

SARAH TRYPHENA PHILLIPS LECTURE ON
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HENRY JAMES AMONG THE AESTHETES

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FEW novelists can have been so reticent as Henry James. Although the posthumous discovery of his letters to a young sculptor gives evidence of an inclination towards men, we cannot be sure that he had a sexual life in any customary meaning of that term. Most writers define their characters largely by indiscretions; James appears to define his by discretions. Among writers of the second half of the nineteenth century, such as the Pre-Raphaelites and their successors in England, or the realistic novelists and decadent poets of France, James stands almost alone in being free of scandal. Discretion marked not only his personal life, but his literary confidences as well. His volumes of autobiography, his letters, and his prefaces intimate, without revealing, the main-springs of his art. Yet my remarks today will pursue what I suspect to be one of those impulses.

In 1873 Henry James, having turned the poetic year of thirty, decided to do something he had not done before. Up to then he had been, to borrow his own nautical metaphor, 'bumping about, to acquire skill, in the shallow waters and sandy coves of the "short story"', but now he set out to write his first novel. The months during which this book, *Roderick Hudson*, was gathering in his mind are therefore of singular interest. James was quite ready to confide that the 'germ' of a narrative came to him from Mrs Anstruther-Thompson at a dinner party, but he was not forthcoming about his bookish impulsions to write. For these the slightest hint may be of use. Such a hint comes in a letter to William James that Henry wrote on 31 May 1873. He was living in Florence, and that day happened to see in a bookseller's window a copy of Walter Pater's new book, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. For a moment James was 'inflamed', as he wrote to his brother, to buy it and to compose a notice of it. But he then recognized, he said, that it

treated of several things he knew nothing about, and gave up the idea. In any case, he made clear, he was planning to write something quite different.

This letter answered one of William James's, received the same day, in which William pointed out a little reproachfully that by living in Florence Henry was missing out on chances to review such books as Pater's new one on the Renaissance, which their sister Alice had already read and found 'exquisite'. Henry James's answer gives the impression that he never looked at the book, except in the window. But he must have gone inside the shop, and thumbed it, for otherwise he could not have known that some of its contents were on unfamiliar subjects. Since there is evidence that he acquired the book then or soon afterwards, and even reviewed it (though the review was never published and is lost), his silence suggests a writer's *secret d'état*, a discretion adopted to avoid confessing the powerful jolt that the book had given him. I suggest that it played a large part in the composition of *Roderick Hudson*, and that it launched Henry James on what was to be one of his great themes.

How do we know that he read it? In the 'Florentine Notes' which he sent to a New York weekly, the *Independent*, over several months of 1874—the very time when he was writing *Roderick Hudson*—he specifically refers to a chapter of Pater's book, that on Botticelli. James speaks of 'an ingenious critic (Mr Pater, in his "Studies in the History of the Renaissance")', which is a reserved compliment, and then says he has written about Botticelli 'more eloquently than coherently'. How backhanded this is we can tell from James's first revision of the passage: instead of Pater's having written 'more eloquently than coherently', he now has written 'more eloquently than conclusively'. In the earliest version James cited Pater's interpretation as 'too fantastic', but by the time he wrote the third and final version, he allowed that this 'fastidious' critic had 'lately paid him [Botticelli] the tribute of an exquisite, a supreme curiosity', and that 'Mr. Pater had said all.' The first version is closer to what James wrote to Edmund Gosse after Pater's death in 1894, when he described him as 'faint, pale, embarrassed, exquisite Pater', and as 'a phosphorescence, not a flame'. 'Exquisite', like 'fastidious', is a word that cuts both ways. And when James wrote to his brother that he was momentarily 'inflamed' to read Peter, just as when he called him 'a phosphorescence rather than a flame', he was slighting the most famous line in Pater's book, 'To burn with this hard gemlike flame is success in life.'

James declined to burn this way. There was no doctrine which could have roused in him more revulsion than this one. For reasons which as I have said remain obscure, he appears to have transposed his passions into his characters' lives, and not expressed them in his own. Perhaps, like Paul Overt in 'The Lesson of the Master', it could be said of James that 'nature had dedicated him to intellectual, not to personal passion'; on the other hand, Paul Overt in that story feels he may have been hoodwinked into detachment when he wanted immersion. Whatever the cause, James—as measured by Pater—did not achieve success in life. His interior fires were diverted to the lives of his fictional characters. Yet, given his homosexual propensity, he could not fail to observe how Pater's book covertly celebrated such a propensity by dwelling on Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Winckelmann. I think that James took alarm, that he heard the incriminating footfalls, that he wished to inscribe himself as neither aesthetic nor homosexual. At the same time, he knew and wanted to portray homosexuals. He could do this by representing them negatively under the guise of aesthetes. Proust would do the same. Pater's manifest relish of men who loved men may also have prompted James to the counter-emphasis, which can be found in his art criticism of this time, on *manliness*, which in context means anything but homosexual love.

Yet his reaction to Pater did not stop in alarm. We must try to see with what eyes he read the celebrated 'Conclusion' of the *Renaissance*. This was the chapter that Pater timidly withdrew in the second edition, then reinstated with cautious qualifiers in the third. It had originally been the concluding pages of an article on 'Aesthetic Poetry' in the *Westminster Review* of 1868. The 'Conclusion' is a kind of manual of seduction of young men, somewhat masked as a manual of instruction for 'aesthetic critics'. James was not easily instructed or seduced. To say that Pater had written more eloquently than coherently about Botticelli was to say that there was more manner than matter—an indictment to be made against aesthetes and aestheticism generally in *The Portrait of a Lady* as 'altogether a thing of forms'. As he wrote in his 'Florentine Notes', 'There are moods in which one feels the impulse to enter a tacit protest against too generous a patronage of pure aesthetics in this starving and sinning world.' (James was himself more interested in sin than starvation.) Although he allows there for 'the heroics of dilettantism', heroics are not heroism.

What Pater urged was an agitated density of taste and savour,

both of art and life. Learnedly citing Heraclitus (although Herrick would have served as well), Pater insisted upon the transitoriness of all things, and particularly upon their 'drift'—a word which he celebrated more than he lamented. All things flow like water—a favourite image—or (to take an internal metaphor) like the pulse. Amid this flow, we can only find recourse in the search for passions, impressions, sensations, pulsations, moments—all words which for Pater are doubly charged. 'A counted number of pulses only is given us of a variegated, dramatic life.' We seek 'not the fruit of experience, but experience itself'. With that rhythmical prolongation that characterizes his style, Pater says, 'While all melts under our feet, we may well catch at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems, by a lifted horizon, to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange flowers, and curious odours, or the face of one's friend . . . High passions give one this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, political or religious enthusiasms, or the "enthusiasm of humanity." . . . Only be sure it is passion', he adds in admonitory afterthought. This famous pronouncement not only offered the aesthetic movement a purpose—it also offered a vocabulary.

Pater's phrases were like caresses, and James shied away from them. His favourite characters are anything but will-o'-the-wisps in the stream. Solidly contextualizing their passions requires courtships almost endless, engagements prolonged into years, discoveries infinitely delayed. Deferral was for James what instant elation was for Pater. James's most direct comment on the 'Conclusion' comes in his art criticism, where against the Impressionists he insists that 'a picture is not an impression but an expression'.¹ It was as if he were anticipating a remark that Yeats makes in *Dramatis Personae*, 'The ideal of culture expressed by Pater can only produce feminine souls. The soul becomes a mirror not a brazier.'² James also criticizes, in various essays, those narcissistic whims to which Pater gives the more honorific name of passions.

In his preface to *Roderick Hudson*, written for the New York edition, James avoids any mention of Pater; instead he speaks of how Balzac might have written the opening scenes in Northampton, Massachusetts. Yet these, as he indicates, were peripheral.

¹ Henry James, 'The Grosvenor Gallery', in *The Painter's Eye*, ed. John L. Sweeney (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1956), p. 165.

² W. B. Yeats, *Dramatis Personae* in *Autobiography* (London: Collier Macmillan Ltd., 1965), p. 323.

Though he does not say so, we have only to read beyond them to recognize that the central theme of the novel is a counterstatement to Pater. The plot might almost be an exemplum: Roderick Hudson, a promising young American sculptor, is given three years in Europe by an art patron named Rowland Mallet. The gift is carefully made innocent because both men are represented as in love with the same woman. Its purpose is to enable him to broaden and perfect his art. Roderick Hudson has scarcely arrived in Rome when he begins to speak, not like the Romans, but like Pater. There is a momentous conversation between him and Mallet. In the middle of it, after a long, dramatic pause, the Pater patter begins. Hudson asks, 'What becomes of all our emotions, our impressions? . . . There are twenty moments a week . . . that seem supreme, twenty impressions that seem ultimate . . . But others come treading on their heels, and sweeping them along, and they all melt like water into water . . .' Here are Pater's moments, impressions, flowings, meltings, and his water images. Rowland Mallet stares askance at his friend Hudson, and thinks: 'His appetite for novelty was insatiable, and for everything characteristically foreign as it presented itself, he had an extravagant feeling; but in half an hour the novelty had faded, he had guessed the secret, he had plucked out the heart of the mystery and was clamouring for a keener sensation . . .' 'Foreign' is in the context a word like Pater's favourite, 'strange'. Roderick Hudson declares, 'we must live as our pulses are timed', echoing Pater's phrase about our being given 'a counted number of pulses only . . . of a variegated, dramatic life'. No wonder then that Roderick's first fortnight in Rome is registered by his friend as 'a high aesthetic revel'. He has fallen into the unheroics of dilettantism.

Unfortunately, the revel soon turns out to be a drift, and the word drift, which is picturesque and approved in Pater, is not so in James. Rowland Mallet tells Roderick, 'You have faltered and drifted, you have gone on from accident to accident, and I am sure that at this present moment you can't tell what it is you really desire!' Though James cannot have read Kierkegaard, he was here making the same criticism of aesthetic man that Kierkegaard had made in the 1830s in *Either/Or*.¹ Pater had praised Michelangelo's Adam for its incompleteness; Rowland says with pity, rather, that 'The poor fellow [Roderick] is incomplete.' The 'Unlimited experimentation' in which Roderick indulges is only a 'pernicious illusion'. 'Ultimately he doesn't care

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, translated by Walter Lowrie, ii (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 234.

for anything.' The drift becomes more than a drift, a fall. Roderick falls symbolically, as well as actually, from a Swiss Alp. His collapse is hastened by his pursuit of a new sensation in the shape of Christina Light. Christina, destined to become the Princess Casamassima, is an appropriate object for him, since she has the moral ambiguity that Pater finds in Mona Lisa; in an echo of Pater's furtive admiration for the 'daughters of Herodias', Christina Light is said to 'make a magnificent Herodias'.¹ James felt later that he had stacked the cards too decisively against Roderick, so that the young man collapses too quickly. It was perhaps the result of James's indignation with Pater's formulas. In Roderick he had now created a new character, the aesthete *gloriosus*, who would be the target of his satire, parody, and moral reproach. Not that Roderick is drawn entirely without sympathy: he is given an eloquent death among the Alpine crags.

Roderick Hudson was the first stage in an elaborate Napoleonic manoeuvre that James waged for thirty years. Four years later he wrote, in 1878, a short story, 'A Bundle of Letters'. In this an aesthetic character remarks, 'And what is life but an art? Pater has said that so well, somewhere.' I'm not sure that Pater had said quite this by that time, though he had certainly implied it. In *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), James evolves a character who does say it. Gilbert Osmond reminds Isabel Archer, 'Don't you remember my telling you that one ought to make one's life a work of art? You looked rather shocked at first . . .' He has actually not told her this before in the novel, but his reminder that he is repeating himself indicates that it is his fixed view. For answer, 'Isabel looked up from her book. "What you despise most in the world is bad, is stupid art."' Gilbert is saturated with the Paterian heresy. He says of himself, 'I was simply the most fastidious young gentleman living.' He is certainly fastidious—he has tastes, he has sensations; what he lacks is sympathies, and feelings for women. He is all pose, all form without substance, 'a faded rosebud' as Ralph Touchett calls him and so 'a sterile dilettante'. Pater in his 'Conclusion' had said that the individual is isolated, 'each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world'. It seems consonant with this metaphor that Osmond should make his house a prison for his wife, and that he should sequester his daughter in the prison of a nunnery. Osmond as artist of life, and Hudson as artist, are trapped in their own selfhood. Osmond's mistress Mme Merle belongs with them, for

¹ See Adeline R. Tintner, 'Henry James's Salomé and the Arts of the *Fin de Siècle*', *The Markham Review* (Fall, 1975), pp. 5–10.

she treats the 'art of life' as 'some clever trick she had guessed'. By antithesis James pleads for less art, more heart.

When James encountered Pater's book, he recoiled at once. Others responded to Pater with much less dissonance. Oscar Wilde read *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* a little later than James; he was only twenty-one and eager to attach himself to a glamorous doctrine. For him it was always his 'golden book' and 'the book that has had such a strange effect upon my life'. Wilde had come up to Oxford from Trinity College, Dublin, where the aesthetic movement was already entrenched. Among the subjects debated at the Philosophical Society in Trinity was one, 'Aesthetic Morality and Its Influence on Our Age', to which Oscar's brother Willie spoke at length. There were also lectures on Ruskin; there was an 'Aesthetic Medal Course'; and privately Wilde was in correspondence with John Addington Symonds, who would play his part as aesthete in Henry James's story, 'The Author of "Beltraffio"'. After he had read Pater, Wilde became a missionary for Paterism. In 1877, for example, he writes a letter to a classmate exhorting him to 'let every part of your nature have play and room'. Unsure in which direction he should point his life, he thought that Pater gave authority to this whirling compass. Like Christina Light in *Roderick Hudson* he toyed for a time with Catholicism—for him as for her it was 'a new sensation'; and the sonnet which Gilbert Osmond in James's *The Portrait of a Lady* sends to Isabel, with the title 'Rome Revisited', may have been concocted because of a poem Wilde published in 1881, entitled, 'Rome Unvisited'. But it was not only Roman Catholicism which attracted Wilde; he also had simultaneously a new sensation from Freemasonry. And if he responded to Pater's pied piping, he also responded to the moral chiding which he simultaneously received from John Ruskin's lectures and conversation. At moments his own proneness to change distressed him: he wrote to a friend, 'I need not say, though, that I shift with every breath of thought and am weaker and more self-deceiving than ever.' In this mood he wrote his poem 'Hélas!' in which he represents himself, like Pater and Roderick Hudson, as adrift:

To drift with every passion till my soul
Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play . . .

But in another mood, in 1886, he defended himself: 'I would go to the stake for a sensation and be a sceptic to the last! Only one thing remains infinitely fascinating to me, the mystery of moods. To be master of these moods is exquisite, to be mastered by them more

exquisite still. Sometimes I think that the artistic life is a long and lovely suicide, and am not sorry that it is so.¹ To some extent Wilde sought to enact the man of many parts—connoisseur of art as of life—whom Pater's *Renaissance* had characterized trait by trait.

It was inevitable that Wilde, in his early days loyal to the 'Conclusion' of Pater's book, should be in a different corner from James. They may well have met on 30 April 1877, at the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery in New Bond Street, which both attended. We don't know how James was attired, but we do know that Oscar Wilde wore a coat that had the shape and colour of a cello because a dream of such a coat had come to him. The new gallery was particularly well-disposed towards the Pre-Raphaelites, and both writers, in separate notices for different journals, praised Burne-Jones, though Henry James feared he detected a want of manliness in him. By chance both men described the first important painting in the show, one by G. F. Watts entitled *Love and Death*. James writes gracefully and to the point:

On a large canvas a white draped figure, with its back to the spectator, and with a sinister sweep of garment and gesture, prepares to pass across a threshold where, beside a rosebush that has shed its flowers, a boy figure of love staggers forth, and, with head and body reverted in entreaty, tries in vain to bar its entrance.

The same elements make Wilde gush; he perceives

a marble doorway, all overgrown with white-starred jasmine and sweet briar-rose. Death, a giant form, veiled in grey draperies, is passing in with inevitable and mysterious power, breaking through all the flowers. One foot is already on the threshold, and one relentless hand is extended, while Love, a beautiful boy with lithe brown limbs and rainbow-coloured wings, all shrinking like a crumpled leaf, is trying, with vain hands, to bar the entrance.

Judicious and cautious James finds that the painting 'has a certain graceful impressiveness'; aesthetic and incautious Wilde ranks it with Michelangelo's 'God Dividing the Light from the Darkness'. When they come to the beautiful boy, Wilde is all atremble, James all aslant. In his essay on George Du Maurier in 1888 Henry James blamed the 'excessive enthusiasm' of the aesthetes on their 'lack of real aesthetic discrimination'. James's own discriminations of the time were weighted on the side of morality, like

¹ Oscar Wilde, *Letters*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Hart-Davis, 1962), pp. 31, 185.

Ruskin's; he was like Ruskin in disapproving strenuously of Whistler, in whom he thought he saw Pater's impressionism at work. But Wilde, though he jested a little about the painting of bursting rockets, recognized Whistler to be a great artist. Twenty years later Henry James came round to this view.

Probably neither James nor Wilde saw each other's review of the Grosvenor Gallery opening, since James's appeared in America and Wilde's in Ireland. But they were to confront each other directly on James's home ground, during Wilde's year-long tour of America, in 1882. By this time Wilde, like Pater, was less naïvely sensationalist in his point of view. His aestheticism had had to become more profound because of attacks upon it, by W. H. Mallock in *The New Republic*, by various parodic plays, by Du Maurier's sketches for *Punch*, and by Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*. But the absurdities of those who cried absurd were those to which Wilde addressed himself. He was forming what might be called post-aestheticism, or reconsidered aestheticism. He firmly denied in a review that art for art's sake was in any sense a statement of the final cause of art; instead it was 'merely a formula of creation', the condition or state of mind in which the work is actually composed.¹ As for beauty, he continued to celebrate it, but as something to be sought not merely by the artist and his appreciators but by society in general. He would eventually move towards a brand of socialism, a doctrine to which Pater was not at all attracted, but which enabled Wilde to outmoralize the moralists. In extolling 'The English Renaissance' as his lecture topic in America, Wilde had quite emerged from the prison of isolated appreciation of moments that Pater had pictured so longingly. This renaissance, unlike Pater's, was not for connoisseurs but for everyone, involving changes in dress, architecture, and home decoration.

Wilde's tour took him to Washington, and it was here, in January 1882, that he and Henry James, who had been in the city for a month, were first thrown together.² They had met first at the house of Judge Edward G. Loring, where Wilde appeared in kneebreeches and wearing a large yellow silk handkerchief. James avoided him. But he was unexpectedly pleased by a newspaper interview that Wilde gave, in which he said that no contemporary

¹ Wilde, 'The Letters of a Great Woman [George Sand]', *Pall Mall Gazette* (6 Mar. 1886).

² See letter from Harriet Loring in George Monteiro, 'A Contemporary View of Henry James and Oscar Wilde', *American Literature*, 35 (January 1964), 528-30.

English novelist could compare with Howells and James. Such compliments were not so frequent that James would ignore them. He went to Wilde's hotel to thank him. It was not a successful visit. James remarked, 'I am very homesick for London.' Wilde could not resist putting him down. 'Really?', he said, no doubt in his most cultivated Oxford accent, 'You care for places? The world is my home.'¹ He felt himself to be a citizen of the world. To a writer like James, for whom the international theme was so important, this was offensive. Wilde said also to James, 'I am going to Boston. There I have a letter to the dearest friend of my dearest friend—Charles Norton from Burne-Jones.'² James knew both men well, too well to be pleased to have their names dropped. We must imagine Henry James outraged by Wilde's knee breeches, contemptuous of his self-advertising and pointless nomadism. He informed Mrs Henry Adams, who had refused to meet Wilde because she did not like 'noodles', that she was right. "'Hoss-car" Wilde is a fatuous fool, tenth-rate cad,' 'an unclean beast.'³ The images are so steamy as to suggest that James saw in Wilde a threat which he did not find in Pater. Pater's homosexuality was covert, Wilde's was patent. Pater could be summed up as 'faint, pale, embarrassed, exquisite', but for Wilde James found other epithets embracing his mind, manners, and probable sexual proclivities ('unclean beast'). It was as if Henry James, foreseeing scandal, was eager to put himself on record as totally without regard for Wilde. (Mrs Adams knowingly spoke of Wilde's sex as 'undecided'.⁴) He seems so vehement as to suggest that this meeting had made him queasy by stirring up his own equivocations about sexuality.

He returned in 1884 to the aesthetic theme. This was in one of his best stories, 'The Author of "Beltraffio"'. In his preface James declared that he had got the idea of the story from hearing about an English aesthete whose wife disapproved of his writings. This man has been identified as John Addington Symonds. It has been said that James did not know till later that Symonds was homosexual, but in the 1880s one never mentioned this, while in the 1890s one admitted to having known it all the time. There was,

¹ Leon Edel, *The Middle Years* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1962), p. 31.

² *The Letters of Mrs. Henry Adams*, ed. Ward Thoron (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1937), p. 338.

³ Edel, *The Middle Years*, p. 31; Ernest Samuels, *Henry Adams: The Middle Years* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard (Belknap Press), 1958), p. 164.

⁴ *The Letters of Mrs. Henry Adams*, p. 342.

however, good reason for not going into that question in the story, for James wanted to mock and anatomize aestheticism without extraneous concerns.

'The Author of "Beltraffio"' carries its critique further than James's earlier writings do. The book Mark Ambient has written, *Beltraffio*, is said to be 'the most complete presentation that had yet been made of the gospel of art; it was a kind of aesthetic warcry'. But just before James wrote the story, exactly such a book had been published, which went far beyond faint, pale, embarrassed, exquisite Pater. This was Huysmans's *A Rebours*. However sardonic its intent—and parts of it are obviously sardonic—it became, the moment it was published in May 1884, the Bible of aestheticism. James's friend Paul Bourget thought it wonderful, Whistler went to congratulate the author the day after publication. Wilde thought it the best thing he had seen in years. James had a copy of the first edition,¹ but thought it monstrous.² That he read it at once seems to be established by the atmosphere he devised for this story 'The Author of "Beltraffio"', of artifice and disease. Huysmans's hero Des Esseintes, after first trying artificial flowers that looked like real ones, decides instead to have real flowers that looked artificial. In Mark Ambient's garden, we are told, 'certain old brown walls were muffled in creepers that appeared to me to have been copied from a masterpiece of one of the pre-Raphaelites'. (Huysmans refers to the Pre-Raphaelites too.) Ambient's house seems to be copied from a prose description of a house in one of Ambient's books. Ambient's sister looks like a copy of a symbolic picture, and his son is 'like some perfect little work of art'. Only Mrs Ambient objects to being aestheticized: 'I don't in the least consider that I'm living in one of his books at all.' The illness from which Ambient's aestheticized son suffers brings death into this scene where no one is quite alive. In Huysmans a tortoise, encrusted with jewels, dies of its own artifice, and at the end Des Esseintes is obliged to give artifice up if he is to survive. James has evolved a quite different story, and yet it seems clear that he has profited from *A Rebours* here as he did from Pater's *Renaissance in Roderick Hudson*.³

During the next four years, from 1884 to 1888, James, Wilde,

¹ Tintner, op. cit., p. 8.

² Geoffrey Keynes, *The Gates of Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 73.

³ James again mocks Pater's impressions. The narrator asks Mrs Ambient of her husband, 'I suppose London's a tremendous place to collect impressions . . . Does he get many of his impressions in London, should you say?'

and Pater could scarcely have failed to meet occasionally in the inbred society of London. Certain things happened in this period that might prompt James to reconsider his earlier view of Wilde. One was that Wilde put aside his kneebreeches and married. A possible scandal had been averted. Another was that he began to publish something besides aesthetic poetry—reviews of books first and a book of fairy-tales. Very likely Wilde succeeded in charming James, as he charmed so many of his sometime detractors. That this happened is borne out by the fact that when in 1888 Wilde was put up for membership in the Savile Club, Henry James inscribed his name among those who supported him.

For his part, Wilde criticized James's novels in print, but always with respect. There are veiled references in his reviews of the late 1880s (as Edouard Roditi has found) to a new school of fiction writing, which 'is not native, nor does it seek to reproduce any English master. It may be described as the result of the realism of Paris filtered through the refining influence of Boston. Analysis, not action, is its aim; it has more psychology than passion, and it plays very cleverly upon one string, and that is the commonplace.'¹ This remark comes from the *Woman's World*, of which Wilde was editor, in 1888. Then in January 1889 he referred to James again in 'the Decay of Lying'; this time he said that James 'writes novels as if it were a painful duty and wastes upon mean motives and imperceptible "points of view" his neat literary style, his felicitous phrases, his swift and caustic satire'. This may not sound generous, but was as favourable an account as Wilde gave of any contemporary novelist, and James did not show any sign of resenting it. Oscar Cargill has suggested, however, that it may have encouraged him to take up again the character of the aesthete, in *The Tragic Muse* which he wrote the same year.

In this novel Gabriel Nash disdains the title of aesthete, but is one. He is a much more attractive representative of the type than Roderick Hudson or Gilbert Osmond or Mark Ambient. He has no need to fall from a cliff or, being a bachelor, to be beastly to a wife. Still, he has his jargon: for him the only 'duty' in life is to recognize 'our particular form, the instrument that each of us carries in his being' and to play that instrument 'in perfection' (both Pater and Wilde use musical metaphors for the soul). But there is a nomadic quality about Nash which fits Wilde much better than stay-at-home Pater. So when Nick Dormer asks Nash, 'Don't we both live in London, after all, and in the Nineteenth

¹ Edouard Roditi, 'Oscar Wilde and Henry James', *University of Kansas City Review*, 15 (Autumn 1948), 52-6.

century?' Nash replies, 'Ah, my dear Dormer, excuse me. I don't live in the Nineteenth Century. *Jamais de la vie!*' 'Nor in London either?' 'Yes—when I'm not in Samarcand.' Gabriel is always represented as on his way 'somewhere else'.

Probably James was here recalling his Washington conversation with Wilde, and the latter's insistence that he was a citizen of the world. But instead of dismissing him as cad, fool, and beast, James allows Gabriel Nash to be catalytically useful in starting Dormer on a new career as a painter, and acknowledges that Gabriel has good taste. Gabriel's career is as amorphous as at that time Wilde's must have appeared to be. He has written a novel, said to contain good things, but is mostly idle. His reflections are said to be 'more ingenious than opportune'. Although other models for Gabriel Nash have been proposed, and other men were no doubt idle, still no one writing about aestheticism in 1889 could have failed to bear that supreme idler Wilde in mind. Moreover, James specifies that he is 'not English', and since he is clearly not American, the chances are very good that he is Irish. James specifies as well that Nash's manner of speaking shows 'a conspicuous and aggressive perfection', a quality which Yeats and many others remarked in Wilde. Like Wilde, too, Nash remains the centre of conversation even when he is absent. James allows his aesthete to defend himself with spirit against two charges that were frequently made against Wilde. The first was that he was a mere *farceur*; so reproached, Gabriel Nash replies, 'One has the manner that one can, and mine moreover's a part of my little system.' The other is that Wilde promulgated aestheticism but provided no workaday example of its achievements (he would provide examples later). On this point Gabriel replies, 'Oh having something to show's such a poor business. It's a kind of confession of failure.' Wilde would tell André Gide about this time, 'I have put all my genius into my life; I have put only my talent into my works.'

The aesthetic theory that Gabriel Nash proffers is a Paterian one, with no sign that he has caught up with Wilde's post-aestheticism. Here are old chestnuts already run through by Roderick Hudson and 'The Author of "*Beltraffio*"': 'We must feel everything, everything that we can. We live for this.' Gabriel goes through 'phases', 'shades of impression'. 'My feelings direct me—if such a life as mine may be said to have direction. Where there's anything to feel I try to be there!' The result is that he is a balloon without ballast: 'I rove, drift, float', he declares, joining Pater, Wilde, and the drifters in James's earlier fiction, but without apology or fictional punishment.

James's divergence from Gabriel becomes apparent towards the end of the book. Gabriel is persuaded to sit for his portrait to Nick Dormer, but after one sitting he fails to turn up for the next. No one knows where he has gone. And then a strange thing happens. He fades from the novel altogether, and even from the portrait, where his painted image begins to vanish as if magically from the canvas. What James implies is that Nash, being all unsituated sensation, does not really exist at all. The perceiver of shades without substance fades into impalpability, the citizen of the world is a citizen of nowhere.¹

It does not seem likely that Wilde would have failed to read *The Tragic Muse*. He kept up with everything, and he read Henry James all his life; *The Awkward Age* was on his last bookseller's bill. In fact, the novel which Wilde wrote in the following months shows some signs of profiting from Henry James's work. Like *The Tragic Muse*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has for three of its main characters a painter, an aesthete, and a tragic actress. The portrait of Gabriel Nash is like the portrait of Dorian in its capacity to change emblematically. One of the stage names that Miriam Routh, the tragic muse of James's title, adopts is that of Gladys Vane; it seems scarcely accidental that Wilde's actress should be called Sibyl Vane. Miriam Routh is Jewish, Sibyl Vane is not, but, as if the ingredient had to be included somehow, Sibyl works for a Jewish manager.

Dorian Gray is often misinterpreted. This book is as critical of aestheticism as is James in *The Tragic Muse*. The old adages from Pater are dusted off and brought out again, only to be discredited. Lord Henry Wotton is full of them—his worst fault in the book is not profligacy, of which he is innocent, but plagiarism from early Pater, for which he is fully culpable. What Lord Henry fails to recognize, as Pater himself said in a review of the book (for Pater sober appealed from Pater drunk), was that the life of mere sensation is anarchic and self-destructive. Dorian Gray is his experiment; the experiment fails. Wilde's intention in the novel has been overlooked because the bad characters talk like him, and the good characters like you and me. But the book is his parable of the impossibility of leading a life on aesthetic terms. Dorian

¹ Others in the book criticize Gabriel because, as 'apostle of beauty', he has no time for 'abuses and suffering', as James had complained earlier that aesthetes took no account of 'this sinning and starving world'. Here James has in mind the narrowness of aestheticism, its blindness to much of life. In *Dorian Gray* Lord Henry is said to 'sympathize with everything except suffering... The less said about life's sores the better.'

cannot isolate himself. Self-indulgence leads him eventually to vandalize his own portrait, but this act proves to be a reversal of what he intends; however unwillingly, he discloses his better self, though only in death. He has pushed through to the point where extremes meet. By suicide Dorian becomes aestheticism's first martyr. The text: Drift beautifully on the surface, and you will die unbeautifully in the depths.

To James, though he made no public comment on *Dorian Gray*, the book can only have seemed another of those loose fictions that people around him insisted upon writing. Wilde made the book elegantly casual, as if writing a novel were a diversion rather than 'a painful duty'. No one could mistake it for a workmanlike job: our hacks can do that for us. The underlying legend, of Faust trying to elicit more than life can give, arouses deep and criminal yearnings; the contrast of these with the polish of English civilization at its verbal peak makes for more tension than the plot appears to hold.

To James's irritation, the early 1890s proved to be the age of Dorian. His old contempt for Wilde reasserted itself. Yet he found himself to be in the position of a rival. This was particularly true because both men took up playwriting at the same time. Wilde did not write aesthetic plays, but James disliked them no less for that. He pronounced *Lady Windermere's Fan* 'infantine . . . both in subject and form'. He conceded that it contained 'so much drollery—that is "cheeky" paradoxical wit of dialogue' that it might go. Some epigrams he thought good enough to quote in letters. (He had long before, as Leon Edel notes, borrowed Wilde's remark in Washington that the city had too many bronze generals.)¹ To a mutual friend of his and Wilde's, Henrietta Reubell in Paris, James wrote that 'the unspeakable one' (he hated to name him) had responded to the curtain calls by appearing 'with a metallic blue [it was green] carnation in his buttonhole and a cigarette in his fingers'. He thought Wilde's remark, 'I have enjoyed myself immensely', quite inadequate, though the audience seems to have been greatly amused by it. '*Ce monsieur* gives at last on one's nerves', James confided.² Not naming Wilde here, as later in his correspondence with Edmund Gosse, may indicate his renewed sense that association with Wilde might prove dangerous.

Wilde's next play, *A Woman of No Importance*, fared no better

¹ Edel, *The Middle Years*, p. 28.

² Edel, *The Treacherous Years* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1969), pp. 39-40.

with Henry James. He thought it 'un enfantillage', 'a piece of helpless puerility'.¹ Yet he was not altogether uninfluenced by Wilde's example. In the play he now himself wrote, *Guy Domville*, there are occasional speeches that sound remotely Wildian. Guy Domville says, when accused of making his aunt jealous by putting the Church first, 'I don't know what I could that I haven't done, to set such jealousy at rest. There's scarcely a rule I haven't utterly abjured—there's scarcely a trust I haven't rigidly betrayed—there's scarcely a vow I haven't scrupulously broken! What more can a man do for conscience?' The stage history of *Guy Domville* has often been told, but it may be salutary to consider it under the aspect of Wilde. It was James's most important effort as a playwright. When Alexander was to produce it, James felt timid of attending his own first night. He decided to attend Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* at a nearby theatre instead. He expected inadequacy, and found it. It was 'so helpless, so crude, so bad, so clumsy, feeble, and vulgar'. Yet the audience liked it. So much the worse for the audience, then. And yet there was that in *An Ideal Husband* to give him pause. For the theme of renunciation entered into both plays. Guy Domville's is of a basic kind: he is about to renounce the world and enter the Roman Catholic priesthood. At the crucial moment, however, the death of a relative makes him the last of the Domvilles, and he is persuaded to carry on the name and to seek a wife instead. But as events turn out, he gives up on his claim to one prospective bride, and then to another, and returns to his original renunciation of the world. Highmindedness can go no further.

What could particularly annoy Henry James was that in *An Ideal Husband*, Sir Robert Chiltern—the ideal husband of the title—is faced with a comparable decision. He is guilty of having sold a cabinet secret in his youth, and though the world will never know it, his wife persuades him that he must in all conscience renounce politics. But in the end he is persuaded, as is she, that the renunciation is not necessary. Wilde offers the indulgence of comedy, where James, himself a great renunciant, had offered only sturdiness of purpose. Wilde had tossed off a play that was better than the one James had laboriously wrought. Worst of all Alexander decided to take James's play off the boards and to put on *The Importance of Being Earnest* instead. Henry James had to suffer the indignity, though only after a month's run, of having the arch-aesthete's play take over his theatre.

No doubt this was bitter for him. His biographers tell us that

¹ Edel, *The Treacherous Years*, p. 41.

Henry James, after witnessing the audience enthusiasm for Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*, walked over to the theatre where his own play was just ending. George Alexander somewhat maliciously brought James out of the wings for a curtain call. James thought for a moment there was cheering, when in fact there was jeering, and James had to retreat in keen embarrassment. It is often said, even by authorities on James, that this incident plunged James into a 'black abyss'.¹ But we must not underestimate his sense of himself. After all, he was fifty-two, famous, infinitely clever. He had just seen the *ignobile vulgus* praise a play he knew to be bad; why then accept their adverse judgement of one he was convinced was good? His behaviour after the performance was stoical: he had promised the cast a dinner, and gave them one. He wrote to his brother of his humiliating experience at the theatre, but added, 'Don't worry about me. I'm a Rock.'² The second day he gave a luncheon for some friends, and he attended the second performance of *Guy Domville* and saw the play received with respect. The reviews were mixed, but William Archer, Geoffrey Scott, H. G. Wells, and Bernard Shaw all praised it. There was comfort in them. Among the friends who spoke reassuringly was Ellen Terry, who asked him to write another play for her. This James agreed to do three days after he supposedly entered the Slough of Despond.

He had in fact too much self-esteem, too much contempt for the London audience and for the plays it admired, to be in any abyss. We can see something of his spirit in that he did finish the play for Ellen Terry a few months later. It was called *Summersoft* and was about courtship. A bit of the dialogue indicates that James had seen Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*: Cora tells Mrs Gracedew of her lover, 'He's clever, and he's good, and I know he loves me.' 'Then what is the matter with him?' 'His name.' 'What is it?' 'Buddle.' Mrs Gracedew ponders and then says, 'Well—Buddle will do.' There is a touch of Bunbury, as well as a reminiscence of the sparring about the name Ernest, in this by-play—though James's point is perhaps different, that Buddle, besides being uneuphonious, is irretrievably middle class. No matter, such light touches did not make Ellen Terry envisage herself in Cora's part. Henry James went to see Edmund Gosse and his wife, and complained that Ellen Terry had commissioned *Summersoft* and then refused to play it. Mrs Gosse, to smooth him

¹ Edel, *The Treacherous Years*, p. 75.

² James, *Letters*, ed. Edel, iii (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard (Belknap Press), 1980), 509.

down, ventured, 'Perhaps she did not think the part suited to her?' James turned upon them and replied thunderingly, 'Think? Think? How should the poor toothless chattering hag THINK?'¹ I cannot believe that writers in the 'black abyss' speak with such arrogance.

Whatever resentment James felt—and he did feel some—of Wilde's superior success as a playwright was suddenly rendered meaningless by Wilde's trial. He was appalled at the 'little beasts of witnesses'. 'What a nest of almost infant blackmailers!' he commented. But the letter he wrote to Edmund Gosse shows little sympathy:

Yes, too, it has been, it is, hideously, atrociously dramatic and really interesting—so far as one can say that of a thing of which the interest is qualified by such a sickening horribility. It is the squalid gratuitousness of it all—of the mere exposure that blurs the spectacle. But the *fall*—from nearly 20 years of a really unique kind of 'brilliant' conspicuity (wit, 'art,' conversation—'one of our 2 or 3 dramatists etc.')

to that sordid prison-cell and this gulf of obscenity over which the ghoulis public hangs and gloats—it is beyond any utterance of irony or any pang of compassion! He was never in the smallest degree interesting to me—but this hideous human history has made him so—in a manner.²

This letter was James's way of showing, by not showing, his involvement. We must remember that he was a homosexual writing to a homosexual. Another letter from him, to Paul Bourget, also credited by some with being homosexual, commented that the sentence, when it was handed down, was cruel; instead of the two years of hard labour meted out by the judge, James proposed that solitary confinement would have been more humane.³ In fact, Wilde suffered both. Only once did James venture that if Wilde should recover after his prison sentence, 'what masterpieces might he yet produce!'⁴ But this seems pro forma sympathy, as if for the record. James did not relent later: in 1905 he said on a lecture tour in America that Wilde was 'one of those Irish adventurers who had something of the Roman character—able, but false'. His life had been 'abominable' before and after imprisonment, his death James pronounced to be 'miserable'.³

¹ John Bailey, 1864–1931, *Letters and Diaries*, ed. Sarah Bailey (London: John Murray, 1935), pp. 203–4. The quotation is from a letter of Edmund Gosse to Bailey, 14 April 1920.

² James, *Selected Letters*, ed. Leon Edel (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1960), pp. 142–3. Text is corrected.

³ Edel, *The Treacherous Years*, pp. 120–1.

⁴ Edel, *The Master* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1972), p. 288.

With Pater dead since 1894, and Wilde virtually so from his trial a year after that, James returned to the subject of aestheticism. When he came to write *The Spoils of Poynton* in 1896, he perhaps had in mind a lecture Wilde had delivered around England in 1883, 'The House Beautiful'. Originally James intended to call his new novel by that name, a vile phrase that Pater had also used in *Appreciations*. In this novel aestheticism is exemplified by Mrs Gereth, who feels an acute suffering brought on by the 'aesthetic misery' of Waterbath. James is interested in other issues, possessing and collecting, sacrificing and exploiting, but at least part of the book is directed against the valuing of sensations that arise from good taste over more basic emotions. Connoisseurship is not so much attacked as put in its place, as part of James's continued presentation of the shortcomings of aestheticism when isolated from the rest of life.

Then in *The Ambassadors*, in 1903, Strether arrives from Woolett, Massachusetts, wearing his puritan glasses, but under the vivid impression of Paris, puts on aesthetic ones. Then aestheticism fails him as, contemplating a country scene as if it were a painting, he is jarred by the sight of two compromised lovers, neither of them painted. His moral sense now returns in force. Strether had urged Little Bilham to 'Live all you can; it's a mistake not to.' But at the end of the book Strether is obliged to recognize that this aesthetic advice is too partial, that beauty loses its attraction when founded on deceit, that morality cannot be dismissed simply because it is gloomily unaesthetic. For himself, both his aesthetic and his moral sense preclude Strether's staying longer. He is no longer pleased in either way. In these novels there is no villain, and a general compassion seems to be accorded both to aesthetes and to non-aesthetes. James was no longer so vehement.

James came back to aestheticism for the last time in 1904, in his essay on D'Annunzio. Here he speaks in friendly retrospect of how some years before society had been roused 'as from some deep drugged sleep, to the conception of the "aesthetic" law of life . . .'. But all its exponents, until D'Annunzio, were inadequate. What aestheticism offered was 'beauty at any price', but he contends that in so doing it promoted taste at any price and sexuality at any price. He found D'Annunzio's work to be characterized by an 'exasperated sensibility'. Its ultimate defect is to see the sexual relation in isolation from the rest of life, when only in the rest of life does it have its 'consummation and extension'. Apart from that it is merely 'zoological'. James holds out the hope that aestheticism

will yet find a more convincing advocate, as if Pater, Wilde, Huysmans, and D'Annunzio had all written in vain. By this time he had been having an affair, or an approximation of an affair, with the young sculptor Henrik Andersen, as letters full of endearments and references to caresses confirm.

It isn't fanciful to suggest that Henry James probably thought of himself as that more convincing advocate. The year he wrote on D'Annunzio was also the year in which he wrote *The Golden Bowl*. James might well feel that in this novel he was remixing the ingredients of aestheticism to show how they might be more gainfully employed than they had been in the past. The four principal characters in this novel are exquisite in their various ways: their taste buds and other antennae are developed as fully and subtly as a Walter Pater could wish. Their sexual relations are as central as in D'Annunzio, but it is the rearrangement of these by thought that provides the interest. The object of the heroine is, *tout court*, to win back her husband from his affair with her father's wife. This can only be done by the effect of imagination working upon life, transforming its ugliness into beauty, a beauty consistent with morality but not primarily moral in intent. The golden bowl of the title is an emblem of her quest, yet the bowl described in the book is a bowl with a crack in it, which must be smashed to pieces so that a new golden bowl of the mind can be created.¹ The ultimate refinement is directed not towards the accumulation of choice external objects but towards the eliciting of latent personal qualities for the sake of love. The result is beautiful, but it is not beauty merely that is being sought.

So aestheticism did not come to an end. It continued to command a following as a series of writers attempted to redefine it. In its more primitive form it awoke Henry James to write his first novel as a criticism of it. Although he had other subjects he never left this one alone for long. At the end of his writing career he saw more clearly that he had used the movement as a stalking horse because it enabled him to represent people like himself under the guise of disclosing their shortcomings. In *The Golden Bowl*, mellowed and emboldened, James makes the fastidiousness of aestheticism and its insistence upon beauty central to life's concerns rather than opposed or peripheral to them. In other words aesthetes, like homosexuals, may have their place in the scheme of creation.

¹ See Martin Price, *Forms of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), Barbara and Giorgio Melchiori, *Il Gusto di Henry James* (Florence: Einaudi, 1984), and Sara Stambaugh, 'The Aesthetic Movement and *The Portrait of a Lady*', in *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 30 (1976), 495-510.