TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF: HABIT AND THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines novelists' contributions to the "psychology of habit" as it emerged in mid- to late-nineteenth-century England and America. First, I situate the realist novel within a larger cultural debate about the social and psychological effects of habitual behavior, retracing the tradition of writing on habit in Victorian philosophy, psychology, and popular advice literature. At stake was the culture's view of itself as the traditions of the past faded and new identities emerged. The chapters then analyze a series of texts written between 1850 and 1900, demonstrating how major novelists took up and often extended the terms of this debate: a frequently overlooked novella, George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*; novels such as George Meredith's *The Egoist* and Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton*; as well as better known works such as Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, and James's*The Portrait of a Lady*. I argue that the unprecedented and unparalleled range of observations about habitual behavior in Victorian fiction had roots in, and in turn helped shape, burgeoning psychological and sociological theories. What is more, these novels all present habit as, potentially, a matrix for creativity and change. Habit, in the view that my study offers, makes vivid both the construction of new identities in this period and the intransigencies of a social structure that resisted their deployment. In the twentieth

century, many intellectuals repudiated the concept of habit, seeing it as a prop for greater mechanization and thus a threat to the "vitality" of human life; simultaneously, moralizing models based on the opposition of "compulsion" and "will" supervened and took hold. This study retraces an alternate route—one that has been largely forgotten—*via* the distinctive contributions imaginative fiction made to understanding habit's role in shaping human behavior and experience. In this view, the concept of habit usefully registers both the construction of new ways of being and the mutual imprints of material culture and mental life in this period.

For my grandmother
Grace T. Cleveland (1919-2005)

The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

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INTRODUCTION

Habit and the Victorian Novel

> If the ethics of art do not admit the truthful presentation of a character essentially noble but liable to great error—error that is anguish to its own nobleness—*then*, it seems to me, the ethics of art are too narrow, and must be widened to correspond with a widening psychology.
>
> —George Eliot, *Letters* III: 317-18

In the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States, social scientists frequently drew upon the behavior of fictional characters to illustrate the powerful shaping force of "habit," a term that came under tremendous new pressure in their writing. Charles Darwin used examples from Margaret Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866) and *The Brownlows* (1868) (80, 270), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) (150), and Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) (241) to illustrate the role of habits in the expression of emotion. William James, in his classic summary of the field, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), relied on the behavior of Jane Austen's old ladies, George Eliot's villagers, and Dickens's minor characters to show how mental associations become habitual (537-38). Sigmund Freud turned to George Meredith's novel *The Egoist* (1879) to support his theory of slips of the tongue in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) (VI: 98-100). The examples abound. Yet the contribution of the English novel to the development of nineteenth-century psychology and the emergence of a recognizably modern form of the discipline toward the end of the century has yet to be fully recognized or made vivid.

This study explores how four major novelists—Charles Dickens, George Eliot, George Meredith, and Henry James—participated in this area of inquiry between 1850 and 1900. Consistent with the generalist nature of Victorian intellectual culture, the examination into the function of habit in everyday life occurred within and across diverse types of writing and investigation. My first aim, therefore, is to position the realist novel within the wider nineteenth-century debate about the social and psychological effects of habit and the status of the individual in an increasingly modern industrial culture. I then demonstrate how novelists took up and extended the terms of this debate, recording both the intransigencies and vicissitudes of habitual behavior in ways that other historical sources do not. Reading in this way has, interestingly, drawn my attention to minor, "flawed," or otherwise neglected works by these major writers. In ways that I could not have predicted at the start, this study also shows some peculiar works to be more central to their authors' canons—and to the Victorian period in general—than has been generally acknowledged to date.

By way of introduction, I first examine theories of habit widely held and extensively debated in nineteenth-century philosophy, psychology, and popular advice literature. In the remaining chapters, I show how novelists were in direct, imaginative conversation with these theories. Chapter 2 investigates the role of habits in perception and memory in George Eliot's novella *The Lifted Veil* (1859). Chapter 3 looks at the growing tensions between individuality and the mechanization of life captured in Meredith's *The Egoist*. Chapter 4 traces distinctive forms of knowledge about the mutual construction of sexuality and habitual space in Henry James's novel *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897). Through these readings, I argue that a specifically *literary* approach

to the tradition of writing on habit sheds new light on both the development of the novel and the emergence of the social sciences. Indeed, the concept of habit was pervasive and culturally central for the Victorians in ways that have been obscured by the twentieth-century preoccupation with the frequently moralizing categories of "compulsion" and "will" after Freud. In this study, I show how the groundwork for an alternate imagining of subjectivity—in narrative and through narrative—was laid in the Victorian novel and its vocabulary of habit. As we will see, this is a particularly rich site for analysis in that it lies at the cusp of psychological realism in literature, the codification and professionalization of distinct disciplines in the social sciences, and the invention of distinctly modern forms of social and sexual identity.

Victorian Perspectives

The inquiry into habit informed many intellectual and aesthetic practices in the Victorian era, including philosophy, psychology, and novelistic discourse, to name some of the most important that this study takes up. Describing the importance of the "shell" of habitual life in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880), Madame Merle exclaims, "There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our 'self'? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again" (Ch. 19, 253). Locating the self in the movement back and forth between the mind and one's "envelope of circumstances," Madame Merle outlines a theory of habit that was finding currency in the nineteenth-century study of human behavior. The wellspring of writing on the function and implications of habitual

behavior dates back to associationist philosophers such as John Locke, David Hume, David Hartley, and Dugald Stewart and continues in later-nineteenth-century psychological writings by, among others, George Henry Lewes, John Stuart Mill, William Carpenter, Henry Maudsley, Alexander Bain, and William James (Vrettos 399). Indeed, as the critic Philip Fisher has written, "The study of psychology in the nineteenth century is in essence a study of habit" (5).

At the center of the discussion were questions about the formation of the individual and the technique of life: the intersection of psychological mechanisms and larger cultural routines. "Custom," says Locke, "settles habits of thinking in the understanding, as well as of determining in the will, and of motions in the body" (*Essay* II:33:6). Two hundred years later, William James found in the nerves and the plasticity of the brain a physiological basis for Locke's observation, as well as deeper social and political implications. Habit is, he declared, society's "most precious conservative agent" (132). For James, as for Madame Merle (10 years earlier), habits define and identify an individual, making each person unique in gesture, disposition, and intellect; yet individual habits are shaped by, and in turn reproduce, social routines. Habits of class, gender, and community shape personal habits of body and mind, which then give form to class identity, gender, and other social distinctions.

To be sure, this was a time of rapid change in the ways people inhabited the world, and England witnessed much of it first. Londoners were the first to occupy a postclassical city of more than a million inhabitants and to encounter the effects of industrialization and imperialism on the rhythms of life and on national character. In the picture that emerges, "habit" becomes a very sensitive register: the Victorians needed to

take stock of its operations as the customs of the past faded. We see this at the juncture of three distinct discursive strands: scientific research, popular advice literature, and mid-century literary conventions.

William James & Physiological Psychology

After chapters on the physical structure of the brain and general conditions of brain activity, William James's definitive 1890 study *The Pinciples of Psychology* begins with a major chapter on habit.[1] "When we look at living creatures from an outward point of view," James begins, "one of the first things that strike us is that they are bundles of habits" (I:104). Habit, for James, has a primarily physical basis: "An acquired habit, from the physiological point of view, is nothing but a new pathway of discharge formed in the brain, by which certain incoming currents ever after tend to escape" (*Briefer* 134). Habit's importance for psychology lies in the propensity of psychological functions such as "the association of ideas, perception, memory, reasoning, the education of the will, etc." to be best understood as "results of the formation *de novo* of just such pathways of discharge" (134). For James, habituation is the process by which "outward agents" or "currents" inscribe or "impress themselves" on the matter of the brain through the nerve-centers. The brain is "plastic" to the extent that blood and the sensory nerve-roots can make impressions upon it: it possesses, that is, "a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once" (135). In this view, habituation is largely a process of overcoming natural (organic) resistance to receiving new stimuli and perceptual awareness—a way of

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[1] Originally appeared in *Popular Science Monthly,* February, 1887. Then published in *Principles of Psychology* (Vol. 1, Chap. IV). Revised for *Psychology: Briefer Course* (1892).

explaining why, for human beings, habituation is a gradual as well as an ongoing process:

> The currents [from these channels], once in, must find a way out. In getting out they leave their traces in the paths which they take. The only thing they *can* do, in short, is to deepen old paths or to make new ones; and the whole plasticity of the brain sums itself up in two words when we call it an organ in which currents pouring in from the sense-organs make with extreme facility paths which do not easily disappear. (137)

Because of the plasticity of the brain tissue, according to James, the effects of routine not only become embodied in the nervous structure of human beings, they are the inevitable results of the physical/elementary properties of the organic materials of which bodies are composed: "The moment one tries to define what habit is, one is led to the fundamental properties of matter. The laws of Nature are nothing but the immutable habits which the different elementary sorts of matter follow in their actions and reactions upon each other" (134). For James, "The philosophy of habit is thus, in the first instance, a chapter in physics" (135).

James's chapter on habit is not exclusively a science lesson, however; his theory of brain activity does not end, as he might have wished it, with the properties of matter and "laws of Nature" that he finds at the source of all routine. James moves, rather, from the physiological and elemental to the social and ethical imperatives of habit, a movement that highlights his awareness of—and deep ambivalence about—the political and social implications of his theory. James describes the embedding of social and political conservatism in the most basic functions of the nervous system:

Habit is thus the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent. It alone is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance, and saves the children of fortune from the envious uprisings of the poor. It alone prevents the hardest and most repulsive walks of life from being deserted by those brought up to tread therein. It keeps the fisherman and the deck-hand at sea through the winter; it holds the miner in his darkness, and nails the countryman to his log-cabin and his lonely farm through all the months of snow; it protects us from invasion by the natives of the desert and the frozen zone. It dooms us all to fight out the battle of life upon the lines of our nurture or our early choice, and to make the best of a pursuit that disagrees, because there is no other for which we are fitted, and it is too late to begin again. It keeps different social strata from mixing. Already at the age of twenty-five you see the professional mannerism settling down on the young commercial traveler, on the young doctor, on the young minister, on the young counsellor-at-law. You see the little lines of cleavage running through the character, the tricks of thought, the prejudices, the ways of the 'shop,' in a word, from which the man can by-and-by no more escape than his coat-sleeve can suddenly fall into a new set of folds. On the whole, it is best he should not escape. It is well for the world that in most of us, by the age of thirty, the character has set like plaster, and will never soften again. (143-44)

Thus, James finds a fundamental biological conservatism in mental processes, conceptualizing an early plasticity of the brain that, along "the lines of our early nurture or our early choice," registers "lines of cleavage" and mental "folds" that soon "set like plaster." The nervous system's physiological predisposition to repetition and rigidification keeps the social structure in place, naturalizing its brutal realities—even, indeed necessarily, to those most adversely affected—and thus thwarting the threat of revolution.

As the fullest and most eloquent articulation of these ideas, James's writings on the physiological basis of habit and its social and political implications have come to stand in for a far-reaching debate that was operative in the culture for more than a century. Prior to James's summary of the field in *The Principles of Psychology*, earlier writing on the psychological mechanisms of habit and social structure ranged from Alexander Bain and the New Psychology to Herbert Spencer and George Henry Lewes and the beginnings of evolutionary psychology, as Rick Rylance has recently demonstrated in *Victorian Psychology and British Culture, 1850-1880*. But the power of James's writing on this subject—his innovation and appeal—comes from his ability to apprehend, sharpen, and repackage the entire field of nineteenth-century physiological psychology—and to marry it to the social conservatism, moral fervor, and easy readability of popular mid-century advice literature.

Conduct Books & Advice Literature

Like scientific and early psychological writings, Victorian conduct books and popular advice literature also reflect the Victorians' need to reflect on the operations of

habit as traditions of the past rapidly eroded. Popular works such as Sarah Stickney Ellis's *The Women of England* (1839) and Samuel Smiles's *Self Help* (1859) also advanced and relied upon theories of habit, as the critic Athena Vrettos has noted. Indeed, Ellis and Smiles make abundant use of a rhetoric of habit in their writings. A brief look at two of their most popular works will show how central this rhetoric was to popular attitudes about identity and character formation in Victorian culture, and to the later shaping of the debate in the more strictly "scientific" terms of nineteenth-century British psychology.

Ellis's 1839 conduct book *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*, aims to reconcile young women to their proper role and position in life, entailing the cultivation of "influence" within "a distinct and separate sphere" (11, 15).[2] Ellis writes: "My desire is to assist them to overcome the three great enemies to their temporal and eternal good—their selfishness, indolence, and vanity—and to establish in their stead feelings of benevolence and habits of industry, so blended with Christian meekness, that while affording pleasure to all who live within the sphere of their influence, they shall be unconscious of the charm by which they please" (18-19). "Youth is the season for regulating these emotions as we ought, because it is comparatively easy to govern our affections when first awakened; after they have been allowed for some time to flow in any particular channel, it requires a painful and determined effort to restrain or divert their course; nor does the constitution of the human mind endure this revulsion of feeling unharmed." Ellis continues ominously, "As the country over whose surface an impetuous river has poured its waters, retains,

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[2] Cited here is Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Daughters of England: Their Position in Society, Character, and Responsibilities*. London: Fisher, Son, & Co., 1842.

after those waters are gone, the sterile track they once pursued, marring the picture as with a scar—a seamy track of barrenness and drought; so the course of misplaced affection leaves its indelible trace upon the character, breaking the harmony of what might otherwise have been most attractive in its beauty and repose" (23). "If we do not acknowledge any regular system of conduct, habit will render that systematical which is our customary choice; and if we choose day by day to act from impulse rather than principle, we yield ourselves to a fatal and delusive system, the worst consequences of which will follow us beyond the grave" (25).

Smiles, in his 1859 best-seller *Self Help: With Illustrations of Character, Conduct, and Perseverance*, also anchors his study of "the art of achievement" and perseverance with a discussion of the importance of careful self-discipline and cultivation of "good" habits. Advancing the middle-class ideals of self-improvement and progress, Smiles's book helps to consolidate the shift, which dates at least from the eighteenth-century and Romantic origins of the English novel, from a courtly notion of gentleman-by birth to the thoroughly middle-class identity of gentleman-by deed. Linking habit to virtue Smiles writes, "It is indeed scarcely possible to over-estimate the importance of training the young to virtuous habits. In them they are the easiest formed, and when formed they last for life; like letters cut on the bark of a tree, they grow and widen with age" (250). "The beginning holds within it the end. The first start on the road of life determines the direction and the destination of the journey…. As habit strengthens with age, and character becomes formed, any turning into a new path becomes more and more difficult" (250). "Indeed, character consists in little acts, well

and honourably performed; daily life being the quarry from which we build it up, and rough-hew the habits which form it" (250-51).

Literary Realism

Of course these issues also preoccupied Victorian novelists and their readers. Now the familiar hallmark of literary realism, local habitations and the small details of "everyday life" came to be represented with new intensity and psychological currency in this period. As the narrator of George Eliot's *Adam Bede* proclaims in giving "these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence" (179):

> I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed; the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you, as precisely as I can, what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath…. I turn without shrinking from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light, softened perhaps by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob-cap, and just touches the rim of her spinning wheel, and her stone jug, and all those cheap common things which are the precious necessaries of life to her.(177, 179).

Echoing the Wordsworthian call to "follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature" (144), Eliot's narrator theorizes her aesthetic aims through a sketch of an old woman and the "cheap common

things” and “precious necessaries” of her everyday existence. The “delicious sympathy” that Eliot’s narrator finds in these pictures derives not solely from the woman herself, or from the homely objects that surround her, but rather from the imagined relation of the woman to the habitual objects and the practices of her daily life, a cathexis long solidified—and evidenced—by habit (179). That she imagines narration as a mimetic process of reflecting something previously *appearing on the mind* shows how deeply implicated were the aims and metaphors of nineteenth-century psychology and literary realism.

Habits identify the most particular traits of character, those that we think of as defining individual personality, as well as types and taxonomies of individuals. They also problematize what it means to have a character and to be an individual in the modern age—“What shall we call our ‘self’? Where does it begin? Where does it end?” They turn interiority inside out. Indeed, a defining feature of the realist novel is its chronicle of the individual’s formation in the midst of overwhelming social forces—in *Daniel Deronda*’s terms, connecting “the course of individual lives with the historic stream, for all classes of thinkers” (Ch. 8, p. 88). In this light, the Victorian novel is the apex of the novel form. It is also, I will argue, an important and unique intervention in the arena of psychological research. This is, in part, why Victorian novels have come to represent the entire period, and why they seem so modern.

Theoretical Considerations

In demarcating “habit” as a distinctive preoccupation within Victorian culture, this study aims to enlarge and reframe current understandings of the term as well as

bring into sharper focus the ways in which Victorians themselves grappled with practices of the self—ways much obscured by the lens of their twentieth-century reception.

The existing models for this study focus on the eighteenth century and the connections between the origins of the novel and changes in the reading public. In *The Rise of the Novel* (1967), Ian Watt draws an analogy between philosophical and literary realism by comparing conditions in the eighteenth-century social and literary scenes. Patricia Meyer Spacks takes this analogy further in *Imagining a Self* (1976) by examining self-conception in eighteenth-century philosophy, autobiography, and novel. Building on this scholarship, I focus on a much later period, tracing the connection, in the last half of the nineteenth century, between psychological and novelistic investigations into the functions and implications of habitual behavior. This project has interest not only for interdisciplinary literary-historical research: it also shows this Victorian model to be relevant as an alternative to psychological theories that are more contemporary to us. It offers an "otherwise" to the current proliferation of, for example, theoretical and political assertions based on modern genetics; "lifestyle" and the commodification of affect; and ego psychology's intensely moralizing story of "consolidation." This alternative, I argue, can be found in the Victorian novel's contributions to the nineteenth-century psychology of habit.

'A dread deity'

In a fascinating 1973 article, "The Failure of Habit," Philip Fisher traces the twentieth-century repudiation of habit in modernist aesthetics and fiction. Rather than

the instrument of self-mastery defended by William James, Ellis, and Smiles, habit is for writers at least since Walter Pater the root of the consummate evasion of life, a kind of "automated moral life" (Fisher 4). Pater wrote in 1900, as if announcing the turn of the century, "To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits. For, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations look alike" (qtd. in Fisher 3). Rejecting the view of the self offered by their Victorian predecessors—one organized around work, action, regularity, and order—modernist writers after Pater make perception, attention, pleasure, and experience the center of the self (Fisher 3). In Fisher's words, "The poetry of aestheticism begins with those experiences where habit fails" (4-5). In *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, Virginia Woolf describes one of these experiences, which she would later call "moments of being":

> It was a way things had sometimes, she thought, lingering for a moment and looking at the long glittering windows and the plume of blue smoke: they became unreal. So coming back from a journey or after an illness, before habits had spun themselves across the surface, one felt the same unreality, which was so startling; felt something emerge. Life was most vivid then. (qtd. in Fisher 5)

James Joyce, in *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, "defeats" habit by ending each chapter—in which "an experience of deliverance hardens into a new form of bondage"—with a new ecstasy, "a new escape from that pattern into which the previous escape had frozen" (Fisher 5). Thus, modernism defined itself, in part, against an earlier

trust in habit's power to shape a stable, productive self over time; yet, it also depended on habit's "failure" for its pleasures, epiphanies, and indeed its very structures. As Fisher states, "These assaults on habit, combined as they are with narrative experiment, only emphasize how essential the notion of habit was to what was understood as self or character, and to what made up a narrative" (5).

Yet habit has fallen out of theorized use in the past century, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has noted in her 1993 essay "Epidemics of the Will," replaced by the proliferation of "addiction" and other paradigms oriented around absolutes of compulsion and free will (138-39). The discursive "epidemic" of addiction attribution in recent years—"workaholism," "shopaholism," "being sexual compulsive," "relationship addiction," "exercise addiction," and the all too self-aware "self-help addiction," etc.—for Sedgwick, points to a locus of addictiveness that "cannot be the substance itself and can scarcely be the body *its*elf, but must be some overarching abstraction that governs the narrative relations between them.... the *structure* of a will that is always somehow insufficiently free, a choice whose voluntarity is insufficiently pure" (131-32). Therefore, compulsion becomes structurally necessary: it *must* be detected behind everyday choice in order to "isolate some new, receding absolutized space of *pure* voluntarity" (134). The need to expose compulsion itself becomes—increasingly blindly—compulsive: "tied," Sedgwick writes (citing Nietzsche), "to the bizarrely moralized imperative for the invention of a Will whose value and potency seem to become more absolute as every grounding possibility for its coming into existence breathtakingly recedes and recedes" (134). Distinguishing between this epidemic of addiction attribution and people's "lived addictions" (whose vanquishment, Sedgwick is

careful to note, also involves a heroic and subtle negotiation of absolutes), Sedgwick asks of the epidemic of addiction attribution not “Why now?” but: “How could it have been otherwise? What shards of outdated cognitive resource may we still find scattered by the roadside of progress, resources by which it might be, or might once have been, possible to think voluntarity and compulsion differently—to resist simply re-propelling the propaganda of a receding Free Will?” (138).

Sedgwick is doubtful of the possibilities for the concept of the unconscious, “whether individual or historical, to be of much help in approaching this particular question,” a skepticism that in this project I share (138). Sedgwick writes that “both psychoanalytic and Marxist thought seem to have the modern heroics of voluntarity/compulsion already inscribed too deeply at he source of their narrative and analytic energies” (138). Rather, Sedgwick suggests the possibility of reconstructing an “otherwise” for addiction attribution in the tradition of reflecting on *habit*, defined expansively here as “a version of repeated action that moves, not toward absolutes, but toward interrelations of the action—and the self acting—with the bodily habitus, the appareling habit, the sheltering habitation, everything that marks the traces of that habit on a world that the metaphysical absolutes would have left a vacuum” (138). Sedgwick finds that the “unmoralized usage of the language of habit in, for instance, Proust is as scouring as any version of contemporary addiction attribution—without at all requiring the hypostatization of a ghostly, punitive free will on the receding horizon” (139).

Proust treats habit, in Sedgwick’s view, as “in the first instance, a perceptual matter” (139). Habituation is, Proust writes, “that operation which we must always start afresh, longer, more difficult than the turning inside out of an eyelid, and which consists

in the imposition of our own familiar soul on the terrifying soul of our surroundings" (vol. 2, 791; qtd. in Sedgwick 139). Thus, Sedgwick offers: "A banal but precious opiate, habit makes us blind to—and thus enables to come into existence—our surroundings, ourselves as we appear to others, and the imprint of others in ourselves" (139). A precious opiate, habit is also, for Sedgwick, the necessary perceptual ground of surprise, laughter, change: "Habit also demarcates the space of perceptual and proprioceptive reversal and revelation—revelation at which introspection itself can never arrive" (139). The passage that Sedgwick cites here is the narrator's receipt of Albertine's letter saying she has left him for good:

> Yes, a moment ago, before Françoise came into the room, I had believed that I no longer loved Albertine, I had believed that I was leaving nothing out of the account, like a rigorous analyst; I had believed that I knew the state of my own heart…. I had been mistaken in thinking that I could see clearly into my own heart. But this knowledge, which the shrewdest perceptions of the mind would not have given me, had now been brought to me, hard, glittering, strange, like a crystallized salt, by the abrupt reaction of pain. I was so much in the habit of having Albertine with me, and now I suddenly saw a new aspect of Habit. Hitherto I had regarded it chiefly as an annihilating force which suppresses the originality and even the awareness of one's perceptions; now I saw it as a dread deity, so riveted to one's being, its insignificant face so incrusted in one's heart, that if it detaches itself, if it turns away from one, this deity that one had barely distinguished inflicts on one

> sufferings more terrible than any other and is then as cruel as death itself. (vol. 3, 426; qtd. in Sedgwick 139-40)

Sedgwick's reading of these two passages in Proust motivates this project and suggests a look back at the earlier tradition of Victorian novelists' engagement with theories of habit. Reading against the grain of both dominant nineteenth-century discourses of habit and their weighty twentieth-century rejection, this study reconsiders an undercurrent in the Victorian novelistic tradition: counterdiscursive representations of habit, the self-conscious manipulation of which Proust and Woolf are, gorgeously, the culmination. Indeed, the question of whether or not we should have habits (answered at least since Pater with a resounding "No") has obscured the fact that we *do*, and with it has gone an attentiveness to all of the richly described, deeply imagined conceptualizations and psychologies of habit—the mutual imprints of material and mental life—that lay the foundation of the genre of the Victorian novel.

Polemical

Of all the fiction of the Victorian era, and of these four great and prolific novelists in particular, the various novels that I read are some of the least established with modern readers. They have, as Lionel Trilling said of *Little Dorrit*, now perhaps the widest read of the works I deal with here, "retired to the background and shadow of our consciousness" (50). The fate of this countercurrent and "psychology of habit" that I trace here stands in marked contrast to the advent and rapid ascendancy of Freudian psychoanalysis, which soon became its own kind of habitual common-sense in literary critical studies. Critics have generally argued that the nineteenth-century novel already

is psychoanalytic theory—that the realist novel is psychoanalysis's unconscious. But the Victorian novel disrupts and forestalls the Freudian model as much as it anticipates it. Part polemic, my study argues thatpsy choanalysis is the unconscious of the novel, that which enters its awareness—focused otherwise on the psychology and phenomenology of habit—only inadvertently and always incompletely.

Raymond Williams writes in *Keywords* that the term "psychological" came to be synonymous with inwardness and personal feeling only in the twentieth century. Rylance cites Williams to argue that "the bifurcation of the novel into increasingly separate 'social' and 'psychological' domains … has disabled the common understanding of the relationship between personal and social developments, which was the great achievement of nineteenth-century realism, and this is one unfortunate consequence of cultural and literary Modernism" (9-10). I argue here that the Victorians had a term for this social psychology, and that term was habit. The subsequent reversal of the term's meaning—habit is now linked inextricably with addiction and questions of the will—marks an odd effect of the replacement and cooption of physiologically based theories of mind in the nineteenth century by psychoanalysis. Habit-as-addiction was of course present for the Victorians too—often masquerading in literary representations for the dynamics of male-male desire as Sedgwick notes, for instance, in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (*Tendencies* 135). As such, it would seem to epitomize the privileged area of inner, private experience detached from social context that would become the domain/product of psychoanalysis and the apotheosis of literary modernism. But habit for the Victorians is primarily linked not with addiction but with

the worldly mundane, with everything in the perceptual experience of one's surroundings that is taken for granted—is thought to be "outside" the self.

Scattered Technologies

Michel Foucault's late turn from a focus on "technologies of domination and power" to the "technologies of the self" also helps form this project's motive and, as a result, part of its title. Foucault defines these latter "technologies" or "arts of existence" as "those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria" (*Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure* 10-11). Foucault's late theory of *ascesis*, or exercise of oneself, is not contrary to his earlier writings but rather stands at a tangent to it. Here he begins to examine what Michel de Certeau calls the "tactics" or "practices of everyday life": ways of operating such as talking, walking, cooking, reading, shopping that "make up the obscure background of social activity," that constitute "a silent production" and "make commonplaces habitable" (xi, xxii). Foucault is especially useful here because, like the Victorian novelists I examine, he understands the processes of self-formation as complex and embodied—not just "codes of behavior" but "forms of subjectivation" (29). His emphases are multiple: the forms of relation with the self; the methods and techniques by which one works them out; the exercises by which one makes of oneself an object to be known; and the practices that enable one to transform one's own mode of being (30). As both Foucault's ascetic writings and the Victorian novel show, the concept of habit entails both the social

formation of the self and the processes by which one acts on that self—“not just as an agent, but as an ethical subject of this action” (26).

In this, the Victorian novel’s overriding concern with connecting “the course of individual lives with the historic stream”—its conceptualization of habit as the relations among and between the levels of body, clothing, behavior, movement, character, buildings, streets, and environs (*OED*)—can be said to have anticipated Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the *habitus*. They are indeed synonymous; the only difference marks the historical phenomenon of what Sedgwick calls “epidemics of the will,” the definitional shift “habit” underwent during modernism, requiring Bourdieu to choose a distinct yet closely related term. For Bourdieu, the habitus is where the idiosyncratic/personal combines with the systematic/social, in one reader’s view, “the mediating link between the individuals’ subjective worlds and the cultural world into which they are born and which they share with others” (Jenkins 75). Whereas “practice” describes an individual behavior, habitus is meant to encompass the collective social construction of the world. It represents an attempt to overcome the opposition between individual and society, voluntarism and determinism, “to understand the relationship between ‘subjectivity’—individual social being as it is experienced and lived—and the ‘objective’ social world within which it is framed and toward the production of which it contributes” (18, 25). Thus, Bourdieu rejects determinism and mechanistic explanations of social life as well as conscious, deliberate intentions as sufficient explanation for what people do, recalling Marx’s adage that people make their own history but not in circumstances of their own choosing (66, 70).

At the center of the concept of habitus are the body's "schemata of perception" through which we learn by assimilating or modifying habits and dispositions (Lande). As the Victorians began to see all too clearly, it is the operations of habit—the body as "mnemonic device upon and in which the very basics of culture … are imprinted and encoded" (Jenkins 75-6)—that mediate between "individual lives" and "the historical stream," between culture and cognition. For the Victorians, habits comprise what Bourdieu would call the "doxic experience" that causes the individual to take oneself and the social world for granted: "the coincidence of the objective structures and the internalized structures which provides the illusion of immediate understanding, characteristic of practical experience of the familiar universe, and which at the same time excludes from that experience any inquiry as to its own conditions of possibility" (*Logic* 20).

Thus, the questions we might pose after reading James, Ellis, Smiles, and more recent commentators push in two different directions at once. On the one hand, a synchronic question: How did novelists take up and extend these burgeoning psychological and popular theories of habit? On the other hand, more diachronic concerns: What has been lost in the modernist evacuation of nineteenth-century philosophies and psychologies of habit? What might be recuperated for the contemporary moment?

Taken together with the appearance of fictional characters in nineteenth-century social science and Madame Merle's forward-looking definition of habit in fiction, this approach reveals a distinctly *literary* contribution to the nineteenth-century psychology of habit. Included in this are the distinct forms of individuality that the Victorian novel

chronicled, and in turn helped shape. The literary critics who have come closest to this project in both subject and period (Fisher 1973; Miller 1982; Chase 1984; Bentley 1995; Vrettos 1999) have tended to emphasize habit's association with *repetition*. This emphasis can also be seen in the eighteenth-century debate about identity, which understood repetition as the primary function of a continuous, unified self—and in its postmodern debunking, in particular with Judith Butler's seminal work on the *citationality* of gender norms in *Gender Trouble* (1990). It also reflects the modernist fixation with time, linear movement, and fear of automation. Sedgwick's writing points us to a different connection, that is, habit's strong reliance on the use of resources and the shaping of *space*—Victorian preoccupations both. This view also involves repetition, of course, but instead of moving toward metaphysical absolutes ("compulsive/voluntary," "biological/social"), it moves toward the fossil *traces of the habit on the world*, including on the self (*Tendencies* 138-40). Indeed, it moves toward the stuff of novels.

Novel Habits

The novelists I look at here all reflect Victorian interest in, and anxieties about, habit's *characterizing* force. Yet they are also doing something markedly different, and more. Whereas other discourses remain focused on the characterological and frequently moralizing valences of habit, novelists also, by necessity, subvert and undercut this: they make things happen to their characters. For them, habit is the impetus of narrative, a necessary ground, and a formal concern. It is perhaps no mistake then that Wilkie Collins identified the two main elements in the attraction of all stories to be "the interest

of curiosity" and "the excitement of surprise"—the characterological, the stable and recognizable, on the one hand; and the narrative, the plotted and unpredictable, on the other (Preface to *The Woman in White* 5). This is not to reduce everything to story but to show that story, in the nineteenth-century novel, is at root interested in behavior—its volatility as well as its intransigencies.

The texts I read here all present habit as weird, not entirely subject to reason, and thus, potentially, a matrix for creativity and change. By foregrounding the repetitive, the involuntary, the inanimate, and the automatic, they startle the reader into emotional response—disquietude, laughter, revulsion, the sense of hovering important uncertain meaning—as the normalizing discourse on habit engaged in by the scientists and moralists does not do. As my chapters will show, Dickens focuses on the deprivation of the senses and the comical but grotesque physical detail, Eliot on the suspension of time, light, and life, Meredith on the syllable, epigram, image, and pregnant object, and James on the weirdly meaningful stuff richly productive of an atmosphere. The reader becomes aware that the "dead" things associated with habit are potentially quick with a livelier than "normal" way of being. This awareness yields a different narrative about the novel, too, as it calls into question the oft-touted "progress" from realism modernism; indeed, a key insight of my study is that the things that can happen in a Victorian exploration get increasingly hard to happen as the twentieth century goes on.

One the most interesting and surprising aspects of this work has been the discovery of how closely the interest in habit also corresponds with crucial turns in the authors' own lives. In my first chapter, which functions as an extended introduction to the ideas presented above, Dickens is shown to be grappling in *Little Dorrit* with a

particularly bitter conception of society, and a walking habit without which he declared he could not work. In Chapter Two, I argue that the strange story of the gothic of everyday life, *The Lifted Veil*, enacts the transition from "Mary Ann Evans" to "George Eliot." Chapter Three explores the implications of an appearance by George Meredith in Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* and the influence of an 1877 lecture he delivered on Henri Bergson and, hence, on twentieth-century thought. And Henry James's homoerotic letters to the young American sculptor Hendrik C. Anderson become a lens through which I consider James's late themes and style. This turn to biography in each chapter is not meant to refocus attention back on the individual, but rather to foreground the additional social contexts that biography provides: Dickens's ideas about the possibilities of reform; Eliot's feminism; Meredith's modernity; and James's queerness. As well, the project strives to enact what it describes: the connection of "the course of individual lives with the historic stream, for all classes of thinkers," including authors.

Habit

From the OED:

Habit sb. [a. OF. *habit, abit*, It. *abito*; ad. L. *habitus*, noun of action, from *habere* to have, *refl.* to be constituted, to be.]

I. Fashion or mode of apparel, dress.

1. a. Bodily apparel or attire; clothing, raiment, dress. a*rch.*
   b. with *a* and *pl*. A set or suit of clothes, a dress (of some specific kind). a*rch.*
   c. *pl*. Clothes, garments, habiliments. a*rch*.
   d. Hence in *sing*. A garment; a gown or robe. a*rch*.
   e. *transf*. and *fig*. Outward form or appearance; guise; 'dress', 'garb'.
2. *spec*. The dress or attire characteristic of a particular rank, degree, profession, or function; *esp*. the dress of a religious order; *the habit*, the monastic order or profession.
3. Riding-habit: A dress worn by ladies on horseback; a lady's riding-dress.

II. External deportment, constitution, or appearance; habitation.

4. Bearing, demeanour, deportment, behaviour; posture. *Obs*.
5. a. Bodily condition or constitution.
   b. *concr*. The bodily 'system'.
   c. The outer part, surface, or external appearance of the body.
6. *Zool.* and *Bot*. The characteristic mode of growth and general external appearance of an animal or plant. Hence *tranf.* ; e.g. in *Cryst*. The characteristic mode of formation of a crystal.
7. Habitation, abode. *Obs*. *rare*.

III. Mental constitution, disposition, custom.

8. The way in which a person is mentally or morally constituted; the sum of the mental and moral qualities; mental constitution, disposition, character.
9. a. A settled disposition or tendency to act in a certain way, esp. one acquired by frequent repetition of the same act until it becomes almost or quite involuntary; a settled practice, custom, usage; a customary way or manner of acting.
   b. (Without *a* or *pl*.): Custom, usage, use, wont.
   c. (Usually in *pl*.) Applied to the natural or instinctive practices characteristic of particular kinds of animals, and to natural tendencies of plants.
   d. *in the habit of doing* something: having a habit or custom of so doing. So *to fall* or *get into the habit*.
   e. *spec*. in *Psych*. An automatic, 'mechanical' reaction to a specific situation which usually has been acquired by learning and/or repetition.
   f. The practice of taking addictive drugs. c*olloq*. (orig. *U.S.*)
10. The condition of being accustomed to something through having constantly to do with it; familiarity. o*n intimate habits*: on intimate terms, familiar. *Obs.*

CHAPTER ONE

Dickens and the Psychology of Habit: *Little Dorrit*

> *Little Dorrit* stands in Dickens's life chiefly as a signal of how far he went down the road of realism, of sadness, and of what is called modernity.
> —G.K. Chesterton, 178

I.

If you were wondering what Mr. Venus was in the habit of collecting, he will be happy to tell you:

> Bones, warious. Skulls, warious. Preserved Indian baby. African ditto. Bottled preparations, warious. Everything within reach of your hand, in good preservation. The mouldy ones a-top. What's in those hampers over them again, I don't quite remember. Say, human warious. Cats. Articulated English baby. Dogs. Ducks. Glass eyes, warious. Mummied bird. Dried cuticle, warious." (*Our Mutual Friend* 126)[1]

Or, perhaps you wanted to know about Jenny Wren's doll's dress-making habits; Dickens's narrator is glad to oblige, with a description in which her character is shown to take on the qualities of her tools:

> … the little figure went on with its work of gumming or gluing together with a camel's-hair brush certain pieces of cardboard and thin wood, previously cut into various shapes. The scissors and knives upon the

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[1] My thanks to Sarah Alexander for her reading of trash in *Our Mutual Friend* and to D. Rae Greiner for her paper on *Little Dorrit*, "Baulked," for pointing me back to some of the passages cited here and suggesting the reading that follows. Papers delivered at the Dickens Winter Conference at UCLA, Los Angeles, 17-19 February 2006. I am also immensely grateful to Rosemarie Bodenheimer, who shared parts of an unpublished manuscript on Dickens with me at a crucial stage in my writing. Cited here as "Streets," paper delivered at Dickens Universe, UCSC, Santa Cruz, 4 August 2005.

> bench showed that the child herself had cut them; and the bright scraps of velvet and silk and ribbon also strewn upon the bench showed that when duly stuffed (and stuffing too was there), she was to cover them smartly. The dexterity of her nimble fingers was remarkable, and, as she brought two thin edges accurately together by giving them a little bite, she would glance at the visitors out of the corners of her grey eyes with a look that out-sharpened all her other sharpness. (272)

Surely, we would hear Joe Gargery before we saw him, given his characteristic humming of "Old Clem" while beating it out in the forge, a lively habit in contrast with Miss Havisham's moldering emotional repositories. Frederick Dorrit would not be hard to spot, with his "habit of shuffling into the picture-galleries, always with his twisted paper of snuff in his hand" (*Little Dorrit* 505). We would know even an erratic character like Mr. F's Aunt by her very predictably enraged non sequiturs. The financier Mr. Merdle habitually holds himself by the wrist, a gesture that extends the central metaphor of *Little Dorrit*—imprisonment—all the way to the unconscious operations of the upper-class body. And then there is Amy Dorrit herself, Child of the Marshalsea, humble and loyal and true to her memory and childhood experience, dutifully making a new home for it wherever she goes.

It is no great news that Dickens rewrote and permanently transformed the literary landscape with his delineation of character through eccentric habits of behavior. For Dickens, nothing could be more obvious or necessary to an effective story (Bodenheimer "Streets" 2). He is rightly regarded as one of the first great novelists of the urban mind. Critical accounts of Dickens's psychology of habit have generally

focused on his mode of characterization, linked as it is with Victorian anxiety about the increasing mechanization of life and with the frequently moralizing concern with the fixity of character once it is formed. For this, there is plenty of evidence in Dickens's fictional world. Athena Vrettos's 1999 article "Defining Habits: Dickens and the Psychology of Repetition" is perhaps the fullest exploration to date. Vrettos reads in *Dombey*'s deadening routine of business the fear that people cannot or do not change very much. True enough: despite everything that works against the neat domestic resolutions of his novels—the social criticism, the comic relief, all of the images of recycling, and visions of the past—the conventional ending usually wins out in Dickens, and his characters, like most of us, do the expected rather than the impassioned thing.

But less attention has been paid to how deeply the idea of habit structures Dickens's narratives. The focus on whether or not we should have habits—or, whether or not individuals change—obscures the fact that we do. In this chapter, in order to create a bridge from the Victorian perspectives and theoretical considerations of my introduction to the readings of later novelists such as Eliot, Meredith, and James, for whom Dickens was inevitable a transfer station, I offer a different approach to Dickens and the psychology of habit. It seems to me that Dickens was keenly aware of—indeed, haunted by—a troubling doubleness in the concept: habit as mere repetition, stasis, and paralysis, on the one hand; and, on the other, habit as the necessary and productive ground for creativity, perceptual change, and sudden revelation—change at which introspection alone could never arrive, as Sedgwick has noted (*Tendencies* 139). It is telling here, I think, that many repetitive habitual activities in the novels also serve as images for novel-writing—scavenging, recycling, forging, remembering, collecting,

running on at the mouth. Indeed, Dickens's thematization of habit reveals an enabling, creative relation with the past and his own ambivalent view of the human mind—the view that, in Lionel Trilling's account, "having received the social impress, [the mind] becomes in turn the matrix of society" (55).

The prevailing idea of habit—of mindless repetition, automation, loss of forward momentum, paralysis, arrest—especially structures Dickens's late novels, perhaps nowhere more clearly than in *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), a novel intensely preoccupied with tension between motion and stasis, creation and death (Bodenheimer 11). The novel opens in a prison in Marseilles and goes on to the Marshalsea, "which, in effect it never leaves" (Trilling 52). Book the Second, "Riches," begins in a prison-like mountaintop monastery, the Circumlocution Office imprisons creativity in England with its knowledge of How Not To Do It, and incarceration is everywhere: persons and classes trapped by their notions of fate or duty, their professions, their dreams, their self-perceptions, their very habits of language (Trilling 52).

Indeed, in his mode of characterization Dickens reflects the discourses of habit prevalent in nineteenth-century psychology and mid-Victorian advice literature. I will argue first through a reading of the biography and then through the novel that Dickens does something different and more: he makes things happen to his characters; his "bundles of habit" are often volatile, and move.

II.

Dickens knew something about habit, as Rosemarie Bodenheimer makes clear in her recent work on Dickens's habit of walking the streets of London, ten miles—

sometimes as much as fifteen and twenty miles—often at night. Bodenheimer's reading of Dickens's walking habit is suggestive in particularly useful ways. Most psycho-biographical approaches imagine Dickens's walking as an obsessive return to the trauma of his shame-filled walks to and from Warren's Blacking as a child. Bodenheimer breaks with this reading and argues instead that "Dickens's compulsory walking was not a way to reconnect with his early isolation, but a means of escaping from his fear of being re-immersed in that fearful condition" (5). To walk for physical release from strenuous mental labor, to roam in search of scraps of new material or whole new fictional worlds, to calm the effects of his intense engagement with his characters, to allay the restlessness of artistic uncertainty: Bodenheimer's reading helps us see that Dickens intimately knew another side to habit than the repetition and compulsion that identify many of his characters. His walking impels forward movement—down into the London streets, in composition, in life.

In his fifties, Dickens's already fragile health began to decline, and stories of the pain in his left foot and his walking in spite of it proliferated (Bodenheimer 20). Bodenheimer tells us that:

> … in 1865, he reported being laid up with a "wounded foot" that he explained to friends as "a frost-bitten foot, from much walking in deep Kentish snow." Forster got a full-blown explanation: he had perpetually wet feet in boots that swelled and shrank; he had repeatedly forced his boot onto a swollen left foot, and continued his rituals of work and walking, until he found himself lame in the snow, three miles from home. The dogs, he reported, were terrified (11.23). The pain, causing

> "sleepless agony" (11.29), went on for two months. Then he returned to his ten miles a day, but he could not wear shoes or boots in the evenings, and he ordered the first of several extra-large boots for his left foot. "Work and worry, without exercise, would soon make an end of me" he exclaimed to Forster. (20)

On the ninth of June 1870, he was dead of a stroke. In the prior weeks, his correspondents all heard how he had been "dead-lame" for three weeks: "I have been subject for a few years past to Neuralgic attack in the foot, originating in over walking in deep snow and revived by a hard winter in America…. Deprivation of my usual walks is a very serious matter to me, as I cannot work unless I have my constant exercise" (qtd. in Bodenheimer 22). Bodenheimer, who focuses on the connection to *Bleak House* (1852) concludes, "Somewhere in Dickens's inner world Lady Dedlock had triumphed, walking to her death through the snow" (23).

The link between Dickens's walking and writing remains tenuous, of course—as Bodenheimer herself warns, "it is difficult to stabilize the relationship between the two" (5)—but it is suggestive and compelling in special ways. For it signals the presence of a more complicated and intensely felt relationship between habits and narratives in Dickens than the reading of habit as primarily a mode of static characterization has up to this point allowed. And this is perhaps nowhere more evident than in *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), a novel in which the tension between movement and stagnation, creativity and blockage, also gets played out in the streets.

III.

After returning to London from a twenty years' stay in China, and beginning to detect the family secret to which he senses Amy Dorrit is the key, Arthur Clennam discovers that Mr. Casby, his old sweetheart's father, is responsible for sending Amy to work for his mother. Mr. Casby's name sets off a train of recollection in Clennam's mind, and he visits the Casby house. On his approach, we get this description, in which Arthur's feelings of dead-endedness are projected onto the unfinished street:

> With a comfortable impression upon him, and quite an honest one in its way, that he was still patronising Little Dorrit in doing what had no reference to her, he found himself one afternoon at the corner of Mr Casby's street. Mr Casby lived in a street in the Gray's Inn Road, which had set off from that thoroughfare with the intention of running at one heat down into the valley, and up again to the top of Pentonville Hill; but which had run itself out of breath in twenty yards, and had stood still ever since. There is no such place in that part now; but it remained there for many years, looking with a baulked countenance at the wilderness patched with unfruitful gardens and pimpled with eruptive summerhouses, that it had meant to run over in no time.
>
> "The house," thought Clennam, as he crossed to the door, "is as little changed as my mother's, and looks almost as gloomy." (159)

Arthur is stuck, suspended. The solemn abandoned road—left off, "baulked," as if to mark his bachelorhood as a failure to provide a "through" way, checked as he was by

his mother's iron will—stands in contrast to what he finds inside. Arthur's old sweetheart, Flora Casby, is now the plump, florid, good-hearted widow Mrs. Finching, with a penchant for running on with little-to-no understandable association of ideas. The effects of their broken engagement have been the opposite. Flora is characterized by unstoppable verbal fluidity contained within the "patriarchal" home of her father whereas Clennam identifies morosely with the stymied blind street. Perhaps auspiciously—and anxiously—Arthur has just met in the preceding chapter his new friend and partner Daniel Doyce, also a bachelor but an engineer and originator, too.

Like Casby's street and Flora's verbal barrage, his mother's home gives Arthur pause upon his return. Doubling as the home branch of the House of Clennam, it is old, stale, and so near ruin that it has been propped up with heavy beams, which in their turn are rotting. Mrs. Clennam is cold, austere, and a paralytic, confined to her room; like Miss Havisham, she is trapped by old habit and seems frozen in time. Like Flora—who, to much different effect, also binds herself by habitually talking in circles—she is trapped by her own self-interested claim on Arthur.

Enter Amy Dorrit. Born within the Marshalsea walls, she is habituated to prison life. The only speck of that atmosphere upon her, that Clennam ever sees anyway, is an overwrought compassion for her father: "it has grown up here with me," she tells Arthur (444). The main stay and support of her ungrateful and proud family, she leaves it only to work modestly and unselfishly as a seamstress, a worker at assembling and repairing for use and reuse, if not exactly recycling. Even her attempts to care for an old pauper friend within the prison are derided and devalued by her father, sister, and brother. At the end of Book the First, "Poverty," the Dorrit family leaves the Marshalsea after

coming into a long-unclaimed, accumulating estate, departing with great fanfare—all but Amy, whom Arthur finds insensible in her old garret room, having fainted in a heap before the new dress she is asked to wear. He carries her down to the waiting carriage in her prison dress instead, to her sister Fanny's great dismay:

> "Here is that child Amy, in her ugly old shabby dress, which she was so obstinate about, Pa, which I over and over again begged and prayed her to change, and which she over and over again objected to, and promised to change to-day, saying she wished to wear it as long as ever she remained in there with you—which was absolutely romantic nonsense of the lowest kind—here is that child Amy disgracing us to the last moment and at the last moment, by being carried out in that dress after all. And by that Mr Clennam too!" (452)

The family strife continues as the others become more and more unhappy in their altered circumstances, oppressed by their new wealth, the position they seek to maintain, and the shame that they feel about the past. Amy, still not considered as "presentable" as the others, retains her simple kindliness, and Mrs. General is engaged with the Dorrit party for the purposes of "forming" the Misses Dorrit in the discipline of Prunes and Prism. All of this, Amy writes to Arthur, makes her long for old faces and old surroundings and her old work:

> Sitting opposite her father in the travelling-carriage, and recalling the old Marshalsea room, her present existence was a dream. All that she saw was new and wonderful, but it was not real; it seemed to her as if those visions of mountains and picturesque countries might melt away at

> any moment, and the carriage, turning some abrupt corner, bring up with a jolt at the old Marshalsea gate. (487-88)

Later in Venice, in "her favorite station," leaning over "the balcony of her own room, overhanging the canal":

> She would think of that old gate, and of herself sitting at it in the dead of the night, pillowing Maggy's head; and of other places and of other scenes associated with those different times. And then she would lean upon her balcony, and look over at the water, as though they all lay underneath it. When she got to that, she would musingly watch its running, as if, in the general vision, it might run dry, and show her the prison again, and herself, and the old room, and the old inmates, and the old visitors: all lasting realities that had never changed. (491-92)

While Amy keeps the old prison days alive by reviving scenes in her mind—and by writing—the other Dorrits seek to distance themselves from the past. Indeed, in Dickens the narratives of character formation are continually intersected by narratives of mental rigidity and social stagnation. Back in London, for instance, Mr. Dorrit sees the Marshalsea turnkey's son by surprise and receives a great shock that violently recalls to his mind the old prison days. Unwell from that point forward, Mr. Dorrit rises at dinner and makes a speech in his old prison fashion, believing himself to be once again the Father of the Marshalsea, before dying. Turning one's back on the past, in the logic of the novel, closes off old channels in the brain and effects a loss of self, a fate that Arthur, who declares that he has "no will," is hoping to escape by discovering the

meaning of the message on the watch his father gives him, its message "D.N.F.": Do Not Forget.

Similarly, the speculator Mr. Merdle, who holds the collective social will in the novel, runs his rigid course to financial ruin and, taking down most of the novel's moneyed (or at least ambitious characters), kills himself with Fanny's penknife in the baths. Arthur, assuming the blame for getting his partner Doyce involved in the Merdle investment scheme, is arrested (literally this time) and finds himself in prison, in the Marshalsea, and is shown to Mr. Dorrit's old room. The Marshalsea being itself a repetition of the prison in Marseilles, the novel continually returns to its old haunts, as if itself required to reenact the psychology of habit that its characters experience individually. Clennam takes up his quarters in the jail with a great deal of feeling brought about by old associations:

> The room was so eloquent to Clennam in the changed circumstances of his return to the miserable Marshalsea; it spoke to him so mournfully of her, and of his loss of her; that it would have gone hard with him to resist it, even though he had not been alone. Alone, he did not try. He had his hand on the insensible wall as tenderly as if it had been herself that he touched, and pronounced her name in a low voice. He stood at the window, looking over the prison-parapet with its grim spiked border, and breathed a benediction through the summer haze towards the distant land where she was rich and prosperous. (756-57)

Habits in Dickens are not just rigid pathways through the mind; "they become interpersonal, exchanged, intensified" (Vrettos 416). Now sick, despondent, and weak,

Arthur lies in a half-dead stupor when the door opens and Amy appears in the worn dress of her prison days. She brings a bouquet of flowers, which Janice Carlisle has recently read as a crucial activation of the senses in a space defined by deprivation so central to the ethos and imagination of the novel. He smells the flowers before he sees her, registering an important break in habit:

> Dozing and dreaming, without the power of reckoning time, so that a minute might have been an hour and an hour a minute, some abiding impression of a garden stole over him—a garden of flowers, with a damp warm wind gently stirring their scents. It required such a painful effort to lift his head for the purpose of inquiring into this, or inquiring into anything, that the impression appeared to have become quite an old and importunate one when he looked round. Beside the tea-cup on his table he saw, then, a blooming nosegay: a wonderful handful of the choicest and most lovely flowers. (788-89)

Having lived there most of her life, Amy knows what is needed, and comes to offer help, albeit by virtue of her new-found wealth and a relatively expensive gift for the times, the nosegay itself a repetition of the flowers a melancholy Arthur tosses into the river earlier in the novel.

This important break in Arthur's habit—an expansion of his sensory awareness—triggers other breaks throughout the end of the novel as a terrible tension builds. Mrs. Clennam, who has been trying to suppress the codicil of the will and the secret of Arthur's real birth mother, the story of the House of Clennam, and pressed to offer silence-money, jumps up out of her paralysis and her habitual chair to rush to the

Marshalsea to tell Amy (to not tell Arthur) the secret. They return at the instant that the old Clennam house crumbles to the ground, burying with it the blackmailer Blandois. Although the secret dies with him, the documents remain hidden somewhere, and the novel's conventional ending involves safely recuperating them: the riotous maid Tattycoram returning to her station from Paris and from Miss Wade's clutches with the documents in hand; Doyce returning from abroad having made a substantial fortune and springing Arthur; and Arthur and Amy walking together from the prison to the church and marrying, famously going "quietly down into the roaring streets" (859).

Like all of Dickens's works, *Little Dorrit* presents us with characters whose distinctive habits seem to contain the true substance or essential nature of their individuality. But perhaps more than any other Dickens novel, or perhaps just more noticeably given thatits central theme is imprisonment, *Little Dorrit* explores the possibilities of breaking the mold, precisely by avowing that it exists. It is not that Amy gets rid of her old habits—she makes them useful, and reuses them. And it is not that Dickens thought habit was good or bad but rather that it was central to his ideas about the possibility of reform. That habit has an ethical charge, and that that charge writes the stories of other people's lives, is the knowledge that Amy Dorrit and Charles Dickens share. They depend on its regularity—that old room, the constant exercise—to show them, and those around them, something new. Like the instances of recycling that move against the conventional domestic ending of *Our MutualFriend* , Not Forgetting works in *Little Dorrit* to provide a way out—at least the fantasy of one—reminding us that cathexis *is* a way of moving forward, even if, like Arthur Clennam's, our knowledge of it remains furtive, partial, and no less true.

In *Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot will explore the structure of this fantasy, too, by way of a more obscure early work, *The Lifted Veil*.

CHAPTER TWO

Past Effects:
George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*

After all, what would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of knowledgeableness and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower's straying afield of himself? —Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* (8)

That YOU *that you* whom they spit at should do it!
—Barbara Bodichon to George Eliot, 26 April 1859 (*Letters* III, 56)

The Lifted Veil represents a significant departure for George Eliot. Written in April 1859, when her head was "too stupid for more important work," namely the early chapters of *The Mill on the Floss,* it can be usefully read as central—because anomalous, experimental, "stupid"—to her development as a novelist, and to shifting novelistic representations of the basis of "self" and "character" in the Victorian period (*Journals* 77). A jarring blend of gothic fantasy and mid-nineteenth-century realism, the story is narrated by a male clairvoyant, Latimer, who attempts to recount the "strange story" of his experience in the month before his death, which he foresees (*The Lifted Veil* 4). Along the way, he relates visions of centuries long past, preternatural insight into the thoughts and feelings of others, foreknowledge of his marriage to his brother's fiancée, her conspiracy to murder him with the help of a conspicuously intimate maid, and, finally, a lurid revivification scene in which his closest boyhood friend transfuses his own blood into a vein of the maid's dead body.

Critics have not known quite what to do with this story (Flint 455). As Beryl Gray notes, "[*The Lifted Veil*] seems to arouse embarrassment rather than interest, as if there were a general wish either that it had not been written at all or that it had been written by someone more appropriate—Poe perhaps" (408). The consensus view has

been that the story is "merely a rather bizarre aberration" (Gray 409).[1] The relationship of *The Lifted Veil* to George Eliot's authority has been an uncomfortable one from its beginnings. Self-consciously offering it to her publisher John Blackwood, Eliot described it as "a slight story of an outré kind—not a *jeu d'esprit* but a *jeu de melancholie*…. I think nothing of it" (*Letters* III, 41). Blackwood, after an uncharacteristically long silence, praised the writing but equivocated: "I think you must have been worrying and disturbing yourself about something when you wrote.… I very much dislike the revivfying experiment at the end and would strongly advise its deletion" (*Letters* III, 67). The ending was not deleted (George Eliot refused), but the story was published in *Blackwood's* anonymously in order to protect the prestige recently won by the commercial success of *Adam Bede.* Suppressed for almost twenty years, *The Lifted Veil* was not attributed to George Eliot until its inclusion in the 24-volume Cabinet edition of her works in 1878. On that occasion, Henry James initiated nearly a century of sidelong critical glances when he acknowledged it in the *Nation* as a "fine piece of writing," albeit "woefully somber," finally dismissing it as "the *jeu d'esprit* of a mind that is not often—perhaps not often enough—found at play" (131). Biographer Gordon Haight updated and reinforced James's view for the twentieth century, quipping, "*The Lifted Veil* proved a *jeu de melancholie* indeed" (296).

For all the story's critical abjection, however, George Eliot did in fact write *The Lifted Veil* and, as Gray notes, after her usual initial diffidence, "She came to regard it as a significant part of her canon" (408). George Eliot's refusal to republish the story in 1873 at Blackwood's request supports this claim. The publisher now wanted the story to

[1] An important exception is Neil Hertz's recent work on George Eliot, in which *The Lifted Veil* plays a central determining part. See *George Eliot's Pulse* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

help the start of his new Series of Tales from Blackwood, noting that his impression of it had improved with time and, no doubt, her fame (*Letters* V, 379-80). Eliot responds:

> I think it will not be judicious to reprint it at present. I care for the idea which it embodies and which justifies its painfulness…. But it will be well to put the story in harness with some other productions of mine, and not send it forth in its dismal loneliness. There are many things in it which I would willingly say over again, and I shall never put them in any other form. (*Letters* V, 380)

Now the author of *Middlemarch,* George Eliot stands by *The Lifted Veil* in this letter. The "many things" in the story—including the ideas that mental processes and physical environments impress themselves on each other, that memory is intimately associated with architecture, and that "self" is constituted in language and narrative—comprise a view of fiction as a powerful technology with which to understand the human mind. What George Eliot refuses here, with no small sense of her power over Blackwood, is sending Latimer's bleak story out into the world again, in her words, "in any other form" than "in harness with some other productions of mine." She continues, "But we must wait a little. The question is not in the least one of money, but of care for the best effect of writing, which often depends on circumstances much as pictures depend on light and juxtaposition" (*Letters* V, 380).[2] George Eliot is keenly aware of both the story's tenuousness and its significance in relation to a larger body of work—an experiment perhaps but a powerfully enabling one.

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[2] The story was ultimately republished in *"Silas Marner," "The Lifted Veil," and "Brother Jacob,"* Vol. 23 of *The Works of George Eliot*, Cabinet ed. (Edinburgh and London: W. Blackwood, 1878-1885), p. 284.

Since Gray's influential 1981 essay, "Pseudoscience and George Eliot's 'The Lifted Veil,'" invited us "to trouble to investigate the nature of the aberration and wonder what led her into it," critical interest in the story has grown (409). Indeed, the story has benefited from a number of recent readings.[3] Most of these readings, however, have been attempts to recontextualize the story within the history of Victorian medicine and science, that is, to restore it to a proper domain of "influence" and find appropriate explanations for "what led her into it." This rehabilitation of the story has had some worthwhile results—in addition to insightful readings, a broader understanding of the intellectual climate in which George Eliot wrote and the individual contacts that brushed up against her thinking, for example. But it has also had the consequence of reifying the normative transparency of George Eliot's major fiction, leaving those works, in effect, untouched by "the nature of the aberration." My objective in this chapter is to take up Gray's lead in questioning the story's reputation and habitual reception, but I want to follow a different trajectory in considering not the aberration's causes but its effects. My aim is not to locate or contain *The Lifted Veil* within a forgotten or overlooked context but to take the story seriously on its own terms, and in relation to George Eliot's canon. I argue that the thematic attention to the concept of "habit" in *The Lifted Veil* offers new perspectives on both Eliot's story and her career. After a close reading of Latimer's representation of habit in the story, I examine its function in George Eliot's narratives of social and individual development in the

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[3] Gray looks to George Eliot's early social milieu, which "embraced Victorian phrenology, mesmerism, and clairvoyance," for "insight into her creativity," finding source material for *The Lifted Veil* in letter-testimonials and case studies (409). Kate Flint argues that the story is informed by more mainstream contemporary science, most notably George Henry Lewes's *Physiology of Common Life* (1859), and that it can be read as "an intervention in this scientific arena" (457). Malcolm Bull traces nineteenth-century theories of "animal magnetism" through the story.

transition between *Adam Bede* (1859) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Finally, I consider *The Lifted Veil* as a timely utterance in George Eliot's career and life, one that transformed the "habit" of her own textual practice.

Perceptual Matters: Scenes of Habitual Life

Latimer's narrative purports to be about the future—his impetus for writing is, after all, that he is a clairvoyant; he knows how and when he will die—but he finds in the world around him, perversely, only remnants of the past. On the simplest level, his story is framed by a vision of his death on the first page and its occurrence, denoted by ellipses, on the last. This device, as Sally Shuttleworth writes, "solves one of the most difficult narrative conundrums: how to narrate one's own death" (xi). The vision presents a striking scene:

> The sense of suffocation increases: my lamp goes out with a horrible stench: I make a great effort, and snatch at the bell again. I long for life, and there is no help. I thirsted for the unknown: the thirst is gone. O God, let me stay with the known, and be weary of it: I am content. Agony of pain and suffocation—and all the while the earth, the fields, the pebbly brook at the bottom of the rookery, the fresh scent after the rain, the light of the morning through my chamber-window, the warmth of the hearth after the frosty air—will darkness close over them for ever?
>
> Darkness—darkness—no pain—nothing but darkness: but I am passing on and on through the darkness: my thought stays in the darkness, but always with a sense of moving onward…. (3)

The prolepsis of this opening scene triggers a recursive loop throughout the rest of the story; the reader's question at each turn is not, *What will happen next?* but rather, *What can happen now?* Critic Helen Small writes, "Latimer makes an immediate challenge to the conventions of realist narrative. Though the narrative frame encloses a cogent, linear plot, it forecloses narrative progression, depriving the reader, as Latimer himself has been deprived, of the freedom not to know what will happen" (xiii). What happens when the future is foreclosed? When the methods of realism are stripped of uncertainty, what perceptions emerge?

George Eliot provides one answer in this scene. Faced with the certainty of his death, Latimer imagines reversing his Faustian bargain—"I thirsted for the unknown"—by revisiting and revaluing scenes of habitual life: the open circuit of stimuli and responses linking familiar habitats (the fields, the rookery), natural phenomena (of light, rain, frost), bodily senses (sight, sound, touch, smell, taste), and other structuring intermediaries such as architecture (chamber, hearth, window), tools (lamp, bell), and affect (distress, anguish). This passage provides an early trace of George Eliot's expansive conception of habit as a necessary ground for the perception of reality and ongoing individuation—not a version of death or the intensely moralized "death-in-life" that Latimer later imagines it to be. Because Eliot's narrative experiment makes the specter of death immediate here—indeed, presents it as experience—the habitual cannot be simply reduced to the realm of the dead or the static or even the unintentional; rather, it is shown to be a matter of perception, and volatile.

The Lifted Veil thus begins with an ending, the narrator's inscription of his own anticipated death: "The time of my end approaches" (3). Latimer suffers from *angina*

pectoris, a term used by physicians at mid-century to describe common heart disease. As Small notes, “In this period, however, the terminology was shifting slightly, and angina was beginning to be understood as ‘a *neurosis* or nervous affection of the heart’ (*Encyclopaedia Britannica,* 1875)” (88 n3). As with other unsympathetic male characters in George Eliot, most notably Captain Wybrow in “Mr. Gilfil’s Love-Story” and Mr. Casaubon in *Middlemarch,* a heart condition is more than a physical state (Small 89 n3); it suggests a disposition. Latimer seems awake to this when he diagnoses himself as suffering from an “exceptional mental character” (3). Indeed, his narrative reads like a case study of the ills of authorship—in his case, turned inward. He has the novelist’s “incessant insight and foresight” but without an artistic channel—he has no poetic voice—and without compassion or the fellowship of others. This is what Gillian Beer has called “the nightmare face of sympathy” (*George Eliot* 79). A dark fantasy about what “the real” might be found to include in the late 1850’s, as Gray and others have shown, *The Lifted Veil* marks the space between biography and pathography, a kind of anti-*Bildungsroman.*

Before he relates how he came to penetrate “the curtain of the future,” Latimer stresses that he has never confided in another person: “I have never fully unbosomed myself to any human being; I have never been encouraged to trust much in the sympathy of my fellow-men” (4). He explains the helplessness of his situation: “It is only the story of my life that will perhaps win a little more sympathy from strangers when I am dead, than I ever believed it would obtain from my friends while I was living” (4). The motto that George Eliot wrote for the story to encapsulate its central idea provides a useful contrast to Latimer’s sense of impotence and disinheritance:

> Give me no light, great Heaven, but such as turns
>
> To energy of human fellowship;
>
> No powers beyond the growing heritage
>
> That makes completer manhood. (2)

Latimer's dispossession from "the growing heritage," like George Eliot the woman writer's, stems from acutely sensitive powers of observation and from an incapacitating femininity within patriarchy.[4] Both narrator and writer "lift the veil," so to speak, "to peep at the forbidden, to access taboo knowledge; to occupy, by connotation, a masculine position," as Kate Flint observes (456). Here Latimer's preternatural vision is equated with Mary Ann Evans's authorial cross-dressing as George Eliot. Both practices require the loss of illusions and dissent from the advice of Shelley's sonnet, "Lift not the painted veil which those who live / Call life" (qtd. in Flint 456). George Eliot's story is, among other things, a dramatization of "the horrors of looking" past the veil of habitual convention (Flint 456).

Inside the narrative frame, Latimer's story begins as a traditional autobiography, with an account of his childhood. He has a tender mother—she sits him on her knee and caresses him during a brief period of blindness—and an "intensely orderly" father, "in root and stem a banker," who thinks him "an odd child" and has little fondness for him (5). His mother soon dies, and he is left to fend for himself with his "sensitive" nature.

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[4] I borrow the term "incapacitating femininity" from Mary Jacobus, whose somewhat overstated conclusion about the story's motto has been nonetheless useful in thinking about the story's relation to the pseudonym and George Eliot's authority: "Here Eliot, the woman writer, asks only for powers that will make her more of a man. To dissent from the great onward movement ('the growing heritage') is to be either neurotically disinherited (like Latimer, the narrator of *The Lifted Veil*) or impotently feminine (as Latimer also is). In this masculinist cultural hegemony, Marianne Evans is doomed to experience her powers either as demonic possession or feminine dispossession unless her incapacitating femininity can be erased under the masculine name George Eliot" (*Reading Woman* 255-256).

At sixteen, possessing a "half-womanish, half-ghostly beauty," he is sent to Geneva to be educated on a different plan from his older brother Alfred, "already a tall youth at Eton" (14, 5). Latimer wants to study the ancient poets: "I was hungry for human deeds and human emotions" (6). But his father prescribes a scientific education for him after a visit to the phrenologist Mr. Leatherall, who finds the defect of Latimer's "abnormal sensibility" in the bumps of his head: "'The deficiency is there, sir—there; and here' he added, touching the upper sides of my head, 'here is the excess. That must be brought out, sir, and this must be laid to sleep'" (13, 6). With this, Latimer's story of his childhood in England culminates in a sharp dismissal: "There is no need to dwell on this part of my life. I have said enough to indicate that my nature was of the sensitive, unpractical order, and that it grew up in an uncongenial medium, which could never foster it into happy, healthy development" (7).

In Geneva, however, he finds a viable habitation and the first stirrings of an identity. During evening boat rides toward the center of the lake, his sensitive nature becomes sensible to Nature: "It seemed to me that the sky, and the glowing mountain-tops, and the wide blue water, surrounded me with a cherishing love such as no human face had shed on me since my mother's love had vanished out of my life" (7). Latimer does make one friend, an English orphan and medical student whom he gives the protective pseudonym "Charles Meunier." Together they share a "community of feeling" despite their "different habits": Meunier interests himself in science and Latimer in literature (8). However, Latimer feels it necessary to justify even mentioning this friendship, so lowly he holds it in his own esteem: "I have mentioned this one friendship because of its connection with a strange and terrible scene which I shall have

to narrate in my subsequent life" (8). Alone, he does as Rousseau did: "[I] lie down in my boat and let it glide where it would, while I looked up at the departing glow leaving one mountain-top after the other, as if the prophet's chariot of fire were passing over them on its way to the home of light" (7). His Romantic sensibility ends here, however, for Latimer has no poetic voice; he does not believe in "the listening ear and answering soul" of an audience. The poet's sensibility without his voice—"this dumb passion"—brings with it "a fatal solitude of the soul in the society of one's fellow-men," a remoteness that is familiar to the English tourist of the Continent and the Victorian reader of Romanticism alike (7).

Dislocations of place and discontinuities in time pattern *The Lifted Veil*. The first of the story's two chapters begins one month from the end of Latimer's life, jumps forward to the end with a vision of his death, and then shifts back in time to his childhood in England, his education in Geneva, and his forced return to England via Prague and Vienna. The second chapter takes place entirely in England and traces the gradual closing-in of Latimer's family obligations and paranoid vision (co-terminous in his narrative), ending in the death foreseen at the beginning. Chapter One moves backward in time and expands; Chapter Two moves forward and contracts. This pattern repeats George Eliot's own experience of traveling to the Continent and returning to England. She made three trips there by 1859, each one accompanying a major turning point in her life and a subsequent change of name: to Geneva after the death of her father in 1849, where she began her *Journals* and decided to cut her ties to the past and join the London intelligentsia, adopting the French spelling Marianne of her name (later shortened to Marian); to Weimar and Berlin in 1854, where she eloped with the still-

married George Henry Lewes (who encouraged her to try her hand at fiction), effectively severing all ties to her family and much of English society by taking his name (in fact if not always in practice); and to Munich via Nuremburg in 1858, where she worked on her first full-scale English novel *Adam Bede* as George Eliot, returning by way of Salzburg, Vienna, Prague, and Dresden (Knoepflmacher 139). In her life as in her fiction, a change in habit occasions a change in perception. Old beliefs are replaced with a new mental image and, in turn, new habits. Latimer's story seems to be on this path in Geneva, but it is cut short. He turns back, blocked from any new perceptual awareness by his belief in the solidity of an integral, changeless "self." Tragically, spectacularly, he concretizes around an understanding of that self which precedes him.

Latimer's identification with the unspoken expectations of his father and brother, both characters associated with rigidity and habit throughout the story, initiates his visions and projections into other people's consciousness. After falling ill in Geneva, Latimer is met by his father, who tells him they will be joined by Alfred and his fiancée, Bertha Grant, the orphan niece of their neighbors the Filmores, for a tour of Central Europe before returning to England. Upon hearing this news, Latimer has the first of three visions, a vision of old Prague as a city frozen in time. This is followed by a second vision of "a pale fatal-eyed woman," who "looked like a birth from some cold, sedgy stream, the daughter of an ancient river" (12). When this image turns out to be a prevision of Bertha, Latimer begins to experience a second phenomenon, a "superadded consciousness" of the actual, which:

> wearying and annoying enough when it urged on me the trivial experience of indifferent people, became an intense pain and grief when it seemed to be opening to me the souls of those who were in close relation to me—when the rational talk, the graceful attentions, the wittily-turned phrases, and the kindly deeds, which used to make the web of their characters, were seen as if thrust asunder by a microscopic vision, that showed all the intermediate frivolities, all the suppressed egoism, all the struggling chaos of puerilities, meanness, vague capricious memories, and the indolent make-shift thoughts, from which human words and deeds emerge like leaflets covering a fermenting heap. (13-14)

This perverse insight is focused first on Alfred, whose self-satisfaction and contempt for Latimer are now seen “not in the ordinary indications of intonation and phrase and slight action” but “in all their naked skinless complication” (15). Here George Eliot uses metaphors of medical science to represent the perversion of an aesthetic. Latimer’s “microscopic vision” lays the conventional “web of character” bare, but ultimately proves to be fundamentally limited.

Only Bertha remains a mystery to him, making her both a fetish and a refuge for Latimer:

> It was like a preternaturally heightened sense of hearing, making audible to one a roar of sound where others find perfect stillness. The weariness and disgust of this involuntary intrusion into other souls was counteracted only by my ignorance of Bertha, and my growing passion for her; a passion enormously stimulated, if not produced, by that

> ignorance. She was my oasis of mystery in the dreary desert of knowledge. (18)

However, a third vision promises to seal Latimer's fate:

> I felt myself sitting in my father's leather chair in the library at home. I knew the fireplace—the dogs for the wood-fire—the black marble chimney-piece with the white marble medallion of the dying Cleopatra in the centre. Intense and hopeless misery was pressing on my soul; the light became stronger, for Bertha was entering with a candle in her hand—Bertha, my wife—with cruel eyes, with green jewels and green leaves on her white ball-dress; every hateful thought within her present to me … 'Madman, idiot! why don't you kill yourself then?' It was a moment of hell. (19)

Sitting in his father's leather chair in the library, now his "habitual place," Latimer stands in for his father but also for his brother, who was to be his father's "representative and successor" (34, 5). Bertha, a forerunner of the self-regarding, serpent-like female characters of Rosamund Vincy and Gwendolyn Harleth, becomes the vehicle for Latimer's corrosive identification with his father and brother: that homosocial bond which remains—and must remain—a mystery to him. He secures not only the family heritage—located here in the familiar objects and habitual space of the library rather than in his family name, which is elided in the text—but the roles of the bourgeois family as well.

Latimer's visions contain the potential for a representational reversal: the power to produce events discursively, that is, by setting up the structure that makes the event

appear. As Cynthia Chase writes of this phenomenon in *Daniel Deronda,* it stages a conflict between the constative and performative dimensions of language, that is, "a conflict between the report of prior events and the discursive production of events, posing the question of how events may be the products of discursive structures, or in *Daniel Deronda*'s terms, how narrative structures are 'the present causes of past effects'" (Chase 7; *Deronda* 704). Similarly, in *The Lifted Veil* cognition and representation are prior to events. Latimer sees himself sitting in his father's chair in Chapter One and will find himself sitting there, enacting the event that the vision structures, in Chapter Two. As we will see with the Prague vision, habitis Eliot's image for this procedure by which "past effects"—in both the temporal and material senses—acquire present causes. Latimer, like Deronda, appears as a "'coercive type'—a 'type' or 'image' with 'foreshadowing power,' with the power to 'coerce' into existence the event it purports to reflect or represent" (Chase 7; *Deronda* 527). As Chase writes, "Thus, though the historical logic must be otherwise, it is, the reader feels, because Deronda has developed an affinity for Judaism that he turns out to be of Jewish parentage" (7). Causality itself is seen to be a product of narration rather than its precondition (Chase 7). *The Lifted Veil* sets up a vision of the distant past as the arbiter of the future. The only thing separating Latimer's dreams from reality in the story is the confirmation of his first vision. If Prague is as he envisioned it, having never been there and seen no images of it, then the rest is doomed to follow.

Latimer of course finds exactly what he predicted in Prague—begrimed architecture, dusty statues of saints, the old synagogue, the wise cicerone reading by the eternal lamp, the old book in its ancient tongue—all the signs of a "time-eaten grandeur

of a people doomed to live on in the stale repetition of memories" (9). Once the vision is verified at the end of Chapter One, the return to England sets off a rapid chain of events leading up to Latimer's death: the accidental death of Alfred, Latimer's marriage to Bertha, his father's death, and the fateful visit of Charles Meunier that concludes with his experiment in the final scene. After falling ill with peritonitis, Mrs. Archer, Bertha's "favourite maid" and companion, dies and is momentarily brought back to life through a ghastly blood transfusion that, in a nod to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* Latimer helps Meunier administer. Gasping for breath, she accuses Bertha of trying to murder Latimer, unveiling their plan to poison him before collapsing back into death. "Great God!" Latimer exclaims, "Is this what it is to live again … to wake up with our unstilled thirst upon us, with our unuttered curses rising to our lips, with our muscles ready to act out their half-committed sins?" (42). Whether or not this scene comments on the desirability of an afterlife, it does achieve a certain limit. For Terry Eagleton, it is the limit of narrative realism; he writes of the transfusion as a fiction: "[W]e can't believe it; and yet of course we must, for this is a 'realist' tale, and within those conventions what Latimer as observer says goes" (qtd. in Flint 462). Jennifer Uglow finds here the threshold of science as devoid of imagination, showing how "it will be used to break the barriers of normal reality" and effectively prove Latimer's father and Dr. Leatherall wrong (qtd. in Flint 463). Finally, U. C. Knoepflmacher understands it as a limit of pathological investigation, typified by Meunier's paralyzed response: "'life for that moment ceased to be a scientific problem for him'" (148; *The Lifted Veil* 42).

The substance of the ending surprises, but its structure justifies and gratifies the reader's participation in the story's strong teleology. The story delivers—it exposes—an

unexpected but structurally necessary ending after all. This makes the culmination of Latimer's narrative, his death, doubly anti-climactic. But it also solidifies and completes the Oedipal structure of Latimer's tale: the all-seeing visionary, an overarching ignorance, deferred action [*Nachträglichkeit*], and the ultimate exposure of a double crime. In addition, the story's representation and refraction of many of the details of the Oedipal plot—Latimer's early memories of maternal love and paternal rejection, the genealogical uncertainty of both Meunier and Bertha, the fierce rivalry with his brother Alfred—only work to consolidate this view.

However, I want to begin a closer reading of *The Lifted Veil* by resisting the gravitational pull of the melodramatic final scene, with all its freight of teleology and lockstep of Oedipal surety. This is, in a sense, to return on different grounds to Blackwood's advice to delete the scene and Henry James's finding in it a "want of connection" to the rest of the tale (131). George Eliot herself was dismissive of, if perhaps not entirely surprised by, the attention given to the sensational ending. Upon hearing of H. E. Blanchon's painting exhibited in the 1879 Paris Salon, "La Transfusion du Sang," depicting the story's moment of stark revelation, she wrote to Blackwood, "I call this amusing—I ought rather to have said typical of the relation my books generally have with the French mind" (*Letters* VII, 165). The sensationalism wryly attributed here to the French mind is, however, also characteristic of the story's reception and publication in the English speaking world. Blanchon's painting routinely illustrates contemporary editions, whose introductions forewarn the reader of "making the detail of the plots explicit" (Shuttleworth) and ruining the surprise; for example: "Much of the impact of 'The Lifted Veil' derives from a powerful final scene which is discussed in

this Introduction. Readers who do not wish to have the shock of the ending spoiled should treat the Introduction as an Afterward" (Small). Recent critical interest in the tale's use of Victorian "pseudoscience" and medicine also relies, in part, on fascination with the story's ending. As noted, this approach has illuminated some things well, and the revivification experiment is an important part of the story, to be sure. But what does it mean to focus on the ending of a tale about a foreseen, inevitable future? What other critical starting points does the text offer?

Attending to the story's preoccupation with habit, I argue, sensitizes us to a reading that the strictly historicizing and Freudian approaches leave in a vacuum. In this light, the most paradigmatic scene is not the story's dramatic ending, but one that occurs in Chapter One: the vision of Prague as a city frozen in time.

Looking Backward: Sensing History, Sensing Self

Here time becomes space.—*Parsifal*

The frame of Latimer's narrative—the opening vision of death and the concluding reality—is interrupted by a central event, around which the tale's two chapters are divided: the visit to Prague that confirms Latimer's preternatural vision. It is here in the middle of the tale rather than the end—in the transition between the "Continental" and "English" halves of the story—that my reading begins. Latimer's "happier life" in Geneva ends with a severe illness and his father's reappearance. The Prague scene emerges from "the languid monotony of convalescence" and, it is important to note, a sentence spoken by Latimer's father, which he does not finish:

> ‘When you are quite well enough to travel, Latimer, I shall take you home with me. The journey will amuse you and do you good, for I shall go through the Tyrol and Austria, and you will see many new places. Our neighbors, the Filmores, are come; Alfred will join us at Basle, and we shall all go together to Vienna and back by Prague’… (8-9)

When his father is called away, Latimer’s entire future hangs on the word *Prague.* Suddenly he has “a strange sense that a new and wondrous scene was breaking” upon him, which bears quotation in full:

> a city under the broad sunshine, that seemed to me as if it were the summer sunshine of a long-past century arrested in its course—unrefreshed for ages by the dews of night, or the rushing rain-cloud; scorching the dusty, weary, time-eaten grandeur of a people doomed to live on in the stale repetition of memories, like deposed and superannuated kings, in their regal gold-inwoven tatters. The city looked so thirsty that the broad river seemed to me a sheet of metal; and the blackened statues, as I passed under their blank gaze, along the unending bridge, with their ancient garments and their saintly crowns, seemed to me the real inhabitants and owners of this place, while the busy, trivial men and women, hurrying to and fro, were a swarm of ephemeral visitants infesting it for a day. It is such grim, stony beings as these, I thought, who are the fathers of ancient, faded children, in those tanned time-fretted dwellings that crowd the steep before me; who pay their court in the worn and crumbling pomp of the palace which stretches its

> monotonous length on the height; who worship wearily in the stifling air of the churches, urged by no fear or hope, but compelled by their doom to be ever old and undying, to live on in the rigidity of habit, as they live on in perpetual mid-day, without the repose of night or the new birth of morning. (9)

Upon hearing of his imminent return to England and the arrival of his brother and his fiancée, Latimer fills in the gap left by his father's unfinished sentence. Instead of completing the itinerary of his looming return to England, however, Latimer reverses it and envisions a stopping of time, "a long-past century arrested in its course" (9). The parched city, the besmirched statues, and the metallic river—like the narrator's vision of the Rhone in *The Mill on the Floss*—carry all the traces of humanity living on "unrefreshed for ages" in "the stale repetition of memories" (9). Outside the bounds of time, the statues, "such grim, stony beings as these," seem "the real inhabitants and owners of this place," and the tumultuous flux and progress of the river is rendered static, "a sheet of metal" (9). "Was this a dream," Latimer asks, "this wonderfully distinct vision—minute in its distinctness down to a patch of rainbow light on the pavement, transmitted through a coloured lamp in the shape of a star—of a strange city, quite unfamiliar to my imagination?" (9-10).

Latimer's vision completes his father's half-spoken sentence but creates a disruption of its own. It interrupts the forward-looking, future-obsessed regard of his narrative. It represents a break in Latimer's habitual vision and an intrusion of the uncanny. What Latimer "sees" anew constitutes a stunning reversal of the usual anthropomorphism. The statues are not humanized but rather, quite the opposite, bring

into being an understanding of what is human or personal in terms of what is ostensibly inanimate and outside the self. Humanity is reduced to “a swarm of ephemeral visitants” while the stone statues—indeed, everything that registers the traces of past habits: the gold-inwoven tatters, the stifling churches, the time-fretted dwellings, the crumbling palace, and the unending bridge—are imbued with an enduring, active, structuring power. The material record of the habitual past, Latimer’s vision seems to say, carries all of the information for the future if we were attuned to it. However, this record—its tragedy—is precisely what must be overlooked in the regular and regulated everyday course of life, as a more sympathetic George Eliot narrator will memorably observe in *Middlemarch:*

> That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity. (Ch. 20, 192)

The habitual in George Eliot’s brand of realism conceals—allows us to bear—the tragic intensity of ordinary life at the same time as it grounds and enables rare moments of its revelation. Chronicling the formation of these moments in history and the fates of individual characters in their midst is the novelist’s task. Latimer’s narrative ultimately hypostatizes this process, however, turning it quite literally to stone.

The interruption of Latimer's vision of Prague creates a strange opening then, a liminal and powerful imaginary scene. The vision is a dream of a habitual past that endures despite human insensibility to it. It subverts the historical logic that reduces all past to something to be overcome—or merely "remembered" (but really forgotten) by monuments. The statues are the "fathers of ancient, faded children" busy hurrying about on trivial paths. Latimer associates their stoniness with "the rigidity of habit" that characterizes his father's conventionality and their imminent return "home" to England. "It is such grim, stony beings as these" that Latimer is about to join and ultimately become in the "English" half of the story (9). Desiccated and decaying, the ancient city offers Latimer an image and an imaginary space for a potent critique of his father's authority and English faith in human progress and enlightenment. Latimer's vision, however, like his narrative, remains confined within his own narrow consciousness; he confides in and thus reaches no one. Latimer has "keen vision and feeling" of the poetic in the everyday—he is un-"wadded" of stupidity—but he can take no action to bring forth his creativity. Rather, the Prague scene effects in Latimer an identification with stasis in the solid, immovable personalities of his father and brother, and the rigid, stone-like positions of the bourgeois family.

Causing him to recognize the presence of the past—and to recognize himself through an identification with that past—Latimer's vision provides a sense of that "historic life" that will also bemuse and help characterize Daniel Deronda. The comparison is revealing. Roused by the forms of the Jewish quarter in Frankfurt, Daniel becomes aware of the historical nature of social institutions: both their primitive origins

and their persistent remains. Whereas Latimer finds terror and dread in this, Daniel feels wonder and veneration. The narrator of *Daniel Deronda* explains:

> I have said that under his calm exterior he had a fervour which made him easily feel the presence of poetry in everyday events; and the forms of the Juden-gasse, rousing the sense of union with what is remote, set him musing on two elements of our historic life which that sense raises into the same region of poetry; — the faint beginnings of faiths and institutions, and their obscure lingering decay; the dust and withered remnants with which they are apt to be covered, only enhancing for the awakened perception the impressiveness either of a sublimely penetrating life, as in the twin green leaves that will become the sheltering tree, or of a pathetic inheritance in which all the grandeur and the glory have become a sorrowing memory. (Ch. 32)

The sense of poetry in the everyday leads to an awareness of history that issues either in the fervor and shelter of "sublimely penetrating life" or in the "pathetic inheritance" of lost illusions and "sorrowing memory." Daniel exemplifies the first possible outcome. His inner vision is linked to emotive memory that transcends the bounds of the individual and moves toward the communal—both in the revelation of his own dim origins and that "growing heritage / That makes completer manhood" invoked by the motto of *The Lifted Veil*. Latimer's vision, however, melancholically condemns history and those caught in its snare to endless and meaningless repetition. In the forms of the past he sees only obsolescence and his own marked individuality, an egocentrism that is redoubled in and by his first-person narrative.

Latimer's tragic sense of uniqueness stems from his alienation from the contemporary world and an identification with an imagined past. In the statues then Latimer also fantasizes an alternative lineage. The narrator of George Eliot's last work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), her only other first-person narrative, differentiates between crudely "wishing that our father and mother had been somebody else whom we never knew" and harmlessly wishing that we were "the son of another age and another nation" (*Impressions* 14). In his vision of Prague's "long-past century," Latimer wishes about the unalterable: his vision hinges on being of a different age rather than a conception of a different self. However, Latimer never acknowledges that the statues are man-made. They have been carved and shaped for public display. Latimer's desire to write down his story for posterity is an attempt to craft something that remains. His motivation, however, is for narrow gain—posthumous self-justification and vainglory—and his analysis is eviscerating. He interprets signs of the habitual past as a prior prohibition rather than a necessary ground, thus misrecognizing the chance to fashion a response of his own in turn.

Latimer's self-perception and thus his entire first-person narrative turn on his interpretation of this scene and the conception of habit upon which it depends. Gray writes:

> [The] key vision is always that of Prague, and it is in his response to it that Latimer reveals the moral flaw on which subsequent events depend; for instead of recoiling in pain from the doomed inhabitants trapped in their barren hell of purposeless repetition and recognizing in the images a mocking reflection of his own artistic infertility and an answer to the

> creativity he has tried to will for himself, he longs, unhealthily, for a reprise. (419)

Latimer's "moral flaw" is of course an effect of his confinement—in his body and consciousness, in his family and its expectations, and in the disciplinary knowledge of "specialists," epitomized by the diagnosis of the phrenologist Mr. Leatherall. The reprise that he longs for, pathologized again as "unhealthy" in Gray's reading, represents an appropriation of the empirical power that others have already used to name him. Without the outlet of artistic creativity and the "energy of human fellowship," however, Latimer's imaginative flight results only in self-justifying moralism and misprision.

Indeed, George Eliot seems to argue in *The Lifted Veil* that empiricism, or relying solely on observation of the visible world, does not necessarily make for—or lead to—good reading. For the Prague vision determines all of the others; it sets up the structure that makes all of the events of Chapter Two appear, leading ultimately to Latimer's death at the appointed hour. First, his vision is verified upon their arrival in Prague:

> I thought with a sense of relief, as we entered the Jews' quarter, where we were to visit the old synagogue, that we should be kept in this flat, shut-up part of the city, until we should all be too tired and too warm to go farther, and so we should return without seeing more than the streets through which we had already passed. That would give me another day's suspense—suspense, the only form in which a fearful spirit knows the solace of hope. But, as I stood under the blackened, groined arches of

> that old synagogue, made dimly visible by the seven thin candles in the sacred lamp, while our Jewish cicerone reached down the Book of the Law, and read to us in its ancient tongue, — I felt a shuddering impression that this strange building, with its shrunken lights, this surviving withered remnant of medieval Judaism, was of a piece with my vision. Those darkened, dusty Christian saints, with their loftier arches and their larger candles, needed the consolatory scorn with which they might point to a more shrivelled death-in-life than their own. (22)

The deferral of action—extended already by the group's nighttime arrival in Prague and then seemingly guaranteed by the confinement of the Jewish quarter the next morning—gives Latimer the sense of security required for a moment of stark reversal and revelation. He does not suspect that a vision of Christian statuary could find relevance in a Jewish quarter, or that that is precisely where it will. After intimating that the visit to the old synagogue is connected with his vision, Latimer goes to the bridge to put an end to the suspense he had wished to prolong: "There it was—the patch of rainbow light on the pavement transmitted through a lamp in the shape of a star" (23). The vision is confirmed, tautologically, with ocular proof. It is found to be true by virtue of its form alone.

The star is a play of light—a projection, prismatic, and vital. As an image it is symbolically rich, evoking Judeo-Christian iconography as well as astronomy and ancient cosmology. Formally, however, it represents a transmission of meaning through a work of art—the colored lamp. The light is not the artifact itself but that which emanates from it, the inverse of a shadow. Its vitality is penetrating and radiant. Latimer

misses this, in part, because it is already in the service of his private thought. He has already reduced "the grandeur and the glory" of historical life—and therefore poetry—to an individual's "sorrowing memory."

A very similar scene in *Daniel Deronda* once again offers a useful contrast. In relating her story to Mrs. Meyrick, Mirah describes her decision to escape her father after he tells her that they are leaving the theater to go to Prague. Like Latimer, she describes increasing paranoia and a calcification of disposition: "I was getting suspicious of everything, and my will was hardening to act against him" (Ch. 20). Sure that her father is plotting against her, she plans to leave for London: "You will think I had not enough reason for my suspicions, and perhaps I had not, outside my own feeling; but it seemed to me that my mind had been lit up, and all that might be stood out clear and sharp" (Ch. 20). Mirah's inner vision, like Daniel's, senses the impressiveness of a "sublimely penetrating life" outside her own thoughts and feelings; indeed, it is what enables her to see through the distinction between "inside" and "outside." Her moment of truth echoes the turning point of Latimer's narrative:

> It was dark when we reached Prague, and though the strange bunches of lamps were lit it was difficult to distinguish faces as we drove along the street. My father chose to sit outside—he was always smoking now—and I watched everything in spite of the darkness. I do believe I could see better than ever I did before: the strange clearness within seemed to have got outside me. It was not my habit to notice faces and figures much in the street; but this night I saw every one; and when we passed before a great hotel I caught sight only of a back that was passing in—

> the light of the great bunch of lamps a good way off fell on it. I knew it—before the face was turned, as it fell into shadow, I knew who it was. Help came to me. (Ch. 20)

Mirah breaks through the bonds of individual self here as Latimer cannot do. She is spurred to action; she moves to London. But first her "action" exists as thought and feeling—that "strange clearness within"—which she then finds outward signs of. Mirah is able to enact her desire only after a break in her habit of disregarding faces and figures in the street occasions a decisive revelation.

Latimer, however, reincorporates all outward signs and experience to his interpretation of the Prague vision in which he sees only rigidity, atavism, and "the stale repetition of memories." Thus his conclusion on seeing the patch of rainbow light on the pavement is foregone: "There it was." The reader, like Latimer, supposes to know already what this means. Chapter One ends there and Latimer finds himself back in England at the beginning of the second and final chapter, a headlong rush through the events predicted. Habit therefore grounds the performative for Latimer too, only in an unwanted direction: through his denial of its potential for perceptual reversal and revelation, he enacts a desire not his own.

In George Eliot's strange story about individual consciousness and the material remains of history, the self and the habitual—architecture, monuments, furniture, and rooms—are mutually implicated, and implicated in language and narrative form.

Scene-Making as Practice of Self: Toward a "Poetry of the Past" in *The Mill on the Floss*

The first thing we love is a scene.—Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*

Initiation to an expanded awareness of history and the natural and social worlds is a central concern of George Eliot's fiction. Habits, insofar as they entail the self's interaction with its environment and supply the necessary ground for perception and change, provide a sensitive record of this movement. Barthes' observation that we love the surrounding scene first—that it "consecrates" the object to be loved (192)—suggests the presence of a causal link between the perception of background and foreground, familiar and unfamiliar, past and present—in short, a link that impels narrative. Marked by the sign of its suddenness, this initiation to awareness is always retrospective, Barthes notes, just as love-at-first-sight can only be reconstituted: "it is always spoken in the past tense" (194). Latimer arrives at a similar kind of initiation with his vision of Prague—he is ravished by that scene; it inhabits him like a memory (Barthes 192)—but he defends against its implications. His identification with middle-class patriarchal power—held in the ellipses of his father's unfinished sentence and in the image of the stone statues on the bridge—will kill him and harm others. AsBodenheimer points out, by the story's end Latimer is in the same position as the dead Mrs. Archer: "[H]e too has nothing to say except that he has been complicit with Bertha in an act of moral self-poisoning" (*The Real Life* 136).

As we have seen, the subjection of Latimer's insight to ready-made scripts and the accompanying return to his ancestral home in England result only in a certain measure of repetition as obsessive self-regulation and confinement. He feels condemned to repeat the dream:

> The more I lived apart from society, and in proportion as my wretchedness subsided from the violent throb of agonised passion into the dulness of habitual pain, the more frequent and vivid became such visions as that I had had of Prague—of strange cities, of sandy plains, of gigantic ruins, of midnight skies with strange bright constellations…. (36)

Latimer recognizes—and is impelled to recognize—habit as stasis and so reproduces that self which he already finds evident, projecting the excess "strangeness" into his visions. His prophecy is self-fulfilling in the strongest sense. Through his habit of inner vision—oddly confirmed by his vision of external traces of past habits—Latimer enacts a rigid self incapable of sympathy, "historic" or otherwise.[5]

This is precisely the kind of self that George Eliot was worried would harm her readers. As George Levine has pointed out, Eliot believed as Arnold did that the Victorian artist should "inspirit" her age, later contending that "the art which leaves the soul in despair is laming to the soul" (qtd. in Knoepflmacher 166). The insightful but negative character of Latimer was nonetheless compelling to the writer. Like Casaubon in *Middlemarch,* he is the tale's author by proxy. Indeed, Latimer occupies a pivotal position in the scope of George Eliot's career. He displaces nagging doubts and fears about the seamless organic world of Hayslope just represented in *Adam Bede* and about embarking to write intimately about the more fractured (and fracturing) experience of

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[5] "Historic sympathy" is what characterizes Daniel Deronda's visit to the Frankfurt synagogue and determines certain key traits in him: "It was on this journey that he first entered a Jewish synagogue—at Frankfort—where his party rested on a Friday. In exploring the Juden-gasse, which he had seen long before, he remembered well enough its picturesque old houses; what his eyes chiefly dwelt on now were the human types there; and his thought, busily connecting them with the past phases of their race, stirred that fibre of historic sympathy which had helped to determine in him certain traits worth mentioning for those who are interested in his future" (Ch. 32).

her Warwickshire childhood. Latimer is the intermediary male narrator that George Eliot created—and was in some ways impelled to create, as we will see—only to make disappear in *The Mill on the Floss*. He is both predecessor and ghost of that novel's production.[6]

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When George Eliot returned to the opening chapters of *The Mill on the Floss* after finishing *The Lifted Veil*, she had now explored the linear, telic horrors of a dead past living on into the future. In the character of Adam Bede she had presented an idealized image of her father; in Latimer she examined the dangers of believing too strongly in that ideal. A very different project now awaited, indeed, became possible: to articulate her own "poetry of the past"—a volatile, structuring force that could link the "obscure vitality" of the past to "the onward tendency of human things" (*Mill* Bk. 4, Ch. 1).[7] This is precisely what Latimer cannot give voice to, and what he misses in reading the patch of light flitting across the pavement as a confirmation of his vision rather than an alternative view: the past is not a substance but a series of transmissions. Having explored the implications of negating this insight in Latimer's narrative, George Eliot was now free to enact it in *The Mill*, beginning with the revised opening chapters.

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[6] Perhaps not incidentally, *The Lifted Veil* is the only original prose MS of George Eliot's to have disappeared.

[7] The narrator of *Daniel Deronda* will state this project in slightly different terms: "I like to mark the time, and connect the course of individual lives with the historic stream, for all classes of thinkers" (Ch. 8). Habits offer a signal language for this, as we see in the sentences that immediately follow this statement: "This was the period when the broadening of gauge in crinolines seemed to demand an agitation for the general enlargement of churches, ball-rooms, and vehicles. But Anna Gascoigne's figure would only allow the size of skirt manufactured for young ladies of fourteen" (Ch. 8). The opening image of George Eliot's inaugural work of fiction comes to mind too: "Shepperton Church was a very different-looking building five-and-twenty years ago. To be sure, its substantial stone tower looks at you through its intelligent eye, the clock, with the friendly expression of former days; but in everything else what changes!" (*Scenes* "Amos Barton," Ch. 1).

One can trace the imprints of the story in the novel, especially at vulnerable points in the narrative. Both works open in dream-like states. They transport the reader to a time and place different from that of the narrator, thus projecting the reader's act of imagination into the narrative itself.[8] We follow Latimer forward into a vision of his death and the narrator of *The Mill* back into a nostalgic dream of the past. These beginnings, while moving in opposite directions, foreground the workings of the unconscious mind as the major narrative premise. Encapsulating the movement of the entire narrative in a single image, they also work synecdochically. Latimer's vision of his death stands in for the series of premonitory visions that make up his narrative and that will bring about his death at the end; similarly, the narrator's memory of a time past in *The Mill* stands in for the larger remembrance of Maggie Tulliver's story which it initiates. These beginnings thus anticipate the importance of the scene-making tendencies so crucial to Latimer's self-conception and Maggie's character. Whereas Latimer's scenes take place in the imagination and find retroactive expression in the natural world, Maggie's scenes—her thrusting pins into her "fetish," her visits to the Red Deeps—are presented as "real" and "in synch" with the temporal world: they are related to us as memories by a third-person narrator.

Another early chapter bears the mark of Latimer's story. In Chapter 3, Mr. Tulliver calls on Mr. Riley, an auctioneer and appraiser, for advice concerning a school for Tom. Just as Mr. Leatherall the phrenologist shames Latimer for the deficiency that he finds in his poetic nature, Mr. Riley shames Maggie for the passion and ambition of

[8] In her chapters "On Vivacity" and "On Solidity" in *Dreaming by the Book*, Elaine Scarry makes the interesting case that this is a device of successful realist fiction. At vulnerable points in the narrative such as the beginning, something intangible and fleeting is passed over something "solid," thus creating the effect of a real world in the narrative and helping the reader make the necessary imaginative leap. Habits, I want to argue, work in this way too.

her reading habits. Like Latimer, Tom is also sent off to school to be "occupied with" the very things he is unsuited for. While "practical" Tom is forced to study a dead language in Latin, Latimer reads Plutarch, and Shakespeare, and Don Quixote "by the sly" (6). Maggie is better suited to her brother's course of education, but she is told to "go and see after [her] mother" when Mr. Riley is finished examining her on her books (12). All three are restricted by the medium in which they are raised, but as the narrator of *The Mill* will later note:

> [I]t is necessary that we should feel [this sense of oppressive narrowness] if we care to understand how it has acted on the lives of Tom and Maggie, how it has acted on young natures in many generations that in the onward tendency of human things have risen above the mental level of the generation before them, to which they have been nevertheless tied by the strongest fibres of their hearts. (244-245)

The restrictiveness of convention has the narrative function of linking the Tulliver children's suffering to "every historical advance of mankind" (245). Childhood, like the "mental level" of parents, is a habit to be broken, and yet it ties them to the past "by the strongest fibres of their hearts." For Latimer, however, the cross-cutting of individual and social development remains static—and private. He dies of that "roar" of sound on the other side of silence whereas Maggie is protected from complete immersion in the world outside by the booming of the mill (Shuttleworth xxiii).

The most significant imprint of the *The Lifted Veil* on the novel—and where the distance provided by the third-person narrator is most telling—occurs in the middle of the book. As in Latimer's story, it is a break in the narrative involving the theme of

habit. Half-way through *The Mill on the Floss* George Eliot interrupts her narrative to describe a strange scene. The interruption recalls the reader to the opening chapter's description of the local habitat of Dorlcote Mill, itself a distant memory of a wide plain, a riverbed, and a stone bridge. This scene is not an English one:

> Journeying down the Rhone on a summer's day, you have perhaps felt the sunshine made dreary by those ruined villages which stud the banks in certain parts of its course, telling how the swift river once rose, like an angry, destroying god sweeping down the feeble generations whose breath is in their nostrils and making their dwellings a desolation. Strange contrast, you may have thought, between the effect produced on us by these dismal remnants of commonplace houses, which in their best days were but the sign of a sordid life, belonging in all its details to our own vulgar era—and the effect produced by those ruins on the castled Rhine which have crumbled and mellowed into such harmony with the green and rocky steeps, that they seem to have a natural fitness, like the mountain pine: nay, even in the day when they were built they must have had this fitness, as if they had been raised by an earth-born race who had inherited from their mighty parent a sublime instinct of form. And that was a day of romance! If those robber barons were somewhat grim and drunken ogres, they had a certain grandeur of the wild beast in them—they were forest boars with tusks tearing and rending, not the ordinary domestic grunter: they represented the demon forces for ever in collision with beauty, virtue, and the gentle uses of life: they made a fine contrast

> in the picture with the wandering minstrel, the soft-lipped princess, the pious recluse and the timid Israelite. That was a time of colour when the sunlight fell on glancing steel and floating banners: a time of adventure and fierce struggle—nay, of living, religious art and religious enthusiasm; for were not cathedrals built in those days and did not great emperors leave their western palaces to die before the infidel strongholds in the sacred east? Therefore it is that these Rhine castles thrill me with a sense of poetry: they belong to the grand historic life of humanity, and raise up for me the vision of an epoch. But these dead-tinted, hollow-eyed, angular skeletons of villages on the Rhone, oppress me with the feeling that human life—very much of it—is a narrow, ugly, grovelling existence, which even calamity does not elevate, but rather tends to exhibit in all its bare vulgarity of conception; and I have a cruel conviction that the lives these ruins are the traces of were part of a gross sum of obscure vitality, that will be swept into the same oblivion with the generations of ants and beavers. (243-244)

This long passage is an example of George Eliot's habit of self-consciously defending herself against anticipated criticism through the guise of her narrator. The ruined villages on the Rhone, "these dismal remnants" bearing the impressions of past eras and the vulgarity of present tastes, oppress the narrator (-as-reader) with a feeling of misanthropy and doom. Unlike the castled ruins on the Rhine, they deny a feeling of harmony and grace, an ecstatic "sense of poetry" and "sublime instinct of form," in short, of romance. They are the stuff of novels.

The passage invites the reader to liken the conventional lives of the “emmetlike” Tullivers and Dodsons just represented on the banks of the Floss to the “narrow, ugly, grovelling” existence of those on the Rhone. The sense of oppressive narrowness is of the same kind: “Here, one has conventional worldly notions and habits without instruction and without polish—surely the most prosaic form of human life: proud respectability in a gig of unfashionable build, worldliness without side dishes” (244). However, the narrator tells us that this is only an effect of observing these people narrowly. They too “belong to the grand historic life of humanity;” even the smallest things are bound to the great. What had so far been presented in moral terms as a question of epoch—“our own vulgar era” versus “a day of romance”—suddenly becomes a question of perspective and scale: “In natural science, I have understood, there is nothing petty to the mind that has a large vision of relations and to which every single object suggests a vast sum of conditions. It is surely the same with the observation of human life” (245). Through a series of narrative and rhetorical devices—including the metaphoric juxtaposition of two different architectures and orders of “reality”—the narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* transforms the oppressive cynicism that marks this scene, yoked so closely in both theme and structure to Latimer’s vision of Prague.

This shift in the function of the narrator represents an important transition in George Eliot’s aesthetic. The interrupting scene evoked in *The Mill on the Floss* also recalls the oft-quoted seventeenth chapter of *Adam Bede*, “In Which the Story Pauses a Little,” defending the realist methods being used to narrate the story. In that earlier novel, the narrator defends the choice of telling a “simple story, without trying to make

things seem better than they were," finding "a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence" (Ch. 17). A visionary mimesis is after all the promise of the novel's opening lines: "With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader" (Ch. 1). Stopping to reflect on what has happened so far and recalling the opening scenes' projections outward to a foreign time or place to set up an analogy to what is near, these "interrupting" scenes do similar work. In *Adam Bede*, however, there is no negativity to indulge or displace. Hayslope comprises an organic unity whose "natural fitness" is untroubled by human affairs; like the castled regions of the Rhine, it belongs to an age of faith (Knoepflmacher 179). In *The Lifted Veil*, the "nightmare image" of this is attributed to Latimer's concretization around a prior identity in a time of flux; divested of his humanity, he becomes a monument to self. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Latimer's brand of nightmare becomes a narrative function; it is elicited from the reader, then absorbed and displaced by the narrator, so that Maggie can act out her own self-making scenes.

Thus Latimer can be read as the necessary excess—what Jacques Lacan has called the "extimate" or intimate exteriority—of the transition from *Adam Bede* to *The Mill on the Floss*, from the representation of individual character in harmony with its surroundings to a more fractured and conflicted sense of self and history. Latimer and Maggie chart two possible strategies for dealing with—and representing—such an unresolved relation to the past. Whereas the character of Hetty displaced the excess of the heroic resolution of *Adam Bede*, a novel like *The Mill on the Floss*—about a heroine and by a newly acknowledged woman writer—required more complex and prior (extra-

)textual negotiation. Bringing the autobiographical to life in *The Mill on the Floss* first required the death of a past self, inscribed in and by *The Lifted Veil*.

Bodenheimer reads the final accusation scene in *The Lifted Veil* as a gothic externalization of Latimer's own situation: "He is telling his accusatory tale at an equivalent moment—between the knowledge of his death and its arrival" (136). Similarly, Latimer's narrative can be read as an externalization of the negativity and fear that George Eliot experienced in sitting down to write *The Mill on the Floss* at the very moment that she was facing mounting gossip about her identity—between the knowledge that she would have to relinquish the secrecy of her pseudonym and its surrender.

The Outing of George Eliot: 1859

> Allow me to ask whether the act of publishing a book deprives a man of all claim to the courtesies usual among gentlemen?— George Henry Lewes writing as George Eliot to the Editor of the *Times,* 16 April 1859 (*Letters* III, 50)

> That YOU *that you* whom they spit at should do it!—Barbara Bodichon to George Eliot, 26 April 1859 (*Letters* III, 56)

> KEEP YOUR SECRET.—Letter to George Eliot from John Blackwood, 18 May 1859 (*Letters* III, 67)

Barbara Bodichon's exclamation on recognizing the voice of her friend in the text of *Adam Bede* is a measure not only of the heights achieved by that novel's publication but also, more tellingly, how steep the hill. Marian (Evans) Lewes—"*that you* whom they spit at"—was an object of a public scorn from which the pseudonym George Eliot served to protect her.[9] On the same day of Bodichon's revelation, 26 April

[9] As Bodenheimer and others have noted, the shift in signature from Marian Evans to Marian Lewes followed closely upon the adoption of the pseudonym George Eliot. It coincided with her decision to tell her brother Isaac about her marriage and resulted in her family's excommunication of her. See Bodenheimer, p. 129 and p. 280 n6. It is also the name George Eliot used in inscribing the fly-leaf of the

1859, George Eliot noted in her *Journal* that she finished writing *The Lifted Veil* (77). The coincidence would prove to be significant. Ten days earlier, George Henry Lewes signed George Eliot's name to a letter to the *Times*, outraged by the recent attempt "to pry into what is obviously meant to be withheld—my name" (*Letters* III, 50). At issue was the claim that Joseph Liggins, a Nuneaton clergyman, was the author of *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*. Amused at first by the rumors from both Warwickshire and London, the Eliot camp began to despair when Liggins' alleged authorship was announced as a fact in a letter to the *Times*, 15 April 1859. The "Liggins affair" reached a fever pitch when they heard of a call for donations for the unpaid Liggins.[10] Replying to Barbara Bodichon, the only person who had seen through the pseudonym in the way that George Eliot had hoped her friends would (Bodenheimer 140), Lewes announced, "We have come to the conclusion of no longer concealing the authorship. It makes me angry to think that people should say that the secret has been kept because there was any *fear* of the effect of the author's name" (*Letters* III, 106). With this the secrecy of the pseudonym unraveled, bringing about what Bodenheimer has suggestively called "the outing of George Eliot." One month later, in the July 1859 issue of *Blackwood's,* an anonymous story appeared under the title *The Lifted Veil*.[11]

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manuscript of *Adam Bede*, bound in red russia: "To my dear husband, George Henry Lewes, I give this M.S. of a work which would never have been written but for the happiness which his love has conferred on my life. Marian Lewes March 23. 1859." See Haight, p. 278.

[10] The Leweses were in effect blackmailed, as Alexander Welsh has written, "without so much as a threatening letter, by the complacency of a nearly total stranger named Joseph Liggins, who permitted people to believe that *he* was George Eliot" (128). See especially pp. 124-130.

[11] Welsh points out, "[Blackwood] and the author were in negotiations over *The Mill on the Floss*, and she did not mistake, or take very kindly to, his nervousness about the revelation of her identity" (129). In a compromise, Blackwood agreed to use the name George Eliot in publishing books but to elide the name in his magazine (Welsh 129).

The enormous critical and popular success of *Adam Bede*, published in February 1859, was even just weeks after its publication all but assured. A rare second edition was called for in mid-March—by which time 1,800 of the 2,100 copies of the first edition had been sold—and the sales figures from that point soared to 14,000 copies by October 1859 alone (Haight 279, 330; Bodenheimer 137). One perhaps unforeseeable effect of this triumph was the pressure it put on the secrecy of the pseudonym upon which the success, in theory, depended. The pressure became so intense that it required an aggressive public-relations campaign, an exchange of heated letters in the *Times*, and ultimately a bittersweet revelation of George Eliot's identity to the public. The pseudonym had primarily served to protect the commercial value of the writings from the public reputation of their author, whose notoriety preceded her literary fame and fortune and threatened everywhere to spread. As Bodenheimer notes, "[T]hey all wanted to keep 'George Eliot' publicly separate from the woman who lived with Lewes. While the pseudonym held, the honeymoon with Blackwood could be extended" (126). George Eliot's income in 1859 was over £2,000, not the £9,000 made by *Middlemarch* in 1879, but no small amount compared to the £353 Lewes had earned in the same year[12] or the 12£ 10*s.* that she had been paid for an essay in the *Westminster Review* (Haight 319, 443; *Journals* 65).

The guarded secret of George Eliot's identity was then a pragmatic, ambivalent stance, more a cautious early negotiation with a publisher than any real desire for

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[12] As Haight notes, "The largest item in Lewes's account was for Agnes [the first Mrs. Lewes] and her brood. To the end he was mindful of his responsibility to her, and Marian, who now provided the money, concurred. Since his life with Marian began, Agnes had never had less than £100 a year from him—often more when she ran into debt" (460-461). Gifts were also given to the children, including money and, in 1876, a Latin dictionary.

lasting anonymity. Alexander Welsh argues in *George Eliot and Blackmail* that the pseudonym functioned primarily as an attempt to manage the "open secret" of the non-legal marriage with Lewes: "The two affairs were inextricably related, and both were successfully managed. The aggressive public-relations secret was made to support and finally to subsume the quietly determined private relation that was its principal source" (123). According to Welsh, the public controversy over the pseudonym helped to deflect the glare of the "open secret." The strategy was in the end successful or at least the books were, even though the controversies of the pseudonym and the marriage would be linked for many years. As a disgruntled critic would later write, "It is no more true that the author of *Adam Bede* was Mrs. Lewes than it is true that the author of *Adam Bede* was Mr. Liggins" (qtd. in Welsh 129n). Welsh highlights a more genuinely comic moment, more comic perhaps because stated in the first person: "That the affairs of unorthodox marriage and pseudonymous writing had become permanently linked is evident from the novelist's joking, in a letter to her new sisters-in-law more than twenty years later, 'that I am the criminal usually known under the name George Eliot'" (126).

Bodenheimer agrees with Welsh's large-scale analysis but adds that a closer look at George Eliot's letters of this period show a far more troubled, increasingly anxious scene. The conflict was never a simple choice between continuing to hide and "outing" herself. Bodenheimer suggests as much by beginning her discussion of this period with a citation from Barthes:

> Yet to hide a passion totally (or even to hide, more simply, its excess) is inconceivable: not because the human subject is too weak, but because passion is in essence made to be seen: the hiding must be seen: *I want*

> *you to know that I am hiding something from you*, that is the active paradox I must resolve: *at one and the same time* it must be known and not known: I want you to know that I don't want to show my feelings: that is the message I address to the other. *Larvatus prodeo*: I advance pointing to my mask: I set a mask upon my passion, but with a discreet (and wily) finger I designate this mask. (117)

The Lifted Veil performs precisely such a designation. Neither the mask itself nor a simple unveiling, it points: to the self-conscious stance of the masculine narrator and *nom de plume*, to its status as an imaginative act and as an impetus for narrative. The story registers the traces of that old habit just as it brings into being for George Eliot a new sense of self as a novelist and that public "YOU" of her own performance. Indeed it marks the volatile space of that transition.

CHAPTER THREE

Mind in Movement:
Embodied Dispositions in *The Egoist*

> The exceedingly lively conversation at his table was lauded by Lady Culmer.
> "Though," said she, "what it all meant, and what was the drift of it, I couldn't tell to save my life. Is it every day the same with you here?"
> "Very much." (310)

If *The Lifted Veil* represents gothic anxiety about the mind's tendency toward repetition and the effects of habit on both individual and communal consciousness, George Meredith's 1879 novel *The Egoist* offers a palliative in the drawing-room of high comedy. Eliot's first-person narrative brings about the melancholic paralysis that it purports to describe; it lays bare habit's power to naturalize and *authorize* the continuance of the past. *The Egoist* satirizes this operation, creating ironic distance by portraying the man of habit through the viewpoints of other characters, most notably the novel's witty, clear-sighted women. Meredith's hyper-stylized manner compounds *The Egoist*'s revelry in habit's subjectivizing force. In the vein of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Austen, Meredith shows habitual personality to be not only a kind of self-inheritance, a lineage, a re-presentation—and volatile—but also a productive source of comedy and social vision. It is the customary ground against which the bright comic spirit can, indeed must, emerge.

Lady Culmer's admiration of the conversation at table in *TheEgoist* (despite not understanding it) is a jab at Meredith's early critics. Indeed, the most common words used in contemporary reviews of his novels were "affectation," "obscurity," "artificiality," and "weakness" (Williams 11; Lucas 3). Yet Meredith's reputation belies a more complicated picture. Whereas Latimer's uncanny prevision is figured by the

association of architectural space with the "private" psychic spaces of memory and imagination, Meredith's comic vision draws attention to a different switching-point: the exchange between habits of thought and the body that moves—and, in moving, habituates itself. Drawing on existing physiological psychology and anticipating key theories of William James, Sigmund Freud, and Henri Bergson, *TheEgoist* makes subtle and crucial use of habitual physical orientation and behavior: characteristic ways of talking, moving, and acting, including stance, gait, speech, and gesture. In its careful attention to the movements and displacements of the body, the novel also prefigures an analysis of what Pierre Bourdieu has more recently called the *habitus*, an acquired system of *embodied dispositions*, a durable training in the collective social construction of the world (93-4).[1] Viciously funny, although by no means "simply" comic—indeed, Meredith seems to be saying, comedies never are—*The Egoist* can be usefully read as an experimental attempt at redefining nineteenth-century understandings of the "patterning" of human behavior and subjectivity. It represents a critical intervention at the very moment that the study of psychology was beginning to be codified as a specialized field and a profession. In this light, Meredith's experimental prose style is a vital part of, rather than frivolous obstacle to, the novel's signification and design.

In this chapter, I read the novel's depiction of habitual behavior in three interrelated ways: as an outgrowth of nineteenth-century physiological psychology; in terms of Meredith's own theory of comedy and its influence on Henri Bergson; and,

[1] For more on the *habitus* as the imprint of culture on the body, where the idiosyncratic (personal) meets the systematic (social), see Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice*: "[Bodily habitus] is political mythology realised, *em-bodied*, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking and thereby of *feeling* and *thinking*.… The principles em-bodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by the voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit …" (*Outline* 93-4).

finally, as an attempt to reformulate earlier Victorian understandings of human behavior in the years leading up to and including the rapid ascendancy and professionalization of Freud's psychoanalytic model. Neither traditional novel nor scientific case study, *The Egoist* offers a competing, experimental model for exploring what was quickly becoming known as "personality."[2] But I also read the novel back through the writers Meredith anticipated, namely William James, Freud, and Bergson. The novel is not just a fictionalization of Meredith's *Essay on Comedy*, as is often assumed. The interpretive loop of the chapter, therefore, (1) traces Meredith's influence on late-Victorian psychology; (2) reads the novel back through that influence to unpack Meredith's representation of habits; and (3) concludes that it represents a pivotal shift between earlier physiological psychology and Freudian psychoanalysis. Meredith's celebrated stylistic "eccentricity"—Wilde: "Ah ! Meredith ! Who can define him?" (298)—can thus be seen as intimately bound up with the move from novelistic understandings of human behavior to the expert, authoritative, professional psychology of the turn of the century.

* * *

The plot of the novel is relatively simple. It concerns the ill-fated engagement of Clara Middleton to Sir Willoughby Patterne, premier of his family, fifth head of the "race" inhabiting Patterne Hall, and the "hope of his county" (7). Willoughby, the egoist of Meredith's title, is in many ways similar to Eliot's Latimer. By turns hypersensitive and morose, he is painfully self-conscious, habitual in his thinking and comportment,

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[2] The *OED* traces the modern psychologizing sense of this word—"that quality or assemblage of qualities which makes a person what he is, as distinct from other persons"—back at least as far as Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748): "In return [I] fall to praising those qualities and personalities in Lovelace which the other never will have" (II, 138).

and Rousseauian in feeling. His name, as has often been pointed out, has an obvious association with *pattern*, recalling Willoughby's exemplary traits as a wealthy young landowner, the model of an English gentleman (Mayo 453). Clara Middleton, whose name identifies her with clarity and temperance, is also ideal—beautiful, intelligent, wealthy, and young—but has none of Willoughby's blinding egoism. Rather, she exhibits a "prompt and most musical responsiveness" (36). Accepting his proposal after he comes into his inheritance, Clara gradually realizes that she cannot marry this self-centered hero, and threatens to become the second woman to jilt Willoughby. The first, ironically named Constantia Durham (she is anything but constant or durable), eloped with a Colonel Harry Oxford prior to Clara's arrival.

The arc of the narrative is formed, therefore, by Willoughby's courtship of Clara and her increasing reluctance to marry him. The rest of the novel involves the other characters' responses to the challenge Clara poses to the formalized, regimented world of Patterne Hall. Under the double-blossom cherry tree, Clara first confides discreetly in Willoughby's cousin, the scholar Vernon Whitford, who quietly loves her. With Vernon she shares a concern for the future of Willoughby's young ward Crossjay and an esteem for her father, the Rev. Dr. Middleton. Clara also speaks with Laetitia Dale, a shy but intelligent woman who has always loved Willoughby but continues to be selfishly ignored by him. As Clara repeatedly appeals to her father (who is more concerned with the Patterne wine) and to Willoughby himself, the arrival of Col. De Craye, an Irishman, marks the lingering possibility of Clara's escape in the mold of her predecessor, Miss Durham. The novel ends with Clara leaving for the Alps with Vernon but only after an abandoned attempt to flee by herself to London by rail, a bizarre turn of events

involving a late-night eavesdrop, Willoughby's last-ditch proposal to Laetitia, and the involvement of Laetitia's ailing father and all the great, gossiping ladies of the county. So *The Egoist* marries off its glossy hero, and never has it seemed so difficult.

For the Victorians, the plot would have been immediately reminiscent of the popular Willow Pattern of china, and the romantic legend connected with it, imported into England from China during the last half of the eighteenth century (fig. 1).[3] That story represents an attempt to explain the design, which became standardized in England around 1830 (Osborne 829).

Fig. 1. The Burleigh reproduction of Enoch Wood's plate, Burgess and Leigh, Middleport, Stoke-on-Trent ("The Willow Pattern")

Its scenes include a pagoda at the edge of water, two birds in the sky, a boat being poled on the water, a fence in the foreground, a three-arched bridge with three figures walking on it, and a prominent willow tree overhanging the bridge (Osborne 829). According to

[3] According to Mayo, the Willow Pattern is the most popular single design employed on English earthenware: "The pattern originated about 1780 at the Caughley porcelain factory in Shropshire, where it was adapted from conventional forms of Chinese porcelain" (454). The pattern then is itself a copy, a citation, a colonization—an instance of the romantic appeal of *chinoiserie* to the English popular imagination. See Patricia O'Hara's "cultural biography" of the willow pattern in the nineteenth century, "'The Willow Pattern That We Knew': The Victorian Literature of Blue Willow," in *Victorian Studies* 36:4 (Summer 1993), 421-42.

the legend, the wealthy mandarin who inhabits the stately pagoda was a widower and had a lovely daughter; she opposed her father's wish that she marry a suitor of high degree in favor of a poor and honorable man, her father's secretary, with whom she had exchanged vows under the blossoming tree (Mayo 455). The daughter is held prisoner and, pining for her freedom, is rescued and carried off by her lover while her father entertains the suitor in the banquet hall; escaping over the willow bridge, they are turned into birds by the gods in honor of their fidelity (Mayo 455).

The correspondence between plot and plate is direct although Meredith plays some with sequence and emphasis. As Mayo has pointed out, Clara makes a bid for her freedom before recognizing Whitford as a lover, and even then she does so ambiguously; the reasons for Clara's revolt interest Meredith more than her new love does anyway (456). In addition, Meredith incorporates the porcelain-idea into the dowager Mrs. Montstuart Jenkinson's enigmatic phrase for Clara, "a dainty rogue in porcelain" (36), and twice into the plot itself: once upon the arrival of De Craye's wedding present, a broken porcelain vase; and a second time in Lady Busshe's gift of a porcelain service, which she uses to test her suspicion of a fissure between Willoughby and Clara. Not only is the plot remarkably simple then, it was also already well known to contemporary readers through the familiar blue Willow plate. Its pattern—already so much a part of everyday domestic life—here also takes on a feeling for narrative form.

Despite the plot's clear outline and its origins in popular iconography, *The Egoist* frequently reads like an opaque text. Even at a first glance it shows itself to be a hard, dense, at times obscure verbal structure. The novel's complexity lies in its subtlety of characterization and its oblique, discontinuous narration. As we will see, Meredith's

dynamic conception of character places emphasis on minute attention to bodily tics, twitches, spasms, convulsions, and sudden exclamations. His dialogue is epigrammatic and often limited to single-syllable words and telegraphic phrasing. In addition, key scenes are left out of the narration, only to be described later by other characters. As Wilde aptly quips, Meredith "breaks his shins" over his own wit: "As a writer he has mastered everything except language: as a novelist he can do everything, except tell a story: as an artist he is everything, except articulate" (298). Meredith's stylistic eccentricity enacts a kind of rigid egoism of its own; it is self-reflexive, as if to say, these foibles are mine, and they are probably yours too. As Rachel M. Brownstein has written, "The self-consciousness that marks his style is his subject" (185).

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Critical reception of *The Egoist* has tended to focus on Meredith's *Essay on Comedy*, written just two years earlier, in 1877, for the London Institution. In that lecture, whose full title was *The Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit [An Essay on Comedy]*, Meredith articulated for the first time, somewhat nervously, his idea that comedy was the cure for "the malady of sameness, our modern malady" (Sypher vii). For Meredith, comedy is a corrective for the tedium of everyday life, the "monstrous monotonousness" that enfolds us (*The Egoist* 5). The general idea of the *Essay* is that comedy, especially as perfected by Molière, has a civilizing function: to expose an individual or collective flaw that has been obscured by convention and complacency. It is the Comic Spirit "who proposes the correcting of pretentiousness, of inflation, of dulness, and of the vestiges of rawness and grossness to be found among us. She is the ultimate civilizer, the polisher, a sweet cook" (5). Meredith expounds:

> Men's future upon earth does not attract it; their honesty and shapeliness in the present does; and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually, or in the bulk; the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign, and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit. (*Essay* 48)

The man with an index finger on a page of the Book of Egoism will find a remedy for his affliction here then. For comedy calls attention to our ready acceptance of the conventional as "real" and "natural" and explodes affectation, self-delusion, and folly. "The ultimate civilizer" in a dull and insensitive world, the comic spirit is pure social vision, "born of our united social intelligence," which shows us "our individual countenances," and thus keeps us alive (Sypher ix). Comedy proposes an alternative antidote to Science, which can tell us little of human life, Meredith claims, for "we have little to learn of apes" (*The Egoist* 5). Art is another matter, "the specific [cure]" (5). "And to love Comedy," Meredith insists, "you must know the real world, and know men and women well enough not to expect too much of them, though you may still

hope for good" (*Essay* 24). Played out in the rarified space of the drawing-room, Meredith's comedy is both a social game and a discipline of the self (Sypher xvi).

Meredith had already begun to incorporate his theory of comedy in earlier novels, most notably *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859).[4] In that novel, with which Meredith made his name as a novelist despite its being boycotted by Mudie for its frank sexual passages, young Richard Feverel is brought up by his father Sir Austin's "system" of scientific educational principles. Mostly, this entailed keeping Richard at home; nonetheless, he falls in love with a neighboring farmer's niece and the two marry secretly despite Sir Austin's opposition. After a series of trials in London, the couple separate; she bears a child, goes mad, and dies; and he is wounded in a duel, lying paralyzed at the end, a "triumph" of Sir Austin's system. In mocking this mechanical, "scientific" approach to education, Meredith prefigures his critique of the unthinking application of rules set forth in the *Essay*. Henri Bergson will take this further in likening social etiquette to bodily regulation: "Constant attention to form and the mechanical application of rules here bring about a kind of professional automatism analogous to that imposed upon the soul by the habits of the body, and equally laughable" (95). The roots for this twentieth-century analogy reach back into Meredith's career at least as far as *Richard Feverel*.

It was *The Egoist*, however, thatmost fully and successfully advanced Meredith's idea of comedy's new "social" meanings. Indeed, it was in the "Prelude" to

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[4] The year 1859 has significance in the personal history of George Meredith, as it does in George Eliot's, as Lionel Stevenson and Norman Kelvin have both pointed out: that "*annus mirabilis* of English literature" (Stevenson 60) and "of nineteenth-century cultural development in general" (Kelvin 5). In addition to *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, the year also saw the publication of *Adam Bede*, works that share "the credit of endowing English fiction with artistic and intellectual self-respect," in Stevenson's opinion (60). Stevenson's *The Ordeal of George Meredith* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953) remains the standard biography.

this novel that Meredith rephrased and compressed the ideas of his lecture for wider consumption. One of the more peculiar of Meredith's habits being the inclusion of a philosophical, often daunting introduction to his works, he subtitled this one "A Chapter of Which the Last Page Only Is of Any Importance." Here he begins, "Comedy is a game played to throw reflections upon social life, and it deals with human nature in the drawing room of civilized men and women, where we have no dust of the struggling outer world, no mire, no violent crashes, to make the correctness of the representation convincing" (3). Instead of a backdrop of heroic action and political and historical conflict (strictly defined), we are presented with "a definite situation for a number of characters": the geographically isolated, hermetically sealed, rigidly hierarchical and regimented world of the country estate (3). Comedy's reflections upon social life depend entirely on the observation of human behavior in the drawing-room; it is there that we find the pattern's manufacture. Focusing on a limited set of characters within a constricted frame, the comic spirit "rejects all accessories in the exclusive pursuit of them and their speech" (3).This social view is made up of verbal shards—Wilde: "His style is chaos illumined by flashes of lightening" (298)—and they are sharp.

The parallels between the *Essay* and the novel are well rehearsed by critics. Meredith began writing the novel only three months after he published the *Essay*, when his ideas about comedy and the comic works which had inspired them must have been fresh in his mind (Stewart and Casal 210). The subtitle of the novel is "A Comedy in Narrative," for it is to be a novel that approximates the structure of a play (Kelvin 106). This approximation of dramatic form replaces elaborate plot structure with the careful psychological analysis of individual characters (DiMauro 250). The narrative has

generally been seen to embody the theoretical insights and enthusiasms of Meredith's essay transparently, as a straightforward "dramatization" of his theory or as an "overflow" of ideas from the *Essay* to *The Egoist* (Stewart and Casal 210). This approach, while in evidence in the novel's early reception from George Eliot to Virginia Woolf, reached its fullest articulation in late-twentieth-century feminist readings of the novel, due in part to Meredith's focus on the comic function of gender in the *Essay*, and in part because this critique of comedy's gendering of class struggle was due.

A 1980 essay on *The Egoist* by Maaja A. Stewart and Elvira Casal provides a representative example of the kind of forceful reading the *Essay on Comedy* sets up.[5] This reading focuses on the portrayal of Clara Middleton as a potentially witty woman who is struggling to free herself from her society's sentimental stereotypes—"the pretty idiot, the passive beauty, the adorable bundle of caprices" (*Essay* 15)—in short, the heroine of romantic fiction that Meredith dismisses with contempt in favor of those women of seventeenth-century comedy, Molière's Célimène and Congreve's Millamant. Analogous to the role of the Comic Spirit in society, Clara's function in the novel is to provide an alternative view on the status quo: "Meredith's concern over the participation of women in comedy reflects an awareness of a need for different perspectives in an approach to reality which seeks to define a potential individual freedom, capable of coexisting with social fulfillment" (212). Clara's very need to adapt

[5] I paraphrase Stewart and Casal here because their discussion of the novel in terms of stasis and vitalism will be useful for my own reading to follow. They are joined by several other influential readers of the novel who, if not primarily concerned with the theoretical outline of the *Essay*, in some way move out from it. See Gillian Beer's chapter in *Meredith: A Change of Masks* (London: Athlone Press, 1970); Rachel M. Brownstein's chapter in *Becoming a Heroine: Reading about Women in Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Donald Stone's *Novelists in a Changing World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972); Dorothy van Ghent's chapter in *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Rinehart, 1953); Carolyn Williams's essay, "Natural Selection and Narrative Form in *The Egoist*," *Victorian Studies* 27:1 (Autumn 1983): 53-79; and Judith Wilt's chapter in *The Readable People of George Meredith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

to her society's stereotypes marks out the space for a critique, and so grounds the possibility of redefining them. Stewart and Casal continue:

> Thus Meredith's emphasis on the importance of witty women to comedy is not an eccentricity, nor merely an intrusion of his personal philosophy into his theory of comedy, but shows an understanding of a central aspect of all comedies—the interplay between society and the forces which call it into question. (212)

Meredith, in seeing in comedy the staging of women's battle with men, isolates its radical potential: "Comedy lifts women to a station offering them free play for their wit, as they usually show it, when they have it, on the side of sound sense" (*Essay* 14).

Stewart and Casal begin from this view. Briefly, this is their reading: Clara Middleton, whose desperation not to marry Willoughby fuels her social insight, becomes a catalyst in the novel, releasing comic perceptions in others. The world of Patterne Hall is static when she enters it: life there has been formalized around Willoughby's egoism. Yet the refreshing variety and flexibility of Clara's personality awakens in others a dormant sense of self. At first they are not ready to deal with her challenge, accustomed as they are to the domination of Willoughby's single presence. Only Vernon Whitford recognizes her wit; the rest of society supports Willoughby's claim on her, mostly out of sheer inertia. But eventually, as Clara gathers courage and momentum, she begins to have an effect on others, aided in no small part by Willoughby's own display of astounding selfishness and self-delusion. The once singular view of the county now becomes a clamor of conflicting opinions and beliefs. In losing control of the social voice, Willoughby is forced to assume the role of a

mature adult beside a newly reawakened Laetitia Dale. Thus Clara enables a "united social intelligence" to free itself from the pressure of Willoughby's cynosure. In breaking away from the rigid codes imposed upon her, their reading concludes, she introduces the comic perspective and revitalizes the world of Patterne Hall.

While it has illuminated some aspects of the novel well, using Meredith's theory of comedy as a starting point has deflected attention from some of the novel's more experimental currents and peregrinations, as well as Meredith's impact beyond his own peculiar canon. The novel, of course, makes its own commentary on the *Essay*, written two years earlier and without the benefit of a full-scale dramatization of "a number of characters" in "a definite situation." That commentary can be found, I am suggesting, in the importance placed on the physical body in the novel, an aspect of Meredith's theory that is implied in the *Essay on Comedy* but not made explicit. As Wylie Sypher's *Comedy* makes clear, the *Essay* had influence beyond *TheEgoist* , most notably in its impact on Henri Bergson, whose 1900 essay *Laughter (Le Rire)* intimates the major, if seldom acknowledged, influence of Meredith on early-twentieth-century thought. Bergson's writing on comedy owes a significant debt not only to the *Essay on Comedy* but to *The Egoist* as well. It throws light, in turn, on the theory of habit articulated in that novel, a theory suggested by Meredith's *Essay* but only fully brought into focus by Bergson.

* * *

Bergson's essay *Laughter* represents a more urgent and frontal attack on the mind-numbing common sense—the "machinery"—of the nineteenth century. Comedy, in Bergson's view, exposes "something mechanical encrusted on the living" (79).

Whereas comedy in Meredith's *Essay* is seen to enlighten and rescue us from our own petty follies and pride, in Bergson it is understood to make us human and natural in the midst of an increasingly mechanical society (Sypher xvi). The shift in tone from *Richard Feverel* to *The Egoist* to Bergson's *Laughter*—from playful to satirical to trenchant—marks just how quickly attitudes were changing in the last half of the nineteenth century. Meredith's "system" and "pattern" here give way to the more functionalist and foreboding "mechanization," Bergson's word for the view, after Marx, that the modern individual has been made an appendage of the machine. In *Laughter*, Bergson seems to be acutely aware that it is not just *a* pattern that comedy must respond to now but a far-reaching, systematized interdependence of patterns.

Comedy resides for Bergson in the exposure of the "ready-made" in human gestures and values. As Sypher notes in his introduction to the essay, "[T]he comic figure is one who is not a man but, instead, a clockwork apparatus leading the special kind of life a puppet seems to have—'the malady of sameness,' Meredith called it" (x). Indeed, Bergson's theory of comedy relies on the paradigmatic example of the body behaving like a machine: "The attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine" (79). Comedy has, for Bergson as it does for Meredith, a social meaning and import: "The comic expresses, above all else, a special lack of adaptability to society" (146). Its mark, therefore, is rigidity of character, automatism, absentmindedness, and unsociability (156). As in *The Egoist*, comedy rebukes the barbarous here defined as the inanimate residing in the living. Echoing Meredith, Bergson explains:

> The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life. Consequently it expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and events. (117)

Comedy thus directs our attention not to actions, but to *gestures*, in Bergson's words, "the attitude, the movements and even the language by which a mental state expresses itself outwardly without any aim or profit, from no other cause than a kind of inner itching.… Action is intentional or, at any rate, conscious; gesture slips out unawares, it is automatic" (153).

Since mechanical behavior stems in part from the division of labor, the modern comic type in Bergson's view is the professional man who acts with rigidity. Sypher provides a useful summary of this type:

> He thinks with the automatism of his business code; he has the egoism of the expert.… This comic figure is identified by his 'professional callousness,' his inelasticity—which is a mode of pride. The automatic responses of this egoist make him appear … like a ready-made product standardized for market.… He lives by formulas, not by animation, and his behavior is a series of repetitions. But life should be a negation of repetition. So we laugh at him. (x-xi)

We have already seen this theory played out in the character of Sir Willoughby Patterne. This description marks his egoism perfectly; it is only the rhetoric that has changed and a new market vocabulary of professional expertise, product standardization, and formulas applied. This newly intensified language points to the rise of a sociological field of inquiry at the end of the century and the new social view of life propagated by the writings of "experts" such as Marx, Georg Simmel, and Bergson himself. It also reflects a certain Continental attitude. In the broad tradition of English comedy, Meredith's laughter is less derisive than Bergson's; he writes in the *Essay*, for example, "You may estimate your capacity for comic perception by being able to detect the ridicule of them you love without loving them less; and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in dear eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes" (42). For Meredith, comedy "laughs through the mind, for the mind directs it; and it might be called the humor of the mind" (47).

Mechanized Minds, Volatile Bodies

> Our souls are hideously subject to the conditions of our animal nature.—*The Egoist* (113)

> It is this physiological unity of organic functions, which is something deeper than consciousness and constitutes our fundamental personality.—Henry Maudsley, *The Pathology of Mind* (1879)

Bergson's emphasis on habit's relation to comedy underscores the centrality of the idea of habit in *The Egoist*. Throughout the novel, descriptions of bodily habits and dispositions stand in for the exposition of characters' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, especially where the narrative is otherwise obscure or silent. Noting the frequency and intransigence of these aporias, Stuart P. Sherman wrote in the *Nation* at Meredith's death in 1909:

> It is true that he undertook a very difficult task. He desired to represent men and women dramatically, revealing the secret springs of their characters in their speeches and acts. But for fatally long periods in many of his novels he would allow them neither to speak nor to act. (490)

This kind of ambivalent stance—Meredith as brilliant-but-flawed artist—marks a significant portion of the criticism. Yet Sherman also signals a peculiar structuring latency in Meredith's writing that such critical ambivalence typically masks: Meredith's "fatal" flaws are indeed productive, as only refusals can be. While he does not always allow his characters to act or speak, he frequently lets them *gesture*—that is, produce by means of the body the automatic, outward expression of a mental state or, in Bergson's words, a kind of "inner itching" (153). It is this socially inscribed, unconscious, habitual realm of the body—the "mind in movement"—that surfaces in *TheEgoist* . In this novel, Meredith draws our attention to the apparent contradiction that the intellect is to be found in bodily movements and tensions: a complex choreography, a comedy of gestures. For him, an indefatigable daily walker, it is in moving that we perceive the world, and the sensory experience of ourselves perceiving.

The novel begins with a scene that establishes Willoughby as a ruthless egoist cut from the pattern of hereditary aristocracy and primogeniture. Surrounded by the "anxious watch of eyes" of the ladies of the Hall, the county dowagers Mrs. Mounstuart Jenkinson, Lady Culmer and Lady Busshe, and his doting, dotty aunts Eleanor and Isabel, Willoughby has been systematically raised to be an English gentleman. In the process, those around him have become mere "echoes of one another in worship of a family idol" (200). His inheritance of one of England's great Houses—built aforetime

on “a grand old Egoism” (6)—is likened both to the blood line of a species and to the growth of a very old tree. When Lieutenant Crossjay Patterne of the Marines calls at the Hall, for example, Willoughby coldly replies “Not at home”; Meredith explains, “For if the oak is to become a stately tree, we must provide against the crowding of timber” (7). Thus, in the opening scene Willoughby displays a “hereditary aptitude in the use of the knife”—that is, “the art of cutting” or refusing to recognize “besieging” poorer relations and younger sons—evoking both the haughty vigilance of egoism and its tough, hard, durable wood (7-8). Indeed, his behavior comes as no surprise to those at the Hall occupied with “strict observation of his movements at all hours” (10). “They perceived in him a fresh development and very subtle manifestation of the very old thing from which he had sprung” (10).

In this passage, the English gentleman is defined by what it is *not*, a description that relies on the material habits of dress. Upon Lieutenant Patterne’s approach down the avenue of limes, Willoughby espies:

> a thick-set stumpy man crossing the gravel space from the avenue to the front steps of the Hall, decidedly *not* bearing the stamp of the gentleman ‘on his hat, his coat, his feet, or anything else that was his,’ Willoughby subsequently observed to the ladies of his family in the Scriptural style of gentlemen who did bear the stamp. His brief sketch of the creature was repulsive. The visitor carried a bag, and his coat-collar was up, his hat was melancholy; he had the appearance of a bankrupt tradesman absconding; no gloves, no umbrella. (9)

The son of tailors, Meredith knew how prestige was acquired and how it reproduced itself by pattern. The individual ego, embodied in the figure of the first-born son and arrayed in the accustomed manner, becomes both evidence of class superiority and its necessary local placeholder, the means of its habitual propagation.

At an even more basic level, physiognomy plays a significant role in the presentation of the novel's main characters. It is Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson, grande dame and quintessence of worldliness, "a lady certain to say the remembered, if not the right, thing," who identifies characters with vaguely physiological epigrams (10). Before we find out that Laetitia has long loved Willoughby and that she writes romantic poems and stories to help support herself and her father, for example, Mrs. Mountstuart says of Laetitia Dale, "Here she comes, with a romantic tale on her eyelashes" (10). This "portrait" of Laetitia has the power of attaching something both intangible and material—her romantic longings and her writings—to the length of her eyelashes. Because of its clever turn of phrase and mystifying obliqueness, the witticism sticks. Willoughby refers to it throughout the novel; when he questions her upon "a dejected droop of the eyelashes," she clarifies and confirms the phrase's insight, replying, "I am, I think, constitutionally melancholy" (192). The narrator's own description of Laetitia as "portionless and a poetess," by comparison, does not accrue the same importance as Mrs. Mountstuart's one-liner (15). Similarly, her clever remark for Vernon Whitford, "'He is a Phoebus Apollo turned fasting friar,'" Meredith tells us, "painted the sunken brilliancy of the lean long-walker and scholar at a stroke" (10). Less memorably, when Vernon denies being annoyed by Willoughby Dr. Middleton tells him, "But you have it on the forehead, Mr. Whitford," drawing a finger along his brows, "There" (202). Dr.

Middleton's gesture points to something plainly visible and already there; Mrs. Mountstuart's gestural phrases, in Bergson's words, "see in embryo" (77)—and thereby seem to bring about—something latent. They are not simply descriptive but performative as well.

Mrs. Mountstuart's epigrams for the romantic couple are abstract and, perhaps appropriately, more insinuating. Of the young Sir Willoughby, on the day of his majority when "rich, handsome, courteous, generous, lord of the Hall, the feast, and the dance, he excited his guests of both sexes to a holiday of flattery," Mrs. Mountstuart says: "*You see he has a leg*'" (10-11). A pyrotechnic of single syllables, this phrase illuminates at the same time that it mystifies; as Brownstein writes, "Not two legs but one. It 'will walk straight into the hearts of women.' Is it a phallus or the leg made in bowing, made for dancing attendance? Does it suggest his deep subservience to women, and to conventions? Far commoner synecdoches for the whole man are 'a head' and 'a heart.' Is 'leg' to suggest that Sir Willoughby has neither? He is physically a perfect specimen; nonetheless, 'leg' mystifies" (194). Meredith reinforces the sexual connotation when the full phrase is given later, this time without emphasis, almost deadpan by comparison: "Mrs. Mountstuart touched a thrilling chord. 'In spite of men's hateful modern costume, you see he has a leg'" (12). While this sexual meaning never completely disappears—that is, in fact, the edge the joke plays on—it is memorable more for its *obscurity*. Indeed, the power of the phrase comes from its rapid-fire brevity, its refusal to say more, and the productive confusion that this creates. The meanings proliferate, as they do when the phrase is later recalled in less physical terms:

> Willoughby aired his amiable superlatives in the eye of Miss Middleton; he had a leg. He was the heir of successful competitors. He had a style, a tone, an artist tailor, an authority of manner: he had in the hopeful ardour of the chase among a multitude a freshness that gave him advantage; and together with his undeviating energy when there was a prize to be won and possessed, these were scarcely resistible. He spared no pains, for he was adust and athirst for the winning-post. (33)

Here, the “leg” is a bearing, a certain demeanor, a mien—something exuded from within. The “leg” is reflected in descriptions of his posture as well:

> Willoughby's comportment while the showers of adulation drenched him might be likened to the composure of Indian Gods undergoing worship, but unlike them he reposed upon no seat of amplitude to preserve him from a betrayal of intoxication; he had to continue tripping, dancing, exactly balancing himself, head to right, head to left, addressing his idolaters in phrases of perfect choiceness. This is only to say that it is easier to be a wooden idol than one in the flesh; yet Willoughby was equal to his task. The little prince's education teaches him that he is other than you, and by virtue of the instruction he receives, and also something, we know not what, within, he is enabled to maintain his posture where you would be tottering. (14)

The “leg” refers to something physical and visibly plain: it is phallic, conventional, and cloaked. It also refers to something “within,” a quality that once again appears only in contrast with the lower classes and Celts, a “poetic leg”:

> Well, footmen and courtiers and Scottish highlanders, and the corps de ballet, draymen too, have legs, and staring legs, shapely enough. But what are they? not the modulated instrument we mean—simply legs for leg-work, dumb as the brutes. Our cavalier's is the poetic leg, a portent, valiance [a heroic deed or statement]. He has it as Cicero had a tongue. It is a lute to scatter songs to his mistress; a rapier, is she obdurate. In sooth *a leg with brains in it*, soul. (13, emphasis added)

The "leg" then is not just a physical property or reference but a mental quality, "a leg with brains in it." It is the embodiment of a poetic instrument, aura. Referring at once to his heroic physique and to a characteristic "style" and "authority of manner," Willoughby's "leg" marks the space between body and mind; it is a habit without language.

The most significant—and figurative, if no less ambiguous and suggestive—of Mrs. Mountstuart's epigrams is her pronouncement that Clara is "a dainty rogue in porcelain" (36).[6] Clara is described as "young, healthy, handsome; she was therefore fitted to be his wife, the mother of his children, his companion picture" (37). But "she is one of that sort," Mrs. Mounstuart tells him. When Willoughby objects to the word "rogue" being applied to the future mistress of Patterne Hall, they have this telling exchange:

> "Why rogue?" he insisted with Mrs. Mountstuart.
>
> "I said—in porcelain," she replied.

[6] Editor Robert M. Adams notes the double, elastic meaning of Meredith's use of "rogue": "In addition to its common meaning of 'playful rascal'—a meaning that stretches sometimes as far as 'outlaw'—the word has the meaning among ceramicists of 'crack' or 'flaw'" (36 n4). It is perhaps interesting in light of my later discussion of the professionalization of psychology that Mrs. Mountstuart relies on an arcane meaning here.

"Rogue perplexes me."

"Porcelain explains it."

"She has the keenest sense of honour."

"I am sure she is a paragon of rectitude."

"She has a beautiful bearing."

"The carriage of a young princess!"

"I find her perfect."

"And still she may be a dainty rogue in porcelain."

"Are you judging by the mind or the person, ma'am?"

"Both."

"And which is which?"

"There's no distinction." (37-38)

Mrs. Mountstuart's response thus denies a distinction between mind and body; it is all surface to her. The suggestion here is that Clara, loving liberty and spaciousness, can be no perfect heroine and that the signs of this are outwardly visible. That she is not—or will not be—"intact," either (figuratively) as Willoughby's "companion picture" or (literally) as the chaste vessel for his children, is left unclear. Clara's status as virgin-exemplar is further put into question when Col. De Craye's wedding present of a broken porcelain vase precedes his own opportune arrival, everywhere threatening Clara's break from Patterne. When Willoughby claims to know Clara's character (even though he does not understand the assessment of Clara as flawed), Mrs. Mountstuart counters, "She has no character yet. You are forming it, and pray be advised and be merry; the solid is your safest guide; physiognomy and manners will give you more of a girl's

character than all the divings you can do. She is a charming girl, only she is one of that sort" (38).

Mrs. Mountstuart's perceptive advice is taken up by the narrative itself, further contrasting to Willoughby's "habit of diving" beneath the surface without first studying the "index-page" of appearances (39). Willoughby has "no tally of Nature's writing above to set beside his discoveries of the deeps" (39). Indeed, the novel stages Willoughby's egoism as a problem of *reading*. Mrs. Mountstuart's "directions for reading" Clara's character are "the same that she practiced in reading Sir Willoughby's" (39). Meredith says, "Miss Middleton's features were legible as to the mainspring of her character" (39). When the older woman commands, "Let me see her," Clara is critically observed in a passage which, in helping to explain the "rogue," bears quoting in full:

> She had the mouth that smiles in repose. The lips met full on the centre of the bow and thinned along to a lifting dimple; the eyelids also lifted slightly at the outer corners, and seemed, like the lip into the limpid cheek, quickening up the temples, as with a run of light, or the ascension indicated off a shoot of colour. Her features were playfellows of one another, none of them pretending to rigid correctness, nor the nose to the ordinary dignity of governess among merry girls, despite which the nose was of a fair design, not acutely interrogative or inviting to gambols. Aspens imaged in water, waiting for the breeze, would offer a susceptible lover some suggestion of her face: a pure, smooth-white face, tenderly flushed in the cheeks, where the gentle dints were faintly intermelting even during quietness. Her eyes were brown, set well

> between mild lids, often shadowed, not unwakeful. Her hair of lighter brown, swelling above her temples on the sweep to the knot, imposed the triangle of the fabulous wild woodland visage from brow to mouth and chin, evidently in agreement with her taste; and the triangle suited her; but her face was not significant of a tameless wildness or of weakness; her equable shut mouth threw its long curve to guard the small round chin from that effect; her eyes wavered only in humour, they were steady when thoughtfulness was awakened; and at such seasons the build of her winter-beechwood hair lost the touch of nymphlike and whimsical, and strangely, by mere outline, added to her appearance of studious concentration. Observe the hawk on stretched wings over the prey he spies, for an idea of this change in the look of a young lady whom Vernon Whitford could liken to the Mountain Echo, and Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson pronounced to be "a dainty rogue in porcelain." (35-36)

The fragmented catalogue of individual features, "none of them pretending to rigid correctness," that begins this passage gives way to a synthesis: the changeable character that Clara will prove to be, summed up by two contrasting images of her. Willoughby, seeing only what he has been trained to look for, does not see this.

From the beginning of the novel, therefore, habits of demeanor and comportment reveal traits that are individual and durable enough to make up a recognizable character—to the reader and to individual characters themselves—and do so in language. Just as Mrs. Mountstuart's epigrams use the bodily habitus to emphasize

particular characteristics and eccentricities, they also represent individuals as generic types. "She is one of that sort.… Rogues in porcelain." In a double sense then, the body gives the individual away.

Mrs. Mountstuart's "portraits" are really sketches drawn from a quick and ready intuition. They are *gestural*—characterizing, typifying, and performative. When Willoughby questions the use of "rogue" to describe Clara, we are told, "Like all rapid phrasers, Mrs. Mountstuart detested the analysis of her sentence. It had an outline in vagueness, and was flung out to be apprehended, not dissected" (39). Indeed, she is much like Meredith himself. In this, and in her prophetic choice of Laetitia for Willoughby's bride early on in the novel, she is a kind of author-by proxy within the text.[7] Linked to her perceptive and performative use of language—she makes things happen with her words—Mrs. Mountstuart recalls the comic element that Bergson associates with the power of the caricaturist:

> However regular we may imagine a face to be, however harmonious its lines and supple its movements, their adjustment is never altogether perfect: there will always be discoverable the signs of some impending bias, the vague suggestion of a possible grimace, in short, some favourite distortion towards which nature seems to be particularly inclined. The art of the caricaturist consists in detecting this, at times, imperceptible tendency, and in rendering it visible to all eyes by magnifying it. (77)

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[7] In addition to being a kind of "transvestite" novel in its reversal of the traditional hero/heroine functions of the English novel, as Brownstein has shown, *The Egoist* is also a "travesty" at the level of authorial language and style, in Meredith's palpable love for, and identification with, Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson's "lady's tongue." The novel, as I will suggest, proposes a psychologizing synthesis between her love of surfaces and Willoughby's "habit of diving" into the deeps: "Mrs. Mountstuart's advice was wiser than her procedure, for she stopped short where he declined to begin. He dived below the surface without studying that index-page" (39).

Indeed, with her *bons mots* Mrs. Mountstuart holds sway in the county, authorizing her own kind of power, the power to name. With each "quiet little touch of nature" she detects a barely perceptible tendency or inclination toward outward expression in the body, and with a clap of thunder she throws light there (11). Hers is an art of exaggeration, not for its own sake but rather, as Bergson writes, "to make manifest to our eyes the distortions which [she] sees in embryo" (77). It is not just the particular exaggerations of temperament that Mrs. Mountstuart finds remarkable, but the potential for rigidness that each reveals, the exposure of a "success in dulling the outward life of the soul, in petrifying its movements" (Bergson 79).

Meredith incorporates a self-conscious awareness of this into the narrative. He writes of Willoughby, "He was handsome; so correctly handsome, that a slight unfriendly touch precipitated him into caricature. His habitual air of happy pride, of indignant contentment rather, could easily be overdone" (41). And of Mrs. Mountstuart he says, "Her word went over the county: and had she been an uncharitable woman she could have ruled the county with an iron rod of caricature, so sharp was her touch. A grain of malice would have sent county faces and characters awry into the currency" (10). The distortions that she directs our attention to she highlights with reference to the body. Her observations, like those of a good caricaturist, are also enactments. As Clara later notes of her cleverness, "She could tattoo me with epigrams" (225). Mrs. Mountstuart's witticisms not only discover individual temperament and character from the outward appearance *of* the body, they have the effect of seeming to write themselves *on* the body. They are comic in as much as they point up the habitual embodiment of

dispositions, laughing at their apparent permanence but ultimately rendering them changeable by making them conscious and visible to the *social* body.

* * *

In addition to physiognomy, Meredith's representations of bodies in their habitual spaces—and their movement through it—further develop and distinguish the novel's characters. Willoughby, for one, is associated with his laboratory, which he frequents "never less than an hour [every day], if I can snatch it" (313). "A habit," he says. "In there I throw off the world" (313). The room helps define Willoughby as an amateur scientist in the spirit of the times, when scientific study was still housed in the home. Recalling the formulas and systems pilloried in *Richard Feveral*, Willoughby's interest in science seems trendy and vain in contrast with the "self-slaughter" of the classical men, Dr. Middleton and Vernon, and the convivial Irishman, Colonel De Craye, who is associated with the jocular, masculine space of the smoking-room (120). Willoughby's laboratory is also the scene of several key moments in the narrative. It is where Lady Busshe's wedding present of a china service is brought, thus corresponding with Clara's attempted escape (much as the breaking of De Cray's porcelain vase foreshadowed its possbility). One of the novel's notorious elided scenes takes place here: the scene in which Clara believes Willoughby will release her but he does not. All we see is the laboratory door shutting behind her afterward: "a hard sob of anger barred her voice" (272). Finally, the laboratory is where Sir Willoughby shuts himself up for relief from the "breath of the world, the world's view of him," which was partly "his vital breath, his view of himself" (312). Thus, here Willoughby variably stretches out, yawns, and groans; his nostrils lift, his hands shake, his facial muscles relax; he

experiences “a violent shake of the body and limbs” (312-13). Ironically cloaked in what Willoughby proudly calls “the work of Science,” the language of his “stretching fits” suggests masturbation instead (312-13). Whatever the case, Meredith presents this room as a completely personal, individual space where the body has free range from social convention.

In place of the skipped laboratory scene between Willoughby and Clara, Meredith depicts Laetitia reading and contemplating the outcome of the interview: “His was a monumental pride that could not stoop. She had preserved this image of the gentleman for a relic in the shipwreck of her idolatry. So she mused between the lines of her book” (271). She has not yet completely realized what Clara meant on their walk together, hand in hand, when she said, “Our dreams of heroes and heroines are cold glitter beside the reality” (131). Thus, Laetitia is also characterized by her solitude, enclosure, and constant presence in the domestic space of Patterne Hall. Her reading is similarly autotelic. Willoughby’s “image of the constant woman,” Laetitia upholds by the intensity of her love and her presence the collective belief in Willoughby as the “sun” of Patterne (32; 374). She is “what the doctors call anaemic; a rather bloodless creature” (130). With characteristic ambivalence, she tells Clara on their intimate walk together, “My days are monotonous, but if I have a dread, it is that there will be an alteration in them” (130). Every morning she walks across the park to see her father, but we never see her in her own home; she is always at Patterne Hall. As Willoughby tells Clara, “I believe, if the whole place were swept away to-morrow, Laetitia Dale could reconstruct it, and put those aspens on the north of the lake in number and situation correctly where you have them now. I would guarantee her description of it in absence

correct" (103). Laetitia's fantasy of the romantic hero is indeed the glue of the Patterne world; her longing is outstripped only by her patience. It is perhaps only fitting that in Willoughby's apocalyptic vision, she is evoked to put everything back together again, only then to be absented from the picture, as Clara notes. Whereas Laetitia clings to the monotony of her days and finds dubious comfort in them, Clara finds only bondage. Indeed, Clara's internment in "the sanctuary of her chamber, the pure white room," recalls the Patterne pearls stowed safely in their iron box (197; 83-4). She tells Laetitia that she could love Patterne's homely picturesque *for her sake*, and *in time*: "Since … since this … this change in me," she haltingly explains, "I find I cannot separate landscape from associations" (130).

Clara's father Dr**.** Middleton, himself a "fine old picture" and "a specimen of art peculiarly English," is linked with the Hall's wine cellar and library (156). His classical erudition and inside jokes, however, are merely dull versions of Mrs. Mountstuart's *bons mots*. He has "a comfortable pride in his digestion," and his civilized taste for "French cookery and wines of known vintages" contrasts with Crossjay's physical hunger and boyish habits (156, 155). Like Vernon, Dr. Middleton sees the appeal of the Hall for a scholar: it is remote, quiet, and predictable. His "leisurely promenade up and down the lawn with ladies and deferential gentlemen, in anticipation of the dinner bell, was Dr. Middleton's evening pleasure" (155). In contrast, Vernon roams the countryside and frequents the lake, where he swims with Crossjay each morning. Like Crossjay, he is only at the Hall temporarily. He is often found outdoors when not studying or tutoring, and his time indoors is represented largely indirectly. Vernon's habitual space is the threshold; indeed, we are told early on that Vernon is a new kind of

Englishman. The contrast between Vernon's letters from abroad and Willoughby's provides the clearest example:

> Vernon seemed a sheepish fellow, without stature abroad, glad of a compliment, grateful for a dinner, endeavouring sadly to digest all he saw and heard. But one was a Patterne; the other a Whitford. One had genius; the other pottered after him with the title of student. One was the English gentleman wherever he went; the other was a new kind of thing, nondescript, produced in England of late, and not likely to come to much good himself, or do much good to the country. (23)

Part of what it means to be a Whitford is that Vernon spends much time chaperoning and chasing his delinquent charge across the Hall grounds. This connects him both with the natural—and, by extension, the romantic and poetic—as well as the civilizing function. His worship of the double-blossom cherry tree, that "Vestal of civilization" where Clara first confides in him, links him with the gardener's creative "improvement" of nature, like him "a new kind of thing" (65). Vernon fosters and disciplines Crossjay, who represents pure Nature, as if cultivating the wild acorn dropped from the stately Patterne oak. Crossjay is himself associated with the bunches of wild-flowers that he picks regularly for Miss Middleton, "dismissed to the dust-heap by the great officials of the household" as "vulgar weeds" (64). Not incidentally, it is Crossjay's education that both occasions and justifies the time spent in Clara's presence. Like Clara and the upright middle class that he represents, Vernon is a peripheral observer: outside Willoughby's static world of hereditary privilege yet still firmly embedded in its pattern.

The world of Patterne Hall is regimented and unchanging when Clara enters it. "She asked for some little, free play of mind in a house that seemed to wear, as it were, a cap of iron.… The habit of the house, with its iron cap, was on him; as it was on the servants, and would be, oh, shudders of the shipwrecked that see their end in drowning! on the wife" (67). From the opening chapter, the Hall is described as a seemingly timeless world of habitual appearances. The "anxious watch of eyes" over the infancy of Willoughby awaits—and thus occasions—the replication of the pattern. As Stewart and Casal note, "At the beginning of the novel, the references and scenes relating to the past confuse the sense of time of the action, emphasizing that Willoughby never moves beyond the day of his majority" (218-9). He is a man, Meredith says, "who lived backwards almost as intensely as in the present" (*The Egoist* 30). As a result, through their long association with each other the characters who inhabit the world of Patterne Hall have formalized their interactions (Stewart and Casal 211). Meredith writes, "Clara wondered whether inclination or Sir Willoughby had disciplined their individuality out of them and made them his shadows, his echoes" (*TheEgoist* 64). They take this rigid code of behavior seriously, for their power and privilege lies only in subservience to it. Indeed, "Laetitia, because of her devotion, and others, because of sheer inertia, support this illusion of a timeless world" (Stewart and Casal 219). Willoughby is likened to an "immovable stone-man," whose "petrifaction of egoism" would austerely refuse the petition for release (*The Egoist* 82). Clara "conceived the state of marriage with him as that of a woman tied not to a man of heart, but to an obelisk, lettered all over with hieroglyphics, and everlastingly hearing him expound them, relishingly renewing his lectures on them" (82). Meredith writes, "What he revealed was not the cause of her

sickness: women can bear revelations—they are exciting: but the monotonousness. He slew imagination" (325).

Thus, when Clara arrives at the Hall Meredith emphasizes society's unspoken expectations of her to conform to convention and become Willoughby's "companion picture." To flatter him, the ladies of the Hall exalt Clara as a "type," the static, brittle image of an ideal bride. Her beauty is described as two-dimensional and lifeless: "She was compared to those delicate flowers, the ladies of the Court of China, on rice-paper" (36). She reminds them of "the bewitching silken shepardesses, who live though they never were"; "the favourite lineaments of the women of Leonardo, the angels of Luini"; and the "crayon sketches of demoiselles of the French aristocracy" (36-7). Working to support his claim on her, these comparisons are, in fact, iterations of Willoughby's own more ominous view of Clara as a kind of mirror image, "divinely feminine in reflective bashfulness" (50). Indeed, the surface of her skin frequently becomes readable. When she blushes at his first caress and declaration that "You are mine, my Clara—utterly mine; every thought, every feeling. We are one," it agrees with "his highest definitions of female character" (50). In accepting Willoughby's proposal at first, Clara herself seems to (mis)recognize this image as her own, so powerful Meredith makes its influence seem.

As her self-awareness and resistance grow, however, Clara is increasingly characterized by motion and fluidity against this backdrop of stasis and rigidity. It is in the contrast between the stifling habitual space of the Hall and the open countryside that we see this most clearly: both in her penetrations, real and imagined, of the barriers of the Patterne compound and in her movements within the confines of that world. Perhaps

only Crossjay, in experiencing the nomadism of adolescence, is more mobile throughout the novel. Like the jay, he has roving habits and a harsh impertinent voice, epitomized by the "odd ring in the ear" produced by his repetition of Willoughby's "not at home" (27).[8] To a somewhat lesser extent, Mrs. Mountstuart is defined by movement too. Seeming to be everywhere at once, she is often in carriages, and otherwise directing the social traffic of the novel, either bringing people together or talking about doing so. Her space is the social arena of the dinner party and the drawing-room (and the novel)—self-conscious, hyper-refined, and volatile. Unlike Crossjay and Mrs. Mountstuart, however, Clara moves with autonomy, directness, and intent. Meredith describes her with the same natural imagery that he had previously used to describe the Comic Spirit: sounds in the mountains and the free movement of air through the wide spaces of nature (Stewart and Casal 215). In the *Essay*, Meredith equates the effect of comedy to "the South-west coming off the sea, or a cry in the Alps" (34). Similarly, Clara is likened to an Alpine mountain echo by Vernon: "She gives you an idea of the Mountain Echo" (29). He civilizes this image of her when he later makes note of "her prompt and most musical responsiveness" (36).

Indeed, Clara moves both literally and figuratively through the world of Patterne Hall with the force of a ricochet. In her revolt against Willoughby and the challenge she presents to his artificial world, she moves to and from the Hall and takes on various unpredictable guises. From the enclosed space of the Hall she frequently travels to outlying points such as the post office and the railway station; thus, she is linked to an

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[8] Crossjay's name also suggests *crossways*, calling to mind a road as well as a crucial turning point. This theme will also make it into Meredith's naming of *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), the story of another habitué of the liminal.

external world of exchange and circulation. Clara's personality is similarly represented as flexible and changing, as we see in this description of her figure and her walking:

> See the silver birch in a breeze: here it swells, there it scatters, and it is puffed to a round and it streams like a pennon, and now gives the glimpse and shine of the white stem's line within, now hurries over it, denying that it was visible, with a chatter along the sweeping folds, while still the white peeps through. (139)

Her swaying, unpredictable motion suggests an adaptive and variable habit. The color of "the silver birch" links her with the "volleys of silvery laughter" of Meredith's Comic Spirit and the "breeze" recalls the South-west that is associated with it (*Essay* 48). Finally, her quirky responsiveness to the external environment is illustrated further by her mode of dress:

> She had the wonderful art of dressing to suit the season and the sky. To-day the art was ravishingly companionable with her sweet-lighted face: too sweet, too vividly meaningful for pretty, if not of the strict severity for beautiful. Millinery would tell us that she wore a fichu of thin white muslin crossed in front on a dress of the same light stuff, trimmed with deep rose. She carried a grey-silk parasol, traced at the borders with green creepers, and across the arm devoted to Crossjay a length of trailing ivy, and in that hand a bunch of the first long grasses. These hues of red rose and pale green ruffled and pouted in the billowy white of the dress ballooning and valleying softly, like a yacht before the sail bends low; but she walked not like one blown against; resembling rather the

> day of the South-west driving the clouds, gallantly firm in commotion; interfusing colour and varying in her features from laugh to smile and look of settled pleasure, like the heavens above the breeze. (140)

* * *

This use of physiognomy and physical orientation within habitual space to distinguish characters would be merely interesting if Meredith's conception of character were not so dynamic. Indeed, it is precisely through the representation of habitual personality (mechanized minds) that Meredith subverts the very notion of stable, fixed identity; it is primarily through a vocabulary of bodily habitus and movement (volatile bodies) that he depicts its continuous recalibrations. In addition to helping form individual characters, bodily habits—and breaks in those habits—have an important narrative function in *The Egoist*. At key moments in the novel, facial expressions, muscular contractions, vocal states, and other forms of body language signal changes in the habitual awareness and perceptions of the main characters where the narrative is otherwise silent.

Meredith prepares us for reading this sensitive register in the novel early on, linking narrative developments to changes in the bodily habitus. Before the plot gains real momentum with the arrival of Colonel De Craye, we are told that Clara imagines a look of surprise changing Willoughby's "habitual air of happy pride" (41). Meredith writes, "Surprise, when he threw emphasis on it, stretched him with the tall eyebrows of a mask—limitless under the spell of caricature; and in time, whenever she was not pleased by her thoughts, she had that, and not his likeness, for the vision of him" (41). In turn, when Willoughby lectures Clara that it is not good for women to be "surprised

by a sudden revelation of man's character," and that some day she will tell him what she has learned of him, Clara tellingly stumbles over her words as with a surplus of knowledge: "An impulse of double-minded acquiescence caused Clara to stammer as on a sob,—'I—I daresay I shall'" (54). Similarly, when Willoughby tells her she should not judge him by his letters, she staccatos, "I do not; I like them" (56). These examples from the early chapters, whose titles "His Courtship" and "The Betrothed" brim with narrative anticipation and ironic portent, prepare the way for Meredith's use of gestural language in the later accounts of both Willoughby's ultimate surprise and Clara's sputtering false starts that eventually bring it about. For if her voice frequently "occupie[s] a pause," it is a pause that speaks of a potential rather than an absence (71). Even Willoughby understands this, if dimly. Meredith writes, "Regarding Clara, his genius for perusing the heart which was not in perfect harmony with him through the series of responsive movements to his own, informed him of a something in her character that might have suggested to Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson her indefensible, absurd 'rogue in porcelain'" (74-5).

Another notable scene between Clara and Willoughby suggests the importance of the bodily register to the plot. While Clara is mustering the courage to make her first plea for release, uttering, "I am unworthy. I am volatile. I love my liberty. I want to be free…," Willoughby interrupts and shouts, "Flitch!" The expletive, which sounds like the "flinch" that it constitutes, is actually a person's name: a former servant who reappears at the Hall to beg reinstatement. Willoughby refuses to help despite the ties of old associations and the needs of Flitch's wife and nine hungry children (Sundell 525). The noun "flitch" refers to a side of bacon and comes from the same root at "flesh,"

underscoring both his family's mundane, physical needs for survival in the midst of the Patterne's worldly abundance and Flitch's embodiment of physical volatility in making jerky, "accidental" movements each time he enters the scene. By calling out Flitch's name at the very moment Clara begins to assert herself, Willoughby is calling attention to his own habitual system of denial, shown here as a kind of involuntary tic or "flinch" of the "flesh."

In the chapter before what is often seen as the turning point in the novel, Clara's consciousness-raising talk with Laetitia, Meredith sums up the situation through a series of significant physical gestures. Discussing what Willoughby calls "the management of that boy," the question of whether Crossjay will be educated or sent to the military, Clara airs her feelings on the side of Vernon's tutoring the boy:

> She said to the ladies, "Ah, no! Mr. Whitford has chosen the only method for teaching a boy like Crossjay."
>
> "I propose to make a man of him," said Sir Willoughby.
>
> "What is to become of him if he learns nothing?"
>
> "If he pleases me, he will be provided for. I have never abandoned
> a dependent."
>
> Clara let her eyes rest on his and, without turning or dropping, shut them. (64)

Clara's shutting of her eyes expresses what she cannot yet articulate. This refusal speaks loudly to Willoughby precisely because it is through the regulation of others' bodies that he maintains his status at Patterne. Meredith writes:

> The effect was discomforting to him. He was very sensitive to the intentions of eyes and tones; which was one secret of his rigid grasp of the dwellers in his household. They were taught that they had to render agreement under sharp scrutiny. Studious eyes, devoid of warmth, devoid of the shyness of sex, that suddenly closed on their look, signified a want of comprehension of some kind, it might be hostility of understanding. Was it possible he did not possess her utterly? He frowned up.
>
> Clara saw the lift of his brows, and thought, "My mind is my own, married or not."
>
> It was the point in dispute. (64)

His frown triggers her thought, and the central tension of the novel—whether Clara will be able to break her engagement to Willoughby—reaches a breaking point without a single word being spoken.

Against the backdrop of the regimented, habitual world of Patterne, Clara's transformations—of herself and the world of the Hall—are similarly represented through the bodily habitus. At her first leap for liberty in which she tells him that she would understand if he realized that Laetitia were more suited to him, Willoughby repeats, *I could not marry Laetitia Dale*, mistaking her underlying meaning for "feminine jealousy" and reassuring Clara that "if [Laetitia] is displeasing in the sight of my bride by … by the breadth of an eyelash, then …" (106). Willoughby completes his sentence by waving Laetitia off into the wilderness with his arm. Clara's response is similarly non-verbal: she "shut her eyes and rolled her eyeballs in a frenzy of unuttered

revolt" (106). What cannot be said is expressed by the body. Gestures are also used to enforce the status quo. When Clara petitions Willoughby for release directly, he asks her to take his arm, an action that enforces his claim on her without making a sound, indeed by its very silence: "To consent to touch him while petitioning for a detachment, appeared discordant to Clara, but, if she expected him to accede it, it was right that she should do as much as she could, and she surrendered her hand at arm's length, disdaining the imprisoned fingers" (109).

References to the body also appear in passages on the dynamic between Willoughby and Laetitia, but they are noticeably figurative in nature. When Willoughby claims that men do not change and women do, Laetitia responds, "The generic woman appears to have an extraordinary faculty for swallowing the individual" (114). Willoughby returns the conversation to his own susceptibility: "I dread changes. The shadow of the tenth of an inch in the customary elevation of an eyelid! … Happily I have inherited habits of business and economy" (115-16). And when she remarks that she is in her thirtieth year, he observes, "Genius is unacquainted with wrinkles" (116). The body is for both merely an abstraction. In Willoughby's view, habits of business and intellect unite and protect them from the instabilities figured by the body—and, increasingly, by the movements of the younger woman, Clara. It is Laetitia, however, who will find out that this illusion comes at great cost—herself.

Most of the book is taken up with the conflict that arises in Clara's mind, however. In a crucial chapter that in many ways forms the novel's hinge, "Clara's Meditations" (Chapter 21), Clara's thoughts about her situation are imbricated with physical sensations. This follows on the chapter in which Willoughby ingratiates Dr.

Middleton with the aged and great Patterne wine, after which he refuses in "his doctoral tongue" Clara's pleas to leave the Hall in the morning. Upon his good-night, she is reduced once again to a single airy syllable: "'Oh!' she lifted her breast with the interjection, standing in shame of the curtained conspiracy and herself" (164). The chapter "Clara's Meditations" then opens in a crisis of sleeplessness: "She was in a fever, lying like stone, with her brain burning" (165). This is an inverse image of the Clara we have seen so far, with clear mind and spirited vigor of movement. She too has fallen prey to the illusory world of Patterne Hall: she is shamed. Momentarily finding comfort in abstractions, she has the "disembodied thought" that she might imitate Vernon's self-control, his ability to bear what is distasteful to him in order to cultivate "a life within" (166). Yet a growing awareness of the severity of her situation and a desire to escape it are marked by a "sharp physical thought: 'The difference! the difference!' told her she was a woman and could not submit" (166). This "physical thought" marks both an ending and a limit: a termination of the phase in which Clara imagines herself in the same position as Willoughby's friends and the world vis-a-via his egoism; and a clear, marked repulsion: "I cannot! I cannot!" (167). As her blushing and mortified facial expressions and half-spoken utterances have already intimated, "[i]n her case duty was shame: hence, it could not be broadly duty. That intolerable difference proscribed the word" (166).

With her brain "burning high and kindling everything," Clara reviews the situation with "incandescent reason" (166). Was she really so volatile? As inconsistent as Constantia Durham? Might she not have misread him? "It was all in one flash … a series of intensely vivid pictures:—his face, at her petition to be released, lowering

behind [his admirers] for a background and a comment. 'I cannot! I cannot!'" she cries aloud (166-7). This moment of mental clarity and physical pain, relying on the juxtaposition of Willoughby's image in her eyes against the world's customary view of him (now further differentiated from her own by the prospect of sexual intimacy with him), marks a change in Clara's own habitual thinking.

Something similar happens, to very different effect, when De Craye goes riding with Clara and realizes his feelings for her. Meredith writes, "It was the clouding of the brain by the man's heart, which had come to the knowledge that it was caught. … He was hit at last. That accident effected by Mr. Flitch had fired the shot. Clean through the heart, does not tell us of our misfortune till the heart is asked to renew its natural beating" (179). He reconstructs the accident brought about by Flitch which effected their first meeting and, hence, a retrospective scene of love-at-first-sight, "a thought of Miss Middleton standing above his prostrate form on the road, and walking beside him to the Hall. Her words? What have they been? She had not uttered words, she had shed meanings" (179). Clara's repulsion and De Craye's ravishment both accompany accidental or unconscious physical shocks and effect a break in their habitual thinking. Both events take place in the imagination, in the "morass of fancy" or the space of memory.

Indeed, for Clara this change of thinking is followed by a kind of extended revelation in dream sequence:

> Poor troubled bodies waking up in the night to behold visually the spectre cast forth from the perplexed machinery inside them, stare at it for a space, till touching consciousness they dive down under the

> sheets with fish-like alacrity. Clara looked at her thought, and suddenly headed downward in a crimson gulf. (167)

She calmly "thinks" first of De Craye as a refuge—a refreshing, harmless "holiday character," marked by his physical form and expressions: his "lithe figure, neat firm footing of the stag, swift intelligent expression, and his ready frolicsomeness, pleasant humour, cordial temper, and his Irishry, whereon he was at liberty to play, as on the emblem harp of the Isle, were soothing to think of" (167). His classical given name, Horace, reminds her of reading poetry with her father and further wraps her in a feeling of safety. The next association is with Vernon, whose advice urges her to do everything for herself, to learn to know her own mind: "He talked of patience, of self-examination and patience. But all of her—she was all marked *urgent*. This house was a cage, and the world—her brain was a cage, until she could obtain her prospect of freedom" (168). As if coming out of a dream on the word "freedom," Clara sees that for her, unlike Vernon, the external strictures of the world of the Hall slide easily into demands on her *not* to know what she thinks and perceives. Meredith writes, "As for the house, she might leave it; yonder was the dawn" (168).

Gazing at the sunrise at the window and at herself in the mirror, she turns away from both: they "stamped her as a slave in a frame" (168). Having had her awakening, Clara takes stock of her sleep-like habituation: "It seemed to her she had been so long in this place that she was fixed here: it was her world, and to imagine an Alp, was like seeking to get back to childhood" (168). Sensing her doom, Clara begins writing a letter to her friend and promised bridesmaid Lucy Darleton, but then she cannot produce a word. This first attempt ends in shredding the letter into pieces, an act that Meredith

suggests is paradigmatic of maidenhood: “Total ignorance being their pledge of purity to men, they have to expunge the writing of their perceptives on the tablets of the brain: they have to know not when they do know” (170). Similarly, having dwelled deeply on her troubles in a fitful night, likened to producing the effects of an opiate, Clara integrates her discovery into consciousness after she sees Vernon and Crossjay enter the park for their morning swim:

> “Am I solemnly engaged?” she asked herself. She seemed to be awakening.
>
> She glanced at her bed, where she had passed the night of ineffectual moaning, and out on the high wave of grass, where Crossjay and his good friend had vanished.
>
> Was the struggle all to be gone over again?
>
> Little by little her intelligence of her actual position crept up to submerge her heart.
>
> ‘I am in his house!’ she said. It resembled a discovery, so strangely had her opiate and power of dreaming wrought through her tortures. She said it gasping. She was in his house, his guest, his betrothed, sworn to him. The fact stood out cut in steel on the pitiless daylight. (171)

Meredith thus represents Clara’s habitual physical thinking as a kind of “dream” against which her conscious actions take shape. It is this “writing on the brain” that, once acknowledged, instigates a new letter to Lucy Darleton and Clara’s attempt at escape.

Emblems of habitual life also provide the ground for Clara's attempt to flee Patterne, a moment of rebellion that is both punctuated and epitomized by the burning physical sensation of a glass of brandy. Alone, soaking wet from the rain, in a railway station inn, Clara and Vernon drink out of the same glass: "All this came of breaking loose for an hour!" (221) First, there is the book of the trains that tells Clara what time she needs to leave and that lets us know that De Craye, when he asks for the schedule himself over breakfast, has caught onto her intent and the double meaning of her morning announcement, "the rest of the day I shall be at liberty" (203). Then there is the "mechanical service" of morning prayers, which neither Clara nor De Craye attend, to Willoughby's great agitation: his "legs crossing and uncrossing audibly, and his tight-folded arms and clearing of the throat, were faint indications of his condition" (210). Finally, at the breakfast table, she faces a clock (211). De Craye once again insinuates himself when he corrects its time—it is five minutes slow by his own watch—thus helping save Clara from missing her train. De Craye further abets her escape by running interference when Willoughby tries to get her to see the wedding present of a porcelain service just arrived from Lady Busshe and stored in the laboratory. When Clara is discovered missing amidst a growing storm, the search party throws open the Hall doors to "a framed picture of a deluge" (214). The customary horizontal orientation of landscape painting is here replaced by portraiture's vertical frame, a sign of the impending threat to Clara's nature of becoming another picture in the Patterne family gallery.

Outside, Vernon pursues Clara through the rain, courting "the clouds of the South-west with a lover's blood" (216). Drawing the connection between walking and

thinking, Meredith writes, "A rapid walker poetically and humourously minded gathers multitudes of images on his way" (216). Vernon's initial happy recklessness is, however, soon dashed by a fear for Clara's safety. He is fortuitously picked up on the road to the station by Dr. Corney, another Irishman with "a Celtic intelligence for a meaning behind an illogical tongue," who advises a dose of hot brandy and water for wet skin and, we presume, a rough truth. Inside the railway station inn, where he takes Clara for cover, Vernon gathers a different set of images than those of the revitalizing storm. They are ushered into "a room of portraits" of the publican's ancestors, "all looking as one," gazing "straight at the guest" with "the aspect of the national energy which has vanquished obstacles to subside on its ideal" (220, 227). The irony of these portraits lining the walls of the anteroom to Clara's escape from Patterne Hall is great. They represent the persistence of the habitual "reflex of mind" that Clara must shun in fleeing, the old pull of her sense of duty and responsibility to her father and friends. They serve as a ground for her determination to be free in this crucial scene with Vernon.

When Vernon says of Clara's declaration that she has opened her heart to him and is not ashamed of having done so, "It is an excellent habit, they say," Clara responds touchingly, "It is not a habit with me" (222). Having provisionally broken with habit, Meredith seems to be saying, Clara now stands on the threshold: "I am going, and I leave my character behind" (222). Through a quick series of events once again involving Flitch and De Craye in a carriage, she returns to the Hall, however. But she does so having realized the possibility of her freedom, out of an active determination to be free and not merely a reflex to escape, as Vernon helps her to discern (223). After he leaves she is tempted to pocket the spoon in the empty tumbler for a memento, going so

far as fantasizing what she will tell her grandchildren of this day. Meredith gleams: "[T]he conclusion was hazy, like the conception; she had her idea" (228).

The rest of the novel thus unfolds in the wake of Clara's return. Willoughby, who learns of Clara's attempted betrayal when Flitch returns her purse "intact" (nonetheless revealing that she had been in the fly with De Craye), maneuvers to save face. Seeing his chance, he bends "his deliberate steps" toward Laetitia: "One who read and knew and worshipped him would be sitting there starlike: sitting there, awaiting him, his fixed star" (317). Emphasizing the extra-rational force of Willoughby's movements, Meredith writes, "The mind was guilty of some hesitation; the feet went forward" (320). Willoughby's proposal to her in the drawing-room, which Crossjay overhears under the Patterne aunts' silky coverlet, she refuses, notably in language that she will later use to accept: "I am changed. … I was an exceedingly foolish, romantic girl. … I shall not marry" (321-3). Here, Laetitia's "habit of wholly subservient sweetness" gives way to something else, a consciousness reminiscent of the self-awareness that Clara discusses with her at the beginning of the novel: "Our dreams of heroes and heroines are cold glitter beside the reality" (131). Laetitia's "ideal of the feminine," that "self-imposed ideal of her daily acting" as the "representative of her sex," that "cramp of a bondage of such old date as to seem iron," is about to be reconciled with her "acuter character" (267).

Clara's change of perspective is indeed contagious; it causes Willoughby and Laetitia to see themselves—and their own "rooted attachment"—differently (310). It forces the "imps" of Patterne Hall to radically reassess Willoughby's long-standing edict "I am the sun of the house!" (374). In the moment of crisis, Lady Busshe, Lady

Culmer, Mrs. Mountstuart, and Mr. Dale become a real-life frieze of portraits like the pictures “all looking as one” at the railway station: they “had a similarity in the variety of their expressions that made up one giant eye for him, perfectly, if awfully legible” (227, 390). Closeted in his laboratory afterward, where we have earlier been told “he could stride to and fro, and stretch out his arms for physical relief, secure from observation of his fantastical shapes,” Willoughby makes a strange discovery (312). Sounding like Bergson, Meredith writes:

> He had learnt to read the world: his partial capacity for reading persons had fled. The mysteries of his own bosom were bare to him; but he could comprehend them only in their immediate relation to the world outside. The hateful world had caught him and transformed him to a machine. The discovery that he made was, that in the gratification of the egoistic instinct we may so beset ourselves as to deal a slaughtering wound upon Self to whatsoever quarter we turn. (399)

Like Laetitia, Willoughby also becomes aware of “his habitual personality” (416). Through his dealings with the comic muse, “He had lost command of his countenance” (416). Laetitia consents to marry him but not because she wants to (Brownstein 189). She declares, “But it is right that you should know what I am when I consent. I was once a foolish romantic girl; now I am a sickly woman, all illusions vanished…. I would not have you change your opinion of him; only that you should see how I read him” (420-21). “So the knot was cut,” the novel’s climax bringing about a “transformation of brides” that none of the Patterne ladies could have predicted on her own in her “habitual submission” (424, 383-4).

As Stewart and Casal write, "The social commitments the major characters make at the end of the novel are fluid and self-aware" (211). Indeed, the Comic Spirit—born of "united social intelligence" rather than individual insight—has exposed the ready-made in human gestures and values and, in doing so, has vitalized the inert, stagnating world of Patterne Hall. At the end of *The Egoist*, that Spirit appears with Clara and Vernon over the Lake of Constance. Sitting beside them on their lofty, snowy perch, she takes a glance down at the world and makes one final gesture: "she compresses her lips" (425). Constituting the last words of the novel, this silencing gesture links comedy to the bodily habitus and the bodily habitus to narrative.

Throughout *The Egoist* the idea of habit is central to Meredith's fictional methods and representational strategies. It also calls attention to the period's shifting attitudes and taxonomies. *The Egoist* is a radical critique of his era's assumptions and beliefs, the suggested alterations of the son of tailors. Meredith's representation of bodily habits and dispositions can be seen, in this light, as an early attempt to redefine Victorian understandings of human behavior and its "patterns." Indeed, the novel is a major text of reference in the movement from physiological psychology to Freudian psychoanalysis. It slips between an earlier nineteenth-century focus on the human nervous system and more modern theories of the abstract structures of the psyche.

Meredithian Slips

The Egoist makes a fascinating appearance in Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901). Borrowing a passage from the American psychologist Ernest Jones, who declared *The Egoist* "the masterpiece of the greatest English novelist,"

Freud illustrates his theory of slips of the tongue with a key scene from the novel (VI: 98-100).[9] When Clara Middleton realizes the full extent of her plight in having agreed to marry Sir Willoughby Patterne, the self-obsessed egoist of the novel's title, she laments:

> 'If some noble gentleman could see me as I am and not disdain to aid me! Oh! to be caught out of this prison of thorns and brambles. I cannot tear my own way out. I am a coward. A beckoning of a finger would change me, I believe. I could fly bleeding and through hootings to a comrade … Constantia met a soldier. Perhaps she prayed and her prayer was answered. She did ill. But, oh, how I love her for it! His name was Harry Oxford … She did not waver, she cut the links, she signed herself over. Oh, brave girl, what do you think of me? But I have no Harry Whitford; I am alone …' The sudden consciousness that she had put another name for Oxford struck her a buffet, drowning her in crimson. (qtd. in Freud, VI: 99)

According to Freud's now familiar (and eponymous) theory of slips, Clara's *lapsus* reveals an underlying motive. The slip betrays her unacknowledged wish to be on more intimate terms with Vernon Whitford.

Two other instances illustrate this reading. When Clara makes the same mistake in a conversation with Sir Willoughby, she exhibits "the spontaneous hesitation and sudden change of subject that one is familiar with in psycho-analysis" (99). The slip comes in response to a patronizing comment about Whitford by Sir Willoughby:

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[9] Freud quotes from Jones's 1911 article "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life" in the *American Journal of Psychology*. He added this example in 1912, in German translation.

> 'False alarm! The resolution to do anything unaccustomed is quite beyond old Vernon.'
>
> 'But if Mr. Oxford—Whitford ... your swans coming sailing up the lake, how beautiful they look when they are indignant! I was going to ask you, surely men witnessing a marked admiration for some one else will naturally be discouraged?'
>
> Sir Willoughby stiffened with sudden enlightenment. (104)

Meredith represents a half-conscious complex here in Clara's substitution of Harry Oxford's name for Vernon's. The mistake, understandable given that both names end in "-ford," takes on added significance for Willoughby and the reader when Clara self-consciously attempts to divert attention away from it. As is typical with slips of the tongue, she winds up confessing more than there is to confess (Freud VI: 100).

Clara betrays her motives a third time in speaking to young Crossjay:

> 'Tell Mr. Vernon at night—tell Mr. Whitford at night you had the money from me as part of my allowance to you for pocket-money. I used to like to have pocket-money, Crossjay. And you may tell him I gave you the holiday, and I may write to him for his excuse, if he is not too harsh to grant it. He can be very harsh.' (206-7)

Meredith, writing in the late 1870s, knew about Freudian slips without the benefit of having read Freud. Careful readers of the novel in the 1880s and 1890s surely picked up on these lapses too. Today, Freud's theories are so much a part of readers' expectations and "common sense"—indeed, what it means even *to* read—that I have found it useful to withhold these examples until this point in my argument. As we have seen, *The*

Egoist makes much of the body's volatility despite the mind's habit-forming tendencies; the *verbal* slip is merely the most privileged of Meredith's examinations of these phenomena. That this has been so only since the early twentieth century sets up a historicizing view of Meredith as a transitional figure.[10]

The Egoist's significance for the history of psychology and the novel does not end with Freud's appropriation of it; it does not even begin with it. Indeed, the novel reveals both the theory of the unconscious that it anticipated and the tradition of British psychology that was about to be superseded by it. As Rick Rylance has noted in *Victorian Psychology and British Culture, 1850-1880*, "Psychoanalysis, with its clinical and personalized emphases, its discursively closed explication, and its roots in continental thought, has, over time, helped obscure that distinctively British psychology of the nineteenth century that was conceived in very different traditions and with different aims and materials" (8). This is perhaps illustrated best by a moment where Freud's own text slips, where a trace of "that distinctively British psychology of the nineteenth century" needs accounting for, that is, where the body intrudes upon abstractions and threatens Freud's authoritative discourse.[11] Commenting on the subtlety and volatility of Meredith's text, Freud's German translator, J. Theodor von Kalamár, writes in a footnote to the first of Clara's slips, "I had originally proposed to translate the English words 'beckoning of a finger' by '*leiser Wink*' ['slight hint'] till I realized that by suppressing the word 'finger' I was robbing the sentence of a

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[10] Perhaps not coincidentally, Meredith's reputation rapidly declined in the years after 1914. See John Lucas's overview "Meredith's Reputation" in *Meredith Now: Some Critical Essays*.

[11] Mary S. Gossy has convincingly written about this in relation to *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. See *Freudian Slips: Woman, Writing, the Foreign Tongue*.

psychological subtlety" (VI: 99n).[12] Kalamár "corrects" himself, but the fault line—the need for "translation" not only between languages but between theoretical models—is registered.

The Egoist charts a theory of the functioning of the unconscious not only in language but through a comedy of manners—or, as I have been arguing after Bergson, a comedy of gestures—linking half-conscious cultural routines to the biological mechanisms of habit. Finding a physical basis for habit in the plasticity of the brain, William James would elaborate this point in more scientific terms in a now famous 1887 article in *Popular Science Monthly*.[13] Eschewing the laboratory for the drawing-room (and the lecture hall for the novel), however, George Meredith represents this psychological nexus by turning to the older tradition of comedy. Of new (psycho)analytic modes, parodied by Willoughby's "habit of diving" beneath the surface "without studying that index-page," Meredith is likewise suspicious (39). Rather, *The Egoist* is his attempt at revitalizing old forms in the face of newer, more market-friendly modes—joining, that is, Mrs. Mountstuart's art of reading "Nature's writing above" with Willoughby's "discoveries in the deeps" (39)—a synthesis of body and mind in fiction. It is Henry James who will take this project further, in linking ways of being to patterns of material consumption and display.

[12] The psychological subtlety lies in "finger's" obvious phallic symbolism but also in the non-verbal, archetypal gesture.

[13] Later published in *Principles of Psychology* (Vol. 1, Chap. IV) and revised for *Psychology: Briefer Course* (1892).

CHAPTER FOUR

The Decoration of Houses: Henry James's Queer Properties

> All this embracing and laying on of hands and tender benedictions in James's letters to Andersen may signify nothing more than a well-known demonstrative hug. Nevertheless there is a quality of passion and possession in the reiterated 'I hold you close,' 'I feel, my dear boy, my arms around you,' or 'I meanwhile pat you affectionately on the back, across the Alps and Apennines, I draw you close, I hold you long.' —Leon Edel, *Henry James,* 313.

I.

Henry James returned to England from Rome in June 1899 the owner of a precious new possession, a small terracotta bust purchased from the young Norwegian-American sculptor Hendrik Andersen. James had met Andersen at the home of his friends the Elliotts in Rome that spring and was, by all accounts, much taken by the sculptor's blond good looks, strapping frame, and youthful vitality.[1] The encounter must have been an uncanny experience for James, for he had created a remarkably similar character in his first and most obviously homoerotic novel, *RoderickHudson* (1875), nearly a quarter of a century earlier. It is likely, too, that Andersen reminded James of himself at twenty-six, just arrived in Rome as an ambitious young artist in 1869. (Henry/Hendrik: They even shared the same name, with "Hendrik" also slipping into "Roderick.") Andersen responded to James's interest and invited the now-famous writer to his studio in the Via Margutta. There, James took a liking to the small portrait bust that Andersen had done of Alberto Bevilacqua, a young count who looked much like Andersen himself. James purchased it for £50 and had it shipped to Lamb House, where, upon its arrival, he placed it on the chimney-piece of his dining room, "the position I

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[1] See the passionate, almost hysterical accounts of twentieth-century biographers, whose language I borrow here, especially Edel, *Henry James* IV: 290, 308; and Kaplan 447.

have that best lends itself, all things carefully considered—where he commands the scene & has a broad base to rest on & the arch of a little niche to enshrine him, & where, moreover, as I sit at meat, I shall have him constantly before me as a loved companion and friend" (*Letters* IV: 108).

The arrival of this prized possession marks the initiation of a frequent and often passionate correspondence with Andersen, one which lasted until James's death in 1916. James likely burned his letters from Andersen on the grate at Lamb House, as was his practice, but Andersen kept his. What remains then is an intimate if one-sided view of the nature and contours of the relationship. Upon receiving the bust, James wrote his first letter to Andersen that same day, declaring: "He is so living, so human, so sympathetic & sociable & curious, that I foresee it will be a lifelong attachment. You will both make many friends here" (IV: 108-9). From the very first mention, James infuses the object with lifelike qualities and links it with Andersen the person, "enshrining" it in his collection, where it becomes an active part of his daily routine. Several weeks later, James reported, "I've struck up a tremendous intimacy with dear little Conte Alberto, and we literally can't live without each other. He is the first object that greets my eyes in the morning, and the last at night" (IV: 113).

James and Andersen would meet again in person only a half-dozen times—four times at Lamb House between 1899 and 1903; once in Newport during simultaneous trips to America in 1905; and once again in Rome, for the last time, in 1907. The relationship deepened nonetheless through letters, the blatant eroticism of which biographer Leon Edel was the first to call out when he noted in them "a quality of

passion and possession" in 1969 (313).[2] The question of how to read Henry James's intimate correspondence with younger men, including the overtly gay Howard Sturgis, the bisexual Morton Fullerton (who would become Edith Wharton's lover), the handsome Anglo-Irish man-about-town Jocelyn Persse(who would later marry) , and the young gay novelist Hugh Walpole, has since become a topic of vehement scholarly debate and fictional re-imagining.[3] Noted Italian James scholar Rosella Mamoli Zorzi is the latest to have entered the fray with her 2004 edition *Beloved Boy: Letters to Hendrik C. Andersen, 1899-1915*, bringing together for the first time all 78 of the letters to Andersen known to exist, including some previously overlooked. While many of these letters are already in print—in Edel's encyclopedic *Henry James: Letters* (1974-84) and, more recently, in Susan E. Gunter and Steven H. Jobe's *Dearly Beloved Friends: Henry James's Letters to Younger Men* (2001)—this collection underscores the intense emotional, erotic, and artistic bond that James shared with Andersen in particular. Ultimately, t his edition can be no less inconclusive about James's sexuality than the others (indeed, it was so *productively* indeterminate), but Zorzi does succeed in

[2] An earlier, largely hushed and unspoken reception of these letters is represented by George Lyttleton's 1956 letter to Rupert Hart-Davis, the publisher of Edel's one-volume *Selected Letters of Henry James* (1955). Lyttleton writes, "I do put it to you that the letter to Hendrik Andersen on p.228 touches the confine of what is bearable" (qtd. in Horne). A month later he adds: "one has to be very fond of him before one can quite stomach those overflowing affectionate letters" (qtd. in Horne). The need for an outsized fondness for James in order to compensate for his unconventional expressions of affection here suggests one further (unconscious?) motive for the mid-century literary-critical establishment's creation of a mythical (untouching and untouchable) "Master." Then, of course, there is James's executor-nephew Harry, who wrote of the correspondence in 1927, "I've been getting it in order, weeding out what had better not be preserved" (qtd. in Horne). According to Jobe, there are 667 unlocated, unpublished letters identified in the Edel Archive <http://jamescalendar.unl.edu/stats.htm>.

[3] It has made appearances in such far-ranging places as the 1993 Sesquicentennial James conference in New York, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and Colm Tóibín's new novel *The Master* (2004). David Lodge addresses the relation between James's "ambivalent" sexuality and confirmed authority in a recent article in *The Guardian* ("Innocent abroad," 2 July 2005) and in his "docu-novel" *Author, Author* (2004). See also Gunter and Jobe's online Calendar and Register of Henry James's Letters (2000), <http://jamescalendar.unl.edu>, which shows that less than a third of James's letters have ever been published.

elevating what has heretofore been an interesting but piecemeal correspondence to the status of a significant, even signal, part of James's life. It makes vivid, and readily available, the "quality of passion and possession" in the letters to Andersen, a freedom rarely found elsewhere in James's correspondence.

Many of the letters, for instance, show James offering advice and encouragement to the young artist while overflowing with expressions of love for him and brooding in the ache of his absence. Here we see not just another "Jamesian self," as Millicent Bell claims in the first of *Beloved Boy's* two painstakingly cautious introductions, but something closer to John Carlos Rowe's definition of an "other" Henry James: "master" of the novel, for sure, but also vulnerable, sexually anxious, and lonely.[4] Just like Roderick and his mentorRowland Mallet in *Roderick Hudson*, Andersen and James talk about art, discipline, career, and how to succeed in the world. Their letters are, as Zorzi notes, "passionate statements on life and art" (xxxix). At the same time, James often seems to hover over his protégé, chiding him for his poor spelling, dictating train schedules and arrival details, and warning Andersen against an impractical grandiosity. When Andersen remains aloof (ending his annual visits to Lamb House in 1903) or refuses to follow James's directions (Andersen ultimately pursues building an over-the-top "World City" for his monumental nude sculptures), James is noticeably crestfallen.

What really sets these letters apart, however, is James's remarkably free language of physical touch and longing—the reiterated verbal embraces, laying on of hands, and pattings on the back (Horne). Indeed, they give yet another meaning to

[4] See John Carlos Rowe, *The Other Henry James* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

James's famously "grasping" imagination: "I feel my dear boy, my arm around you" (Zorzi 12), "I put, my dear boy, my arm around you, & feel the pulsation, thereby, as it were, of our excellent future & your admirable endowment" (12), "I hold you close" (25), "Always grasping you hard and holding you close, I am yours, dearest Hendrik immensely" (35), "I meanwhile pat you affectionately on the back, across the Alps and Apennines, I draw you close, I hold you long" (49), "I pat you on the back tenderly, tenderly" (55), "I take you, my dear old Boy, to my heart, & beg you to feel my arms around you" (71) "lean on me as on a brother and a lover" (27).

Whether or not any of this epistolary passion was, in Edel's famous words, "acted out" (IV: 315), James's letters to Andersen show that the desire was unmistakably there, and it was openly expressed. (One wonders, of course, what James's calling another man "darling darling," "my bearded Bandit," and "Belovedest" is if not a sexual performance or, in the years following the Wilde trial, what could have been more bold an "act" than committing that desire to writing.) The was-he-or-wasn't-he epistemological tussle that the biographical argument often gets reduced to threatens, however, to obscure the most important point of this correspondence: Toward the end of his life, Henry James found himself in love with a younger man and wrote "long past midnight" letters to him. These letters present a range of interpretive possibilities and a series of *additional* questions, not the least of which concerns the presence of a queer force in James's writing in the years leading up to, and including, his late masterpieces.[5] As the critic Michael Moon writes, "The queerness—the daring and risky weirdness,

[5] The period of prolific and virtuosic writing of *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) coincides exactly with James's new friendships with gay men and the height of the epistolary romance with Andersen, a fact that is commonly subordinated in/to the legend of the (celibate) "Master."

dramatic uncanniness, erotic offcenteredness, and unapologetic perversity—of James's writing continues to demand to be addressed" (4). As I will argue in this chapter, it animated his writing much as Andersen's sculpture, "enshrined" on its broad base, animated, indeed "commanded the scene," at Lamb House. Indeed, if we make anything less of that queerness than James himself did, in Moon's words, "it is our failure of nerve and imagination, not his" (4).

II.

Objects in James are always more than things. They cluster and grasp at the reader's attention like objects in a Sargent painting, often confusing foreground and background by equating human subjects with the decorative objects that surround, identify, and enclose them.[6] Several critics have recently addressed the link between material culture and affective life in James in interesting new ways. In his book *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003), Bill Brown demonstrates how James participated in a new decorating impulse of the era, epitomized by Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman's 1897 guide *The Decoration of Houses*.[7] Brown

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[6] Bill Brown reads James's fascination with Sargent's *The Daughters of Edward D. Boit* (1882) as evidence of his recognition of "an indeterminate ontology, the inability to distinguish between the animate and the inanimate" (137). We might also look to the mysterious, uncanny, queer(?) portraits of *Dr. Pozzi at Home* (1881) and *Madame X* (1884). What is the "subject" of these paintings? An individual or a dress? An intimate dressing closet, a character, a lifestyle? As one viewer has said of *Dr. Pozzi*, "It's an 'ode to red,' featuring an individual." See the John Singer Sargent Virtual Gallery at <http://www.jssgallery.org>.

[7] See also Thomas J. Otten, "*The Spoils of Poynton* and the Properties of Touch," *American Literature* 71:2 (June 1999): 263-90. "Like James's novel," Otten writes, "*The Decoration of Houses* reflects a moment of intensified interest and a distinct shift in the aesthetics of interior design" (267-68). He notes, too, that the lead article of the premiere issue of *House Beautiful* magazine, which appeared in 1896, "defines the 'successful house' as one 'where it is evident that thought has been used everywhere,' and so 'the sundry bits of poor furniture or bad pictures which survive from an earlier period, or are the gifts of well-meaning but misguided friends' must be relegated to the attic" (268). *The Spoils*, which James had originally thought to call *The House Beautiful*, begins by teaching the same lesson (Otten 268-69).

suggestively calls the dialectic of person and object world so central to James's aesthetic a "dynamic of materialist affectivity"—of feeling through things and being touched by them in turn (140). Consider, by way of example here, the "superadded" settings of homes like Gardencourt and Gilbert Osmond's Palazzo Roccanera, in *The Portrait of a Lady* (Brown 147); the Venetian stones and interiors of *The Wings of the Dove*; and the Doctor's feeling, after Morris violates his home in *Washington Square*, that the impressions left behind on his things have also been imprinted on his psyche (152-53). Nancy Bentley's 1995 study *The Ethnography of Manners* places James within a tradition of ethnographic writing and the new scientific interest in customs, manners, and artifacts, through which individuals become seen to be products of an overarching "culture." In *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol* (1998), Michael Moon traces the "fantasmatic and eroticized object-relations" in James to his "initiation to artistic style" via the heroic male nudes at the Louvre, where the James family visited in 1855 when Henry was 12. For that small boy—and others, Moon argues—eroticism is circuited through a distinctive (imaginary) relation to space and to things.[8] In my reading, Jamesian "orientation" emerges finally as both a spatial structuring of desire and a habitual mode of perception, one with a marked initiation, a memory, and residual material traces.

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[8] As Butler has shown, this kind of relation is *citational* in that it refers back to past practices and prior codes for ("self-")knowledge and authority. An emphasis on the temporal aspect of identity formation has marked discussions of performativity, generally. James, I want to argue here, shows how identity (both one's self-relation and one's relation to the world) is also, always a material practice. James's keen elaboration and refinement of habit's *spatial* meanings complicate and make room for what otherwise might be reduced to, or written off as, mere "repetition"—that is, make room for, in Sedgwick's words, "the interrelations of the [repeated] action—and the self acting—with the bodily habitus, the appareling habit, the sheltering habitation" (*Tendencies* 138).

Indeed, material things—fabrics, furniture, rooms, and houses—represent the most tangible and conspicuously emblematic of "habits" in James. They inhabit the individuals of his novels as much as individuals inhabit them. Jamesian things, like habits in Proust as Sedgwick has argued, enclose the self in an enabling familiarity as well as mark out the space of perceptual change and revelation that inevitably punctures it—"revelation at which introspection itself can never arrive" (*Tendencies* 139). As Madame Merle exclaims in describing the importance of this "shell" of habitual life in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880), "There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our 'self'? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again" (19:253). As so often happens in James's work, subjectivity is displaced away from the subject and onto material interiors; it becomes something primarily spatial and displayed rather than "acted out," in time or in plots. As Brown notes, Madame Merle sounds much like a precursor of James the psychologist here (140).[9] Locating the self in the movement back and forth between the mind and one's "envelope of circumstances," she outlines a theory of habit that was finding currency in the nineteenth-century study of human behavior, perhaps nowhere more influentially than in James's late experiments at the limits of psychological realism. Whereas William James's physiological psychology of habit emphasizes the brain's material plasticity and its propensity to *receive* the imprints of currents "pouring in from the sense-organs" *via* increasingly routine pathways (1892; 137), Henry James's

[9] William James would write ten years later, for example: "[Because] it is clear that between what a man calls *me* and what a man calls *mine* the line is very difficult to draw," a "*man's Self is the sum total of all he CAN call his*, not only his body and his psychic powers but his clothes and his house, his wife and his children,…his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account" (1890; 279).

fiction calls attention to the *inscriptive* power—both thematic and writerly—of the material practices and social perceptions of everyday life. Indeed, James the novelist can be seen to be formulating a theory of what neurobiologists now call "peripersonal space," the space or "schema" *around* the body and extending outward from it, that is, what is on the periphery or fringes of a subject.[10]

* * *

This is perhaps best, if not first, seen in James's novel *The Spoils of Poynton*, published in 1897, the same year as *The Decoration of Houses*. Often identified as the first work of his celebrated "late" style, it has earned a reputation as one of James's most enigmatic fictions. The narrative has been widely read as a "perversion" of the conventions of the realist novel. Indeed, it is a work that is marked by a *refusal* to describe the objects that James declared formed "the very centre" of it; "it is," after all, James writes in his Preface, "a story of cabinets and chairs and tables" (xliii; xlvi).[11] James's ambivalence about placing the things at the center of his work—his decision to evoke them only to withhold them from the novel's visible register—constitutes what Bill Brown has called a "structuring absence" (162). Brown writes, "James was obviously attracted to things yet somewhat embarrassed by them, eager to describe the physical object world yet eager to chart a kind of consciousness that transcends it" (141).

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[10] Tellingly, dress and adornment often figure in explanations of the "peripersonal." As popular today as it was a century ago, the example of the women wearing big feathered hats who knew exactly how to align their bodies when ducking through doorways is both descriptive and symptomatic of its close link with "habit." See the *New York Times*, 13 July 2004. In this chapter I explore a slightly more expansive notion of the peripersonal *via* James's psychological interest in the space (both perceptual and imaginative) that *begins* at arm's length and extends outward into rooms and habitual spaces.

[11] Wayne C. Booth sees a further link between *The Spoils of Poynton* and *Roderick Hudson* in the way that James "leaves a curious ambiguity in his own description of the 'subject'"—whether it is properly Mrs. Gereth's spoils or Fleda's "concentrated feeling," Roderick's degeneration or Roland's experience of him. See *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 345.

James was, to be sure, embarrassed by things, precisely to the extent that they register a certain queerness—an overweening love, an odd directionality, an inconvenient sense-memory or association. But to say that he wanted, necessarily, to "transcend" this embarrassing physical object world seems to tell only part of the story. (That wish more probably, unconsciously, belongs to the critic.) Rather, I argue here that this "structuring absence" also mobilizes an atmosphere of a sexual secret in *The Spoils of Poynton*; that James's embarrassment derives from the intimacy and eroticism that he associates with habitual objects and interiors in the novel; and that this "story of cabinets and chairs and tables" adumbrates the presence of a queer force in James's writing, the understatement of which has tended to get reproduced in the received view of the novel's *formal* "perversions" and the attendant myth of a "transcendent," masterful Jamesian authority.

The commanding position that James gave to Andersen's bust at Lamb House suggests then not only the significance of the emotional, erotic, and artistic bond that James shared with Andersen late in life; it also signals the *thematic* importance of habitual space and objects to James's conception of subjectivity and consciousness leading up to his late masterpieces and culminating in *The Golden Bowl*(1904). We can see an earlier example of this in the mutual imprints of daily habitations and consciousness—interiors and interiority—in *The Spoils of Poynton*, a pivotal work written two years before James met Andersen on a warm June day in Rome. In characteristic Jamesian fashion, life once again imitated art: just as *Roderick Hudson* seemed to usher in the "real-life" Hendrik Andersen, the signal importance of James's

"brave little Bevilacqua & braver still big Maestro Andersen" (*Letters* IV:109) was anticipated, indeed enabled and brought to life, by a work of fiction.

'A story of cabinets and chairs and tables'

> It is a small and ugly matter – but there is distinctly in it, I should judge, the subject of a little tale – a little social and psychological picture.
>
> One can imagine the rebellion, in this case (the case I should build on the above hint), of a particular sort of proud woman – a woman who had *loved* her home, her husband's home and hers (with a knowledge and adoration of artistic beauty, the tastes, the habits of a collector).
>
> —Henry James, *Notebooks*, Dec. 24, 1893.

The story of *The Spoils of Poynton* is perhaps a familiar one: it concerns a struggle over the ownership of some fine furniture. The widowed Mrs. Gereth must leave her beloved home of Poynton, the decoration of which has been her life's passion and work, so that, according to English custom, her son can take possession of it upon his marriage.[12] Allowed to choose a few things from her collection of furniture and objects to take with her to the dower-house, Mrs. Gereth instead takes nearly everything, unable to bear the prospect of her precious things falling into the hands of her "beautiful" but "dense" son Owen and his philistine bride-to-be, Mona Brigstock (40). Only Fleda Vetch, an intelligent and sensitive young woman of piercing insight and

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[12] Recent scholarship on the property rights of women will help account for the legal side of Mrs. Gereth's predicament. See especially Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1993); Elizabeth Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, and William Veeder, *The Woman Question: Social Issues 1837-1883* (New York: Garland, 1983); Anne Laurence, *Women in England: 1500-1760, A Social History* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994); Trevor May, *An Economic and Social History of Britain: 1760-1970* (New York: Longman, 1987); Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Susan Staves, *Married Women's Separate Property in England, 1660-1833* (London: Harvard University Press, 1990); and Dorothy Stetson, *A Woman's Issue: The Politics of Family Law Reform in England* (London: Greenwood, 1982). A useful summary of these issues by Hiam Brinjikji is available at: http://www.umd.umich.edu/casl/hum/eng/classes/434/geweb/PROPERTY.htm

understanding, shares Mrs. Gereth's exquisite taste—and, by extension, James's own.[13] Fleda has been educated at the school of an impressionist painter, has visited museums, and has "*flair*" (47). She becomes a kind of surrogate in the ensuing quarrel, a role that becomes more and more difficult as she finds herself "in love with" Owen, a feeling that is impossible to separate from Fleda's collusion with, and desire to please, Mrs. Gereth, as we will see. As the most intelligent participant in the struggle, Fleda is a perfect reflector for James. Ultimately, however, she is unable to prevent the marriage or arrange a peaceable agreement between mother and son, resulting in one of the most shocking endings in all of nineteenth-century fiction—indeed, it is tempting to say the novel *performs* the end of nineteenth-century fiction: Fleda arrives as Poynton burns to the ground.

Intimacy in the novel is established through the material world of objects. The novel opens with a contrast of decorative styles and tastes: The principle dyad of the novel, Fleda Vetch and Mrs. Adela Gereth, meet at Waterbath, the country house of the Brigstocks, where they are both disaffected weekend guests. "Isn't it too dreadful?" Fleda privately discloses to Mrs. Gereth in the very first scene (37). Mrs. Gereth has herself just fled "the esthetic misery of the big commodious house" to seek "relief," a "necessity of every nerve," in the open air:

> It was hard for her to believe that a woman could look presentable who had been kept awake for hours by the wallpaper in her room; yet none the less, as in her fresh widow's weeds she rustled across the hall, she

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[13] James's writerly (self-)identification in specifying Poynton as in the Jacobean style (i.e., after *James* I) is especially telling here. Both his preferred architectural-decorative tastes and his highly personal fictional style align him with the Fleda-Mrs. Gereth camp. See Bernard Richards's interesting notes on James's likely sources for Poynton, pp. xxii-xxiii. The frontispiece photograph in the New York Edition gives a striking visual picture of the style.

> was sustained by the consciousness, which always added to the unction of her social Sundays, 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*. (35)

The initiation of the friendship is, therefore, brought about through an intense mutual recognition of bad taste, an aesthetic despair of the "dreadful"—the "imbecilities of decoration" (35), "trumpery ornament and scrapbook art," "strange excrescences and bunchy draperies," "the acres of varnish" with which everything was smeared (37-8). The new friendship is formed, that is, on an aesthetic principle, a shared disdain for the crass materialism and "cheap gimcracks in this awful age" (53-4). Significantly, the aesthetic responses that open the novel are figured as a series of physiological reactions, a function of what Mrs. Gereth more precisely calls her "nerves." Design details are imagined here to reflect the inhabitants of Waterbath as well as to shape the consciousness and most finely tuned physical responses of others—to impart, potentially, a bodily "stamp."[14] "The drawing room, Mrs. Gereth lowered her voice to mention, caused her face to burn, and each of the new friends confided to the other that in her own apartment she had given way to tears" (37). Thus secured, the relationship intensifies through this same idiom, a common bond of furniture and feeling, drawing all of the other characters in and around their love of things; indeed, their feelings for

[14] Later, Mrs. Gereth's figuring the loss of her objects as an "amputation" will reinforce this idea of décor as a bodily extension (79); see also the mention of "a disfigured Ricks" (200). Conversely, Mrs. Gereth is figured as "the great piece in the gallery" as if she herself were an object fragmented from the larger whole of Poynton (81).

the “old things” determine all of the novel’s other relationships, including Fleda’s intensifying feelings for Owen.

This despair at “the intimate ugliness of Waterbath,” however, soon gives way to “a passion for the exquisite,” a shared appreciation of Mrs. Gereth’s collection at Poynton:

> They went at last, the wiseheads [Fleda and Mrs. Gereth], down to Poynton, where the palpitating girl had the full revelation. “*Now* do you know how I feel?” Mrs Gereth asked when in the wonderful hall, three minutes after their arrival, her pretty associate dropped on a seat with a soft gasp and a roll of dilated eyes. The answer came clearly enough, and in the rapture of that first walk through the house Fleda took a prodigious span. She perfectly understood how Mrs Gereth felt – she had understood but meagerly before; and the two women embraced with tears over the tightening of their bond – tears which on the younger one’s part were the natural and usual sign of her submission to perfect beauty. (47)

Fleda’s ecstatic response mirrors Mrs. Gereth’s feelings about Poynton exactly, in language that suggests both psychic-spiritual union and mutual orgasm. They are feelings that derive not from mere *ownership* of individual objects but rather in the aesthetic *appreciation* of the total effect that Mrs. Gereth has created with them. As Brown suggestively notes, “the ‘things’ at Poynton are not so much objects as they are congealed actions, passionate acts of seeking, selecting, and situating” (146).

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The novel, as Fotios Sarris and others have noted, thus exhibits and resists "commodity fetishism," Marx's notion of a product of labor that conceals its material and social provenance (55-56). One might even say, as Raymond Williams famously did, that "after the first chapter of *Capital*, people should be sent to read *The Spoils of Poynton*" (qtd. in Sarris 55-56). Mrs. Gereth plunders other people's labor (we never find out where the Gereths or the Brigstocks get their money), but she re-creates something entirely her own (including a certain kind of *self*-production) in the process; indeed, it is commodity fetishism that Mrs. Gereth criticizes in her intense loathing of Waterbath and the crude love of possession that it represents. It is not exchange-value that matters to her (after all, according to her husband's will, the things never belonged to her anyway), but rather Poynton's "personal and unique aesthetic value" (Sarris 58), the beauty of her own labor, as James writes, "the beauty Mrs. Gereth had so patiently and consummately *wrought*" (63, emphasis added).[15] Poynton is, James tells us, "the record of a life" (14). Indeed, the things "body forth" her self and her personality (Sarris 59). "They're living things to me," she says; "they know me, they return the touch of my hand" (53).

The erotic charge effected in and by Fleda and Mrs. Gereth's love of things is as complicated as it is palpable throughout the novel. In addition to the (self-)touching, passionate embraces, gasps, tears, and knowing looks between Fleda and Mrs. Gereth, Fleda becomes caught up in both Mrs. Gereth's attempt to prevent her son Owen's marriage to Mona Brigstock and Owen's attempt to get his mother to back down and

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[15] This word is interesting; it suggests a connection between Jamesian interiors and William James's theory of neurological plasticity, both "wrought" by the artist and by habit. James wrote of his brother William to Andersen on January 12, 1901: "He has a wondrous sense of things plastic, things modelled, things *wrought*" (qtd. in Zorzi xiii, emphasis added).

return the “stolen” things to Poynton. The marriage plot is thus implicated in, and frequently eclipsed by, the property story, characterized by a passionate same-sex bond between two women. When Fleda realizes that Mrs. Gereth has audaciously transported the things from Poynton to Ricks, thus halting the impending marriage, we get this description: “By this time the very fingers of her glove, resting on the seat of the sofa, had thrilled at the touch of an old velvet brocade, a wondrous texture she could recognize, would have recognized among a thousand, without dropping her eyes on it” (7: 80). As Thomas J. Otten has recently noted, intimate knowledge is cast here, as it is throughout *The Spoils of Poynton*, in tactile terms (264). Outside the novel’s visible register, the old velvet brocade constructs a moment of queer recognition that is indifferent to, and glides obliquely across, the conventional marriage plot that hangs in the balance. As Brown writes, “Their intimacy with the physical object world, an intimacy on which their intimacy is built, could not be rendered by the distantiating sense of sight, only by the tremble of the touch” (149). The novel furnishes this intimacy not with a Balzacian accumulation and description of visible objects but with rather with “the material weight of metaphor” (Brown 161).

To take this a step further, as Stephen Reid does in a fascinating 1966 article, “Moral Passion in *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Spoils of Poynton*,” Fleda gets exactly what she wants in this scene: not to be married. Reid writes, “No critic, to my knowledge, has raised in Fleda’s case the possibility that *her* severe moral code, like Isabel’s, is a rationalization for a deeper motive” (30).[16] “But there is,” he finds,

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[16] See also Melissa Soloman’s essay on the homoerotic nature of the relationship between Isabel Archer and Madame Merle: "The Female World of Exorcism and Displacement: Or, Relations between Women in Henry James's Nineteenth-Century *The Portrait of a Lady*." In *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997): 444-64.

"sufficient evidence in the novel that Fleda's violently strong injunctions to Owen that his pledge to Mona is 'sacred' and beyond remedy have their source in the wish that Owen and Mona *be* married—that she, Fleda, remain unmarried" (30). Reid notes the "impression" of an "abnormally strong bond between the two women" in, for example, the statement, "She [Fleda] kissed her companion's hands, she did homage at her feet, she murmured soft snatches of praise, and yet in the midst of it all was conscious that what really showed most was the wan despair at her heart" (32; *The Spoils* 180). Yet once they have "lost" the things for good, Fleda loses her depression, and "the situation at the end of the book [the two women living together in "their new life" (204)] is exactly what Fleda had passionately desired and toward which she worked against incredible obstacles, and under a disguised motive" (Reid 32-3). As Fleda says when they return to Ricks to make a new life together, "Besides, I'm happy" (203). Reid suggestively argues (in lines buried in the middle of an unusually long paragraph), "Considering the overly great respect that Fleda has for Mrs. Gereth (in absolutely everything *except* Mrs. Gereth's interest in having her marry Owen), a respect shared by no one else in the book, we have before us a love-relationship between the older and the younger woman. In this light, the spoils become the symbol of that relationship.… [T]hey are that part of Mrs. Gereth to which Fleda can most directly give a passionate love" (33).

Indeed, James renders (unconventional) love as an expression and extension of not unified, integral subjects but rather the intersubjective world of material objects and textures. Through highly stylized "touches" such as Fleda's recognition of the velvet brocade at the very moment when the obstruction of Owen's marriage to Mona also

becomes known (Mona won't marry him without the things), James turns the teleology and inevitability of the marriage plot—and, in effect, the tradition of the novel—inside out. Mrs. Gereth literalizes this narrative effect when she equates Fleda not with a future daughter-in-law but with a piece of furniture: After she returns the things to Poynton with much bitterness, Mrs. Gereth objectifies her friend as one of her possessions, writing to her that on her upcoming visit, "with nothing else but my four walls, you'll at any rate be a bit of furniture. For that, a little, you know, I've always taken you—quite one of my best finds" (200).

* * *

For Freud, the fetish is a sexually charged part-object, an instrument of the male's disavowal of his mother's "castration." In *The Spoils of Poynton*, as Sarris has argued, Mrs. Gereth's fetishism of Poynton can be understood as a disavowal of her *own* (figurative) castration, namely her dispossession, according to English law, of her right to her things—indeed, as she would say, to her "self" (70). While this model of fetishism has real problems for a feminist reading,[17] it does point to James's (at least partial) identification with the novel's designing women—that is, in drawing a connection between their eroticism in/of objects and James's own attempt to represent the subject of desire. Indeed, as Sarris writes, "It is worth noting that Mrs. Gereth's personal and psychological investment in beautiful objects evinces an aesthetic ideology that is commonly ascribed to James himself" (59). Through her fetishism of Poynton,

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[17] For feminist critiques and revisions of Freud's writings on the fetish, see especially Elizabeth A. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Marcia Ian, *Remembering the Phallic Mother: Psychoanalysis, Modernism, and the Fetish* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Naomi Schor, "Female Fetishism: The Case of George Sand." *Poetics Today*, 6:1-2 (1985), pp. 301-10.

Mrs. Gereth defends against her extinction in death (like James, she wants to leave something behind) as well as a dispossession in life (also like James, who was required to pretend, however transparently, that his desire for Andersen was not what it was). Both James and Mrs. Gereth find complex ways to negotiate such dispossession: Mrs. Gereth in her extralegal claim to her furniture and James, at some distance as I have been arguing, in his attempt to represent, first in fiction, everything that Andersen's bust would soon come to mean to him.

One could go further with this reading—for example, by emphasizing the simultaneity of the avowal/disavowal that Freud sees operating *via* the fetish, or by arguing that it is precisely in language that this loss/recapture ultimately gets played out *ad nauseam*. But I would like to suggest that the novel sets up another possible route. While the readings of fetishism in the novel are revealing, Brown's conception of material objects as "congealed actions" suggests an alternative, perhaps less limiting—although not mutually exclusive or altogether separate—analytic tool and image. It evokes *habits of collection* as key to James's early representation of (peri-)personality and his conception of human psychology more generally; it also yields a distinctly queer reading of the novel and its place within James's larger oeuvre. Free of fetishism's tricky logic of substitutions, the "passionate acts" and "congealed actions" of Mrs. Gereth (and later Fleda) not only compensate for dispossession, they move toward *creating* something. Importantly, James represents this as a homosocial project pitted against the legal prejudices and social conventions of Victorian sexual and social ideology. Through the things at Poynton, and later at Ricks, the two women form a

community of taste and feeling—which is also sometimes referred to as a "torment of taste" (86)—in an otherwise nightmarish social world.

III.

> I have been memorizing the room. In my memory I shall live a great deal in this room.—Garbo in *Queen Christina* (1933)

In *The Spoils*, James is committed to making palpable the intimate relation of the individual self to its inanimate everyday surroundings. First, reflecting a growing awareness of the central nervous system's role in memory, consciousness, and what I am calling "peripersonal" identity, the novel represents material things as active—and vital to human self-perception and social identity. Second, the things broker an eroticism that is not accounted for by the heterosexual romance/marriage plot and that is not reducible to James's late stylistic eccentricities alone. Indeed, the distinctly queer valence of the novel is a function/extension precisely of its anti-Enlightenment association of furniture and feeling—the uncanniness that James (years before the psychologists) already sees in the connection between property and subjectivity. It is surprising, considering the prominence of this theme in the novel, that the continuing critical disagreements about Fleda Vetch's motives and values that have marked discussions of the novel have not more fully admitted the possibility of an erotic attachment between the novel's two arty women. Finally, despite the ultimate "failure" of the novel's same-sex relation (as is also the case in both *Roderick Hudson* and *The Bostonians*), the things (and hence the relationship) in *TheSpoils* bring about a fuller self-understanding and consciousness, what James calls "an advantage in being able to

feel" (202), emphasizing again that habits frequently give way to, are the necessary ground of, surprises, shocks, and new perceptions.

First, the novel obsessively links people with their possessions and worldly habitats. After the varnished department-store things of Waterbath suggest a flattening, consumerist consciousness, alienated from the material world of texture and touch, we see Fleda apprehend Mrs. Gereth anew through her whole "envelope of circumstances" in a tour of Poynton:

> Wandering through clear chambers where the general effect made preferences almost as impossible as if they had been shocks, pausing at open doors where vistas were long and bland, she would, even if she had not already known, have discovered for herself that Poynton was the record of a life. (47)

Fleda's astute perception upon her initiation to the world of Poynton's beauty and harmony is that it is to be understood in human terms, as "the record of a life" and, as Thomas J. Otten has recently suggested in a fascinating essay on properties of touch in the novel, as a collection of objects that anticipate and invite the hand's grasp: "They are things with handles, like teacups and cabinets, or with contours that reflect the shape of the whole body, like sofas and chairs, or things that, like vases and figurines, are scaled to be arranged by hand, fondled, toyed with.… These objects are a material record of the details of the body" (265-66). Just as the things hold the narrative of an individual life and the history of the human form, so too do they hold the story of their own manufacture and provenance, and therefore, the (muted) record of other lives:

> It was written in great syllables of colour and form, the tongues of other countries and the hands of rare artists. It was all France and Italy, with their ages composed to rest. For England you looked out of old windows—it was England that was the wide embrace. (47-48)

The inheritance comprised by the spoils is not merely an individual, (auto)biographical, commoditized one but records an even more distant abstraction, "culture," as well. "The actual composition of that record, the great syllables of form and color in which it is written, invokes," as Richard S. Lyons notes, "the whole cultural inheritance of Europe—all France and Italy" (68). The equilibrium of the image here—that is, of a cultured, civilized European interior held in the "wide embrace" of English nature—reflects a particularly Jamesian model of subjectivity, poised between allegiances and everywhere on the verge of expression (and transgression). Reduced synecdochically to their "hands" and speaking in the "great syllables" of their vernacular "tongues," the great unnamed artists of these pieces do the work, in advance, of recording, re-membering, and (to use James's own word here) *writing* other people's experiences. It is the habit and talent of a collector to recognize and "read" their narratives and assemble and arrange the disparate pieces.[18]

Ricks, the dower cottage in Essex left to Mr. Gereth by an aunt and offered to Mrs. Gereth by Owen as a new home, tells a different kind of story. "Why it's charming!" Fleda exclaims when the two women go to take a look for the first time at its "small prim parlor," "single plate" windows, and "ugly geraniums" (67). James writes, "Fleda had instantly averted her eyes from these ornaments, but Mrs. Gereth

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[18] See Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

grimly gazed, wondering of course how a place in the deepest depths of Essex and three miles from a small station could contrive to look so suburban" (67-68). Faded and melancholy in its picturesque muteness, Ricks contrasts sharply with the cheerful and loud faux-urbanity of Waterbath; however, like Waterbath, Ricks is also figured as active in its contrivance. The result, for Mrs. Gereth at least, is the same: Fleda "saw her companion become sensible with a soundless moan" (68). Tellingly, Mrs. Gereth's despair reaches its lowest point on the subject of doors: "the thing in the world she most despised was the meanness of the undivided opening. From end to end, at Poynton, there swung high double leaves. At Ricks the entrances to the rooms were like the holes of rabbit-hutches" (68).

In addition to voicing an aesthetic preference for the cosmopolitan here, Mrs. Gereth is, of course, also planning her move to Ricks with the "spoils" in tow. She needs to know if her furnishings and things will fit through the doorways, and if she will be able to work her magic there. This time, the appellation "spoils" seems doubly appropriate. She has already plundered foreign antique stores and workshops, accumulating her collection through patient seeking and careful selection; now, faced with losing that collection under English inheritance law, she takes what she feels is rightfully hers.[19] The hutch-like single doors of the dower house, reminiscent of the narrow reinforced doorways of feudal castles described in *The Decoration of Houses*, are the only impediment, as if even English architecture, contrasted with the airy

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[19] Aviva Briefel's recent article, "Feminine Tautologies," provides a fascinating framework for thinking about Mrs. Gereth's usurpation of her property as a tautological crime, a literary trope that Briefel situates in the historical period that produced the Married Women's Property Act (and beyond), thus "becoming a central model for demarcating the limits of female possession" (151). See *Novel* 37:1/2 (Fall 2003/Spring 2004): 135-57.

Italianate double doors of Poynton, conspires against her.[20] Part fortress, part primitive (prelapsarian?) hut, Ricks produces only contempt in Mrs. Gereth. Fleda, in the meantime is busy reading the story that the rooms tell:

> The place was crowded with objects of which the aggregation somehow made a thinness and the futility a grace; things that told her they had been gathered as slowly and as lovingly as the golden flowers of the other house. She too, for a home, could have lived with them: they made her fond of the old maiden-aunt; they made her even wonder if it didn't work more for happiness not to have tasted, as she herself had done, of knowledge. Without resources, without a stick, as she said, of her own, Fleda was moved, after all, to some secret surprise at the pretensions of a shipwrecked woman who could hold such an asylum cheap. The more she looked about the surer she felt of the character of the maiden-aunt, the sense of whose dim presence urged her to pacification: the maiden-aunt had been a dear; she would have adored the maiden-aunt. The poor lady had passed shyly, yet with some bruises, through life; had been sensitive and ignorant and exquisite: that too was a sort of origin, a sort of atmosphere for relics and rarities, though different from the sorts most prized at Poynton. (68-69)

From humble beginnings and without independent resources, Fleda recognizes the affinity between the maiden-aunt and Mrs. Gereth's position, both as inferior subjects of the law and as collectors of their own aegis. Her empathy accompanies a self-

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[20] See Codman and Wharton's chapter, "Doors," especially pp. 51-59 on the history of the treatment of the door in England, Italy, and France.

identification as fallen in “knowledge”—into culture, language, and cosmopolitanism represented by the rarified rooms and “tongues” of Poynton, but also perhaps into the material comforts and pleasures of the body, for which she is dependent on Mrs. Gereth’s tutelage and support. Here, Fleda identifies with her isolated, “out of place” status, and the prospect of a modest future and “bruised” virginity. Unnamed, the maiden-aunt remains for Fleda a “dim presence” whose material traces of “character” create “a sort of origin, a sort of atmosphere” for relics and future asylum alike.

Once the stand-off between mother and son is brought about—first by Mrs. Gereth’s refusal to move to Ricks without all the things and then, when she is refused, by her clandestine move to Ricks with most of the collection, and her refusal to return anything to a Poynton inhabited by a Brigstock—Fleda finds herself in the uncomfortable position of acting as intermediary. Growing weary of equivocating and denying her conflicted feelings for Owen, Fleda returns to her father’s home in London, ostensibly to help her sister Maggie prepare for her upcoming marriage. Her return to her father’s house—conspicuously elided from the novel, as is her sister’s marriage—represents the background that always threatens to push through the narrative: that is, Fleda’s lower-class origins and, by extension, the novel’s thinking about class in general. The novel refuses anything more than passing mention to Maggie’s marriage just as it refuses throughout the possibility of social relationships sustained by feelings unmediated by concerns of property and inheritance. The next chapter begins breezily, “As soon as her sister had been married she went down to Mrs. Gereth at Ricks” (79). Here, the narrative reflects Fleda’s reluctance to look back at where she has come from and the formidable undertow effected by the things and Mrs. Gereth in Fleda’s

consciousness: to wit, "her inner vision was much more fixed on the alterations there, complete now as she understood, than on the success of her plotting and pinching for Maggie's happiness" (79).

Mrs. Gereth having "communicated next to nothing"—only that the "amputation, as she called it, had been performed" (79)—Fleda does not know what to expect when she arrives at the newly inhabited Ricks: "All she had written was that she had got the new place well in hand and that Fleda would be surprised at the way it was turning out" (79). James writes:

> Her leg had come off—she had now begun to stump along with the lovely wooden substitute; she would stump for life, and what her young friend was to come and admire was the beauty of her movement and the noise she made about the house. (79)

Fleda knows by now not to underestimate the imaginative powers of Mrs. Gereth, her "wonder-working wizard" (80), but what she finds waiting for her on the threshold at Ricks "made her catch her breath and falter," a vision at once of the refurbished Ricks, herself as accomplice, and a despoiled Poynton:

> Dusk had fallen when she arrived, and in the plain square hall, one of the few good features, the glow of a Venetian lamp just showed, on either wall, the richness of an admirable tapestry. This instant perception that the place had been dressed at the expense of Poynton was a shock: it was as if she had abruptly seen herself in the light of an accomplice. The next moment, folded in Mrs. Gereth's arms, her eyes were diverted; but she had already had, in a flash, the vision of the great gaps in the other house.

> The two tapestries, not the largest, but those most splendidly toned by time, had been on the whole its most uplifted pride. When she could really see again she was on a sofa in the drawing-room, staring with intensity at an object soon distinct as the great Italian cabinet that, at Poynton, had been in the red saloon. Without looking, she was sure the room was occupied with other objects like it, stuffed with as many as it could hold of the trophies of her friend's struggle. By this time the very fingers of her glove, resting on the seat of the sofa, had thrilled at the touch of an old velvet brocade, a wondrous texture that she could recognise, would have recognised among a thousand, without dropping her eyes on it. (80)

Looking and not looking, perceiving and imagining, this passage plays on several senses and kinds of recognition. The sight of a few objects—the admirable tapestry in the hall lit by the glow of the Venetian lamp—produces an "instant perception" of a more serious crime. Shielded in the fold of Mrs. Gereth's arms, Fleda envisions the "great gaps in the other house" before the Italian cabinet of the red drawing-room breaks in upon her vision and the old velvet brocade upon her gloved fingers, confirming her vision of a Poynton scarred and a sense of herself as an unwitting accessory. Fleda's shock registers a simultaneous pleasure. In addition to the moral dilemma she finds herself embroiled in, characterized by the visual cataloguing of pieces, she recognizes in the thrill of her touch a reunion with the things and Mrs. Gereth's daring, dangerous savoir-faire.

Mrs. Gereth's fall from Poynton to the dower house is compounded by Fleda's more drastic fall from Ricks to her father's house. A series of fraught conversations with Owen and Mrs. Gereth leads Fleda back to West Kensington, where she ponders her situation and future from a safe distance. Ritualistically confirming in each morning's newspaper that the wedding has not yet taken place (as Mrs. Gereth also does), she seems more concerned about Mrs. Gereth's self-defense at her post than the possibility of Owen's impending availability as suitor and husband. "One of the effects of her intimacy with Mrs. Gereth," Fleda muses, "was that she had quite lost all sense of intimacy with any one else. The lady of Ricks had made a desert around her, possessing and absorbing her so utterly that other partakers had fallen away" (130).

At her father's, Fleda experiences a feeling of alienation and homelessness. She feels herself a kind of "presence" (a word that links her with the maiden-aunt) in front of her father, who "dodders" to his club each morning after breakfast not to return until midnight, leaving her "richly alone" (131). He, too, is a collector of sorts. In Chapter XIII, we finally get a description of his home as seen through Fleda's eyes: "She had in their common sitting-room the company of the objects he was fond of saying he had collected—objects, shabby and battered, of a sort that appealed little to his daughter: old brandy-flasks and match-boxes, old calendars and hand-books, intermixed with an assortment of penwipers and ash-trays, a harvest gathered in from penny bazaars" (131). The miscellany of extraneous curios contrasts sharply with the collection at Poynton. Mundane, utilitarian, vaguely masculine, undoubtedly English (indeed, a lexicon of Anglo-Saxon words), and uninspired, her father's collection holds forth for Fleda a

maidenly future without the spoils, perhaps as a poor watercolorist. As James reminds us, "She had not indeed struggled with a brush since her visit to Waterbath" (133).

A complicated series of events and crossed lines of communication (which Bernard Richards has noted would have been eradicated by the modern phone call or text message) builds a terrible tension and leads to the novel's denouement: Mrs. Gereth prematurely restores the things to Poynton and Owen and Mona are married. This situation is determined by the following turn of events: After Mrs. Brigstock interrupts an unchaperoned Fleda and Owen at tea, Fleda takes further flight to her sister Maggie's in the Midlands. Owen, having quarreled with Mrs. Brigstock, finds her there to tell her that he is essentially free, but Fleda sends him back to break with Mona in person. Meanwhile, Mrs. Gereth hears from Mrs. Brigstock of the argument, and sends the things back to Poynton in the hopes of securing the marriage between Fleda and Owen. She telegraphs Fleda to propose a tour of the continent with Owen and herself. Fleda can only tell her that she hasn't heard from Owen since she sent him away, and she fears the worst. The restoration of the things effects the deposition of the widowed mother required by English law and the Oedipal logic of the plot.[21] However, the return of the spoils also brings Mrs. Gereth and Fleda back together again, closer now than ever and free of the impediment of the looming marriage that the removal of the things, in one view, sadistically kept suspended. As consolation for losing control of the story of her life, and her son, Mrs. Gereth gets to keep Fleda, her best "find," all to herself.

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[21] Fleda's "mistake" in this, the novel's climactic moment, is symptomatic of the strong Oedipal trajectory of the plot. On the point of Owen's declaring himself, the unchaperoned pair is interrupted by Mrs. Brigstock: "'You're surely able to guess,' he said with his voice down and her arm pressed as she had never known such a tone or such a pressure – 'you're surely able to guess the one person on earth I love?' The handle of the door turned and she had only time to jerk at him: 'Your mother!'" (147).

The erotic nature of this bond is established even before the denouement is made clear. Mrs. Gereth and Fleda telegraph to Waterbath and Poynton to find out what has happened to Owen. At Euston station, in a key scene just before Fleda returns to Maggie's, Fleda and Mrs. Gereth are brought together again in a glance that is unspoken as it is conditioned by the uncertainty of their position vis-à-vis the things:

> It was the unsaid that occupied them—the thing that for more than an hour they had been going round and round without naming it. Much too early for Fleda's train, they encountered at the station a long half-hour to wait. Fleda made no further allusion to Mrs. Gereth's leaving her; their dumbness, with the elapsing minutes, grew to be in itself a reconstituted bond. They slowly paced the great grey platform, and presently Mrs. Gereth took the girl's arm and leaned on it with a hard demand for support. It seemed to Fleda not difficult for each to know of what the other was thinking -- to know indeed that they had in common two alternating visions, one of which at moments brought them as by a common impulse to a pause. This was the one that was fixed; the other filled at times the whole space and then was shouldered away. Owen and Mona glared together out of the gloom and disappeared, but the replenishment of Poynton made a shining, steady light. The old splendour was there again, the old things were in their places. Our friends looked at them with an equal yearning; face to face, on the platform, *they counted them in each other's eyes*. (190, emphasis added)

Joined by the "unsaid," the "thing" without a name but mutually understood and looked at with an "equal yearning" in a shared vision of the things, the two women are brought together again. Their reunion is literalized when they agree, as Fleda boards the train, that even if they have lost they will still go abroad, just without Owen. Fleda wonders for an instant "if this were not practically a demand for penal submission" before Mrs. Gereth adds more warmly, "We can always, as time goes on, talk of them [the things] together" (192).

The eroticism suggested here does not necessarily mean Mrs. Gereth and Fleda "are" lesbians, although James, the savvy author of *The Bostonians*, is certainly mobilizing that possibility here. Rather, the things mediate a relationship outside conventional marriage that James represents with heightened intensity. Indeed, as I am arguing, the novel's female homoeroticism is inextricably bound up with James's own (transgendered) attempt to represent the subject of desire. The novel displaces the object and site of desire away from the physical (gendered) body and onto a shared aesthetic of the inanimate, a sense of style and a taste, which is not less erotic for its circuitousness—comprising, in short, a volatile collection of habits through which queer identities become recognizable, to one another and to others, and leave their marks.

Despite the ultimate "failure" of the novel's same-sex relation, characteristic of James's ambivalent stance, the things in *TheSpoils* are shown to enablean expanded consciousness of self and of being able to feel. Back at Maggie's, amidst her sister's common things, Fleda waits for word from either Owen or his mother. The mutual vision of Poynton seen in the other's eyes she now experiences as a personal memory and a vision of herself in the eyes of another:

> The part of her loss that she could think of was the reconstituted splendour of Poynton. It was the beauty she was most touched by that, in tons, she had lost—the beauty that, charged upon big wagons, had safely crept back to its home. But the loss was a gain to memory and love; it was to her too at last that, in condonation of her treachery, the old things had crept back. She greeted them with open arms; she thought of them hour after hour; they made a company with which solitude was warm and a picture that, at this crisis, overlaid poor Maggie's scant mahogany. It was really her obliterated passion that had revived, and with it an immense assent to Mrs Gereth's early judgement of her. She equally, she felt, was of the religion, and like any other of the passionately pious she could worship now even in the desert. Yes, it was all for her; far round as she had gone she had been strong enough: *her love had gathered in the spoils*. (193-94, emphasis added)

The women break down in tears again when Mrs. Gereth comes to Maggie's to announce Owen's registry-office marriage to Mona before a church service to follow at Waterbath. "'He has done it,' said Mrs. Gereth, turning her eyes avoidingly but not unperceivingly about her and in spite of herself dropping an opinion upon the few objects in the room. Fleda, on her side, in her silence observed how characteristically she looked at Maggie's possessions before she looked at Maggie's sister" (194-95). "'We're together, we're together,' Mrs. Gereth lifelessly repeated. 'That's all we *are* now; it's all we have.' The words brought to Fleda a sudden vision of the empty little house at Ricks; such a vision might also have been what her companion found in the

face of the stopped Dutch clock" (196). The scene culminates with a partially spoken vow that is reminiscent of the marriage vow's "till death do us part." When Mrs. Gereth morbidly offers, "Our only chance is the chance she may die," Fleda says, "Mona won't die" (198). Mrs. Gereth responds:

> "Well, *I* shall, thank God! Till then"—and with this, for the first time, Mrs. Gereth put out her hand—"don't desert me."
>
> Fleda took her hand, clasping it for a renewal of engagements already taken. She said nothing, but her silence committed her as solemnly as the vow of a nun. (199)

The women's spoken (and felt) vow here contrasts sharply with the written law of men; the comparison to a nun's vow further links the two with the homosocial space of the dower-house-as-convent and recalls Fleda's feelings about the sanctity of the marriage promise: "Nobody had a right to get off easily from pledges so deep, so *sacred*," which in Reid's reading is her primary (disguised and rationalizing) reason for *not* marrying Owen (104, emphasis added).

Mrs. Gereth once again invites Fleda down to a "disfigured" Ricks, that site of bruised "chastity" and "decline," that is, of isolation from the social world of patriarchal law and men. She is staying in England because Owen and Mona are going abroad. She writes, anticipating the consolation of the mutual transparency the two will find at Ricks:

> For action you're no good at all; but action's over, for me, for ever, and you'll have the great merit of knowing when I'm brutally silent what I shall be thinking about. Without setting myself up for your equal I

> daresay I shall also know what are your own thoughts. Moreover, with nothing else but my four walls, you'll at any rate be a bit of furniture. For that, you know I've always taken you—quite one of my best finds. (200)

There, Fleda discovers that Mrs. Gereth's taste has made the maiden-aunt's things tolerable for them both. Delighted at the "magic of a passion of which such a picture represented the low-water mark," Fleda recognizes in the "few sticks" that Mrs. Gereth had gathered, "the vivid presence of the artist's idea" (201; 202). "You make things 'compose' in spite of yourself," she tells her (202).

The things are of course the maiden-aunt's collection of old furnishings, which Mrs. Gereth has fished out of storage in an empty barn. Consistent with the novel's theme, they are equated with her very person when Fleda says in her surprise, "I thought you had got rid of the maiden-aunt" (202). As Fleda remarks, the effect is not "the great chorus of Poynton," but "a voice so gentle, so human, so feminine—a faint far-away voice with the little quaver of heart-break" (202). Like a fallen general, Mrs. Gereth dismisses the "wretched" things of "that stupid starved old woman's," but Fleda is sensitive to the message that their simple beauty conveys, "the impression somehow of something dreamed and missed, something reduced, relinquished, resigned: the poetry, as it were, of something sensibly *gone*" (203). Recalling the "dim presence" she noted on her earlier visit to Ricks, Fleda again senses something in the house "that will never be in the inventory":

> "Does it happen to be in your power to give it a name?" Mrs. Gereth's face showed the dim dawn of an amusement at finding herself seated at the feet of her pupil.
>
> "I can give it a dozen. It's a kind of fourth dimension. It's a presence, a perfume, a touch. It's a soul, a story, a life. There's ever so much more here than you and I. We're in fact just three!" (203)

From their shrunken state, Fleda notes something more in the things at Ricks, pointing perhaps to the reader's own experience of having to imagine the unnamed things in James's description of Poynton, a world that was flawed only, as Fleda notes, by the fact that there were no ghosts. "But it's cured of that now," she adds. Mrs. Gereth concurs, "Yes, henceforth there will be a ghost or two" (203). The lingering presence of the maiden-aunt is mirrored by the women's own ghosting of Poynton. It extends the erotic charge of things back into a female lineage and suggests the kind of erotic remainder or "ghost effect" that Terry Castle has called out as a feature of modern queer representation.[22] Just as Ricks registers the traces of a kind of ghosting of same-sex desire, so too does *The Spoils of Poynton* record a similar kind of ghosting for James. The dower-house, like James's "house of fiction," indeed records the "record of a life," including its ghostly memorial traces.

* * *

At the end of the novel, Owen writes to Fleda to offer her a keepsake of her choice from Poynton. She considers carefully, once again visualizing her old habitual environment:

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[22] See Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

> She moved there in thought—in the great rooms she knew; she should be able to say to herself that, for once at least, her possession was as complete as that of either of the others whom it had filled only with bitterness. And a thousand times yes—her choice should know no scruple: the thing she should go down to take would be up to the height of her privilege. The whole place was in her eyes, and she spent for weeks her private hours in a luxury of comparison and debate. (210)

The impression of virtual possession occurs to Fleda again when the train is pulling into the station in the vicinity of Poynton:

> Off in that quarter was an air of wild rain, but there shimmered straight across it a brightness that was the colour of the great interior she had been haunting. That vision settled before her—in the house the house was all; and as the train drew up she rose, in her mean compartment, quite proudly erect with the thought that all for Fleda Vetch then the house was standing there. (211)

As she arrives, however, Fleda receives a shock first in the old porter's face and then in the extraordinary smell of smoke: her question "Poynton's *gone*?" and her response, the final words of the novel, "I'll go back" (213).

The novel thus links imagination—rooted in the everyday world of habitual objects and sensory experience—with a creativity that is as strange as it is potentially dangerous. This is inextricably linked to James's thinking about sexual identity during this period, as Lyons writes:

> In the novels and tales of the 1890s, the imagination is always in some measure illusory or perverse—at best ambiguous and at worst destructive. Traces of these characteristics of the imagination remain in the late novels (witness Strether) but there has been an access of power—almost certainly related to changes within James himself, including a belated sexual awakening—that has enlarged the scope of the imagination's force and task. James recovers, after a fashion, his vocation as a social novelist by entrusting to the imagination of his centers of consciousness the power to create the values that the society can no longer embody. The peculiar means he employs to this end and the peculiar relationship thus established between the imagination and reality make up together the late James style and fictional mode. Only prefigurations of the later uses of syntax, metaphor, and symbol are present in *The Spoils of Poynton*, but in its divided aims and effects it manifests the shifts in purpose and method that led to James's final phase. (76-77)

In a novel obsessed with the "recognition of the principle of property" (*The Spoils* 200), it is the prospect of *dispossession* that fascinates—that is, of being disinherited, but also of being stripped of the Enlightenment identity of an autonomous, unitary self. Thus, James grants to his characters the "power to create"—or, to use Fleda's word, to "compose"—counterdiscursive "values that the society can no longer embody," which amount, in the figurative language of the novel, to smuggled goods. The novel's ending demonstrates a queer kind of performativity, then: The fire that consumes Poynton represents the destruction of an estate, a family tradition, and a line of succession. It

also enacts the unconscious thoughts of both Fleda and Mrs. Gereth: Fleda says early on that the Brigstocks "wouldn't after all smash things nor burn them up" (45); a little later, Mrs. Gereth takes up the suggestion and threatens, "Rather than make them over to a woman ignorant and vulgar I think I'd deface them with my own hands" (53). Similarly, Fleda enacts her desire (not to marry) precisely by *seeming* to deny herself. The fire at the end of *The Spoils* can also be seen as a catalytic spark in James's life and career, signaling the performativity *of*, and not just *in*, the novel. For James went on to write dazzlingly new forms of fiction in *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, and *The Golden Bowl*, during a period of rapid composition that is also marked by James's growing friendships with openly gay and/or sexually ambiguous men, as evidenced by the correspondence.

The novel, as I have been arguing, displaces identity and interiority—or, more properly, those Jamesian "centers of consciousness"—onto material things and projects character outward into the space of the "peripersonal" and the social. If, as Otten has suggested, this kind of reading returns us to "the deeply familiar conception of the Jamesian plot as the growth of consciousness," it is hopefully with "a strengthened grasp of that plot's bodily and material interests" (286). It also provides descriptive salience and calls further attention to the special place of *The Spoils* in the James canon, which Lyons has described as marking "a decisive turn from his realist episode of the 1880s toward the dramas of consciousness that were to be his chosen subject until the end of his career" (59). Whereas Otten maintains a certain amount of (desexualized) abstraction in arguing that Jamesian growth of consciousness has "bodily and material interests," and whereas Lyons sees a more or less clean break between James's realist

and modernist impulses and periods, I argue here that James's late "dramas of consciousness" are firmly grounded in "social themes" and a sense of the physical object world, and that that sense of a larger world of feeling has a *specific associative content* for James, including that of his own deeply imagined homoeroticism.

* * *

Even as *The Spoils* foregrounds the shaping power and "material affectivity" of interiors, the novel ultimately renders feeling as something free from external reality. As seen in Fleda's vision and memory of Poynton, James suggests by the novel's ending that our only "real" inheritance is our worldly experience, composed of perceptions rooted in the body by habit and "remembered" by the nervous system. As Otten convincingly writes:

> Like *The Ambassadors*' Lambert Strether, who feels a change "deep down" "in his own organism" after his brush with Parisian culture, Fleda at the end of *The Spoils* possesses an enriched consciousness of her own perceptual powers, is "conscious of an advantage in being able to feel." … Hence at the novel's end the objects of class are rendered as inalienable property: property in the sense of an attribute, instead of an object that must be subject to the hazards of everyday life like clumsy movers or unjust inheritance law or even the fire that guts Poynton in *The Spoils*'s last scene. In other words, a sense of one's own bodily processes must be the ultimate private property. (285-86)[23]

[23] As Otten notes, his argument is similar to Jeff Nunokawa's account of property in the Victorian novel, "especially to his claim that novel economies achieve an ultimate stability by transforming property into objects of the female imagination." See *The Afterlife of Property: Domestic Security and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 13-15.

To Otten's list of hazards, I would add the whole weight of approved social practice and James's own "obliterated passion," for which the bust by Andersen becomes both symptom and sign. Like women under English property law, in the realm of sexuality James can only really have his desire for the object. This is no mere "transcendence" of the physical object world, however, since the novel, *The Spoils* itself, is the one material object that persists here, a fact to which James returns our attention again and again with the formal brilliance of the novels of his last phase. In a work such as *The Golden Bowl*, writing the "self" fully becomes "self-writing," Foucault's late ascetic notion of a training and cultivation of the self in writing; the habitual "object" becomes the novel itself, pointing us toward the modernism and phenomenology of writers like Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf.

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