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HENRY JAMES & HIS STANCE TOWARDS AESTHETICISM AND DECADENCE

Henry James a jeho postoj k estetismu a dekadenci

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Prague, January 9, 2015

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Jan Mackal

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Abstract

This M.A. thesis focuses on the problematic relationship between Henry James and Aestheticism and Decadence on the example of his two masterpieces—*The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). The main task is to document the evolution of this relationship and to point out that despite his lifelong preoccupation with these two artistic movements in his literary works, James refuses to assume a concrete stance toward them. Before the literary analysis of the two abovementioned novels, the author devotes the first chapter to a brief historical survey as to the nature and purpose of the work of art, to the development Aestheticism and Decadence in Europe and Britain, and to James's relationship with some of the proponents of British Aestheticism. The rest of the thesis is devoted to the literary analysis of the two novels through the optics of Aestheticism and Decadence.

Keywords: James, Henry; Aestheticism; Decadence; literary analysis; transatlantic studies

Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce se zaměřuje na problematický vztah Henryho Jamese k estetismu a dekanenci na příkladu dvou vrcholných děl – románů *Portrét dámy* (1881, č. 2006) a *Zlatá číše* (1904, sl. *Zlatá čaša* 1977). Jejím hlavním cílem je zobrazit vývoj tohoto vztahu a poukázat na fakt, že navzdory tomu, že se James zaobíral těmito směry ve svých literárních dílech po celý život, odmítá k nim zaujmout konkrétní stanovisko. Předtím, než se autor pustí do literární analýzy výše jmenovaných románů, věnuje první kapitolu stručnému historickému přehledu o povaze a účelu uměleckého díla, vývoji estetismu a dekadence v Evropě a v Británii a Jamesovu osobnímu vztahu s některými z představitelů britského estetismu. Zbytek práce se věnuje literární analýze dvou románů optikou estetismu a dekadence.

Klíčová slova: James, Henry; estetismus; dekadence; literární analýza; transatlantická studia

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0. Preliminaries

0.1. Note on the Editions of the Primary Works

Both novels discussed in this thesis, i.e., *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), were after its initial publication later revised by James himself for the so-called New York edition. Although the extent of the revision differs considerably in each case, an in the case of *The Portrait of a Lady* we may even speak of two different *Portraits* (cf. Anthony J. Mazella's essay "The New Isabel"), it is often at the critic's discretion which edition he or she will use. For the purpose of this thesis, I used the Norton critical edition for *The Portrait of a Lady*, based on the 1908 New York edition of the novel, and in the case of *The Golden Bowl*, the Oxford World's Classics edition that reproduces the text of the first English edition from 1905.

0.2. Aestheticism or aestheticism?

Everyone dealing with the Victorian literature, or nineteenth-century literature influenced by the aesthetic theories of art for art's sake will sooner or later encounter some difficulties as to the nature of the term Aestheticism. In the context of the mid- and late-nineteenth century, Aestheticism refers to an artistic movement. As defined in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* by M. H. Abrams, Aestheticism was a "European phenomenon during the latter nineteenth century . . . [stressing] the view that a work of art is the supreme value among human products precisely because it is self-sufficient and has no use or moral aim outside its own being" (3). Therefore, everyone applying this principle in his/her works was regarded as a representative of Aestheticism. However, one may proclaim the independence of art on any moral or utilitarian principle even

today when the Aesthetic Movement is long gone. And exactly this feature constitutes the weakness of the term: when we speak about Aestheticism, do we mean by that the general tendency of attributing only the aesthetic function to the work of art, or do we speak about a specific movement in the arts (predominantly literature and visual arts) beginning as early as the 1830s and culminating in the *fin de siècle* period? Furthermore, the situation becomes even more convoluted when employing the term to convey both meanings simultaneously. Therefore, when referring to the Aesthetic Movement, "Aestheticism" will be capitalized; when referring to the general philosophy and principles of the Aesthetic Movement, "aestheticism" will not be capitalized. In the case of rare instances, when the term conveys both meanings at the same time, the capitalization varies.

1. Introduction

The main goal of this thesis is to document the evolution of Henry James's stance toward Aestheticism and Decadence in his fiction, and to argue that this evolution does not head toward a concrete stance toward these two artistic movements, but veers toward ambiguity. Since this thesis constitutes a work of literary criticism, the main method of exploring the links between James and Aestheticism consists primarily of an analysis of the two selected novels, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), through the optics of aesthetic theories proposed by Théophile Gautier, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde, and others, and less in studying direct confrontations of James's personality with the ideas and/or representatives of Aestheticism, of which there were a few.

Due to the temporal and spatial dimensions of M.A. thesis, I have chosen to focus on *The Portrait* and *The Golden Bowl*, for these novels not only constitute James's literary accomplishment in his early and major phase, but they are also perfect candidates for the demonstration of James's evolution in his approach to Aestheticism and Decadence. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Aestheticism, though not *a priori* immoral itself, is, nonetheless, closely connected and dealt with from the point of morality; in *The Golden Bowl*, morality is sidelined and obfuscated to the point where ambiguity toward Aestheticism assumes place previously held by morality.

Before I fully immerse myself in the analysis of these two novels, I will provide a brief historical and theoretical introduction to Aestheticism and Decadence, their doctrines and philosophies, and discuss the important ideas of some of the representatives of these two artistic movements. I believe that in order to assess James's objections to and potential issues with Aestheticism, one needs to attempt to understand the Aesthetic

Movement itself first. Yet, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 2, this task poses a serious challenge, since under the term Aestheticism and the overused label *l'art pour l'art* lie various ideas and discourses, proposed by various artists, philosophers and theoreticians of art, which often contradict one another, and thus make any attempt to define Aestheticism rather complicated.

2. Aestheticism and Decadence

> In order to decide whether anything is beautiful or not, we refer the representation, not by the Understanding to the Object for cognition but, by the Imagination (perhaps in conjunction with the Understanding) to the subject, and its feeling of pleasure or pain. The judgement of taste is therefore not a judgment of cognition, and is consequently not logical but aesthetical, by which we understand that whose determining ground can be no *other than subjective*.
>
> — Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (1790, italics original)

> "To see object as in itself it really is" has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impressions as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly.
>
> — Walter H. Pater, Preface to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873)

> I would define, in brief, the Poetry of words as *The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*. Its sole arbiter is Taste. With the Intellect or with the Conscience, it has only collateral relations. Unless incidentally, it has no concern whatever with Duty or with Truth.
>
> — Edgar Allan Poe, "The Poetic Principle" (1850, italics original)

2.1. The Nature and Purpose of the Work of Art: A Brief Historical Survey

Considering the rich history of human knowledge in the field of philosophy and aesthetics, it is fairly apparent that the questions of whether the work of art has any meaning, purpose, or intention apart from its beauty—in other words, the question of the autotelic nature of the work of art—has not only been the main focus of artists and theoreticians of aesthetics since the 1830s, when *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, a novel by Théophile Gautier, whose preface is nowadays regarded as a manifesto of art for art's sake, first appeared. As early as in the antiquity, famous philosophers, such as Aristotle

or Plato, engaged in elaborate debates as to the main question of the true nature of the work of art.

Anyone, who attended just a basic course devoted to the theory of literature, must be familiar with Aristotle's notion of art as mimesis, i.e., imitation. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle writes that "[i]mitation . . . is one instinct of our nature" (IV), which is "implanted in man from childhood" (IV), therefore, every artistic creation, be it a poem, comedy or tragedy, or musical composition, is called art exactly because it imitates nature. In a simplified manner, if one is at a loss whether one sees a work of art, he can immediately assert the artistic value by a simple "test," and proclaim it either a work of art, or simply dismiss it—if it does not imitate nature in any way, it is not a work of art.[1] In terms of nineteenth-century Aestheticism, Aristotle's aesthetics is not compatible with its philosophy, since its principal concern is not to see whether the work of art imitates nature, but whether it is aesthetically pleasing. Furthermore, in its excessive form, Aestheticism believes in the concept of life imitating art, and not vice versa.[2]

Similarly, the notion of the work of art of Aristotle's predecessor Plato is associated with mimesis. However, Plato's mimesis becomes furthermore problematized with his world of Ideas or Forms. The work of art represents, or imitates, a natural object which is perceived as real. Nonetheless, according to Plato's well-known philosophical teachings, objects, that we perceive and think of them as real, are nothing more than mere imperfections of their ideal Forms. Therefore, the work of art is a mere imitation

[1] According to Aristotle's definition, most modern *objets d'art* would not qualify as *objets d'art*. For instance, in what way do the canvases of, say, Jackson Pollock, or Mark Rothko imitate nature?

[2] See conclusion to 2.3. British Aestheticism: Swinburne, Pater, Wilde. This aspect of Aestheticism was the principal theme of multitudes of cartoons and parodies in *Punch*, a weekly satirical magazine which was extremely popular during the Victorian era. A typical example of such cartoons depicts a number of aesthetes, one of them holding an aesthetic object—a piece of china, for instance—and worshipping it, encouraging others to "live up to it."

of an imperfect imitation of the perfect Form of the work of art—in other words, art is always a copy of a copy ("[t]he imitative art is an inferior who marries an inferior, and has inferior offspring" [*The Republic*, Book X]), and as such is potentially threatening, since it conveys falsity and illusion and leads the general public from Truth:

> the poet with his words and phrases may be said to lay on the colours of the several arts, himself understanding their nature only enough to imitate them; and other people, who are as ignorant as he is, and judge only from his words, imagine that if he speaks of cobbling, or of military tactics, or of anything else, in metre and harmony and rhythm, he speaks very well—such is the sweet influence which melody and rhythm by nature have. (*The Republic*, Book X)

This is the reason why Plato would have poets banished from his ideal Republic.

Yet in "Ion," which is a short dialog centering on a professional rhapsode reciting Homer, Plato admits that the artist can actually make a better copy of the Form that is found in our ordinary experience because of a divine inspiration. In comparison with his previous idea, this one comes significantly closer to our conventional view of Greek art—masterpieces that are produced by artists who are inspired by Muses. In this regard, this theory is more traditional and more accessible to the general public; moreover, it allows Plato to leave some space for artists in his ideal state and simultaneously annuls his opponents' arguments about his radicalism. Nonetheless, no instruction how to recognize the art that was created with the help of divine inspiration is presented. Plato's ideas about art, especially his second theory, came to the knowledge of Western medieval and Renaissance scholars through the filter of Neo-Platonism, and therefore not in their exact and pure forms. Together with the Horace's notion of didacticism, mentioned in

his *Ars Poetica* (the often quoted phrase that poem should "instruct and delight"[3]), mimetic theories form the bases of the aesthetic theory during the whole period of Middle Ages and Renaissance.

It takes a substantial amount of time for a debate that would question and undermine the mimetic theory in the sense that a primary function of the work of art is not related to its (in)ability to imitate nature. Until the 1830s, the Greco-Roman definition of art and its purpose is singularly accepted, but from those years on, a new theory of art slowly begins to take shape. It is only fitting that this event should take place after the eighteenth century, which was extremely fruitful concerning works of literature written with regard to the tradition and prescriptions of Greek and especially Roman authors. The period of Classicism, as it is often labeled by the Continental literary historians, comprised of a revival of the old forms of poetry and drama written in the golden times of the Roman Empire—poets like Horace and Ovid serving as models to the contemporary authors. In England, this period is often referred to as the Augustan Age, most prominently represented by Alexander Pope, then John Dryden, and others, and from the point of view of literary criticism culminating in the works of Dr. Samuel Johnson. After this extremely formalistic period, new authors with new ideas about art and artistic creation gradually started to appear and the Classicism slowly began to shift toward what will be later known as Romanticism.

It is well beyond the scope and definitely outside the main argument of this thesis to discuss the history of literary genres and styles, therefore I will not engage in elaborate discussion as to the reasons for the change in artistic preferences. In a slightly

[3] As the authors of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* write in the introduction, "Horace's injunction that poetry should both 'instruct and delight' has been repeated so often that it has come to be known as the Horatian platitude" (121).

oversimplified manner, Romanticism was a reaction against the formalism and constraints of Classicism which, according to the new generation of artists and poets, did not fully allow for a free imagination and artistic creation. It is not something unusual that Classicism preferred mimetic theory of art, as did classical authors; however, this kind of mimesis was not understood as a realistic depiction of Nature with its natural "flaws," but as a depiction of an ideal Nature—in other words, what Nature should be and should represent, the so-called *belle nature*.[4] It is evident that Romanticism, which sought to get rid of all constraints so that there would be a space for unrestricted imagination, opposed this artificially created Nature which is nothing more than one of such constraints of the poet's imagination.

In Europe, as early as in the 1750s, a new literary movement began to slowly emerge within the dominating theory and practice of Classicism. In Continental context, especially in German-speaking parts of Central Europe, literary works with aesthetics different from its classicist counterparts emerged. The works of Friedrich Schiller, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and other German authors clearly differ from the pure, rationalist logic of the Enlightenment.[5] German authors of this period attempted to merge Classicism, Enlightenment philosophy, and early Romanticism into a style, or movement which was later called Weimar Classicism (*Weimarer Klassik*).[6] In England, however, there was no such a profound attempt of fusion of Classicism and Romanticism;

[4] This idea of *la belle nature* can also be seen in landscaping of that period—its personification is the French formal garden, where wild nature is restricted by human hand and everything is neatly cut and trimmed to create an ideal nature pleasing to the human eye.

[5] Cf. *Sturm und Drang* movement and *Empfindligkeit* (Sensibility)—in Continental literary history, this period of transition between Classicism and Romanticism is often referred to as Pre-Romanticism or Sentimentalism.

[6] In this regard, J. W. Goethe stands in between Classicism and early Romanticism, therefore, in literary history he is often viewed as a transitional figure between those two artistic movements, similar to Ludwig van Beethoven who is regarded the same way in history of classical music. Such figures are extremely important for the realization of the fact that even though we often tend to think about the borders between Classicism and Romanticism in a clear-cut fashion, many times it is not the case.

Romanticism appears as a new literary movement distinctly opposed to the literature written by the representatives of its predecessor.[7] In Britain, as early as in the 1770s the Lake Poets are producing a different kind of poetry in terms of form, themes, and diction. They are no longer displaying their "craftsmanship" of poetry, using heroic couplets, writing mock epics, or criticizing bad judgment as Pope did. They are fascinated with real—and often wild—nature and natural phenomena, and not with the artificial *belle nature*, and they produce lyrical poetry in which they give vent to the unrestricted emotional feelings they experience. In his famous "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads*, W. Wordsworth defines good poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," (246) whose purpose is to point out to

> incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature. (244-5)

If we compare his ideas about what poetry should be like and what should depict, and the actual poetry produced by the Romanticists with the poetry written by their predecessors, we can clearly see the radical difference in its objectives and in the ways of approaching the subject. And because of the emergence of Romanticism, Aestheticism could later appear, since Romanticism was the first style which started to see the work of art not governed by some prescribed external rules but as a free product of artist's

[7] Once again, the borders are not so clear-cut. In English context, we may think of the "graveyard school" and its most prominent representative Thomas Gray (1716-1771) with his famous *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, which displays early signs of Romanticism in terms of subject-matter and depiction of emotional states. However, in comparison with the large scope of *Weimarer Klassik*, the scope of the "graveyard school" was significantly smaller and, furthermore, did not constitute a fusion of Classicism and Romanticism.

imagination which, when finished, becomes an autonomous creation "different from—if related to—the real world" (Johnson 36). Therefore, I hope that this overly long description of the work of art, seemingly unrelated to the topic of this thesis, is justifiable, for without Classicism, strictly adhering to the old Greco-Roman principles, there would not have been a reaction in the form of Romanticism and consequently, without Romanticism, there would have been no Aestheticism as we understand it today.

2.2. Aestheticism and Decadence: A Continental Phenomenon

The general tendency when it comes to Aestheticism is to associate it almost automatically with the 1890s in Britain and the larger-than-life figure of Oscar Wilde. Nonetheless, at that time the Aesthetic Movement was coming to an end, and it can be said that Oscar Wilde with his trial for "gross indecency" represented its zenith. Moreover, the geographical origins of Aestheticism, surprisingly, do not lie in Britain, but on the Continent—in France and Germany, to be more specific. The foundation of its philosophy is to be found in Romanticism and the idea of a work of art as an autonomous creation, and in the philosophical teachings of Immanuel Kant. As early as in 1790, this famous German philosopher from Königsberg, Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia) deals with the question of beauty and aesthetic judgment. In his *Critique of Judgment*, he writes that in judging the work of art he "wish[es] to know if this mere representation of the object is accompanied in [him] with satisfaction, however indifferent [he] may be as regards the existence of the object of his representation" (47). By saying so, he does not credit the work of art with any other feature that aesthetic value. He gives an example of someone asking him whether he likes the palace in front of which he is standing. Kant offers various answers to the question, yet not a single one

addresses the idea of beauty, but instead points out at the purpose of the building or at the vanity of the aristocrats who made the common people work on the palace (47). However, he consequently rejects all those answers as having nothing to do with the idea of aesthetic judgment. In this regard, he lays foundations for the theoretical principles of Aestheticism.

The Romantic idea about the autonomous nature of the work of art and Kant's notion of aesthetic judgment were first appropriated in France by French artists who were disillusioned by the general tendency of the middle classes to adhere to narrow-mindedness and moralization in their evaluation of art which they combined with the philosophy of utilitarianism. In the late 1820s and throughout the 1830s, the political climate in France was that of deep conservatism—the French Revolution was defeated, the Great Emperor imprisoned on Saint Helena, and the Bourbon kings restored. To prevent another attempt to create a liberal state where everyone would be granted same rights as the others, France became associated with the Holy Alliance—a military pact of Austria, Russia, and Prussia, whose chief aim basically was to prevent democracy, republicanism, and secularism in Europe and maintain the post-Napoleonic *status quo* instead. This conservatism was not only present in the official state policy, but also in society, where the rising middle class became a pillar of the new conservative regime, and thus promoted conservative ideas even in the sphere of the arts.

In his preface to his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), which is by many scholars seen as manifesto of art for art's sake and Aestheticism per se,[8] Théophile Gautier caustically criticizes the bourgeoisie and their moralizing and utilitarian

[8] Many scholars attribute Gautier with the coinage of the phrase "*l'art pour l'art*," however, he was just the first one who adopted this phrase to describe his version of aesthetics. The author of the phrase is Victor Cousin, a French philosopher known for its reforms of French system of education, translations of Plato, and deep knowledge of Descartes' works (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

approaches to art. He speaks of the post-Napoleonic years as a period of "rehabilitation of virtue undertaken by all the parts of statues, or the condemnation of certain novels and plays in the newspapers journals of every hue, red, green, or tri-coloured" (9). He gives various examples of preserving the decorum in arts, such as carved wine leafs on statues, whose purpose is to conceal the intimate parts due to their supposed immorality. In his extremely witty and satiric preface, Gautier masterfully points out the hypocrisy of the middle classes who, on the one hand, condemns new art as immoral and look up to the old masters, such as Molière,[9] and yet on the other frequent theaters and buy "immoral" books, whose reviews they read in the conservative papers and magazines in large quantity.

Apart from his biting critique of the hypocrisy of the middle class and of the media, his preface is more important for its theoretical ideas which lay the foundations of Aestheticism. Among other, Gautier writes that "[s]ome one has said somewhere that literature and the arts influence morals. Whoever he was, he was undoubtedly a great fool" (26). According to Gautier then, art has no moral or educational value or purpose. He admits that "[n]othing that is beautiful is indispensable to life" (30), but he instantly adds that he would "rather give up potatoes than roses, and . . . [that] there is none but an utilitarian in the world capable of pulling up a bed of tulips in order to plant cabbage therein" (30). In this statement, he asserts the ultimate importance of art in the life of a human being. Gautier is also the first one offering a preliminary portrait of an aesthete:

> I am one of those to whom superfluity is a necessity—and I like things and persons in an inverse ratio to the services that they render me. I prefer a Chinese vase, strewn with dragons and mandarins, and of no use to me whatever, to a certain utensil which is of service to me,

[9] In Molière's plays, Gautier believes that "virtue is always disgraced and trashed" (Preface 17).

> and of my talents the one I esteem the most is my incapacity for guessing logogriphs and charades. (31)

Furthermore, "[i]t appears to me that the most fitting occupation for a civilised man is to do nothing, or to smoke analytically his pipe or cigar" (31). Gautier contrasts this aesthetically cultivated ideal of a person with the mundane and ordinary men in the witty and bitterly sarcastic style he maintains throughout the whole preface: "I know that there are some who prefer mills to churches, and bread for the body to that of the soul. To such I have nothing to say. They deserve to be economists in this world and also in the next" (30). It may appear almost unreal that Gautier presents the same ideas and opinions that Oscar Wilde would propose in the 1880s and 1890s as early as 1835.[10]

Apart from Théophile Gautier, the ideas and philosophy of Aestheticism in France were also proposed by Charles Baudelaire. The author of *Les Fleurs du mal*, now regarded as one of the greatest poets not only of French literature, but of Western literature in general, was at the time of the publication of his most famous poetry collection perceived as base, low and vulgar, because he dared to challenge the conservative middle-class ideas about aesthetics and beauty. In his aesthetic philosophy, Baudelaire was greatly influenced by Anglophone literature, more specifically by his knowledge of works of Edgar Allan Poe whom he translated into French. In his essay called "The Poetic Principle" (1850), Poe disregards the general idea that poetry should instruct and depict truth. He writes that "under the sun there neither exist nor *can* exist any work . . . than this very poem—this poem *per se*—this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem's sake" (1, italics original).

[10] On the other hand, this fact nicely points out that Wilde and his ideas were far from being original; that Wilde was, in fact, a "supreme anthologizer or, to put it less euphemistically, the century's most famous plagiarist"(Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture* 7), as one critic has aptly written.

Although Aestheticism is originally a Continental movement, it would probably not exist in its actual form without the collaboration of French and Anglophone literary tradition. Baudelaire highly esteemed Poe and his ideas about poetry, and he appropriated Poe's thoughts into his own oeuvre.

Baudelaire's version of Aestheticism is different from the British Aestheticism proposed by Walter Pater which emphasizes spiritual sensations and in that sense comes closer to the innocent and naïve English Romanticism of the Lake Poets. In his poems from *Les Fleurs du mal*, Baudelaire often veers toward the ugly, the uncomfortable, the depressive, or, on the other hand, toward the sensual and the erotic, which was unacceptable for the middle-class philistine[11] readers of the time. His style is therefore not just "aesthetic," but also heading into another domain—that of the Decadence. As Th. Gautier writes in his "Notice" to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1868),

> [l]e poëte [sic] des *Fleurs du mal* aimait ce qu'on appelle improprement le style de décadence, et qui n'est autre chose que l'art arrivé à ce point de maturité extrême que déterminent à leurs soleils obliques les civilisations qui vieillissent : style ingénieux, compliqué, savant, plein de nuances et de recherches, reculant toujours les bornes de la langue, empruntant à tous les vocabulaires techniques, prenant des couleurs à toutes les palettes, des notes à tous les claviers, s'efforçant à rendre la pensée dans ce qu'elle a de plus ineffable, et la forme en ses contours les plus vague et les plus fuyants, écoutant pour les traduire les confidences subtiles de la névrose, les aveux de la passion vieillissante qui se déprave et les hallucinations bizarres de l'idée fixe tournant à la folie. (17)

In this very long and elaborate sentence, Gautier defines Baudelaire's style as decadent (even though he would clearly prefer more suitable word) and for the first time

[11] In the nineteenth century, the term "philistine" denotes a narrow-minded person, ignorant of culture and aesthetic appreciation because of his/her emphasis on materialism and conventional moralism. In the English context, the first usage of this term is associated with Matthew Arnold, who adapted it from the German word "Philister," describing a person lacking university education.

gives a clear definition of the style of poetry which will come to a broader focus in Britain (and in other European countries) only in the 1890s.[12] Apart from describing Baudelaire's poetry as decadent, he also reinforces the notion of Baudelaire as one of the representatives of Aestheticism, alongside himself:

> Baudelaire avait en parfaite horreur les philanthropes, les progressistes, les utilitaires, les humanitaires, les utopistes et tous ceux qui prétendent changer quelque chose à l'invariable nature et à l'agencement fatal des sociétés.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Avec ses idées, on pense bien que Baudelaire était pour l'autonomie absolue de l'art et qu'il n'admettait pas que la poésie eût d'autre but qu'elle-même et d'autre mission à remplir que d'exciter dans l'âme du lecteur la sensation du beau, dans le sens absolu du terme. (19, 21)

By doing that, he enables Aestheticism to gain a stable and dominant position in French literature of the time which indisputably helped in the dissemination of art for art's sake philosophy across the English Chanel.[13]

2.3. Aestheticism in Britain: Swinburne, Pater, Wilde

Baudelaire's decadent Aestheticism was introduced to England mainly by Algernon Charles Swinburne—a person to whom Wilde was supposed to refer as

[12] As Johnson writes, "[t]he Decadence often denotes the nineties . . . and also refers to the lives, as well as the work, of some poets and artists who flourished—if that is the word—in the nineties" (47-8), such as Oscar Wilde, Ernest Downson, and Aubrey Beardsley. Similarly, in Czech context, the poets of the Decadence started to appear predominantly in the 1890s, the period often referred to as *fin de siècle*—e.g. Jiří Karasek ze Lvovic, Antonín Procházka.

[13] It is important to realize that even though Aestheticism and the idea of art for art's sake first appeared in France, their development on the British Isles does not mirror the development in France. With Pater, Symonds, Whistler, James, and others, the Anglo-American version of Aestheticism became an independent and self-contained movement. Whereas in France the ideas voiced by Gautier paved the way for Parnassianism and Symbolism, thus actually creating a split, rather than a unified whole, in Britain Aestheticism dominated the artistic sphere until the early 1900s, partly also due to the fact that it is able to encompass various artists and various ideas into its broad definition.

"braggart in matters of vice, who had done everything he could to convince his fellow citizens of his homosexuality and bestiality without being in the slightest degree a homosexual or a bestialiser" (*A. C. Swinburne: Biography*). Even though he may not have been so decadent, Swinburne certainly was a very controversial figure for the Victorian society and its morals. With his obscure themes of death, pain, and suffering (often connected with masochistic delight), neo-paganism, and lesbianism (cf. *Faustine*), he held a mirror to the Victorian hypocritical society, who pretended that no such things exists, in a similar manner as did Baudelaire to the French society in France.[14] Even though by most of the contemporary readers Swinburne's poetry was perceived as foreign and deviant from the English tradition, Swinburne himself maintained a close connection with the Romantic generation of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and especially Blake. As R. V. Johnson writes, in his study of William Blake, Swinburne took great efforts to "[represent] Blake as a votary of art for art's sake" (60). Blake is concerned with the beauty of the art, and he would probably detest the Victorian moral attitude toward art, yet his stance toward art and beauty is closely related to his philosophical ideas and prophetic visions (cf. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*), and not solely focused on the work of art as an object entirely devoid of any significance save for its beauty and pleasing effects upon the viewer or, in case of literature, reader. In this sense, the relationship of the members of Aestheticism to the Romanticists is rather problematic, and does not reflect the differences fully:

> [t]he contrast between Blake and the aesthetes enforces the point that 'art for art's sake,' as proclaimed in the nineteenth century, implied this exclusive view of the aesthetic, as

[14] For instance, in *Dolores (Notre-Dame de Sept Douleurs)* he associates the figure of the Holy Virgin with a cruel and sensual pagan mother-goddess, who enjoys masochistic pleasure: "I could hurt thee—but pain would delight thee" (405). His decadent style is also apparent from the very beginning of the poem: Cold eyelids that hide like a jewel / Hard eyes that grow soft for an hour / The heavy white limbs, and the cruel / Red mouth like a venomous flower (1-4).

> something discontinuous with the rest of life. This is the view that Swinburne urges in William Blake. (Johnson 61)

It is apparent that Swinburne in his theoretical view of art and beauty has to rely on the formalist aspect of the work of art. In this regard, we touch upon the basic problematic issues of Aesthetic theory—if the work of art has not any meaning outside its own sphere of beauty, then its form must gain extreme prominence. The subject-matter is unimportant, since it does not serve any purpose—it does not convey any message. But are there some forms to be preferred, i.e., those which are more aesthetically pleasing, or are all forms considered beautiful in the same way?

Despite Swinburne's close connection to the French origins of Aestheticism, the Decadence did not dominate the British literary field until the 1890s. In the meantime, British Aestheticism was, compared to its French counterpart, more restrained. Matthew Arnold, a poet and a literary critic, presented his ideas about the continuous struggle between two dominant philosophies controlling human mind and behavior, i.e., Hebraism and Hellenism, in his *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), advocating the principles of Hellenism which are able to overcome the rigid and moralistic philistinism of the society stemming from the enormous influence of Hebraism since the prevalence of Christianity in the West. However, his tone was far from the caustic sarcastic tone of Gautier's Preface; in fact, Arnold offered his ideas in elaborately thought essays, entirely devoid of any direct attack that would qualify him as "an enemy of the people."

Expressing thoughts about art and beauty in elaborately written essays also applies to Walter H. Pater, the father of British Aestheticism who voiced his ideas about the beauty and the art in his famous essay collection on Renaissance art called *Studies in*

the History of the Renaissance (1873).[15] To give a few examples, his essays are devoted to the study of Botticelli, Michelangelo's poetry, Leonardo Da Vinci, and also to the German philosopher and modern founder of art history and archaeology Johann Joachim Winckelmann among others. The most valuable parts of the collection in terms of Pater's theoretical approach to art and poetry are, however, the Preface and the Conclusion, the latter causing quite an uproar after its publication and casting Pater temporarily on the list of enemies of the Victorian society.[16]

Since Aestheticism, and aesthetics in general, revolves around beauty and its nature, Pater as many others before him starts with the impossible task of defining beauty. Nonetheless, he differs from the most in that he offers a definition of beauty from the end: "[t]o define beauty not in the most abstract, but in the most concrete terms possible, not to find a universal formula for it, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it, is the aim of the true student of aesthetics" (Preface to *The Renaissance*, vii). Instead of the seemingly logical searching for some universal truths about what beauty consists of, Pater "virtually refuse[s] . . . to define beauty at all" (Johnson 3), since "[b]eauty, like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative" (Preface vii). And because of this relativity, the beauty of the work of art is dependent on each observer and the realization of his or her impressions of pleasure which are produced by the object (Preface viii).

The main issue with Pater's approach to beauty is, however, that those experienced impressions are (1) highly unstable, (2) products of a certain condition of

[15] The second and later editions of this collection of essays bear the title *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*.

[16] The ideas presented in the Conclusion to the Renaissance were seen by the critics and the general public as encouraging immoral hedonism, and this critique eventually led Pater to withdraw the Conclusion from the second edition of the essay collection and restore it in the subsequent editions in a revised and censored form.

our spirit in a certain given time, and (3) are in "perpetual flight" (Conclusion to *The Renaissance* 209). The task of an aesthete is, then, to maintain a constant vigilance of the senses—in Pater's words "[t]o burn always with the hard gem-like flame . . . [to expand] that interval [of acute perception] in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time (Conclusion 210, 212)—since this is the only way in which one is able to overcome the vulgar and the ordinary, and elevate one's self into the high sphere of the arts and profit from its impressions on human soul and spirit.

The ideas of this philosophical, or contemplative Paterian version of Aestheticism were flourishing throughout the 1860s and 1880s in the works of many contemporary artists, especially painters and sculptors; for instance, the American painter James McNeill Whistler. Since the late 1880s, however, this contemplative Aestheticism was slowly being replaced by until then marginal movement of Decadence (cf. the solitary position of Swinburne and his radical poetry in the 1860s). As one critic aptly put it, both

> Aestheticism and Decadence have a similar genealogy, and both are descendants of nineteenth-century art's struggle to free itself from moral constraints. [However,] Aestheticism is, metaphorically, the pubescent child who refuses to go to church in order to read Walter Pater and sneak a cigarette. Decadence is [on the other hand] the adolescent fully ensconced in his fuck-off phase, intrigued by Baudelaire and the darker side of Catholic ritual, smoking something stronger than cigarettes in the narthex. (Mendelssohn, "Aestheticism and Decadence" 96)

Even though there were decadent poets and artists before, there needed to be a preliminary phase of "pure and innocent" Aestheticism before the "morally relaxed, sexual, violent, esoteric, morbid, perverse, artificial, hyper-refined and exotic" (Mendelssohn 95) Decadence could prevail. And once the Decadence prevailed over

Paterian innocent Aestheticism, the Aesthetic Movement in Britain slowly reached its zenith, embodied in the literary and artistic figure dominating the 1890s—Oscar Wilde.

If one had to choose an epithet which would describe Wilde perfectly, it would be controversial. On the one hand, extremely successful playwright, whose comedies were sold out and appreciated by the Victorian audience for their sarcasm and wit; on the other, a comical, flamboyant, and for some also disturbing figure—a dandy, "the self-proclaimed apostle of Aestheticism" (Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture* 1), criticizing his own audience of philistinism and hypocrisy. The resolution of this disparate image came in the infamous trial for "gross indecency," where the second "deviant and dangerous" personae of Wilde prevailed, causing him never to regain his previous social position. In 1900, shortly after his release from prison, Wilde dies in Paris and his death symbolically marks the end of Aestheticism.

Similar to Pater, and consequently to Gautier, Wilde was opposed to the idea that art should instruct and have any moral value. In his Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he wrote that "[t]here is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all." His adherence to the principles of Aestheticism was not what was problematic or disturbing about him; when he came to the artistic world, Aestheticism and its principles were fairly grounded in the minds of the general public. However, in case of Wilde, there accumulated a quite a few objections which labeled him as potentially dangerous and immoral. First, it was the fact that apart from being merely a representative of Aestheticism in Paterian sense of the term, in his work (especially in *The Picture*) he combined the contemplative, and basically harmless, form of Aestheticism with Decadence, almost openly on the verge of depicting "the love that dare not speak its name," and threw it to the public.

Second, it was his personality which took delight in provoking the supposedly lethargic public to react to his dandyism, or in other words his aesthetic posing. Unlike Charles Algernon Swinburne who merely tried to provoke the public by his bizarre and hedonistic imagery expressed in his poetry, Wilde was a public figure, even a celebrity, and provoked not only by his literary works, but also by his eccentric behavior. And because he was a public figure, it was essentially harder to "tolerate" his excesses, namely his homosexuality, [17] as it was possible in case of Pater.

Nonetheless, even though there may be some grain of truth in it, to view the infamous trial of 1895 simply as an allegory of the Philistines doing away with Aestheticism would be a huge oversimplification. Rather, it had to do with the 1890s crisis of masculinity, where the traditional homosocial bonding prescribed and maintained throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century (i.e., male friendships from public schools, universities, associations with clubs, etc.) became highly unstable and at odds with the "new self-consciousness of men who desired other men" (Dellamora 193).[18] Furthermore, the ideas of Aestheticism about beauty and art were at that time nothing new and as such were even accepted by many members of the society who visited museums and galleries, among whom Grosvenor Gallery had a reputation of being "Temple of Aestheticism" (Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture* 3). Finally, one year before Oscar Wilde's trial, in 1894, Walter Pater—the chief priest of Aestheticism, the father of the Aesthetes—dies; his death together with Wilde's fall thus aptly marks the end of Aestheticism and its gradual transformation, among others with the help of Henry James, into Anglo-American Modernism.

[17] Apart from Wilde, a similar homosexual scandal erupted in case of John Addington Symonds who was also a proponent of homosexual love. However, unlike Wilde, when his marriage dissolved, he retreated to France in order to escape the public humiliation (Freedman 172).
[18] For an exhaustive analysis of the 1890s with regard to Oscar Wilde's trial, homosexuality, and heteronormativity, see Dellamora Ch. 10.

Wilde's ideas concerning art, beauty, and criticism are most clearly articulated in his *Intentions* (1891)—a collection of essays including, among others, "The Decay of Lying," and "The Critic as Artist." These two essays are composed in dialog, thus resembling Plato's writings; however, their tone is far from serious when compared to Plato. Although seemingly light-hearted, such as in stating that the English public "forgives everything except genius" ("The Critic as Artist" 95), under the rather badly fitting mask of carelessness one can see the existential *ennui* and the fear of banality for which *objects d'art* serve as a remedy. Basically, all world is corrupt and shallow and, therefore, one must turn to art, since it is the only thing capable of overcoming the banality and superficiality of our everyday lives:

> life is chaos . . . its martyrdoms are mean and its heroisms ignoble [and] it is the function of Literature to create, from the rough material of actual existence, a new world that will be more marvellous, more enduring, and more true than the world that common eyes look upon, and through which common natures seek to realise their perfection (136)

In this sense, Wilde brings Aestheticism to its extreme form, voicing the idea that life should imitate art and not vice versa. He is not satisfied with Paterian keen perception and realization of one's "impulses" which enlightens the soul, but attempts to give one's aesthetic experience absolute prevalence in life, thus assigning it a role it is not and never will be capable of fulfilling. And precisely at this moment Aestheticism becomes to fade until it fully vanishes with Wilde's death.

2.4. Henry James and Aestheticism: Wilde, Theater & the Aesthete

James firstly became acquainted with the cultural milieu of England and its intellectual and artistic debates during his stay in London during the 1870s. At that time,

Aestheticism was at its heyday, Pater's *Renaissance* was already circulating among the middle and upper-class readers, and a persona of Oscar Wilde slowly started to attract attention. Therefore, it is apparent that James did not live in a personal vacuum, but rather participated in and reacted to the prevalent trends of contemporary aesthetic philosophy. Similar to Wilde, James was a disciple of Walter Pater and his philosophy of recognition of beauty in the work of art as the supreme experience one can attain. James's early works are thus full of the struggle for the ultimate vision of beauty that would be pure and innocent. On the other hand, Wilde's rendition of Pater's highly sophisticated thoughts and ideas about aesthetic vision is shallow and superficial—as one critic aptly put it, Pater's ideas are "transformed . . . into an endless chain of sensual desire climaxing in the Gothic horror of Dorian Gray's fate" (Freedman 172). The difference of James's and Wilde's attitude toward Pater is only one of the many differences between James and Wilde.

Even though the Aesthetic Movement comprised of many influential artists, writers, and philosophers, there is a consensus among critics to explore James's relationship with Aestheticism through the lens of his personal relationship with Oscar Wilde. Although superficial at first sight, namely by neglecting other important personages who were from the theoretical perspective far more important than Wilde, and by transforming Wilde into a sole monolithic embodiment of Aestheticism—a thing which despite Wilde's enormous popularity is dangerously close to aberration, it is, nevertheless, the best framework in which we can identify concrete issues and problems arising from the incompatibility of Jamesian and Wildean Aestheticism.

The first issue that comes to mind when tracing the relationship between James and Wilde is deeply personal. Until recently, many influential critics, such as Richard

Ellman, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and others, thought of their mutual animosity animosity as stemming from James's sexual panic concerning the problematic question of his sexual orientation. Because of Wilde's flamboyant and carefree attitude toward his homosexuality in friendly circles, they assumed that Wilde posed a threat for James that had to do with James's internalized homophobia. As Richard Ellman writes in his biography of Oscar Wilde, "James's homosexuality was latent, Wilde was patent" (170-1). However, this argument is refuted by modern scholarship which points out James's unproblematic friendships with other gay men, such as Robert Ross, Wilde's literary executor and first male lover (Freedman 171; Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture* 7). Instead of solely relying on sexual panic and homosexuality in their analysis of Wilde and James's relationship, younger generation critics tend to analyze their differences in terms of their attitude toward the Aesthetic Movement and its philosophy.[19]

Coming from their differences concerning Pater's philosophy is their attitude toward culture in general. James believed in high culture that should refine the senses and give pleasing impulses, whereas Wilde was deeply rooted in popular culture where books and plays (and basically any works of art) are to be consumed by the public, thus creating a financial profit for the author. This statement does not rule out James's concern about financial profitability of his works, but it seems that Wilde, in contrast to James, knew better how to please his audience. For James, whose theatrical attempts were total fiasco,[20] this was a hard pill to swallow, and he understandably held grudge

[19] Although heavy reliance on James's sexual orientation is certainly limiting in analyzing his relationship with Oscar Wilde, I would not go that far as to suggest that it is unimportant. It is true that at the end of his life, James came to terms with his homosexuality; nonetheless, he was never able to fully disclose the fact that he prefers men. Therefore I feel that James' and Wilde's sexual orientation must have played some role in their relationship, and, as such, cannot be so easily dismissed.

[20] Cf. the premiere of *Guy Domville* (1895) which ended in booing while James was bowing to the audience at the end of the play.

against Wilde: "[e]verything Oscar does is a deliberate trap for the literalist [i.e., person able to recognize high art], and to see the literalist walk straight up to it, look straight at it and step straight into it, makes one freshly avert a discouraged gaze from this unspeakable animal" (*Letters* 3, 372-3).

Hand in hand with James's approaches to higher culture goes the fact that in terms of literary culture he thought himself and his work superior to Wilde and his literary products.[21] This stance is not only perceivable in James's own lamentations concerning his failure on the theatrical scene,[22] but also in critical observations: "James's [audience] is composed of the true *cognoscenti*, an elite that ratifies its status by its *enjoyment* of the complexity, the subtlety, the interpretive intransigence, of James's dramatic art" (Freedman 175; italics mine). But even if there were such *cognoscenti* of high drama, there were only a few, which does not allow the play to run for a substantial period of time, let even turn it into a commercial success. It is therefore highly appropriate that James's strength as an artist lie in his novelistic oeuvre which is unquestionably more suited to capture "the complexity, the subtlety, the interpretive intransigence" (Freedman 175) and to mediate them to highly sophisticated readers. James's fiction is precisely the place where his complex relationship with Aestheticism is most clearly to be seen.

James's preoccupation with principles of Aestheticism appears as early in his literary career as 1875, when *Roderick Hudson*, James's first novel universally considered as canonical, was published. Essentially a bildungsroman, the novel concerns

[21] I purposely use the word "products" to stress their exchange value as commodities.
[22] Cf. a passage from his letters concerning one of his play that was staged in London: "[a]nd there was a Wednesday matinee last week as well as Saturday, and every *raffiné* in London (I mean of course only the people who *don't* go to the usual things) has been to see it, yet it doesn't 'go'!" (*Letters* 3, 517; italics original).

the coming of age of the eponymous protagonist, young and extremely talented sculptor who is transplanted from New England puritanical milieu to culturally thriving Italy so that he may grow professionally. However, as he comes closer to the artistic circles, he is unable to resist the temptations of Bohemian life and, despite his friends and family's attempts to bring him back to his stool and chisel, never fully overcomes the temptations and dies at the end of the novel.

From *Roderick Hudson* onwards, Aestheticism, often in the characters of aesthetes, appears in many James's early novels, fully culminating in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), which I will examine in the following chapter. Be it Morris Townsend, Christopher Newman, Felix Young, or Gilbert Osmond, they all share some of the characteristics of an aesthete and embody what James thought as problematic characteristics of Aestheticism. So do Gabriel Nash and Mark Ambient from James's middle phase, even though he concentrated more on shorter fiction (his "tales") and development of other themes, such as radicalism and anarchism, as in the case of *The Bostonians* (1886) and *The Princess Casamassima* (again 1886).

The appearance of Aestheticism and aesthetes once again culminates in James's later or "major phase," to use the title of F. O. Matthiessen's study, beginning with *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and ending with *The Golden Bowl* (1904). Of the major phase, I will discuss and analyze the latter novel to support the central argument of this thesis, i.e., James's ambiguous stance toward Aestheticism and Decadence.

In the following chapters, I will attempt to show that even though James's approach to Aestheticism has evolved from the initial highly critical examination through the lenses of morality, as in the case of *The Portrait of a Lady,* where Aestheticism is repeatedly used and abused, this evolution does not head toward a concrete and ultimate

stance, but rather to a certain obscurity. Although it may seem that James's eventually endorses the principles of Aestheticism in *The Golden Bowl*; when carefully examined, the novel turns out to be full of deliberate contradictions that ultimately lead only to one possible interpretation—James's ambiguity toward Aestheticism and Decadence.

3. *The Portrait of a Lady*: Aestheticism and Morality

> "Some day you must know him. I'll bring you together and then you'll see what I mean. He's Gilbert Osmond—he lives in Italy; that's all one can say about him or make of him. He's exceedingly clever, a man made to be distinguished; but as I tell you, you exhaust the description when you say he's Mr. Osmond who lives *tout bêtement* in Italy. No career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no anything. Oh yes, he paints, if you please—paints in water-colours; like me, only better than I."
>
> — Madame Merle to Isabel about her old friend Gilbert Osmond

> "Don't you remember my telling you that one ought to make one's life a work of art?"
>
> — Gilbert Osmond to Isabel during his courtship

First published in 1881, at the height of Aesthetic craze, *The Portrait of a Lady* was one of the first literary works that approached Aestheticism from the standpoint of ethics and morality. Although the Philistine middle class conventionally regarded Aestheticism as an aberration, utterly disregarding propriety and decorum while promoting deviant, perverse, and immoral behavior (cf. Swinburne's poetry, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*), James was far from taking the same condescending stance of the middle classes toward Aestheticism, even though he may have felt personally threatened by some of its proponents (cf. his homosexuality briefly discussed in Chapter 1). It would be a flagrant misreading to see *The Portrait* as an example of a castigation against Aestheticism from the point of morality, even though given the unequivocally complex structure and style of the novel, such interpretations may seem possible after a

negligent reading.[1] The point James wanted point out was the fact that the doctrine of art for art's sake is not in contradiction to morality or ethics per se, but that the immorality often associated with aestheticism lies in its abuse in order to achieve one's personal goals. Hence, aestheticism becomes especially an immensely powerful tool in the hands of those who are merely hiding their malignant nature behind the charming aesthetic pose. Such is, of course, the case of Gilbert Osmond and, initially, of Serena Merle too; both of them using (and abusing) aestheticism to improve their social and economic status at the expense of other people, whom they are consequently treating as inanimate *objects d'art*. What James wants to demur and censure in the novel is the egregious paradox created by such (ab)use of aestheticism, for aestheticism, among other things, originated as a reaction to the philosophy of utilitarianism pervading the sphere of the arts.

In his critique, James discerns two "types" of aestheticism—the naïve, romantic, and idealistic aestheticism originating in the ideas of Walter Pater, represented by Isabel Archer; and the decadent, perverse, and self-contained aestheticism that would mostly come to prominence in the 1890s, represented by Osmond, and, to some extent, by Madame Merle. Apart from the apparent criticism of Osmondian decadent aestheticism, which is attacked on the grounds of it being a mere inauthentic pose, James does not have much mercy with Paterian aestheticism as well. Although clearly not opposed to it (Isabel is, after all, the protagonist and the central consciousness of the novel), he feels

[1] Although still written predominantly in the realist mode of the late nineteenth-century fiction, the style of the novel and the narrator's voice become more involved than it were in, say, *Roderick Hudson* or *The Europeans*. The complex sentences elongate, narrator's comments become more frequent, and there seems to be the tendency for the reader to penetrate the layer of the narrative, obfuscated by the rich vocabulary, in order to get to the core of the story. Furthermore, there is also an instance of an interior monolog that comes closely to resemble the Modernist stream of consciousness (Ch. XLII)—term coined by James's older brother and a famous psychologist William James. Even though James's style in *The Portrait* is unequivocally less complex than the style of *The Wings of the Dove* or *The Golden Bowl*, the novel still does not constitute an easy read.

obliged to point out its susceptibility to fall prey to itself when abused by morally flawed people. Precisely this fact is the most disturbing issue of the novel; the moral void created by the inability of aestheticism to defend against itself when used by others as a tool to accomplish certain goals. In this regard, aestheticism becomes simultaneously an enemy to itself and a means of its own destruction.

3.1. Isabel Archer: Victim of Aestheticism?

When Mrs. Touchett meets her niece Isabel Archer for the first time, their meeting takes place in an old "large square double house, with a notice of sale in the windows of one of the lower apartments" (31), where Isabel sits in an "office," a dark and small room behind the library, with a book in her hands. The narrator tells us some facts concerning Isabel's education that "was really laid in the idleness of her grandmother's house, where, as most of the other inmates were not reading people, she had uncontrolled use of a library full of books with frontispieces" (33). This uncontrolled access to the library, combined with the "worldly" education of her father, who took his three little daughters repeatedly across the Atlantic to get to know the world, formed Isabel's personality more than that of her two sisters': "'Isabel's written in a foreign tongue. I can't make her out'" (38), her brother-in-law says about her. It is this curious amalgamation of self-taught[2] naïve and romantic Emersonianism, combined with the remnants of American Puritanism that makes on the one hand Isabel socially awkward in her native land, but on the other an ideal disciple of European Aestheticism that she quickly appropriates once she crosses the Atlantic.

[2] Cf. "[h]er thoughts were a tangle of vague outlines which had never been corrected by the judgement of people speaking with authority" (53) or "Isabel Archer was a young person of many theories; her imagination was remarkably active" (52).

When she arrives at Gardencourt, she is eager to know everything and everyone. After the period of dwelling in a dark house across the ocean, Isabel now appears in full light, enchanted by the environment she is transplanted in and by the people she meets there.[3] Compared to America, she can act more freely, since in Europe, she is no longer "written in a foreign tongue" (38), and as such she is not regarded as the socially-awkward girl, whose "reputation of reading a great deal hang[s] about her like the cloudy envelope of a goddess in epic" (41), but as a charming young lady, whose independence and quest for knowledge does not pose a threat to her potential suitors; in other words, she is valued precisely for the things she was feared in America.[4]

Isabel's nature is composed of two principles: a strong sense of her personal independence and her unquenchable thirst for further knowledge. While the former can be attributed to her Puritan origins,[5] the latter, "the naïvely egotistic American quest" (Van Ghent 680), is more associated with the teachings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The American Renaissance and Transcendentalism are basically American renditions of European Romanticism, and as such they share common grounds with Aestheticism which also derives partly from Romanticism.[6] Therefore, in Isabel James created a character who has crossed national borders and blended Puritanism and aestheticism, two seemingly incompatible doctrines. And exactly this fact is what makes Isabel's fate more tragic, since in Osmond's world order there is no place for American notion of freedom. As he says in a conversation with Madame Merle, Isabel "'has only one fault .

[3] In this regard, Isabel reminds of another Jamesian heroine—Daisy Miller. However, Isabel is far from frivolous, and even though inexperienced in the same way as Daisy, she is older and has more propriety for decorum.
[4] There is one exception, namely the character of Caspar Goodwood. However, as I will argue later, even he subconsciously tries to possess her, and thus deprive her of her independence.
[5] The Puritans went to America primarily to achieve religious freedom.
[6] As R. V. Johnson writes, "[i]n the Victorian age itself, aestheticism was seen as originating in the Romantic period" (35).

. . [t]oo many ideas . . . [f]ortunately, they're very bad ones'" (244). However, as Michael Gora rightly noted, they must be sacrificed primarily "[n]ot because they are bad, but because they are hers" (140)—according to him, in marriage they both must act as one body, one unity, the head being Osmond, of course.

Unlike Osmond, who just assumes the role of an aesthete because it provides him with a suitable air of distinction in his pathetic insignificance, but deep down remains hollow, craving for personal importance and conventional life of the mighty, Isabel is a genuine disciple of Paterian aestheticism. By an act of Providence, she is brought from her dark ancestral house to the Old World where she is able to put Pater's philosophy into practice. We see her constantly appreciating a variety of things and objects, be it Gardencourt, Touchetts' English residence; the collection of paintings at Lockleigh—the ancestral home of Lord Warburton; or the beauty of Florence and Rome, where she "number[s] her *pulsations* as she [crosses] the threshold of Saint Peter's" (245; italics mine). However, she is very well aware of the fact that once she succumbs to marriage, her freedom to aesthetically appreciate beauty would be lost forever; in other words, she will become the possession of her husband. This is the reason of her refusing both Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton. As she says to the latter, "I can't escape my fate . . . I should try to escape it if I were to marry you (118).

The fate Isabel thinks she would escape by marrying is to get to know and experience the Paterian "pulsations" and acute perception of beauty as much as possible—"to drain the cup of experience," (134) as Ralph says, which is eventually allowed to her because of the inheritance from her uncle Daniel Touchett. The idea of bequeathing Isabel a considerable sum of money, seventy thousand pounds to be precise, is, however, not her uncle's, but her cousin Ralph's, who, as he says, "should like to put

a little wind in her sails" (160). By convincing his father, Ralph inadvertently becomes an instigator of Isabel's fate the same ways Gilbert Osmond will become later in the course of the novel. In this sense, Ralph, unfortunately, constitutes an example of the abuse of aestheticism; as one critic rightly noted, in the character of Ralph we can see the "endemic—indeed epidemic—contagion" (Freedman 153) of aestheticism in Europe. Similarly, R. P. Blackmur also realized that the black and white world the novel presents at a superficial level of reading is not valid: "everyone tampers with Isabel, and it is hard to say whether her cousin Ralph Touchett, who had arranged the bequest, or the Prince, Gilbert Osmond, who marries her because of it, tampers the more deeply" (qtd. in Freedman 153). Consequently, Isabel falls victim not only to Osmondian inauthentic and utilitarian aestheticism, but also to aestheticism epitomized by Ralph Touchett, for he too, though unwittingly, abuses aestheticism in that he endows aestheticism with a utilitarian function that is able to produce profound and irreversible changes in Isabel's life. As one critic said, "the differences between Gilbert Osmond and Ralph Touchett are vast, but they are also thin" (Gass 698), for Ralph objectifies Isabel the very same way Gilbert Osmond does. Even though he says that Isabel is "entirely independent of [him]" (160), it is not the case—the statement is only partly true. The fact is that were it not for his devotion to aestheticism, Isabel would not be treated as an *object d'art* either by him or by Osmond; the first projecting his visions of fruitful life on her,[7] and the latter regarding her as one condition among others that need to be fulfilled to achieve his ideal mental picture of total conventionality. The disturbing fact about all of this is, of course, that Isabel is not a work of art, but a human being.[8]

[7] "I shall not live many years; but I hope I shall live long enough to see what she does with herself" (160).
[8] Freedman also writes that by doing all of the above, Ralph "attempts to collect her" (154). In my reading of the novel I would not go that far. One unfortunately (?) cannot deprive Ralph of his aesthetic predilections; however, he does not want to *possess* Isabel, as do others (Osmond, Goodwood). In his treatment of Isabel as an *object d'art*, another metaphor, more fitting, closely describes his relationship to

Isabel has, nevertheless, her own aesthetic visions she projects onto others.[9] In this sense, she too becomes guilty of misusing Aestheticism for her own purposes, and as such she is, at least, partially responsible for her unhappy fate herself. However, the situation is much more complex and convoluted to be reduced to so simple an interpretation; the idea James wants to convey is extremely delicate and subtle. Isabel belongs to the same category of "aesthetes" like Ralph, who are unwittingly misapplying their aesthetic principles, doing it without thinking of any deliberate harm or self-aggrandizement. Therefore, one has to continuously keep this fact in mind when evaluating them and comparing their deeds with the deeds of those willingly abusing Aestheticism for personal gain, as is the case of Serena Merle and Gilbert Osmond.

Gilbert Osmond's aesthetic vision is that of the aesthetic pose; in other words, his aestheticism is far from being authentic—as a matter of fact, it is just a masterfully played part. He is described as an American gentleman, though being more European than American, dwelling in a hilltop villa above Florence, and possessing an exquisite taste. Apart from his taste and a few valuable objects, he has nothing—no money, no social status, simply nothing. Ralph, when pressed by Lord Warburton for a piece of information concerning Osmond, aptly sums up his whole existence: "[h]is name is Gilbert Osmond—he lives in Florence" (253).[10] Unlike other characters, who can see through Osmond's aesthetic pose and discover behind his agreeable façade a shallow and pathetic existence, Isabel is unable to classify his personality, as she is able in the case of

her; Isabel is not a privately owned object, but an object in a gallery or a museum, where everyone can go and see her—the fact that Goodwood and Osmond cannot accept. Ralph, however, does not wish (unlike his rivals) to see her every day, very much in the same fashion as Osmond sees the old clock on the chimney-piece in one of the salons in Palazzo Roccanera, but to go and watch her from time to time.

[9] The most pertinent example of such projection is, of course, Gilbert Osmond himself.

[10] Even Isabel is aware of Osmond's social insignificance; as she says to Caspar Goodwood, "Give me up, Mr. Goodwood; I'm marrying a perfect nonentity" (279).

Warburton or Goodwood; if Warburton is "a specimen of an English gentleman" (65), Osmond "resemble[s] no one she had ever seen . . . he i[s] a specimen apart" (224).

The reason why he is a "specimen apart" needs to be attributed to Isabel's optimistic and unspoiled view of life; he is a "specimen apart" because in Isabel's mind there is yet no category of morally corrupt and malevolent people which Osmond, and subsequently Madame Merle, will eventually come to represent. Hence, Gilbert Osmond does not come to Isabel as an aesthetic sham, but as a person capable of sharing her aesthetic outlook on life.[11] She thinks that by marrying him she would not lose her personal freedom and become an ornament of her husband's household, as she thinks she would by marrying her other former suitors, but that she will gain a friendly companion on her journey to the absolute of aesthetic devotion. In this regard, she objectifies Osmond in the similar way Ralph objectified her before by projecting her ideas onto Osmond's seemingly blank surface. She realizes only too late that Osmond just pretended to give up so that he could eventually defeat her by means of her own weapons. By that time, however, she has already been metaphorically collected and displayed in Osmond's collection of *objects d'art*.

3.2. « J'accuse ! » : Gilbert Osmond and Serena Merle's Deliberate Abuse of Aestheticism

[11] In this sense, *The Portrait* dangerously becomes to resemble Du Maurier's caricatures in *Punch*, in which "libidinal energies are deflected from healthy and normal outlets onto art objects, which are thus worshipped in a perverse and unhealthy manner" (Freedman 149). This view of marriage and family life can be seen in the novel in the brief mention concerning Isabel and Osmond's child which died before reaching the age of one. After this event, there seems to be no sexual relationship between Osmond and Isabel. Apparently, according to James, Aestheticism is not exactly a fruitful ground for procreation. For discussion of sexuality in the novel, see White 59-71.

Although the famous "Letter to the President of the Republic" by Émile Zola was written and published in 1898, therefore more than fifteen years since the initial publication of James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, its title would be extremely fitting as a subtitle to James's novel. Like Zola, who accused the hypocritical French society of framing an innocent artillery officer Alfred Dreyfus, James similarly accuses the abuse of aestheticism in the hands of mere aesthetic poseurs who, feigning their devotion to aestheticism, employ it as an instrument in order to achieve their personal goals at the expense of others, especially genuine votaries of art for art's sake.[12]

Gilbert Osmond, this gentleman living in Italy, is an example of such an aesthetic poseur, or pseudo-aesthete *par excellence*. In his character, James embodied the typical aesthetic characteristics and predilections presented in the canonical texts of Aestheticism, such as Huysman's *À rebours* (1884) and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) (Ascari 44). Osmond is possessive, indolent, prefers passivity to activity, and "all things decaying to those robust and healthy" (Freedman 148).[13] Unlike des Esseintes, the protagonist of *À rebours*, or Lord Henry of *The Picture*, Osmond's goal is not to be one of the numerous petty aesthetes tending to their petty art collections, such as Edward Rosier, but he aims higher: "[t]here were two or three people in the world I envied—the Emperor of Russia, for instance, and the Sultan of Turkey! There were even moments when I envied the Pope of Rome—for the considerations he enjoys" (227). Although he uses the past tense, implicating that he is finally reconciled with his fate of being "poor and . . . not a man of genius" (227), the only one fooled by his words is

[12] In this sense, those aesthetic poseurs become hypocrites to the letter of the original meaning of the word. Υποκριτής (hypocrites) means "one who plays a part," "an actor"; and the word as such is derived from the verb υποκρίνομαι (hypokrinomai) meaning "to play a part," "to pretend." By assuming the aesthetic principles for self-aggrandizement, such pseudo-aesthetes are, in fact, playing a part.
[13] The masterful execution of the aesthetic pose is one of the facts that make it impossible for Isabel to see through his mask and learn about his true nature before she marries him.

Isabel, who unfortunately projects her own aesthetic visions onto Osmond, making herself believe that she has found a companion on her journey to the ultimate aesthetic pleasure and appreciation of beauty. When Ralph, who unmistakably sees through Osmond's artificially constructed façade, warns Isabel of marrying this "sterile dilettante" (292), Isabel abruptly cuts him off:

> [h]e's not important—no, he's not important; he's a man to whom importance is supremely indifferent. If that's what you mean when you call him "small," then he's as small as you please. I call that large—it's the largest thing I know . . . [he] has borne his poverty with such dignity, with such indifference. Mr. Osmond has never scrambled nor struggled—he has cared for *no worldly prize* . . . Mr. Osmond's simply a very lonely, a very cultivated and *very honest* man—he's not a prodigious proprietor. (292-3; italics mine)

Gilbert Osmond may be everything, but with the exception of him not being a "prodigious proprietor," he is none of the above. In reality, Osmond would love to be a convention itself, and when this favor is denied to him, he just assumes the aesthetic pose, because it enables him to conceal his envy under the guise of pseudo-aesthetic indifference to the outer world.[14]

He marries Isabel, or rather her money, in order to become what he always longed to be—a person of considerable wealth, social status, and respectability; "the first gentleman in Europe" (360). Once he accomplishes it, he can discard the aesthetic pose and live the conventional life of the *crème de la crème* that is, nonetheless, completely in opposition to Isabel's Aestheticism; the fact she ruminates over in the famous Chapter XLII:

[14] There is a certain perversity in his striving for the conventional, since the conventional is a synonym to the banal, the ordinary, the mundane; all these terms having under normal conditions negative connotations—repetitions, automatisms, mechanical acts, unoriginality, etc. Osmond brings this aberration even into a higher level, since he uses Aestheticism, whose aim is to experience the genuine and deeply personal aesthetic pleasure, in other words, to strive for originality and authenticity to achieve the state of the conventional. For further discussion, see Holland 709.

> [h]is ideal was a conception of high prosperity and propriety, of the aristocratic life, which she now saw that he deemed himself always, in essence at least, to have led. He had never lapsed from it for an hour; he would never have recovered from the shame of doing so. That again was very well; her too she would have agreed; but they attached such different ideas, such different associations and desires, to the same formulas. Her notion of the aristocratic life was simply the union of great knowledge with great liberty; the knowledge would give one a sense of duty and the liberty a sense of enjoyment. But for Osmond it was altogether a thing of forms, a conscious, calculated attitude . . . [t]here were certain things they must do, a certain posture they must take, certain people they must know and not know. (361)

Nevertheless, maintaining his passive aesthetic pose, Osmond alone is incapable of accomplishing such an involved scheme; his assumed role of an aesthete becomes rather a hindrance, and he may truly seem dilettantish in the sense of his being unable to do the first move. His aesthetic "qualities" will subsequently play a tremendous role, yet at first, Isabel needs to be pushed into his way, and the agent of this action is no one else than Serena Merle, who thus comes to play a prominent role in Isabel's life.

Despite everything that the readers will eventually learn about her in the course of the novel, Madame Merle, as she is unanimously called by other characters, truly is a remarkable character. "Serena Merle hasn't a fault" (169), Mrs. Touchett says to Isabel, and from the image of her personality Madame Merle presents to the public she really has not. In Isabel's (and readers') view, she is a paragon of a great lady: "[t]o be so cultivated and civilised, so wise and so easy, and still make so light of it—that was really to be a great lady" (166); however, there is something sinister lurking behind her pleasing appearance which Isabel rightly notices. She, indeed, has a fault, but her fault is precisely her ability to appear faultless: "she was not natural . . . her nature had been too much overlaid by custom and her angles too much rubbed away. She had become too flexible,

too useful, was too ripe and too final. She was in a word too perfectly the social animal" (167). Some sixty pages later, Ralph comes to a similar conclusion about her:

> [h]er modesty is exaggerated . . . she pushes the search for perfection too far . . . She's too good, too kind, too clever, too learned, too accomplished, too everything. She's too complete in a word. I confess to you that she acts on my nerves and that I feel about her a good deal as intensely human Athenian felt about Aristides the Just. (216)

Since people are naturally not perfect, no one can be such a perfect "social animal" with everything that this term accomplishes. Very early then we are given the impression that something is not quite right with Serena Merle.[15]

For Madame Merle, however, this social pose is the only means of her existence the same way aesthetic pose is initially for Osmond; once deprived of it, she becomes nothing at all, as seen at the end of the novel. As she is relatively indigent when compared to her social acquaintances, she spends most of her time visiting others, offering her flawless manners and sense of propriety and decorum in exchange; as Mrs. Touchett says to Isabel, "'[i]t's a favour to me that she stays; she's putting off a lot of visits at great houses'" (169). Her life thus comprises of "nothing more than the high degree of social competence evinced in her capacity to live entirely at the expense of other people" (Llewellyn Smith 46), or, to put it more bluntly, of parasitizing on others.[16] Unlike Osmond, who pretends to shun the society in his assumed aesthetic pose,[17] Madame

[15] She, from time to time, strengthens this impression herself: "'[i]t's very true; there are many more iron pots certainly than porcelain. But you may depend on in that every one bears some mark; even the hardest iron pots have a little bruise, a little hole somewhere. I flatter myself that I'm rather stout, but if I must tell you the truth I've been shockingly chipped and cracked. I do very well for service yet, because I've been cleverly mended . . . [b]ut when I come out and into a strong light—then, my dear, I'm a horror!'" (168). These words are both ominous and disturbing, since not only they collide with the image she presents to the society, but also appear at the beginning of the novel, where she actually seems morally flawless.

[16] As the Countess Gemini says, "'[n]o one knows, no one has ever known how what she lives on, or how she has got all those beautiful things. I don't believe Osmond himself knows" (453).

[17] He really just pretends, since his obsession with conventionality ultimately depends on the society. As Isabel realizes during her solitary vigil in Chapter XLII, "[h]e was unable to live without it [i.e., the society],

Merle must remain constantly in the limelight (which, given her secret past, may be a little uncomfortable), for there is simply no other viable option. Though a person with a penchant for aestheticism,[18] she turns into a female variation of Osmond because of the limitations of her gender. Even though she is now a widow, and in this sense possessing a certain degree of personal independence, her identity is still based on the identity of her deceased husband, which manifests in her being referred to as Madame Merle virtually by everyone in the novel.[19] In this regard, *The Portrait of a Lady* affirms its position as a realist novel. Her aestheticism thus cannot manifest in the manner of Du Maurier's cartoons, as is the case of her former lover, but turns solely into her treatment of people—in other words, aestheticism in Madame Merle's hands becomes a practical tool for achieving one's needs and goals. As she says to Osmond, "I don't pretend to know what people are meant for . . . I only know what I can do with them" (207).[20] Given the fact that Aestheticism emerged partly in opposition to utilitarianism,[21] her employment of aesthetic principles is thus, like Osmond's, highly paradoxical.

Madame Merle does not want to profit from Isabel primarily herself, but she wants to please Osmond. Though not lovers anymore, they still maintain a close connection, reinforced by their daughter Pansy. In this sense, many critics agree that she has a certain reason for orchestrating Isabel's fate (if it can be put in this

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and she saw he had never really done so; he had looked at it out of his window even when he appeared to be most detached from it" (361).

[18] Cf. the narrator's description of Mme Merle's apartment during Edward Rosier's visit: "Rosier got up and wandered about with knick-knacks and the cushions embossed with princely arms. When Madame Merle came in she found him standing before the fireplace with his nose very close to the great lace flounce attached to the damask cover of the mantel . . . 'It's old Venetian,' she said; 'it's rather good'" (302).

[19] This fact not only undermines her personal independence, but her Americanness as well.

[20] Dorothy Van Ghent ("On the Portrait of a Lady," 1953) rightly spots a connection with Kant's Categorical Imperatives, in this case with his second Categorical Imperative: "[a]ct in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end" (*Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* 30).

[21] See Th. Gautier's "Preface" to *Mademoiselle de Maupin,* of which some parts are quoted in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

straightforwardly), since in Isabel Pansy would get a substitute for Madame Merle, who chose to never acknowledge her maternal ties to her.[22] Nevertheless, the connection is only one-sided; Osmond does not regard her as an accomplice in crime, but uses her the same way she uses others: "[s]he has worked for him, plotted for him, suffered for him . . . and the end of it is that he's tired of her" (455), Countess Gemini aptly sums up her position in the whole scheme. Once their plot is over, she is discarded, because for Osmond she no longer has any value.[23]

Because of her ultimate rejection by Osmond, readers may for a moment have the tendency to cast her to the position of a victim, similar to Isabel. Nonetheless, it is crucial to realize that she has become a victim of her own utilitarian abuse of aestheticism, for which precisely this aestheticism punished her. It could be deduced that Serena Merle's fall constitutes James's rendition of the Dickensian trope of poetic justice. However, such "Dickensian" reading of *The Portrait* would be a misreading, a fallacy. The novel, as many of James's writings, revolves around a highly moral problem, but James unequivocally refuses to comply with the grossly simplified black and white vision of the world. By making Osmond, another utilitarian of aestheticism, an instrument of Madame Merle's punishment, the message of the novel becomes highly problematic—in other words, there still remains the question of who will be there to punish Osmond for his abuse of aestheticism. Hence we too are left with Madame Merle wondering whether she "ha[s] been so vile all for nothing" (437).[24]

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[22] Cf. Holland 704, Stafford 118.

[23] In this sense, her idea of her relationship with Osmond parallels Isabel's idea of her relationship with Osmond—they both seek a companion for their plans, and they are both ultimately rejected; the fact they both eventually realize: "[u]nder all his culture, his cleverness, his amenity, under his good-nature, his facility, his knowledge of life, his egotism lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers" (360); "[y]ou're very unhappy, I know. But I'm more so" (464), to which Isabel gives credit—"[p]oor, poor Madame Merle!" (432).

[24] This resolution paves the way for James's later ambiguity toward Aestheticism in *The Golden Bowl*.

It is in the final scene of Osmond's repudiation of Serena Merle where James distinctly presents a metaphorical battle of Osmond's false Aestheticism against Madame Merle's regained genuine aestheticism. After the fiasco of Osmond's pursuit to marry Pansy to Lord Warburton, under the circumstances Madame Merle's mask gradually begins to drop,[25] and Isabel eventually realizes Serena Merle's lion's share of her marriage to Osmond. From this time onward, Madame Merle's stable position in the Osmond family is shattered; a fact that eventually helps Osmond to break his ties with her. Madame Merle comes on the verge of a nervous breakdown, when she realizes that all her past efforts signify nothing to Osmond, and that she, in fact, has become another victim of Osmond's abuse of aestheticism, even though she played the same game according to the same rules. She realizes that Osmond "not only dried up [her] tears, [but that he also] dried up [her] soul" (434), but only when it is too late. She appeals to Osmond's sense of morality, which is itself deeply connected with the aesthetic feeling, as Dorothy Van Ghent successfully demonstrated,[26] to acknowledge that what they had done was hideous; however, he does not grant her a tiny bit of understanding: "[d]on't you know the soul is an immortal principle?" (434), and rather reminds her that it was she who had put him "into a box [i.e., marriage]" (436). In their final encounter, Osmond attacks Madame Merle's regained aestheticism on the very basis of its authenticity to feel, to experience—"[y]ou always see too much in everything; you *overdo* it; you *lose sight of the real*" (436; italics mine).

[25] Cf. her words to Isabel concerning the question of Pansy's marriage: "'[i]f Lord Warburton simply got tired of the poor child, that's one thing, and it's a pity. If he gave her up to please you it's another. That's a pity too, but in a different way . . . Let him off—let us have him'" (430), to which Isabel violently reacts asking her "'[w]ho are you—what are you?'" (430).

[26] "Aesthetic experience proper, since it is acquired through the senses, is an experience of *feeling*. But so also moral experience, when it is not sheerly nominal and ritualistic, is an experience of *feeling*. Neither one has reality—has psychological depth—unless it is 'felt'" (Van Ghent 683; italics original). Furthermore, the etymology of the word "aesthetic" comes from Greek αίσθησις (aisthesis) meaning "perception of the senses" in the Ancient Greek, or simply "feeling" in Modern Greek.

Those words are of utmost importance in order to fully comprehend the question of aestheticism and morality. Madame Merle, unlike Osmond who is motivated by his "obsessive concern for 'the world' and that world's opinion of him" (Freedman 159), was forced by external circumstances to abuse aestheticism in order to cover her adulterous affair, and when it finally becomes unbearable to continue to play this part, she breaks down. Deep inside, she has always been a genuine aesthete, possessing, as Freedman rightly observed, "a rich sensibility, a subtlety, a complex and ultimately tragic capacity for deep emotion" (160), and thus eventually comes to represent a complete opposite of Osmond, who appears to be a genuine aesthete, but is nothing more than a pathetic sham. Osmond utilizes this incompatibility of their respective worldviews to break off their relationships once and for all. Once Madame Merle becomes unable to manipulate people by abusing the principles and philosophy of Aestheticism because of her regained aesthetic sensibility, she becomes completely useless for Osmond, and as such is discarded like the coffee cup which "already has a wee bit of a tiny crack" (436).[27]

3.3. The Triumph of the Conventional?

The final breaking off with Madame Merle crowns Osmond's triumph. He has become a wealthy respectable man in the eyes of the world, and no one can ignore him anymore—his dream has eventually come true. Although he does not dispose of his exquisite taste, he no longer needs to pretend his faithful devotion to aestheticism, since aestheticism has served its purpose, and can be therefore discarded like Serena Merle,

[27] This particular metaphor of interpersonal relationships is not only dominant in Du Maurier's cartoons published in *Punch*, but also in *The Golden Bowl*, where the hidden crack in the bowl gains much more prominence and becomes a symbol of the aesthetic and moral problem constituting the novel.

whose nature eventually became to personify aestheticism with its emphasis on sensitivity and authentic feeling—all of which Osmond deems meaningless and superfluous.

Concerning his wife, Isabel realizes that she has been outrageously deceived and ensnared in Osmond and Merle's plans, or, in other words that "the most important decision of her life had been determined, not by her free choice, but by someone else's deliberate calculations," (Ramalho de Sousa Santos 306), and that Osmond's devotion to aestheticism proved a masterful red herring to camouflage his pitiful existence. Moreover, she too realizes with horror that she was far from being passive in "affronting her destiny" (Preface to the New York edition of *The Portrait of a Lady* 8): "[s]he had taken all the first steps in the purest confidence and then she had suddenly found the infinite vista of a multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end" (356). Because of that, she accepts her doomed fate, since she feels that one has to be fully responsible for one's deeds: "I married him before all the world; I was perfectly free; it was impossible to do anything more deliberate" (407), she says to Henrietta who tries to convince her to leave Osmond. She stays and accepts her new identity of Mrs. Osmond which figuratively becomes the frame of the portrait of the young and innocent Isabel Archer of Albany, New York.

As Mrs. Osmond, Isabel finds herself amidst various divergent streams of people, each of whom trying to sweep her to their own side. Ralph and Henrietta, unable to bear Isabel's unhappiness and profound change for the worse, try to convince her to leave Osmond; Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood, two former suitors who, especially in the case of the latter, masochistically attempt to be as closer to Isabel as possible; and finally Gilbert Osmond, her husband, who cruelly reminds her of her obligation as his wife. Of those, Osmond is the most insistent, since his semblance of propriety and

decorum to the world is essentially dependent on Isabel's complaisance, as he reminds her during their interview brought about by Ralph's dying in England:

> I take our marriage seriously; you appear to have found a way of not doing so. I'm not aware that we're divorced or separated; for me we're indissolubly united. You are nearer to me than any human creature, and I'm nearer to you. It may be a disagreeable proximity; it's one, at any rate, of our own deliberate making. You don't like to be reminded of that, I know; but I'm perfectly willing, because—because— . . . [b]ecause I think we should *accept* the consequences of our actions, and what I value most in life is the *honour of a thing*! (446; italics mine)

These words are the utmost evidence that Osmond was never a true votary of art for art's sake, but that he used its philosophy to suit his execrable ends; and once those ends are accomplished, he may drop the heavy mask and start being his authentic ordinary, hypocritical self with immense concern for appearances.[28] Moreover, under the pretext of "indissoluble" unity, he forces Isabel to accept the role Serena Merle so brilliantly played in his life; i.e., that of the match-maker, since Pansy's "happiness" should "logically" concern Isabel and himself in an equal manner. Isabel then founds herself, in the words of James himself, "in reality ground in the very mill of the conventional" ("From the *Notebooks*" 640).

Of the two potential candidates, Osmond wants Pansy to marry her wife's former suitor Lord Warburton, even though he is aware of the fact that Pansy clearly prefers young Ned Rosier. His choice of the potential son-in-law can be regarded as another

[28] Laurence B. Holland also noticed Osmond's conventionality in his essay dealing with the question of marriage in *The Portrait of a Lady*. His essay is important in that it notices the perversity of Osmond's striving for the conventional. Convention, which is usually thought of as a series of repetitive acts and formulaic habits ultimately leading to ordinariness, is transformed into a carefully controlled process: "convention becomes conscious and deliberate, the result less of habit and tacit agreement than of calculated control, deliberate formulation" (709). In this sense, the figure of Osmond represents a paradoxical reversal of the traditional view of conventionality; instead of striving for originality, one strives for the exact opposite.

piece of evidence of his inauthentic pseudo-devotion to aestheticism. Of the two, Ned Rosier is an embodiment of a genuine aesthete per se: "a very gentle and gracious youth, with what are called cultivated tastes—an acquaintance with old china, with good wine, with the bindings of books, with the *Almanach de Gotha*, with the best shops, the best hotels, the hours of railway-trains" (185). All his needs and financial means are conformed to his life devoted to aesthetic sensations and to his collection of *bibelots*; however, he is able to differentiate between lifeless *objects d'art* and human beings—a thing which seems rather problematic for the other aesthetes in the novel (Ralph and his treatment of Isabel, Isabel and his treatment of Osmond). However, his proposal is automatically excluded from consideration on the basis of his relative poverty in the eyes of Gilbert Osmond. In this regard, it becomes evident that the capacity of aesthetic appreciation, the ability to "burn always with the hard gem-like flame," (210) as Pater put it in his famous Conclusion to *The Renaissance,* signifies nothing to Osmond; what Osmond truly craves for is wealth and social position—the former he attained by marrying Isabel, and the latter he hopes to attain by means of his daughter becoming a Lady. Only through this marriage can he further elevate his position—to finally become on par with those sultans of Turkey and popes of Rome, whom he nonchalantly mentions to Isabel when they meet for the first time.[29] When the promised letter asking for Pansy's hand does not arrive, Osmond, and Madame Merle, too, become angry with Isabel, accusing her of malevolently preventing the marriage on the grounds of the former sympathies between her and Warburton, even though as K. Potočková rightly noted in her M.A. thesis, "[a]ccording to Madame Merle Isabel has no influence [as to] who[m]

[29] Warburton himself notices that Isabel's "husband has very large ideas" (371); he refers to the financial side of the matter, but he inadvertently comments on Osmond's *parvenu* inclinations as well.

Pansy will marry" (54)—at least that is what she says to Ned Rosier, when he comes to see her so that she could intercede on his behalf.[30]

As to the person standing in the midst of Osmond's plans for grandeur, Pansy does not have a voice of her own in the matter. Although James does not reduce her to a mere tool in the hands of her father, utterly incapable of emotions and opinions—for instance, she likes Lord Warburton, but she loves Rosier, whom she would like to marry if possible—she is presented as a child-like figure, although the span of the novel covers several years, and at the end of the novel she is nineteen (!) years old (311). Under the tremendous influence of her father, who, in his perversity, attempted to transform her into a lifeless work of art to suit his plan for conventionality, sending her to a convent, where she was brought up in obedience to the strict rules, she grew up a timorous being, almost completely devoid of any distinct personality.[31] In Pansy's education, Osmond employs yet another trait of the conventional, the morality. Although amoral himself, he wants his daughter to be a paragon of daughters: well-educated, possessing perfect manners, showing high respect to her father and to other people around; as he says, "'she's a little saint of heaven!'" (228). Yet morality in the hands of the amoral has disastrous consequences; instead of an independent human being, Osmond creates a

[30] It is obvious that Warburton only wants to be as close to Isabel as possible. He likes the girl, but she is not his primary aim, which can be deducted from his soliloquy with Isabel: "'[a]ren't you afraid that you'll bore her?' And as her companion stared at this enquiry Isabel added: 'If she can't dance with you for half an hour how will she be able to dance with you for life?' 'Ah,' said Lord Warburton readily, 'I'll let her dance with other people!'" (370). His dilemma is resolved by not sending the letter, since unlike Isabel in the case with Gilbert Osmond, he is able to realize the potential fatal consequences of his marriage to Pansy—in other words, he knows that he would just use her and made unhappy both her and himself.

[31] One critic even wrote that she "never had the chance to grow up as a person" (Tintner 144). Although at the first sight this statement may seem really pertinent, I am wary to fully agree. Pansy has, at least, a little sense of her own personality; she implicitly knows that not everything her father requires of her is good. Yet unlike Isabel, her problem lies in the fact that she has been under Osmond's corrupting influence for her whole life. No matter what, she will always choose to obey; as she says to Isabel in the convent, where she is literally banished after the unsuccessful result of marrying her to Warburton, "I must never displease papa" (462). However, when she says "[d]on't leave me here" to Isabel during her visit in the convent (461), one can see her plea for help—she has a personality—but she is unable to act according to her own judgment. Therefore, she relies on the help of others who are much stronger than her and are able to defy Osmond.

meek and utterly submissive creature whose respect for her father is not based primarily on love, but rather on awe. As such, Osmond's total triumph of the conventional will be never fully accomplished, since in terms of ethics, he will forever remain amoral according to the conventional understanding of morality.

Similar to Isabel, Pansy is manipulated to fit the conventional family picture Osmond delineated in his mind or, in the aesthetic parlance, she is treated as an *object d'art*, which is aptly emphasized in Osmond's words about her:"'[o]ne's daughter should be fresh and fair; she should be innocent and gentle. With the manners of the present time she is liable to become so dusty and crumpled. Pansy's a little dusty, a little dishevelled; she has knocked about too much'" (442), and in the *discours indirect libre* in the paragraph following Osmond's words Isabel realizes that "[h]e had wanted to do something sudden and arbitrary, something unexpected and refined; to mark the difference between his sympathies and her own, and show that if he regarded his daughter as a precious work of art it was natural he should be more and more careful about the finishing touches" (442). However, unlike Isabel, who is opposed to Osmond's idea of her mind being "attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer-park" (362), Pansy is unable to defy her assigned role as one of the objects constituting Osmond's art collection.

Throughout the novel Gilbert Osmond uses the philosophy of Aestheticism as a means of achieving his personal goals—a respectable conventionality. By attributing aestheticism such function, he completely reverses its basic idea, i.e., that of almost non-attainable, non-utilitarian, elevated state of mind capable of appreciation of art and beauty as it is, without any relation whatsoever to external reality. Various characters react in various ways to this aberration—Madame Merle treats aestheticism the same

way as Osmond at first, only to realize later that she is not capable of abusing aestheticism anymore; according to Ralph it is a sterile dilettantism; and Pansy is even deprived of her free will to comment on it. As for Isabel, she tries to defy this aberration responsible for her misery; nonetheless, she eventually returns to Osmond and assumes her position in the "house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation" (360) notwithstanding her personal misfortune, thus finishing the metaphorical portrait of a lady.

It may seem that the "hypocritical Gothic suitor" (753), as Millicent Bell called Osmond, possessing the "faculty for making everything wither that he touched" (355), has been victorious in the battle against Aestheticism and morality. By assuming this to be the case, one is automatically granting Osmond a total victory, which is, in a sense, an aberration as well. Isabel is the one whose consciousness forms the basis of the novel, and therefore one must not forget her side in the matter which I deem to be more important than that of Osmond. Her final return to Osmond signifies nothing less than genuine Aestheticism and morality were not vanquished as they had appeared to be. Isabel returns to Osmond, because she is bound to him by marriage—in that regard, her return is a sublime evidence (even though a little perverse one) of her invincible morality—and because he is paradoxically the only one with whom she can retain, if not spiritual, then at least physical independence.[32] And as to Aestheticism itself, Osmond will never succeed in erasing Isabel's ideas from her mind—in this regard, her mind will

[32] Caspar Goodwood, who suddenly appears at the end of the novel very much in the fashion of the romantic heroes, or fairytale princes—always ready to save their damsel in distress—is ultimately rejected by Isabel (and James), because of his aggressive, possessive, and commanding nature: "[y]ou can't turn anywhere; you know that perfectly. Now it is therefore that I want you to think of *me* . . . [w]hy should you go back—why should you go back through that ghastly form? —To get away from *you*!" (488, italics original).

never be “attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer-park” (362), in spite of her final return to Palazzo Roccanera.

4. *The Golden Bowl*: The Great Reversal?

> But it was all right—so Charlotte also put it: there was nothing in the world they liked better than these snatched felicities, little parties, long talks, with "I'll come to you to-morrow," and "No, I'll come to *you*," make-believe renewals of their old life. They were fairly at times, the dear things, like children playing at paying visits, playing at "Mr. Thompson" and "Mrs. Fane," each hoping that the other would really stay to tea.
>
> — the disconcerting nature of Adam and Maggie's relationship

> "I must risk your thinking me selfish—for of course you know what it involves. Let me admit it—I *am* selfish. I place my husband first . . . I want," Charlotte said, "to have him at last a little to myself; I want, strange as it may seem to you"—and she gave it all its weight—"to *keep* the man I've married."
>
> — Charlotte, saving face, after she has been vanquished

The Golden Bowl (1904) crowns James's literary achievement and together with *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and *The Ambassadors* (1903) constitutes the "holy trinity" of James the Master. It is a novel where indulgence toward Aestheticism and the tendencies to employ it in human relations that prevailed in the former two novels achieve a complete unity and create a powerful work of literature—so powerful that after completing it, James could not produce another major novel until his death in 1917 and turned instead to autobiographical writings and revision of his older texts for the New York edition. The exhaustion produced by writing *The Golden Bowl* was not only physical and emotional exhaustion of James himself, but also more generally the exhaustion of the subject and the literary approach toward it. James began his literary

career in the mode of nineteenth-century Realism, propagated in America by his "tutor" William Dean Howells (whom he, however, quickly surpassed), then battled with the European movements of Aestheticism, Symbolism, and Decadence, and finally blended all the disparate artistic movements and literary influences to pave the way for the post-war Anglo-American Modernism, and the most successful and complete example of such amalgamation is *The Golden Bowl*. After this novel, there was simply nothing left to do than wait for the first generation of Modernist to assume their place on the literary stage that Henry James with an utmost care prepared for them.

The literary world at the time of the publication of *The Golden Bowl* was still experiencing the reverberating echoes of the decadent *fin de siècle* together with the approaching sense of modernity. In this period of rapid changes vis-à-vis cultural as well as political life, James finally put an end to his long preoccupation with Aestheticism by producing a work that brilliantly captured the sense of the waning Aestheticism and the immediate change of the world. Although the subject-matter of the novel is rather conventional—a story of marriage and adultery, it, nevertheless, allowed James to assess his previous concerns with Aestheticism, especially with regard to its inability to defend itself against being (ab)used in human relations, and eventually promote the philosophy of Aestheticism, since even though aestheticism should not be used to any purpose, if used with good intentions, it does not have to pose a threat; on the other hand, it may present a solution to a highly moral problems, of which adultery and the overly close connection of Maggie and her father indisputably are.

In this sense, his stance toward Aestheticism has undoubtedly changed since the times of *The Portrait of a Lady*; nonetheless, to argue that James has made a "180-degree turn" in his relationship with Aestheticism would be a misreading. James was never an

easy writer to read, and this statement is even more pertinent to his latter works. On the one hand, *The Golden Bowl* supports the abovementioned argument of the great reversal; however, on the other hand, it disrupts it from within by making Charlotte a recipient of both Maggie's severe punishment and her silent compassion at the same time. In its treatment of Aestheticism, *The Golden Bowl* certainly represents a step further from the moral emphasis of *The Portrait of a Lady*, yet it does not manage to fully resolve James's attitude to Aestheticism once and for all. Rather, it supports the argument of James's ambiguous stance toward Aestheticism.

4.1. Aesthetes Conforming to the Conventional

As in *The Portrait of a Lady*, aesthetes too occupy the world of *The Golden Bowl.* Virtually every character partakes some way or other in aestheticism; however, the most direct partakers are Adam Verver, the first American millionaire, and his daughter Maggie. Together, they form a perfect duo, whose passion is to collect the greatest works of art while simultaneously enjoying the presence of both their acquisitions and especially of each other. As Maggie says to Amerigo, "[w]e've been like a pair of pirates—positively stage pirates, the sort who wink at each other and say 'Ha-ha!' when they come to where their treasure is buried" (11). As such, they represent the ideal couple, so caustically ridiculed in Du Maurier's cartoons and so much sought in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Unlike in *The Portrait*, where we witness the search for and eventual formation of the "aesthetic couple," cast as Isabel "affronting her destiny," in *The Golden Bowl*, James presents us with an already formed couple of such sort. Nevertheless, the eventual outcome of Adam and Maggie's powerful bond is eventually equally similar to the unfortunate outcome of

Isabel Archer and Gilbert Osmond's marriage—it brings unhappiness to all parties concerned.

The first apparent problem of *The Golden Bowl* resides, of course, in the relation of Adam and Maggie; the Ververs are not husband and wife, but father and daughter—a fact that is rather uncomfortable when one thinks of a couple and that lead many critics to point out incest: "billionaire and his daughter . . . each marry other people, the better to sustain their own incestuous relationship" (Ohi 33). I am rather cautious to phrase Adam and Maggie's relationship using such term, but their closeness is definitely uncanny.

From the traditional viewpoint, in the relationship between the child and the parents, female figures, be they mothers or other motherly figures (e.g., nannies, governesses), are favored more than fathers; fathers are concerned only with the question of their having male heirs who would continue to bear the family name. However, in the early twentieth century, Freud and Jung proposed the concepts of Oedipus and Electra complexes, thus reversing the traditional notion of relationships based on gender, i.e., father and son, and mother and daughter. In light of those theories, already known at the time the novel takes place, Maggie's relationship with her father can be seen as a fulfilled Electra complex, and thus gains a slightly disconcerting nature; a fact acknowledged by everyone in the novel:

> there was nothing in the world they liked better than these snatched felicities, little parties, long talks, with "I'll come to you to-morrow," and "No, I'll come to you," make-believe renewals of their old life. They were fairly at times, the dear things, like children playing at paying visits, playing at "Mr. Thompson" and "Mrs. Fane," each hoping that the other would really stay to tea. (184-5)

Since Adam's wife and Maggie's mother died when Maggie was still a little child, Maggie does not have to psychosexually compete with her mother, but comfortably assumes her position and becomes a substitute of Adam's wife, even better that the original as Adam admits in his thoughts: "[s]he was her mother, oh yes—but her mother and something more; it becoming thus a new light for him, and in such a curious way too, that anything more than her mother should prove at this time of day impossible" (109). Although Adam's thought refers explicitly to the question of Maggie's natural predisposition for motherhood, manifested in her treatment of the Principino, implicitly, it also refers to the inability of his late wife to assume the role of a companion on Adam's journey to ultimate aesthetic bliss. On the other hand, Maggie is more than convenient for such a role.

Although they are more than able to manage on their own, they both eventually marry. We do not know what is the exact reason for Maggie to marry the Prince, for the novel begins *in medias res*, following the Prince's rambling around London, but the most obvious reason is convention: at a certain age women were supposed to marry. In this sense, the Ververs are accommodating to the prescriptions of the society they live in, even though they are aware that once Maggie marries, she will not be able to be as close to her father as she used to be. Unlike Osmond, whose aim is to strive for the conventional, for Maggie and her father the conventional is a nuisance, thwarting their mutual aesthetic bliss. In this sense, they represent aesthetes concerned with a higher sphere than that of the meagre and vulgar social life that pressures them to conform to the conventional.

Given their social and economic status, at least they do not have to settle for just anyone. The prince, with his aristocratic heritage and the history of famous and infamous

deeds in his old family, having as one of his ancestor the famous Amerigo Vespucci—"the pushing man who followed, across the sea, in the wake of Columbus and succeeded, where Columbus had failed, in becoming godfather, or name-father, to the new Continent," (59) as Fanny ornately narrates, is exactly what they as Americans are missing. By "acquiring" him, they are legitimizing themselves as successors of the European tradition that seems to be dying, as the dynamic of the world is once again in the process of shifting from the East to the West, in this case from the palaces of Europe to the exhibition halls of America, that is epitomized by Adam's plan for the great museum in American City—the symbolical *translatio studii et imperii*, as Michael Gorra has aptly named it (150).

More importantly, apart from *translatio studii et imperii*, Maggie's marriage to Amerigo represents a defiance of the very conventional into which she and her father are forced to—in other words, they nullify the conventional by reconstituting the conventional act of marriage as acquisition of a new valuable work of art. They choose Amerigo with meticulous care, believing he will contribute to their milieu based on aesthetic principles rather than negate it. And eventually they believe their acquisition to be a success—as Adam later reveals to Amerigo: "'[y]ou're round, my boy,' he had said—'you're *all*, you're variously and inexhaustibly round, when you might, by all the chances, have been abominably square'" (101, italics original). Amerigo. the person, or rather the *object d'art*—the "old embossed coin, of a purity of gold no longer used" (18)—is prepared to do as they wish, for he depends on Mr. Verver's millions. Unlike Isabel Archer, he lets himself to be collected voluntarily, since he is in a financial situation different from her, and thus "sell[s] himself as a treasure of European civilization to the rich American Patron of Art and his enthusiastic little daughter (Sabin 208). As Maggie unabashedly says to the Prince,

> "[y]ou're at any rate a part of his [i.e., Adam's] collection . . . one of the things that can only be got over here. You're a rarity, an object of beauty, and object of price. You're not perhaps absolutely unique, but you're so curiously eminent that there are very few others like you—you belong to a class about which everything is known. You're what they call a *morceau de musée*." (10, italics original)

Adam and Maggie treat Amerigo as a lifeless *object d'art*—a theme James gives a high prominence in *The Portrait of a Lady* and which together with its moral implications form the main basis of James's criticism of the capacity of aestheticism and aesthetes to treat other people as inanimate objects. For by doing so, aestheticism acquires a certain role, which consequently violates its proclaimed ideal of a non-utilitarian doctrine. Nonetheless, in *The Golden Bowl* James does not openly criticize this abuse of aestheticism; rather, he lets the critique go: "[i]t is as if James wishes us to set our judgmental reflexes jangling only to set them at ease; relax, he tells us, Adam's aestheticism may appear to be cancerous, but it is fundamentally benign" (Freedman 230). In this regard, we can see a clear shift of James's stance toward Aestheticism; what was once thought of as extremely troubling and possibly immoral is now regarded as harmless. Certain perversity still persists, however, it has rather a comical effect, paving the way for the novel to be read as a masterful dark comedy, as one can see in the following dialog between Maggie and the Prince:

> "I like the class," he had laughed for this, "in which you place me! I shall be one of the little pieces that you unpack at the hotels, or at the worst in the hired houses, like this wonderful one, and put with the family photographs and the new magazines. But it's something not to be so big that I have to be buried."
>
> "Oh," she had returned, "you shall not be buried, my dear, till your dead. Unless indeed you call it buried to go to American City."

"Before I pronounce I should like to see my tomb." (11)

Nevertheless, although it may seem that James's stance toward Aestheticism has shifted from castigation to promotion, this idea will be eventually dismissed in the course of the novel, as both the narrator and the characters never fully assume a resolute stance on the matter.[1]

Even though Adam and Maggie transform their acquiescence to the conventional into another aesthetic quest for precious objects and regard Amerigo as "a pure and perfect crystal" (102), Amerigo's presence after all does disrupt the equilibrium existing when it was just the two of them. As Adam reflects at Fawns, "[i]t was Maggie's marriage and Maggie's finer happiness . . . that had made the difference . . . [i]t was as if his son-in-law's presence, even from before his becoming his son-in-law, had somehow filled the scene and blocked the future" (98, 99). The perfect aesthetic duo has been destroyed by the presence of the third person, and now Adam is the odd one out, which Maggie reluctantly admits: "[w]hat has really happened is that the proportions, for us, are altered" (124). As it becomes clear from Adam's aesthetic passivity, so brilliantly captured in some fifteen pages of Adam's rumination and inaction in the billiard room at Fawns when everybody except Adam and Mrs. Rance went to church, Adam—and Maggie as well—dreads the idea of his remarrying that starts tapping at the door in the form of Mrs. Rance. Unlike Adam, she is not associated with aesthetic passivity but with the world of action. She is active, resolute, and knows her goals. She follows Adam into the billiard room and founds him unable to face the question of marriage. Adam dreads that he would be proposed since he would have to say no to the realistic, straightforward

[1] I have in mind the contradictory narrative voice that, when making itself present, proclaims one thing only to dismiss it later (cf. the abovementioned quote about Adam's "benign aestheticism") and especially the actions and thoughts of the principal characters, most of whom Maggie, whose feelings oscillate between vengeance and pity.

American woman. Adam is baffled and lost, because "[h]ere of a sudden was a question that concerned *him alone*" (113, italics mine). Maggie is similarly terrified, and as a result, during their conversation in the gardens surrounding the estate recommends the invitation of Charlotte Stant who will, apart from her exquisiteness similar to Amerigo's, solve Adam's situation.

Charlotte, Maggie's childhood friend and her fellow student from the boarding school, occupies the same position in the society as Serena Merle in *The Portrait*: impecunious, always dependent on others for "having her," offering her grace and charms for exchange: "she's always with people, poor dear, she rather has to be; even when, as is sometimes the case, they're people she doesn't immensely like" (132).[2] Because of her friendship with Maggie, Charlotte does not pose a threat for Adam; unlike Mrs. Rance or other "practical" women, Charlotte would "make [them] grander" (133) like the Prince did, because she is "[g]reat in nature, in character, in spirit" (133). What Maggie tries to do by inviting Charlotte to Fawns is to fill in the gap created by her marriage to the Prince or, in other words, find a substitute for herself: "[s]he points out Charlotte to her father as an object of rare value and, with an alacrity that hints at another sort of moral void, the Ververs cash in on Charlotte's star qualities" (Llewellyn Smith xii). Adam likes Maggie's idea, for he learns that Charlotte possesses the ability of aesthetic feeling during their evenings at Fawns spent at the piano and most patently during the acquisition of the ceramic tiles in Brighton from Mr. Gutermann-Seuss, where

[2] As W. Stafford writes, "James was never again to create a villain as one-sidedly drawn as Osmond, nor a 'good' American as woodenly drawn as Caspar Goodwood . . . [a]nd although we are later to see some aspects of Isabel in characters as diverse as the rigidly idealistic Fleda Vetch (of The Spoils of Poynton) and the adventuresomely romantic Lambert Strether, it is more frequently Serena Merle who was to appear and re-appear in major fiction after major fiction . . . [a]nd of course, we see Madame Merle in the duplicitous Charlotte Stant of *The Golden Bowl*, from her impecunious American beginnings through her enigmatic return to American City as Mrs. Adam Verver" (121). Moreover, Charlotte also reminds of another fictional heroine of the same period—Lily Bart of Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905).

she, apart from her aestheticism, professes her natural talent for socializing: "he felt quite merged in the elated circle formed by the girl's *free response* to the collective caress of all the shining eyes, and by her *genial acceptance* of the heavy cake and port wine that, as she was afterwards to note, added to their transaction, for a finish, the touch of some mystic rite of old Jewry (159, italics mine).

Charlotte represents a "remedy" (154), as he says, for the present situation, and although Adam in his thoughts phrases his marriage to Charlotte as putting Maggie at peace and providing Charlotte a future (154), he primarily provides a solution for his changed situation. This "remedy," as he calls it, is but a selfish gesture, for by marrying Charlotte, the Ververs believe that Adam would form a new aesthetic duo with Charlotte, yet they did not bother to ask about her opinion on that matter. Like with Amerigo, Maggie and Adam treat Charlotte as *object d'art*, as suiting their needs, and as in the previous case, James does not utter a single objection.[3] Nonetheless, once married, no such aesthetic duo forms and the situation resolves, or rather problematizes itself, by placing Adam and Maggie to their premarital position.

4.2. Charlotte and Amerigo: Victims of Aestheticism

The resolution of the situation, or rather the reversal to pre-existing conditions, not only does not resolve the problem, but creates another. Maggie and her father, thinking that they had overcome the conventional by its own rules of the game once

[3] Once again, James might be silent, because Charlotte is aware of the transactional nature of her marriage. Yet I do not think that one's awareness of being "collected" eliminates the problematic associations of being treated as a lifeless work of art. It may seem here that James is finally reconciled to this instance of abuse of aestheticism; however, this idea becomes problematized as the story unfolds. James lets Maggie, the aesthete, punish Charlotte for her affair with the Prince—made possible due to Maggie's aestheticism—and at the same time realize her own share of fault, all of this leading to an ambiguous message of the novel.

again renew their aesthetic bond that essentially forbids anyone else from participating in their own little aesthetic bliss. In this sense, they negate the very concept of marriage to the extent that it becomes unimportant who their *sposi* are; since they are "just for show," they could have been anyone. Although Adam and Maggie managed to solve their own problematic situation, unless they rid themselves of their Aestheticism, they will never solve the situation—they will merely relegate it to Charlotte and Amerigo who are now the odd ones out. And once again, James lets his opinion unspoken.

If they were two persons previously unknown to each other, the present imbroglio would most certainly constitute a painful and troubling matter. However, given their mutual history, the undue closeness of their respective *sposi* enables them to recommence their old love affair. The possibility of this occurrence is most disconcerting for Fanny Assingham who, often to a comical effect, sees herself as the one propelling the action in the novel, even though she in reality has less influence on things than she actually believes.[4] The most fitting instance of her worrying occurs at the official party in London, where she sees Charlotte and Amerigo together without their spouses, which she, knowing their mutual past, interprets as an uncanny possibility of the potential renewal of their relationship. She confronts Charlotte and she is baffled by her unabashed summary of the reality:

> "I accepted Adam's preference that I should come to-night without him: just as I accept, absolutely, as a fixed rule, all his preferences. But that doesn't alter the fact, of course, that my husband's daughter, rather than his wife, should have felt she could, after all, be the one to stay with him, the one to make the sacrifice of this hour–seeing, especially, that the daughter has a husband of her own in the field . . . I've simply to see the truth of the matter—see that Maggie thinks more, on the whole, of fathers than of husbands. And my situation

[4] Cf. her saying to her husband Bob concerning Charlotte: "'We're to marry her. It will be,' Mrs Assingham continued, 'the great thing I can do'" (64), even though it was Adam's decision to marry Charlotte.

> is such," she went on, "that this becomes immediately, don't you understand? a thing I have to count with." (188)

In this excellent and formidable answer to Fanny's objections, Charlotte masterfully describes the situation and rightly puts the blame on Maggie, for she and Adam are responsible for not including her and Amerigo in their little aesthetic circle.

The Prince hints at the possibility of the exclusion from Maggie and Adam's private aesthetic sphere already in the famous telegram that "would, in all probability, straightaway dished her marriage" (213). He uses the French phrase "à la guerre comme à la guerre," (212) approximating to "one must make the best of one's situation," to imply that everything which may happen is justifiable by the difficult situation wherein Adam and Maggie have put them. Although the Prince says to Fanny that he and Charlotte have to "jump out from time to time to stretch [their] legs" (197) from "Mr. Verver's boat" (195), the situation is rather that they are pushed away from the boat to the open sea. At least for them, however, they "kno[w] how to swim" (198). In this sense, their affair becomes inevitable.

Even though they did not renew their affair instantly, and James allows some time to pass from Adam and Charlotte's marriage, their close contact with each other is unavoidable. Because Adam and Maggie prefer to indulge in their private aesthetic sphere as they did before Maggie's marriage, the stepmother and the stepson have to represent the family on the outside—be it on the official party at the embassy, or later on at Matcham, where they eventually recommence their affair sexually. In this sense, they are victims of Adam and Maggie's aestheticism that prevents them from being with their spouses, and thus they do not regard their illicit affair as immoral; rather, they see

it as a natural solution to the problem. As Charlotte says, "it's all theirs, every inch of it; it's all a matter of what they've done *to* us" (211, italics original).

From the conventional viewpoint of morality, adultery is contemptible. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, adultery completely destroys the existence of Serena Merle to the point that has to abuse aestheticism in order to survive. However, in *The Golden Bowl* James seems to believe in Charlotte's justification of her liaison with the Prince, since Book First abounds with arguments in favor of Charlotte and Amerigo's solution to the problematic situation Adam and Maggie have put them into. His belief in this solution also seems to be supported by his depiction of the actual renewal of their affair as an "image of communion" (Priest 224):

> [t]hey vowed it, gave it out and took it in, drawn, by their intensity, more closely together. Then of a sudden, through this tightened circle, as at the issue of a narrow strait into the sea beyond, everything broke up, broke down, gave ways, melted and mingled. Their lips sought their lips, their pressure their response and their response their pressure; with a violence that had sighed itself the next moment to the longest and deepest of stillnesses they passionately sealed their pledge. (229)

Charlotte and Amerigo's liaison is not some ordinary case of adultery, such as Georges Duroy's affairs in Maupassant's *Bel-Ami*, serving either purely sexual or economic profit, but a passionate vow, a pledge that is "sacred" in essence (228). In this sense, James clearly moves beyond the moral viewpoint of adultery as something ugly.[5] By presenting adultery as the inevitable result of aestheticism, James moves beyond the limiting view

[5] As he wrote in his notebook while devising a plot for *The Wings of the Dove*, "one can do so little with English adultery—it is so much less inevitable, and so much more ugly in all its hiding and lying side" (*Notebooks* 170). This lying and ugliness is what Maggie will see in Charlotte and Amerigo's liaison, while Amerigo, with his "decadent" European notion of adultery will not be capable of understanding her objections (Llewellyn Smith 571; cf. the recent public inquiry concerning François Hollande's illicit affair where most people stated that his extramarital relationship is his private business). In this sense, Maggie comes to resemble Isabel Archer who also blended two disparate doctrines—Aestheticism and Puritanism.

of aestheticism through its relation to morality, so dominant in *Roderick Hudson* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. Charlotte and Amerigo are victims of their spouses' aestheticism and as such, they have his silent sympathy; nevertheless, by shifting the attention to Maggie in Book Second, it is as if he wants to completely destroy what he created with such an utmost care in Book First.

4.3. Maggie's Quest to Save her Marriage: Ambiguity Prevails

In The *Portrait of a Lady*, James frowns upon and punishes any abuse of aestheticism in the name of utilitarianism; in *The Golden Bowl*, James seems to be doing the exact opposite. Instead of letting Maggie silently suffer for her abuse of aestheticism, James aims to redress the situation and present a final resolution. Unlike *The Portrait of a Lady*, whose open ending creates a space for new possibilities and interpretations, *The Golden Bowl* strives to create a sense of closure.[6] Nevertheless, the closure James offers eventually comes to resemble the open ending of the former novel—at least in terms of James and his attitude to Aestheticism, for by making Maggie the agent of the redress, he undermines his stance toward Aestheticism in favor of ambiguity.

Jonathan Freedman convincingly argues that in terms of aesthetic types, Maggie is a "*belle dame sans merci*—a 'timid tigress' who deploys the cruel power of withdrawn omniscience in the guise of the 'American girl'" (239, italics original), very much in the fashion of Swinburne's heroines, such as Dolores of the eponymous poem. Nonetheless, by reducing Maggie solely to the decadent, cruel *belle dame sans merci* that enjoys hurting others by ignoring them, Freedman misses the compassionate Maggie who has

[6] I see James's attempts to resolve the imbroglio of *The Golden Bowl* as an attempt to finally resolve his lifelong preoccupation with Aestheticism, even though the result is far from being tangible.

tears in her eyes while listening to Charlotte commenting on Adam's *objects d'art* while acting as a *cicerone* at Fawns. Although her hidden actions toward restoring Amerigo and Charlotte back to their places absolutely constitute the definition of the *belle dame sans merci*, in her sensibility and compassion, she still remains the "American Girl"—it is not a "guise" (Freedman 239). If Maggie lacked these two attributes, it would be easy to see James's treatment of Aestheticism in the novel as strikingly different from that of *The Portrait* (Maggie triumphs in spite of treating others as *objects d'art*); however, by making Maggie's triumph accompanied by her awareness of pain and torment she inflicts on the Prince and especially on Charlotte, James refuses to assume a clear, distinct position.

In Book One, James makes a distinction between activity and passivity; Charlotte and the Prince are portrayed as the active ones, while Maggie and her father are depicted as the stereotypical passive, indolent aesthetes who are, moreover, also represented in a child-like manner—be it Charlotte's notion of them "playing at 'Mr. Thompson' and 'Mrs. Fane'" (185), or Fanny's affected "[s]he [Maggie] wasn't born to know evil. She must never know it" (59). Furthermore, the Prince and especially Charlotte justify their liaison on the basis of their spouses' infantilization; their illicit romance will contribute to maintain the present situation where Maggie figures as an innocent little daughter and Adam as a loving, benevolent father. However, in Book Second, aptly called "The Princess," Maggie undergoes a sudden spiritual awakening, distinctly realizing the infantile position in which everyone puts her, and begins to actively participate in the world of the novel. Her realization that she gave up her husband to be with her father and as a result that there exist something between her husband and her stepmother comes to represent newly-acquired knowledge; knowledge of "Evil—with a very big E" (282) that Fanny, Charlotte, and the Prince wanted her to save from.

As Freedman rightly noted, knowledge, or more specifically the degree of one's knowledge, is the pivotal theme around which the narrative of Book Second revolves:

> Fanny can and does ask questions of her sphinxlike friend and receives answers that allow her . . . to establish the extent of her knowledge, its sources, and the evidence that backs it up. Amerigo, by contrast, is shown the golden bowl, told of how Maggie learned of it, and then issued a hermeneutic challenge: "I've told you all I intended. Find out the rest—". Charlotte is presented with virtually no interpretive cues from Maggie at all. (236)

This shift from utter ignorance to the ultimate knowledge of everything that puts an end to the illicit affair between the mother-in-law and the son-in-law, packing the former to American City—"into exile, a death-in-life in his [Adam's] artistic necropolis" (Kventsel 168), completely undermines the justification of the liaison on the basis of Maggie and Adam's aestheticism, and fully inculpate the adulterers, whose affair is now paradoxically rendered not as an "image of communion" (Priest 224), but as base and immoral.

For Maggie at first, knowledge is something inaccessible in "the garden of her life" (299)—she is no longer in ignorance of it, but not yet in possession of the "tall tower of ivory" (299):

> [s]he had walked round and round it—that was what she felt; she had carried on her existence in the space left her for circulation, a space that sometimes seemed ample and sometimes narrow; looking up, all the while, at the fair structure that spread itself so amply and rose so high, but never quite making out, as yet, where she might have entered had she wished. She had not wished till now—such was the odd case; and what was doubtless equally odd, besides, was that . . . no door appeared to give access from her convenient garden level (299)[7]

[7] The "door" will eventually appear later in the form of the golden bowl—an eyewitness of Charlotte and Amerigo's mutual past. Until then, Maggie's ignorance of their love romance places her into "a nightmare version of the aesthete's world" (Freedman 232).

James here employs the cliché "knowledge is power, ignorance is bliss" and gives it an ironic twist; the knowledge or, in other words, Maggie's realization that "[s]he had surrendered herself to her husband . . . and yet she had not, all the while, given up her father" (300)—i.e., the outward perception of the exclusivity of their aestheticism, does not make her mighty, or at least she thinks so at the beginning, "[m]oving for the first time in her life as in the darkening shadow of a false position" (301). Similarly in the case of Charlotte, the ignorance, in which Maggie and Amerigo keep her, causes her an excruciating pain: "Charlotte was in pain, Charlotte was in torment" (545).

Like Isabel Archer, Maggie is at first associated with innocence and *naiveté*, but whilst Isabel passively accepts her fate after being deprived of those qualities, Maggie begins to act. However, she has to act inconspicuously so that no one notices the change that had occurred in her. As she tells Fanny, "I go about on tiptoe, I watch for every sound, I feel every breath, and yet I try all the while to seem as smooth as old satin dyed rose-colour" (380). In this regard, she is a disciple of Pater, "burning always with the hard gem-like flame" ("Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* 210) to decipher the truth. However, the truth does not stand for an overall individual experience of beauty, but more prosaically for the nature of Charlotte and Amerigo's relationship. In this sense, Maggie is guilty of the same thing Ralph Touchett, Isabel Archer, and Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait*—she (ab)uses aestheticism to her own purposes. Here, once more, James does not castigate Maggie for such an aberration that her treatment of aestheticism apparently constitutes, but on the other hand endorses Maggie's approach to resolve the moral problem—such an abuse of aestheticism becomes the only means of gaining knowledge and attaining the truth.

Furthermore, the reappearance of the golden bowl, "the *deus ex machina* of the novel-world" (Roraback 232, italics original) serves as assurance that Maggie's dedication to use Pater's method in human relations was right; now she is no longer tormented by insecurities, but is sure of Charlotte and Amerigo's liaison: "[i]t was as if she had come out—that was her most general consciousness; out of a dark tunnel, a dense wood, or even simply a smoky room, and had thereby, at least, for going on, the advantage of air in her lungs" (449). The symbolism of the bowl, made from one piece of a perfect crystal and gilded "by some beautiful old process" (85), is, according to Maggie's view, more that obvious: the hidden crack signifies the adultery that disrupted the unity of "the quartette" (239). Nonetheless, on the other hand, the crack may also represent Maggie and Adam's aesthetic seclusion that prevents the unity of the two couples. In both cases, however, the unity is imaginary—the crack is still there, despite the golden layer spread on the surface.[8] By proposing the first interpretation, James risks the possibility that he will be regarded as a proponent of aestheticism in human relations, yet at the same time, he vehemently resists it.

The most pertinent example of such resistance is Maggie's quest to save her marriage. Unlike in *The Portrait of a Lady*, where the boundaries between Aestheticism, though partly blurred, are not still clearly discernible, in *The Golden Bowl*, Maggie's tactics defy the black-and-white classification of *The Portrait*—she is both Isabel and Osmond, and she is deeply aware of it, as "tears in her eyes" (543) testify this during her conversation with Fanny about Charlotte's miserable fate. Later on, she pities Charlotte and thinks of her as "Io goaded by the gadfly or . . . Ariadne roaming the lone sea-

[8] Apart from this interpretation which essentially depends on the plot of the novel, in broader view, the golden bowl can also signify the artificiality and falsity of the American "Gilded Age," with so many Americans seeing themselves as successors of European civilization, culture, and art which they did, paradoxically, by appropriating European values.

strand" (523); however, that does not prevent her from casting her as a scapegoat of all their (i.e., their "quartette's") sins and wrongdoings.

This duality of Maggie's mental projection of Charlotte becomes most obvious in the nocturnal stalking scene that represents the culmination of the unbearable, stifling atmosphere of Book Second. Charlotte, tormented by Maggie's silence and by the Prince's changed relationship to her, is on the verge of a breakdown and in a desperate attempt to gain at least a little knowledge of the present state forces herself on Maggie:

> Charlotte had seen she was watching her from afar, and had stopped now to put her further attention to the test. Her face was fixed on her, through the night; she was the creature who had escaped by force from her cage, yet there was in her whole motion assuredly, even as so dimly discerned, a kind of portentous intelligent stillness. (474)

At first, Maggie is terribly scared of the possible actions of this escaped "creature"; she sees herself as "having been thrown over on her back, with her neck, from the first, half broken and her helpless face staring up" (475). In spite of her image of defeat, Maggie eventually triumphs by employing an "extraordinary form of her humbugging" (481), as she calls her Osmondian manipulation, and baffles Charlotte by not allowing herself to grant her a single hint of the extent of her knowledge of the affair: "I accuse you—I accuse you of nothing" (480).[9] At the same time, however, Maggie is relieved that she has ""see[n] her [Charlotte] through to the end" (480), as if her prevarication was a favor to Charlotte. Maggie (and James as well) is torn between being Osmond and Isabel; and once the manipulation à la Osmond is done, she immediately begins to assume Isabel's compassion and in her mind offer Charlotte her sympathy. One critic has aptly

[9] Given the deliberate formulation, the deliberate pause, and the peculiar construction of the negative, Maggie's answer borders on ambiguity which throws Charlotte emotionally even further off her balance despite her mastery of the dissimulation.

compared the result of the nocturnal scene to a game of chess: "[i]t is a chessboard that has been switched round so that, although the black queen still moves on the black squares, suddenly we are on her side" (Llewellyn Smith xiii).[10] The scene culminates with Charlotte's terrifying embrace and kiss that evokes the Judas kiss; nevertheless, for Charlotte, on whose side James wants us to play, the game is lost.

In spite of the painful outcome for both women, Maggie continues to play the now opened game of chess until all Charlotte's chessmen are out of the checkerboard. Charlotte, even though she started the game, does not want to play anymore. Maggie knows it, and yet she insists on playing exactly because of Charlotte's reluctance to continue. She must win, and she is willing to suffer for the victory. The situation now reverses and Charlotte becomes the one being chased after, even though the chase constitutes an act of agony for Maggie. Instead of quickly resolving the situation on the basis of morality, as young James would, James the Master does not content himself with a simple resolution, but maintains the shifting perspectives of Maggie as both Isabel and Osmond, simultaneously thinking of Charlotte as a victim and a perpetrator.

Apart from the nocturnal scene, Maggie's dual view of Charlotte also occurs when Charlotte acts as a *cicerone* to a group of admirers of Adam's collection at Fawns. On the one hand, she maintains her role in the Verver's "family coach" (314), acting as the social, gregarious part of the family; but on the other hand, her "natural" role as Adam's wife and the lady of the house now comes to represent her punishment for which Maggie, realizing with horror and pain, is personally responsible:

[10] In this sense, the whole preoccupation with Aestheticism in *The Golden Bowl* may be seen as a game that James plays with his readers, never fully disclosing his motives and attitudes concerning Aestheticism.

> [s]o the high voice quavered, aiming truly at effects far over the heads of gaping neighbours; so the speaker, piling it up, sticking at nothing, as less interested judges might have said, seemed to justify the faith with which she was honoured. Maggie meanwhile, at the window, knew the strangest thing to be happening: she had turned suddenly to crying, or was at least on the point of it—the lighted square before her all blurred and dim. The high voice went on; its quaver was doubtless for conscious ears only, but there were verily thirty seconds during which it sounded, for our young woman, like the shriek of a soul in pain. Kept up a minute longer it would break and collapse—so that Maggie felt herself, the next thing, turn with a start to her father. "Can't she be stopped? Hasn't she done it *enough*?" (511-2, italics original)

In another moment in the novel, Maggie sees Charlotte as having "a long silken halter looped round her beautiful neck" (508) and being led by Adam to her doom represented by her banishment to American City, "the Bunyanesque setting for [Adam's] spectacular philanthropic venture" (Kventsel 148). In all these instances, Maggie feels horrible, yet she continues to torment Charlotte until she forces her to assume her "doom" as Adam's wife as the only viable existence.

Maggie's strivings culminate during the last encounter with Charlotte at the gardens of Fawns, when she forces Charlotte, who desperately tries to escape Maggie's presence under the pretext of reading in the park, to name the cause of her liaison with Amerigo, i.e., Maggie and Adam's exclusion of other people from their private aesthetic sphere. By that, paradoxically, she helps Charlotte to save her face and spare her the total defeat by sharing the blame, allowing Charlotte to inculpate her: "'[h]ow I see,' she [Charlotte] broke out, 'that you've worked against me!'" (530). It is a swan song of the "splendid shining supple creature" (472) who knows that her fate is sealed, yet who wants to have the last word, reminding Maggie of her own problematic involvement in the matter.

Although Maggie is aware of this involvement, James lets her win despite her use of aestheticism in human relations, which he deemed highly problematic in his early works—in this regard, his stance toward Aestheticism undoubtedly evolves. This evolution presented in *The Golden Bowl* consist of the combination of two distinct versions of Aestheticism—the innocent and naïve Paterian version with the dark, decadent version of Baudelaire and Swinburne; nevertheless, by making Maggie an amalgamation of those two "Aestheticisms" that are constantly clashing in her consciousness, he refuses to assume a concrete position on Aestheticism, and the novel results in ambiguity. Furthermore, as he never judges or questions Maggie's actions, it is impossible to present a concrete conclusion of James's stance toward Aestheticism without lapsing into misreading. In this sense, the only viable conclusion is ambiguity itself.

5. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have chosen two major novels out of the numerous Jamesian literary canon to demonstrate the evolution of James's stance toward Aestheticism and Decadence. Although it may appear that the eventual ambiguity toward the doctrine of art for art's sake in *The Golden Bowl* comes rather unexpectedly, there have been signs of this, though not so clear, even in James's middle phase. The work that instantly comes to mind is a short story called "The Author of *Beltraffio*."

The plot is rather simple—a young naïve admirer of Mark Ambient, the eponymous author, and his novels unexpectedly gets a chance to visit his favorite author and spend a few days on his estate in Surrey. However, as he witnesses the stifling atmosphere in Ambient's household, the story gets darker and eventually comes to resemble the last chapters of *The Golden Bowl,* where no one except Maggie and her father knows what is to come. Ambient's wife deems her husband's novels corrupt and immoral and she becomes so desperate to save their sickly child from his father's supposedly corrupt influence to the point of killing him by withholding him his medicine.

In this story, James starts to question the optics of morality as a suitable means for dealing with Aestheticism. Although the end is a perverse exaggeration for a realistic story, it, nevertheless, clearly points out the problems inherent in Aestheticism when examined in contrast to morality. In this sense, the story can be regarded as a turning point in James's approach to Aestheticism that will eventually lead to ambiguity, both aesthetic and moral.

Apart from *The Golden Bowl*, the ambiguity of James's stance toward Aestheticism is already apparent in the previous two novels that constitute the "holy

trinity" of James the Master—*The Ambassadors* and *The Wings of the Dove*. Alas, given the prescribed length of the thesis and the lack of time needed for a more extensive research, I focused on the last novel of the three which gives a complete portrait of James's achieved stance of ambiguity. Moreover, to obtain more rounded and complete picture of James's relationship with Aestheticism and Decadence throughout his long literary career, a substantial analysis of his earlier novels, such as *Roderick Hudson*, *The American*, *The Europeans*, etc. would merit the present thesis as well. Nonetheless, I leave these only as potential suggestions for a possible research on a doctorate level that would be able to encompass the whole scope of James's literary oeuvre. Given the relative novelty of reading James in the context of Aestheticism and Victorian literature, I deem this area immensely fruitful for a professional scholarship, and I believe that we will soon hear of other critical studies that will enhance the collection of Jamesian criticism in the direction of transatlantic studies.

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