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Autor: Veidovsky, Boris

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MAN ENOUGH
MASCULINITY AND THE NOVEL IN HENRY JAMES'S "THE ART OF FICTION"

Véritable *Poétique* du roman, « The Art of Fiction » est un essai où se croisent de nombreux thèmes Jamesiens. L'auteur de *Portrait d'une femme* y présente un panégyrique du roman, dont la tâche est, dit-il, de faire concurrence à la nature. Dans la compétition à laquelle se livrent la création naturelle et celle du romancier, James cherche à établir l'étalon d'une écriture masculine qui pourrait sortir vainqueur de la confrontation et s'imposer au monde. On voit se dessiner là, non seulement les angoisses liées à la masculinité de l'ère victorienne, mais aussi une histoire de la sexualité constituée, à l'intérieur des traditions platonique et aristotélicienne de l'art, par l'opposition entre le « réel » et la « fiction »; c'est l'opposition qui mime la tension entre le masculin et le féminin, et dont est issu l'art du roman.

> *The words next to each other actually sound different to the ear that sees them. Make it either sees or hears them. Make it the eyes hear them. Make it either hears or sees them. I say this not to explain but to make it plain.*
>
> Gertrude Stein, "Henry James"

"The Art of Fiction" is Henry James's most famous single statement about the art of the novelist and his most dogmatic piece of critical writing. James's essay acts as a response to a lecture delivered on 25th April 1884 by Walter Besant at the Royal Institution. Walter Besant, then a famous London critic, owes much of his remaining fame to his exchange with Henry James who used him as a fictitious opponent in his essay. In his intervention before the conservative Royal Institution, Besant advocated popular and

realistic standards for the novel, which he considered as a wholesome form of entertainment. James's rejoinder, "The Art of Fiction", first appeared in September 1884 in *The Longman Magazine* published in London, and was later reprinted as a chapter of an eponymous volume where his essay appeared next to Besant's. In 1888, James included "The Art of Fiction" in his volume of critical writings, *Partial Portraits*, in which Besant's essay was no longer reprinted and thus became even more of a rhetorical device. James had used Besant to write *against* him ; he had propped up his "Art of Fiction" against Besant's essay, but now "The Art of Fiction" could stand on its own and did not need Besant anymore. Since then, the essay has been regularly reprinted in volumes of James's criticism, often as the lead essay, posing as the epitome of James's definition of the art of the novel. Not unlike the fascinating but also daunting "Prefaces" that James added to the novels he selected for the *New York Edition*, "The Art of Fiction" presents itself as a formidable usher with whom it is necessary to negotiate before entering the realm of the master's fiction[1].

To make the negotiation with the usher a little bit easier, or to avoid confronting the guardian standing before the "law" ordering James's fictional world, it might be advisable to use a back door, that is approach James's aesthetic theory through an earlier critical piece. The theoretical stakes and the masculine anxiety of "The Art of Fiction" can be traced through a genealogy of thoughts and cultural background to a review that the twenty-two year old Henry James wrote in 1865 for the American journal *The Nation*. The review of Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* is ruthlessly titled "The Limitations of Dickens". The whole essay is an exercise in admiration as well as a scene of rivalry and cruel confrontation between the then aging Dickens and the ambitious and determined rookie.

At this point of his life, James had only published two short pieces of fiction but he is intent on demonstrating that he is confident enough to thoroughly and methodically destroy Dickens' novel[2]. In 1865, Henry James is emerging from adolescence and in

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1. "The Art of Fiction" is the lead essay in *The House of Fiction*, ed. Leon Edel (London, 1962), and in *The Art of the Novel*, ed. Richard P. Palmer (New York, 1962).

2. "A Tragedy of Errors" appeared in 1884 in *The Continental Monthly* (unsigned). "The Story of a Year" (first signed story) appeared in 1885 in

his aggressive essay he does not manage to totally disguise his reverence and admiration for the author whom he eagerly read during the formative years of his boyhood. That was the time when he was "not so fond of study [...] as of reading", and when his father would describe him as "a devourer of libraries, and an immense writer of novels and dramas[3]". When he writes his review of Dickens, James has just abandoned Harvard Law School where, as the obedient second son of Henry James Sr., he had started his studies in 1862. Unlike his two younger brothers, Wilkinson and Robertson, James has not joined the Union Army and has not fought in the Civil War that has just ended. When he publishes his first stories and starts reviewing for *The Nation*, James seeks to find his place in the masculine and patriarchal ethos of his time. He is to be a man, though he is not a father and head of a family. He is not in business (like his father), nor in Academia (like his elder brother William), nor has he been a soldier (like his younger brothers), nor (having left Harvard) is he a man of law.

In a world of men who adjudicate matters *urbi et orbi*, James is becoming a writer, and as a writer he is torn between the culturally unutterable desire to question the masculine ethos in which he has been raised and educated and the desire — caused by fear — to conform to its rules and customs. As a result of his ambivalent feelings, the review of *Our Mutual Friend* is divided between admiration and rivalry, and "The Limitations of Dickens" often reads as the temptation, and the resistance to the temptation, of an *imitation* of Dickens.

The first line of the review nonetheless seems to burn all bridges as it peremptorily asserts : "*Our Mutual Friend* is [...] the poorest of Mr. Dickens's works. And it is poor with the poverty not of momentary embarrassment, but of permanent exhaustion[4]". This abrupt opening is followed by a litany of flaws that the

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The Atlantic Monthly. Neither story was later collected by James.

3. Letter from Henry James Sr. To Mrs. James, 15 October 1857, quoted in "Henry James : A Chronology", in *The Portable Henry James*, ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel, New York : Penguin Books, 1987, p. 30.

4. Henry JAMES, "The Limitations of Dickens", in *The Portable Henry James*, p. 429-36. Hereafter referred to as LD. The review first appeared in *The Nation* on 21 December 1865. It was collected with other critical essays and reviews covering the years 1865-91 by LeRoy Phillips in a volume entitled *Views and Reviews* published in 1908.

young critic finds in the novel and by reproaches he addresses to its author. Nowadays, the review is mostly considered by Dickens scholars as an exaggeratedly aggressive and ungrounded judgement of *Our Mutual Friend* by the inexperienced James. The point here is not to determine whether the judgement James passes on the novel is fair, or if it does justice to Dickens. It is interesting, rather, to read the review as something like a primal scene of writing where James affirms that he is man enough to openly challenge the old master in his own field.

Although the terms of the review bear on stylistics and aesthetics, James's attack develops in a broader cultural field where he can indirectly voice his own anguish resulting from the Victorian masculine ethos. What James assaults in *Our Mutual Friend* is Dickens' "exhausted" masculinity and what appears in the essay as the effeminate character of Dickens' art. "Who else but Dickens", James writes, "would have established a lady in business in a novel on the admiringly solid basis of her always putting on gloves and tying a handkerchief around her head" (LD, 429-30). James's sarcastic comment points to the fact that — for him — Dickens' novel is based on a feminine mannerism which has nothing to do with the "business" of the novel. From the very start, he critiques the idea that the economy of the novel, that is the idea that the standard signs on which the whole construction of the novel is predicated, might be *feminine,* or, coming from a male author, *effeminate*. The sign economy of the novel — not unlike the monetary economy of a nation state which needs to be guaranteed by a strong currency — is to be established on reliable and authoritative masculine traits.

For James, the feminization of the semantic economy of Dickens' novel impedes his protagonists from acquiring the status of true "characters", and they remain "simply figures" that make no imprint on life (LD, 433). Eugene Wrayburn and Bradley Headstone fail to become real characters, James claims, because they belong to Dickens' troop of "grotesque creatures", "pathetic characters", and "little monsters". Because Dickens is deprived of his masculine creative power, and because he is unable to promote a masculine economy in his novel, he never produces what James calls "life". As a result, Dickens' creative offspring are stillborn characters that cannot emulate life.

The virile competition with life cannot be accommodated to any "sentimental business" but calls for a real *agon*. Although

James recognizes that the *agon* in Dickens' novel has some potential, and that "[t]here lay in the opposition of [the] two characters a very good story" (LD, 433), he deplores that Dickens' "*conception is weak*", and that life is hardly likely to spring from the weak germ planted by the aging writer:

> The friction of two *men*, of two *characters*, of two *passions*, produces stronger *sparks* than Wrayburn's *boyish repartees* and Headstone's *melodramatic commonplaces*. (LD, 434; emphases added)

Such an *agon* is not a worthy subject for a serious novelist: "Wrayburn lounges about with his hands in his pockets [...] talking nonsense"; "Headstone strides about" and spends his time "clenching his fists and biting his lips and grasping his stick" (LD, 433). Both male characters — or non-characters — on whose opposition the novel should be based are portrayed by James as unable to act, to rise to the occasion and to produce those "sparks" of life that a real confrontation between two real males should produce. The protagonists are animated by no "passion", and they are feminized and belittled by James who attributes to them affected and effeminate attitudes. In the absence of such sparks, Dickens is no Prometheus competing with the gods of nature and creation; his hand does not dare to seize the fire, and the fire of life does not burn in his lifeless novel.

The genetic and genealogical metaphor becomes even more perfidious when James adds to the devastating comments on Wrayburn and Headstone that, like the other female characters of the novel, Miss Jenny Wren is "deformed, unhealthy, unnatural" (LD, 432). With the other figures of the novel, she forms a "troop of hunchbacks, imbeciles, and *precocious children* who have carried on the *sentimental business* in *all* of Mr. Dickens's novels" (LD, 432; emphases added). Dickens' weakened potency has made him come up with "artificial creations" (LD, 433) that "occupy a half-way position between the *habitual probable of nature* and the *habitual impossible* of Mr. Dickens" (LD, 433; emphases added). Dickens' "artificial creations" belong neither to the world of nature nor to the world of fiction. They are horrible little creatures, the degenerate offspring of a seminal and semantic economy that has lost its vigor and its vitality. Under James's ruthless pen, *Our Mutual Friend* is but the last descendent of a degenerate family, the weak and monstrously contorted limb of a decadent family tree.

James echoes his own professional anxiety and his own suspicion of being an interloper in a world of men when he attacks Dickens for conducting his novelist's job as a lady-like business. The old man's novels resemble, James adroitly suggests, fine embroideries that design pleasant motifs, but "there is no humanity" in them (LD, 432). James repeatedly insists that the novel is based on degenerate female characters and that it ends up resembling Miss Jenny Wren, who is "a poor little dwarf" (LD, 431). The whole novel becomes a gossipy affair, akin to Miss Jenny Wren, "who makes doll's dresses, and is forever pricking at those with whom she converses in the air, with her needle" (LD, 431). Even as James recognizes in *Our Mutual Friend* a "long-practised hand" and deems worthy of merit the fine stitching of what he calls Dickens' "manufacture of fiction", he relentlessly concludes : "Seldom [...] [have] we read a book so intensely *written*, so little seen, known, or felt" (LD, 430). The act of writing itself is deprived, in Dickens' case, of any vitality and virility and his pen becomes a needle that stitches and embroiders. Dickens stitches up dresses for pantomimes and dolls, but he fails to beget "real" characters. He reproduces no life in his novel, only figures of fancy, "bundle[s] of eccentricities animated by no principle of life" (LD, 431). To the fine work of the needle that adorns the page, James opposes seeing, knowing and feeling, which become the mark of the true virile novel writer and which make of "a story so told [...] one of the most elevating experiences within the reach of the human mind" (LD, 435).

Through his critique of Dickens and his call for a masculine art of the novel, James voices the anxiety resulting from the cultural values exacted from all creators in Western Platonic and Aristotelian traditions. James, who often seems to be writing "The Art of Fiction" with Aristotle's *Poetics* open on his desk, adopts theories of art predicated on a prevalent masculinity mostly expressed through a hypertrophy of the eye / I and of the *logos*. The virile creator is to be a conqueror of truth, beauty and reality. When James evokes "one the most elevating experiences within the reach of the human mind", his phrase borrows from Protestant religious discourse and at the same time Aristotle's cathartic effect attributed to a successful piece of writing. The novelist is a tragic hero who competes with nature, but also with the other conquering arts where virile hands hold the sword, the

chisel, the brush, or the pen[5]. James elaborates on the conquering triad seeing, knowing, feeling to show how Dickens is deficient in those respects and how, as a result, his writing is "lifeless, forced, mechanical" (LD, 431). In a world of aesthetic theories and cultural principles predicated on masculine values, James feels that he has to assert that he is man enough to "compete with life" and to win the battle[6]. In his review, James casts himself in the role of the heroic challenger in an Oedipal rivalry in which Dickens impersonates the formidable forces that James must confront to make the novel fulfill its destiny as a form of art and ethical intelligence.

After a thorough disquisition on all of Dickens' characters and narrative strategies, James shifts the tone of the review. The piece starts with aesthetics and turns toward a cultural critique based on ethical grounds. While the work of the novelist consists, James argues, in "prosecut[ing] [...] generalisations in which alone consists the real greatness of a work of art" (LD, 435), Dickens only produces "artificial creations" and "creatures of pure fancy" that bear no resemblance to nature. Dickens' effeminate art is not only bad writing, something that is aesthetically displeasing, but also, and most of all, it is dishonest and "conveys a certain impression of charlatanism" (LD, 434). Dickens is true neither to nature, nor the reader, nor himself.

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5. Western literature is extraordinarily beset by male creation myths. Despite what should appear as irrefutable biological evidence, our writings are inhabited by men who paradoxically "beget" creatures and sometimes entire worlds. There are innumerable examples of male creators portrayed in the act of "fighting" with the "matter" of their creation. Creative power, strength, or ability are often conveyed through metaphors of muscular exertion and virile activity. These creation metaphors where the energy, the pain, and the anguish of labor and delivery are replaced by forms of violence and transgression are so commonplace in our vocabulary, symbolism, and standard metanarratives that they are but seldom questioned. The muscular and energetic image of a poet akin to Prometheus and Hephaistos dominates, for instance, the act of poetic creation in Blake's "The Tyger": "What the hammer? what the chain? / In what furnace was thy brain? / What the anvil? what dread grasp / Dare its deadly terrors clasp?" For a reflection on and a questioning of the male creation myths and their connection to a gendered and sexed body in the poetry of William Blake and others, see in the present volume the essay "Création et incarnation" by Neil Forsyth and Martine Hennard Dutheil.

6. Henry JAMES, "The Art of Fiction", in *The Portable Henry James*, p. 387-413; p. 399. Hereafter referred to as AF.

Dickens' characters refer to no "existing type" and are "animated by no principle of nature" (LD, 431), because he has no eye and cannot see. "The chief condition of [Dickens'] genius", James writes, "[is] *not to see beneath the surface of things*" (LD, 434; emphases added). Dickens, "the greatest of superficial novelists", may be endowed with sight, but no insight; he has no penetrating eye that can reach below the surface of nature to feel, capture, possess, and know its essence, its truth, its beauty. The language of business tropes both the impression of dishonesty and of absence of real manly values. Dickens' novel is made of "*gratuitous* distortions" (LD, 432), it produces "*cheap* merriment", "*Cheap* pathos" (LD, 431), all in all it is "*poor business*" (LD, 430) that turns out to be "infinitely depressing and *unprofitable*" (LD, 436; emphases added).

James prolongs his moral condemnation by writing that Dickens produces figures that are never "the strictly logical consummation" of real people, and in a fascinating reversal of the mimetic process between nature and fiction, he exclaims, "What a world were this world if the world of *Our Mutual Friend* were an honest reflection of it!" (LD, 432). Dickens' work "is not serious writing" (LD, 435), and it cannot "enlarge our knowledge of the world" (LD, 435). The responsibility of the honest novelist seeking retribution for the business of novel-writing consists in reflecting what James calls "mankind at large" and thereby producing a new knowledge of the world. A world known is a world controlled, and the novel is to help produce the laws and rules that order a masculine ethos:

> Rules alone are consistent with each other; exceptions are inconsistent. Society is maintained by natural sense and natural feeling. We cannot conceive a society in which these principles are not in some manner *represented*. (LD, 432; emphasis added)

Just as a society is ruled by the conventions and rules enforced by the necessity of *representation*, so must the novelist be in control by imposing rules in his novels that no character is allowed to break.

The repudiation of Dickens becomes a moral reflection on the role of the novel and the responsibility of the novelist in a male-dominated world. When James declares Dickens a "superficial novelist", we are no longer in the realm of aesthetics, but ethics. Bad novels are unethical. James writes that he is willing to "ac-

cept [the] consequence of [his] proposition", and, as if excited and emboldened by his earlier statements, he adopts the tone of a prosecutor or a minister to somewhat pompously declare :

> It were, in our opinion, an offence against humanity to place Mr. Dickens among the greatest novelists. For to repeat what we have already intimated, he has created nothing but figure. He has added nothing to our understanding of human character. (LD, 434)

Although one must allow for the inevitable temptation of hyperbole within the genre of literary reviewing and criticism, and although one must allow for James's youthful and probably exalted temperament, the words "offence against humanity" express a level of anxiety that goes well beyond the stakes of a simple literary review.

The scene of Oedipal rivalry that both unites and opposes the old master and the young ephebe shows us a James making a statement about the coming of age of a new generation of writers. The scene, however, should not be limited to this aspect, and one should not yield too easily to the psychoanalytical temptation to say that James is "killing the father". It may well be that the real stakes of the rivalry lie not so much in the "honours and emoluments" sought by the younger opponent, but much rather in the very conception that the art of the novel should be a masculine art. It may therefore be necessary to read James against himself and suggest that the "mutual friends" he is writing against are in fact the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions of art that exact the writer's subordination to a masculine creative economy. It may be tempting to read James as writing under a Bloomian "anxiety of influence" consisting in "the misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation[7]". Clearly, James seeks to distance himself from Dickens and create his own tradition of the novel ; this, however, is only the most limited aspect of the review. More than the anxiety of influence, what we witness in James's text is "the influence of anxiety[8]". The larger stakes of the essay are not related to the fear

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7. Harold BLOOM, *The Anxiety of Influence : A Theory of Poetry*, New York & London : Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 30.

8. I am indebted for the cunning reversal of Bloom's famous phrase to Eric Savoy who retraces signs of disclosure and concealment of homoerotic desire in James's texts. Savoy focuses, in particular, on James's ambiguous reception of Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps* in 1865. Savoy quotes Richard

of lacking originality or of being under Dickens' influence, but rather to the influence that masculine anxiety itself exerts on the young Henry James. It is the anxiety generated by a culture in which real men do real work — in business, in Academia, in the military, in the Church — while women, idlers, and variously degenerate personages deal with and inhabit the world of fiction.

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Some nineteen years later, it is a very different Henry James who makes a new attempt at formalizing the art of the novel in "The Art of Fiction". He is now forty-one years old and has published several novels, numerous stories, scores of reviews, articles, and sketches[9]. Not only is he a celebrity who lives comfortably off an

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Dellamora who proposes that for nineteenth-century readers and critics Whitman functioned "as the signifier of male-male desire in a new form of sexual-aesthetic discourse". Savoy argues that James's initial homophobic reaction to Whitman resulted from "the pervasive influence of anxiety, which arises [...] from the fraternal recognition and definition of the (proscribed) desiring self". Though he admits that it is impossible to "(re)construct a gay identity for Henry James", Savoy claims that later in his life James revised his stance on Whitman, "distance[d] himself from his youthful anxiety, and reconstruct[ed] his subjectivity". Indeed, the more mature James seems to have reconciled himself with Whitman's poetry. He discussed passionately and with a good deal of indulgence *Calamus,* which had been received as Whitman's homoerotic manifesto. Along the same lines, in her autobiography *A Backward Glance* (1934), Edith Wharton recalls Henry James reading aloud from Whitman at Lenox in 1905, "in a mood of subdued ecstasy" that made the two "divergent intelligences" seem to "walk together like gods". My concern is not to identify in James a possible gay subjectivity but, not unlike Savoy, I am interested to see how his subjectivity, modeled under the pressure of a culture of compulsory masculinity and heterosexuality, is at work in James's aesthetic theory of the novel. See Eric SAVOY, "Reading Gay America: Walt Whitman, Henry James, and the Politics of Reception", in *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman: The Life after the Life*, ed. Robert K. Martin, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992, p. 3-15; Richard DELLAMORA, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aesthetics*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990.

9. *Watch and Ward*, Henry James's first novel, appeared in serialized form in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1871. *Roderick Hudson*, serialized and republished in 1876, was his first novel in book form; it was followed by *The American* (1877), *The Europeans* (1878), *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *Washington Square* (1881). *Daisy Miller* (1879) secured James's international celebrity. In 1883 the first edition of his collected novels came out in London.

apparently inexhaustible pen, but he is also a social animal who confides to his notebook in 1879, "dined out during the past winter 107 times![10]" James's career as a novelist is solid at this point: he is well off, he is famous, he is respected. Based on biographical data, one may suppose that it is not the personal anxiety of "making it" in the profession that prompts him to outline a masculine definition of the novel in "The Art of Fiction". While Dickens may have been a threatening father figure and the source of Oedipal rivalry for the young James, Walter Besant is a sitting bird for his now mature rhetoric. In the 1880's, even less than in the 1860's, it is not his personal position that James defends in "The Art of Fiction", but rather a masculine established order which he shows as being under attack by the feminization of the culture of his time. John Carlos Rowe rightly points out that in several novels of that period, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *The Bostonians*, and *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), "James emphasized the demonic effects of lesbian feminist identity" and sought to "subordinat[e] the feminine, stereotyped as it certainly was in his typology, to his own aesthetic power[11]". "The Art of Fiction" formalizes and theorizes such subordination of the "feminine" through a masculine aesthetic, even as it records James's discontents with masculinity and his constantly growing fascination with a "feminine" *écriture*, that is with whatever may constitute the disruptive and disjunctive forces within the masculine ethos.

The strategy at work in "The Art of Fiction" is again confrontational; it seems that in his riposte to Besant James seeks to produce the "sparks" of life produced by the "friction" of two "passions". James exploits for his own writing the momentum created by Besant's essay — also entitled "The Art of Fiction". James notes that Besant's "pamphlet" "appears to indicate that many persons are interested in the art of fiction, and are not indifferent to such remarks, as those who practice it may attempt to make about it" (AF, 387). "Only a short time ago", James remarks, "it might have been supposed that the English novel was not [...] *discutable*" (AF, 387). The occasion of James's essay is

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10. *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

11. John Carlos ROWE, *The Other Henry James*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1998, p. 105.

theoretical, for it is necessary to establish an *ars poeticae* that the novel needs, but it is also historical, for the time is ripe for the affirmation of certain principles for the novel which is to take the place it deserves among the arts.

The historical moment must have seemed important, for James was not the only respondent to Besant. Robert Louis Stevenson — whom James mentions as an example of good writing in "The Art of Fiction" — published an essay entitled "A Humble Remonstrance", which appeared in *The Longman Magazine* shortly after James's "The Art of Fiction", and read :

> Life is monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt, and poignant; a work of art, in comparison, is neat, finite, self-contained, rational, flowing, and *emasculate*. Life imposes by *brute energy*, like *inarticulate thunder*; art catches the ear, among the far louder noises of experience like an air *artificially made* by a *discreet musician*[12].

Stevenson's description of the novel is steeped in Platonic and patriarchal views of art, which present the novel as subordinated to the power and the authority of "life". In his romanticized view, the author confronting the marvels and terrors of life is like a sailor fighting against a storm. The voice of the novelist is the plaintive, timid and apologetic sound of a son whose voice is made inaudible by the crashing thunder of Zeus-like "life". Stevenson offers a graphic rendering of Platonic and Aristotelian mimetic theories that make of the novelist's artifice something that is necessarily a degradation of the seminal and life-sustaining energy of nature. The novel may *seem* real with its finitude and internal logic, but this neat ordering, Stevenson proposes, is really that which stigmatizes it as a weak imitative art, as an illegitimate son, a weak offspring, a bastard.

Unlike Stevenson, James, in "The Art of Fiction", is far from "humbly remonstrating". On the contrary, he deplores that the English novel "ha[s] no air of having a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself" (AF, 387). "The successful application of any art is a delightful spectacle, but the theory", James adds, "is interesting too" (AF, 388). He therefore presents a full-fledged *doxa*

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12. Robert Louis STEVENSON, "A Humble Remonstrance", in *Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson : A Record of their Friendship and Criticism*, ed. Janet Adam Smith, London : Rupert-Davis, 1948 ; reprinted in John Carlos ROWE, *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James*, Madison : The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984, p. 233 (emphases added).

of the novel, with "temerity" and "courage" (AF, 387), and refuses to apologize for making of the novel "the business of his life" (AF, 399), that is for being a writer. "The only reason for the existence of the novel is that it does attempt to represent life" (AF, 389), but "history", he adds, "is also allowed to represent life" and "it is not, any more than painting, expected to apologize[13]" (AF, 390).

Writing fiction is no sentimental business : like the historian (or the painter), the novelist is to look for the truth, for if he does not do so he "deprives him[self] [...] of all his standing-room" (AF, 391). Thus, James's "truth" is not to be separated from, let alone opposed to, Stevenson's "brute energy" of life. In a direct evocation of Aristotle's *Poetics,* James claims for the novelist "the assurance" and the "tone of the historian", and insists that it is the novelist's "task" "to represent the past [and] the actions of men" (AF, 390 ; 391). Fiction is not the *emasculate* offspring of reality, a "making believe" (AF, 390); fiction is on the contrary to enhance a masculine aesthetics in which the novelist is the begetter of life. For James, the novelist trades directly with the real, and fiction is a real trade for real men, who can seek in it the "honours and emoluments that have hitherto been reserved for the successful profession of music, poetry, painting and architecture[14]" (AF, 391).

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13. It is interesting to note that even as he seeks to disentangle the novelist from his Platonic subservience to "the true and natural begetter" of things, opening thereby the way to modern and even postmodern conceptions of art, James nonetheless resorts to the Platonic "trick" that consists in calling the visual arts to the rescue of representation. In *The Republic*, Socrates calls "the true and natural begetter" the "author" of things that have "real being" (X, 597 d). In his competition with life, i.e. with that which "has real being", the "imitator" is always defeated ; his production can never have "real being". However, Plato's resorting to the comparison with painting enables him to render *visible* the process of imitation that produces the work of art. When James writes that "the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is [...] complete" (AF, 389), he does something of the same order. Not only does the analogy move the novel up the Platonic scale of "removes from nature" (X, 597 e), but it provides a *demonstration* of the way the novel works. PLATO, *The Republic*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato,* trans. Paul Shorey, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1987. All further references are to this edition.

14. In the limited scope of the present essay, it is impossible to fully explore the Platonic and Aristotelian resonances of "The Art of Fiction". Let us note, for instance, that James's listing the novel among other arts, as well

"Honours and emoluments" are the signs of success in two complementary masculine economies. The former signifies recognition and a sense of belonging to the "brotherhood of novelists" (AF, 387); the latter signifies success in the male-dominated entrepreneurial world of the Victorian bourgeoisie. These traits anchor the novel in James's historically constructed reality, and thereby absolve it from the suspicion that it is a mere pastime. James seeks to prudently steer the ship of the novel between the Scylla of a feminized "art for art's sake" and the Charybdis of a slavish and emasculate imitation of things as they are. Or, as John Carlos Rowe has it when he convincingly translates this into the terms of modern literary criticism, in "The Art of Fiction", James begins to develop a "dialectical notion of 'realism' [as] a reaction not only to Besant's valorization of a naive reality but also to Stevenson's insistence upon a romantic ideality[15]".

Indeed, Stevenson proposes to see art and life as different but complementary in a dialectical relation of subservience and underwriting in which art would produce craftily manufactured objects presenting a more polished and unified vision of life :

> A proposition of geometry does not compete with life, and a proposition of geometry is a fair and luminous parallel for the work of art. Both are untrue to the crude fact, both inhere in nature, neither represents it[16].

While Stevenson is looking for some conciliatory common ground, James refuses to satisfy himself with such tame definition of the dialectics of art and life :

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as his reference to "[t]he old superstition about fiction being 'wicked'" (AF, 389), ironically echoes Socrates' harangue against all imitative arts : "Is it, then, only the poets that we must supervise [...], or must we keep watch over the other craftsmen, and forbid them to represent the evil disposition, the licentious, the illiberal, the graceless, either in the likeness of living creatures or in buildings, or in any other product of their art" (*The Republic*, III, 401b). Even though his theory of the novel is inscribed within the Platonic agonistic pattern presenting an artist engaged in the impossible competition with the "natural begetter", and within an Aristotelian division of knowledge, it appears that James is really writing against Platonic conceptions of art as subservient imitation. The time is not ripe for him to write, as Wallace Stevens would, that "life is an imitation of literature", but he makes that future moment possible.

15. J.C. Rowe, *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James*, p. 233.

16. R. L. Stevenson, "A Humble Remonstrance", in *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James*, p. 231.

> I may therefore venture to say that the *air of reality* (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel — the merit on which all its other merits [...] helplessly and submissively depend. If it be not there they are all as nothing, and if these be there, they owe their effect to the success with which the author has produced the illusion of life. The cultivation of this success, the study of this exquisite process, form, to my taste, the beginning and the end of the art of the novelist. They are his inspiration, his despair, his reward, his torment, his delight. It is here in very truth that he *competes* with life; it is here that he *competes* with his *brother* painter in *his* attempt to render the look of things, the look that conveys their meaning, to catch the colour, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle. (AF, 399; emphases added)

For James, writing has nothing to do with sentimentalizing life by embellishing or polishing it: it is a heroic and manly struggle made of many conflicting emotions and feelings; it is a struggle where men of the same conviction join in a brotherhood with their brothers of the brush[17]. Like a tragic hero, James proposes to fight with the hydra-like monster of infinite, illogical, and monstrous life. The hyperbolic tone of the passage, the heroic — or mock-heroic — rhythm of its sentences, and the all-encompassing character of the theory expounded in it trope the fear and the anxiety that the battle might end with the defeat of the novelist and an emasculate work of fiction, which would be, in turn, the representation of a feminized world.

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17. It is worth noting that James displays Jane Austen and George Eliot as examples to the "young aspirant of fiction" (AF, 406) to whom the essay is rhetorically addressed. In James's early review, the critique of masculinity may have seemed limited to a form of belated Oedipal conflict; here, the masculine *agon* is displaced from the male person onto the persona of the novelist, and from the aggressiveness of the fight to a more subtle way of occupying an aesthetic and cultural territory. As a result, the masculinity of the novel is no longer strictly linked to the genetically determined sex of the novelist. This is what enables James to take two women as examples of good novelists, even as he dismisses several male writers. One should note, however, that even though the "woman of genius" (AF, 398) may have had a historical counterpart, she remains anonymous, while the other woman James mentions, Mary Ann Evans, appears under her masculinized pen name, "George Eliot" (AF, 410). Mary Ann Evans' masculinization by and through the art of fiction enables her to "paint [a] landscape with a[n] [...] intelligence" that prompts James to say "yes" to her (art). I would argue that he is saying "yes" not so much to Mary Ann, the woman, but rather to the "brother of the brush/pen" "George" has become.

By recounting the story of the past, by telling the story of the world, the novel tells what the world *is*. Beyond what may appear as a tautology lurks the possibility that by exploring reality the novel impinges on that reality. The masculine aesthetics of the novel is to take into account "reality [which] has a myriad forms" (AF, 397), but also to project that aesthetics onto reality and thereby control it. The novel, as much as "reality", is described by James as articulated by narratives and metanarratives whose functioning and workings need to be elucidated. Those who think of "the effort of the novel [...] as a facticious, artificial form, a product of ingenuity, [...] the business of which it is to arrange things, [...] [and] translate them into conventional, traditional moulds" (AF, 405) misunderstand what the "task" and the "merit" of the novel is. The art of fiction is really *the art of reality*, as James suggests :

> Catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life, that is the attempt whose strenuous force keeps Fiction on her feet[18]. (AF, 405)

Those who do not perceive the seriousness of the task of the novel in its effort to represent reality "condemn the art [of fiction] to an eternal repetition of a few familiar *clichés,* and lead us straight into the wall" (AF, 405). Fiction has a productive effect; the aesthetics of the novel exerts a pressure on the aesthetics of the real world of experience.

While retaining that fiction is a mimetic art and *represents* reality, James mixes metaphors and allegories to suggest that the process of representation is not one of arrangement or sequence, but that there is an interchange between reality and fiction whereby fiction may have "the odour", the "rhythm", or the "air" of reality (AF, 397; 405; 399). There is a difference between reality and fiction, but both are articulated by "[the] sense of the story [which is] the idea, the starting point". Both in "reality" and in "fiction" there is the masculine principle, the "germ", out of which grows either the novel or reality to constitute an "organic whole".

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18. "Fiction" (capitalized in James's text) is intriguingly feminized. It is difficult to interpret the feminine pronoun here, which may be the sign of a "feminization" of fiction. The latter would then be "kept on her feet" by the masculine principle of "life", or the masculine "idea", "the germ"? If this is not a — revealing ? — slip of the pen, James may also be thinking of French *écriture* or *(la) fiction*; fiction, then, would reveal the presence of more than one language within language.

James blends warlike and biological metaphors to reinforce the trope of a narrative encoding that sustains a masculine aesthetic both in fiction and in reality :

> [I]n proportion as the work is successful the idea *permeates* and *penetrates* it, *informs* and *animates* it, so that every word and *every punctuation-point* contribute directly to the expression, in that proportion do we lose our sense of the story being a blade which may be drawn more or less out of its sheath. (AF, 407 ; emphases added)

How carefully should we read James if his prose is constructed like a genetic code where every sequence, or sentence, indeed, every "punctuation-point" counts ? And how carefully should we read what we experience as "reality"? Again, James parallels the text and the texture of the world at large. "Reality" too, is made of "punctuation-points" that contain, like the minuscule seed of a sequoia, huge narrative ramifications. Thus James mentions "an English novelist, a woman of genius" who derived a whole story from a scene that very briefly caught her eye :

> [A]s she ascended a staircase, [she] passed an open door where, in the household of a *pasteur,* some young Protestants were seated at a table round a finished meal. (AF, 398)

For the novelist who has "the power to guess the unseen from the seen" (AF, 398), that is the power to extract the life-sustaining principle from an apparently meaningless anecdote and derive from that an "air of reality", "[t]he glimpse made a picture ; it lasted only a moment, but that moment was experience" (AF, 398). Every scene of a novel or of everyday life, however minute, is impregnated by this organic structuring element ; both "reality" and "fiction" spring from that seminal moment of conception to which James referred in his Prefaces as the "germ".

Such an organic conception of the work of art has had a great deal of success in many Western aesthetic and critical schools. Formalism, New Criticism, and Structuralism, to mention just a few relatively recent avatars of this conception, have availed themselves of this masculine controlling rhetoric to define what the essence of good writing was and distinguish it from "ordinary" or "everyday" language. A good piece of writing, according to these schools, is that in which every element — even "punctuation-points"? — can be neatly associated to an organic whole to which it necessarily belongs and without which the ensemble would be found failing.

James suggests this, but goes further when he writes that "[t]he advantage, the luxury, as well as the *torment* and *responsibility* of the novelist, is that there is no limit to what he may attempt as an executant — no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes" (AF, 395 ; emphases added). The sentence suggests that the novel writer is not only a manly fighter, but that he must also be held *responsible* for his acts of writing. James's ironic reference to what Besant calls the "moral purpose" of the novel indicates that he defends the masculinity of the novel not solely on aesthetic grounds but also on ethical grounds that have nothing to do with the alleged reputation of the novel being "wicked". Affirming the masculinity of the art of fiction is a way of responding to the implicit moral question posed by Victorian culture about the novel : how can the morality of a work of art — the novel in particular — be justified within the Victorian masculine ethos if it is only an amusement and a "making-belief"? It appears that for James the world is not simply passively there to be copied : reality calls for a response and the art of fiction in representing reality is the response to that call.

Thus, the masculine anxiety expressed in "The Art of Fiction" reflects the cultural anxiety resulting from the pressure exerted on all males within the culture who constantly need to reaffirm their masculinity to be able to take their place economically and psychologically within the male ethos ; James too feels the need to justify the adequacy of his art and to show that he is man enough. Both the anxiety and James's ethical concern had already appeared in his review of *Our Mutual Friend* where James had affirmed that a good story can turn out to be "one of the most elevating experiences within the reach of the human mind" (DL, 435). The chief accusation he had therefore retained against Dickens was that the latter had "added nothing to our understanding of the human character" (DL, 434). The 1865 review closed with James insisting that a story which is not properly written is "infinitely depressing and unprofitable" (DL, 436). The economic metaphor was to preserve the novel from the suspicion of being some fanciful amusement, but it also suggested that a good novel would edify the reader who would profit from it not only while reading it, but also after reading it through a better understanding of human character.

In 1884, James returns to this question. To admit, like Anthony Trollope, that the events narrated by a novel "have not really hap-

pened and that [the author] can give his narrative any turn the reader may like best" (AF, 390) is something that "shocks" James. To consider the novel as a "making-belief" is for him not only a mistake, but, as his densely mystic tone suggests, a serious moral flaw: "Such a *betrayal* of a *sacred office* seems to me, I *confess,* a *terrible crime*" (AF, 390; emphases added). Such a "crime" expels its perpetrator from the brotherhood where painters and novelists are united in their pursuit of truth, the edification of the reader, and the construction of a masculine subjectivity that sustains these pursuits.

James unites painting and writing both on the aesthetic and moral level. Both arts are bold conquerors of truth, that is of life, that life which embodies the "real":

> The only reason for the existence of the novel is that it does attempt to represent life. When it relinquishes this attempt, the same attempt that we see on the canvas of the painter, it will have arrived at a very strange pass. It is not expected of the picture that it will make itself humble in order to be forgiven; and the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete. (AF, 389)

James insists that novelists and painters "may learn from each other", and that "they may explain and sustain each other" (AF, 390). Resorting to the "image" of painting in order to speak of writing is of course an old device of Western rhetoric, one with which we have been familiar at least since Plato's Book Ten of *The Republic*. Although he seeks to distance himself from Plato, his mentor, Aristotle too writes in the *Poetics* that good writers (that is, good tragedians) "should emulate good portraitists[19]". James seems to be invoking *The Poetics* (i.e. *an art of fiction*) to support his own essay, but it turns out that Aristotle's text is *both* James's model *and* the text he is — much more than Besant's essay — writing against. One must keep in mind throughout the essay that "The Art of Fiction" is simultaneously the title of Besant's essay, James's essay, and Aristotle's treatise. This may be the reason of James's irony at Besant's expense in the first lines of his essay, where he writes that he would not have "affixed so comprehensive a title to [his] few remarks [...] did [he] not seem to discover a *pretext* for [his] temerity in the interesting pamphlet published under this name by Mr. Walter Besant" (AF, 387;

19. Aristotle, *Poetics,* 1454b, 9.

emphasis added). It appears that if the argument with Besant constitutes the "pretext" for writing a new *ars poeticae*, the actual *pre-text*, the real dogmatic treatise James is taking issue with, is Aristotle's *Poetics* and its masculine antagonistic theory of mimesis.

Thus, James prolongs the Aristotelian challenging of the Platonic hierarchy, which makes of writing an imitative art "three times removed" from truth, that is one remove further than painting[20]. In "The Art of Fiction" James establishes the complete analogy between painting and writing, but his syllogistic move, which is another step along his metaphorical chain, goes further as he also abolishes the distinction between picture and reality on the one hand, and between history and fiction on the other :

> The only effectual way to lay it at rest is to emphasize the analogy [...] [between the novelist and the painter] — to insist on the fact that *as the picture is reality, so the novel is history.* (AF, 390 ; emphases added)

In a return of the ethical mode, James concludes this passage by writing that this is the only "general definition" that "does justice" to the novel. The essential move of the passage, however, is the parallel conflation of history / novel and painting / writing. James modifies the disjunctive grammar that demands that something is *either* historical reality *or* fiction, that it is *either* painting *or* writing, and proposes that *painting is writing is painting*[21]. James seeks to upset the logocentric syntax that disjoins and opposes the true and the represented, which contend with one another within a preordained hierarchy. James's manly and bold contention is not with this or that form of *ars poeticae*, but with a received conception of the *real* and the artist's place and responsibility within that real.

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20. Plato, *The Republic*, X, 597, e.

21. James devoted several stories to the complex and fascinating epistemology that links the "real" and the "represented" both in painting and writing. These texts, where the real / fiction is painted / written, dramatize these epistemological issues and link them to questions relative to the sexuality of women, marriage, and the economic and political control of society by men. Though one may claim that this theme (to call it that) is present in all of James's œuvre, special mention needs to be made of "The Liar" (1889), "The Real Thing" (1892), and of one of James's earliest tales, "The Story of a Masterpiece" (1868). The latter is the object of a skillful analysis and a profound reflection by Peter Halter in the present volume.

Although he upsets the Platonic hierarchies of imitative arts and prolongs the Aristotelian critique of these hierarchies, James nonetheless privileges painting as a mode of representation and presents his theory under the façade of a masculine tradition in which to see is to know and to show is to prove. James cannot "show" how the novel is to work; like Aristotle, he resorts to painting as the art which comes closest to the art of fiction because of its capacity to represent life, that is its capacity to "imitate people in action[22]". While he seems to align his writing within a neo-Aristotelian tradition expressed in the cultural terms of his time as confident masculinity, patriarchy, and domesticity, James also undermines that tradition. Given his cultural and historical situation, James cannot articulate directly a frontal critique of masculinity; he cannot make of the novel the site of contested masculinity, for the necessary critical tools are not available to him. However, he "inaugurate[s] a poetic of the mute [...], a poetic of eschewals and refrainings, working round the margins of a voiceless theme, a theme voiceless because not yet public, not yet specified[23]". Throughout his life, Henry James would relentlessly work at the upsetting of the syntax that relates the "true" and the "represented" while seeking to articulate their aporetic simultaneous expression "within the shape of the formal English sentence". Even as he is affirming the primacy of masculinity in the art of the novel, James is preparing his notes toward a fiction where that masculinity would be radically mooted; this would happen in his "famous late style, where subject and verb are 'there' but don't carry the burden of what is said[24]". In "The Art of Fiction", James builds a Victorian house of fiction whose façade, like the façade of the nineteenth-century bourgeois houses in which he would live in all his life, "is a metaphor for American domesticity, for patriarchal confidence that binds generations together, or for the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality[25]". The masculinity of the novel is what passers-by can see from the street; it is the public scene of James's fiction.

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22. Aristotle, *Poetics,* 1448 a.
23. Hugh KENNER, *The Pound Era*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, p. 16.
24. H. Kenner, p.17.
25. Richard RODRIGUEZ, "Late Victorians: San Francisco, AIDS, and the Homosexual Stereotype", *Harper's* (October 1990): 57-66; quoted in Savoy.

In a fascinating analysis of the San Francisco urban scene, Richard Rodriguez describes the way in which in the 1980's gay men opted to make their residence in Victorian houses in the city, which became a privileged site of U.S. gay culture. Eric Savoy notes the ironic disjunction created by these men inhabiting a site whose appearance is, like "no other architecture in the American imagination [...] evocative of compulsory heterosexuality[26]". In the urban scene described by Rodriguez there are two architectonic principles and two related, though opposed, semantic economies. Not unlike the masculine rhetoric and aesthetics of "The Art of Fiction", the façades of the Victorian houses that harbor and give visibility to a gay culture "accommodate both a self-protective secrecy and the impulse toward disclosure[27]".

As Rodriguez points out in his analysis of San Francisco sites of contested masculinity, the Victorian façade tropes the affirmation of masculinity, heterosexuality, and (re)productive economy by precisely presenting itself *as* a façade. It is a smiling and optimistic face, a shining coin whose flip-side is the dark interior of the Gothic house with its "shadows [...], cobwebby gimcrack, [and] long corridors[28]". James's "Art of Fiction" may present to a culture avidly seeking self-congratulation and self-confirmation the scene of a reassuring and self-righteous masculine façade, but it is also an oblique and unutterable invitation, formulated in the "semantics of caution that characterizes James[29]", to have a look behind the scenes at that which can neither be said or shown. The façade of the masculine *doxa* of fiction hides the ob-scene possibility of another language, a language not obscene for what it says or does — pay homage and pay its dues to a filial fear of literary preemption and subordination to the real — but for what it does not say and refuses to do.

Boris VEJDOVSKY

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26. E. Savoy, p. 6.
27. E. Savoy, p. 5.
28. R. Rodriguez, p. 59.
29. E. Savoy, p. 7.