic Muse*. Nick's jibe characterises the novel form in the same way that the characters speak of paintings, plays, and 'the world' itself. In this way, it simultaneously points to the unreality of the text—Nash talks like a witty but artificial 'American' fiction, not unlike a James novel as conceived by certain of his critics—while paradoxically making a claim for its very reality: Nash talks 'like' an American novel, which is odd or amusing, Nick implies, because he is a "real" person and should not speak like a character in a book. This minor moment, apparently incidental and frivolous, acquires a deeper force when related to the myriad

instances in the text in which the arts are compared. Such comparison implicitly connects painting and drama with the art of fiction; and this implicit connection is, ultimately, a rivalry: in describing the constraints to which the different art forms are subject, the novel situates these arts within a hierarchy which places fiction at the top.

This rivalry is clear in the case of Nash's portrait. Early in the text, Nick describes his experiences with Nash at Oxford, and Sherringham complains that this verbal 'portrait of the complicated Nash' is 'lamentably dim' (757). That is, Nick has not captured the mercurial complexity of the aesthete's character, foreshadowing his eventual failure to represent Nash in oils. James seems to have recognised that fiction has an advantage over painting in this regard. The novel can show characters both in successive states—developing from one thing into another through time, following Lessing's classic theory[46]—but also vacillating between two opposing positions, which suits Nash very well indeed. In this way, the canvas cannot hold Nash's portrait, but fiction can (though at the expense of the immediacy available in painting or sculpture—Ruth Bernard Yeazell has recently called such longing for immediacy 'portrait-envy'.[47]) This capacity of the novel enables James to represent Nick as an embodied version of the conflict between painting and politics: there are 'two men in him, quite separate' (881), each of which seeks to establish his own hierarchy (as in Nick's trips to the National Gallery).

This pattern of competing comparisons recurs throughout the text, and extends from painting and drama to the art of sculpture. The novel opens, for example, with the Dormers gazing at the sculptures on display at a Salon of the mid-1880s. Immediately the visual sense is foregrounded, and the reader is invited to "look" closely at the scene and its characters:

[46] See Lessing, *Laocoön*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick.
[47] Yeazell, "Portrait-Envy".

> The spirit of observation is naturally high at the Salon, quickened by a thousand artful or artless appeals, but no particular tension of the visual sense would have been required to embrace the character of the four persons in question (703).

A novel which does not feature illustrations does not typically provide visual sense impressions, can only stimulate the visual imagination. But the Salon context, with its glances towards the visual arts, affords the text an ekphrasis of Nick's family, "ekphrasis" being the appropriate term because of the ways in which the Dormers are explicitly compared to or made analogous with the artworks around them: 'As a solicitation of the eye on definite grounds, they too constituted a successful plastic fact' (703). Their 'plastic fact' encourages the reader to make inferences about their class, status, relation, and attributes. Lady Agnes, for example, has

> a high forehead, to which the quality of the skin gave a singular polish—it glittered even when seen at a distance; a nose which achieved a high, free curve; and a tendency to throw back her head and carry it well above her, as if to disengage it from the possible entanglements of the rest of her person (704).

Her 'high forehead,' 'high' curving nose, and the attitude of her head when she laughs (disengaged from 'possible entanglements') all indicate a person of high status, class, and "breeding". The 'polish' of her skin, meanwhile, suggests a marmoreal beauty, a polished personal culture, and a lack of emotional range. These class associations are reinforced by the 'looped silken canopy' of her 'crinkled flaxen hair,' which appeared 'like the marquee of a garden party' (705). Such descriptions would seem to encourage a comfortable analogy between fiction and the visual arts—in this case sculpture, though the same reasoning applies to painting. Indeed, the Dormers are described in terms which make them appear as figures in a contemporary art review:

> The fresh, diffused light of the Salon made them clear and important; they were finished productions, in their way, and ranged there motionless, on their green bench, they were almost as much on exhibition as if they had been hung on the line (703-4).

The ekphrasis of the Dormers hangs them on the line, displays them in the same way as favoured paintings were exhibited at the Salon (at eye level, in line with the eye). But the novel immediately sets about troubling the inferences drawn from this ekphrasis. For example, at the end of the opening chapter, the narrative voice notes that 'The foreign observer whom I took for granted in beginning to sketch this scene would have had to admit that the rigid English family had, after all, a capacity for emotion' (712). That is, the reality of these characters belies the fable of their image, a fact of which the novel is actively aware: 'We shall see quickly enough how accurate a measure it [the description] might have taken of Nicholas Dormer' (705). In this way, the characters in the text defy stasis, must be represented by the art of fiction rather than a visual or plastic art. Thus, the text constructs these static images precisely to disturb them: the novel will show the ways in which these characters are not 'finished productions' but are instead in motion, in conflict, disharmonious with and among themselves and with the world around them.

Thus, *The Tragic Muse* points to the shortcomings inherent to the stasis of painting and sculpture, but shows that these two arts can be useful to the novel. Tellingly, the chapter at the Salon ends with Grace Dormer looking 'around her to see if at this moment they [the family] were noticed. She discovered with satisfaction that they had escaped' (712). They had escaped the too static, too reductively suggestive sculptor's eye—the inert image of the family—and have entered instead the shifting labyrinth of the novel. The text is, once more, aware of this discrepancy: responding to questions posed about the characters' future, the narrative voice declares that 'The reader shall learn these things in time, if he care enough for them' (716). Shall learn these things 'in time': after opening in the Salon and describing the Dormers in relation to sculpture, the text highlights its own capacities over and above that of the visual arts. These instances differ from

conventional novelistic narration precisely because of the consistent reflection on and comparison with the faculties and limitations of the other arts.

Although the text vaunts the novel's unique capacities, it also manifests an anxiety concerning the fate of literature in the modern marketplace. It does so in part by implying that, because the theatre and painting are subject to the demands of their audiences, the novel, too, suffers from such conflict. As we have seen, this anxiety appeared in the novelist's contemporary correspondence and is mirrored in the text—in, for example, Nash's comments about the *omnium gatherum*. But it appears most clearly in the fact that Nick's portrait of Nash gradually fades from the canvas '"without a trace," like a personage in a fairy-tale or a melodrama' (1236). This is not only, as suggested above, an indication of artistic impermanence. Critics such as Eric Haralson have seen the fading of Nash's image as a sign of his queer elusiveness.[48] Sarah Lyons argues that, instead, Nash's disappearance may be read 'as a symbol of the attenuation of the novelist in a debased, spectacle-driven culture'.[49] This argument depends on figuring Nash as a novelist, something which he explicitly disavows: 'Literature, you see, is for the convenience of others. It requires the most abject concessions. It plays such mischief with one's style that really I have had to give it up' (725). That is, this 'attenuation' had already been enacted by Nash long before Nick painted his portrait. Crucially, though, Nash abandoned literature precisely because it demanded that he satisfy the demands of his readers. Moreover, these reflections are refracted through Nash's aestheticism: the 'abject concessions' are specifically stylistic, which means that the writer ought to produce for the happy few, which is reward enough, 'besides, of course, the pleasure for yourself' (820). This is another reason why it is important to see the parallels between Nash's and James's attitudes to the public, but also why the two figures cannot simply be conflated. Because this seems like an easy jest at the expense of the aesthete: Nash pursues disinterestedness to such an extreme that he ultimately produces nothing. But when this attitude is related to James's own production—

[48] Haralson, *Modernity*, 74-6.
[49] Lyons, "Intelligence," 128.

when Nash's 'abject concessions' are linked to James's 'abysses of vulgarity'—it becomes the expression of a sincere anxiety about the future of 'literature' and its survival in the face of market imperatives.

In discussing fiction in the shadow of the other arts, in whispers and by implication, the novel subtly reveals the ways in which it, too, struggles under the same pressures as painting and the drama. Each is subject to the market; each must fight to achieve aesthetic autonomy. However, because painting and drama are shown to have relatively low levels of autonomy in relation to their respective markets, fiction, it is implied, has more autonomy, can comprehend and, in some cases, exceed the other arts. It therefore ought to supersede painting and drama in a hierarchy of the arts. In the end, though, this can be viewed as an internal battle, a struggle within the family, with each art fighting for prime position. But the novel is saturated with warnings, threats, and indictments of a larger, external struggle: the struggle between art and the world. Miriam, for example, instructs Nick to 'give up the base, bad world' to pursue his painting. Nick contends that it is 'the base, bad world that pays,' that earns one's daily bread. Miriam assents, but counters by saying that, if it is the world that pays, then one ought to 'make it pay, without mercy—squeeze it dry. That's what it's meant for—to pay for art' (988).

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