

The Problem of Representing “Truly” in Henry James’s *The Tragic Muse*

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Summary

In *The Tragic Muse* (1978) Henry James offers a study of the ways in which acting and portraiture are unseated from a locus of transcendental signification by the fact that they are irretrievably and problematically cut off from origin and self-authenticating presence. Both Miriam Rooth’s performances and Nick’s portraits fail to bridge the “spacing” that divides imitation from that which it represents. Jacques Derrida’s essay “Signature Event Context” (1982) proves to be particularly apposite to a consideration of the narrative and thematic permutations thrown up by the problem of deferred origin in *The Tragic Muse*. The notion of iterability is central to Derrida’s essay: iterability is a function of *différance* which refers to a sign’s effective operation in the absence of a producer or addressee; as such it is especially pertinent to a discussion of imitation and representation in James’s work.

Opsomming

In *The Tragic Muse* (1978) bied Henry James ‘n studie van die maniere waarop toneelspel en uitbeelding ontsetel word vanuit ‘n lokus van transendentale betekenis deur die feit dat dit onherroepelik en problematies afgesny is van oorsprong en self-outentiserende teenwoordigheid. Sowel Miriam Rooth se optredes as Nick se uitbeeldings slaag nie daarin om die “spasiering” te oorbrug wat imitasie onderskei van wat dit verteenwoordig. Jacques Derrida se essay “Signature Event Context” (1982) blyk by uitstek van toepassing te wees op ‘n oorweging van die narratiewe en tematiese permutasies wat deur die probleem van verskuilde oorsprong in *The Tragic Muse* na vore kom. Die idee van herhaalbaarheid is sentraal in Derrida se essay: herhaalbaarheid is ‘n funksie van *différance* wat verwys na ‘n sinnebeeld se effektiewe werking in die afwesigheid van ‘n regisseur of ‘n geadresseerde; as sulks is dit veral pertinent tot ‘n bespreking van imitasie en voorstelling in James se werk.

Perhaps unusually for Henry James, the presentation of the worlds of art and politics in *The Tragic Muse* (1978) is delicately coloured with wry, knowing humour. The supporting cast, in particular, provides him with the occasion for almost Dickensian simile and caricature. Lady Agnes, nonplussed by the spectacle of Miriam’s early attempts at acting, wears “the countenance she might have worn at the theatre during a play in which pistols were fired” (TM, 100).¹ Waiting for her son’s return from the hustings of Harsh, “her tall,

upright black figure seemed in possession of the fair vastness like an exclamation-point at the bottom of a blank page” (TM, 162). The dull, plodding, unfortunately-named Grace Dormer; the “immemorial blank butler” (TM, 193), Mr Chayter; the “large, mild, healthy” Urania Lennox “who liked early breakfasts, uncomfortable chairs and the advertisement-sheet of *The Times*” (TM, 345); the shawl-encrusted, obsequious Mrs Rooth (who “twinkled up at [Sherringham] like an insinuating glow-worm” (TM, 479)) – all of these vividly-drawn characters provide the text with the matter and language of comedy, palliatives to its rather more weighty deliberations on the merits and risks of dedicating one’s life to art.

But humour in *The Tragic Muse* is not simply incidental, nor is it vested exclusively in minor characters. On the contrary, Peter Sherringham’s childlike vulnerability to the charms of the theatre and its illusions is a target of much of the novel’s more pointed satire. The vocabulary of truth, purity and perfection used to describe his idealism is strikingly similar to that used, on occasion, by James himself.² Sherringham’s logocentric will to completion is particularly evident in his vision, born in “momentary illusion and confusion” (TM, 325), of a manager of the theatre “striving for perfection”, a drama in which is rendered “all humanity and history and poetry” and which would be a “new and vivifying force” (TM, 326). Recalling Miriam’s performance, he “floated in a sense of the felicity of it, in the general encouragement of a thing perfectly done, in the almost aggressive bravery of still larger claims for an art which could so triumphantly, so exquisitely render life” (TM, 325). In a comment that pre-empts James’s own assertion in *The Art of the Novel* about “[l]ife being all inclusion and confusion, and art being all discrimination and selection” (AN,120), Peter regards Miriam’s beauty as

a supreme infallible felicity, a source of importance, a stamp of absolute value. To see it in operation, to sit within its radius and feel it shift and revolve and change and never fail, was a corrective to the depression, the humiliation, the bewilderment of life. It transported Sherringham from the vulgar hour and the ugly fact; drew him to something which had no reason but its sweetness, no name nor place save as the pure, the distant, the antique.

(TM, 341)

But Sherringham’s belief that a fine dramatic performance can order life’s muddle and render “a supreme infallible felicity”, “the pure, the distant, the antique”, is systematically and wittily undermined throughout the novel. The fragility of his ideals “of absolute value” is exposed by the ease with which he is emotionally and intellectually flummoxed by the crafty dilettantism of Gabriel Nash (TM, 43-51 and 374-380). Nash’s vivid depiction of the “brutal nature of the modern audience”, the “sweltering mass, disappointed in their

seats, timing the author, timing the actor, wishing to get their money back on the spot, before eleven o'clock" (TM, 50), swiftly deflates the diplomat's fantasies of dramatic glory and aesthetic transcendence. This deflation is sustained by Miriam Rooth, who gently but doggedly forces her "master" (TM, 334)³ to acknowledge that his image of her as a "priestess of art" (TM, 131) is a precarious fabrication. Sherringham himself is acutely aware of the faintly ridiculous figure he has cut, and satirises himself as a mixture between a lovelorn adolescent and a performing monkey:

He had done very little since his arrival in London but moon round a *fille de théâtre* who was taken up partly, though she bluffed it off, with another man and partly with arranging new petticoats for a beastly old "poetic drama".... He had given himself a certain rope and he had danced to the end of his rope, and now he would dance back.

(TM, 391)

The satire that is directed at Peter Sherringham is extended to undercut any kind of quasi-religious reverence for art. Madame Carré's salon, for instance, is described as a "little temple of art" (TM, 81) – complete with "votive offerings" (TM, 79). But the effect of this locus of achieved aesthetic sublimity is rendered comically mundane by Nick's impression that Miriam, in the midst of its glories, behaves as if she has found herself in "the waiting-room of a dentist" (TM, 81). The Théâtre Français is described, with just a touch of ironic exaggeration, as the "holy of holies" (TM, 234), a "church" (TM, 237) and a "convent", complete with an "inner sanctuary" (TM, 246), that has "the tone of an institution, a temple, which made them all, out of respect and delicacy, hold their breath a little and tread the shining floors with discretion" (TM, 237). In a moment of exasperation, however, Peter Sherringham is provoked to blaspheme against the venerable institution of the theatre, dismissing it as no more than "a vulgar shop with a turnstile" (TM, 467).

The artist's studio and the gallery are subject to the same ironic treatment. Gabriel Nash might describe the Salon at the Palais de l'Industrie as one of the "temples" of the "gods", "a house of strange idols ... and of some curious and unnatural sacrifices" (TM, 22), but Nash's remarks are invariably equivocal, and his description smacks more of jaded cynicism than of sincere admiration. In a rather different context, Miriam Rooth wears, in Nick's studio, a "religious air of consideration", in an atmosphere of "holy calm" (TM, 284), aping the mannerisms of a humble acolyte in an inner sanctum. This faintly absurd religious tableau is, furthermore, turned into a scene from farce when Julia Dallow makes her unexpected entrance and interprets Miriam's "religious air" as over-familiar, faintly disreputable "indolent possession" (TM, 285). Nick's studio becomes, for Miriam, her "asylum" and she envies Nick "shut up in his

little temple with his altar and his divinity” (TM, 440); nevertheless, the “temple” is not impervious to the desecrations inflicted by the simpering piety of Mrs Rooth, who, with her “vague, polite, disappointed bent back” (TM, 444) “explored the place discreetly, on tiptoe, gossiping as she went and bending her head and her eyeglass over various objects with an air of imperfect comprehension” (TM, 443).

The satire in *The Tragic Muse* marks a significant stage in the development of James’s aesthetics as it seems to be based upon an acknowledgement that blinkered, reductive adherence to the myth of aesthetic purity is most appropriately the subject of ridicule. But, pointed and effective as the comedy may be in *The Tragic Muse*, the novel also offers a subtle exposure of the processes of representation upon which aesthetic illusion depends and which, ironically, strip that illusion of its pretensions to origin and plenitude. Sherringham’s chimera of a performance which is “new and large and of the first order” (TM, 325) and of an actress who will “be original” (TM, 142) can only be sustained if he resists the evidence that such a production and such a performer depend upon repetition and the “gropings and humiliations of rehearsal” (TM, 247). These activities, by their very constitution, place in question the production’s originality and uniqueness, ironically demonstrating that it is neither “of the first order” nor “new”. He recoils from the possibility that the theatre might become the art “of the stage carpenter and the costumer” (TM, 140), because the foregrounding of their talents would expose the machinery, the “tricks of the trade” (TM, 153) that construct the illusion, and the evidence of which diminish its mystique. His sentiments are “crushed” (TM, 328) by Dashwood’s detailed knowledge of “the actual theatre” (TM, 326), of “receipts and salaries and expenses and newspaper articles” (TM, 327). Sherringham relishes “the results, the finished thing, the dish, perfectly seasoned and served: not the mess of preparation – at least not always – not the experiments that spoil the material” (TM, 153). Rehearsal, for Peter, is a “hissing, smoking, sputtering caldron in which a palatable performance is stewed” (TM, 404); Miriam teases him for not liking “the kitchen fire” and for wanting “only ... the pudding” (TM, 406). And as much as he is unsettled by rehearsal, he also finds “wearisome” the “importunate repetition” (TM, 146) that is an inescapable part of theatrical production and performance:

Sherringham could not help protesting against the lame old war-horse whom it was proposed to bring into action, who had been ridden to death and had saved a thousand desperate fields; and he exclaimed on the strange passion of the good British public for sitting again and again through expected situations, watching for speeches they had heard and surprises that struck the hour.

(TM, 329)

James's exposure of the ways in which repetition and rehearsal serve to unsettle the aesthetic ideal acquires subtle and complex treatment in his investigations into the processes and value of imitation and iterability in *The Tragic Muse*. Miriam Rooth's aporistic claim, "I represent, but I represent truly" (TM, 452), calls attention to the difficulty of establishing aesthetic representation as a locus of truth. In James's early novel, *Roderick Hudson* (1986), the eponymous hero claims with splendid but naïve bravado that his sculptures will "be" "Beauty", "Wisdom", "Power", "Genius" and "Daring" (TM, 124); in a similar vein, Peter Sherringham exults that Miriam "was beauty, she was music, she was truth; she was passion and persuasion and tenderness" (TM, 455). But Roderick's sculptures, like Miriam's performance and Nick's portraits of the actress, can never "be" that which they imitate, because they are always marked by the absence of the imitated. Representing "truly", therefore, becomes a precarious activity of alternating endlessly between truth and artifice, the imitated and the imitation, origin and mimesis. In the course of this alternation, the absolute, logocentric values of truth and originality upon which Sherringham bases his aesthetic are systematically eroded.

The problem of imitation in *The Tragic Muse* might be usefully clarified when considered in the light of two essays by Jacques Derrida: his discussions in "The Double Session" (1981) of Plato's theory of mimesis, and, in "Signature Event Context" (1982), of iterability. In "The Double Session", Derrida argues that the Platonic tradition of mimesis is based upon a hierarchical opposition in which origin is privileged as the locus of presence and truth, and imitation is regarded as supplementary and non-essential. But within this opposition lie the terms of its undoing: a supplement can only be added to that which is not a self-possessed plenitude; if a supplement can be added, then the original is troubled by the same lack or absence which marks the representation. Plato's logocentric system is further destabilised by the fact that he is unable to describe imitation without referring to its ability to reveal the truth, therefore bestowing upon it all the value which was supposed to reside exclusively in its binary opposite, the superior original:

while Plato often discredits *mimesis* and almost always disqualifies the mimetic arts, he never separates the unveiling of truth, *aletheia*, from the movement of *anamnesia* What announces itself here is an internal division within *mimesis*, a self-duplication of repetition itself; *ad infinitum*, since this movement feeds its own proliferation.

(Derrida 1981: 191)

Mimesis, therefore, involves the endless imitation of imitations, a chain of supplements in which primary origin recedes "*ad infinitum*".

The endless displacement of origin is given further consideration in Derrida's essay, "Signature Event Context" (1982). In the course of an examination of J.L. Austin's speech act theory, Derrida argues that representation, far from being simply a "progressive extenuation of presence" (Derrida 1982: 313), is actually constituted by the fact that it is able to function independently of both addressee and producer:

All writing ... in order to be what it is, must be able to function in the radical absence of every empirically determined addressee in general. And this absence is not a continuous modification of presence; it is a break in presence, "death", or the possibility of the "death" of the addressee, inscribed in the structure of the mark

(Derrida 1982: 315-316)

The case of the addressee also applies to the producer of the message. The written sign, by means of an "essential drifting" (Derrida 1982: 317) is always cut off from presence and origin. All signs are made possible by their ability to be repeated in any context, and the "unity of the signifying form is constituted only by its iterability" (p. 318). The condition of absence which informs the written sign is, he claims, the condition of "all 'experience' in general, if it is granted that there is no experience of *pure* presence, but only chains of differential marks" (p. 318).

This last claim is considerably more contentious, however. To suggest that origin cannot be regarded as an absolute and untroubled locus of presence is one thing: to argue that there can be "no experience" of origin *at all* is another. Such a position is of questionable value to an examination of origin and imitation in *The Tragic Muse*, particularly as regards the status of the artist as author of a work of art; what *is* of value, however, is Derrida's rather more circumspect proposition that origin is always already placed beyond reach, and cannot entirely be recaptured as an untroubled, transcendental presence. The more troublesome claims expressed in "Signature Event Context" might be tempered if regarded in the context of the position adopted by Derrida in his Introduction to Edmund Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*. He writes that Husserl is only able to conceive of transcendental origin by means of *writing*, a form of inscription, which is marked by iterability and therefore always already cut off from self-presence:

The possibility of *writing* will assure the absolute traditionalization of the object, its absolute ideal Objectivity – i.e., the purity of its relation to a universal transcendental subjectivity. Writing will do this by emancipating sense from its *actually present* evidence for a real subject and from its present circulation within a determined community.

(Derrida 1978: 87)

The interplay of origin and writing therefore creates an aporia in which pure origin can only be understood in terms of displacement and deferment; that is, in terms of *non*-origin.

In "Signature Event Context", Derrida describes the "general citationality" (Derrida 1982: 325), or "general iterability which is the effraction into the allegedly rigorous purity of every event of discourse". Iteration "introduces an essential dehiscence and demarcation" (p. 326); it is, in other words, a characteristic of discourse that demonstrates "[d]ifférance, the irreducible absence of intention" (p. 327). He writes:

This citationality, duplication, or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is not an accident or an anomaly, but is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could no longer even have a so-called "normal" functioning. What would a mark be that one could not cite? And whose origin could not be lost on the way?

(Derrida 1982: 320-321)

Once again, Derrida's claim that "intention" is "irreducibl[y]" absent, and that origin, however qualified, can never be retrieved, is an extreme and contentious one. His observation that all marks of discourse are iterable and that pure presence, origin or truth is necessarily qualified – "lost on the way" – because of this condition, however, may give some clue as to the difficulties involved in aesthetic representation which are explored in *The Tragic Muse*. The work of art, as an event of discourse, is different and deferred from its origin, and inscribed with the absence of what it represents. By the same token, however, that which is imitated can only be made present *because* it is imitated. The fact that it can be supplemented and re-presented indicates that it is constituted by lack; in *The Tragic Muse*, this is made especially evident in the rehearsals and repeated performances of plays, which cause so much distress in the logocentrically minded Peter Sherringham. Aesthetic production becomes, therefore, a process characterised by the aporia of representing "truly", whereby origin is stripped of absolute value, and neither it nor imitation is a fixed, transparent locus of truth and presence.

In spite of her vivacity and the fact that she is "irresistibly real" (TM, 458), Miriam Rooth (is) absence personified. This apparently contradictory notion is indicated, firstly, by the fact that she is regularly referred to by pseudonyms, such as "Maud Vavasour, or Edith Temple, or Gladys Vane" (TM, 44), "the English Rachel" (TM, 232), "the Garrick of [her] sex" (TM, 233), "the Tragic Muse" (TM, 270); or by the name of a character in a play, such as "Constance" (TM, 226) or "Juliet" (TM, 527). The repeated transformation of identity, which accompanies these name changes, hints at the difficulty of knowing Miriam as a present and definable subject. Furthermore, the problem of Miriam's identity is aggravated because her presentation of herself is

invariably a performance. She is forever representing someone else and living exclusively in a realm of otherness. She has a “plastic quality” (TM, 92) and she strikes Peter as having the

histrionic nature ... in such perfection that she was always acting; that her existence was a series of parts assumed for the moment, each changed for the next, before the perpetual mirror of some curiosity or admiration or wonder – some spectatorship that she perceived or imagined in the people about her.
(TM, 130)

James makes it clear that Miriam and her performances cannot be traced back to a basic, immutable identity or origin, as she has “no nature of [her] own” (TM, 145) and is “an embroidery without a canvas” (TM, 145). So skilled is she at not being a fixed self that she can “act even at not acting” (TM, 279).

Above all, Miriam exposes the inadequacy of reductive theories of the relationship between truth and representation: “if she was sincere it was sincerity of execution, if she was genuine it was the genuineness of doing it well” (TM, 410), and she sometimes says “things with such perfection that they seemed dishonest” (TM, 250). There is no stable distinction between the business of representation and the world outside the theatre:

As soon as she stepped on the boards a great and special alteration usually took place in her – she was in focus and in her frame; yet there were hours too in which she wore her world’s face before the audience, just as there were hours when she wore her stage face in the world.
(TM, 408-409)

Acting is always an art of imitation, in which an actress such as Miriam pretends to be someone else. And no matter how much the actress playing the part of Juliet succeeds in living up to the dictum “*Ars celare artum*” (TM, 230), the physical context of the theatre with all its illusion-making machinery, as well as the ability of the actress to assume different roles and to repeat her performance at will, points towards the inescapable fact that she is *not* Juliet. Miriam’s involvement in the practices of dishonest perfection, representing “truly”, sincere execution and genuine artificiality reveal her identity to be perpetually inscribed with aporia, in that the reader and her audience are invited to choose between her artificiality and her status as a high priestess of truth, and are simultaneously denied any basis upon which to make that choice.

While James’s project is to demonstrate that the theatre can never fulfil Sherringham’s logocentric desires, he does not argue that artistic effort and the artwork are always secondary to some Platonic, privileged original. In *The Tragic Muse*, that which is imitated is always already an imitation itself. Actresses act in the style and manner of other actresses, so that the textual

construct of an "original" Juliet, or Célimène, or Phaedra recedes perpetually. Acting is, furthermore, dependent upon the text of a play, a text that, because it can be performed and re-performed, calls attention to iterability and the fact that origin, in the form of the moment and conditions of the writing of the play, can never be fully recaptured.

A revealing instance of the circular and iterable nature of imitation may be found at the beginning of the novel, where Miriam is undergoing the rigorous discipline of Madame Carré's training:

What she mainly did was to reproduce with a crude fidelity, but with extraordinary memory, the intonations, the personal quavers and cadences of her model.

"How bad you make me seem to myself, and if I were you how much better I should say it!" was Madame Carré's first criticism.

Miriam allowed her little time to develop this idea, for she broke out, at the shortest intervals, with the five other specimens of verse to which the old actress had handed her the key. They were all delicate lyrics, of tender or pathetic intention, by contemporary poets – all things demanding perfect taste and art, a mastery of tone, of insinuation, in the interpreter. Miriam had gobbled them up, she gave them forth in the same way as the first, with close, rude, audacious mimicry. There was a moment when Sherringham was afraid Madame Carré would think she was making fun of her manner, her celebrated simpers and grimaces, so extravagant did the girl's performance cause these refinements to appear.

When she had finished, the old woman said: "Should you like now to hear how *you* do it?" and, without waiting for an answer, phrased and trilled the last of the pieces, from beginning to end, exactly as Miriam had done, making this *imitation of an imitation* the drollest thing conceivable.

(TM, 132-33; my italics)

This "imitation of an imitation" might indeed be the "drollest thing conceivable", but it is nevertheless little more than an extreme case of what is intrinsic to acting. There is no pure, retrievable original or source – in spite of Peter's wistful claim that Miriam will "be original" (TM, 142) – only what Jonathan Culler calls the "infinite referral" (TM, 98) of imitation, which, as we have seen, can never "be" a self-possessed plenitude. This is not to say that the repetition of texts and acting styles permits no variation: James is careful to distinguish between Miriam's naïve imitation and Madame Carré's skilled parody. Not all differences are buried, and within the imitation of imitations, acting retains the potential to be more than simple mimicry. It is in this regard that Derrida's radical position as regards the hopelessness of any conception of genesis and originality becomes particularly evident. James, on the other hand, offers a considerably less extreme, more positive view, implying that creativity might seek expression within the context of imitation and repetition.

Nevertheless, the search for creative opportunity is made undeniably problematic because of the tenaciousness of the interplay between dramatic imitation and iterability: Miriam tells Peter “I want to be what *she* is” (TM, 248), and even Madame Carré has *her* “rare predecessor, straight from whose hands she had received her most celebrated parts, and of whom her own manner was often a religious imitation” (TM, 80). Individuality is in danger of becoming subsumed in the process: an actress “has to talk about herself”, or about “other actresses”, which “comes to the same thing” (TM, 109). Miriam gives a further clue to the endlessly reflective world of drama by claiming that she actually exists as both actress and audience, watching herself in performance: “I didn’t miss a vibration of my voice, a fold of my robe”. Peter replies, “I didn’t see you looking”, to which Miriam retorts “No-one ever will. Do you think I would show it?” (TM, 230), a comment which simultaneously seals her off from her audience and enhances the aporia between imitation and sincerity which she repeatedly enacts.

It is revealing that in *The Tragic Muse* James presents Miriam as a character who personifies absence and non-truth, but in his preface to the novel he attempts to establish her as the text’s stable pivot. A novel without a centre, or with a misplaced centre, is, James rather wittily declares, a clumsy and awkward construct:

Time after time, then, has the precious waistband or girdle, studded and buckled and placed for brave outward show, practically worked itself, and in spite of desperate remonstrance, or in other words essential counterplotting, to a point perilously near the knees – perilously I mean for the freedom of these parts. In several of my compositions this displacement has so succeeded, at the crisis, in defying and resisting me, has appeared so fraught with probable dishonour, that I still turn upon them, in spite of the greater or less success of final dissimulation, a rueful and wondering eye. These productions have in fact, if I may be so bold about it, specious and spurious centres altogether, to make up for the failure of the true.

(AN, 86)

Having thus expressed his abhorrence of the “failure of the true” that the unfixed centre implies, James seeks to establish as the centre of *The Tragic Muse* the very character who cannot be fixed, who demonstrates *above all* “the failure of the true”:

Miriam *is* central then to analysis, in spite of being objective; central in virtue of the fact that the whole thing has visibly, from the first, to get itself done in dramatic, or at least in scenic conditions – though scenic conditions which are as near an approach to the dramatic as the novel may permit itself I never “go behind” Miriam; only poor Sherringham goes, a great deal, and Nick Dormer

goes a little, and the author, while they so waste wonderment, goes behind *them*: but none the less she is as thoroughly symbolic, as functional, for illustration of the idea, as either of them, while her image had seemed susceptible of a livelier and "prettier" concretion. I had desired for her, I remember, all manageable vividness – so ineluctable had it long appeared to "do the actress", to touch the theatre, to meet that connexion somehow or other, in any free plunge of the speculative fork into the contemporary social salad.

(AN, 89-91)

In a moment of blindness and insight James valorises the aesthetic ideal and simultaneously exposes its shaky, even illusory foundations. The claim that Miriam is "symbolic" conflicts with the novel's demonstration that the symbolic is troubled by *différance*, and, indeed, far from making concrete the aesthetic "idea", Miriam is characterised by perpetual imitation and the play of *différance*.

James's claim that he "goes behind" characters who have "gone behind" Miriam, who, of course, "goes behind" the masks of the characters she portrays is especially intriguing. It might seem that James has unwittingly placed himself within the process of perpetual deferment of origin that the novel enacts, and that he too, therefore, is unable to demarcate the limits and contours of Miriam's shifting identity. It might also be argued, however, that there can be no "going behind" the novelist who is, therefore, the *author* – in the sense of "originator" – of the text. Nevertheless, in spite of James's attempts in the prefaces apparently to make his presence as explicit and vivid as possible,⁴ the author-as-origin cannot be made fully present or recaptured because of the text's ability to function separately from the presence of its producer. Its source is discernible but distanced, caught up in the play of *différance*. In keeping with this interpretation of the relations that exist between author and text, James *can* be regarded as able to fix Miriam as the "concretion" of his "idea", but only inasmuch as she is presented in terms of mutability and elusiveness.

James writes in *The Art of the Novel* that his text is "as near an approach to the dramatic as the novel may permit itself", and thereby situates the novel in the "chain of differential marks", imitation and iteration that the drama embraces.⁵ His novel is not a saturated, self-sufficient construct, but an imitation of an art form which is constituted by imitations of imitations. It is not surprising, therefore, that James cannot recall the origin or "germ" for *The Tragic Muse*, but describes it instead as a "poor fatherless and motherless, a sort of unregistered and unacknowledged birth" (AN, 79). James's apparently simple analogy offers, however, a moment of insight. A germ or seed is effaced – not obliterated – by growing into a plant, and so is implicated in the dynamics of creative mutability; the original seed exists, but in a different

form. Similarly, by commenting on the novel's orphaned status, James exposes the myth of absolute origin. By the same token, however, an orphan is not *without* origin; the origin is simply unknown, it has been "lost along the way" (Derrida 1982: 321).

This complex process whereby origin is made present as an absence, and the role this process plays in problematising aesthetic production, are wistfully evoked in a description of Madame Carré's trophy-bedecked salon. Resplendent as this "museum" (TM, 79) is with the spoils of theatrical victories, the presence of these trophies points inexorably and inescapably towards absence and lack. There is "something missed", a "reference to clippings which ... could now only be present as a silence ... the form without the fact ... a record of movements in the air" (TM, 80). The almost oppressive tangibility of the trophies is effectively counterpointed by the ethereal memories of irretrievable glory to which they bear witness.

In a rather different context, the unbridgeable chasm that yawns between aesthetic ideals and aesthetic production is made vivid in an evocative allusion to Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. Nick apostrophises the Parisian cathedral as an accomplished perfection: "Notre Dame *is* solid; Notre Dame *is* wise; on Notre Dame the distracted mind can rest" (TM, 120). But a more careful scrutiny of the description of the cathedral qualifies his idealism:

They had come abreast of the low island from which the great cathedral, disengaged today from her old contacts and adhesions, rises high and fair, with her front of beauty and her majestic mass, darkened at that hour, or at least simplified, under the stars, but only more serene and sublime for her happy union, far aloft, with the cool distance and the night The lamplight of the great city washed its foundations, but the towers and buttresses, the arches, the galleries, the statues, the vast rose-window, the large, full composition, seemed to grow clearer as they climbed higher, as if they had a conscious benevolent answer for the upward gaze of men Behind and at the sides the huge dusky vessel of the church seemed to dip into the Seine, or rise out of it, floating expansively – a ship of stone, with its flying buttresses thrown forth like an array of mighty oars. Nick Dormer lingered near it with joy, with a certain soothing content; as if it had been the temple of a faith so dear to him that there was peace and security in its precinct.

(TM, 120-21)

There can be little doubt that Nick finds evidence in the cathedral that the aesthetic ideal can be made real. But the description here is less one of a concrete and present perfection than of a strange, chimerical apparition of a floating ship of stone which seems not to be rooted in the earth but which levitates instead beyond the reach of the rather star-struck man admiring it. It looms out of the dark, which obscures and simplifies its detail, as a rather

threatening confirmation of the ideal's elusive, even illusory, status.⁶ Notre Dame suggests simultaneously the fulfilment and the impossibility of aesthetic success. Its "majestic mass" seems to proclaim the achievement of an almost overbearing, triumphant presence, but the fact that it is "disengaged from [its] old contacts and adhesions" undercuts that proclamation of completion with disruptive suggestions of lack and a failure to make origin manifest.

Considerably different from Notre Dame is the abbey at Beauclere, which ambiguously counterpoints failure and the value of incompleteness. In contrast to the cathedral's "large, full composition", the towers of the abbey "had never been finished, save as time finished things, by perpetuating their incompleteness" (TM, 194). While the abbey's rather forlorn aspect immediately connotes abandonment, compromise and diminished expectations, it is nevertheless enriched because it is party to the processes of time. Its aesthetic value emerges from the interchange between depletion and creation, where being "finished" can be achieved only through a "perpetuat[ion]" of "incompleteness".

Clearly, the ambiguities attached by James to the values represented by Madame Carré's salon are also at play in his allusions to Notre Dame and Beauclere Abbey. Furthermore, James goes to considerable lengths to show how the problems of absence, imitation and deferred origin also find expression in the fine arts. Like Miriam, Nick Dormer enjoys some degree of success: he extricates himself from Harsh, Lady Agnes and the restrictions of a public life; he paints portraits and these are, apparently, well received. Nevertheless, he is plagued by the evidence that that which he paints inexorably points towards absence. A portrait, like the actress's performance, is forever cut off from the subject it strives to evoke, and by definition cannot be literally present and true in itself. This state of affairs is shrewdly hinted at by Miriam's reaction to the news that her second portrait has been promised to Peter Sherringham, who has left for South America to lick the wounds inflicted by her rejection of his marriage proposal. Miriam "blow[s] half a gale about it", and protests that "there could be nothing less soothing to him than to see her hated image on his wall" (TM, 487). Should Peter indeed have received the portrait, it would, as Miriam points out, remind him of nothing but her unattainability and absence.

James stresses the problems associated with mimesis in Nick's work by having him paint precisely the person in the novel who signifies imitation above anything else: Miriam Rooth, the Tragic Muse. Try as he may to paint the real Miriam, she always presents the "found" attitude (TM, 444), so that his work of art is an imitation of an imitation of an imitation.⁷ Planning his second portrait of the actress, Nick tells Sherringham:

What I ought to do is to try something as different as possible from that thing [his

first portrait of Miriam]; not the sibyl, the muse, the tremendous creature, but the charming woman, the person one knows, in different gear, as she appears *en ville*, as she calls it.

(TM, 425)

The capricious Miriam supports him in his deluded aims:

Don't make me vague and arranged and fine, in this new thing ... make me characteristic and real; make life, with all its horrid facts and truths, stick out of me. I wish you could put mother in too; make us live there side by side and tell our little story. "The wonderful actress and her still more wonderful mamma" – don't you think that's an awfully good subject?

(TM, 451)

These ambitions, however, remain unfulfilled. Miriam presents, as expected, the "found" attitude, resonant of affectation and contrivance rather than the "characteristic and real". Basil Dashwood supplies some idea of how the artifice of the second painting promises to match that of the first when he visualises them placed in public:

it was indeed easy to guess how such an arrangement [that is, Peter's acquisition of the proposed painting] would interfere with his own conception of the eventual right place for the two portraits – the vestibule of the theatre, where every one going in and out would see them, suspended face to face and surrounded by photographs, artistically disposed, of the young actress in a variety of characters.

(TM, 495)

Evidently, the second portrait is just as likely to show Miriam in character, rather than "*en ville*". And it is interesting to note how Dashwood participates in the perpetuation of reflection so typical of acting *and* portraiture when he visualises the portraits "face to face", suggesting that the two pictures could "look" at one another in an interminable reflection of imitation.

The failure of Miriam's portrait to reflect its subject as an unproblematic and unqualified presence is shown to be the inevitable outcome of an unattainable ideal. For the portrait remains incomplete: "[h]e regarded this work as a kind of pictorial *obiter dictum*: he had made what he could of it and would have been at a loss to see how he could make more. If it was not finished, this was because it was not finishable" (TM, 417). Many paintings are, of course, like those Nick admires in the National Gallery (TM, 497), deemed to be complete inasmuch as the artist ceases to work on them and they are framed, exhibited and admired. But Nick's incomplete painting of Miriam effectively highlights the propensity of art works to be "not finishable" in another sense, in that they

are unable to reach and reflect saturation of presence. And it is hardly surprising that it is not only the portraits of Miriam that make this inability clear, but also Nick's attempt at representing that other cunning practitioner of artifice and illusion, Gabriel Nash.

Nash, in his abhorrence of repetition and his deification of the aesthetic gesture over the work of art, epitomises in his lifestyle and his conversation the speciousness of his set of aesthetic values. He regrets the "abject concessions" (TM, 28) required by literature, and remarks that Nick's attempts at painting will make his "case less clear, [his] example less grand" (TM, 125). Nevertheless, Nash makes lofty claims for the portraitist's occupation:

Nick shared his box at the theatre with Gabriel Nash, who talked during the entr'actes not in the least about the performance or the performer, but about the possible greatness of the art of the portraitist – its reach, its range, its fascination, the magnificent examples it had left us in the past: windows open into history, into psychology, things that were among the most precious possessions of the human race. He insisted, above all, on the interest, the richness arising from this great peculiarity of it: that, unlike most other forms, it was a revelation of two realities, the man whom it was the artist's conscious effort to reveal and the man (the interpreter) expressed in the very quality and temper of that effort. It offered a double vision, the strongest dose of life that art could give, the strongest dose of art that life could give.

(TM, 282)

Some of James's readers have argued that Nash is James's spokesperson in the novel,⁸ and the above statement of faith does seem to approximate, in certain respects, some of the sentiments expressed in both *The Tragic Muse* and in the prefaces to the New York Edition (collected posthumously in *The Art of the Novel*). But laudable as Nash's pronouncements might appear to be, they carry with them an unmistakable, facile glibness. As the novel progresses, Nick becomes increasingly doubtful of Nash's perspicacity. He "had already become aware that he had two states of mind in listening to Gabriel Nash: one of them in which he laughed, doubted, sometimes even reprobated ... the other in which this contemplative genius seemed to take the words out of his mouth" (TM, 282). Nick becomes impatient with Nash's reluctance (or inability) to make concrete his aesthetic ideals:

He had grown used to Nash – had a sense that he had heard all he had to say. That was one's penalty with persons whose main gift was for talk, however irrigating; talk engendered a sense of sameness much sooner than action. The

things a man did were necessarily more different from each other than the things he said, even if he went in for surprising you. Nick felt Nash could never surprise him any more save by doing something.

(TM, 371)

So Nash, in spite of his concerted efforts at being original and unique, is also a species of actor, a poseur caught up in the toils of imitation – so much so that his words “engender ... a sense of sameness”. So resistant is Nash to actual production that he is reluctant to sit as a model for Nick, and, appropriately enough, Nick is faced once more with the impossibility of making his subject fully present in the portrait. Nash’s imitations of originality and the insubstantiality of his rarefied aesthetics preclude even an approximation of his likeness. Instead, Nick has the impression that his painting of Nash is literally vanishing, in a mockery of fixity and saturation.⁹ Like Miriam’s portrait, it too is incomplete. The picture’s fading away is accompanied by Nash’s disappearance, and with him go the last vestiges of any hope that the work of art can live up to the demands of the aesthetic ideal.

The frustration and anxiety provoked by the failure of works of art to match the aspirations of their would-be creators is given eloquent testimony in a number of James’s tales about art and artists. In the short story, “The Liar”, Oliver Lyon tries, like Nick, to reveal the true identity of his subject by painting his portrait. It would seem, on the face of things, that he succeeds in his task, for both the Colonel and Mrs Capadose are horrified by what they see. But matters are not quite so simple. The artist’s success is complicated by the fact that the reader is never given any idea of what the portrait looks like: it is always hidden from view and no observer other than the painter and his victims ever sees it. Further, the destruction of the painting implies that its ability to capture its subject is vulnerable and transient, an implication also evoked by Nash’s fading portrait in *The Tragic Muse*. And, as accurate as the portrait of Colonel Capadose might be, it nevertheless fails to deliver to the artist what he most desires: Mrs Capadose’s humiliation and gratitude. Its artistic triumph is questionable, its failure to fulfil the painter’s purpose undeniable. Given the fact that the painting is a reflection of someone who is nothing if not false, and is produced by a painter whose motives are riddled with falsity and deceit, it is perhaps not surprising that it affords no satisfactory revelation.

One of the final comments in “The Liar”, Mrs Capadose’s remark, “But you must remember that I possess the original!” (CT: vi 440), resonates with irony. The story demonstrates that the painting cannot fully re-present the original (a state of affairs made certain by the painting’s destruction); that, far from possessing the original, Mrs Capadose is possessed by *it*; and – the implications seem endless – the “original” which possesses her is precisely the

opposite of original: the Colonel is a fake, and his artifice and *non*-originality are what imprison her.

In "The Real Thing" one encounters once more the portrait as a means by which the perpetuation of imitation and absence is maintained. The narrator/artist is unable to paint the Monarchs because, he claims, they are too real to be fictionalised in his illustrations. But whether the Monarchs are indeed the real thing is continually put into question, as are the ability and motives of the narrator himself. The implication that the narrator might be little more than a second-rate charlatan, attempting to capture on canvas representations of two models of questionable authenticity, renders the entire story a parody of representation, and serves to emphasise the impossibility of retrieving the presence of truth from the work of art. The suggestions of falsity and imitation that surround both model and artist, and the difficulty of establishing unequivocally the relative aesthetic values attached to the real and the fake, provide an echo of the repetitive and iterable nature of the work of art in *The Tragic Muse*. The possibility of representing "truly" is quelled at every turn.

In "The Madonna of the Future", one finds yet another disappearance of a painting: perhaps "non-appearance" is a more appropriate term in this case. Indeed, Theobald's "Madonna" is present *only* as an absence, the blank canvas a paradoxically expressive testimony to the fact that his model has grown old and, in fact, has never been the saintly virgin he perceived her to be. Theobald's vision can never be tainted by the compromise that the production of a work of art would demand, and his hand remains "paralysed" (CT: iii 39) by his pathetic, barren inspiration. The extremity of Theobald's case highlights the potential difficulties associated with artistic creation, but his aestheticism and abhorrence of the "vulgar effort and hazard of production" (CT iii: 38) also recall that of Gabriel Nash, who maintains that "having something to show is such a poor business. It's a kind of confession of failure" (TM, 123). Both artists' failure to "have something to show" suggests that the value and viability of their inspiration must ultimately be called into question and found lacking.

These stories contribute towards the construction of an inventory of aesthetic failure and dissatisfaction in James's fiction, an inventory comprised of blank canvases, fading portraits, inappropriate models, charlatan illustrators and portraits of actresses who can never be fully known. The question must then be asked: if the artists in James's fiction are persistently faced by the fact that their art points to absence rather than to stable identity and presence, what is to be made of James's own position in relation to this evidence? In spite of his witty deprecations of Peter Sherringham's idealism, James betrays (especially in the prefaces to the New York Edition) a resolute hankering after transcendent aesthetic signification and closure. In *The Tragic Muse* itself there emerges a conflict between James's satire of logocentric aesthetics on the one

hand, and, on the other, his endorsement of Nick Dormer's attempts to shrug off his obligations to the stifling rigidity of politics in favour of a life dedicated to art.

In his preface to the novel, James makes it clear that he views art and "the world" (with which politics is synonymous) as in "conflict" (AN, 79) and placed in an "opposition" which "beget[s] an infinity of situations" (AN, 80). The world of politics is given short shrift in the preface, as if to imply that it is the presentation of art and artists which is more deserving of his (and our) attention. James's main concern, he writes, was to "do something about art" (AN, 79), based upon his conviction that there "need never, at the worst, be any difficulty about the things advantageously chuckable for art; the question is all but of choosing them in the heap" (AN, 82). In the novel he makes only a half-hearted effort to suggest that political effort has anything to recommend it over art: its adherents – Mr Carteret and Lady Agnes being most noteworthy examples – are extraordinarily unimaginative and dogged in their limited and limiting view of life. Even the more sympathetically presented Julia Dallow fails (at least initially) to exert a persuasive hold over Nick, and, one suspects, over James himself, who does not allude to her at all in his preface, other than in a dismissive reference to her in passing as "a beautiful imperative woman with a great many thousands a year" (AN, 92). Nick's decision to abandon Julia and politics for an uncertain future as a portraitist is described as a triumphant gesture, a "romance" in which the artist "eats the cake of the very rarest privilege" (TM, 96).

But in spite of James's polarisation of art and "the world" in his preface, there are considerable ambiguities attached to the competing claims of art and politics in the novel itself, and the oppositions between the two are frequently deconstructed. Art, rather than providing satisfaction to the artist and control over chaos, becomes provokingly wayward; it is, ironically, the arena of politics that orders (and limits) life's "inclusion and confusion". Julia Dallow's formidable "completeness" (TM, 116) is reflected in the garden at Harsh, which offers no "worrying ambiguity": the military line of trees appears "to be waiting for some daily inspection", along with the "official frill of hedges" and the "named and numbered acres" (TM, 175). The evidence of Harsh warns that closure can become *foreclosure*, and resistance to inclusion may result in a benign but restricting exclusion of play and creativity. While the irony of this description fuels James's faintly damning treatment of politics in the novel, the irony also tends to rebound upon James's pronouncements on the aesthetic value of "discrimination and selection" (AN, 120), of making "relations" which "stop nowhere ... happily *appear* to do so" (AN, 5).

While Nick's choice between the occupations of portraitist and politician initially places politics in opposition to art, it becomes increasingly apparent that political activity involves efforts strikingly similar to those associated with

artistic production. Nick makes this point when he responds to Lady Agnes's reference to his position as a representative of Harsh: "What a droll thing to 'represent', when one thinks of it! And what does *it* represent, poor torpid little borough, with its smell of meal and its curiously fat-faced inhabitants?" (TM, 165). The processes of repetition and representation which James shows to be constitutive of dramatic production in *The Tragic Muse* are evidently as characteristic of, and problematic to, political work, in which the politician must represent a constituency whose identity is uncertain. The similarity between Miriam's dramatic gestures on and off the stage and those employed by Nick at Harsh is underscored by his suspicion that his "gallant readiness on platforms ... was not really action at all, but only a pusillanimous imitation of it" (TM, 177).

That art and politics in *The Tragic Muse* are not necessarily exclusive domains is forcefully indicated by the novel's ambivalent conclusion. In the spirit and tradition of comedy, the ending seems to be one of tidy resolution. But there remains nevertheless a distinct residue of disappointment that falls outside the novel's comic ambit and points towards the serious concerns that lie beneath James's humorous debunking of naïve logocentrism. Nick Dormer and Miriam Rooth may be regarded as successful artists who overcome considerable restrictions and limitations for the sake of art. But in spite of the triumph of Miriam's performance and Nick's portraits, both artists' conquests are tainted. Nick's claim to Peter that his decision to be a painter gives him a "great advantage in [his] life" which makes up "for the absence of some other things" is met with the reply: "That sounds a little flat" (TM, 426), a remark that aptly sums up the tone of the end of the novel. Nick's second painting of Miriam remains unsatisfactorily incomplete, and neither picture gives him "private glee" (TM, 482). Miriam dreads that her audience will "want Juliet for ever" (TM, 501), and, in spite of the vague promise that both artists have "a great deal more to show" (TM, 530), they are both subdued by less than perfect matches; their successes are, after all, controlled and compromised by the desires and behaviour of others. Nick is last seen playing in Julia's charades (TM, 514) – a figurative echo of his rather miserable subjection to her at the beginning of the novel – while Miriam is equally imprisoned by the ridiculous Mrs Rooth, who vows "I shall keep this up; I shall never lose sight of her!" (TM, 481). It seems as if the personal relationships in the novel serve, in this case, to reflect James's realisation of the impossibility of the pure aesthetic ideal.

Many critics have commented on the various disappointments at the end of *The Tragic Muse*.¹⁰ Daniel Mark Fogel's point that the "marriages that are finally made at the end of the various intrigues in the novel symbolise not a fusion of the opposed values of life and art but rather resignation to the impossibility of a fusion" (Fogel 1981: 173) is especially persuasive. I would

argue, however, that the ending does not so much acknowledge the “impossibility of a *fusion*” (my italics) as it does the impossibility of the *opposition*, because both elements of the art/life opposition are shown to contain disruptive traces of one another. Ironically, it is this *deconstruction* of the opposition which, to borrow James’s words, “beget[s] an infinity of situations”, in that it renders the conclusion ambiguously *inconclusive*.

Kenneth Graham’s view of the end of *The Tragic Muse* is unusual in that he provides a more positive response, claiming that James finally achieves a harmony “between technical means and imaginative ends”:

It is far too much to say that James gives us, at the last, the best in the best of worlds. For all these people it is a world that has not quite matched up to what it promised, and we feel a qualm at the forms it has finally provided for all that talent and energy and thought and feeling. But nevertheless our sense of reconciliation is a very profound one, as profound as at the end of all great comedies; and the profundity is that of James’s eventual submission to life and its limiting conditions. The harmony of the ending rises out of the whole book’s harmony of tone, plot, and motif, as James himself claimed in the Preface [O]n another level, [it] ... emanates from James’s decision in *The Tragic Muse* that there are no simple conclusions as to the relative merits and truths of “the world” and “art”, the free “expanse” of life and the shaping window of the mind.
(Graham 1975: 125-126)

Graham’s argument is convincing because it draws attention to the fact that the novel offers, in tandem with its comedy, a careful investigation of the impossibility of unqualified aesthetic transcendence. But it must also be said that Graham accepts too readily James’s own estimation of the novel as presenting a “preserved and achieved unity and quality of tone” (AN, 97), and he fails adequately to measure the discord sounded by the sense of failure at the end of *The Tragic Muse*.¹¹ Graham’s view must be qualified by the fact that he neglects the implications of Nick’s renewed participation in Julia’s “charades” at the end of the novel. In fact, Graham claims that Nick plays out the “*last* phase of [his] full charade, which is the charade of all people untrue to themselves” during his visit to Beauclere (Graham 1975: 98; my italics). This phase is finally broken, he says, “by the entry of the Tragic Muse herself into [Nick’s] studio” (Graham 1975: 101). Furthermore, what Graham sees as James’s acceptance of the fact that “there are no simple conclusions as to the relative merits and truths of ‘the world’ and ‘art’” underplays the persistence with which James venerates the possible achievements of the artistic enterprise throughout his career, especially in the prefaces to the New York Edition.

In spite of the thoroughness of Graham’s otherwise perceptive discussion of

the novel, it must be argued that the ending of *The Tragic Muse* is more ambivalent than he suggests. Just as James's novels frequently undermine the claims of their prefaces, what this novel enacts is the very same contradiction between the logocentric *ideal* of art and the impossibility of making that ideal present in the *work* of art itself. James's "ideal of faultlessness" (AN, 21) for his own novel as a work of art is that it should be a complete and unified structure. The uncertainty and ambivalence of the novel's conclusion, however, substantially undermine this will to closure.

The compromises of the end of the novel, I would argue, also suggest that James is hesitantly working towards an aesthetic which incorporates an apprehension of the interplay between art and life. However uncertain and erratically sustained, allusions to the value of aesthetic production as a process, in which mutability and incompleteness are regarded as positive attributes rather than symptoms of failure, are made throughout *The Tragic Muse*. The finished incompleteness of the abbey at Beauclere, the equivocal achievements of Nick's unfinished representations of Miriam Rooth, and the ambiguous revelations of Nash's fading portrait are all instances in which James seems tentatively to be testing an alternative set of aesthetic standards which recognise the value of process and provisionality. James's main achievement in *The Tragic Muse* is his exposure of the folly of an aesthetic based on reductive notions of truth and perfection, an exposure that involves an intricate examination of how iterative processes disrupt the opposition between origin and imitation. Lying dormant in this deconstruction is the potential, however hesitantly articulated, for an aesthetic which embraces dissemination and the endless displacement of origin rather than rejecting them as anathema to artistic triumph.

Notes

1. Abbreviations in this article refer to the following texts by Henry James:
TM: *The Tragic Muse*
AN: *The Art of the Novel*
CT: *The Complete Tales of Henry James*
2. A point also made by William Storm (2000: 142).
3. In keeping with the ambiguities associated with the title of "master" throughout James's work, Miriam calls Sherringham "Dear master" and "*Cher maitre*", and "*appeared to express gratitude and reverence by every intonation*" (TM, 334; my italics). Miriam's "gratitude and reverence" might, like so many other emotions displayed by the actress, be assumed for effect, and their sincerity is uncertain: Sherringham's retort that she is "doing the humble dependant now" (TM, 334) demonstrates that he is well aware of this. Certainly, his inability to control and

keep Miriam suggests that he is anything *but* her “master”. Moreover, ironically implied in Miriam’s contention that she can’t be “humble” because she is “too proud, too insolent in her triumph” (TM, 334), as well as in the repeated suggestions throughout the novel that Sherringham is held helplessly in her thrall, is the suggestion that it is *she* who has mastery over *him*. In “The Lesson of the Master”, published just two years after *The Tragic Muse*, James will develop the ironic potential attached by Miriam to the term (Scherzinger 1999: 283).

4. James attempts to assert his presence as originator of the text by recalling specific details of the moment and conditions of its production. In his preface to *The Tragic Muse*, for example, he recalls a scene of “a wide west window that, high aloft, looked over near and far London sunsets, a half-grey, half-flushed expanse of London life”:

The production of the thing, which yet took a good many months, lives for me again all contemporaneously in that full projection, upon my very table, of the good fog-filtered Kensington mornings; which had a way indeed of seeing the sunset in and which at the very last are merged to memory in a different and a sharper pressure, that of an hotel bedroom in Paris during the autumn of 1889

(AN, 85)

Later, he claims that rereading the last chapters of the text allows him to “catch again the very odour of Paris, which comes up in the rich rumble of the Rue de la Paix” (AN, 87). The vocabulary of presence is forceful in this extract: the scene “lives ... again”, the projection is “full” and “contempor[ary]”. The repetition of the word “very” (“my very table”, “the very odour of Paris”) marks an attempt to revivify the scene as complete and fully present. In these recollections, however, the figure of the author is also curiously displaced and his status as origin rendered problematic, in that his presence is made discernible only by metonymical references to his room, his table and his surroundings. Furthermore, while recollection makes present the smells and sounds of the scene of production for James, these memories are of necessity exclusive to the author himself, and cannot be shared in such a direct fashion by the text’s audience. Indeed, later in the preface, James acknowledges the inadequacy of these reminiscences, and admits that he has “got too much out of the ‘old’ Kensington light of twenty years ago – a lingering oblique ray of which, to-day surely quite extinct, played for a benediction over my canvas” (AN, 88). Now the vocabulary is suffused with implications of absence (the sunlight is “oblique” and “extinct”) that considerably temper his earlier assertions of unqualified presence.

5. A number of excellent essays have been written on the subject of *The Tragic Muse* as a painterly and dramatic text. Joseph Litvak, William R. Goetz, Judith E. Funston, Meir Sternberg and William Storm, in particular, provide detailed, lucid discussions.

6. A similar state of affairs may be found in James's tale, "The Madonna of the Future". During his "moon-touched aesthetic lecture" (CT, iii:14) delivered in the "grey dusk" of a Florence evening, Theobald opines:
- "The days of illumination are gone! But do you know I fancy – I fancy," – and he grew suddenly almost familiar in this visionary fervour, – "I fancy the light of that time rests upon us here for an hour! I have never seen the David so grand, the Perseus so fair! Even the inferior productions of John of Bologna and of Baccio Bandinelli seem to realize the artist's dream. I feel as if the moonlight air were charged with the secrets of the masters, and as if, standing here in religious contemplation, we might – we might witness a revelation!"
- (CT, iii: 13)

Of course, neither the painter nor the narrator of "The Madonna of the Future" witness a "religious" "revelation", but each is confronted instead with art's *non*-revelatory status. The "secrets of the masters" remain secrets, the "artist's dream" unrealised.

7. Adam Sonstegard places this play of iterability into the context of a slightly different medium in his essay on the relations that inhere between photography, painting and fidelity in the novel: "Nick's painting begins to function like a roll of photographic film that duplicates existing images" (Sonstegard 203: 34), photography being, moreover, "a new technology of rampant duplication" (p. 37).
8. Macnaughton provides a useful, concise summary of the history of this view of Gabriel Nash (Macnaughton 1985: 11). Kenneth Graham, however, offers this persuasive impression, persuasive because it draws a connection between the problematic status of the character and the disruptive effects of *différance* in *The Tragic Muse*:
- James does not use him as a spokesman in this novel any more than he uses him as a simple butt: there is, instead, an interplay of attitudes to Nash which is very characteristic of the book's general sophistication and lack of fixity.
- (Graham 1975: 87)
9. I cannot agree with Macnaughton that the painting does not actually fade away: Nick only imagines that it does, a "disappearance" convenient to him at a point when he has received from Nash all the benefits he is likely to garner from their friendship, and when Nick prepares to take up again with Julia Dallow, who despises Nash and the threat the aesthete-philosopher represents, from her point of view, to Nick's respectability and (it is hinted) masculinity.
- (Macnaughton 1985: 6)

Macnaughton's explanation is based upon a series of inaccuracies and misinterpretations. First, Nash's disappearance from the world of the novel –

he is not present at the “private view” (TM, 529) of Nick’s exhibition – serves as a kind of narrative confirmation of Nick’s impression that the painting is indeed fading away. Second, Bidy confirms the picture’s vagueness, asking Nick “whom it might represent, remarking also that she could almost guess, but not quite: she had known the original, but she couldn’t name him” (TM, 515). Third, the charge that Nick prefers to avoid the guilt inspired by Nash’s opposition to Julia Dallow is unfounded, as at this stage the relationship between the painter and Mrs Dallow has not resumed: the attempt at painting Nash takes place just before autumn (TM, 505) and the renewed relationship takes place much later, “toward the end of March of the following year” (TM, 512). Fourth, even if he does harbour hopes of a more intimate attachment with Julia Dallow, we have not been given, in the course of the novel, cause to suspect Nick of indulging in such self-deluding expediency in order to rationalise conflicting emotions. In fact, in his dealings with those most offended of parties, Lady Agnes and Mr Carteret, Nick shows great integrity and honesty, even if that integrity causes him considerable personal and financial loss. And finally, Macnaughton fails to consider the many implications attached to the blank, fading, incomplete and destroyed canvases which litter James’s fiction, implications which make the fading of Nash’s portrait likely to be a great deal more than merely a trick of a guilty imagination.

Sonstegard correctly observes that “Gabriel fades from both the canvas and the novel but of course reappears quite persistently in the novel’s criticism” (Sonstegard 2003: 36). He usefully offers a succinct summary of some examples, most notably the prominence Nash has taken in the flurry of readings of the novel as a (failed) homoerotic text that have emerged since the “outing” of James in the early 1990s (Sonstegard 2003: 28, 36). To his list I would add essays by Salamensky and Lane, (both of whom draw intriguing parallels between Nash’s portrait and that of Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde’s novel); as well as Sara Blair’s reading of the novel’s racial trajectories that decree Nash’s disappearance because “his unstable alterity contests James’s version of racial theatre”.

(Blair 1996: 505)

10. For example, Sergio Perosa (1978: 39), Daniel Mark Fogel (1981: 173-174), Edwin Fussell (1990: 128), and D.J. Gordon and John Stokes (1972: 82)
11. Elsewhere, however, Graham regards the prefaces with some suspicion, referring to them as “a unique and inestimable potpourri of misguided depreciation, over-honeyed complacency, and intermittent dazzling acuity, all of which can mislead just as easily as it can assist” (Graham 1975: 80-81).

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