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Portrait of an Act

Representation and Ethics in *The Portrait of a Lady*

Few of James's novels have generated as much reader frustration as *The Portrait of a Lady*. While Isabel's final decision to return to Osmond famously had such supportive contemporary readers as Grace Norton confessing to having thrown the book across the room in vexation, our collective irritation today at what seems like James's distinctly perverse refusal to allow us a satisfying narrative ending manifests itself only slightly less hysterically in the growing plethora of competing critical interpretations seeking to explain—and thereby in part to mitigate—Isabel's controversial decision. Leaving aside for the moment certain formal similarities that will be discussed later on, my suggestion will be that it is not so much perversion on James's part but, rather, his attempt to represent an ethical act that leads him to resolve the novel in this contentious way.

Granted, a concern with the ethical dimension of Isabel's story is nothing new. We find this expressed both thematically—few other James characters, after all, are as fascinated with the unfolding of their ethical development as Isabel Archer,—and in its encircling critical interpretations where the novel has been understood for the most part in terms of a narrative of aesthetic/ethical education: as a female *Bildungsroman*. For a significant number of critics, Isabel's final decision to return to Osmond is best comprehended as the result of an ethical widening of perspective produced by her experience of suffering that finally enables her to integrate herself more fully into the communal body and take up a socially responsible role as Pansy's mother. But even when critics trope Isabel's return rather more negatively on the ethical spectrum—Dorothea Krook, for example, for whom Isabel's return is discovered to result from her sexual fear of Goodwood—the prevailing tendency in the reception of *The Portrait of a Lady* has been to try to produce a convincing *reason* for the interminably vexed question of why it is that Isabel returns to the "house of suffocation."[1]

Given our ongoing failure to achieve critical consensus through such an approach, I propose that it is time now to head in the opposite direction. Rather than advocating yet another empirical or, as Kant would say, pathological reason for Isabel's decision, I will suggest that it is only by understanding her choice as intentionally empty—that is, made deliberately without reference to empirical considerations—that we can begin to approach the specifically ethical dimension of her act.

Before exploring the ethical implications of her act, however, let us simply note the extent to which the question of ethics has reasserted itself in the past couple of decades. As Lawrence Buell puts it in his introduction to a special *PMLA* issue on Ethics and Literary Study, ethics is rapidly becoming "the paradigm-defining concept [of the 1990s] that textuality was for the 1970s and historicism for the 1980s."[2] The origins of this "revival of ethics" are many, of course, but we can identify some of the major moments marking this shift that can be loosely grouped as follows: the continuing interrogation of the political and ethical implications of deconstruction, as witnessed by Jacques Derrida's recent works addressing more overtly "political" concerns, as well as his dialogues on ethics with Emmanuel Levinas; the critical legacy of Michel Foucault, whose examination of the discursive constructions of subjectivity has been invaluable in reorienting criticism toward the critiques of ideology and the construction of the "other" that the studies of gender, class, and race have adopted as their mandate; the politicizing of psychoanalytic concepts by the so-called new Lacanians, such as Slavoj Žižek and Joan Copjec, and their concomitant focus of attention on Lacan's *Ethics* and *Encore* Seminars in formulating a concept of an "ethics of psychoanalysis."[3] What is common to each of these diverse critical practices is that they are all in one way or another concerned with critiquing what has come to be called the "metaphysics of presence," whose founding principle is the philosophical concept of identity. Thus Levinas's philosophical concern to found an ethics of alterity on the Other shares with more deliberately "politically" oriented theory an interest in finding ways of relating to otherness that do not involve the violent subsumption of difference to identity.

It is just such a concern that drives one of the more interesting recent readings of *The Portrait of a Lady*. For Jonathan Freedman, the novel tells the story of Isabel's aesthetic education, in the course of which she is led to reject what he calls Osmond's reifying "aesthetic vision" and to embrace a more "ethical" mode of "seeing" at the end of the novel.[4] Through recognizing the common nature of suffering, Freedman argues, Isabel asserts her own aesthetic vision, which grants her an "embeddedness in historical process, her own participation in the human community" (Freedman, 162). I want to briefly examine this essay because I believe it explicitly presents what is often only implicit in many of the critical responses that trace the novel's trajectory in terms of the narrative of ethical progress or *Bildung*. This is the notion that the aesthetic possesses a specifically ethical function insofar as it is empowered to reconcile social and epistemological antagonisms. The teleological narrative of *Bildung* is unthinkable without the help of a recuperative aesthetic capable of redeeming bad or damaged experience for a wider social gain.

Let us take a brief look at Freedman's argument in order to identify the features of the reconciling or "redemptive" aesthetic. Freedman divides the aestheticism in the novel between what he calls the bad "Osmondian" reifying aesthetic, characterized by a violent objectification of other people into works of art, and Isabel's "higher" form of aestheticism in chapter 42 where, in a state of heightened perception, she discovers the truth about her relationship with Osmond. This heightened state of perception, Freedman argues, is homologous with Walter Pater's conception of aesthesis whereby "a 'quickened, multiplied consciousness' comes into powerful visionary being" (Freedman 160).

Accordingly, for Freedman, Isabel's vision in this chapter represents a form of perception that is "structurally different" from the Osmondian perceptual paradigm, which seeks to force the objects of the world to serve as objects for "detached contemplation" (160). For here Isabel achieves a moment of vision "experienced in, of and for itself"—a vision which, while detaching her from the world of objects, nevertheless allows her to "understand the nature of that world" (160). Yet even this form of aesthetic vision is still implicated for Freedman in a negative, because potentially alienated, aestheticism. Such a vision, he argues, is open to the criticism that the transcendence achieved by consciousness alone effectively removes the self from the world, from contact with others, "from any possibility of action, indeed from history itself" (161). In its place, Freedman offers a third version of aestheticism that he says sidesteps this critique: riding on the Campagna a few chapters later, Isabel is struck by the "splendid sadness of the scene," which seems to reflect her own "personal sadness" (*PL* 431). Recognizing the ruins of Rome as a place of human suffering, Isabel comes to an understanding of her own share in that suffering. As Freedman puts it, "Isabel achieves at this moment a humanizing vision in which her individual 'sadness' and the sadness of the scene connect to form an image of commonality and community, not one of alienation and superiority" (Freedman 162). And such an aesthetic vision, Freedman asserts, possesses a certain ethical dimension to the extent that, through the uniting power of sympathy in suffering, it allows an encounter with others that respects their fundamental difference.

Perhaps now is the time to put my cards on the table and admit that I sympathize with Freedman's desire to rescue the aesthetic from the powerful critiques mounted against its oppressive mechanisms, not to mention its implication in the totalizations of systematic thought, discovered most tellingly in post-Kantian idealist philosophies and literary Romanticism. However, by answering Osmond's "malevolent" aestheticism with a vision of community and the commonality of human suffering, Freedman unwittingly participates in the very tropes of the totalizing aesthetic he seeks to circumvent. To permit Isabel to find a reflection of her own suffering in nature is to call on the most powerful master trope of the aestheticizing vision, the metaphor that enables the reconciliation of two irreparably severed worlds. It is to subscribe to the idea that a specular relation exists between the sensible and supersensible realms of nature and of mind (or Spirit). Metaphorizing the external world as a reflection of her own consciousness, Isabel is able to bridge Kant's "immeasurable gulf" between the laws of nature and human freedom. But in order to do so, she must succumb to the violence of a reflective paradigm that, enabling one to see likeness in and through the fractures of difference, implicitly subsumes otherness beneath an imperial Identity. In Freedman's revised aesthetic, Isabel achieves her vision but only at the cost of the very ethical stance it was intended to promote (the respect for otherness). Tellingly, then, Freedman ends his essay with a gesture that confirms his allegiance to the traditional "aesthetic of redemption."[5] Offering James's style as a paradigmatic example of the redeemed, or "ethicized" aesthetic, Freedman understands the novel's refusal of closure—the unanswered question of why Isabel returns to Osmond—as the author's attempt to allow his characters a measure of their own autonomy without being "enmeshed" by the author's controlling vision. But when he argues that the effect of reading the novel is to give us the vaguely disquieting experience of seeing a "painted picture move" (Freedman 163), Freedman resorts to what is perhaps the most grandiose (and ethically suspect) of all of the aesthetic fictions that purport to bridge the distance between the world and art, namely, Pygmalion's gesture of bringing the aesthetic object to life.

Freedman's argument is interesting mainly because I find it emblematic of this recent "ethical" trend in literary criticism that turns on the philosophical problem of intersubjectivity, that is, on the question of how to relate to otherness in a nontotalizing way.[6] What is useful about it is the way it highlights what may often otherwise be obscured in many of these attempts to conceive of a nonviolent relation toward the other, namely, an unacknowledged dependence on aesthetic tropes such as reflection and recuperation which, if left unexamined, may work against the ethical solutions being sought after. I believe Freedman is right to orient the question of ethics toward the aesthetic realm. James's novel, however, provides a cautionary tale against the dangers of mistaking aesthetics for ethics.

I

For James, as for many of his contemporaries, the problem of ethics begins with the question of representation. Since at least as far back as the Kantian revolution, ethics has seen itself relegated to the realm of the noumenal, remaining with the other Ideas of reason (God, the thing in-itself) strictly unrepresentable. And while we have no evidence of the same level of direct interest in speculative philosophy as his brother William, James nevertheless cannot fail to have been at least mildly familiar with these basic tenets of Kantian thought as they came to him filtered through the intellectual tradition of mid-nineteenth-century thought and letters.[7] The question of how an ethical act can be represented must thus form the nucleus of this discussion of Jamesian ethics, as indeed it correspondingly also makes up one of the central thematic concerns not only of *The Portrait of a Lady* but also, as we will see, of *The Wings of the Dove* and "The Altar of Dead." In Isabel's case, however, the question is not so much how to make these representations, but rather how to *read* the preexisting ones in which she already finds herself. Let us begin, then, with this question as it first confronts our heroine on her arrival in Europe. Discovered moping after her father's death in Albany, Isabel is brought to Europe by her Aunt Lydia to see what might be made of her. Arriving at her uncle's ancient English seat of Gardencourt—whose name already denotes the uneasy marriage of nature and culture that we will investigate as being forged by representational language—Isabel, the "free keen girl," must now learn to navigate her way through a society far more richly layered with signification than she has been accustomed to in America. The question confronting Isabel, as many critics have already pointed out, is the question of how she should interpret these new representational complexes.

How, then, does Isabel read? It is now a critical commonplace to assert that Isabel's problem lies in her inability to distinguish between people's appearances and the reality behind them: that she is a naive reader of representations. After all, her terrible mistake in choosing Osmond results from her inability to see beyond the mask of his self-presentation. Reading synecdochically, Isabel finds herself unable to project beyond the part he shows her to a vision of the whole man. As Isabel later discovers,

> she had seen only half his nature then, as one saw the disk of the moon when it was partly masked by the shadow of the earth. She saw the full moon now—she saw the whole man. She had kept still, as it were, so that he should have a free field, and yet in spite of this she had mistaken a part for the whole. (*PL* 357)

But whether, in so doing, Isabel is guilty merely of a simple perceptual blindness or, more damningly, of what Moody calls her "grave moral blindness" resulting from her deliberate and willful refusal to see anything other than what she wants to see, there appears to be a fundamental disjunction between representation and reality that Isabel is, at least initially, unable or unwilling to perceive.[8]

At first sight, it seems that Isabel's problem is simply a naive confidence in the coincidence of signs and their meanings. Isabel's assertion that "she would be what she appeared, and she would appear what she was" (*PL* 54) lends credence to this picture of Isabel as an unsophisticated reader of representations who is unable to distinguish the difference between an inside and an outside; so much so, in fact, that she fancies she can judge books by their frontispieces, and people by the image that they project. Indeed as Elizabeth Sabiston points out, the novel colludes with this mode of seeing through a persistent metaphorical linkage between people and their houses, that is, with their visible social (and economic) representations.[9] Thus despite Isabel's protest to Madame Merle that it will not be for his house that she chooses a husband (*PL* 175), she refuses Warburton because she perceives that life at Lockleigh would imprison her in a social, territorial, political system in the same way that the house "locks up" its women, the Misses Molyneux. Caspar Goodwood is similarly incarcerating, as Osmond perceives with exquisite irony when he asks Isabel why she refused his suit: "It would have been an excellent thing" he muses, "like living under some tall belfry which would strike all the hours and make a queer vibration in the upper air" (*PL* 412). Similarly, Isabel's impaired view of Osmond is reflected in James's description of the Florentine villa house, which was a "rather blank-looking structure" (*PL* 195), wearing "more or less of that air of undervalued merit" that characterizes Osmond himself. It has a face like a mask, a "somewhat incommunicative character" with "heavy lids but no eyes; the house in reality looked another way" (*PL* 195).

Significantly, the power of these architectural metaphors derives from the way they work in the service of a mimetic representational paradigm that maintains that a visible, motivated connection exists between a person's inside essence and their outward appearance. Had Isabel only been better able to perceive this connection, this reading would argue—had she, that is, been able to read more subtly or "skeptically"—she would have refused Osmond on the same basis that she refuses Warburton and Goodwood. For she would have seen through his external guise and into the "whole man"; she would have understood that, like his house, he was looking at her "awry."

In either case, whether she reads naively or skeptically, both strategies share a founding assumption about the role of representation. This is the idea that the function of representation is to attempt to reflect (imitate on the basis of a visual resemblance) an already existing reality (Osmond's "true" nature). Hence mimesis contains certain inherent epistemological assumptions. It implicitly asserts the prior existence of a reality "out there," independent of the observer and the intentions of consciousness. Reading "mimetically" then, is to peel away the layers of representation in order to discover the truth behind it, to match the representation to the reality on the basis of a reflective relation. Signs may or may not be truthful, but the fundamental assumption is that their purpose is to represent a prior reality.

From this perspective, it is hard not follow those critics who fault Isabel's reading strategy, for hers seems only a particularly naive version of the seemingly more "critical" stance that Isabel's detractors uphold as a preferable mode of reading. For if Isabel could only read or "see" more critically, they suggest—that is, beyond the "false" appearances or facades of things—she would apprehend the truth of her situation, of the world, of relations between people, and ultimately, the truth of representation as an inherently untrustworthy mode. She must learn to see the reality of things and of people, to penetrate the veil of representation in order to see the essence behind appearances. Hence reading, for these critics, becomes a process of *aletheia*, the discovery or, better, the unveiling of prior truth.

The problem with such an epistemology of reading with regard to Henry James, of course, is that truth is never a simple concept for this writer whose narratives are typically much more concerned with the unfolding dramas of a character's "seeing" and knowing than with the peripeteias of plot (or, better, the plot's reversals are precisely moments of vision rather than of action). Truth is never static in James but requires the active, albeit subjective, participation of his characters to "fill out" its reality. The very difficulty of delimiting some prior truth is extensively thematized in his novels and short fiction, forming the narrative's central problematic in texts such as *The Golden Bowl*, *What Maisie Knew*, "The Beast in the Jungle," and "The Turn of the Screw" to name only a few of his best-known fictions. So we should at least be alert to the dangers here of oversimplifying James's dialectical understanding of the relation between representation and reality.

In case this seems like an unnecessary, external philosophical problem I am imposing on the novel, let us look again at the much-cited discussion between Isabel and Madame Merle where they quite deliberately speculate on such "metaphysical" matters. At first sight, Merle appears to advocate the naive perspective critics accuse Isabel of holding when she asserts the existence of a seemingly necessary continuity between the self and its representations. Merle lectures Isabel:

> "When you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our 'self'? Where does it begin? where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for *things*! One's self—for other

> people—is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garment, the books one reads, the company one keeps—these things are all expressive." (*PL* 175)

A closer look, however, shows that Merle's sense of self is no fixed or prior entity that finds expression in the representations of her famous "things." Rather, it is Isabel who clings to a concept of essential identity, and it is the representations that fail to represent her that she objects to. Isabel replies:

> "I don't agree with you. I think just the other way. I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly the clothes which, as you say, I choose to wear, don't express me; and heaven forbid they should! . . . My clothes may express the dressmaker, but they don't express me. To begin with, it's not my own choice that I wear them; they're imposed upon me by society." (*PL* 175)

Here we have not only two very different conceptions of self, but also different understandings of the way representation functions. For Isabel, one's self-representations in the form of one's clothes, houses, friends, and so on are unable to reflect what she holds to be her essential identity; indeed they inhibit her self's expression. She conceives of her self as a self-contained entity, existing prior to the structures of representation that she inhabits. Rejecting the "cluster of appurtenances" as arbitrary, for Isabel an adequate concept of representation would claim an essential relation between the self and its representational expression. It must represent the self in a nonarbitrary manner, reflecting her innermost self in a necessary relation.

Serena Merle, on the other hand, proposes a different view of the self and its relation to representation. For Merle, the self is a fluid concept, constituted by the very signifying representations that Isabel rejects as contingent. Accepting the arbitrary nature of signs, Merle puts them to work for herself, and understands their power for creating meanings. Where Isabel rebels against the limits of representation, seeking a more profound presentation of herself (although she is unable to say what this would be), Merle finds possibilities in those very limitations. Understanding the self as a product of representational structures, Merle is free to choose and select the meanings she finds useful. Thus Ralph is more astute than he realizes when he calls Madame Merle the "great round world herself" (*PL* 216). Not confined by a concept of essential selfhood, Merle can use the structures of representation to create her self and her world. If the result is a trifle artificial, this is because the self understood as a product of its representations has no need of the fantasy of spontaneity and naturalness that typifies the interiorized concept of subjecthood that Isabel favors: "If for Isabel [Madame Merle] had a fault it was that she was not natural [. . .] her nature had been too much overlaid by custom and her angles too much rubbed away. She had become too flexible, too useful, was too ripe and too final. She was in a word too perfectly the social animal that man and woman are supposed to have been intended to be" (*PL* 167).

I don't wish to place too much emphasis on this conversation, since of course the irony is that Serena Merle's position is merely one more stance she adopts in order to shield her "real" self from the scrutiny of others, that is, the fact that she is Pansy's mother. By the same token, despite Isabel's insistence on a stable, interiorized self, she undergoes the greatest transformation of all the characters in the novel. Nevertheless, this exchange is useful for articulating the two competing concepts of representation and their implicit epistemological positions at work in the novel. For here James presents *in nuce* the debate between two philosophical positions on representation which, as John Smith suggests, effectively comprise the history of philosophy.[10] The first is the idea that things-in-themselves can be known "in a universal, abstract and internal form which is independent of observer and context." The second is the idea that the truth "exists only in some mode of appearance, or representation-for-a-mind, whereby knowledge can consist only of myriad, necessarily incomplete, particular perspectives" (Smith 31). At issue in both of these positions is the question of determination, that is, where the ground of knowledge is to be situated. The first holds the ground in the object world. Here, the stakes of representation hinge on the success (or failure) of representation to accurately depict or reflect what is already given in nature. The second position asserts the priority of the structures of representation. This position has two facets; either it must authorize a concept of (auto-constituting) subjectivity as the grounding agent (where the structures of representation are understood as the structures of the perceiving consciousness). Or, like Merle, it abandons any concept of an autonomous subject in favor of a grounding in the nonintentional determinations of linguistic structures.

To assume, then, that Isabel's problem with reading entails a simple failure to match people's representations accurately with their underlying truth is thus to implicitly endorse a mimetic concept of representation whose philosophical implications are wide-ranging. As indicated, mimetic representation aims to accurately portray the object world but its paradox is that it has difficulty giving a "measure of commensurability" against which the representation can be gauged for accuracy (Smith 31). Furthermore, as Smith explains, this engages a vicious circle whereby every attempt to measure the accuracy of the representation would also have to be represented and therefore measured against another gauge, and so on to infinite regress (Smith 31). Mimetic representation must fail to depict the "truth" of its object, must always fall short, because like Isabel we can never be sure that the process of representing has adequately matched things as they are.

Here, then, is the paradox of mimetic representation: even while it attempts to reflect the reality of things as they are, mimesis forces us to confront the mediated nature of all representation. For as soon as we try to re-present an object, we are obliged to realize that there is no guarantee that the relation between the thing and its representation will match. There is no outside position, no neutral observation that can tell us whether we are successful. Epistemologically, this realization mirrors the dilemma of the Kantian subject confronted with an object world that is inherently unknowable as it is in-itself. What we see are "representations" of a world whose reality is forever inaccessible to our cognition. Ethically, this plants the subject firmly within the laws of the phenomenal world: construed as an "appearance" even to itself (as Isabel discovers when she flounders looking for an adequate "expression" of herself) the phenomenal subject finds itself determined by the empirical laws of nature. Actions performed by the (phenomenal) subject therefore take place according to nature's law of causality, which states that any action that takes place at a certain point in time is a necessary result of what existed in preceding time. And since the subject is unable to change what occurred in the past—as Kant puts it, "time past is no longer in my power"[11]—it follows that the subject's acts are acts of necessity—the results of prior causes—and not of freedom. They are acts, that is to say, determined by grounds not within the subject's power.

In James's time, the trope of irony seemed to offer a way out of this impasse of freedom and necessity that sentences the subject to a fatal determinism by its phenomenal nature.[12] Irony, after all, purports to take the subject out of time, or at least out of the temporality of mimetic representation by splitting the self, enabling it to see itself in two different places at the same time. As Hayden White observes, irony is essentially a trope of negation where "entities can be characterized by way of negating on the figurative level what is positively affirmed on the literal level."[13] In irony, the split opened by mimesis between subject and world becomes internalized as the split between two selves, empirical and linguistic. Irony's "subversive mimesis," in Alan Singer's words, appropriates the epistemological divide as an aspect of itself. Thus irony steps in where mimetic representation flounders, that is, by founding representation's "measure of commensurability" within its own reflective processes.

But by grounding knowledge in representational structures, irony presents its own epistemological and ethical dilemmas. For it either must assert a thoroughgoing idealism, where all representations are conceived as the product of a subject's self-activity; or, it is obliged to do away with the notion of a unified self altogether and with it, any concept of intentional subjective agency. This is because of irony's well-known tendency to reproduce, or to ironize itself in what Paul De Man calls "irony to the second power."[14] De Man explains how, while the temptation of irony is to construe the function of the reflected or "linguistic" self as one of assistance to the original or empirical self, in fact the structure of irony is such that it makes any return to the empirical world impossible. Irony's tendency to "gain momentum," to ironize itself, effectively severs the world of fiction from the empirical, foreclosing any return to the original self (Rhetoric 218). De Man explains,

> When we speak [. . .] of irony originating at the cost of the empirical self, the statement has to be taken seriously enough to be carried to the extreme: absolute irony is a consciousness of madness, itself the end of all consciousness; it is a consciousness of a non-consciousness, a reflection on madness from the inside of madness itself. (Rhetoric 216)

Wresting the subject from the determinations of nature, irony purports to free the subject from causal necessity by internalizing the gap between subject and world. But the resulting freedom is the freedom of utter lawlessness, since any ground on which to base an action is immediately annulled by the ironic gesture. Hence in the thoroughgoing freedom of the ironic consciousness we have no way of returning to a concept of subjective agency that requires at least a minimal ground in order to act. For in irony, each position is progressively negated in the madness of irony's self-annihilation.

The discourse of aesthetics was born precisely to address this seemingly intractable problem of the division in our being. As rational subjects, we can transcend the laws of nature and inhabit a world of intellectual freedom, but in order to act we must submit to the laws of the sensible world. Aesthetics surmises that there must be a way of mediating these two aspects of ourselves: either there is a rational basis to the sensible that will correspond to our rational nature, or there may be a sensible aspect to reason itself, a way of apprehending rationality directly through the senses. For Isabel, it is this second approach that initially seems to provide the ideal solution to her philosophical problem.

II

Let us begin by considering Dorothy Berkson's simple but incisive question: Why does Isabel marry Osmond?[15] Indeed, why does she marry at all, given the high value she places on her freedom? Critics have long noted how at the beginning of the novel, Isabel's freedom is largely conceived in negative terms. Isabel's peculiar vision of happiness—"A swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads one cannot see" (*PL* 146)—gives body to this ideal of freedom as an ongoing, open horizon of as-yet unseen possibilites. Central to this ideal is the concept of choice. As Isabel tells her aunt, she wants to be free "so as to choose" (*PL* 67). But, as Donatella Izzo points out, because any one choice would close off future choices, her ideal of freedom seems essentially to be the freedom *not* to have to choose.[16] Despite Isabel's prodigious enthusiasm for "life" there is a strange passivity or inertia in this concept of freedom, a trait that leads some critics to argue that her much touted "independence" actually masks an overriding fear of the world.[17] Ralph makes a similar observation when he gently chides Isabel in his often quoted statement, "You want to see but not to feel" (*PL* 134).

Nevertheless, Isabel's decision to marry is heavily predicated on her understanding this decision as an act of freely willed choice. Indeed, this "single sacred act" (*PL* 386) of her life, the choice of mate, is so frequently couched in devotional terms that we understand her choice to have almost religious significance for her. Why should choice be so significant for her? It is because choice is the means by which Isabel believes she actualizes her freedom. Tellingly, then, when Isabel refuses Warburton's suit, she justifies it to herself on the grounds that he had offered her no opportunity to consciously choose:

> What she felt was not a great responsibility, a great difficulty of choice; it appeared to her there had been no choice in the question. She couldn't marry Lord Warburton; the idea failed to support any enlightened prejudice in favour of the free exploration of life that she had hitherto entertained or was now capable of entertaining. (*PL* 101)

Similarly, the deprivation of freedom Isabel famously feels in Goodwood's company can be equated with the inhibition of her continuing right and ability to choose. Hence despite his protestations that he wants to marry her in order to make her free—"It's to make you independent that I want to marry you" (*PL* 142)—the kind of freedom he propounds is precisely the opposite of what Isabel means. Goodwood imagines that a woman's independence is to be found in marriage that can provide freedom from the social and economic constraints facing a young, unmarried Victorian woman in society: "An unmarried woman—a girl of your age—isn't independent. There are all sorts of things she can't do. She's hampered at every step" (*PL* 143). Dorothy Berkson points out how for Goodwood, freedom is assumed to be a "gift which he can bestow."[18] For Isabel, however, the issue is not pragmatic but transcendental. It involves an absolute freedom to judge and to choose her destiny, a freedom of mind that she finds all too restricted in Goodwood's company: "it was part of the influence that he had upon her that he seemed to deprive her of the sense of freedom. There was a disagreeably strong push, a kind of hardness of presence, in his way of rising before her" (*PL* 104–5). She finds him unyielding in the pressure he exerts on her, pressing his suit like a creditor assuring an economic obligation as Isabel's frequent metaphors of debt imply: "there was something in having thus got rid of him that was like the payment, for a stamped receipt, of some debt too long on her mind" (*PL* 144). His presence, "the stubbornest fact she knew," only serves to enforce her resolve "to avail herself of the things that helped her to resist such an obligation" (*PL* 105). Simply put, he deprives her of her freedom to choose.

Much of Osmond's appeal, in contrast, is in the way he personifies the act of choice for Isabel. When, after her first visit to the Val d'Arno, Isabel takes away the image of Osmond strolling on the terrace with Pansy, the image appeals not just for its aesthetic value—for the Romantic "lowness of tone" and the "atmosphere of summer twilight" (*PL* 237) that Freedman points out in his critique of Isabel's early aestheticizing vision—but also, more importantly, because it presents Isabel with a tangible image of a life dedicated to the continual act of selecting and choosing: the life of the connoisseur. Meditating on the image, Isabel recognizes how it "spoke of the kind of personal issue that touched her most nearly; of the choice between objects, subjects, contacts—what might she call them?—of a thin and those of a rich association" (*PL* 237). Isabel imagines that life with Osmond will be liberating rather than confining precisely because, epitomizing choice itself, he impresses her with a sense of expansion and possibility. Their life together would be a walk in the "open air of the world, indifferent to small considerations, caring only for truth and knowledge and believing that two intelligent people ought to look for them together and, whether they found them or not, find at least some happiness in the search" (*PL* 359).

At the beginning of the novel, then, Isabel's love of independence and liberty is characterized by what Paul Armstrong perspicaciously notes is an "essentially futural" notion of freedom.[19] Freedom, for Isabel, means inhabiting the state of possibility. This is a negative rather than positive concept of freedom, understood as an absence of limitation. Isabel believes she is free as long as there is nothing impinging on her continuing ability to choose, and her new inheritance comes to symbolize this concept of freedom. James tells us that, "[her] fortune [. . .] became to her mind a part of her better self; it gave her importance, gave her even, to her own imagination, a certain ideal beauty" (*PL* 193). Her fortune incarnates the ideal of choice: "She had never had a keener sense of freedom, of the absolute boldness and wantonness of liberty. [. . .] The world lay before her—she could do whatever she chose" (*PL* 272–73).

However, Isabel quickly comes to realize what Kierkegaard would consider the "spiritual sickness" attending her understanding of freedom conceived as boundless possibilities. For after the first deep thrill of inheriting the means for doing anything she wants wears off, Isabel takes to her traveling plans with almost a sense of desperation. Reflecting that having money gives her the means for "doing," she finds she has no idea what she wants to do, and chapter 31 finds her roaming restlessly around the Mediterranean basin. James has Madame Merle dryly observe how "even among the most classic sites, the scenes most calculated to suggest repose and reflection, a certain incoherence prevailed in her. Isabel travelled rapidly and recklessly; she was like a thirsty person draining cup after cup" (*PL* 274). After several months of such aimless movement, Isabel returns to Rome with a new sense of the value of limitation. James explains how, "[t]he desire for unlimited expansion had been succeeded in her soul by the sense that life was vacant without some private duty that might gather one's energies to a point" (*PL* 297). It is at this point that she decides to marry, a decision that Isabel believes will "[simplify] the situation at a stroke" (*PL* 297). For Isabel now believes she understands what Armstrong calls the paradox of freedom, namely, that one requires some limitation in order to be truly free. Freedom without boundaries, she discovers, is no freedom at all but rather a wearisome slavery to her immediate whims. By marrying Osmond, Isabel imagines she will expand rather than contract her freedom—duty will give her a vehicle through which to articulate her freedom.

In fact, Isabel has simply now learned the lesson Madame Merle was trying to impart earlier. As she rejected what she considered the arbitrary "conventions" of representational structures, Isabel nevertheless found herself unable to articulate what she imagines is her "essential" self: "I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself but I know that nothing else expresses me" (*PL* 175). In a similar way, Isabel's much-touted "freedom" remains meaningless without some kind of stabilizing ground or duty that will contract one's "energies," impose some limitation on her as yet formless freedom. Otherwise, her freedom remains a purely abstract idea, without any actualization in the world. Discovering that she must accept representational structures in order to gain expression for her self, Isabel now also realizes that the promise of unbounded possibilities will remain unfulfilled as long as she refuses to make a choice. Isabel had wanted to be free in order to "see life" but she realizes "that one cannot do anything so general": "One must choose a corner and cultivate that" she explains to Ralph (*PL* 288), "one must marry a particular individual" (*PL* 293).

Isabel's choice of Osmond astonishes everyone except herself (and of course the two involved in the deception). But her choice makes perfect sense to Isabel for whom Osmond seems to embody precisely the perfect balance between necessity and freedom she seeks. Osmond, like Merle before him, strikes Isabel as succeeding in the delicate task of managing to retain "one's independence" in the face of the demands of social convention. They do so, not by rejecting necessity out of hand, but by embracing it. In their easy submission to the "language" of manners, Osmond and Merle appear to Isabel to expand the possibilities of self-expression: "To be so cultivated and civilised, so wise and so easy, and still make so light of it—that was really to be a great lady, especially when one so carried and presented one's self" (*PL* 166), a trait Isabel resolves to try to emulate when she finds herself secretly exclaiming "I should like awfully to be *so*" (*PL* 165). Isabel finds Osmond the perfect counterpart to Merle's "greatness." His very fastidiousness in observing social conventions appears to put him beyond them, enabling him to achieve the appearance of exquisite naturalness: "Everything he did was *pose—pose* so subtly considered that if one were not on the lookout one mistook it for impulse" (*PL* 331). What makes Osmond so attractive to Isabel is that he appears to have found the solution to her philosophical dilemma. Rather than rejecting the limitations of (linguistic, social) structures, Osmond *identifies* with them, confiding to Isabel, "I'm not conventional: I'm convention itself" (*PL* 265). But in this way, through the paradoxical embrace of limitation, he appears to carve out a space of originality and freedom within the social network he inhabits. And, as Paul Armstrong points out, this is precisely the promise that the aesthetic holds out. Art, he explains, especially in the formal rigors of poetry, is a unique example of how the free adoption of limitation has the paradoxical effect of opening up the possibilities of expression (Armstrong 114).

In her portentous conversation with Ralph in chapter 34, Isabel lists her various reasons for choosing Osmond. Where Ralph sees only a "small," "narrow," "selfish," "sterile dilettante" (*PL* 291–92), Isabel finds Osmond's "being so independent, so individual" as a sign of his "noble nature" (*PL* 290). Deliberately misunderstanding Ralph's point about Osmond's "smallness," Isabel finds that quality to speak of his humility and indifference to the adulation of the world. Listing his qualities negatively, Isabel finds Osmond to have "no property, no title, no honours, no houses, nor lands, nor position, nor reputation, nor brilliant belongings of any sort" (*PL* 293). But despite the "smallness" of his possessions and position in the world, Isabel sees him inhabiting a far larger, richer, freer world than anyone she has yet met. What is it that gives Isabel this impression? It is because she makes the error of conflating his superior aesthetic sense with a superior morality. Why does she make this mistake?

As a fervent reader of German philosophy prior to her arrival in Europe, Isabel may well have had at least a passing acquaintance with the works of Friedrich Schiller whose popularization of Kant in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* finds in beauty a means for reconciling humankind's conflicting sensuous and spiritual impulses. Extending the Königsberg philosopher's claim that beauty is a symbol of the morally good, Schiller's contribution to aesthetic theory is to permit Kant's unrepresentable or noumenal Idea of freedom to acquire phenomenal form in the shape of an ethical community founded on an appreciation of beauty.

Through acquiring a taste for beauty, Schiller surmises, one is led from the state of nature to the state of freedom that for both philosophers is possible only through morality. Yet for Schiller such morality is realized not through the harsh imposition of strict laws but, more gently and efficiently (or, as we might say now, "ideologically"), through desire. Seeing nature in the free but lawful state that is beauty, we *want* to shed our natural mode as primarily sensuous creatures and similarly enter into the bound condition of morality.

It is worth noting that this is precisely the promise of the concept of *Bildung* which, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy have shown in their monumental study *The Literary Absolute*, is similarly implicated in bridging two irreconcilable realms.[20] Through the process of *Bildung* or self-formation, the individual merges with universal humanity by becoming an exemplary person, a tutelary figure whose singular narrative of coming-to-self nonetheless provides a model for all other individuals. Despite her disingenuous comment to Ralph, "if you look for grand examples of anything from me I shall disappoint you" (*PL* 133), Isabel's impassioned interest in her own self-development indicates the extent to which she has internalized the teleological narrative of *Bildung* in order to see her life in terms of a progression toward an ethical end. Recall how, at the beginning of the novel, Isabel "was always planning out her development, desiring her perfection, observing her progress" (*PL* 56). Now, however, using the Schillerian logic she has imbibed through Merle, Isabel discovers that an ethical condition may be reached not through the application of prohibiting laws as she previously thought ("It was wrong to be mean, to be jealous, to be false, to be cruel," *PL* 54), but with Osmond as her tutor, through following the dictates of her own desire. As the telos of *Bildung*'s activity of self-formation, a man whose life is dedicated to cultivating himself, Osmond appears to Isabel as an ideal figure to emulate whose exquisite taste is simply the visible, outward reflection of his equally exquisite morals. It is this, more than anything, that convinces her of the rightness of her choice: "You might know a gentleman when you see one," Isabel chastizes Ralph, "you might know a fine mind. Mr Osmond makes no mistakes! He knows everything, he understands everything, he has the kindest, gentlest, *highest* spirit" (*PL* 293) [my emphasis].

Armstrong argues that pride and idealism are responsible for Isabel's choice; her decision is the result of her basic self-deception. Believing she has understood freedom's lesson—the paradox of the "servile will"—Isabel imagines she is freely accepting limitation, but rather, in marrying

Osmond, she is in fact "attempting to defy limitation in the guise of accepting it" (Armstrong 112). Armstrong cites Ralph's suspicion that Isabel has chosen Osmond as a result of a "fine theory" she has invented about him but, as Armstrong puts it, the problem is "it is too much a theory, and it is simply too perfect" (113). He explains, "[a]lthough she is binding her will by devoting herself to Osmond, Isabel's pride in accepting restraints blocks any sense that she is actually going to be limited. Romantically imaginative still, she senses only the possibilities of which she will avail herself" (113). Armstrong is right, I believe, to pinpoint Isabel's choice as the result of a "fine theory," but this stems less from her pride than from her mystified idea of the relation between ethics and aesthetics. Believing she is making an ethical choice, Isabel marries on the aesthetic's "fictitious theory," namely, that a motivated relationship pertains between moral and sensuous realms whose apotheosis is found in the man of taste, or the "beautiful soul." Whereas Goodwood represents (among other things) the demands of sensuous impulse, while Warburton, despite his liberal tendencies, personifies the claustrophobic constraints of preexisting social and moral systems, Osmond presents himself as the perfect combination of both. As Ralph observes, he is "the incarnation of taste" (*PL* 291): he is what Hegel would call the "living concept" of aesthetic ideology, of beauty's ideal synthesis of both sensible and supersensible realms.

Driven as she is by such aesthetic concerns, it is not surprising that Isabel should choose Osmond over her other suitors. Osmond will show Isabel how to reconcile her ideal of freedom within the constraints of necessity. The problem of course, which James presents with such exquisite irony in his portrayal of Osmond, is that such an aesthetic solution is accomplished only by disguising the violence through which this synthesis is ultimately forged. The violence with which Osmond inflicts his will on everything in his sight is in fact no arbitrary or capricious facility but the underlying truth of what De Man calls "aesthetic ideology" that succeeds in yoking together two irreconcilable realms and whose primary trope, as we saw with regard to Freedman earlier, is metaphorical identity (i.e., metaphor in its "symbolic" modulation).[21] James's Osmond ironizes the hidden truth of *Bildung*'s metaphorical ideal, namely, the violence of a will that assimilates everything under its purview.

Of course, as a parody of some of the worst excesses of late Victorian aestheticism, Osmond simply represents James's satiric commentary on contemporary aesthetic concerns. However, as with all parodies, it only works to the extent that it contains a grain of truth. The deep insight that James has us discern through Osmond is the way the fantasy of aesthetic reconciliation remains just that, a fantasy that purports seamlessly to integrate the realms of nature and freedom on the basis of a perceived identity while at the same time veiling the underlying violence by which this apparent synthesis is achieved.

But just as important concerning our tendency to read *The Portrait of a Lady* in terms of a novel of development is the way James's Osmond simultaneously directs a revitalized attention to the mechanisms by which the *Bildungsroman* itself secures its reconciliatory narrative goals. For to the extent that he embodies the telos of the *Bildungsroman*'s ideal of *Bildung* (as the beautiful soul), Osmond's obscene will to power obliges us to confront a similar will expressed structurally in the *Bildungsroman*'s drive toward narrative closure which, as Martin Swales observes in his influential study, characteristically follows a certain established pattern. Swales explains how the *Bildungsroman* "operates with a tension between concern for the sheer complexity of individual potentiality on the one hand, and a recognition on the other that the practical reality—marriage, family, career—is a necessary dimension of the hero's self-realization, albeit one that by definition implies a delimitation, indeed, a constriction, of the self."[22] Following Marc Redfield, it is what we might now call the "aesthetic ideology" of the *Bildungsroman* that permits Isabel to suddenly perceive during her aimless travels how, what had appeared to be a constriction of the self, is nothing but the actuality, that is, the practical realization, of her freedom which will finally be able to reach temporal and phenomenal expression through the public ritual of marriage. Incorporating the individual into the social body, the beauty of marriage—the ultimate telos of the *Bildungsroman*—for Isabel and other heroines of nineteenth-century fiction lies in the way it promises to realize the ideal synthesis of freedom and necessity, uniting under one term both individual desire (sensuous impulses) and the larger social Good (an ethical or moral community). In marriage, the individual's desire coincides with society's law, transforming what is essentially (as Osmond knows very well) an economic transaction into an expression of personal freedom. Like Schiller's beauty, the marriage contract elicits *voluntary* consent to society's limitations on the individual's erotic freedom by revealing how, what appeared initially to be opposed (individual desire and duty), are really one and the same thing. But we need not wait for twentieth-century critics such as Adorno to point out how such an apparently ideal syn-