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The Authority of Difference:
Culturally Effected Realism in Whitman and Henry James

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Advised by Sandra Zagarell

In his introduction to the third volume of the 2004 *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1860-1920), Sacvan Bercovitch claims that the field of American literary history—which has certainly, as he suggests, been decentralized over the last 40 years from “the history of a certain, agreed-upon group of American masterworks”—is now governed by the “authority of difference” (Bercovitch 2). This, Bercovitch elaborates, means that the critical task of the American literary historian is no longer synthesis; it is not, as it was for much of the 20th century, to construct narratives, to trace trends, to contextualize and interrelate literary history within political, scientific, cultural history. Or rather, Bercovitch argues that it is to do all of these things at once and as acts of “challenge and engagement, so that [each critical approach] actually gains substance and depth in relation to other, sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting modes of explanation.” It is an approach that recognizes dissidence as productive and continuity as suspect, and although Bercovitch never makes the connection explicit, it is perhaps not accidental that this statement introduces the volume of the history covering the late 19th-century period of American realism. The years between the Civil War and the beginning of World War I mark a cultural nexus, both national and international, and separating and defining artistic movements within those dates has always been a slippery task. “American realism” might mean a dozen different things to as many critics, historians and readers—it has been characterized as a response to romantic sensationalism, to mass-media consumerism and print culture, as a choice in subject matter, adherence to a set of stylistic conventions, as like and unlike European realism, like and unlike realist painting, like and unlike high modernism.

The study of American realism, then, lends itself particularly well to Bercovitch’s “authority of difference”—that is to say, it is a study best organized not in pursuit of any kind of consensus, but as a series of intersecting and conflicting explanations. It is with such an approach

in mind that this essay draws together two venerated American authors who, though a part of the American canon many times over, are chronologically and stylistically on opposite edges of most of the accepted delineations of Realism: Walt Whitman and Henry James. Though calling Whitman a realist is perhaps the bolder claim, neither author fits immediately or entirely comfortably into this framework. The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1855, concurrent with the work of Emerson, Melville, and Hawthorne, not Howells, and Whitman's radical free-verse poetry, full of ragged rhythms and invented words, is a sharp outlier from the traditionally novelistic realist canon. Certainly some of James's earlier novels often make the list of important realist texts--the *Cambridge Companion to Henry James* (1998) identifies *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima*, both published in 1886, as "instancing the power and limits of James's experiments with realism, marking an 'episode' in his evolving authorial practice" (Blair 151). His later work, however—including, despite its 1881 publication date, *The Portrait of a Lady*, which will be this essay's focus—is rarely discussed in terms of any kind of engagement with realist principals; James's interest here in complex forms and interior consciousness is more often taken to suggest his relationship to the modernism of Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

But beginning with the notion that difference itself can be a mode of understanding, the inherent conflict between James's and Whitman's literary historical *positions* becomes grounds for a conception of realism that is deeper, thicker, more complete because it encompasses more disparity. My argument here will on one hand suggest that James and Whitman's work actually does take up some of the principles of American realism posited by the likes of William Dean Howells. Both authors, like Howells himself, published frequently-studied theoretical and critical essays on the nature of poetry, fiction, and the task of the author, and their work itself is often

deeply reflective of these theories. Part of what this essay will suggest is that James and Whitman's literary visions, their understandings of the purpose and capacity of artistic language, are in different ways continuous with the intent of Howellsian realism. I will argue that for Whitman, the task of representing the real is inextricably bound up with the task of representing the democratic, and that both kinds of success call for poetic simplicity in much the same way that Howells does. James, on the other hand, continues the realist quest for empirical accuracy in fiction, locating the Howellsian "truthfulness" of the text in the singular discerning consciousness of its author.

On the other hand, this essay also joins the critical conversation about the nature, not of realism's intent, but of its action. It will suggest a way of understanding the operation and the effect of both authors' texts that is different from either of the Howellsian intentions I have just described, and different too from most of the reigning critical evaluations of realism. In dealing with and comparing each author's theoretical principles, I will largely be in agreement with a familiar critical suggestion: that American realism responds to the "corrupt and dismaying" conditions of late 19th-century life by attempting to position itself against the social norms codified in and represented by conventional and popular fiction (Pizer 15). In this second part of my discussion of each author, however, I will challenge this notion--but not by suggesting, as many critics have, that realism's authors are unsuccessful in their goal of challenging social convention; I have no stake here in the criticism that 19th-century realist writers simply codified new but equally problematic social norms. Rather, I will argue that James and Whitman each in their own way actually work with the conventions that they claim to oppose, imaginatively and poetically re-casting them as part of a literary representation whose realism lies in its inclusiveness of the reader.

In keeping with Bercovitch, I will take each author separately and sequentially, having no need to impose a connective order. I will first trace the connection between Whitman's democratic ideology and Howells's realist principles, before moving to discuss how Whitman achieves this new inclusive realism through a plurality of poetic modes which ultimately culminate and come together in his so-called transcendental catalogues. In the next section, I will follow both James's intended and his enacted realism through two important critical essays—"The Art of Fiction" and the 1908 Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*—and into the text of *The Portrait of a Lady* itself. I have chosen this novel because, as I suggested earlier, it does not fit as neatly into James's so-called "realist period" as some of his other work published within the same decade. Although it shares many structural and stylistic qualities with these novels, the way it centers around a single consciousness places it at a point of departure from the realist style within James's body of work. Throughout our discussion, we will explore James' and Whitman's work as dovetailing more than as perfectly aligned; moving in and out of relation with Howells, with one another, in principle and in poetic strategy, they touch and depart, touch and depart. My goal here then is not to argue for this new inclusive realist effect as pervasive or totalizing, as traceable across and beyond the traditional borders of realism—that possibility, as we have suggested, has gone by the wayside in a contemporary critical environment where the invocation of consensus "sounds rather like an appeal for compromise, or like nostalgia" (Bercovitch). I aim instead to offer a different kind of "mode of exploration" into literary history, one which, as Bercovitch suggests might be most useful where it is most partial or fragmented.

1. The Origin of All Poems: Whitman's Prescription, Transcription and Authorization of the Reader

The notion that Whitman's poetic voice seeks to embody the American democratic spirit is a critical truism as old as the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*; Whitman himself proclaims in the 1855 Preface that "the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem," and that the nation's genius "is not best or most in its executives or legislatures... but always most in the common people," who are themselves "unrhymed poetry" (Whitman 486). It is in this search for a democratic poetics that we can see a kind of consonance between Whitman and someone like Howells. Critics have long recognized the relationship between high art and mass culture as fraught for Howells. Nancy Bentley argues compellingly in the Bercovitch history—though in a different way than I will—that both James and Howells, for all their rejection of sensationalist literature, actually draw much of their illuminative power from the "unruly theatrics of an emerging mass culture" which they claim to oppose (Bercovitch 73). But the essence of Howells's argument positions the theatrical and the ornamental against the real, and also in a sense against the democratic. His famous mockery of the artist's "ideal grasshopper" emphasizes the value of the commonplace, and problematizes literature which displays a "love of the marvelous":

The young writer who attempts to report the phrase and carriage of every-day life, who tries to tell just how he has heard men talk and seen them look, is made to feel guilty of something low and unworthy by the stupid people who would like to have him show how Shakespeare's men talked and looked, or Scott's, or Thackeray's, or Balzac's, or Hawthorne's, or Dickens's; he is instructed to idealized his personages, that is, to take the life-likeness out of them, and put the literary-likeness into them ("Editor's Study" 258).

The romantic fiction-writer's grasshopper is not only too dramatized, too artificial, but edges out with false authority the "simple, honest and natural grasshopper" which belongs to the ordinary man (259).

It is again with skepticism that many critics have received Howells references to realism as “democracy in literature”¹—Bentley is reasonably representative when she argues that Howells’s notion of the commonplace is “far closer to that of social scientists than of populists: it is a unit of analysis rather than a measure of democratic value,” and that although Howells sought “a literary understanding of the totality of American society,” his fiction is not democracy in literature “any more than sociology is democracy in science” (Bercovitch 248). It will be useful to keep in mind this distinction between intended and actual democratic realism as we turn to Whitman.

The previously-quoted opening to the 1855 Preface suggests the force and amplitude with which Whitman asserts his poetics as American; it also begins to emphasize the distinction Whitman makes between the politically, institutionally, culturally American and the genuinely democratic. It is not in executives or legislatures, not in “ambassadors, or authors or colleges or churches or parlors...newspapers or inventors” that the American essence resides (Whitman 486). Rather, these representatives and systems of cultural organization in fact become obstacles to equality. The opposition is subtle in the sense that it is often indirect; the poet rarely seems to criticize any particular cultural institution. But as Whitman’s poetry imagines a new democratic social order, it inherently suggests on a far more general level that current social systems cannot adequately or fairly represent the American populace. Let us take the following passage from “Song of Myself,” in which the voiceless and underrepresented are gathered round the same table in a vision of new democratic equity:

This is the meal equally set, this is the meat for natural hunger,
It is for the wicked just the same as the righteous, I make appointments with all,
I will not have a single person slighted or left away,
The kept-woman, sponger, thief, are hereby invited,

¹Howells wrote in a letter to T. W. Higginson in 1909 that “democracy in literature... wishes to know and to tell the truth, confident that consolation and delight are there” (*Selected Letters* 81).

The heavy-lipp'd slave is invited, the venerealee is invited;
There shall be no difference between them and the rest ("Song of Myself" 372-377).

Whitman never abjectly supported abolition in poetry, theory or biography, and the speaker here certainly offers no overt attack on slavery or any other such institution. But the passage identifies these social designations—slave, thief, kept-woman—as harmful, as necessitating the intervention of the inviting, equalizing poet. The subjects of these designations share something in common with Howells's grasshopper; the poem suggests that their true nature is obscured by an added layer of a different kind of artificial "show and semblance" (*Criticism and Fiction* 58). The language and structure of cultural systems become antithetical to the "simple, honest, and natural" representation of the common man, to realism and democracy in poetry--just as the "wire and cardboard" structure of overly-literary ornamentation is antithetical to the same kind of realism for Howells ("Editor's Study" 259).

This rejection of cultural structures is most dramatic in the kind of passage we have just seen, in which Whitman's poetic voice bills itself as a creative force powerful enough to re-shape extant cultural reality until it more closely matches his democratic vision. In scenes like the above, the poet's responsibility is to give voice to those who are voiceless and underrepresented under the current system, to invite the venerealee to his own table since he is unwelcome elsewhere. The speaker's leadership here is on a human scale, a call for action and re-organization. The poet demands, accepts, invites, rejects, "speaking the sign" of a new democracy so he can adopt the authority to then say, "By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms!" ("Song of Myself" 507).

In other moments the emphasis is less on the poet's directive power and more on the visionary; the creative poetic voice becomes something both more powerful and more complex, a kind of prophet or even deity whose envisioned democratic universe will entirely replace the

current unequal one. “There will soon be no more priests,” Whitman intones in the Preface, “Their work is done...A superior breed shall take their place...the gangs of kosmos and prophets en masse shall take their place...through the divinity of themselves shall the kosmos and the new breed of poets be interpreters of men and women and of all events and things” (Whitman 502). The force the poet opposes is again a set of reigning cultural leaders—priests—who symbolize a particular social—in this case religious--category, and also have the power to designate others’ social categories; we recall the poet’s earlier desire to dissolve the distinction between “the wicked” and “the righteous.” But here the poet not only levels these categories, but seeks to replace the makers of such distinctions with himself.

This image of the poet as progenitor of a kind of new democratic cosmology represents the height of the creative, transformative power that Whitman’s speaker assumes in the name of equality. This poetic mode represents something of a departure from the intent of Howellsian realism, for although Whitman continues to set himself against the undemocratic, he is less interested here in simple, honest representation, and more willing to take advantage of literary ornament and structure to aid his cause. But as we explore how Whitman’s creative poetic voice makes use of deliberately complex and figurative language, we will begin to see that even as Whitman departs from Howells’s principles, his language pushes toward a different kind of realist effect.

The critical work of Stephen John Mack, whose 2002 book locates the discussion of Whitman’s creatively democratizing poetic voice thoroughly in his language, will be helpful in further exploring this idea. Mack argues that Whitman’s poetic-deific speaker is so intensely creative that his work actually becomes a *prescriptive* force, rather than any kind of descriptive one. Mack claims that Whitman uses language “pragmatically,” in a way that anticipates the late

19th-century philosophical sense of the word developed by William James and John Dewey; rather than any kind of mimetic representation, he suggests that Whitman is interested in constructing a deliberately non-corresponding reality. In this reading, the task of the poet grows from the simple act of laying out a “meal equally set” to the creation of an entire democratic mythological narrative that becomes real because it is enactable, pragmatic.

Mack takes this transformative, creative agent as the dominant incarnation of Whitman’s democratic spirit, failing to really recognize or account for the other modes in which the poet works. But his argument takes an incredibly important step in suggesting that the source of Whitman’s pragmatism, of his ability to speak a new equitable reality into being, is his language. As we follow Mack’s argument into the text of “Song of Myself,” this lens will help us see the totality with which Whitman’s poetry separates itself from existing, undemocratic reality--but we will also see how that separation begins to break down, the creative speaker’s relationship to cultural institution becoming more complex, and eventually, productive toward a different kind of realism.

For Mack, part of the motivation for Whitman’s push toward a pragmatic, prescriptive poetics is rooted in his lack of faith in the communicative capacity of language:

Whitman’s poetry implicitly seems to demonstrate an awareness of the arbitrary nature of linguistic communication, of the futility of attempting to verify the truthfulness of words by how accurately they correspond to non-linguistic fact. In Whitman’s verse, words appear to function...as tools for the construction of a ‘reality’ that is not bound by the constraints of correspondence theory (Mack 5).

Mack goes on to read Section 25 of “Song of Myself” as progressing through this sense of the failed correspondence between language and reality toward a sense of freedom; the poet’s acceptance of the inherent “originality” of words constitutes permission to abandon the now-futile task of mimetic representation. For Mack, Whitman’s fluid and partial commitment to linguistic correspondence is what allows his poetry to bring its new democratic cosmology to

bear. Mack takes up passages where the speaker *proclaims* his independence from representation: “You conceive too much of articulation,” he addresses language itself, “Do you not know O speech how the buds beneath you are folded?” (“Song of Myself” 570-571). In discounting “articulation,” the speaker releases himself from the need for linguistic precision, the kind of scientifically accurate representation that Howells calls for. But I would add that even in its description of the buds folded beneath speech, the poem also *embodies* this movement away from language as direct transmission. The image describes speech as metaphoric, as having depth, containing meaning that is not outwardly and immediately displayed; at the same time, it also *uses* metaphor--the image does its work on the level of literary conceit.

When Whitman’s poetic speaker constructs himself as the prophetic originator of a democratic universe, it is also not merely a celebration of literary and creative power, but an act of it. The poem’s figurative language grants the poet-God his authority as himself a kind of figurative, almost mythic presence. Section 42 in “Song of Myself” begins, *in medias res*, with “a call in the midst of the crowd,/My own voice, orotund sweeping and final” (68). The democratic poet-God is introduced mysteriously and partially here, as the identity of the voice calling through the crowd is held in suspension until the second line; the speaker declines to present himself directly to the reader, instead positioning himself at an angle. Out of this obliqueness arises a brief moment of startling simplicity, as the artist-God openly and easily gathers his subjects round: “Come my children,/Come my boys and girls, my women,” he invites in another echo of the “meal equally set.” But that inviting, equalizing intention is dropped back behind the abstruse in the next line. “Now the performer launches his nerve, he has pass’d his prelude on the reeds within,” the stanza continues, and the language is parse-able, but not easily

and not to certainty—it requires interpretation. The poet remains at his station facilitating democracy, but his language veils him as mythic, unreachable.

The section immediately preceding this passage in “Song of Myself” is one which Mack takes as a primary focus, and it will help us explore this phenomenon more thoroughly. Section 41 begins:

I am he bringing help for the sick as they pant on their backs,
And for strong upright men I bring yet more needed help.

I heard what was said of the universe,
Heard it and heard it of several thousand years;
It is middling well as far as it goes—but is that all?

Magnifying and applying come I,
Outbidding at the start the old cautious hucksters,
Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah,
Lithographing Kronos, Zeus his son, and Hercules his grandson,
Buying drafts of Osiris, Isis, Belus, Brahma, Buddha,
In my portfolio placing Manito loose, Allah on a leaf, the crucifix engraved,
With Odin and the hideous-faced Mexitli and every idol and image,
Taking them all for what they are worth and not a cent more,
Admitting they were alive and did the work of their days...
Accepting the rough deific sketches to fill out better in myself,
 bestowing them freely on each man and woman I see,
Discovering as much or more in a framer framing a house... (1021-1037).

If the poet’s mythic capacity as the performer on the reeds arose from his elevated and obscuring language, here it comes from his alignment with the greatest literary and mythological figures of all time. Mack reads this passage as reflecting Whitman’s attempt, not to assert himself as equal to, or even to replace traditional mythological and religious narratives, as he calls for the replacement of the priests in the Preface. Rather, Whitman’s aim becomes to “read himself, as the emblem of common experience and democratic selfhood, into the very narratives he would subordinate,” appropriating these ancient myths as already inherently part of his own democratic cosmology (Mack 14).

This idea marks two ways in which the separation between the democratic-poetic reality and extant cultural systems begins to break down. First, the figures that the poem invokes straddle the divide between the literary and the institutional. Stars of the most beloved human narratives, they work metaphorically on their “readers” in the same way that the image of the “folded bud” of speech does—at the same time that they head particular religious denominations. And if we take Mack’s suggestion that the speaker here actually re-appropriates these narratives as part of his own, the literary-democratic and the culturally institutional become even more deeply interrelated.

But there is a third, different, and still further way in which this passage takes the action of the creative-democratic poet and embeds it in the cultural. Mack again helps us by noting the distinctively commercial language that pervades the section, which he reads as further emphasizing Whitman’s intent to develop a truly pragmatic worldview—a vision of new democratic reality that is functional, “alive” and doing “the work of [its] day,” ready to be put into practice. But this language also locates *the process of establishing the poet’s creative authority* within the realm of the physical and commercial. The poet enters himself alongside a dozen competing ancient mythologies in full celebration of their figurativeness, their position outside of the real. But on a lexical level, he acts as a member of a working-class culture which, though in a different way than Zeus or Buddha or the priests, is thoroughly *of* the inequitable reality that the poet-God aims to change. The speaker “outbids,” “buys,” “takes,” “lithographs”; he implicates the “old cautious hucksters” themselves as partners in these transactions, participants in a different kind of institution. The great poetically-constructed deities—of which the Whitmanian poet is now one—remain at the height of literary conceit and authorial creativity.

They act, however, in the same capacity as the framer framing his house, the bidder at an auction—physical, transactional, earthly, human.

Thus far we have dealt predominantly with the sections of *Leaves of Grass* in which the speaker's approach to establishing a new democratic realism relies on the creative authority of the poet—even if that authority is often embedded in the cultural systems it claims to oppose. The relationship of this voice to Howellsian realism, then, is complicated. In its engagement with highly literary, metaphoric structures, this poetic mode pushes away from Howells ideologically—but the way that it simultaneously engages with the details, the language of cultural institutions prefigures a different kind of realism that appears in the poems' catalogue sections, to which we will now turn.

Whitman's transcendental catalogue sections represent here the culmination of a poetic mode that is traceable throughout *Leaves of Grass*; in contrast to the transformative, creative voice which raises up the poet-God, this second voice is interested in a much more overtly Howellsian kind of transcriptive realism. Perhaps Whitman himself describes it best:

The greatest poet has less a marked style and is more the channel of thoughts and things without increase or diminution...he swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome, I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains...what I tell I tell for precisely what it is...what I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition. You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me (Whitman 493).

This is in essence the same sentiment that lies behind Whitman's condemnation—just pages earlier in the 1855 Preface—of “executives and legislatures,” of priests. The source of inequality is still the false, discriminating order overlaid on society by its cultural leaders—but here, the poet recognizes himself as part of this problematic body of cultural leadership. Creative authority is no longer a solution, allowing the poet to overtake inequality. Instead, language that is not

directly transcriptive, language with a “marked style,” must be *set aside* for the sake of democracy. This idea takes us directly back to Howells, whose democratic realism is deeply dependent on transparent, transcriptive language. For Whitman, that linguistic simplicity is democratizing in that it erases the distance between poet and reader, as well as any unfair distinctions between, returning for example to our earlier passage, “the wicked” and “the righteous,” the kept-woman and the ordinary woman.

Thus the problem of inequality in the extant socially systematized world is distilled down from the level of legal and political institutions to the level of language. The poet’s goal becomes transparency, finding representative language so plain and unbiased it slips behind the imbalances created by American cultural structures. In places, the poem articulates this goal quite insistently. In one of the opening sections in “Song of Myself,” the speaker invites the reader to bypass artistic language entirely, asking us to meet him at “the origin of all poems” (33). “You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the specters in books,” he proclaims—but rather than the reader rising to a new democratic cosmology, the poet must drop back to the most basic shared experiential plane, the already inherently democratic “origin” of poetry.

My choice to discuss this transcriptive poetic voice and the deific, creative one separately is largely for argumentative purposes; in fact both voices are traceable close proximity to one another throughout the poem--we noted earlier, for example, that Section 42, the “call in the midst of the crowd,” tacks back and forth between figurative obscurity and inviting transparency. The catalogues are not a culmination of either poetic mode in terms of the poem’s structure, then, but function as an embodiment of the transcriptive poet’s search for simplicity of language and perfection of representation. In these sections, the poet works entirely through what we might

call acts of naming--simply listing or “cataloguing” a wide variety of characters and locations. In this way he reduces the task of literary representation to its simplest possible form—far from the elaborate mythological structures of the “old cautious hucksters” section, this minimalized structure lowers the poet closer to the “origin of poetry” by removing the barriers of linguistic ornamentation.

The most frequently discussed catalogue sections are certainly those in “Song of Myself,” but the best platform for examining the way in which these sections push toward democratic transparency is a poem that first appeared in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* under the title “Poem of Salutation”; it was later re-titled “Salut Au Monde!” The poem is organized around a series of questions that the speaker asks himself: “What do you hear Walt Whitman?” “What do you see Walt Whitman?” (21, 41). The response sets the poet up, not as a creative or shaping force, but as a kind of surveyor, observing and noting the contents—cultural, human, physical, geographic—of the world at large, without altering them:

I hear the workman singing and the farmer’s wife singing,
 I hear in the distance the sounds of children and of animals early in the day,
 I hear emulous shouts of Australians pursuing the wild horse...
 I hear continual echoes from the Thames,
 I hear fierce French liberty songs...
 I hear the chirp of the Mexican muleteer, and the bells of the mule,
 I hear the Arab muezzin calling from the top of the mosque,
 I hear the Christian priests at the altars of their churches, I hear the responsive base and
 soprano,
 I hear the cry of the Cossack, and the sailor’s voice putting to sea at Okotsk...

I see plenteous waters,
 I see mountain peaks, I see the sierras of Andres where they range...
 I see the Lybian, Arabian, and Asiatic deserts...
 The waters of Hindustan, the China sea, and the gulf of Guinea... (22-35, 48-58).

Part of the sense of this poem’s democratic intent comes from the way the speaker’s observations are arranged. The collection of images looks un-patterned in that it draws together physically and culturally disparate figures in juxtapositions that seem easy, thoughtless. “I see the cities of the

earth and make myself at random a part of them,” the speaker claims later, empathizing with the Parisian, the Siberian and the Brazilian vaquero with equal facility, taking in with one glance the Amazon and the Yiang-tse. In fact the succession of images is rather carefully inclusive, covering all continents, all major religions--“all the haunts and homes of men,” the poem ends (226). But it is also the simplicity of the images that creates this sense of representative fairness; they receive no development, are noted without commentary, and in this way the poet avoids having them issue any judgment.

Thus we can recognize within the catalogues a kind of extremity of Howellsian realist intent; language is stripped down its most “simple, honest and natural” in that the poem seeks out a kind of minimal unit of evocation, the smallest word or phrase that can successfully signify the represented figure. But perhaps unsurprisingly, this intent is not perfectly carried out. I suggested previously that the democratic poet-God relies for his authority on the *vehicle* of culturally saturated language. In perhaps an even more obvious way, the catalogues make the same engagement. “Salut Au Monde!” openly explores the same culturally instituted categories that Whitman recognizes as problematic in the Preface. The poet may be trying to avoid communicating his own additional linguistic bias, but the designations that he explores already carry cultural baggage. The speaker acknowledges himself that he is dealing in “ranks, colors, barbarisms, civilizations,” religious, ethnic, national, geographic, occupational and biological systems of organization. When the poem minimizes the distinction between the Parisian and the Brazilian by simply and starkly juxtaposing the two terms, that effect is dependent upon the extra-textual connotations that those terms solicit from the reader. The conjunction is only democratizing because our understanding of the word “Parisian” is more complicated than “someone who lives in Paris”; without our added cultural association, the comparison is

meaningless. In effect, then, the catalogues achieve something very different from Howellsian transcription. Rather than trying to divest language of its cultural complications, the catalogues transform these labels into a kind of metonymic touchstone. Instead of an obstacle, they become a vessel, and the reader is transported *by way of* cultural structures outside of the poet's creative mediation, back to the "origin of all poems."

The catalogues in "Song of Myself" work toward a similar effect, but they rely on a more complex structure that actually reintegrates the authority of the creative poet. The longest passage begins in Section 15:

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,
 The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles
 its wild ascending lisp,
 The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving dinner,
 The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm...
 The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirm'd case,
 He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother's bedroom;
 The jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws works at his case,
 He turns his quid of tobacco while his eyes blurr with the manuscript;
 The malform'd limbs are tied to the surgeon's table,
 What is removed drops horribly in a pail;
 The quadroon girl is sold at an auction-stand, the drunkard nods by the bar-room stove...
 The canal boy trots on the tow-path, the book-keeper counts at his desk,
 the shoemaker waxes his thread,
 The conductor beats time for the band and all the performers follows him...
 The bride unrumples her white dress, the minute-hand of the clock moves slowly,
 The opium-eater reclines with rigid head and just-open'd lips,
 The prostitute draggles her shawls, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled neck...

The speaker here invokes categories that sound less institutional than many of those in "Salut Au Monde!" because they are more specific. "Contralto" is a narrower classification than "Parisian," and a less politically loaded one than "the Arab muezzin" or "the Mexican muleteer." The way the categories in "Salut Au Monde!" are positioned to create a balanced and inclusive picture also draws attention to the fact that they are part of different social systems; a contralto is still a particular type of physical and professional person, but it is a less self-consciously social category. The speaker adds a single modifier, "pure," and a location, "the organ loft," and the

resulting outlined image is spare, but not as stark as the single word, “Parisian.” Instead of placing the imaginative burden immediately and totally on the reader’s extra-textual cultural associations, the shape of this phrase loosely suggests an artistically created biography. The spirit of the transformative poet-God is in operation again here, but not to the same level of completion as before; rather than an entire mythological narrative, an artistically constructed figure who aims to compete with Zeus himself, he imagines only a draft, an outline. On one hand, then, the reader is encouraged to take the phrase as the beginning of a narrative, a biography imaginatively generated by the author; on the other hand, the description is still sparse enough that, as with “the Parisian,” we must supply the informational thrust from our own cultural experience in order to make any real narrative sense of the phrase.

Let us take the “married and unmarried children” as one more example. Those six short contextualizing words, “ride home to their Thanksgiving dinner,” tie the image down all the way to a particular day. The multiplicity of children, married and unmarried in combination, further suggests, not a general event but the experience of a specific family. Perhaps these characters are fictional, invented by the poet, or perhaps they refer to real people who are simply unknowable to us—in either case we can only really understand them as part of another poetic narrative. But the speaker only suggests that narrative with the broadest of brushstrokes; we are required to fill in the gaps. And it is the associations that we bring to the central set of social-category words—“married,” “unmarried,” “children”—which guide us in that development. The way that language itself participates in cultural systems of organization allows these single words to powerfully direct our experience of each catalogued image, to expand a single line into a complete act of representation.

We can actually see this process more clearly in sections where it is less successful because the distance between the poet and the contemporary reader is greater. Sometimes the poet relies on words that are simply *too* culturally loaded, or have become more or differently loaded over the last century and a half. The speaker's defense of "thieves and dwarves" in Section 24, for instance, hardly reads in 2011 as a genuinely unbiased and equalizing sentiment despite its intention. "The lunatic" is a good example from the "Song of Myself" catalogues (in "Salut Au Monde!", we have all "the defective human bodies of the earth,/The blind, the deaf and dumb, idiots, hunchbacks, lunatics") of the way in which the contemporary reader's cultural associations are sometimes turned back on themselves. The word cuts so sharply into a discriminatory social category that it becomes jarring, off-putting, rather than allowing us to participate in the construction of the narrative. But this accidental consequence of changed language and politics allows us to see how much work the category-words do here.

Not entirely within either of Whitman's modes of poetic intent, then—neither the work of the creative poet-priest or the perfect transcriber—the catalogues in fact draw both voices together to effect a different kind of democratic realism. Mack suggested that Whitman recognizes "the futility of attempting to verify the truthfulness of words by how accurately they correspond to non-linguistic fact" (Mack 5). We can see now how the catalogues illustrate this. With "truthfulness," or realism, and democratic equality bound up into one idea, the catalogues embrace this futility, embrace the unreliability with which language, even single words, can democratically, realistically, represent the American people; rather than totally authorizing the poet's transformative power, or working to strip language down to perfect transparency, they use culturally saturated language as a means of *authorizing the reader* instead. We are invited to enter into the imaginative work that the poem does, to share the responsibility of representation,

and it is in this way that we are truly allowed to stand beside the poet and look in the mirror with him. Whitman's realism succeeds in the sense that the common American reader is not only accurately and equitably represented, but also becomes a collaborator himself in the evocation of a democratic reality.

2. The Watcher and the Field-Glass: James's Invested Author and Isabel Archer's Self-Portrait

The Portrait of a Lady was published a full ten years before the "deathbed" edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* in 1891, but James nonetheless fits far more easily into a discussion of late 19th-century American realism than Whitman. James and Howells were contemporaries and personal friends, and Howells promoted James's work alongside that of other realist and naturalist writers. But the theory of realism that this essay will recognize in James's critical writing, and which will form the basis for our discussion of *The Portrait of a Lady*, focuses Howells's principles through a particular conception of the figure of the artist; James locates the source of the accuracy, the "truthfulness" of a text within the personal imaginative capacity of its author. Whitman's two poetic voices worked with different strategies to imagine a democratic poetic reality separate from inequitable American cultural systems. James is perhaps less interested in democracy, but his vision of the realist author is also made up of two different and sometimes conflicting components. Both components, however, depend for success on the author's singular position, and on the same separation from cultural structures as Whitman.

The first of these components is perhaps the most recognizably Howellsian; beginning with "The Art of Fiction" in 1884, James's critical writing extols the "accomplished novelist" as one who is exacting, almost scientific, in a way that recalls the Howellsian realist author's empirical observation of the grasshopper. Even as James dismisses Walter Besant's notion that

fiction should follow a set of rules, he requires the novelist to “speak with assurance, with the tone of the historian,” to have “taste” and to recognize that “art is essentially selection” (“Art of Fiction” 322, 324). The overall picture presented is one of the artist as a skilled, discerning expert, practiced, deliberate, judicial. It is this treatment of the author that forms the cornerstone of the well-recognized configuration of James as the “master novelist.” In a sense our reading of the isolated Jamesian author is drawn out of this trope, and it will be useful to take a moment to trace the way in which it connects the realist author’s precision, his masterfulness and truthfulness, to his singularity.

Though it has been revised and contested in several different directions over the last 40 years, this image of James as a master artist was critically predominant for much of the 20th century, as even a cursory glance through a bibliography on James makes clear.² “The Art of Fiction” is often taken as the beginning of James’s attempt to “dignify” the novel, to elevate fiction to the level of high art, but it is his later critical work that truly launches the elite and selective Jamesian author upon the world. The Prefaces that James wrote to accompany the republication of his collected works in the 24-volume 1908 New York Edition--and indeed, the existence of the edition in the first place--have also long been taken as evidence of a Jamesian author whose first priorities are detailed accuracy and style. Contemporarily reviewed by Percy Lubbock as “an event, indeed the first event” in the history of the novel, the New York Edition was further canonized over the course of the 20th century as evidence of James’s formal “mastery” (McWhirter 2). Many of the theoretical arguments evinced in the 1908 Prefaces echo the insistence of “The Art of Fiction” on an elite, “accomplished” author whose powers of

²A keyword search of “Henry James” + “master” in the MLA International Bibliography brings up 11 exact titular matches. Leon Edel’s *Henry James: The Master 1901-1916* is by a stream of variations, including: *The Critical Reception of Henry James: Creating a Master*, *Recanonizing Henry James: The Master*, *Henry James: The Mature Master*, *Who’s Henry James? Further Lessons of the Master...*

selection and organization set him apart from the masses—from his readership. We will turn to these in greater detail shortly—but even entirely aside from its content, the publication of the New York Edition itself has long been read as suggesting James’s emphasis on craft and revision, and on the careful construction and presentation of novel and author alike. Leon Edel’s 1951 essay “The Architecture of Henry James’s ‘New York Edition’” perhaps summarizes this critical attitude best when it characterizes the collection as a “literary monument”—a beautifully, carefully assembled tribute to none other than the artist himself (Edel 172).

“The Art of Fiction” and the New York Edition Prefaces, then, form an essential part of the platform on which the image of the Jamesian author as singular in both his task and ability is built. This image has, of course, been seriously complicated since its critical heyday. Since the 1970s, a steady stream of James scholars, building on deconstructionist theories and reacting to the intensity of, as Ross Posnock put it, the “aura of sanctity” that had grown up around James’s cultural presence, have attempted to dismantle the master novelist on multiple claims (McWhirter 2). But our departure from this conversation will not take issue with the authority that has been granted to the master novelist so much as it will attempt to separate the author’s singular *artistic* capacity from his political configuration. James’s stylistic mastery and his cultural authority are, as Lubbock and others suggest, self-declared, but they work with and depend upon affirmation from a literary and social community. This reading will recognize a Jamesian author-figure with all of the taste and assurance of the master novelist. I am not interested here, however, in the way these qualities establish the author as a cultural and political “presence,” the way they socially grant him artistic authority. Rather, we will examine the way that they work alongside and with a second, quite different quality, not to elevate the author within society, but to establish his independence from it.

This second capacity that James's author possesses contrasts sharply with the selective author-as-historian image that we first traced in "The Art of Fiction." The fact that both ideas are presented in close proximity within the same essay already suggests, however, that like Whitman's two contrasting poetic voices, they ultimately work together. Often within a single paragraph, "The Art of Fiction" alternates between calling on the artist to be scientifically accurate, organized, exhaustive, and celebrating an engagement with the artistic subject that is not systematic but loose and deeply subjective. James never stops emphasizing the importance of truthful representation, but when he urges the author to develop his "sense of reality," it is not always the discerning, empiricist "sense of reality" that the scientist or historian possesses. "Humanity is immense," he rhapsodizes, and "reality has a myriad of forms; the most one can affirm is that some of the flowers of fiction have the odour of it, and others have not; as for telling you in advance how your nosegay should be composed, that is another affair" ("Art of Fiction" 326). The essay describes "experience" as a spider-web in the "chamber of consciousness;" the task of the imaginative mind is to catch its elements like air-borne particles, "take to itself the faintest hints of life" and "convert the very pulses of the air into revelations" (326). Flowers, spider-webs, pulses and particles—in his attempt to articulate the process of the realist author, James is just as often reduced to this fanciful and utterly imprecise language as he is able to describe "the importance of exactness—of truth of detail" (327). The essay's language seems to reflect the ineffable nature of its subject. The artist's "sense of reality" is intuitive, indescribable, ephemeral like a spider-web, an unnamable artistic capacity that is accessibly only to the individual who possesses it—and only accessible to him in a kind of single instinctive leap. Bound only loosely to the physical world, and hardly at all to the social, the author who must

“catch the color of life itself” is isolated in a different way than the master novelist building a historically accurate monument—but both figures must work alone.

Examining two of the many critical attempts that have been made to negotiate between these seemingly opposite artistic sensibilities will help us to further understand the complexity of their relationship, as well as their dependence on the author’s socially isolated position. Let us turn first to an essay by the prolific David McWhirter; one of the multitude of late 20th century critics working to undercut the dominance of the constructing, historically-accurate Jamesian “master.” McWhirter deals primarily with this selective author, but his particular revision of the master novelist reading is supremely helpful in that it recognizes the selective authority of James’s artist-figure as *less exclusive*. In his 1995 introduction to a collection entitled *Henry James’s New York Edition: The Construction of Authorship*, McWhirter recognizes, as many other critics do, that reading James himself and the Jamesian author-figure as an “autonomous, unitary, originating and decidedly masculine genius” is problematic because it is too totalizing, it leaves no room for complication. But unlike most critics, McWhirter does not locate the source of that problem in our own post-structural literary world, but in James’s own New York Edition. For McWhirter, the volume’s emphasis on discerning judgment and selectivity does not just build up the author as a towering, stony-faced “master”; rather, these qualities are part of a model of authorial self-hood that is decidedly “revisionary.” McWhirter suggests that James is interested, not in the definitive construction of his own self-image, or of the artistic reality within his fiction, but in an open exploration of the nature of imaginative consciousness: he depends “not on a totalizing narrative of mastery but on a capacity for establishing multiple, often contradictory lines of connection, relation and responsiveness to the many Henry Jameses who inhabit [the New York Edition]” (McWhirter 15).

This suggestion will become even more useful when we turn to *The Portrait of a Lady*, but immediately, it helps us in two ways. First, it allows us to take James's critically presented author as dynamic rather than static, authoritative, but also exploratory--a notion that helps make sense of the way two such different authors cohabitate "The Art of Fiction." Second, it allows us to take the New York Edition not as a symbol of the artist's terminal authority in carefully shaping and re-shaping his text, but as modeling the author's constant reconfiguration and re-evaluation of his own sense of purpose and process. Under this model, James's 1908 Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* no longer seems to overwrite the 1881 novel it comments on; rather, the two can be taken as in dynamic conversation, if they are not perfectly continuous. (We might apply the same thought to the revisions James made to the body of many of the texts included in the New York Edition).

With the new openness of this relationship in mind, let us turn to another critic who deals more directly with the text of the 1908 Preface to *Portrait*. Dorothy Hale succinctly summarizes the opposition between the two artistic qualities which we traced through "The Art of Fiction," between the accurate, impartial historian and the intuitive free-wheeler, in her 1998 reading of *The Art of the Novel*. James, she argues, "outlines two competing ideals of novelistic authorship: on the one hand...the novelist is best when he projects his views...on the other hand...when he refuses to project them" (Hale 85). But Hale manages to synthesize the work of the "projecting" author with the work of the objective one by understanding both as acting from a singular, isolated position. We have already discussed the projecting author's intuition as un-shareable, untranslatable, in "The Art of Fiction," and the 1908 Preface reinforces that idea, pervaded by the same insubstantial imagery. There are more flowers, as the "degree of the artist's prime sensibility" is likened to "the quality and capacity of...soil, its ability to 'grow' with due

freshness and straightness any vision of life” (*Portrait* 6). The story, characters and theme of James’s novels become “wind-blown germs”—and as for their origin, James asks, “Isn’t it all we can say that they come from every quarter of heaven, that they are *there* at almost any turn of the road? They are the breath of life—by which I mean that life, in its own way, breathes them upon us. They are...floated into our minds by the current of life” (5).

Hale re-identifies this indescribable artistic capacity, the “degree of the artist’s prime sensibility,” as essentially a measure of the author’s personal, subjective investment in the artistic subject—what she terms his “interestedness.” But this necessarily vague and personal quality is not, for Hale, opposed to the objectivity and precision of the Howells-like realism that the Preface also calls for. (In an almost perfect paraphrase of Howells, James suggests that the most important question we can ask of a novel is, “Is it valid, in a word, is it genuine?” (6)). Rather, she recognizes the author’s subjectively invested, intuitive perception, his “interestedness,” as essential to the clarity and accuracy of his representation. Hale describes an “economy of relation between viewer and viewed,” in which the artist’s “capacity for appreciation,” the intensity of his personal investment in the scene he is observing, is directly proportional to the clarity with which he can artistically convey it. The greater the artist’s knowledge of his artistic subject, the more irresistible its reproduction becomes; “the palpability of [the author’s] point of view—his interestedness—is imagined by James as a power to make palpable, not just to vivify but to instantiate the authentic identity of the thing that interests him” (Hale 87).

Hale explicitly links, then, the artist’s intuition and his accuracy as dependent parts of a single process. Thus far, we have not really separated the observation of reality from its representation, taking both together as either enacted meticulously or instinctively, and Hale does

not really depart from this. In fact, significantly, she further emphasizes the inextricability of the acts of perception and of rendering, the author's singular point of view carrying him in one movement from "interestedness" through to an authentic artistic image. We can follow this notion out by re-reading one of the most famous passages in all of James's theory, his description of the "house of fiction," whose windows are

...but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other...The spreading field, the human scene, is the 'choice of subject'; the pierced aperture...is the 'literary form'; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist (*Portrait* 7).

The "watcher's" task is to bring together subject and form, observed image and "pierced aperture," but we can now suggest that this process is no longer solely an act of thoughtful organization, the work of a meticulously observing author-historian. Rather, the watcher's capacity for perception and his capacity to render depend on the quality of his personal investment in the artistic subject, upon a relationship between observer and subject that is unquantifiable and impenetrable from the outside.

Hale's argument, then, suggests that James's theoretical realism neither attempts to totally objectively detail an extant reality, nor depends entirely on the author's creativity. Rather, it requires the author to work from a particular, isolated position, the singularity of his own consciousness. This allows him to perceive and to represent a reality that is—and here perhaps lies the real paradox—inherently more accurate because it is delineated by a mind from which it is thoroughly separate. The text of *The Portrait of a Lady* itself serves both to clarify and to complicate this argument. It is clarifying in the sense that the novel's protagonist, Isabel Archer, can be taken as a kind of literary dramatization of the artist-figure presented in James's critical writing. If the measure of a good novel is "the amount of felt life concerned in producing it,"

Isabel's determination to "live fully" suggests an exploration of the perceptive author (*Portrait* 6). If that author's unique consciousness is the key to the realistic enactment of his perception, Isabel's celebrated independence and her disruption of social expectation seem to set her against apart from ordinary cultural experience and structure. Perhaps the best example of the way the novel, at least initially, sets Isabel up as a self-isolating perceptive figure is her early refusal to marry Lord Warburton. Accepting Warburton's proposal would enact Isabel's basic and expected participation in the social world—Warburton's wealth and title only make him a more potent symbol of a compromise Isabel is not willing to make. She cannot accept his proposal because she "can never be happy in any extraordinary way; not by turning away, by separating [her]self...from life. From the usual chances and dangers, from what most people know and suffer" (119). She is determined to achieve a full and heightened breadth of experience and perception, at the expense of her own social peace; like the Jamesian author, she must stand alone in order to recognize truth.

But as Hale suggests, the power and action of James's author is not only perceptive, but draws together in one movement intuitive observation and *production* of an authentic artistic representation. The mode of Isabel's artistic production is both incredibly important to understand and less than obvious. She plays the piano only passably, she loses her interest in books over the course of the novel ("...literature had seemed a fading light..."), and she never writes fiction, although others seem to expect it of her (93). Isabel understands her own heightened, artist-like perception as dependent on her separateness from ordinary social experience—but in an odd, recursive way, her own singular consciousness is also initially set up as a kind of artistic canvas. The novel, of course, is itself a "portrait" of Isabel, the product of James's own process of imaginative perception and revision—but Isabel's quest is to paint a kind

of self-portrait, to fully experience the world around her so that she may best understand and express her own mind.

It is perhaps easiest to see this in terms of contrast; the foil to Isabel's interest in artistry for the sake of self-recognition, self-awareness, is certainly the figure of Madame Merle. Merle's first introduction to us is as an accomplished musician, far more of one than Isabel—yet she has none of Isabel's, or James's (or for that matter, Howells's), concern that her art should reach for something essential, should represent experience fully. Rather, as Isabel recognizes early in their friendship, writing, painting, music are part of Madame Merle's social presentation of herself. She gives away her sketches, she plays the piano with her audience in mind; her art forms the substance of her connection to others. Isabel takes this as deeply detrimental, to Merle's art and to her character. Her greatest flaw is that she is “too perfectly the social animal that man and woman are supposed to have intended to be,” that she exists “only in her relations, direct or indirect, with her fellow mortals” (167). Such an existence seems low, incomplete to Isabel; she recognizes Madame Merle's sociability as, like the act of marriage to Warburton, an impediment to artistic self-understanding and expression, and seeks to separate herself from it: “I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself,” she insists, “but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one” (175).

As with Warburton, part of Isabel's wariness here is in response to Madame Merle's location in the material world as well as the social, her argument that

...there's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our 'self'? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for things! One's self—for other people—is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps—these things are all expressive” (175).

The connection between the aesthetic and the expensive is constantly held up in *The Portrait of a Lady*, and it is a connection that could support an entire book's worth of exploration. But here "the expensive" merely becomes a perfect synonym for "the social." Madame Merle's clothes and furniture are part of the way she shapes her image for the benefit of others, just as her "pastimes" are. But for Isabel, real artistic expression is not an act that takes a social form, or that seeks social affirmation. It is created by an individual consciousness, but it is also directed at that single consciousness; the artist is the only one with the need or the right to judge the authenticity, the truthfulness, of her own self-portrait.

Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond—who also "lives exclusively for the world" and represents the combined destructive power of the material and the social for Isabel—dramatize then, another aspect of James's theory: the "anxiety of provision for the reader's amusement" that he describes in the 1908 Preface to *Portrait* (11). James identifies some elements in *The Portrait of a Lady* as "of the essence" and others as "of the treatment," and the difference between the two is more or less the difference between the sketches Madame Merle gives away and Isabel's experiential "self-portrait." James contrasts an image of the entertaining but extraneous Henrietta Stackpole clinging to the side of a coach with the moment of Isabel's quiet self-reflection after she sees Osmond and Madame Merle sitting together and begins to understand the true nature of their relationship. The moment, James claims

...was designed to have all the vivacity of incident and all the economy of picture. She sits up, by her dying fire, far into the night, under the spell of recognitions on which she finds the last sharpness suddenly wait. It is a representation simply of her motionlessly *seeing*, and an attempt withal to make the mere still lucidity of her act as 'interesting' as the surprise of a caravan or the identification of a pirate...it all goes on without her being approached by another person and without her leaving her chair. It is obviously the best thing in the book (15).

Even if it is not "the best thing in the book," this scene certainly does achieve a kind of highly evocative minimalist beauty solely through its depiction of Isabel's internal experience. It

is a pivotal moment in the novel, in which key information about Osmond and Merle's relationship is suggested to the reader, if it is not yet completely clear to Isabel; but the drama and the aesthetic power of the scene arise not from the content of Isabel's revelation, but from the way she both experiences and re-shapes it as artistic. If ever there were an example of "converting the very pulses of the air into revelation," it might be this moment in which Isabel grasps as one impulse both the truth and the artistry before her: entering the drawing room to find Merle and Osmond paused in conversation, she stops short because "she had received an impression. The impression had, in strictness, nothing unprecedented; but she felt it as something new...the thing made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light" (364). It is not Isabel's social awareness that helps her here—she tries, but cannot precisely trace the source of her unease in the pair's posture, their body language, their facial expressions. But with the intuition of the author who can "catch the color of life itself," she recognizes reality in the artistic tableau these two figures create. The scene later that night which James describes in the Preface, then, constitutes the artist's imaginative re-configuration of her subject as Isabel stands in the middle of the saloon "gazing at a remembered vision" of her husband and Madame Merle "unconsciously and familiarly associated" (364).

We can see here how Isabel's singular artistic consciousness helps her achieve a kind of aesthetic self-understanding and self-expression that is in total contrast to Madame Merle and Osmond's completely socially orientated artistry, a "realism" that both stems from her isolation and feeds back into it. But the *novel's* realism does not stop there, and James does not allow Isabel to stop there; he moves her, with all of her disdain for Merle's clothes and Osmond's "furniture," quite literally into their living room. Isabel's marriage to Osmond represents her movement into the social and material world, where her singular imaginative consciousness

operates in a different way. As Mrs. Gilbert Osmond, Isabel undeniably and perhaps unavoidably becomes entrenched in the world of social artistry that her husband so thoroughly occupies, giving her Thursday evening parties and chaperoning Pansy to dances. But the effect of Isabel's entrance into this world contradicts her earlier fear of the social and material as "barriers" to artistry, as well as James's wariness in the Preface of making too much provision for the reader's amusement. Isabel's artistic realism is not compromised when she becomes Mrs. Osmond, but expands to *include* the social and cultural. As Whitman's realism ultimately relies on language as culturally saturated, Isabel here begins to absorb and incorporate Osmond and Merle's social world into her own imaginatively artistic one.

We can observe this immediately by recalling Isabel's response to Lord Warburton's proposal. The letter she writes is in fact almost an abstention, a refusal or perhaps an inability to really engage with the possibility of a life with Warburton: "We see our lives from our own point of view," she writes, "that is the privilege of the weakest and humblest of us; and I shall never be able to see mine in the manner you proposed" (107). Isabel not only dismisses the social world that Warburton represents, she cannot even conceive of engaging with it. Osmond, though poorer than Warburton, makes up for it with a careful social pose, a vigilant and well-trained "eye to effect"; both men are gateways to the same kind of life. But where Warburton's society was an impediment to Isabel's artistic intuition, Osmond becomes its subject; our first introduction to the Osmonds is an image of "a small group that might have been described by a painter as composing well," and one of Isabel's first impressions is "the image of a quiet, clever, sensitive, distinguished man, strolling on a moss-grown terrace above the sweet Val d'Arno and holding by the hand a little girl whose bell-like clearness gave a new grace to childhood" (195, 237). Rather than refusing to engage in the possibility of a socialized life as she does with Warburton,

Isabel engages with it deeply as an aesthetic image. She intuitively grasps and artistically refigures Osmond in the same way that she later does when she finds Merle and Osmond together in the drawing room. And even long after their marriage has begun to turn sour, Isabel continues to feel its aesthetic weight, unable to turn her back on “the single sacred act of her life” (386).

Isabel’s singular artistic consciousness, then, works *upon* the social world here; Madame Merle with her furniture and her pastimes, Osmond and his social finagling, the Thursday night parties, form the “human scene,” and Isabel stands at the window with her field glass, re-framing them as part of her personal aesthetic vision, her self-portrait. The realism that the novel effects does not ignore but absorbs the “furniture” that James’s critical writing opposes. But we can add one more dimension to this realism by recognizing that the relationship which Isabel forges here between the social and the artistic is in fact bi-directional. Osmond and his reality are aesthetically re-cast—but like Whitman’s cultural category-words, they also become a kind of medium for the artistic shape of Isabel’s experience. We have already seen this to some degree in the saloon scene; Isabel’s revelation takes an aesthetic form, a “remembered vision” of a “flicker of light,” but its *content*--the hint the Osmond and Merle were once lovers--is the stuff of gossip. The sequence in Chapter XXVI, in which Isabel visits the sights of Rome, will help us take this idea further. The backdrop in this part of the novel—Saint Peter’s basilica, the gallery at the Capitol, the great achievements of human cultural and artistic history--provides a striking framework for the events that play out there. The first description of Isabel’s experience of the city is both aesthetic and highly individual; it is the experience of the intuitive author, as yet unattached to the cultural landscape around her. Isabel sees both more and less than what is enumerated in her traveler’s guidebook (“her Murray”), and her thoughts are constantly directed

inward: “From the Roman past to Isabel Archer’s future was a long stride, but her imagination had taken it in a single flight and now hovered in slow circles over the nearer and richer field” (246).

In the next line, however, her flight is interrupted by the entrance of Warburton, and Isabel’s visit to Rome is transformed from one in which beauty leads deeper into isolation into the climactic act in a kind of social comedy. At Saint Peter’s with Warburton, Ralph, Henrietta Stackpole and Bantling—the only missing social force is perhaps Madame Merle—Isabel soon runs into Gilbert Osmond as well, days before he is to declare his love for her and officially invite her into his artistic world (“...one ought to make one’s life a work of art”). When Osmond arrives and tells Isabel, “I didn’t come for the others,” directly echoing Warburton’s own proposition at Gardencourt while the man himself stands ten feet away, it is a beautiful, emotionally resonant image that is affecting, that *works*, entirely because of Warburton and Osmond’s social configuration.

In part, this is a structural effect that the reader experiences, the work of James himself, and we will return to this point momentarily. But it is also affecting for Isabel. This confluence of social events into an aesthetic moment snaps her out of her individual experience of Rome; Warburton’s entrance seems to open her up to the notion that the cityscape around her also represents a confluence of the social into the aesthetic, and vice versa. Saint Peter’s is a church, a functional place of worship, and a symbol of cultural institution in the same way that it is for Whitman. It is also a physical structure, made of the same material stuff as Madame Merle’s furniture, erected not in an intuitive flash of imagination, but by human labor—as James describes his own work in the Preface, the slow piling of “brick upon brick” (13). At the same time, it is the basilica’s incredible beauty that conducts its humanity, causes Isabel to feel that “in

that splendid immensity individual indiscretion carries but a short distance” (251). When Osmond complains later that Saint Peter’s is “too large; it makes one feel like an atom,” Isabel recognizes that this reduction of the individual is in fact what makes the basilica so magnificent. “Isn’t that the right way to feel in the greatest of human temples?” she responds, the aesthetic resonance of her own life, her meeting with Warburton and her impending marriage to Osmond, diminished but also heightened as she spots its echo in the ceiling of a 300-year-old church.

So Isabel’s social consciousness is developed by her artistic consciousness, at the same time that her artistic consciousness is expanded by her social one, each type of experience giving greater texture and meaning to the other. And it is through this mutually amplifying interchange that James, like Whitman, calls in the reader as the final player in *The Portrait of a Lady*’s realism. The elements that come together to make this scene powerful—the mirrored proposals, the setting, the poignant anticipation of an act which the reader knows will profoundly, and not positively, transform Isabel’s life—are, as noted above, structural, formal. They affect the reader’s aesthetic and emotional experience of the text, but they are rather clearly *orchestrated* by James himself. (And if by chance we missed the recapitulation of Warburton’s line by Osmond, Isabel helpfully points it out to us.) With its mechanics laid bare like this, the scene almost strikes the reader as the equivalent of James’s surprise caravan or pirate, Warburton’s strategic placement part of the same pandering act of “provision for the amusement of the reader” as Henrietta Stackpole. But that way that the artistic construction of the scene is foregrounded—the fact that Isabel herself notices the repetition of Warburton’s line—is perhaps what makes the scene firmly “of the essence.” Having Isabel herself recognize the moment’s literary resonance brings her experience and the reader’s experience into absolutely perfect consonance; the scene that James has created engages the reader’s imagination, while the scene

that Isabel experiences engages her imagination—but nothing at all now stands to separate the two, the scene as we read it in the novel from the reality in which Isabel lives.

Tracing this phenomenon through just one more passage, helps us recognize that even the genuine pain that Isabel suffers at the hands of Merle and Osmond's social machinations becomes the vehicle for an aesthetic self-consciousness, and the translation of her experience onto a universal artistic plane. When Isabel meets Madame Merle for the final time, recognizing her at last as completely false, she also perceives her as an eerily doubled and reversed art object: "The effect was strange, for Madame Merle was already so present to her vision that her appearance in the flesh was like suddenly, and rather awfully, seeing a painted picture move" (456). Like her impression of Osmond and Pansy strolling on the terrace above Val d'Arno, Isabel's imaginative vision of Madame Merle is so vivid that her bodily self becomes something gross in comparison, freshly locating her and her crime firmly within the world of vulgar sociability. This recognition is the emotional substance of the scene, Isabel's understanding that she has been used by Merle as "an applied, handled, hung-up tool, as senseless and convenient as mere shaped wood and iron"—she has been painfully drafted into Merle's world of calculated, material, architectural "things" (459). At the same time, the moment has the same artistic shape as the meeting in Saint Peter's, and the same doubly-imagined quality of Isabel's "remembered vision" in the saloon. The image of a painting unexpectedly moving recalls Isabel's speculation on the perceptive life of the sculptures in the Capitoline Museum; her interaction with Merle here is quietly elevated to the same universalized, artistic experience:

Disconnected visions passed through [her mind], and sudden dull gleams of memory, of expectation. The past and the future came and went at their will, but she saw them only in fitful images, which rose and fell by a logic of their own. It was extraordinary things she remembered. Now that she was in the secret... the truth of things, their mutual relations, their meaning, and for the most part their horror, rose before her with a kind of architectural vastness (465).

In these late scenes of the novel, Isabel inhabits this socially and artistically self-refracted mode of experience with increasing frequency and depth. Moments later, on the train back to Gardencourt, the actual structural shape of the novel again enables the reader and Isabel to have identical aesthetic experiences: she recalls that “Gardencourt had been her starting-point, and to those muffled chambers it was at least a temporary solution to return” (465). This moment of symmetry is part of the fabric of James’s text and the reader’s imaginative experience--but it acts with equal force upon Isabel’s imagination, giving the same artistic shape to her actual lived experience. The reader becomes an inextricable part of the confluence of social and artistic forces that now constitute Isabel’s self-portrait.

It is not only for Isabel, then, but for James as well that the social and the artistic push one another toward a more open reality, accessible not just to the master novelist or the discerning watcher, but to all readers. James certainly effects this operation on a different scale than Whitman; while the latter boils the intersection of artistry and culture down to the level of language itself, to single words, James takes the fate of an entire human being not only as his subject, but as his canvas. Isabel’s lived experience is both the object and the means of *The Portrait of a Lady*’s aesthetic achievement, and consequently of its realism. But once we have recognized that, in terms of the particular but important line of investigation that this essay follows, James and Whitman are deeply interested in the same achievement, that they (for the most part, fairly successfully) *work* toward the same goal, these differences become instructional rather than prohibiting comparison. The full argument here must be the work of another essay, but we can imagine, for example, the fruitful re-examination of the notion of “realist novel” that might result from further examination of the different forms and scales that these authors employ.

There are similar grounds for a discussion of two different emerging modernist models of consciousness, first in the multiplicity of characters and images that form the realism of the catalogues, second in James's use of a single highly developed figure as his means of bringing the reader into the text. Such discussions would be impossible without the recognition that James and Whitman's texts are in conversation regarding the nature of realism—but they would be meaningless, or at least supremely boring, without the distance between them. As Whitman juxtaposes the Parisian and the Brazilian, as James juxtaposes Isabel's social revelation with the dome face of Saint Peter's, so our critical task becomes to transform cultural, historical, contextual disparity into a connective and illuminating force.

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