

# Real paper beings? : On the projection of interiority in American literary realism

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# Real Paper Beings? On the Projection of Interiority in American Literary Realism

Sämi Ludwig

This essay tries to present a sophisticated notion of realist referentiality based on William James's philosophical pragmatism as an alternative to the solipsistic models of much contemporary representational theorizing. It does so by salvaging approaches that go back to the time preceding many of the watershed modernist changes and analyzing the ways in which ethics and contact are played out in two major works of American literary realism, namely William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. The issues at stake are both epistemological and moral, based on the assumption that representation originates in "reality" and therefore necessarily refers back to it. This shows in Howells's treatment of "paint" as well as in his creation of Lapham's moral imagination. Similarly supportive of individual agency, Henry James attributes subjectivity even to his humble characters, warning of objectifying formalist appropriations and impositions. Thus, although represented characters may phenomenally be mere "paper beings," we miss out on much of the relevance and "respect" of representation if we reduce them to such.

## I

This paper presents an American pre-modernist epistemology and its particular mode of referentiality, which I consider interesting because it is experiential, based on a long tradition of non-conformist Puritan ways of personal insights, Emersonian transcendentalism, and pragmatist phi-

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losophy. These three creeds have developed a genealogy of ideas that coincides at some point with the literary work of the American realists. This genealogy marks a psychologizing development that was halted by the arrival of modernist aesthetics and, more portentous, formalist philosophies. I find the old not-so-radical realists and pragmatists interesting because rather than being scientific and detached in the sense of objective rigidity (I am here thinking of phenomenology and twentieth-century logical positivism), they operate in an animated world of interacting subjectivities, risking the construction and projection of the Other as a subject beyond mere negativity or materiality only. This results in a *fundamental dialogicity* projecting agency and even motivation on both ends – psychological issues that deeply involve ethics and morality.

It is important to note that this mode does not follow the syntactic logic of language and signs but instead is guided by a pragmatics of human interaction. Rather than essentialist, such a model is truly constructivist – not merely in the semiotic sense of sign-construction (or deconstruction)(Derrida *passim*), but as experiential reality construction, of which sign-making is merely a part. Mimesis of this old kind aims to be grounded, i.e., to be *contiguous with experience*, and hence aims beyond many of the “objective” assumptions of imitative representation. Rather than alienating, separate and non-referential, it sees language as connective and meaningful, as part and parcel of a particularly human prosthetic extension of physical interaction and in its application based on a necessity of *good intentions* – which is exactly where morality comes into our discussion. Thus I am suggesting that going back to some particular concerns in American literary realism may help us better understand the shortcomings of certain solipsistic twentieth-century representational practices and overcome the Nietzschean extra-moral logic of their many elaborate “late” (and “post”) critiques.<sup>1</sup>

My material is mainly furnished by the Harvard physiologist, psychologist, and pragmatist philosopher William James (1842-1910), in particular his late collection *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909) and the posthumously published *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912). His theory is then connected to *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) by the main spokesperson of American literary realism, William Dean Howells (1837-1920), and to the classic *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) by William’s younger brother, Henry James (1843-1916). I will trace an argument along two lines: first,

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<sup>1</sup> . . . which have in many ways merely “critiqued,” i.e., built upon, formalism in conceptualist ways rather than rejected (“criticized”) it! One reason for this practice may be the infelicitous translation of the French word *critique* – which means both.

that there is, or at least can be, a *connection between physics and metaphysics* in a psychologized human interiority. Second, that beyond the *construction of an object world*, in a necessary gesture of *empathy*, this interiority also furnishes a *projection of subjectivity in the Other* – which raises all kinds of interesting questions about the nature of representation and imagination, and the issue of so-called “paper beings” in fiction.<sup>2</sup>

In “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” (1904), the opening essay in his collection on *Radical Empiricism*, William James denies the merely representational nature of consciousness, claiming that consciousness is not “like a paint of which the world pictures were made” (8). Instead he sees “paint stuff” as picture and material at the same time and uses this image as an analogy for experience as consciousness and matter at the same time.<sup>3</sup> Thus, James the elder projects a model of human cognition based on what he calls “pure experience” as the perceptual intersection of inside and outside, in which the interior “stream of thought” (of an individual human consciousness) and the exterior “stream of life” (of the dynamic outside world) coincide, just as “one identical point can be on two lines” (*Radical* 12): “As ‘subjective’ we say that the experience represents; as ‘objective’ it is represented,” but in “its pure state, or when isolated, there is no self-splitting of it into consciousness and what the consciousness is ‘of’” (23).<sup>4</sup> Hence according to the Jamesian model

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<sup>2</sup> I have already discussed all three of these authors in *Pragmatist Realism*, but with a slightly different emphasis. This time the main issue is referentiality and ethics.

<sup>3</sup> Also see the only French article in the collection, “La notion de conscience” [The Idea of Consciousness] (*Radical* 206-33), e.g., the first thesis of his conclusion: “1 La Conscience, telle qu’on l’entend ordinairement, n’existe pas, pas plus que la Matière, à laquelle Berkeley a donné le coup de grâce” [1. “Consciousness as we ordinarily understand it does not exist, and neither does Matter, which Berkeley got rid of.”] (232; my translation). And further: “5 Les attributions sujet et objet, représenté et représentatif, chose et pensée, signifient donc une distinction pratique [. . .] qui est de l’ordre fonctionnel seulement, et nullement ontologique comme le dualisme classique se la représente” [5. “The attributions subject and object, represented and representation, thing and thought, thus stand for a practical distinction [. . .] which is of a purely functional order and not at all an ontological order, as classical dualism would have it.”] (233; my translation).

<sup>4</sup> James gives several chiasmic examples that live up to the best formulations of any postmodern French philosopher: “Experiences of painful objects, for example, are usually also painful experiences; perceptions of loveliness, of ugliness, tend to pass muster as lovely or as ugly perceptions; intuitions of the morally lofty are lofty intuitions. Sometimes the adjective wanders as if uncertain where to fix itself. Shall we speak of seductive visions or of visions of seductive things? Of wicked desires or desires for wickedness?” (34-35). James’s point, as we shall see, is however to take the argument in a referential and thus very different, non-alienating direction from, say, Guy Debord.

of consciousness, the physical and the metaphysical coincide in perception.<sup>5</sup>

For James, this further implies that when we “pass from percepts to concepts, or from the case of things presented to that of things remote” (*Radical* 15), this contiguity stays important, although “we tend altogether to overlook the objectivity that lies in non-perceptual experiences by themselves” (17). James’s “paint” idea that “*thoughts in the concrete are made of the same stuff as things are*” (37) makes him emphasize that so-called “ambulatory relations” lead from experiences to ideas (*The Meaning of Truth* 245). We should not be deceived by the fact that “what is ambulatory in the concrete may be taken so abstractly as to appear saltatory” (246).<sup>6</sup> James even anticipates forms of operational representation in cognitive psychology when he describes an “evolution” in thought “of the psychical from the bosom of the physical, in which the esthetic, moral and otherwise emotional experiences would represent a halfway stage” (*Radical* 36). As he writes: “Sensations and apperceptive ideas fuse [...] so intimately that you can no more tell where one begins and the other ends, than you can tell, in those cunning circular panoramas that have lately been exhibited, where the real foreground and the painted canvas join together” (30).<sup>7</sup> This cohesion from contiguous to detached, from concrete to represented, expressed in James’s circular panoramas much coincides with the basic assumptions about mental operations as

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<sup>5</sup> Also see James’s *Principles of Psychology* (243). These Jamesian conceptualizations have had a great influence on modernist literature in the form of “stream of consciousness” writing, introduced by William James’s Radcliffe student Gertrude Stein.

<sup>6</sup> James writes: “Cognition, whenever we take it concretely, means determinate ‘ambulation,’ through intermediaries, from a *terminus a quo* to, or towards, a *terminus ad quem*” (*Meaning* 247).

<sup>7</sup> Also see James’s use of the same comparison in “Humanism and Truth”:

As in those circular panoramas, where the real foreground of dirt, grass, bushes, rocks and a broken-down cannon is enveloped by a canvas picture of sky and earth and of a raging battle, continuing the foreground so cunningly that the spectator can detect no joint; so these conceptual objects, added to our present perceptual reality, fuse with it into the whole universe of our belief. (*Meaning* 220)

And again in *Some Problems of Philosophy*, James suggests in a long discussion of “Concept and Percept” that:

[. . .] we hang concepts upon percepts, and percepts upon concepts interchangeably and indefinitely; and the relation of the two is much more like what we find in those cylindrical ‘panoramas’ in which a painted background continues a real foreground so cunningly that one fails to detect the joint. The world we practically live in is one in which it is impossible, except by theoretic retrospection, to disentangle the contributions of intellect from those of sense. (107-8)

defined by twentieth-century cognitive psychologists. Thus in Jean Piaget's model, we find overlapping stages of representation moving from *sensorimotor* to *pre-operational*, *concrete operational*, and *formal operational* (i.e., abstract) modes (see Singer and Revenson 128-32). This is echoed by his younger American colleague, Jerome Bruner, who defines cognitive development along similar lines of *enactive*, *iconic*, and *symbolic operations* (*Toward*; "Ontogenesis"). Moreover, basically the same kind of epistemological claim is made in the foundational work on cognitive linguistics by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in particular in *Philosophy in the Flesh*.<sup>8</sup> All of these scholars present a complex development of intimately connected representational practices ranging from concrete to abstract which are hierarchically grounded in the concrete.

One of the main issues forming this extension of "pure experience" is time: "*experience as a whole* is a process in time" (*Radical* 62; my emphasis). Time allows for conceptual learning about an equally "real" world of objects, or what James calls the "common-sense notion of permanent things" (*Meaning* 219). As he writes: "Knowledge of sensible realities [. . .] is *made*; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time" (*Radical* 57). Here is an example of such knowledge construction – which coincides with object construction:

A baby's rattle drops out of his hand, but the baby looks not for it. It has "gone out" for him, as a candle-flame goes out; and it comes back, when you replace it in his hand, as the flame comes back when relit. The idea of its being a "thing," whose permanent existence by itself he might interpolate between its successive apparitions has evidently not occurred to him. It is the same with dogs. Out of sight, out of mind, with them. (*Pragmatism* 85-86)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> It is already anticipated in *Metaphors We Live By*: "[W]e typically conceptualize the non-physical in terms of the physical – that is, we conceptualize the less clearly delineated in terms of the more clearly delineated" (59).

<sup>9</sup> This is an important point that we encounter repeatedly in James's work:

The greatest common-sense achievement, after the discovery of one time and one space, is probably the concept of permanently existing things. When the rattle first drops out of the hand of a baby, he does not look to see where it has gone. Non-perception he accepts as annihilation until he finds a better belief. That our perceptions mean *beings*, rattles that are there whether we hold them in our hands or not, becomes an interpretation so luminous of what happens to us that, once employed, it never gets forgotten. [. . .]. We may, indeed, speculatively imagine a state of "pure" experience before the hypothesis of permanent objects behind its flux has been framed; [. . .] the category of trans-perceptual reality is one of the foundations of our life. Our thoughts must still employ it if they are to possess reasonableness and truth. (*Meaning* 208-9)

Again we find here that James's pragmatism anticipates Jean Piaget's cognitive experiments with peekaboo games and Piaget's conclusions on the construction of "object permanence" (*Origin; Essential Piaget* 292). The only reason why the notion of an "objective" reality exists is because we project it from our real experiences. James's radical empiricism of "common sense" is in this sense very different from overblown positivist claims, from which he many times distanced himself (see, e.g., *Meaning* 266). The "objectivity" of reality itself is merely a matter of projective "knowledge" beyond direct "perception."<sup>10</sup> Hence it cannot be apprehended without *constructive imagination* (which is, not coincidentally I would say, one of the crucial issues in the poetry of James's Harvard student Wallace Stevens).<sup>11</sup> We can summarize that in William James's model of understanding reality, perception and knowledge constructions are intimately connected. Representations are understood as "real" across time and constructed bottom-up, based on experience.

## II

This view that our knowledge originates in some kind of "pure experience" also appears to have influenced William Dean Howells, who, significantly, made the protagonist of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, a novel about morality and honesty, a paint manufacturer whose paint originates from the earth: "My father found it one day, in a hole made by a tree blowing down. There it was, laying loose in the pit, and sticking to the roots that had pulled up a big cake of dirt with 'em" (6). Like William James's paint as "mind stuff," Lapham's paint originates in the outside world. It is natural and associated with the "roots" of a tree – an image that may indicate possibilities of development and growth. The businessman praises its durability; it is a part of nature, "like the everlasting hills, in every climate under the sun," but he has never tried it "on the human conscience": "I guess you want to keep that as free from paint as you can" (11). Obviously, things get complicated when you paint interiority, and the novel, with its several moral dilemmas, illustrates this very well. It is interesting to know that Lapham's best line of paint is called

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<sup>10</sup> Think about your knowledge of a human head. You can never directly perceive both its front and its back, but you *know* that the person you are facing has a back of the head. . .

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Stevens's poem "The Snow Man." It does not come as a surprise that Stevens's work has been analyzed in terms of pragmatism. See, e.g., Poirier, or Levin's chapter on "Wallace Stevens and the Pragmatist Imagination."

the PERSIS BRAND, named after his wife (12). Like the most important partner in his life, this line of paint is supposed to be reliable, honest, not deceiving, even transparent: “the paint showed through flawless glass” (12).

Clearly, there are all kinds of fascinating facets to this “paint” as a material of representation: an often-cited example is when Lapham even paints a rock for advertising, arguing, “I say the landscape was made for man, and not man for the landscape” (14). Rejecting the positivist precession of things, this statement reads like a utilitarian application of Wallace Stevens’s visionary imagination.<sup>12</sup> Lapham continues: “That paint was my own blood to me” (15), and further states: “I believe in my paint” (16); “I mix it with *Faith*” (17).<sup>13</sup> It is almost like a religion to him – at one point a character even mistakes the paint for a glass of jam (21), something to eat like a host. Like William James’s mind stuff of “pure experience,” Howells’s “paint” originates in reality, which it defines as object and subject at the same time, furnishing identity and even extending into matters of “belief” in ways that rhyme with James’s pragmatist arguments in *The Will to Believe* (later crucially renamed “the right to believe.”<sup>14</sup>)

A crucially different approach to Lapham’s vertically rooted “business” approach can be found in Bromley Corey’s dilettante approach to paint. An amateur painter, he went to Rome, and then only “painted a portrait of his father” (65). The beautiful, grey-haired Boston Brahmin with a noble Roman nose (60) is “talking more about it than working at it” (66).<sup>15</sup> We learn that Bromley lives on the fortune inherited from his grandfather’s China trade (65),<sup>16</sup> i.e., he deals in old money and stays within traditional representations. Though saved by his great sense of irony, the old man represents the dualist approach to paint and avoids getting involved in the nitty-gritty “roots” of business entrepreneurship.

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<sup>12</sup> In “The Snow Man,” Stevens discusses the existence of non-perceived landscape (i.e., “There’s No Man”): “For the listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” Note the chiasmic relation of object and subject, most probably influenced by Jamesian ideas like the one quoted in footnote 4.

<sup>13</sup> This is very different from his incompetent and “dry” partner Rogers: “he didn’t know anything about paint” (16). Significantly, Rogers is the one who wants to draw Lapham into an immoral money-laundering scheme to save himself from bankruptcy (311). See my point below.

<sup>14</sup> See “Faith and the Right to Believe” (*Some Problems* 221-31).

<sup>15</sup> Note that Howells is taking a jab at the idle aesthetic of the Brahmin’s beauty!

<sup>16</sup> The grandfather is described as an “old India merchant” (65).



His life “feeds” on the given realm of his inherited money, i.e., the representational tokens of wealth. Howells thus criticizes the Corey family’s sense of class superiority, which is, curiously, often defined in terms of “grammaticality,” i.e., the horizontal connection of representations: “How can you expect people who have been strictly devoted to business to be grammatical?” (60). Significantly, Bromley’s son, Tom Corey, likes Lapham “in spite of his syntax” (61). As a member of the young generation, he can see beyond formal prejudices, and will join the business people in the end. Howells thus offers crucial stories that develop representational agency in different directions, involving vertical contiguity and horizontal structures, thereby opening up major fields of interactional tension.

The main issue seems to be *feedback* that involves both, misunderstandings and honesty. Thus, there is a subplot in which visual clues are misinterpreted in a love triangle. Underestimating the difference between the immediacy of perception and the more complex knowledge of truth, the honest Persis tells her husband: “Well, Silas Lapham, if you can’t see *now* that he’s after Irene, I don’t know what ever *can* open your eyes” (83). Yet unfortunately, good reasoning can be blocked by perceptualist notions. Tom Corey is not after the pretty younger sister but loves the older, “plain” but more intelligent, Penelope. We find here a complication that arrives with the extension of surface into interiority, from perception to knowledge, and an elaboration of what can happen if things are not imagined correctly and there is no corrective interaction. Beyond the “paint” reality, this seems to signal a second and more complex, dynamic stage of cognitive construction, in which we have to break through the object barrier and move our conceptualizations from dead object to live subject. Significantly, the triangle misunderstanding leads to an intimate inter-subjective encounter that turns into one of the most convincing “realistic” dialogues in American literature when the two sisters finally sort out their misunderstandings (230).

But more important for Howells is the main plot line, in which the honest paint merchant goes bankrupt and is tempted by his former partner Rogers and his “dry tears” (308) to sell a worthless piece of real estate to unknown English investors in order to save himself: “I want you should sell to me. I don’t say what I’m going to do with the property, and you will not have an iota of responsibility, whatever happens” (310). This is where Lapham “rises,” as the title of the novel suggests, to moral responsibility. He realizes that beyond the uncommitted façade of this business deal, i.e., beyond its formal financial nature (*pecunia non olet*), harm may come to the invisible and unsuspecting investors far away.

Able to imagine the real consequences of this proposal, after a sleepless night, Lapham asserts the contiguous “rooted” principle of his earthy “paint” not merely in isolated images but also in much more complex representational configurations such as business contracts. For Lapham and for the realist author Howells, as for William James, there is no truly categorical difference between perceptual and conceptual understandings – the latter are merely more difficult to figure out and to master. Beyond their formal nature, this involves the imagination of consequences when we return from representation back to experience. Significantly, the honest Persis cries at this moment of crisis, as opposed to the “dry” Rogers, who is incapable of, or maybe unwilling to act upon, empathy (263). Such empathy, though utterly projective, may precisely be the kind of necessary practice that asserts “ambulatory” connections when things look “saltatory” and seem unconnected.<sup>17</sup> Howells also has his moral expert, the Reverend Sewell, and his wife visit Lapham because they are “interested in the moral spectacle” (342). Though the operation of evil can be traced in the physical world, Sewell states, “I’m more and more puzzled about it in the moral world” (343). He learns that Lapham has no regrets and feels “as if it was a hole opened for me, and I crept out of it” (344). Lapham’s moral behavior makes him, like his paint, free and at the same time contiguous with the earth, reconnecting him with reality.

If Howells mainly elaborates in his fiction on the rootedness of representation in outside reality and on the responsibility of moral imagination because much of our discursive behavior feeds back on the experiential world, his colleague Henry James deals with such “reality” constructions mainly in terms of interpersonal understanding and the construction of identity. In the writing of William James’s younger brother, we consistently find the psychological imagination of real things or objects *extended to the interiority of other objects*, which in turn become subjects themselves who are supposed to imagine other subjects as well, etc. In addition to the “it,” what becomes the main construction in Henry James’s fiction is a “you.” In short, we learn not only about *objects or facts* to which we attribute reality as things, but also about the existence of *people*, whose dialogic contributions to our own conceptualizations exist in addition to our own, making reality constructions interper-

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<sup>17</sup> In another context, I have called this necessity for projective empathy the “cognitive wager” (see “From Phallic Binary to Cognitive Wager”).

sonal.<sup>18</sup> We have then, in imagining a person, an interlaced construction of an object that is in addition also a subject capable of imagining relevant realities of her own.

### III

This “reality” of multiple subjectivities is of course one of the main reasons why William James ultimately believes in *A Pluralistic Universe*, as it is called in a fascinating collection of his late essays. For Henry James, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, such multiple subjectivity becomes an *issue of interpersonal respect* for the Other, who is not only a thing but a person, and in turn should be allowed to project her own reality. If Isabel Archer gets this respect from the Touchett family in the form of a solid inheritance that makes her independent, she later gets ensnared by the evil Gilbert Osmond. Osmond’s definition of marriage precisely denies Isabel’s own subjectivity, a denial that seems to be one of Henry James’s main concerns in *Portrait*. Thus, when Isabel is reluctant to support Osmond’s scheme of marrying Pansy to the rich Lord Warburton, he immediately accuses her of “working against [him]” (507). In Osmond’s cosmos, any other opinion is framed as binary opposition, as the mere negativity of his own.<sup>19</sup> Significantly, Isabel’s American suitor Caspar Goodwood notices that Osmond speaks “as if he and his wife had all things in sweet community and it were as natural to each of them to say ‘we’ as to say ‘I’” (540). This sense of being “indissolubly united” (540) again shows later when Osmond tells Isabel: “You smile most expressively when I talk about *us*, but I assure you that *we, we*, Mrs. Osmond, is all I know, I take our marriage seriously” (571). It is this one-sided imposition of the “we”<sup>20</sup> which makes togetherness a

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<sup>18</sup> In this context, also see Berger and Luckmann’s work on the social construction of reality.

<sup>19</sup> Also notice Gilbert’s reaction when Isabel wants to return to England and visit Ralph Touchett, accusing her of “revenge”: “If you leave Rome to-day it will be a piece of the most deliberate, the most calculated opposition” (570). Because he can only think in terms of his own framework, any dissent is considered opposition: “Your cousin is nothing whatever to me, [. . .]. That’s why you like him – because he hates me” (571). Freudians would say that Osmond projects his own views onto others. Theologians may associate him with the devil. Formalists may find his argumentation structuralist (see my observations below).

<sup>20</sup> On the inhuman imposition of a “we” in American literary realism, also see George Washington Cable’s Frowenfeld and his criticism of “the Creole ‘we’” in *The Grandissimes* (151).

virtual “hell,”<sup>21</sup> because it denies the reality (or shall we say, the “subject construction”?) of the Other. What is lacking is a dialogic sense of “you,” in a Jamesian concern reminiscent of the later work of the Austrian-Israeli philosopher of religion, Martin Buber.

In his realist novel, Henry James takes us most deeply into this issue of dialogue, respect, empathy, and the “you” in his presentation of the love affair of Pansy and Rosier, whose subjectivities are emphatically asserted, even though neither of them is what Emerson would call a “representative,”<sup>22</sup> i.e., an important, person. In fact, both of them are characterized by their mediocrity. Pansy is, after all, merely a meek “pansy” flower “impregnated by the idea of submission” (258). Like Persephone, she is incarcerated, first in a nun’s convent and then in her father’s Palazzo Roccanera.<sup>23</sup> But although she is described as being “like a sheet of blank paper” (303) or a “small, winged fairy” that in “the pantomime soars by the aide of the dissimulated wire” (341), we also read that “her eyes had filled with tears” (258). There are moments of subjective dissatisfaction, expressed in mere unarticulated fluidity. The same limitations apply to Rosier, whom Isabel remembers as the boy who never went “near the edge of the lake” because, as he said, “one must always obey to one’s *bonne*” (235). Lord Warburton calls him “very harmless” and Isabel adds that “[h]e hasn’t money enough and he isn’t very clever” (476). Worse, when Madame Merle notices that “Mr. Rosier is not unlimited,” Isabel replies in a memorable slur that “he has about the extent of one’s pocket handkerchief” (440).

Yet Rosier musters quite a bit of courage, insisting on his right to see Pansy. Although she tells him that “Papa has been terribly severe [. . .] he forbade me to marry you [. . .] I can’t disobey papa” (416), Rosier can come to an understanding with her. This shows when Pansy drops “six

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<sup>21</sup> See: “She had not been mistaken about the beauty of his mind; she knew that organ perfectly now. She had lived with it, she had lived *in* it almost – it appeared to have become her habitation. If she had been captured it had taken a firm hand to seize her” (459). And further:

he had led her into the mansion of his own habitation, then, *then* she had seen where she really was.

She could live it over again, the incredulous terror with which she had taken the measure of her dwelling. Between those four walls she had lived ever since; they were to surround her for the rest of her life. It was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation. (461)

<sup>22</sup> See Emerson’s point about important individuals in *Representative Men*.

<sup>23</sup> We read that the dark Palazzo where “little Pansy lived” is “but a dungeon to poor Rosier’s apprehensive mind” (392).

words” into the “aromatic depths” of a teapot, saying, “I love you just as much” (416). Henry James is very careful to make every single word of this formulation count, defining “love” as something very different from merely appropriative desire. It has to be reciprocal, a dialogic doubling of two subjectivities of “you” – which is very different from Osmond’s appropriative notion of marriage as a “we” defined by himself only. This binary of “you” is not a single unit of positive and negative defined in terms of subject and object (“it”), but it is positive and *again* positive – a William Jamesian “pluralistic” *combination of subject and subject* that goes beyond the definition of a single constructive cognitive center. Note that at some point, Rosier starts wearing “his glass in one eye” (469), which implies his capability of double vision.

These are issues of respect and empathy, and Isabel understands “that Pansy thought Mr. Rosier the nicest of all the young men,” even though he is much inferior to Warburton, her other suitor (446). This is where the plot changes to Isabel and her responsibility for Pansy. Still trying to be loyal to her husband Osmond, Isabel racks her brain and, like the bankrupt Mr. Lapham, she stays up late, “trying to persuade herself that there was no reason why Pansy shouldn’t be married as you put a letter in the post-office” (467). Notice here that James’s formulation differentiates between definitions of Pansy as a mere thing or object, as opposed to seeing her as a subject entitled to insights and desires of her own. Isabel observes about Rosier: “He has the merit – for Pansy – of being in love with Pansy. She can see at a glance that Lord Warburton isn’t” (498). This mutuality is also emphasized by Pansy herself: “You think of those who think of you, [. . .]. I know Mr. Rosier thinks of me. [. . .]. He can’t help it, because he knows I think of *him*” (502). The visual metaphor of this attitude would be re-spect.

Isabel is impressed with “Pansy’s wisdom” and “the depth of perception of which this submissive little person was capable,” concluding that “Pansy had a sufficient illumination of her own” (505). Her suggestion that Pansy’s father would like the girl to “marry a nobleman,” is answered by Pansy with an assertion of her subjective belief: “I think Mr. Rosier looks like one!” (505). For Pansy, the mediocre “Rosier” is like her own rosebush, her own experience of epiphany, and she explains that she has come to an understanding with Warburton. He “knows that I don’t want to marry, and he wants me to know that he therefore won’t trouble me. That’s the meaning of his kindness. [. . .]. I think that’s very kind and noble. [. . .]. That’s all we’ve said to each other” (504-5). Notice that this attitude of kindness is associated with “nobility,” not in the sense of a degenerate upper class, but as an almost

Christ-like human acceptance and respect. It is this kind of quality that characterizes Warburton, who has been Isabel's suitor in England, the land of angels.<sup>24</sup> Notice also that a similar notion of aristocracy is attributed to Isabel herself, when Pansy addresses her "as if she were praying to the Madonna" and wants her advice: "It isn't because you love me – it's because you're a lady" (502). Pansy is here using the very imagery of the title of James's famous novel – a female version of nobleman that may signal several things. To be sure, there is a mixing of secular and religious discourses, but I see this as neither a simplistic assertion of metaphysics nor one of reactionary class structure. Warburton is, after all, introduced as "a nobleman of the newest pattern, a reformer, a radical" (88). Old vocabulary is used to formulate new ethical positions – thus I find here a metaphorical extension of William James's psychological suppositions applied to interpersonal relations, in which their complexity is elaborated from the level of projected facts – such as Isabel's realization of what her marriage is<sup>25</sup> – to her realization of interpersonal respect in very particular kinds of relationship. In their last encounter, Isabel and Pansy silently embrace in an egalitarian way, "like two sisters" (592). Just as Martin Buber's work on the "I" and the "Thou" is about religious insights that should apply to human beings,<sup>26</sup> James's fiction about the "noble" behavior of a lady extends to dialogic empathy. There is a perfectly secular positive value if we "believe," in a utopian sense, in radical Christian nobility without hierarchy.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, Isabel cannot stay in England but her "business" is back in Rome, in the world of human beings: "Deep in her soul – deeper than any appetite for renunciation – was the sense that life would be her business for a long time to come" (596). Moral behavior has to do with learning from experience the "lady"-like utopian qualities of respect, and it is our business to return these values to the world, or what William James would call the "stream of life."

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<sup>24</sup> Caspar Goodwood is, in contrast, a suitor of human dimension.

<sup>25</sup> See her observation on the "house of darkness" cited above.

<sup>26</sup> According to Buber, facts are based on foundational verbal configurations ("Grundworte"), which define two different approaches to the world: "One of the foundational configurations is the pair I-Thou. The other is I-It; but without change of the foundational configuration, It can also stand for He or She" (7, my translation).

<sup>27</sup> Similar aesthetic utopian elements can be found in William Faulkner and his Christ-like owner of souls and bodies, Charles Bon. Also see my "From Rectangles to Triangles."

## IV

The moral concerns of the realist writers, quite in tune with the pragmatist epistemology of William James, should be obvious here, and I would even suggest that the fiction writers do extend the philosophical reach of James the elder. I furthermore think that, even if you do not believe that radical empiricism can be extended from percepts to concepts, and that the “stuff” conjectured in our “consciousness” is not physically “real,” that does not matter. The argument that these projections are relevant still holds because, if concepts originate in experience, they should successfully lead back to it, be that in physical interaction or in human relations. Otherwise they are either irrelevant or can even be harmful. Although text is only “text” and fictional characters are certainly mere “paper beings,” as Roland Barthes rightly observed (261), this phenomenological assessment falls short of the true significance of realist fiction. Even though representations are not “real” and even though money does not smell across the “saltatory” chasm, we need to imagine them (it) otherwise in order to live up to our responsibility.

Henry James quite literally confronts us with the “evil” of formalism in his depiction of Gilbert Osmond, who personifies all of these shortcomings. Like Rogers, the unfeeling and “dry” former partner in Silas Lapham’s paint manufacturing business, Osmond likes to stay near the fire and is also described as “dry.” As Madame Merle tells him: “You’ve not only dried up my tears; you’ve dried up my soul” (556). In that sense, Osmond is of course a downright devilish character.<sup>28</sup> He is also described with the terms “malignant” and “coolness” (570). He is defined by his lack of emotions and his formality. Actually, in a sense, we can even read Osmond as a parody of the extra-moral theory paradigm, where surface merely adds to surface in the sense of formalist hermeneutics. When he accuses Madame Merle: “You express yourself like a sentence in a copy-book” (558), she replies, “you’re more like a copy-book than I” (559). Osmond generally stands for sophisticated artificiality; for example, “he regard[s] his daughter as a precious work of art” (567). The signature scene is probably, when we find Osmond “with a folio volume [. . .] copying from it the drawing of an antique coin [. . .] transferred to a sheet of immaculate paper” (568-69). We find here a notion of tracing and imitation that denies all ability for creation, com-

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<sup>28</sup> Also see my discussion in *Pragmatist Realism* (156-62). In the religious sense he contrasts with the Christ figures Warburton, whom Osmond calls an “odd fish” (506), and Ralph Touchett.

bined with the representation of money, implying the unreality of forgery. "Beware of formalism!" seems to be the message in James's creation.

I would claim that the theoretical bottom line of this kind of realism, and at the same time its reason for moral commitment, is the utter denial of all context-free truth. There is no *regina scientiarum*, no formal philosophy that precedes knowledge, no matter what it applies to. All knowledge derives from experience, and therefore it necessarily applies back to experience again. It reflects on its own origins. Abstractions seem to hide this fact, and the danger is that they will be simply useless, or worse, misapplied in wrong places. Just as money merely stands for an abstract third or comparative value ("exchange value") within a real economy, abstract concepts are in their nature like the rules of mere capitalist finance.<sup>29</sup> They are immensely calculable, but "saltatory," and therefore often alienated from any real purpose.<sup>30</sup> To be sure, both finance and theory have their influence, but if we want to control them, we should muster our causal imagination and connect them to real experience. Because whenever there is referentiality, there is morality implied.

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<sup>29</sup> I make this point in my "Currencies and Realities."

<sup>30</sup> As William James writes in his criticism of "Mr. [Bertrand] Russell and Mr. G. E. Moore": "Whoever takes terms abstracted from all their natural settings, identifies them with definitions, and treats the latter *more algebraico*, not only risks mixing universes, but risks fallacies which the man in the street easily detects" (*Meaning* 317).



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