Journal of American Studies of Turkey
40 (2014): 5-20

From Practice to Theory: Henry James's Prefaces

Ünal Aytür

Abstract

Henry James's prefaces to the New York Edition of his novels provide fascinating insights into how his novelistic practice and theory meshed together. Although James was not the first to promote the novel as a serious and worthy art (earlier authors such as Jane Austen and Edward Bulwer Lytton had anticipated James's views in their writings), he deliberately and systematically devoted a considerable part of his critical output to this end. Among these writings, his early essay "The Art of Fiction" stands out, not least because it expounds a conception of the novel which remained essentially unchanged to the end of his career. In the essay, James argues that the main objective of the novelistic art, "a personal, a direct impression of life," can only be realized fully through painstaking attention to form. In the prefaces, James gives detailed accounts of how he experimented with form, particularly with point of view, in pursuit of this objective. Through a discussion of several of the prefaces, this article traces how James's theories of fiction found their counterparts in what he terms the "execution" of his novels. The article concludes with a comparison of the opening paragraphs of *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Spoils of Poynton*: published sixteen years apart, the two novels exemplify the Master's never-ending quest for achieving the form best suited to the matter at hand.

Keywords

Henry James, the New York Edition, the prefaces, point of view, central consciousness, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Spoils of Poynton*

James published his last major novel, *The Golden Bowl*, in 1904. The same year (in August) he went back to America for a visit after an interval of more than twenty years. He stayed with his brother William in

Boston, journeyed down to New York, Philadelphia, Washington, and all the way to Florida. In the spring of 1905 he went to Chicago, St. Louis, and California on a lecture tour. After returning to England in the autumn he wrote his impressions of the "new" United States in a book he called *The American Scene* (1907). James was at the height of his reputation now as the great Master of fiction. For some time he had been in contact with publishers about a collected edition of his works, and the American publishing house Scribner's had accepted to produce an expensive edition of his novels and tales. James wanted to call it "The New York Edition" as a "sort of homage" to his native city. He spent the years between 1905 and 1909 mostly preparing this twenty-four-volume edition, which, according to Leon Edel, James "regarded [. . .] as his literary monument" (624). It was an enormously difficult task. He read over everything he wanted to appear in this "definitive" edition, and revised some of his early novels such as *Roderick Hudson*, *The American*, and *The Portrait of a Lady* extensively. To each of the volumes he wrote a preface dealing with the subject, the origin, and the artistic intentions of the novel or group of shorter works it introduced. A wide-spread critical opinion is that, taken together, these prefaces "comprise probably the most significant and instructive statement in English on the literary craft and on the purposes and processes of fictional composition" (Brooks, Lewis, and Warren 1400). James himself was more modest in his view of them. In a letter to his fellow novelist Howells he wrote: "They are, in general, a sort of plea for Criticism, for Discrimination, for Appreciation on other than infantile lines—as against the so almost universal Anglo-Saxon absence of these things; which tends so, in our general trade, it seems to me, to break the heart. [. . .] They ought, collected together, [. . .] to form a sort of comprehensive manual or *vade-mecum* for aspirants in our arduous profession" (Horne 463).

The prefaces are, indeed, part of James's lifelong plea for a serious critical approach to fiction—an approach based on aesthetic rather than moralistic standards and principles that, he felt, were still common both in England and America at the time. James's description of contemporary criticism of fiction as "infantile" is, however, only partly justified. Things had started to change significantly since Jane Austen's vivid account of the general attitude of both writers and critics to novels at the turn of the century. In chapter 5 of *Northanger Abbey* (1798), she tells us that on rainy mornings whenever Catherine and her friend Isabella had nothing else to

do, "they shut themselves up to read novels together" (36). "Yes, novels;" she repeats, and chastises her fellow writers for "degrading" their own books by "joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works […]" (36). She asks them to respect their craft, and points out the need for solidarity: "Let us not desert one another: we are an injured body," she says and observes that, although novels "have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much decried. From pride, ignorance, or fashion, our foes are almost as many as our readers; [. . .] there seems almost a general wish of [. . .] undervaluing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them. 'I am no novel-reader; I seldom look into novels; do not imagine that *I* often read novels […].' Such is the common cant. 'And what are you reading, Miss—?' 'Oh! it is only a novel!' replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame" (36-37).

Jane Austen died in 1817 without seeing much change in the status of the novel as a literary form. But, as Richard Stang has shown in *The Theory of the Novel in England 1850-1870*, a couple of decades after her time, writers began to assert that the novel must be regarded as a work of art, consciously shaped according to aesthetic principles. The earliest, and perhaps the most important of these novelist-critics was Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, who anticipated Henry James in some of his views. In his essay "On Art in Fiction," for example, Bulwer criticized Walter Scott for not having what he calls "a high conception of art," and for being more concerned with producing "picturesque effects, [. . .] striking scenes, [. . .] [and] illustrations of mere manners" rather than with working out "certain passions, or affections of the mind, in the most complete and profound form" (69). Like James, he believed that the novelist's subject must "lie long in his mind, to be revolved, meditated, brooded over, until, from the chaos breaks the light, and he sees distinctly the highest end for which his materials can be used, and the best process by which they can be reduced to harmony and order" (73). As Richard Stang points out, in Bulwer Lytton's prefaces and critical essays there is "an almost Jamesian [. . .] insistence on the need for the novelist to be an intensely dedicated craftsman" (12). In the "Dedicatory Epistle" to his novel *The Last of the Barons*, using James's favorite analogy for the novelist Bulwer Lytton writes:

"To my mind, a writer should sit down to compose a fiction as a painter prepares to compose a picture. His first care should be the conception of a whole as lofty as his intellect can grasp—as harmonious and complete as his art can accomplish" (xii). James himself contributed significantly to these efforts to promote the novel as an artwork equal to painting, poetry and drama in importance and dignity. He wrote reviews and critical essays for literary periodicals from the very beginning of his career in the mid-1860s. In 1878 he published his first book of critical studies, *French Poets and Novelists*. In 1884 came out his famous essay, "The Art of Fiction," which begins with the observation that, until "[o]nly a short time ago [. . .] the English novel [. . .] had no air of having a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it – of being the expression of an artistic faith, the result of choice and comparison" (165).[1] Like the contemporary French novelists whose works he knew so well, James believed that a serious work of art must depend on a theory and a conviction. Accordingly, in "The Art of Fiction" he expounded a conception of the novel which remained essentially unchanged to the end of his career—so much so that, James's discussions of his own works in the prefaces are based essentially on the major ideas he expressed in this early essay. The governing idea here is that, the novel paints a picture of life. "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life," he asserts, and defines the novel as "a personal, a direct impression of life" (AF 166, 170). This, however, is the subject-matter of the novel only. As a work of art, the novel must have a form, and so James gives another definition—this time in terms of form: "A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found [. . .] that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts" (174).

James describes the creation of such a form as an "exquisite process, [. . .] the beginning and the end of the art of the novelist" (173). Since character, incident, description, and dialogue are all inseparably fused in the form of the finished novel, critical appreciation too should begin with it. "The form [of a novel]," he declares, "is to be appreciated after the fact: then the author's choice has been made, his standard has been indicated; then we can follow lines and directions and compare tones and resemblances. Then [. . .] we can estimate quality, we can apply the test of execution. The execution belongs to the author alone; it is what is most

1 Further parenthetical references to James's "The Art of Fiction" will be abbreviated as AF.

personal to him, and we measure him by that. The advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility of the novelist, is that there is no limit [. . .] to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes. Here it is especially that he works, step by step, like his brother of the brush, of whom we may always say that he has painted his picture in a manner best known to himself" (170).

This passage is a longer version of James's more often quoted statement in "The Art of Fiction" that, "We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his *donnée*: our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it"(175). In his prefaces to the New York Edition James seems to be doing exactly what he asks critics to do here—going over his novels and tales again, and applying "the test of execution" to them. In his privileged position as both writer and reader, he goes back in memory and writes in each preface, what he calls "the story of a story" (*The Art of the Novel* ix).[2] This retrospective look at his novels and tales starts with an autobiographical account of how the idea first came to him for a particular work, and when, where, and how it was written. "Addicted to 'stories' and inclined to reprospect," he says of himself in the preface to *Roderick Hudson*, "he fondly takes, under this backward view, his whole unfolding, his process of production, for a thrilling tale, almost for a wondrous adventure" (*AN* 4). Obviously, writing the prefaces was not an opportunity for James to formulate a comprehensive theory of the novel, but to give an informal account of the creative process he used in the production of each novel and tale. In each preface his focus is on the particular problems he encountered during the composition of the work under discussion. There are two major concerns, however, that he brings up again and again in different prefaces—two closely related tenets on which, as a matter of fact, James's whole conception of the novel rests, both of them declared much earlier in "The Art of Fiction": one is that, the novel is "a personal, a direct impression of life"; and the other, that the novel "is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism." In connection with the first of these views James says in the same essay: "There is no impression of life, no manner of seeing it and feeling it, to which the plan of the novelist may not offer a place [...]" (AF 182).

In the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* he elaborates on this view with his famous metaphor of "the house of fiction": "The house of fiction

2 Further parenthetical references to *The Art of the Novel*, Richard P. Blackmur's collected edition of Henry James's prefaces, will be abbreviated as *AN*.

has [. . .] not one window, but a million [. . .] every one of which has been pierced [. . .] in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will." The windows are of different shapes and sizes, but they all overlook the same "human scene." At each window "stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or [. . .] a fieldglass, which forms [. . .] for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. [. . .] The spreading field, the human scene, is the 'choice of subject'; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, 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" (*AN* 46).

This passage takes us back to "The Art of Fiction" again where James advises young writers to "[w]rite from experience and experience only," but adds immediately: "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!" (173). As his implied preference for seeing "more," "bigger," and "finer" suggests, James does not hold all individual impressions of life, all ways of seeing and feeling it, in equal value. He relates the ability to make most of what one observes to the possession of a fine consciousness or sensibility in the watcher. Hence, the acquisition of a direct and personal impression of life is not enough; it is only the beginning of the creative process—the raw material to be processed. In "The Art of Fiction" James defines the novel as "a direct impression of life," in order to emphasize the close relation of the novel to life as part of a strategy to win for novels the kind of prestige traditionally given to painting and history. With its basic capacity to reproduce "all life, all feeling, all observation, all vision, [. . .] all experience," the novel is, he maintains, "the most magnificent form of art" (AF 177, 179). So in "The Art of Fiction" James does not go into the question of how and by what means a direct impression is to be reproduced in novels. At one point, he declares that, "Art is essentially selection, but it is a selection whose main care is to be typical, to be inclusive" (AF 177)—and leaves it there. In the prefaces, however, he discusses the whole process of artistic creation dwelling on his own methods of composition, and his discussion of the whole process is based on the fundamental difference

between life and art, which James never loses sight of. As he asserts in the preface to *The Spoils of Poynton* once more, life is "all inclusion and confusion," whereas art is "all discrimination and selection" (*AN* 120). The whole process of putting all this "confusion" into a coherent form begins with the choice of a subject. But there is no difficulty here, because James's only criterion for "the worth of a given subject" is whether or not it is "valid," "genuine," "sincere, [and] the result of some direct impression or perception of life" (*AN* 45). The difficulty lies in the fact that, though life provides novelists with ideas for subjects, it offers them no "laws for a saving selection," no "guidance" on how to develop those subjects (*AN* 120).

The "given subject" involves what James calls "developments" and "relations" in the preface to *Roderick Hudson*. "They are of the very essence of the novelist's process, and it is by their aid, fundamentally, that his idea takes form and lives," he says (*AN* 5). To give his vision of life "complete expression," the novelist has at his disposal only those relations to choose from, and he must choose only those that have a direct bearing on the subject (5). To appreciate the "degree of that directness," however, is a highly difficult matter because, the "felicity of form and composition [. . .] mercilessly rests" on it (5). The difficulty arises from the basic difference between life and art again. The directly observed human scene presents an unbroken continuity of relations; so, in actual life relations do not end anywhere. The subject of fiction too, James asserts, consists "ever, obviously, of the related state, to each other, of certain figures and things" (5). But the novelist must create the impression that those relations come to an end naturally. At least the reader should never feel that the surface reality of actual life has been sacrificed to the exigencies of art. This is what James implies when he says that the "felicity of form and composition [. . .] mercilessly rests" on selecting relations that have a direct bearing on the subject (5). The key word here is "mercilessly," because as a writer who considers the creation of an intense illusion of reality "to be the supreme virtue of a novel" (AF 173), James feels that the act of picking only certain relations out of life poses a serious threat to that illusion by violating "the principle of continuity" which governs all "relations" in actual life. Selection, he implies, runs the risk of appearing like an act of mutilation, and that would not do. Therefore, "the exquisite problem of the artist," he declares, "is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle

within which" relations that end nowhere in real life "shall happily *appear* to do so" in the novel (*AN* 5).

This brings us to James's second fundamental tenet that, the novel must have a form like "a living thing, all one and continuous." An examination of his method of creating such a form can profitably begin with the distinction he makes between life and art again. The essence of life, for James, is its diffuseness and confusion, while that of art is compactness, intensity, and form. Therefore, drawing that circle around relations, which James also calls "developments," is important only as a first step to ensure lifelikeness and to achieve a certain degree of structural unity. The final aim is to create a vividly imitated and intensified version of actual life in a form whose different parts are vitally related to each other. This conception of form is a direct result of James's conception of realism, whose basic principle is correspondence "to our general sense of 'the way things happen,'" as he puts it in the preface to *The American* (*AN* 34). Thus, despite a widespread opinion to the contrary, James's lifelong concern about formal questions springs from his desire to present life as fully as possible in all its complexity, with all its contradictions, complications, and ambiguities, by means of every technical device available. For this purpose, from the beginning of his career he experimented and developed, step by step, as it were, a narrative method whose main aim was to convey his vision of life dramatically, by reducing the felt presence of his own voice to the minimum. The essence of James's method lies in the use of what he calls a "center" or "central intelligence." This is usually a major character in the novel, whose consciousness functions as a stage where the whole "story" is enacted. Accordingly, everything in the novel is presented as this character sees, feels, and understands it. In the preface to *The Princess Casamassima,* after observing that, for him "the *leading* interest of any human hazard" lies "in a consciousness [. . .] subject to fine intensification and wide enlargement," James describes such a character as a "person capable of feeling in the given case more than another of what is to be felt for it, and so serving in the highest degree to *record* it dramatically and objectively [. . .], the only sort of person on whom we can count not to betray, to cheapen [. . .] the value and beauty of the thing. By so much as the affair matters for some such individual, by so much do we get the best there is of it" (*AN* 67).

This shifting of the focus from the external world of events to the internal world of a perceiving mind enables James to establish what he

calls a "point of command" from which he treats the subject in hand. As "a principle of composition" it is this center, this "point of command," that makes it possible for everything in the novel, as James puts it, "to hang together" (*AN* 15). James explains this method first in the preface to *Roderick Hudson*, but often returns to it in the other prefaces. He begins by observing that he was in full possession of the "complicated" facts of "Roderick's disintegration,"—the incidents, the characters, everything to go into that process. Therefore, his problem was not, one of selection; it was rather, he declares, "How [to] boil down so many facts in the alembic, so that the distilled result, the produced appearance, should have intensity, lucidity, brevity, beauty, all the merits required for my effect?" (*AN* 13). In other words, he needed a narrative technique which would enable him to execute his subject—that is, to carry out the task of transforming life into art. The solution he found almost by chance, he says, was to place the center of the novel in Rowland Mallet's mind, and so to present his young hero's gradual degeneration on the arena of his friend's consciousness. This makes Rowland the only character in the novel to whose mind the reader has direct access. Accordingly, since his feelings, thoughts, motives, and reasoning about Roderick and his friends are an index to his own character, Rowland becomes an important figure in his own right. In this way, the novel presents not one, but two stories at once—the story of the observed Roderick, and that of the observing Rowland. Since, however, Rowland's consciousness is in the foreground most of the time, James goes so far as to call his novel "the very drama of that consciousness" (*AN* 16). James then explains how he made Rowland's mind only acute enough to make sense of Roderick's "situation" and story; because "*too* acute" a mind would have made Rowland "superhuman," and it would damage the all-important illusion of reality in the novel (16). To carry conviction, Rowland had to be made a man capable of being "befooled and bewildered, anxious, restless, fallible," and at the same time, intelligent enough to render the "appearances reflected" in his mind "intelligible" (17).

James's application of this narrative method both in *Roderick Hudson* and *The American* is in its infancy yet. But it remained his basic method which he improved as he went along; so, in each succeeding preface he has something to say about this technique of composition in connection with the particular requirements of the novel he discusses. In the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, for instance, James defines his subject matter as

"a certain young woman affronting her destiny." That was, he says, "all my outfit for the large building of" the novel (*AN* 48). The question was how to make this "one single cornerstone" strong and interesting enough to carry the weight of such a big building. The solution he found this time was not to place the center in the mind of another observer like Rowland Mallet: "'Place the center of the subject in the young woman's own consciousness,' I said to myself,'" he explains, "'and [. . .] [s]tick to *that*—for the centre; put the heaviest weight into *that* scale, which will be so largely the scale of her relation to herself. [. . .] Place meanwhile in the other scale the lighter weight [. . .]: press least hard [. . .] on the consciousness of your heroine's satellites, especially the male; make it an interest contributive only to the greater one'" (51). Both in *Roderick Hudson* and *The American* the story is centered, in theory at least, in the mind of a single character, whereas in *The Portrait of a Lady* Isabel's story is presented mainly through her own mind, and to a lesser extent, through the minds of her satellites. In all these three novels, however, outside and above these centers of consciousness, there is the third-person narrating presence of the writer himself, describing scenes and characters, and arranging the relations among them. The opening paragraphs in *The Portrait of a Lady,* obviously "spoken" by the third person narrator, create an impression of him as a man of taste and fine sensibility, almost making him a character interesting in his own right.

James wrote the prefaces to *Roderick Hudson*, *The American*, and *The Portrait* more than twenty-five years after the publication of these novels—that is, at a time when he had already developed his dramatic method of narration fully. His application of it in none of these early novels is so consistently pursued as he makes it out in the prefaces to them. He brought this method to full maturity only in the novels of his "major phase": *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). In these later novels, too, the story is conveyed through the consciousness of one or two characters, with the basic difference that, despite the use of third-person narration again, the writer's voice has disappeared from the scene to a great extent. There are two earlier novels—*The Spoils of Poynton* (1897) and *What Maisie Knew* (1897)—which prepared the way for James's final phase. They were composed after a fairly long period of writing plays in the 1890s. James was always interested in the theatre. He had been asked to adapt *Daisy Miller* and *The American* for the stage; their partial success encouraged him to write original plays. The failure

of these plays was a great disappointment for him, but the experience he gained as a playwright helped him to "tidy up" the method of his earlier novels to make it more tightly dramatic. To secure greater concentration and intensity, he now reduced the number of his characters, and confined the field of vision strictly to that of one or two centers of consciousness. The story progresses mainly in a series of scenes now. Though the third-person narration is maintained, the presence of the writer has disappeared almost completely from the stage.

We see the first extensive application of this narrative method in *The Spoils of Poynton*, which tells the story of a fight over a houseful of antique furniture. The four participants are Mrs. Gereth, a widow, her son Owen, his fiancée Mona Brigstock, and Mrs. Gereth's newly acquired young friend Fleda Vetch. The action progresses on two related lines: the fight between the mother and her son over the furniture; and the love affair that develops between Owen and Fleda. As James observes in the preface to the novel, the story focuses not on "cabinets and chairs and tables" but on "[t]he passions, the faculties, the forces their beauty [. . .] would set in motion" (*AN* 127). Therefore, "the key to" his "modest drama" would be "character, the question of what my agitated friends should individually, and all intimately and at the core, show themselves" to be (127). They show themselves to be "fools" mostly by the way they behave during the struggle for the possession of Mrs. Gereth's antiques, but they do not see their foolishness. Only Fleda sees, James remarks in the preface, "almost demonically both sees and feels, while the others but feel without seeing" (129). It is because of this capacity for keen perception that James used Fleda as the central consciousness: "the progress and march of my tale became and remained that of her understanding" (128), he declares, implying thus that, it is Fleda's growing perception and awareness, that form the novel's real drama—not the "ugly" fight between mother and son.

As we see, the main difference between *The Spoils of Poynton* and the earlier novels is one of degree, not of kind, as regards narrative and structural strategy. This can be illustrated by comparing the opening paragraphs of *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Spoils of Poynton*. *The Portrait* begins with the description of a summer afternoon in the omniscient manner of Henry Fielding almost—the voice we hear is that of the writer-narrator obviously:

Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea. There are circumstances in which, whether you partake of the tea or not - some people of course never do - the situation is in itself delightful. Those that I have in mind in beginning to unfold this simple history offered an admirable setting to an innocent pastime. The implements of the little feast had been disposed upon the lawn of an old English country house in what I should call the perfect middle of a splendid summer afternoon. Part of the afternoon had waned, but much of it was left, and what was left was of the finest and rarest quality. Real dusk would not arrive for many hours; but the flood of summer light had begun to ebb, the air had grown mellow, the shadows were long upon the smooth, dense turf. They lengthened slowly, however, and the scene expressed that sense of leisure still to come which is perhaps the chief source of one's enjoyment of such a scene at such an hour. From five o'clock to eight is on certain occasions a little eternity; but on such an occasion as this the interval could be only an eternity of pleasure. The persons concerned in it were taking their pleasure quietly, and they were not of the sex which is supposed to furnish the regular votaries of the ceremony I have mentioned. The shadows on the perfect lawn were straight and angular; they were the shadows of an old man sitting in a deep wicker-chair near the low table on which the tea had been served, and of two younger men strolling to and fro, in desultory talk, in front of him. The old man had his cup in his hand; it was an unusually large cup, of a different pattern from the rest of the set and painted in brilliant colours. He disposed of its contents with much

> circumspection, holding it for a long time close to his chin, with his face turned to the house. His companions had either finished their tea or were indifferent to their privilege; they smoked cigarettes as they continued to stroll. One of them, from time to time, as he passed, looked with a certain attention at the elder man, who, unconscious of observation, rested his eyes upon the rich red front of his dwelling. The house that rose beyond the lawn was a structure to repay such consideration and was the most characteristic object in the peculiarly English picture I have attempted to sketch. (5-6)

And this is how *The Spoils of Poynton,* written sixteen years after, opens:

> Mrs. Gereth had said she would go with the rest to church, but suddenly it seemed to her that she shouldn't be able to wait even till church-time for relief: breakfast was at Waterbath a punctual meal and she had still nearly an hour on her hands. Knowing the church to be near she prepared in her room for the little rural walk, and on her way down again, passing through corridors and observing imbecilities of decoration, the esthetic misery of the big commodious house, she felt a return of the tide of last night's irritation, a renewal of everything she could secretly suffer from ugliness and stupidity. Why did she consent to such contacts? why did she so rashly expose herself? She had had, heaven knew, her reasons, but the whole experience was to be sharper than she had feared. To get away from it and out into the air, into the presence of sky and trees, flowers and birds, was a necessity of every nerve. The flowers at Waterbath would probably go wrong in colour and the nightingales sing out of tune; but she remembered to have heard the

> place described as possessing those advantages that are usually spoken of as natural. There were advantages enough it clearly didn't possess. It was hard for her to believe a woman could look presentable who had been kept awake for hours by the wall-paper in her room; yet none the less, as she rustled in her fresh widow's weeds across the hall, she was sustained by the consciousness [. . .] that she was, as usual, the only person in the house incapable of wearing in her preparation the horrible stamp of the same exceptional smartness that would be conspicuous in a grocer's wife. She would rather have perished than have looked *endimanchée*. (1)

The writer's voice is not so much in evidence here as it is in the opening paragraph of *The Portrait of a Lady*. Obviously, we are in Mrs. Gereth's mind here, seeing everything through her eyes, and following her thoughts directly without the intervention of the writer-narrator. Even before the chapter ends, however, the point of view is shifted to Fleda. We learn this from the narrator, who, just before the transfer is made, puts in a very brief appearance, and refers to Fleda as "[t]hat member of the party in whose intenser consciousness we shall most profitably seek a reflexion of the little drama with which we are concerned" (6). This is a surprising remark to come from James, because he often criticizes novelists for damaging, by such explanatory words, the illusion of reality that he considers to be one of the vital aspects of the novelist's art. On the other hand, James knows, of course, that the novel is not drama—that, it is a narrative art. That there must always be a teller to tell the tale, and so it is impossible for the novelist to disappear from the world of his creation completely. What James wishes to do is, basically, to bring fiction "to the condition of drama," and as we have seen, he tries to do it by making his centers of consciousness at once "subjects," and vehicles of narrative and formal construction. This narrative method enables him to transfer his inevitable presence into the minds of his "reflectors." In the preface to *The American*, after pointing out that the novel is all Newman's "vision, *his* conception, *his* interpretation," James goes on to declare: "at the window

of his [. . .] sufficiently wide consciousness we are seated, [and] from that admirable position we 'assist.' He therefore supremely matters; all the rest matters only as he feels it, treats it, meets it. A beautiful infatuation this, always, I think, the intensity of the creative effort to get into the skin of the creature; the act of personal possession of one being by another at its completest" (*AN* 37). It is impossible to agree that, in this early novel James gets into the skin of Christopher Newman as completely as he claims to do here. It was only in the novels of his final phase—in *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, and *The Golden Bowl*, and after more than thirty years of constant concern with narrative technique—that James achieved anything approaching the degree of possession he needed in order to give his novels the dramatic form that he desired so much.

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. Northanger Abbey *and* Persuasion. London: Collins, 1953. Print.

Brooks, Cleanth, R.W.B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren. "Henry James (1843-1916)." *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*. Ed. Brooks, Lewis, and Warren. Book C. New York: St. Martin's, 1973. Print.

Bulwer Lytton, Edward. "On Art in Fiction." *The Critical and Miscellaneous Writings of Sir Edward Lytton Bulwer*. Vol. 1. Philadelphia, 1841. 52-88. *Google Book Search*. Web. 28 Sep. 2014.

---. *The Last of the Barons*. London, 1859. *Google Book Search*. Web. 28 Sep. 2014.

Edel, Leon. *Henry James, A Life*. New York: Harper, 1985. Print.

Horne, Philip, ed. *Henry James, A Life in Letters*. New York: Viking, 1999. Print.

James, Henry. "The Art of Fiction." *The Art of Criticism*: *Henry James on the Theory and Practice of Fiction*. Ed.William Veeder and Susan M. Griffin. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986. 165-83. Print.

---. *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James.* Ed. Richard P. Blackmur. New York: Scribner's, 1934. Print.

---. *The Portrait of a Lady*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963. Print.

---. *The Spoils of Poynton.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982. Print.

Stang, Richard. *The Theory of the Novel in England 1850-1870*. New York: Columbia UP; London: Routledge, 1959. Print.