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SEEING THINGS AS THEY ARE: MONEY AND ART IN ZOLA AND HENRY JAMES

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Introduction

“I recollect a poem, which must be among
my papers, where the Muse of tragic art and another
female form, by which I personified Commerce,
were made to strive very bravely for my most
important self.”

—Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*

It is something of critical commonplace by now that money plays an enormously important role in the nineteenth-century novel. As John Vernon writes, “the twentieth century possesses far less claim to be called the age of money than does the nineteenth. The evidence is there in novels, and in the way those novels register the historical forces that speak through them.”¹ Compelling formal reasons have been adduced to account for this in the modern novel generally, and it is no doubt the case that the two objects of consideration for this study—money and the novel—are closely related social phenomena. Indeed Lionel Trilling, noting the poverty of Don Quixote, posits the two as social cognates: “the novel is born with the appearance of money as a social element—money, the great solvent of the solid fabric of the old society, the great generator of illusion.”² Closer to our own period of interest, Edward Said points to the close relationship between pursuit of fortune (and consequent re-directing of reproductive energy) and the plot-design of the nineteenth-century novel: “Marx’s discovery of the imaginative role played by money in mid-nineteenth-century Western society is analogous to the discovery made by the novelist’s record of a celibate enterprise. . . . Money is always in evidence

¹ *Money and Fiction: Literary Realism in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*. Ithaca (Cornell University Press), 1984, p. 8.

² *The Liberal Imagination*, New York (Viking), 1950, p. 209.

during the course of the realistic novel. It seduces the protagonist from natural procreation to a ‘novelistic’ enterprise, to living with great expectations.”³

Less often remarked is the advent of the *Künstlerroman* which attends this growing interest in mobilized values after the French Revolution. An attendant development is the waning of religious authority and sentiment. Among the secular forms of “vocation” that fulfill a growing spiritual need in the absence of stability are the life of business and that of art. The two strands run in seemingly contrary directions. Emblematic of this divergence, and appearing at the dawn of this period, is Wilhelm Meister’s fragment on the poet at the crossroads, torn between an artistic career and the paternally decreed pursuit of business. The situation posed by that fragment is emblematic of this study’s inquiry, which takes the form more particularly of a comparative study of two of the period’s most ambitious literary artists, Emile Zola and Henry James, as it enquires into the relation between aesthetics and that concrete reality confronting all artists of the time: the marketplace. Aesthetics here is taken in both its broad sense of philosophical reflection on the place of beauty within humanity’s social destiny, and the far narrower sense of *aestheticism*, the various positions taken against the compromises of bourgeois art which form part of both novelists’ background.

As the publishing industry developed in the nineteenth century, there was a growing demand for content that resulted in a massive proliferation of text, but also something of a buyer’s market for publishers. In this environment, poets lost what had been an essential part of their function and cultural cachet. No longer dependent on patrons, they were in a sense more “free.” Or so Zola believed. Others observed merely the advent of a new master to serve: bourgeois taste, with its appetite for an art “fortified little by little with romantic elements diluted

³ *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. London (Granta), 1985 [1975], p. 145.

and rendered bland, assimilated at last by the great public after fifteen or twenty years through the intermediary of skillful—but not very artistic—adaptors.”⁴ For those disinclined to cater to this taste, the new conditions could be fierce and often unforgiving, as the career of Théophile Gautier attests. In reaction to this devaluation of “fine” literary art by the market, there arose a loosely amalgamated set of positions collectively referred to as *l’art pour l’art*: “in the absence of political faith, after the disappearance of every slightly elevated social ideal, in the continual weakening of religious faith, at the moment of decline of the great artistic school of 1830, one sought on all sides a new faith, and those we have named [Gautier, Flaubert, the Goncourts, Baudelaire, Fromentin, Leconte de Lisle, Banville, Barbey d’Aurevilly], and many others with them, hoped to find this faith no longer in life and in action, but in a rejuvenated form of art which remained to be determined.”⁵ If the form this new art should take remained to be determined, what was certain was that it must not be harnessed to utilitarian aims. The notion of art as allied with the “useless” here began to assert itself. This inverse proportion of utility to beauty finds vigorous expression in Gautier’s preface to his volume *Premières poésies 1830-1845*, published in 1866:

⁴ Cassagne *La théorie de l’art pour l’art en France* p. 115, my translation.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110. But it would be a mistake to say that Flaubert did not remain engaged in an effort clearly to comprehend (and rigorously to criticize) the society of his era. Edmund Wilson has commented astutely on this aspect of the novelist in his essay “Flaubert’s Politics”: “Flaubert had more in common with, and had perhaps been influenced more by, the socialist thought of his time than he would ever have allowed himself to confess. In his novels, it is never the nobility—indistinguishable for mediocrity from the bourgeoisie—but the peasants and working people whom he habitually uses as touchstones to show up the pretensions of the bourgeois. . . . [L’*Education sentimentale*] plants deep in our mind an idea which we never quite get rid of: the suspicion that our middle-class society of manufacturers, businessmen and bankers, of people who live on or deal in investments, so far from being redeemed by its culture, has ended by cheapening and invalidating all the departments of culture, political, scientific, artistic and religious, as well as corrupting and weakening the ordinary human relations: love, friendship and loyalty to cause—til the whole civilization seems to dwindle.” Edmund Wilson, *The Triple Thinkers*, in *Literary Essays and Reviews of the 1930s and 40s*, New York (Library of America), p. 80, p. 84.

En général, dès qu'une chose devient utile, elle cesse d'être belle.—Elle rentre dans la vie positive, de poésie elle devient prose, de libre, esclave.—Tout l'art est là.—L'art, c'est la liberté, le luxe, l'efflorescence, c'est l'épanouissement de l'âme dans l'oisiveté. . . . [L]es objets dont on a le moins besoin sont ceux qui charment le plus.

“Utile” is, of course, merely a catchword for the means-ends rationality of the reigning bourgeois values; for art does have one extremely important use: “l'art est ce qui console le mieux de vivre.”

There have been several arguments tying the development of literary and economic discourse in recent years. An especially compelling case has been made by Catherine Gallagher against the “rise of the novel” thesis put forward by Ian Watt. Watt had begun his study of the growth of the novel in eighteenth-century England by privileging the category of realism: “Modern realism . . . begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses: it has its origins in Descartes and Locke. . . .”⁶ Against this thesis, Gallagher points out that often the works of Fielding or Defoe overtly signal their fictionality to the reader, so that the dominant qualities of the modern novel—which after all does not fool readers into believing its story—require further explanation: “we seek some indication of what it was about early modernity in the first capitalist nation that propagated not just *realist* fiction but *realist fiction*.” Instead of inviting readers to believe in the literal truth of a novel (as some earlier narratives had conventionally done), these works solicit the reader’s powers of judgment as to their *believability*. The reader is thereby encouraged, in this make-believe context, to “extend credit” to the situations depicted, a mental exercise that had more serious applications throughout

⁶ *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, Berkeley (University of California Press), 1957, p. 12.

modern life, including the acceptance of paper money: “too wise to believe that the treasury held enough specie to cover all of their paper at once, [common people] instead understood that the credit they advanced collectively obviated the need to hoard precious metals privately. . . . Indeed, almost all of the developments we associate with modernity—from greater religious toleration to scientific discovery—required the kind of cognitive provisionality one practices in reading fiction, a competence in investing contingent and temporary credit.”⁷

Beyond the essential qualities of “realistic” novels, literature gradually began to evolve discourses about itself and its own “value” as a commodity that naturally connect to the economic conditions in which it developed. This value received descriptions in various terminologies, depending on the specific qualities critics and writers wished to valorize, but the general drift is toward a notion of the “literary” which can be set apart from (or above) other fictional commodities on the market, and eventually towards a hypertrophy of the “aesthetic” quality which pleads for an autonomous sphere outside the “sordid” cares of the economic altogether. Initially a technical term used to specify sense-perception, “aesthetic” soon came to denote the realm of beauty (complementing, in the Kantian system, the branches of epistemology and ethics), whence it gradually was transformed into a fetish object for the generation of writers following the romantics. Erich Auerbach identifies this development as first developing in France in a social context dominated by two major features. First, the growth of the reading public led (in the eyes of artists, at least) to a tremendous efflorescence of reading matter which produced in turn a “leveling” effect, a “coarsening of taste” and devaluation of the rarefied rewards of earlier forms of literary art. More significantly, a “moral discomfort” came to prevail

⁷ “The Rise of Fictionality,” in *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti, vol. 1, Princeton (Princeton University Press), 2006, pp. 337-63; pp. 346-47.

with the waning influence of religion, as the patent injustices produced by political and economic developments of the new society could no longer be explained away as “decreed by God.” The Balzacian or Hugolian manner of addressing social reality head on was no longer felt as viable: “There now arose the conception and the ideal of a literary art which in no way intrudes into the practical events of the present . . . and whose sole duty it is to fulfill the requirements of style. These demand that the subjects treated (be they external phenomena, be they products of the author’s apperception or imagination) be made manifest with sensory vigor and, further, in a new, not yet outworn form which will reveal the writer’s distinctive character. In this attitude . . . the value of art, that is, of perfect and original expression, was assumed to be absolute. . . .”⁸ It was the unique characteristic of this new movement “to ascribe to literature and art in general the most absolute value, to make them the object of a cult, almost a religion.”⁹ Such an attitude suggests exclusivity, but whatever their pretensions to embody alternative values to the reigning ones of economic competition, such works nevertheless, as commodities, lived by such competition. Indeed, in a kind of return of the repressed, the emphasis on seeking out a “new, not yet outworn form” gives the gesture away immediately in its espousal of the market value of novelty. Peter Bürger’s survey of the naturalism-aestheticism opposition foregrounds the fact that such movements had to compete with one another in the literary marketplace, a fact that became more pronounced with Zola’s growing success: “The consciousness of questions of the literary market—sharpened not least by Zola’s extraordinarily high sales—also determines certain categories of aestheticist conception of literature. It is only possible to explain the significance

⁸ *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask. Princeton (Princeton University Press), 1953, p. 503.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 504.

attributed, among aestheticists of the most varying stamp, to a concept of novelty emptied of any content determination, as an interiorizing of the literary market's competition principles."¹⁰

Although the self-styled “aesthetic movement” in Britain was in many ways a cultural import from France, parallel developments had already been taking place in the British publishing situation that paved the way for this reception. Mary Poovey explores these developments in considerable detail, and her work presents a salutary reminder that such ideologies do not simply arise independently of historical developments—that the aesthetic is not a fully autonomous sphere—but are *conditioned* by them.¹¹ After the repeal of the so-called “knowledge taxes” (sales taxes on paper goods like periodicals that were passed along to consumers, with the effect of limiting the lower classes’ exposure to potentially subversive ideas), confronting a market newly flooded with print, “Literary” writers increasingly had to locate an explicit standard of “value” for their works—which they did precisely by situating it in opposition to these works’ *market* value. Poovey’s work helps us to recontextualize aestheticism as a further outgrowth of the “literary” which emerged during this period. It is a Romantic concept (elaborated by Wordsworth and Coleridge in connection with “originality”), but further refined by Ruskin at midcentury, in response to particular historical conditions. These conditions were a newly active print market, one in which the unprecedented number of imaginative writers gave rise to a competition among them for market share of the general readership. The strategy

¹⁰ Peter Bürger, “Naturalismus – Ästhetizismus und das Problem der Subjektivität,” in *Naturalismus/Ästhetizismus*, Suhrkamp, 1979, p. 52.

¹¹ The point is also made by Cassagne with respect to the development of *l’art pour l’art* in France: “The works of Baudelaire, of Flaubert, of Leconte de Lisle bear . . . a reflection of the epoch. The theory of *l’art pour l’art*, of which they are the *approximative* practical application, was born of given historical circumstances. . . . It marks a reaction against the development of industrialism. It is one of the forms of resistance to the parallel, albeit antagonistic, progress of the bourgeoisie and of democracy, a progress which is the characteristic of the time.” *La théorie de l’art pour l’art en France*, p. 458.

adopted in this campaign was to define the lesser product precisely in terms of its marketability—to be popular was to be inferior. One may certainly suppose that such valuations may have formed part of readers’ consciousness as they navigated this abundant print landscape, but the aesthetic ideology—the redefinition of what constitutes literary *value*—that grew more pronounced in the latter half of the century was mainly a creation of writers, and was a direct reaction to the market notion of value. While there were different ways of conceiving what constituted this aesthetic value, an obvious one refers to persistence through time. This is hardly surprising, given that “commodity” novels, the bestsellers of those early days, were trading on the capitalist virtue of *novelty*. Aesthetically valuable works were thus those books that could be profitably reread, and even those that *demand*ed such reading.

From here, it was a short step to the notion of the “aesthetic” as that which privileges subjective sensation and emotion. Raymond Williams, noting the term’s proximity to Arnold’s concept of “culture,” describes how it served to individualize the experience of art, making it in effect a sort of private refuge of pleasurable sensation, shielded from the coarseness of a market-driven society: “isolated subjective sense-activity as the basis of art and beauty as distinct, for example, from *social* or *cultural* interpretations. It is an element in the divided modern consciousness of *art* and *society*: a reference beyond social use and social valuation which, like one special meaning of *culture*, is intended to express a human dimension which the dominant version of *society* appears to exclude.”¹²

* * *

¹² *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Revised Edition, New York (Oxford University Press), 1983 [1976], p. 32.

Goethe's novel anticipates several important motifs that will appear many decades later in the works here considered. The first is the crisis of vocation—specifically, the contrasting of the artist's life with that of the merchant or businessman. Another relates to the effects suffered by the individual personality through artistic activity, be it that of the artist or the model. And in the case of James, at least one further resonance with the German predecessor is discernible: the problem of filial responsibility, which is one variation on the motif of fractured family relations. If Wilhelm's youthful poem presents an opposition between *Dichtkunst* and *Gewerbe*, broader patterns in the novel's composition point to an analogical source of fascination between the aesthetic and the commercial spheres. This fascination arises from contemplating a complex arrangement of smaller parts. In a flashback episode recounting a puppet-theater production from his youth, Wilhelm's urge to demystify for himself the mechanics of the spectacle leads him to glance under the curtain. Here he observes the objects, their function having been served, being packed away, leaving his curiosity but imperfectly satisfied. The terms in which he articulates his frustration point to the essential element missing in his awareness: "I sank into deep meditation: my discovery made me both more satisfied, and less so, than before. After a little, it first struck me that I yet comprehended nothing: . . . for the connection of the parts with each other was entirely unknown to me, and every thing depends on that."¹³ This preoccupation with "connection" (*Zusammenhang*) reappears later, during a debate between Wilhelm and his friend Werner. The latter, annoyed that Wilhelm should ever have written a poem personifying the spirit of *Gewerbe* as an old sybil, praises the advantages enjoyed by the merchant, who inhabits a

¹³ Quotations are from Thomas Carlyle's translation of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, a work that Henry James reviewed in 1865 in his early twenties, and which seems to have left a lasting influence. It is alluded to in both *Roderick Hudson* and *The Tragic Muse*, and the quote in our epigraph may well have suggested the title of the latter.

world free of confusion at the commodities around him, from the superficially tangled copiousness of which he can mentally distil an underlying structure, seeing them in their place—and their benefit to himself—within the totality of business (*Handel*): “When you observe how many men are busied, whence so many things have come, and whither they are going, you will feel as if you, too, could gladly mingle in the business. You will then see the smallest piece of ware in its connection with the whole mercantile concern; and for that very reason you will reckon nothing paltry, because every thing augments the circulation by which you yourself are supported.” This question of the relation of part to whole implicitly subsumes the opposition of *Dichtkunst* to *Gewerbe* depicted in Wilhelm’s poem into a broader analogy, an impression of the pair as competing but analogous invitations to human activity. As we will see in the following studies of Zola, this is precisely his approach—Claude Lantier’s aesthetic activity is the outlet for his neurotic, obsessive energy (his share of the familial disease) just as Saccard’s tireless financial maneuvering is his.

But Werner’s admonishment to Wilhelm also evokes the source of these temptations. The commercial comings and goings observed by the contemplative gaze of the merchant are liable to produce for the uninitiated little more than exhausted confusion, followed by acceptance of the narrow horizons of one’s direct experience. As complexity begets ever greater complexity, the situation evoked in Goethe’s novel feels all too familiar two centuries later. Indeed, it has become a cliché in our time merely to observe how few of us can say with any certainty whence comes the food composing the substance of our bodies. The merchant Werner masters this complexity of exchange, and recognizes in the flow of commodities no mere abstract, external movements—they provide the material nourishment of his existence, as the original text makes clear: “*die Zirkulation . . . von welcher dein Leben seine Nahrung zieht.*” As commercial society

is compelled, through its inner dynamics, to spread its tendrils in all directions, seeking out ever new sources of lifeblood to sustain its constant growth, a new subjective feeling arises of occupying a tiny node in an increasingly large and complex system. Georg Simmel, in approaching his philosophical account of the “totality of being,” chooses as the vehicle for doing so precisely *money*. “In this problem-complex, money is simply a means . . . for the presentation of relations that exist between the most superficial, ‘realistic’ and fortuitous phenomena and the most idealized powers of existence, the most profound currents of individual life and history.”¹⁴ We may surmise that money was an obvious choice for such a tool. Its function as a universal means serves to unite even the most seemingly remote spheres of existence.

As Franco Moretti observes, representations like Goethe’s in *Wilhelm Meister* were not universally received: “In France, the socio-cultural model of the classical *Bildungsroman* would have seemed unreal, and indeed it never took root there.”¹⁵ But it is interesting to note that what will appear in Zola’s *L’Argent* as a kind of mania, an illness explicable in Zola’s terms in part through the inherited pollution, is merely an unhinged variant of good “householder” behavior as espoused by Werner in his dialogue with Wilhelm Meister. “Capital, due to its purely quantitative nature, and the competition it is subject to, can be a fortune only in so far as *it keeps growing*. It must grow, and change form, and *never stop*: as Adam Smith observed in *The Wealth of Nations*, the merchant is a citizen of no country in particular. Quite true, and this is precisely the point: the merchant’s journey can never come to a conclusion in those places . . . where everything is ‘well-being, transparency and concreteness’. He will never know the quiet happiness of ‘belonging’ to a fixed place.”¹⁶ This is all too true of Saccard, who will narrowly escape prison (thanks to his

¹⁴ *The Philosophy of Money*, p. 55.

¹⁵ *The Way of the World*, p. 64.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

family connection) and finish out the novel allegedly at work on a new land-reclamation scheme in the Netherlands. The reader senses that this project will go much like the previous ones: some modest early success, followed by the quick attainment of astonishing victories, culminating in a terrible fall for Saccard and anyone who happens still to be under his influence.

It is likely that *Wilhelm Meister*, as it was appearing in installments, was a significant inspiration for one of modern philosophy's most inventive and provocative examinations of the relation of art to individual and social life, Schiller's letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Where Goethe's novel made room for a defense of the businessman's panoramic view of human activity (his perspective on the general *Zusammenhang*), Schiller notably approaches practical human occupation from below—outlining the perspective of the psychically fragmented laborer in terms which strikingly anticipate the analysis of alienated labor and a long tradition of Marxist thought. Schiller here addresses the problem of rebuilding the ship of state while it is at sea. He insists that something must be found to bear up a society in the course of its refashioning, a scaffolding that will prevent harm to living people as the State is being remade. The primary thrust of his argument is that this refashioning must take place in the minds of individual subjects, and that this task can only happen by way of the aesthetic, which he will subsequently align with the non-goal-oriented play-instinct (*Spieltrieb*), anticipating in part the “uselessness” preached by the exponents of aestheticism: “if man is ever to solve that problem of politics in practice he will have to approach it through the problem of the aesthetic, because it is only through Beauty that man makes his way to Freedom.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Second Letter, p. 9. Page references are to the bilingual edition of Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, Oxford (Clarendon Press), 2005 [1982].

Before unfolding his project for man's rehabilitation through the aesthetic in all its chiasmatic development, Schiller pauses at the outset to offer his diagnosis of the problem—namely, the spiritual impoverishment of human life in the noxious medium of existing conditions. While not explicitly thematized, this impoverishment, it is clear from Schiller's terms, has its primary causes in the organization of the production process. In the Sixth Letter he describes these pernicious conditions specifically with reference to work in a manner that foreshadows both the fragmentation of the "series of purposes" of the money economy described by Simmel and the materialist accounts of psychic fragmentation developed by the intellectual followers of Marx: "State and Church, laws and customs, were now torn asunder; enjoyment was divorced from labour, the means from the end, the effort from the reward. Everlastingly chained to a single little fragment of the Whole, man himself develops into nothing but a fragment; everlastingly in his ear the monotonous sound of the wheel that he turns, he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of putting the stamp of humanity upon his own nature, he becomes nothing more than the imprint of his occupation or of his specialized knowledge."¹⁸ With the division of labor comes the uneven exercise of human capabilities among individuals, and the identification of each with its specific function to the exclusion of other faculties which are left to languish in idleness and atrophy through disuse. The "parts" are ground down to stunted shadows of themselves in the name of perpetuating an "abstract idea of the Whole." Rare is the individual that could adequately represent the full range of potential development in the species; rather, "one has to go the rounds from one individual to another in order to be able to piece together a complete image of the species." Everything gets divided, including the moments

¹⁸ Sixth Letter, p. 35.

or phases of production and consumption, into rationalized units, calculable in terms of time and sums of money.¹⁹

The temporal logic of the artwork, in Schiller's presentation, is to address itself to three moments simultaneously. Produced by the pressures of the present and addressing itself to the attention of its contemporaries, it nevertheless carries within itself signatures of human creativity legible to the eyes of the observer. It is at once relic and harbinger. Art is of extraordinary spiritual value to humans because it does not necessarily reflect *only* the medium in which it originates but attests to something older—indeed timeless—and “nobler” from which man has fallen, yet toward which he may yet return: “Humanity has lost its dignity; but Art has rescued it and preserved it in significant stone. Truth lives on in the illusion of Art, and it is from this copy, or after-image, that the original image will once again be restored. Just as the nobility of Art *survived* the nobility of Nature, so now Art goes before her, a voice rousing from slumber and preparing the shape of things to come.”²⁰ The means for this spiritual homecoming lie in the attestation itself. That an artist has the vision to execute a work that others will experience as beauty, and that others can indeed have such an experience and recognize this vision (implicit in the artwork's artificial nature) in the act of doing so, bears witness to a connection between humans that lies outside the calculating logic of the reality principle.²¹ It is as if “occupation” and art are two sides of the same basic fact of human existence—what Marx will later call its “species-being,” humanity's characteristic transforming of the world as found into something

¹⁹ Money in particular is of course what Simmel will focus on to such extraordinary effect as he describes the effects of this situation on the “sequence of purposes.” Lukács would later describe this situation at length under the rubric of *Verdinglichung*, “reification.”

²⁰ Ninth Letter, p. 57.

²¹ For a synthesis of Schiller's argument with the Freudian vocabulary, see Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, Beacon Press (Boston), 1966 [1955], pp. 172-96.

better suited to its needs and desires. If work grinds away the nerve endings of human sensitivity, alienating people from themselves and each other, the non-utilitarian experience of artistic beauty awakens the beholder to a more fulfilling possibilities for this productive capacity, and thereby restores something of the essential bond of humanity they share with all others.

Schiller's emphasis on the "non-utility" of art places it at the head of a long line of European "aestheticism" famously emblemized in Oscar Wilde's declaration that "all art is quite useless."²² It is uncertain to what degree subsequent considerations about aesthetics and politics were directly indebted to Schiller's vigorous and provocative early example. What is clear, in any case, is a preoccupation with closely aligned problems, particularly in England, by several of the century's foremost art critics. John Ruskin, notably, sets forth a bold echo of Schiller in decrying the instrumentalizing of human beings: "You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both. Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions. If you will have that precision out of them, and make their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanize them."²³ Ruskin's criticism here likewise anticipates the critique of psychic fragmentation later diagnosed in Lukács's analysis of reification: "We have much studied and much perfected, of late, the great civilized invention of the division of labor; only we give it a false name. It is not, truly speaking, the labor that is divided; but the men:— Divided into mere segments of men—broken into small fragments and crumbs of life; so that all

²² Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, London (Penguin), 2003, p. 4.

²³ "The Nature of Gothic," from *The Stones of Venice*, in *Unto This Last and Other Writings*, London (Penguin), 1985, p. 84.

the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin, or the head of a nail.”²⁴

Ruskin’s follower William Morris, a textile designer and popularizer of socialism, singled out this chapter from *The Stones of Venice* for special publication by his Kelmscott Press, calling it in his preface “one of the very few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century.” This text likewise dwells on the importance of labor to humanity, and how the perversion of the former spells degradation for the latter: “the lesson which Ruskin here teaches us is that art is the expression of man’s pleasure in labour, that it is possible for man to rejoice in his work, for, strange as it may seem to us to-day, there have been times when he did rejoice in it. . . .”²⁵ Anticipating the criticism that his emphasis on the political could seem surprising in discussing a work of art criticism, Morris points out that the subject of his commentary was much the same: “Indeed from the time at which [Ruskin] wrote this chapter . . . , those ethical and political considerations have never been absent from his work; . . . it is just this part of his work . . . which has had the most enduring and beneficent effect on his contemporaries, and will have through them on succeeding generations.”²⁶ This is essential, because it highlights a peculiarity of the artwork’s function within *British* aestheticism, which always retained in its artistic speculations something of Ruskin’s concern for the progress of humanity. As Jonathan Freedman summarizes, “British aestheticism’s understanding of itself was thus always already political.”²⁷ Indeed, probably the first use of the slogan in English by Swinburne strongly implied that certain social

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁵ “Preface to *The Nature of Gothic* by John Ruskin,” in *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, ed. Clive Wilmer, London (Penguin), 2004, p. 367.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 369

²⁷ *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture*, Stanford, 1990, p. 12.

benefits would attend to work well done, if the artist simply focused on doing the work well. For Swinburne, the real benefit of living in an environment of “good art” is that

“the spirit and mind of men then living will receive on some points a certain exaltation and insight . . . which of course implies and draws with it many other advantages of a sort you may call moral or spiritual. But if the artist does his work with an eye to such results or for the sake of bringing about such improvements, he will too probably fail even of them. Art for art’s sake first of all, and afterwards we may suppose all the rest shall be added to her”²⁸

Far from dismissing social questions, British aestheticism saw itself as a cultural movement whose ramifications could extend beyond itself into other areas of society.

On the other hand, the French movement whose slogan Swinburne would repurpose had been distinctly a reaction not only against *l’art bourgeois* but also *l’art social* as promoted by the followers of Saint-Simon and others.²⁹ Pierre Bourdieu neatly summarizes the situation that arose in France at this time as the most ambitious artists withdrew from any valuation (henceforth seen as vulgar and unenlightened) by the market of bourgeois consumers: “We are in effect in an inverted economic world: the artist can only triumph in the symbolic domain by losing in the economic one (at least in the short term), and *vice versa* (at least in the long term). It is this paradoxical economy which, in a manner that is itself also very paradoxical, lends inherited economic properties all their weight, and especially *la rente*, a condition of survival in

²⁸ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *William Blake*, ch.2, in *The Aesthetes: A Sourcebook*, ed. Ian Small, London (Routledge and Kegan Paul), 1979, pp. 5-6.

²⁹ Flaubert: “Le seul moyen de vivre en paix, c’est de se placer tout d’un bond au-dessus de l’humanité entière, et de n’avoir avec elle rien de commun qu’un rapport d’œil. Cela scandaliserait les Pelletan, les Lamartine et toute la race stérile et *sèche* (inactive dans le bien comme dans l’idéal) des humanitaires, républicains, etc. – Tant pis ! Qu’ils commencent par payer leur dettes avant de prêcher la charité. Par être seulement honnêtes, avant de vouloir être vertueux. La Fraternité est une des plus belles inventions de l’hypocrisie sociale.” (letter to George Sand, 23-24 January 1867, *Correspondance*, V, p. 271). On the development of *l’art pour l’art* in opposition to prevailing literary tendencies after 1848, see Cassagne, pp. 86-117.

the absence of a market.”³⁰ In order to enjoy the symbolic status bestowed on those “outside” the *terrain économique*, one must have means such as few could have. As the ill-remunerated Théophile Gautier said of the author of *Madame Bovary*, “Flaubert a eu plus d’esprit que nous, [...] il a eu l’intelligence de venir au monde avec un patrimoine quelconque, chose qui est absolument indispensable à qui veut faire de l’art.”³¹ Even Flaubert was eventually forced to accept a *pension*, having over-extended his financial resources in helping a relative. It was a source of tremendous shame for the artist’s pride, as shown in an 1879 letter to his niece: “J’ai lieu de croire qu’on va m’offrir une pension : et je l’accepterai, bien que j’en suis *humilié* jusqu’à la moelle des os (aussi je désire là-dessus le secret le plus absolu). Espérons que la presse ne s’en mêlera pas ! ma conscience me reproche cette pension (que je n’ai nullement mérité, quoi qu’on dise) ; parce que j’ai mal entendu mes intérêts, ce n’est pas une raison pour que la patrie me nourrisse ! En résumé, j’aime mieux la vie la plus chétive, la plus solitaire et la plus triste, que d’avoir à penser à l’argent. Je renonce à tout, pourvu que j’aie la paix, c’est-à-dire ma *liberté d’esprit*.”³²

It is almost difficult to picture the interactions between a relentlessly anti-mercenary writer like Flaubert and the up-and-comer Zola, making ends meet with journalistic hackwork until he can find his big break. An episode from the Goncourts’ *Journal* illuminates the picture:

... Alors Flaubert se met à attaquer — toutefois avec des coups, de très grands coups de chapeau, au talent de l’auteur — se met à attaquer les préfaces, les doctrines, les professions de foi naturalistes de Zola.

Zola répond à peu près ceci :

« Vous, vous avez une petite fortune qui vous a permis de vous affranchir de beaucoup de choses... moi, ma vie, j’ai été obligé de la gagner absolument avec ma plume, moi j’ai été obligé de passer par toutes sortes d’écritures, oui d’écritures

³⁰ *Les règles de l’art : Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris (Seuil, coll. “Point essais”), 1998 [1992], p. 141.

³¹ Quoted in Bourdieu, *Ibid.*, pp. 142-43.

³² Flaubert, *Correspondance*, V, p. 508.

méprisables... Eh ! mon Dieu, je me moque comme vous de ce mot naturalisme, et cependant, je le répéterai, parce qu'il faut un baptême aux choses, pour que le public les croie neuves... Voyez-vous, je fais deux parts dans ce que j'écris, il y a mes œuvres, avec lesquelles on me juge et avec lesquelles je désire être jugé, puis il y a mon feuilleton du BIEN PUBLIC, mes articles de Russie, ma correspondance de Marseille, qui ne me sont de rien, que je rejette, et qui ne sont que pour faire mousser mes livres.³³

But the Zola of 1880, basking in the success of *Nana* (1879), his second major success after *L'Assommoir* (1877), has a decidedly optimistic view of money. No longer the embattled striver, he welcomes the healthier modern relation of money to the arts in his essay on "L'argent dans la littérature." Part literary sociology, part homiletic, the essay presents the newly successful Zola's convictions as to the essentially meritocratic nature of the artistic marketplace. Writers of the Third Republic have the good fortune, unique in history, to be free of the patronage system and of the weight of convention. We will return to these arguments later in our exploration of Zola's efforts to construct a fictional machine for their expression in *L'Argent*. Suffice it to say here that, despite his early lean years, Zola left no room for public doubt as to his views on the essentially salutary mechanism of commerce.

James, on the other hand, having made no such explicit public statement on the relation of his art with the marketplace, and otherwise enjoying a reputation for rigorous commitment to the artistic vocation and its exacting standards, was left somewhat vulnerable to biographical distortions about his great private fortune. The situation was not helped by his being the scion of the notably well-to-do James family.³⁴ The first two-volume edition of James's letters, edited by Percy Lubbock, presented only this side of the author, the urbane socialite. But as his first major biographer Leon Edel noted in his first volume, the letters "suffered from a lack of concrete

³³ *Journal*, 19 February, 1877.

³⁴ Michael Anesko cites, by way of example, this remark by Ferner Nuhn: "If he was not exactly a visiting prince to his enchanted realm, he was at least a well-provided-for baronet." *The Wind Blew from the East*, Harper and Brothers (New York), p. 1942, p. 143, quoted in Anesko, p. 200 note 16.

biographical data: they offered the Henry James of the drawing-room and the weekend-visits rather than the James who wrote assiduously and sought in the market place of letters, to sell his precious wares. The ‘working’ Henry James was utterly lost from sight. . . .”³⁵ It is not for nothing that the reputation of endless wealth stuck as long as it did. The novelist’s career represents an extreme of distrust of the “cheap and easy” scarcely to be met with among men and women of letters. It can be tempting to see in James’s output an obsession with form and style that would make it representative of the aesthetic movement’s preoccupations, and certainly his own comments, in his Prefaces and elsewhere, promoting the tradition of a “high aesthetic temper,” lend a semblance of credibility to such an assessment. Was one of his final (unfinished) novels not to bear the title of *The Ivory Tower*? The parallel did not fail to appear in criticism from his contemporaries. Stuart Sherman, for example, devoted an essay to the novelist’s “aesthetic idealism,” in which he insists that Pater is the most telling lens through which to view his corpus: “James is like Pater in his aversion from the world, his dedication to art, his celibacy, his personal decorum and dignity, his high aesthetic seriousness, his Epicurean relish in receiving and reporting the multiplicity and intensity of his impressions, and in the exacting closeness of his style.”³⁶ All this is certainly true, and yet incomplete. After all, aestheticism is regularly thematized within the works themselves, where it comes in for various degrees of criticism. It is impossible to see in a scheming, hyper-refined tyrant like Gilbert Osmond a paean to Paterian “aesthetic seriousness.” The apparent flight from the world represented by this figure, above all his posture of indifference to money: these affectations James vigorously unmask in *The*

³⁵ Edel, *The Untried Years*, pp. 11-12

³⁶ Sherman, Stuart. “The Aesthetic Idealism of Henry James,” *On Contemporary Literature* (New York, 1917), p. 238.

Portrait of a Lady as the most calculated mercenary striving. In this respect, the aesthetic pose is a fitting cultural expression of the economic realities that it seeks to flee or transcend.

The influence of the aesthetic in James, then, eludes easy generalizations. Jonathan Freedman offers the cogent and sober assessment that the novelist “habitually slides between overt condemnation and a covert sympathy with the means and ends of the self-conscious British ‘aesthetic movement’; indeed, sympathy and judgment often appear so closely tied together as to be virtually indistinguishable.”³⁷ If James adhered to an ideal of the “ferociously literary,” he was no less saturated with the visual arts. Indeed, a repeated expression in his correspondence refers to the “lust of the eyes.” In her study of artists whose works appear in his fiction, Adeline Tinter characterizes the intensity of James’s visual contemplation and the particular use he had for painting and statuary: “It was his only lust, and he indulged in it all his life. . . . This transfer of an erotic function to the organs of sight was a true expression of the voracity with which James devoured visual impressions. When these impressions were the creations of great artists, his possession of them for his own purposes became the irresistible drive of his own creativity.”³⁸ This is perhaps a key for distinguishing James’s own position from that of the “aesthetes” in his works—he is a devoted producer of works himself, one who must in fact make his way among the complex gears of the publishing industry.

As Michael Anesko neatly summarizes: “James anxiously desired to reach a mass audience at the same time that he remained suspicious of it.”³⁹ His private communications reveal an intense desire for popularity, if a desire that is tempered by a resigned recognition of the odds of fame on his own terms. Even in advanced age, with the great work of his career

³⁷ *Professions of Taste*, p. 136.

³⁸ *Henry James and the Lust of the Eyes*, p. 2.

³⁹ Anesko, p. ix.

behind him, James had lost none of his commercial shrewdness in planning his output, and in his advice to an intimate acquaintance, the younger sculptor Hendrik Anderson, the elder artist spelled out the moral of his industry in terms of clear-sighted calculation. Advocating for the sure thing, for *paying* work as the condition for realizing one's own visions, James advised, "*Make the pot boil, at any price, as the only real basis of freedom and sanity. Stop building in the air for a while & build on the ground. Earn the money that will give you the right to conceptions (& still more of executions,) like your fountain – though I am still wondering what American community is going to want to pay for 30 [or] 40 stark naked men and women, of whatever beauty, lifted into the raw light of one of their public places.*"⁴⁰ These admonitions would soon be reiterated when his young friend showed himself determined to persist in the same line: "Stop your multiplication of unsaleable nakedness for a while and hurl yourself, by every cunning art you can command, into the production of the interesting, the charming, the vendible, the *placeable* small thing." It was to the same young artist that he promoted "that benefit of *friction with the market* which is so true a one for solitary artists too much steeped in their mere personal dreams."⁴¹

Indeed, James's instinct for turning things to account extended into his personal conceptions of his work. A famous letter to his brother points to his determined rigor of vision and engagement with his surroundings: "The great thing is to be *saturated*, with something—that is, in one way or another, with life; and I chose the form of my saturation." Less well known is the following sentence, wherein this "saturation" figures as a "capital" invested in his artistic consciousness, generating a return in the form of textual productivity without encroaching

⁴⁰ *Henry James Letters*, IV, 6 August 1905, pp. 369-70.

⁴¹ Quoted by Anesko, who takes the phrase for the title of his study, p. 6

overmuch on the original value itself: “Moreover you exaggerate the degree to which writing takes it out of my mind, for I try to spend only the interest of my capital.”⁴² If the author for James is no less salesman than worker, compelled to see his way to making products which literally sell in exchange for money, the financial figurations of his artistic consciousness extended to composition itself, putting him on guard against overwork. We will see how he depicts a less happy account of this “investment” of artistic cerebration in *Roderick Hudson*. The present study does not propose to venture deeply into biographical comparisons of these two figures. It should already be apparent that, despite their extreme stylistic differences, the roughly contemporary careers of Zola and Henry James bear several salient correspondences. These parallels invite attention to the connection, in their respective works, between the aesthetic and the financial, matters which both novelists explicitly confronted in their works.

A set of more local factors also make comparison of James and Zola interesting on these grounds. For it is not mere chronology that unites them, but largely overlapping literary traditions. The most formidable “ancestor” in this respect is, doubtless, Balzac, a figure who elicited tremendous admiration from them both. For Zola, covering some similar ground, Balzac’s weight must at times have seemed too great to bear, for he was at pains also to distinguish himself from this prodigious predecessor, going so far as to pen a sketch on the “Différences entre Balzac et moi.”⁴³ Rather than be a “mirror of contemporary society” like the

⁴² Letter to William James, 29 October, 1888, *Henry James Letters*, III, pp. 244-45.

⁴³ *Les Rougon-Macquart*, Gallimard, “Bibliothèque de la Pléiade,” V, pp. 1736-37. Christa Bevernis analyzes the parallels in the uses to which Balzac and Zola construed science as foundational to their method, to a degree which set them together at odds with the tradition of Romantic exaggerations emblemized by Victor Hugo. She observes that Zola’s artistic ideal was one of pure observation, whereas Balzac had insisted on the artist’s being in possession of carefully considered judgments and opinions. “Balzac et Zola : Sur quelques aspects de leurs théories esthétiques,” in *Europe*; Apr 1, 1968; 46, 468; pp. 282-86.

Comédie humaine, Zola would have his work examine the specific reactions of environment and heredity within a single family. “Ma grande affaire est d’être purement naturaliste, purement physiologiste. Au lieu d’avoir des principes (la royauté, le catholicisme) j’aurai des lois (l’hérédité, l’énéité [*sic*]). Je ne veux pas comme Balzac avoir une décision sur les affaires des hommes, être politique, philosophe, moraliste. Je me contenterai d’être savant, de dire ce qui est en en cherchant les raisons intimes.” Zola goes further still, claiming for himself a degree of objectivity that seems overtly inhuman, a vision of novelistic practice that takes little interest in people: “Balzac dit qu’il veut peindre les hommes, les femmes et les choses. Moi, des hommes et des femmes, je ne fais qu’un, en admettant cependant les différences de nature, et je soumetts les hommes et les femmes aux choses.”

If, as we have noted, there seems to be a deep kinship between money and fiction, especially the nineteenth-century novel, it is worth pausing here over this figure who marks the onset of money as an explicit obsession in literature. Balzac is not the first to write novels about money, but scarcely have the financial situations and aspirations of characters been more amply documented than in the panoramic survey of the *Comédie humaine*; as Stefan Zweig said, it is Balzac who “brought money into the novel” in a decisive fashion.⁴⁴ And as Peter Brooks neatly summarizes in his recent survey of his work, Balzac’s fiction relentlessly foregrounds the connection between the private matters more typically belonging to the realm of fiction and the economic forces underpinning them: “Money in *The Human Comedy* is crucial, the ‘lifeblood’ of society, and at the very center of Balzac’s fictional world stands the money-lender, the usurer called ‘the capitalist’ who commands the supply of money running through society’s veins. . . . His knowledge takes us into the machinations that enable modern society, fueled by credit rather

⁴⁴ Quoted in Misik, *Das große Beginnergefühl*, pp. 36-37.

than landed wealth, to function. The unmoved mover at the center of circulating capital, Gobseck's strange wisdom allows him to understand dramas enacted within the privacy of families."⁴⁵

Zola is deeply impressed by Balzac's efforts, but he is writing around 1870, and at a certain moment his essays inevitably become distracted by contemporary events, so that the *Comédie* furnishes him with a valuable weapon in the contemporary culture war.⁴⁶ Balzac's professed conservatism and loyalty to the Catholic church make of him, observes Zola, a cherished idol for the regressive elements in French society, but his commitment to producing a faithful record of the world around him inevitably places him on the side of the Revolution. It is interesting to hear such an assessment from Zola, as the subsequent tradition of Marxist criticism will largely echo this sentiment at Zola's own expense.⁴⁷ Zola dwells at some length here on Balzac's political and religious convictions, and notes what will eventually become a commonplace in Marxist literary criticism: Balzac's inadvertent effort in service of a cause not his own, his status as a "démocrate sans le savoir." He notes that *Le cabinet des antiques* easily proves his point, as it seems to have "no other goal than to condemn the nobility in its entirety."⁴⁸ Indeed, Zola goes to great lengths here to make an almost proto-psychoanalytic reading of

⁴⁵ *Balzac's Lives*, New York Review of Books, 2020, p. 38.

⁴⁶ These articles are collected in "Livres d'aujourd'hui et de demain" (1863—1873), in *Œuvres Complètes*. Ed. Henri Mitterand. Cercle du livre précieux. Tome X.

⁴⁷ The most famous example is Georg Lukacs, who on several occasions made invidious comparisons slighting the promoter of naturalism. In a typical example, he points to Zola's praise for the "sense of reality" in the *Comédie humaine*, which amputates this impression from the complex processes which underlay it, and which were the essential element in Balzac's social representation: "But Zola arrived at this 'sense of reality' by first cutting out of Balzac's life-work the great contradictions of capitalist society and accepting only the presentation of everyday life which was for Balzac merely a means of throwing the contradictions into bolder relief and giving a total picture of society in motion, complete with all its determinants and antagonisms." *Studies in European Realism*, London (The Merlin Press), 1972 [1950], p. 89.

⁴⁸ October 31, *Op. cit.*, p. 913, p. 914.

Balzac. Having identified a contradiction, he finds the solution to it “au fond de cet esprit,” in Balzac’s desire to be in literature an “autocrat”—he is obsessed by “the will, domination, order obtained through the command of one man, despotism reasoned and utilized. Thus, he accepted the monarchy and Catholicism as two excellent systems of absolute government. In his mind, to govern men, priests and kings were necessary, just as he alone could lead the numerous subjects of the *Comédie humaine* to their true destiny.”⁴⁹

A later volume impresses Zola anew with the structural majesty of Balzac’s effort, occasioning from his pen some long architectural metaphors about the *Comédie*, and about its producer as preeminently an architect and a stonemason. “It is a world, a world of human creation, arrogant and petty, built by a prodigious mason who was an artist on the side. . . . And the laborer has raised his great tower with such an instinct for the grandiose and the eternal that the framework of the edifice seems as though it will forever remain intact; sections of wall may crumble, the floors collapse, staircases break apart, but the stone foundations resist, the tower is raised so straight, so high, supported on the broad feet of its giant columns; little by little, the mud and sand will go away, and there will appear on the horizon the marble skeleton of the monument, like the bizarre, jagged profile of a city.”⁵⁰

Zola dwells on his cherished motif – the royalist-as-democrat, the catholic-as-freethinker – more than ever here, adding now the figure of the seer: the spirit of Revolution made Balzac not only a *démocrate inconscient*, but a “prophet of tomorrow”— because although he was charged with gross exaggeration during his life, subsequent events have not only vindicated his representation but surpassed it: “the Second Empire realized Balzac’s monsters. The imagination

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 915.

⁵⁰ May 13, 1870, *Ibid.*, p. 925.

of the modern Juvenal was surpassed by reality. . . . “mud has become man, the impossible become real.”⁵¹ Zola’s notion of Balzac as a prophet echoes Marx’s own awed assessment of him.⁵² He goes on to reject the idea of leaving Balzac’s legacy as a cultural figure to the oldsters: “The party of reaction, of the past, must not take hold of our great men and confiscate them for their benefit. Even in the democratic party, one is wary of him, one does not speak his name. Well, I for one am convinced that we must reclaim Balzac loudly, as one of our own.”⁵³ The review of August 1, 1872 is especially notable for repeating Balzac’s dismal representation of money’s influence on the literary world, the pernicious effects that have extended to the next generation of writers (Zola’s own)—those who have turned to journalism for quick, certain cash, and abandoned more ambitious work. “Money has killed talent,” he laments. The new conditions of journalism have deeply dislocated the literary world. The “most intelligent” writers are now “selling themselves for small change. . . . The bread is guaranteed, the pen feeds the man day by day, one reaps one’s daily harvest of notoriety each evening; immediate success, daily profit, forced labor that one ends by regulating like a clock. . . .”⁵⁴

This complaint naturally touches on one of the elements that most stands out amid the busy landscape of the *Comédie humaine*. In his panoramic record of modern French society,

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 926, p. 928.

⁵² The comparison is described secondhand by Paul Laforgue in his reminiscences of Marx: “Für Balzac war seine Bewunderung so groß, daß er eine Kritik über dessen großes Werk „La Comédie humaine“ schreiben wollte, sobald er nur sein ökonomisches Werk vollendet hatte: Balzac war nicht nur der Historiker der Gesellschaft seiner Zeit, sondern auch der Schöpfer prophetischer Gestalten, die unter Louis-Philippe sich noch im embryonischen Zustande befanden und erst nach seinem Tode, unter Napoleon III., sich vollständig entwickelten.” “Karl Marx, Persönliche Erinnerungen,” from *Mohr und General. Erinnerungen an Marx und Engels*, Berlin 1965 (pp. 322-26, 337-38, 331-32), quoted in *Marx-Engels: Über Kunst und Literatur*, ed. Manfred Kliem, Dietz Verlag (Berlin), 1967, p. 21.

⁵³ *Op cit.*, p. 929.

⁵⁴ August 21, 1872. *Ibid.*, p. 961.

registering the shockwaves produced by the vigorous ramping up of modern capitalism, Balzac had naturally not failed to take some account of the fate of the work of art. He recorded the temptations, the risks, and the bitter realities of artistic (specifically literary) pursuit in *Illusions perdues*. This work is an early statement of the conflict between commercial writing and the more highly valued “literary” work. It thus shows most vividly how this opposition had already reached a fever-pitch at the moment of a matured romanticism. When the “grand homme” of the provinces, Lucien de Rubempré, makes his assay on the capital, manuscript in hand, he is unprepared for the environment of cynicism and abuse that awaits him. He is fortunate to make the acquaintance early on of a dedicated group of serious-minded young poets and philosophers. Balzac’s exposition of the Cénacle is a prolonged idealization of solidarity. It is a kind of secret society of mutually supportive fellow-workers, who quietly eke out a modest living while devoting themselves to their respective intellectual callings. Its members conceive of themselves distinctly as a class, or indeed a family. Pleasures and pains are shared, support freely given (without the element of exchange), all topics discussed with perfect freedom. It is a salve to the battered Lucien for the alienation he experiences amid the exploitations of Paris, but it is not enough to save him from the seductions of his own egotism. The leader of the group, Daniel d’Arthez warns the young poet that to pursue his art seriously will not come without exacting a cost: “On ne peut pas être grand homme à bon marché. . . . Le génie arrose ses œuvres de ses larmes.” Given this, the work must be its own reward. Daniel’s attachment is thus all to the work itself, next to which his self-presentation is of the humblest. He takes on writing jobs for low-paying reference works. Far from any dreams of wealth or status, Daniel keeps his energies evenly distributed, with the express intent of living on his own terms in order to develop his own personal project: “ il n’en écrivait ni plus ni moins que ce qu’il en fallait pour vivre et pouvoir

suivre sa pensée.” Ultimately Lucien is unable to live up to the spartan ideal of the artistic personality that Balzac sets forth here. His artistic ambitions are vitiated by his wish for social advancement. He enters into the world of journalism ostensibly as a stopgap, a provisional support on his way to committing to the work of his life; yet gradually, just as the members of the Cénacle warn him, the more easily won success of journalism shortens the range of his ambitions. Worse still, its rewards, tending away from spiritual fulfillment and towards a tawdry instant gratification, begin to sap away his creative energies, such that work becomes merely an occasional means for maintaining his dissipation rather than the rule governing his life: “la vie de Lucien fut donc une longue ivresse coupée par les faciles travaux du journalism. . . . Mais l’étude était une exception, le poète ne s’y adonnait que contraint par la nécessité.” The pressures to which Lucien ultimately succumbs are in large part conditioned by the exploitative circumstances of the literature market, represented by the rapacious Finaud, among others. This aspect has led to Georg Lukacs’s large claims for the novel’s historical status: “*Lost Illusions* is a tragi-comic epic showing how . . . the spirit of man is drawn into the orbit of capitalism. The theme of the novel is the transformation of literature (and with it of every ideology) into a commodity and this complete “capitalization” of every sphere of intellectual, literary, and artistic activity fits the general tragedy of the post-Napoleonic generation into a much more profoundly conceived social pattern than can be found in the writings even of Stendhal, Balzac’s greatest contemporary.”⁵⁵ No doubt Balzac here struck the note of exploitation, of art *against* commerce (and losing to it) with much greater force than what we observed in *Wilhelm Meister*, for example. It is no less an account of how these conditions warp and maim the artist who is

⁵⁵ *Studies in European Realism*, p. 49.

unprepared or ill-equipped. All of these motifs return in the *Künstlerromane* to be discussed below.

James, too, scarcely misses an opportunity to expound at length on the debt owed not only by himself but indeed by every novelist to come in Balzac's wake. Speaking and reading French with ease from boyhood (thanks to continental experiments in education visited on the elder boys by Henry Sr.) and thoroughly acquainted with Balzac's work early on (thanks to recommendations from family friend Thomas Sargent Perry), James was well positioned to derive instruction from this extensive and illustrious example. He produced altogether five major statements on his great French predecessor, the last of which—a dense lecture on “The Lesson of Balzac,” delivered during a tour of his home country in 1905—implicitly evokes the theme of *Illusions perdues*; for here James asserts the need for criticism to maintain some genuine appraisal of merit in the face of “the stiff breeze of the commercial, in other words of the special bookselling spirit; an eager, active, interfering force which has a great many confusions of apparent value . . . to answer for.”⁵⁶ In James's estimation, this is a critical (and commercial) environment which renders Balzac a mere empty pseudo-homage “in the graceless and nerveless fashion of those who edge away from a classic or a bore. ‘Oh, yes, he is as ‘great’ as you like—so let us not talk of him!’” If Zola was consciously (and self-consciously) following in the footsteps of a giant, James was at pains to make those steps discernible to a public too liable to lazy failures of attention. In this thin intellectual atmosphere, James proposes to show that “a really paying acquaintance with a writer can never take place if our recognition remains perfunctory.” From this critical indolence, James goes on to draw grim conclusions about the modern fate of his chosen artform: “I see no better proof that the great interesting art of which

⁵⁶ *Literary Criticism, II: European Writers and the Prefaces*, pp.117-18.

Balzac remains the greatest master is practically, round about us, a bankrupt and discredited art . . . , than this very fact that we are so ready to beg off from knowing anything about him. . . . [T]he name of the man who is really the father of us all, as we stand, is scarcely more mentioned than if he were not of the family.”⁵⁷

Interestingly, James had recently cited the figure of Zola himself as doing much to mitigate this “bankruptcy” of the modern fiction situation. This represented a positive shift in what had long been an ambivalent valuation of the naturalist’s works. He had reviewed three of Zola’s novels as they appeared, expressing great appreciation for the latter’s serious application and ambition—“one of the most interesting literary labours of our time”—while regularly castigating the “uncleanness” and “indecentcy” of their subject matter. Following Zola’s death, James penned in 1903 a long assessment of his achievement which not only repeated his admiration for Zola’s industry, but observed that his singular career was—by its very uniqueness—an overall boon to those who practice fiction seriously: “We have worked round to the so marked and impressive anomaly of the adoption of the futile art [i.e. fiction] by one of the stoutest minds and stoutest characters of our time. This extraordinarily robust worker has found it good enough for him, and if the fact is, as I say, anomalous, we are doubtless helped to conclude that by its anomalies, in future, the bankrupt business, as we are so often moved to pronounce it, will most recover credit.” (872-73) An effort like the *Rougon-Macquart*, for James, attests to a degree of continuous effort and personal investment. Such a project, whatever James’s personal reservations, was a major presence in a saturated (and thus devalued) literary

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 119-20.

field, “the rising tide of prose fiction, a watery waste out of which old standards and landmarks are seen barely to emerge, like chimneys and the tops of trees in a country under flood.”⁵⁸

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Chapter Plan:

The following studies examine the close connection of the aesthetic and financial motifs first in Zola (chapters 1 and 2), then in James (chapters 3 and 4). Chapter 1 will explore the artistic “vocation” in *L’Oeuvre* in part as a catastrophe of financial mismanagement. If Claude Lantier initially enjoys something of Flaubert’s disinterested detachment, eventually his fruitless work, and his domestic expenses with his eventual wife and son, manage to corrode his entire inheritance, which is where the personal disasters and eventual madness begin to present themselves. *L’Oeuvre* presents several distinct possibilities for the artistic career, seemingly in order to valorize the one closest to Zola’s own—namely, the artist as laborer, indefatigably chained to the work of his life, proud even through his disappointments, and above all deriving a respectable income. Against this, the monomania and perfectionism of the visionary protagonist stands out as the most grotesque excess, and his fixation on the painted female symbol of his unfinished final work as madness. At the same time, the novel analyzes how the artist internalizes the ruthlessness and opportunism of market relations within his own domestic life, and how his wife, by agreeing to pose for his great work, only finds herself further alienated from him and, in the end, from her own body. Further, as a kind of nightmarish penance, the market wreaks its revenge on the artist (the transparently autobiographical Sandoz) who aspires to live outside of bourgeois conformity by colonizing his brain altogether, making him cold to the comforts afforded him by his success, and even to the embrace of his family. The chapter

⁵⁸ *Literary Criticism*, vol. II, 871.

thus examines how the artistic careers of its various characters are closely mappable onto their position within the market—a set of relations which allow only for disgraceful mediocrity, personal self-sacrifice on the altar of the ideal, or a kind of workaholicism that cuts one off even from the comforts of success.

Chapter 2 looks at a different kind of “vocation,” that of pure money-getting itself. Here we will see how the effort to bring money itself into focus as an object of novelistic attention poses representational challenges to Zola, and how the effort receives further interference both from his tendentious resolutions hinted at in “L’argent dans la littérature” and from the urge once more to insert versions of himself into the narrative. Despite Zola’s proclaimed intentions for the novel, *L’Argent* exhibits plutomania and the proud pretensions of money-getting as hollow substitutes for reproductive power. From this perspective, we can see how both of these male-dominated professions serve, in the minds of Zola’s impassioned protagonists, as occasions for a fantasy of supremacy, one linked in *L’Oeuvre* to parenthood, and in *L’Argent* even to godliness.

Chapter 3 will examine James’s artist-novels—*Roderick Hudson* (1875), his first major novel, and the more mature *The Tragic Muse* (1890)—which exhibit the twin temptations of money for the artist, either as a temptation towards dissipation and sterility (as for Balzac’s Lucien) or towards the no less barren path of conformity and respectability. We will witness a unique exploration of the poisoned-gift motif in *The Tragic Muse*, where James stages the opposition between money—a tool used by the dead to manipulate the living—and art, while eschewing the facile gestures of aestheticism, by depicting successful application of something resembling the Protestant work ethic to the aesthetic domain. This is to say that James in this novel comes surprisingly close to demonstrating Zola’s proposition from “L’argent et les lettres” regarding the beneficent relation of artistic production and the marketplace. A productive and

salutary program of production, as James conceives it, seems to entail a species of capitalist aesthetic, a willingness to embrace risk and a marshalling of one's forces in the present in the interest of future growth—even if that growth is only personal.

Finally, Chapter 4 will study how *The Golden Bowl* firmly unites the aesthetic, the erotic, and the flagrantly transactional. Part of the notorious challenge of the novel's style lies in its casual application of financial metaphors to intimate personal relationships. Its relentlessly reifying narration of a plot about marriage and adultery set against a backdrop of unlimited wealth points, beneath the thick cloud of gold dust, to contradictions that can only be solved through a major and permanent rupture. Adam Verver has employed his incredible means to acquire a massive private collection of artworks, seemingly in response to the early passing of Maggie's mother (the origin of his passion to collect). The novel reveals this naïve, sheltered young woman's gradual awakening, within this perversely gilded atmosphere of objectified personal relation, to the cost of things. The golden bowl of the title, heavily invested with metaphoric charges and resonances, in this reading quietly announces in its subsurface "crack" a limitation of Jamesian narrative itself—the absence of intimacy or desire. We have already seen not only James's preoccupation with financial matters in his own business dealings, but the extent to which his conception of artistic production (his own and the artist figures in his work) was a thing constructed out of the figurative dynamics of financial exchange—the gilded crystal bowl represents this artistry itself. Having perceived so keenly in his fictions the complex effects of monetary forces brought to bear in relationships, in *The Golden Bowl* James trains this contemplative gaze on both sides of a marriage. Amid the figurative profusion, it is easy to lose sight of this work's radical novelty within the Jamesian corpus: his last major novel, it is his first serious attempt to represent the two parties of a married couple. Yet the radical perspectivalism

of his technique prevents the representation of their intimacy itself. The treatment of the Prince and Charlotte (salacious by Jamesian standards but otherwise extremely muted) receives some highly suggestive figurations, but the sources of Maggie's desire for her husband and the tenor of their shared understanding lie entirely beyond the representable. What is for James extremely representable is a social world constituted by relationships of buying and collecting human beings to display like art objects.

Chapter 1: “Allons travailler”: Labor and Alienation in *L’Oeuvre*

Halfway into Zola’s “art-novel” *L’Oeuvre* (1886), the artist-protagonist Claude Lantier, newly returned to Paris after four years at Bennecourt, has a significant conversation with a fellow painter Bongrand. The latter, an aging talent who, having enjoyed a major success in his youth, struggles now to compete with his younger self, complains about the rise of a new kind of art-dealer. For an earlier generation, including a younger Claude, the circulation of paintings took place through the small-scale speculations of poor but passionate connoisseurs, typified by the character of Malgras. Malgras had led a hectic operation on the small scale, buying for ten what he could sell for fifteen, dressing poorly and cutting corners, haggling over such petty sums that Claude at one point had thrown him out of his studio in frustration. Yet for all the pettiness of his economic activities, Malgras served a useful function and had the redeeming quality of loving the material: “adoring painting deep down, earning his poor living by rapidly renewing his few *sous* of capital in prudent transactions.”⁵⁹ The retirement of Malgras, as Bongrand recounts, sees a new figure, Naudet, taking his place on the stage, “a merchant who, for a few years now, was revolutionizing the trade in pictures,” a flamboyant speculator whose contempt for genius and genuine art is matched only by his greed.⁶⁰ Disdaining the poor life of a “connoisseur” such as Malgras, Naudet directs his effort not towards appreciating art, which he hates, but towards exploiting it to maintain a certain social position. Always dressed to the nines and appearing anywhere it is “*décent*” to be seen, he also serves a different clientele:

. . . a speculator, a *boursier*, who did not care at all about good painting. He brought only the intuition for success, he guessed the artist to launch, not the one

⁵⁹ “. . .adorant au fond la peinture, gagnant sa pauvre vie à renouveler rapidement ses quelques sous de capital, dans des opérations prudentes.” *Les Rougon-Macquart : Histoire naturelle et sociale d’une famille sous le Second Empire*, ed. Henri Mitterand, Gallimard, (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1966, vol. 4:185. Subsequent citations refer to this edition.

⁶⁰ “. . .un marchand, qui, depuis quelques années, révolutionnait le commerce des tableaux. . .” *Ibid.*

who promised the controversial genius of the great painter, but the one whose deceptive talent, inflated with false boldness, would fetch a premium on the bourgeois market. And this was how he shook up this market, by pushing aside the tasteful amateur of former days and only dealing with the rich amateur, who knows nothing about art, who purchases a picture as he would a share on the stock exchange, through vanity and in the hope that its value will rise.⁶¹

From a cult object appreciated by the initiated, the work of art, the vessel into which Claude wishes to pour something of his “essence” through his vision, assumes ever with ever more rigor the character of a commodity, mere dead value available to investors. This is the environment to which Claude returns to his work after a four-year idyll with his lover Christine, and the cynical materialism decried in Bongrand’s account signals broader changes affecting all of Claude’s fellow-workers in the art world.

This shift would not necessarily matter for Claude, save that at this point in the narrative his own material circumstances begin undergoing a change. His past dealings with Malgras, always a matter of bitter haggling, had nevertheless been tolerable because Claude was not forced to confront market forces. This is no longer the case now that he is supporting Christine and their son Jacques. The artist’s revolutionary pronouncements about art that is honest or authentic or valuable must be read against the evolving background of his financial situation. Moreover, this critical optic must take into account not only the relation between the failed painter’s work and his finances, but also how both of these elements condition his relations with Christine, as well as the overt contrast of his trajectory with that of the “successful” artist—the novelist Sandoz. While this character, a flagrant authorial stand-in for Zola himself, attempts to

⁶¹ “. . . un spéculateur, un boursier, qui se moquait radicalement de la bonne peinture. Il apportait l'unique flair du succès, il devinait l'artiste à lancer, non pas celui qui promettait le génie discuté d'un grand peintre, mais celui dont le talent menteur, enflé de fausses hardiesses, allait faire prime sur le marché bourgeois. Et c'était ainsi qu'il bouleversait ce marché, en écartant l'ancien amateur de goût et en ne traitant plus qu'avec l'amateur riche, qui ne se connaît pas en art, qui achète un tableau comme valeur de Bourse, par vanité ou dans l'espoir qu'elle montera.” (4:186)

control the “message” of the narrative through occasional commentaries—including having the novel’s last word, “Allons travailler!”—the present analysis will demonstrate within the text a more thoroughgoing repudiation of aesthetic autonomy, one that finally casts a shadow over the ambitions of both men.

In an article on the position of art and aesthetics in *L’Oeuvre*, Thomas Zamparelli observes that “Zola’s authentic or true artist is defined less by his aesthetic than by a state of mind, by certain moral qualities, by a certain vision of the world and his role in it, and, finally, by certain faults and weaknesses typified and magnified by the character of Claude Lantier.”⁶²

While it is true that Zola takes no position with regard to impressionism or any other contemporary aesthetic currents which the subject matter might seem to suggest—and of which he had considerable knowledge through his work as an art critic and his friendship with many artists—I will propose that the events of the novel viewed as a whole do suggest a certain propositional content with regard to the aesthetic, taking the latter more broadly. What Zamparelli’s terms leave unsaid is that “falseness” in art is tied specifically to market values in the novel. In other words, in order for the drama of *L’Oeuvre* to have any dynamism, we must everywhere assume to some degree not the specific tenets of the various representatives of Romanticism or of *l’art pour l’art*, but the basic assumption that a career in art represents an alternative to the values of market society. For what Claude—whom we must take as the most rigorous assessor of “authenticity” in this novel—despises most are works done for hire: “he would sooner starve to death than resort to commerce, to the fabrication of bourgeois portraits, to sham religious works, to restaurant awnings and signs for midwives.”⁶³ Thus, if, as Zamparelli

⁶² Thomas Zamparelli, “Zola and the Quest for the Absolute in Art.” *Yale French Studies*, p. 144.

⁶³ “. . . il aimait mieux crever la faim, que de recourir au commerce, à la fabrication des portraits bourgeois, des saintetés de pacotille, des stores de restaurant et des enseignes de sage-femme” (4:42).

states, “it is the problem of authenticity in art which forms the nucleus around which the whole novel turns,” the question is not *what is authentic* but *is authenticity possible at all?*⁶⁴

While Claude’s stubbornness and monomaniacal work habits remain consistent after the return from Bennecourt, the effects of his behavior as registered on his young family point to a gradual internalizing of the forces of exploitation from which his small passive income has always insulated him. As the narrative’s occasional shifts into Christine’s point of view reveal, Claude grows into a kind of caricature of a labor boss, while her own experience demonstrates with increasing starkness the self-alienation of the worker under capitalism as analyzed by Marx. Meanwhile, the novel presents, parallel to Claude’s story, that of the novelist Sandoz, a similarly stubborn, obsessive, and self-critical artist, but one whose relative lack of means compels him to publish despite his own reservations, to eventual success.

Finally, a successful career as an artist in the world depicted by Zola exacts a sacrifice, either of one’s integrity and aesthetic principles or of one’s personal happiness. The former may allow for a hollow pseudo-career, a matter of journalistically inflated reputations and prices artificially blown up by the maneuverings of dealers (this is the role of Fagerolles); instead of this, both Claude and Sandoz choose to stick to their own paths, with divergent results. As Claude’s personal capital begins to erode under his feet, his visions become less a matter of direct observation; he places an improbable female nude as the focal point of his final work, a large-scale representation of the Île de la Cité, and bedecks her body with symbolic trappings—golden skin, flowers surrounding the genital area—that reveal a gradual reversion to the Romanticism of his youth, a doomed quest to “create life” and “become a God.” Sandoz manages to stick consistently to his plan, execute his works, publish them and continue on, with

⁶⁴ “Zola and the Quest for the Absolute in Art,” p. 144.

positive results. Yet despite his triumph, Sandoz's own exclamations reveal at what brutal personal cost he has succeeded; if Claude's great Idea leads him to exploit Christine's body, Sandoz's does the same to his own mind, so that he is never free of the colonizing "germ" of the great project that follows him even into his sleep.

In assessing these developments, the present analysis adopts the fruitful optic of alienation because it allows all of these activities to be integrated at some level within the overall constellation presented in the novel—how the characters stand in relation to each other, but also to the social environment that conditions and responds to them. Other accounts have taken more narrow aspects of Claude's artistic production as the basis for assessing the novel's overall message or effect. Focusing on the metaphor of parturition in the novel, Marie Lathers sees in *L'Oeuvre* a return of the repressed for Zola, who cannot escape "the romantic metaphor of the artwork as child of the fecund male artist." Pointing to the central female nude of Claude's *Cité de Paris* painting—the thwarted "work" of the title—Lathers assimilates Claude's failed efforts to get beyond Romanticism to Zola's own: "In an effort to rid modernity of romanticism, Zola seems condemned to the reinscription of its maternal metaphor."⁶⁵ Yet Lathers slips here from saying something real and important about Claude to making the same point about Zola, as though the novel's propositional content (insofar as it can be said to have any) matches the positions and actions taken by its protagonist. But Zola makes it quite clear that Claude's efforts tend in the direction of madness. Even if Claude is a composite of certain real artists, as other characters are also composites of real people,⁶⁶ the narrative trajectory is all Zola's own

⁶⁵ *Bodies of Work: French Literary Realism and the Artist's Model*, Lincoln (University of Nebraska Press), 2001, p. 185.

⁶⁶ cf. Patrick Brady, *L'oeuvre de Emile Zola : roman sur les arts, manifeste, autobiographie, roman à clef*, Geneva (Droz), 1967, pp. 225-57.

creation,⁶⁷ and if we can provisionally discount the pseudoscientific underpinnings, we can distill from the novel's contents a more interesting kind of statement. Yet if this is a *roman à thèse*, of which Sandoz comes out the most evident candidate for the "winner," such an assessment must come to grips with the fact that Sandoz is miserable. Even after his great novel series begins to meet with some success, he still describes himself as laborious old workhorse, impersonal and anhedonic. If the novel's closing imperative is put in Sandoz's mouth—"Allons travailler"—this is not an optimistic look toward future success. Rather, the productive conscience is an implacable, inescapable foreman which has insinuated himself into the artist's brain and thus condemns the latter to a life of toil and mental isolation.

I

Romantic antecedents

L'Oeuvre has frequently invited scrutiny for its documentary associations.⁶⁸ Its protagonist has notably attracted the attention of critics and art historians for certain resemblances to Manet and to Zola's childhood friend Cézanne. In its overall presentation of Claude's artistic milieu, their attitudes, their struggles, and their regular sites of frequentation, the book has attracted considerable esteem; as one critic proclaims, "*L'Oeuvre* is a most valuable book for knowledge of the art world between 1863 and 1885, and its documentary basis gives it real significance as an inside history of the times."⁶⁹ Paradoxically, this strong documentary character comes not simply from a thorough preliminary dossier, as was so often the case for

⁶⁷ One can safely ignore Edmond de Goncourt's claim that Zola had simply plagiarized *Manette Salomon*.

⁶⁸ Henri Mitterand summarizes how various aspects of Claude's life and career evoke several different painters of the time in his Pléïade edition (especially pp. 1372-74).

⁶⁹ Robert J. Niess, *Zola, Cézanne, and Manet: a Study of L'Oeuvre*, Ann Arbor (University of Michigan Press), 1968, p. 216.

Zola's novels. To be sure, he prepared such a file. But as Paul Alexis had already noted in his commentary on the novelist (published four years prior to *L'Oeuvre*), Zola had been closely involved in the art world through his critical writings and personal relationships, so that he already had a ready supply of anecdote and insight: "One work whose documents will give him less trouble to gather together is the novel he sets out to write about art. Here, he will need only to remember what he saw in our milieux and experienced himself. . . . Naturally, in this work Zola will be forced to harness his friends, to collect their most typical characteristics."⁷⁰ The unusual weight accorded biographical information in studies of this novel is not especially controversial, as several passages are frankly autobiographical. Zola's preparatory notes on Claude make this identification unmistakable: "It's the incomplete genius, without the full realization: he's missing just a little bit, he slightly undershoots or overshoots through his physiology; and I add that he has produced some absolutely marvelous works. A Manet, a dramatized Cézanne ; closer to Cézanne."⁷¹ As Zola confided to his correspondent Jacques van Santen Kolff shortly after beginning composition: "It's my whole youth that I recount, I've placed all my friends there, I've placed myself there."⁷² And as we shall see, Zola even goes so far as to include a fictional stand-in for himself in Claude's *cenacle* in the figure of Sandoz: "My whole confession. *A resigned, practical echo of Claude.*"⁷³

⁷⁰ *Emile Zola: Notes d'un ami*, Charpentier (Paris), 1882, pp. 121-22

⁷¹ "C'est le génie incomplet, sans la réalisation entière : il ne manque que de peu de chose, il est un peu en deçà ou au-delà par sa physiologie ; et j'ajoute qu'il a produit quelques morceaux absolument merveilleux : Un Manet, un Cézanne dramatisé ; plus près de Cézanne." F. 265, quoted in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, 4:1354.

⁷² "C'est toute ma jeunesse que je raconte, j'ai mis là tous mes amis, je m'y suis mis moi-même." 6 July, 1885.

⁷³ "Toute ma confession. *Un écho pratique et résigné de Claude.*" F. 288, quoted in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, 4:1358. Much has been made of the supposed rift between Zola and the period's "modern" painters following the publication of *L'Oeuvre*—most notably in the case of Cézanne himself, a childhood friend who possibly never spoke to him again following its publication.⁷³ Henri Mitterrand has

Yet the interest of this work goes beyond merely documentary concerns, particularly in its portrayal of the “values” informing Claude’s early views, views which will ultimately be pushed to a logical extreme in the course of his tragic career. He maintains a faith in the path of artistic production as the only viable mode of living, even in the face of constant failure, discouragement, and material pressures. This faith of course has distinct antecedents in the anti-commercial aesthetic ethos which first appeared among the Romantics, who found themselves in a new relationship to the world around them following the virtual end of the patronage system after the Revolution. Disdaining the commercial values pervading the new society of the nineteenth century, yet requiring a means of subsistence that could only come from this society, this generation faced a dilemma. As Maurice Z. Shroder summarizes, “it was from the middle class that the artist had divorced himself, in opposition to the middle-class virtues, commercial astuteness, practicality, hard-headedness and often hard-heartedness, that the artist had taken his stand,” yet “it was only from the bourgeoisie that the artist could win rewards and recognition; only by conforming to bourgeois taste could he make a living.”⁷⁴ This contradictory situation produced, among other developments, a discourse of the aesthetic as a value of sufficient power and saliency to stand opposed to the commercial. The new aestheticizing tendency, heavily

recently disputed some of the more sensationalized aspects of the biographical gossip surrounding the novel by pointing out that Cézanne was never known to contemplate suicide and was, unlike Claude, quite productive. Mitterand notes the further possibility of certain people around the artist spreading a most unflattering interpretation of the novel, influencing his opinions and emotions, and thereby leading him to cut off contact with the novelist. But a third possibility seems most likely: “through the recent change in his familial and social status—his marriage with Hortense on 28 April, 1886, and the death of his father on 23 October, which rendered him an well-to-do *rentier*—he no longer needed Zola’s periodic support, and he allowed the years to slip by, at a geographical remove, in a withdrawal into himself and his work which led him to let old friendships lie fallow, even if he kept a warm place for them in his heart.” *Zola tel qu’en lui-même*, Paris (PUF), 2009, p. 200. In this respect, Cézanne’s material situation did not resemble Claude’s (at the novel’s beginning) at all until after it was published!

⁷⁴ *Icarus: The Image of the Artist in French Romanticism*, Cambridge (Harvard University Press), 1961, pp. 41-42.

influenced by Théophile Gautier, would develop further throughout the nineteenth century, persisting into Zola's own period among the Parnassian movement and those espousing the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*. It was of course a matter of tremendous importance for his close contemporaries the Goncourts. Describing this atmosphere of romantic recoil from utilitarian aesthetics, Erich Auerbach observes, "Under the date of February 8, 1866, an entry in the Goncourt diary ridicules the idea *de demander à une oeuvre d'art qu'elle serve à quelque chose*"; this tendency thus sought to "ascribe to literature and art in general the most absolute value, to make them the object of a cult, almost a religion."⁷⁵

This outgrowth of Romanticism is essential, this chapter will argue, for comprehending an implicit aspect of this protagonist's distaste for the market and his obsessive inward-turning tendency, as well as his eventual slide into obsession, failure, and eventual suicide. What his career, and that of his fellows, demonstrates in the novel is the failure of art to offer an escape from, or remedy for, the brutal historical fact of alienation, of estrangement from what was once familiar. While Claude Lantier is no aesthete in any sense we would recognize based on the careers of figures like Gautier or Wilde, his obsessiveness and perfectionism recall the efforts of a figure such as Flaubert. Indeed, he perhaps emblemizes the dilemma of the perfectionist blessed—or cursed—with financial independence, at least at the beginning. For by the time his money begins to run out, it is already too late. Though the narrative offers no clear account of Claude's discovery of his vocation, at the moment it begins his path has long since been

⁷⁵ *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask, Princeton (Princeton University Press), 1953, p. 504. The tendency seems never to have arrived at a widely shared and carefully systematized position. One of the earliest scholars of the movement describes it as being not a clearly defined school, but rather "a rather incoherent group of individualities, often very distinct ones, brought together only by certain shared tendencies—very important tendencies, to be sure—sometimes unable to reach agreement on any other point but the question of the independence of art." Albert Cassagne, *La théorie de l'art pour l'art en France*, p. viii.

determined, and the minor success he finds early on with *Plein air* (whose description loosely parallels aspects of *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*) simply provides enough earthly reward to keep him on it until the end. Whatever interest may lie in tracing the individual personalities who were fused into the novel's cast of artists, or in what the general fate of these characters seems to imply about, say, modernism or impressionism—as an artistic project or the specific destinies of its various practitioners—of at least as much interest is the idea of the aesthetic *position* within the market society. In this respect, the novel seems rather to make a specific point about the construal of the aesthetic as a value in itself outside the social and economic constraints of any given period—a position that only emerges, ironically if unsurprisingly, in very particular socio-economic circumstances.⁷⁶

Making ends meet

Claude's opposition to the commercial values surrounding him remains possible only due to his specific situation. The uniqueness of this position becomes clear when set beside the circumstances under which the other artists around him struggle. The finances of all of these characters are on full display, starting with the painter's own. We are quickly reminded of the moment in *L'Assommoir* when nine-year-old Claude was “adopted” by an art-collector who, recognizing the boy's talent, allowed the boy to stay with him in Plassans and sent him to school

⁷⁶ “Art for Art's Sake ... is, to begin with, a specifically Western notion, generated on European soil by European writers, and then culturally diffused to such Occidental outposts as the United States and the Creole sectors of Latin America.... The idea of an aesthetic realm, totally separate from life, has no immediate roots in nonindustrial, ‘primitive’ cultures or even in the more ‘developed’ nations of the Near East and Asia, where the arts remain closely bound up with religion or with other, larger, indigenous spiritual traditions and practices. Aestheticism, in sum, is a theory with no major, vital resonances or academic standing outside Western (and Westernized) societies.” Gene H. Bell-Villada, *Art for Art's Sake and Literary Life: How Politics and Markets Helped Shape the Ideology and Culture of Aestheticism, 1790-1990*, Lincoln (University of Nebraska Press), p. 3.

there. We presently learn that this benefactor died seven years later, leaving sixteen-year-old Claude a *rente* of a thousand francs a year, and power to touch the capital at age twenty-five. This is what allows Claude the relative freedom to pursue his ambitions, a fact which separates him from most of the other artists in the story: “For his part, Claude had his freedom, thanks to a *rente* of a thousand francs; but how terrible was it for him at month’s end, especially when he shared the contents of his pockets. Luckily, he was starting to sell some small pictures, bought at ten or twelve francs by old Malgras, a sly dealer. . . .”⁷⁷ The youthful discovery of Romanticism in youth seems to nourish Claude’s ambition all the more—he is eager for *glory*, the glory of establishing a new mode of artistic vision on the basis of an acknowledged masterpiece. Enjoying a degree of financial independence, Claude is generous toward his less-fortunate *confrères*, despite the personal trouble this sometimes brings him.

Chaîne presents a more pathetic, faded carbon copy of Claude’s own situation and antecedents. Like Claude, his destiny has also been the plaything of an avid art-collector, who has “flattered” him with hopes for the future, but has also encouraged him to take up painting, an area in which he shows no talent; he has failed his exams, receiving no scholarship, but has gone back to Paris anyway—for a single year—with money advanced by his poor father against his “undoubted success.” Despite repeated failures, he manages to stretch this sum for eighteen months, before finally cohabitating with the sculptor Mahoudeau, even sharing a bed in an effort to cut costs. For his part, Mahoudeau knows at least in what genre he can best apply his talents, and shows early promise after a contest in Plassans, but lacks Chaîne’s frugality and is engulfed by the metropolis: “. . . he had come to Paris as the town prizewinner, with a grant of eight-

⁷⁷ “Claude, lui, avait sa liberté, grâce aux mille francs de rente; mais quelles fins de mois terribles, surtout lorsqu’il partageait le fond de ses poches! Heureusement, il commençait à vendre de petites toiles achetées des dix et douze francs par le père Malgras, un marchand rusé. . . .” (4:42)

hundred francs per year for four years. But he had been disoriented and helpless in Paris, had failed at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, squandering his grant without doing anything; so that after four years he had been forced, in order to survive, to find work with a seller of religious statuary, where he spent ten hours a day slogging away at Saint Josephs, Magdalenes, and everything else in the calendar.”⁷⁸ Despite Claude’s gentle encouragement of Mahoudeau, the two obviously live in different worlds. The latter has rather conventional ideas about sculpture, and no passionate ambition pushing him onward to further achievements. Yet he manages, for a time at least, to exploit his talent enough to make some compromises with the materialistic society in which they all struggle to survive. Another friend from Plassans, Dubuche the architecture student, is burdened not with his own maintenance, but with a debt to his parents: “For his part Dubuche, pressured to pay back to his parents the interest of the sums placed on his head, sought out grunt work to do for architects, apart from his work at the Ecole.”⁷⁹

The presentation of the young artists’ finances highlights Claude’s unique relationship to time. Alone among the men in his circle, Claude has never since age sixteen been forced to confront the possibility of material failure, nor is he saddled like them with debts or monetary obligations to his parents. (If he occasionally shares more than he can afford with them, this likely has the indirect effect of keeping him within a circle of fellow-workers, a milieu he seems to need in order to thrive.) A regular income allows him to forge his own path, one unconstrained

⁷⁸ “Fils d’un tailleur de pierres de Plassans, il avait remporté là-bas de grands succès, aux concours du Musée; puis, il était venu à Paris comme lauréat de la ville, avec la pension de huit cents francs, qu’elle servait pendant quatre années. Mais à Paris, il avait vécu dépaysé, sans défense, ratant l’École des Beaux-Arts, mangeant sa pension à ne rien faire; si bien que, au bout des quatre ans, il s’était vu forcé, pour vivre, de se mettre aux gages d’un marchand de bons dieux, où il grattait dix heures par jour des Saint-Joseph, des Saint-Roch, des Madeleine, tout le calendrier des paroisses.” (4:66-67)

⁷⁹ “De son côté, Dubuche, pressé de payer à ses parents les intérêts des sommes placées sur sa tête, cherchait de basses besognes chez des architectes, en dehors de ses travaux de l’École.” (4:42)

by the market forces buffeting his fellow-workers. Free of any pressing needs or obligations, the painter is largely at liberty to develop his theories and techniques on his own schedule. Claude's goals are projected into some eventual, indefinite future, and he is in a position to wait until the organic growth of his work leads to this success. And this situation is protected by the legal condition that the painter not touch his capital until he is twenty-five (the "three inseparables" of Plassans—Claude, Sandoz, and Dubuche—are all twenty-two when the novel begins). He is contemptuous of "*le commerce*" in art because he can afford to be—he can get by with letting Malgras rip him off at ten francs a sketch because he has a safety net. The others enjoy no such luck. Their fledgling careers sit atop no such assured means of living; rather, they have staked money against future success, thus existing figuratively, when not literally, in an indebted state.

These financial considerations naturally inform the artists' views on the place of dealers in their world, further highlighting the uniqueness of Claude's position. According to the other young artists, dealers constitute a useless class of parasitic middle-men who seemingly expend all their efforts on behalf of the wrong party to the transaction, the buyer. "All dealers were shouted down; it was vexing that the art lover distrusted the painter so much that he absolutely had to pass through an intermediary in the hope of obtaining a discount. This question of daily bread stirred them up again. Claude showed a fine contempt: so what if one was robbed, if one had produced a masterpiece, even if one had only water to drink?"⁸⁰ For Claude, the greatness of the work and the attendant sense of accomplishment offer in themselves a compensation for poverty and hardship.

⁸⁰ "Tous les marchands furent conspués, il était vraiment fâcheux que l'amateur se défiât du peintre, au point de vouloir absolument passer par un intermédiaire, dans l'espoir d'obtenir un rabais. Cette question du pain les excitait encore. Claude montrait un beau mépris: on était volé, eh bien! qu'est-ce que ça fichait, si l'on avait fait un chef-d'œuvre, et que l'on eût seulement de l'eau à boire?" (4:88)

The rage for profit

The distinctions between Claude and his peers displayed in the opening chapters receive keener dramatization in the straightened financial circumstances of the second half. The painter's contemptuous refusal to resort to commissioned portraiture, for example, is highlighted by the shift in Mahoudeau's career. The sculptor, who had been supporting himself with religious statuary, must adapt to a downturn in that particular market, and resorts to doing busts, complying with the absurd requests of his clients to flatter their physiognomies with a resigned practicality: "“But a man has to eat, right?””⁸¹ Claude is of course well aware of the privilege he enjoys compared to his friends, and must stop himself from mocking the bitter, petty squabbles that break out between Chaine and Mahoudeau as they struggle through hard times: “Ah, poverty, how discouraging! How could you hold anything against those who were crushed by it?”⁸² Such comments tend to emphasize Claude's humanity, while at the same time implying that he still occupies a position apart, one in which he can live up to his mysterious ambitions.

In this altered environment to which Claude has returned, the latent opportunism lurking within some of his friends has emerged into full expression. The only real successes are “immoral” ones (within the scale of moral values implied in the novel). The most superficially brilliant is the tenuous career of Fagerolles, who had gone to the Beaux-Arts against his father's wishes and fallen under Claude's influence, and who now achieves some success, first by diluting Claude's ideas to produce works more digestible by the public, then by casting his lot with the arch-manipulator of the market Naudet. The latter's adroit scheming leads to an artificial “bubble” construed as a direct analog to the frenzy of the stock exchange, as seen above, and

⁸¹ ““Mais il faut manger, n'est-ce pas?”” (4:170)

⁸² “Ah! cette misère, quel découragement! comment en vouloir à ceux qu'elle écrase?” (4:171)

then to the destruction of Fagerolles's reputation when it inevitably bursts. This trajectory places in relief Claude's insistence on sending things to the jury, as though this body, despite its hostile conservatism, retains more legitimacy in matters of aesthetic value than the market. Naudet's cynical experiment with Fagerolles demonstrates that, as far as society at large is concerned, paintings are principally one more asset in which the rich may park their wealth in the hope of future returns.

This rage for profit and the moral qualities it promotes in individuals is evidently an important subsidiary aspect of Zola's plan for the novel, and finds a brilliant exemplar in the career of Jory. Though here the apparent character flaw is connected more rigorously to the broader biological scheme, his inconstancy is just as much a reaction to his background as an inheritance: "Jory showed in effect an inherited avarice, which was an object of amusement for the others. . . . he managed to live a disordered life without money and without debts; and this innate ability to enjoy for nothing was in him connected with a continuous duplicity, a habit of lying which he contracted in the sanctimonious environment of his family. . . ."⁸³ Jory seems like a useful member to the group (publishing articles about the work of Claude, Bongrand, and the others), but is fundamentally an opportunist. These qualities are already visible in their early interactions: "Beside himself, Claude addressed Jory like an idiot: was it not better to destroy this work rather than submit a mediocre version? Yes, it was disgusting, this low commercial interest!"⁸⁴ Evidently, Claude's convictions are no match for the prevailing social forces; the

⁸³ "Jory montrait en effet une hérédité d'avarice, dont on s'amusait. Il ne payait pas les femmes, il arrivait à mener une vie désordonnée, sans argent et sans dettes; et cette science innée de jouir pour rien s'alliait en lui à une duplicité continuelle, à une habitude de mensonge qu'il avait contractée dans le milieu dévot de sa famille. . . ." (4:70)

⁸⁴ "Hors de lui, Claude traita Jory de crétin: est-ce qu'il ne valait pas mieux détruire cette œuvre que de la livrer médiocre? Oui, c'était dégoûtant, ce bas intérêt de commerce!" (4:73)

thirst for success, coupled with the native tight-fistedness Jory gets from his father, leads him to cultivate relationships with a view strictly to their eventual profitability for himself. Upon his return from Bennecourt, Claude witnesses a telling exchange between the petty journalist and his mistress, who calls out Jory's transactional relations in front of their guest: "Do you think I don't see you [and Fagerolles], him always patting you on the back in the hope of flattering articles, and you acting the kindly soul, all the while calculating the advantage you'll receive for supporting an artist liked by the public?"⁸⁵ This moral quality ultimately develops beyond mutually beneficial wheeling and dealing into a thoroughgoing exploitation of artists, as Jory enriches himself by milking them dry, happily boasting of his success to a miserable Claude in the "egoistic joy of feeling himself fat and victorious in front of this poor, defeated devil."⁸⁶ In the novel's final stretch, not only has Jory found his way into a lucrative post at a major art review—a position which once might have crowned his hopes of contributing to his friends' aesthetic campaign. He has now also slipped into shady art dealing—a lesser imitation of Naudet's tactics—which naturally sets him at odds with several members of the group: "The bourgeois rapacity he had received from his father, this profit-seeking inheritance [*hérédité du gain*] which had thrown him secretly into modest speculations with his earliest income, now revealed itself fully, making him into a formidable gentleman bleeding white those artists or amateurs who fell into his hands."⁸⁷ The figures who thrive in this environment largely do so in ways antithetical to any notion Claude may have of success.

⁸⁵ "Est-ce que tu t'imagines que je ne vous vois pas, lui toujours à te passer la main dans le dos, parce qu'il espère des articles, et toi faisant le bon prince, calculant le bénéfice que tu en tireras, si tu appuies un artiste aimé du public?" (4:178)

⁸⁶ ". . . dans la joie égoïste de se sentir gras et victorieux, en face de ce pauvre diable vaincu." (4:302)

⁸⁷ "La rapacité bourgeoise qu'il tenait de son père, cette hérédité du gain qui l'avait jeté secrètement à des spéculations infimes, dès les premiers sous gagnés, s'étalait aujourd'hui, finissait par faire de lui un terrible monsieur saignant à blanc les artistes et les amateurs qui lui tombaient sous la main." (*Ibid.*)

Laying hands on the capital

It is of course against these bourgeois values of tight-fisted calculation that Claude has been working throughout his career. Yet with his small family now returned to Paris and Claude resuming his efforts to paint, his growing preoccupation with his work and their deteriorating financial situation test the limits and assumptions of his artistic credo. The financial difficulties they had been free from in the countryside now assert themselves rigorously, and only now does Claude begin to unleash his frustrations in a way that ties them to wealth, as logistical complications make painting outdoors inconvenient in many places without special equipment which he cannot afford: “He complained bitterly about not being rich. . . .”⁸⁸ Curiously, the paintings Claude commits himself to during this final period suggest indirectly how their financial situation affects his nerves and overall state of mind. Freshly returned from Bennecourt, Claude feels his ambition returning and, not yet gnawed at by their material difficulties, puts his *plein-airiste* convictions to work on a brutally realistic scene of want and desperation, painted from life: “he painted a background of poverty, low hovels dominated by factory chimneys; and, in the foreground, he had placed in the snow two loutish figures, a little boy and girl, devouring stolen apples. . . . The work, placed under the dead light of his window, even shocked him with its brutality; it was like a door opened onto the street; the snow was blinding; the two lamentable figures stood out against the muddy grey.”⁸⁹ If Claude’s artistic values are far outside the

⁸⁸ “Il se plaignait amèrement de n’être pas riche. . . .” (4:207)

⁸⁹ “. . . il peignait un fond de misère, des mesures basses, dominées par des cheminées d'usine; et, au premier plan, il avait mis dans la neige une fillette et un voyou en loques, qui dévoraient des pommes volées. Son obstination à peindre sur nature compliquait terriblement son travail, l'embarrassait de difficultés presque insurmontables. Pourtant, il termina cette toile dehors, il ne se permit à son atelier qu'un nettoyage. L'œuvre, quand elle fut posée sous la clarté morte du vitrage, l'étonna lui-même par sa

commercial, the means of expressing them lie immediately to hand, even in the grim social effects construed in relation to money. The natural visual values of apples take on the added associations of theft. Claude of course knows immediately that the painting will be refused, but a perverse pride in flouting convention leads him to submit it anyway. As Allen Pasco notes, “it is interesting to see the jury's rejection the poverty scene lead to his turning away from reality.” Following the rejection, Claude begins allowing himself to work from sketches, but another rejection leads him to dig in his heels again, leading in turn to still another rejection; this continues until he arrives at his major vision of the Île de Cité, which begins in a moment of real observation but proceeds to acquire ever greater layers of symbolic amplitude. Pasco observes that this is a work “in no sense done from nature” and further highlights the parallel with the Pygmalion story by pointing to the valuable materials which bedeck the central nude of this final work. Just as the mythical sculptor decked out his statue with jewels, so Claude endows his feminine ideal with skin made of diamonds and gold: “symbole du désir insatiable, extra-humaine de la chair, devenue de l'or et du diamant entre ses doigts, dans son vain effort d'en faire de la vie.”⁹⁰ We may add that Claude's outfitting the “Femme” with such precious materials on canvas represents as well a sublimation of the tribute he personally renders to the work that so obsesses him: for despite Christine's frequent admonitions, Claude has begun to touch the capital left to him by the deceased collector, pushing their household further towards poverty in order to realize his vision.

Work and play

brutalité; c'était comme une porte ouverte sur la rue, la neige aveuglait, les deux figures se détachaient, lamentables, d'un gris boueux.” (4:204-205)

⁹⁰ “The Failure of *L'Oeuvre*,” *L'Esprit Créateur*, Vol. 11, No. 4, (Winter 1971), pp. 45-55, p. 50, p. 47; *Les Rougon-Macquart*, vol. 4, p. 347.

Claude and Sandoz have always figured themselves as ‘outside’ the society they inhabit, even from an early age. This includes, on the one hand, avoiding more socially acceptable forms of work. Sandoz (again like Zola), eventually abandons his clerking work and struggles for a time until meeting with success in publishing. Claude of course never works at all, a fact that he occasionally comes to regret during his depressive episodes. The artistic vision previously afforded by his relative autonomy, having outlasted the material conditions that supported it, is now felt as a burden that excludes him from simpler forms of comradery and satisfaction in work; he has “a need for self-abasement” that periodically leads him to mingle with the dockworkers, “living among laborers, expressing at every crisis his old desire to be a bricklayer’s aid. Wasn’t happiness having solid limbs, doing the work they were made for quickly and well? He had spoiled his existence; he should have found himself a job long ago. . . .”⁹¹ Such expressions of regret further develop the motif of Claude’s two-sided desire for the objects of his representations. On the one hand, he longs for a sense that he is involved in work that his body would be perfectly attuned to perform; on the other, such labor forms simply one aspect among others in a city he wishes, with his superior artistic vision and skill, to dominate. This is the initial import of his major effort, a vast rendition of the Île de la Cité seen from beneath the Pont des Saint-Pères (now the Pont du Carrousel).

“Look! I place myself under the bridge; in the foreground, I have the Port Saint-Nicolas, with its crane, with its masses of dockers unloading the barges. Eh? Do you get it? That’s Paris at work! Strapping men with bare arms and chests. . . . Then, on the other side, the *bain froid*, Paris at play, and no doubt a small boat

⁹¹ “Il courait furieusement Paris, les faubourgs surtout, par un besoin de s'encaillier, vivant avec des manœuvres, exprimant à chaque crise son ancien désir d'être le goujat d'un maçon. Est-ce que le bonheur n'était pas d'avoir des membres solides, abattant vite et bien le travail pour lequel ils étaient taillés? Il avait raté son existence, il aurait dû se faire embaucher autrefois.” (4:246)

there, to occupy the center of the composition; but I'm not too sure about yet. I still need to look into it.”⁹²

The composition would aim, then, at a global view of the city, in which the partitioning of the main aspects of modern life—labor and leisure—is brought into focus. This aesthetic reconciliation of spheres ripped asunder under a capitalist organization of life must be the work of an eye and a hand standing outside of it.

Claude's is a work ethic that seems, within the terms set by the novel, to transcend conventional labor—he rarely thinks of anything besides his work, resents interruptions, and can scarcely go anywhere without viewing his surroundings with his painter's eye. Sandoz comments on these obsessive work habits at his friend's funeral: ““When I think of all those fiddlers of the Ecole and the press that accused him of laziness and ignorance, repeating one after another that he had always refused to learn his craft! . . . Lazy, my god ! He whom I've seen fainting with fatigue after ten-hour sittings, he who had given his entire life, he who has killed himself out of his madness for work!”⁹³ Conversely, when Claude is painting regularly, he never appears to take pleasure in anything unrelated to his work. The only joy vouchsafed to him is the ambitious heat generated by traversing the streets of Paris with his like-minded friends. If Claude's final work gropes towards a symbolic synthesis of work and leisure, it seems to be a project that can only be undertaken by someone inhabiting a space beyond this dualistic mode of life, someone

⁹² “Regarde! je me plante sous le pont, j'ai pour premier plan le port Saint-Nicolas, avec sa grue, ses péniches qu'on décharge, son peuple de débardeurs. Hein? tu comprends, c'est Paris qui travaille, ça! des gaillards solides, étalant le nu de leur poitrine et de leurs bras... Puis, de l'autre côté, j'ai le bain froid, Paris qui s'amuse, et une barque sans doute, là, pour occuper le centre de la composition; mais ça, je ne sais pas bien encore, il faut que je cherche.” (4:216)

⁹³ “Quand je pense . . . que ces petits figneurs de l'école et du journalisme l'ont accusé de paresse et d'ignorance, en répétant les uns à la suite des autres qu'il avait toujours refusé d'apprendre son métier!... Paresseux, mon Dieu! lui que j'ai vu s'évanouir de fatigue, après des séances de dix heures, lui qui avait donné sa vie entière, qui s'est tué dans sa folie de travail!...” (4:355-56)

for whom the metropolis is not a site into which to integrate his energies by performing labor and taking pleasure; it is a prize to seize on the imperial march towards artistic glory.

II

A chaste passion

Claude's vestigial Romanticism appears, in the terms set by the novel, to be the latent motive for his general antipathy towards women. This aspect of his character is at first easily accounted for as the shyness he seeks to conceal through an affectation of brutality: "he treated them all as a boy who ignored them out of a suffering timidity."⁹⁴ Indeed, the fear of any genuine contact, with all the risks involved, is said to have become itself the ground of his and Sandoz's youthful superiority as votaries of the ideal: "Woman herself was banished, they had a timidity and clumsiness that they erected into a childish austerity of superior boys."⁹⁵ Through a concatenation of circumstances, Claude has reached early maturity without experiencing any pressing need to grow up, and his youthful idealization of women, coupled with an overall lack of experience, has left him with a sense of awkwardness which he seeks to overcome in his paintings. Already at the outset, Zola's narrator announces the mysterious economy between Claude's timidity around women and the sublimated form of his fascination with them in painting.

His excitement grew: it was his chaste passion for womanly flesh, a mad love for nudities desired and never possessed, a powerlessness to satisfy himself, to create with his two frenzied arms as much of this flesh as he dreamed of embracing. Those women that he chased out of his *atelier* he adored in his pictures, he

⁹⁴ "Il les traitait toutes en garçon qui les ignorait d'une timidité souffrante" (4:13).

⁹⁵ "La femme elle-même était bannie, ils avaient des timidités, des maladresses, qu'ils érigeaient en une austérité de gamins supérieurs" (4:40).

caressed them and attacked them, desperate to the point of tears at his inability to make them sufficiently beautiful or alive.⁹⁶

Creation of the order Claude envisions is intimately bound up with chastity and with a kind of spiritual impotence in the impossibility of its realization. This inability to arrive at a satisfactory representation seems to be a result of exactly this rejection of a real female presence.

Yet Claude's aloofness towards women is not only a psychological response to fear of the other. The terms of its presentation suggest an even deeper fear, one tied to his sense of his vocation and his position as a revolutionary artist trying to impose himself on a public that adores convention, and the material conditions that allow him to maintain such a position. The telling moment occurs the morning after Claude's first meeting with Christine, when he has allowed her to sleep in his flat and hung up her wet clothes to dry. Catching, almost by accident, a glimpse of her naked form as she is sleeping, he is overcome with the need to draw her. Claude feels he has regressed to boyhood, removed by spontaneity and time pressure (he must work quickly before she wakes) from the swarming thoughts that have assailed him since the girl's arrival—a variation on the traditional voyeuristic scenario. He at first appreciates the girl's beauty, then proceeds to adopt an asexual professional gaze that is at the same time associated with childhood: If his painterly eye is mesmerized by the female body, this fascination stems from his childish fixation on the color and texture of nature; thus Christine herself is effaced beneath the "snow of her breasts" and "the delicate amber of her shoulders."⁹⁷ Here the female

⁹⁶ "Son excitation augmentait, c'était sa passion de chaste pour la chair de la femme, un amour fou des nudités désirées et jamais possédées, une impuissance à se satisfaire, à créer de cette chair autant qu'il rêvait d'en étreindre, de ses deux bras éperdus. Ces filles qu'il chassait de son atelier, il les adorait dans ses tableaux, il les caressait et les violentait, désespéré jusqu'aux larmes de ne pouvoir les faire assez belles, assez vivantes" (4:50-51).

⁹⁷ As we will see, this foreshadows the growing alienation she will experience from her own body later, when she begins regularly posing for the central female figure of the *Île de la Cité* painting.

body does not appear as an object of desire, enticing enough to provoke amorous questing or jealous rage. Rather, the gaze is itself the moment of fulfillment—and not the gaze alone, but its creative prolongation and recording in the act of drawing the body. At this point, sex and art are seemingly at odds, alternative contenders for the same mental space. Facilitating Claude's avowed preference for the latter is his affected contempt for all women, born of his native shyness. But beyond concealing his timidity (seemingly carried over all the way from childhood), this posture also has a strategic use in maintaining Claude's material position, which can support himself easily enough—provided he is careful—but not much more. Thus the temptation of a woman represents for him “the fear of encumbering his existence if he should give in.”⁹⁸ The risks are unspecified, but the primary one seems to be a child, as later events will bear out.

His true attitude towards women is not a fear of rejection; rather, Claude experiences a kind of intimidation specific to himself as an ever-thwarted creator. This is one of several aspects of the novel that overtly recall the myth of Pygmalion, who sculpted his beloved Galatea out of disgust for the “low” women he saw around him. Just so, when Claude first encounters the attractive and flirtatious Irma Bécot while marching about with his friends, he dismisses her as a “tramp [*roulure*]” (4:77). Indeed, the first time he encounters Christine, his attitude is much the same, rejecting her seemingly too elaborate account of her presence by his door. Her train to Paris has been delayed, and her cabman has left her in the city (after attempting to assault her) rather than take her to her new employer's home in Passy. Claude at first rejects her as “a joker. . . some harlot who's been chucked out on the street and is looking for a man.”⁹⁹ And just

⁹⁸ “la crainte d'encombrer son existence, s'il cédaît” (4:45).

⁹⁹ “une farceuse, pensa Claude, quelque gueuse flanquée à la rue et qui cherche un homme” (4:12).

as the mythical sculptor, having created an ideal of feminine beauty sheltered from the real women he observed, sees it through Venus' blessing endowed with life, so Claude's own work, for all the "realism" he espouses, eventually drifts into an attempt to "create" life itself, an attempt cast in terms that position his efforts against childbirth. For what is genuine art, according to Claude? We can perhaps sum it up concisely as something real that is expressed through the unique sensibility of an attentive and observant consciousness. Yet his most overt and concise pronouncement on the matter seems to hover between competing notions of observation and begetting.

What more was there, in art, than giving what one had in one's stomach [*ventre*]? Did it not all come down to planting some woman before oneself and rendering her as one sensed her? Wasn't a bunch of carrots—yes, even a bunch of carrots!—studied directly, painted naively, in the note of one's personal vision, worth the eternal drivel of the Ecole, that tobacco-juice painting, shamefully cooked to order? The day was coming when one single original carrot would be pregnant (*grosse*) with a revolution.¹⁰⁰

There is, in Claude's conception, an ideal of direct experience, unmediated by the formulae of professionalism. Even the most mundane and objective of materials, "directly" studied, cannot but furnish the "personal note" of the artist's vision. Yet even this early in the narrative, the terms of Claude's credo reveal the broader field into which his imagination extends itself. An artist's productions emerging from the "ventre" (stomach but also womb), the hypothetical carrot's being "grosse" with a revolution alerts us subtly to the stakes that Claude's effort will take on, particularly as his relationship with Christine deepens. His effort comes to seem a kind of competing pregnancy, a demiurgic striving after creation which eventually goes beyond skillful

¹⁰⁰ "Est-ce que, en art, il y avait autre chose que de donner ce qu'on avait dans le ventre? est-ce que tout ne se réduisait pas à planter une bonne femme devant soi, puis à la rendre comme on la sentait? est-ce qu'une botte de carottes, oui, une botte de carottes! étudiée directement, peinte naïvement, dans la note personnelle où on la voit, ne valait pas les éternelles tartines de l'École, cette peinture au jus de chique, honteusement cuisinée d'après les recettes? Le jour venait où une seule carotte originale serait grosse d'une révolution." (4:44)

reproduction of the actual, leaning into symbolic excess. If this work also requires, in Claude's example, the presence of a woman, the coupling takes place entirely through the eyes. If the modest title *L'Oeuvre* conceals as much as it announces about the novel's subject, the broader stakes of Claude's effort at "creation" are starkly revealed in the list of potential titles Zola set down before making his choice.

Faire un enfant. Faire un monde. Faire de la vie. Création. Créer. Procréer.
Engrosser la nature. La lutte contre l'ange. La défaite. Être Dieu. Enfantement.
Accouchement. Parturition. Conception. Enfanter. Fécondation. . . . Œuvre
vivante. Chair vivante. Le génie... Les faiseurs d'hommes. Les créateurs de
monde.¹⁰¹

Thus, we see that the preoccupation with the ambiguity of "creation," the connection but also the tension between creating art and creating life, is part of Zola's project from the beginning.

Claude demonstrates this tension throughout the narrative as, excepting his and Christine's brief "honeymoon" period in Bennecourt, he gradually loses interest in erotic contact, a pattern that continues until the final night of his life: "Their bed, since many long months ago, had frozen over; they lay there beside one another as strangers, following a slow rupture of the bonds of their flesh: a voluntary abstinence, a theoretical chastity, which Claude was driven to in order to give all his virility to his painting. . . ." ¹⁰²

II

A grown-up child

¹⁰¹ 4:1338.

¹⁰² "Leur couche, depuis de longs mois, se glaçait; ils s'y allongeaient côte à côte, en étrangers, après une lente rupture des liens de leur chair: volontaire abstinence, chasteté théorique, où il devait aboutir pour donner à la peinture toute sa virilité. . . ." (4:341).

If Claude's ever-growing Pygmalion complex casts his effort as an activity taking place in competition with motherhood, Christine's position in his life assumes greater irony. David Baguley has observed that *L'Oeuvre* is a *Künstlerroman* in more ways than one, describing the trajectory of artists working in a variety of genres with specific reference to their relations with women.¹⁰³ Within the relationship between Claude and Christine, this is particularly true with regard to the competing notions of "creation" it embodies and to its invasion by the alienating effects of the commercial values Claude has sought to avoid. Christine's is the one constant presence in the novel that has almost nothing to do with artistic production—yet productivity, in the form of motherhood, she very much has, and her body is made to serve the productive ends of Claude's work when she begins to pose for him; it is the fraught juxtaposition of these two forms of creation that furnishes the "private" wing of the novel, complementing the "public" one of the authentic artist facing the fallen, commercialized world.¹⁰⁴

Christine quickly assumes the role of "mother"—not to their son Jacques (whom both largely neglect until his eventual death), but to Claude himself: "her heart opened up more

¹⁰³ "L'Oeuvre de Zola: Künstlerroman à thèse," *Emile Zola and the Arts: Centennial of the Publication of L'Oeuvre*, ed. Jean-Max Guieu and Alison Hilton, Georgetown University Press, 1988, pp. 185-98, p. 192.

¹⁰⁴ Patrick Brady has mapped out a scheme in which a "Woman" figure (in this novel and some of Zola's other works) serves a "mediating" function between the Artist and the Group: "In *L'Oeuvre*, . . . the basic conflict which opposes the Artist to Society—mediated . . . by the Woman—is represented by the clash of aesthetic values between oil-painting and water-colour, symbolizing both class struggle and battle of the sexes." The fact that Christine's mother used to paint water-colors on fans, a skill which she herself once or twice attempts to practice, magnifies the stakes of this medium in contrast to Claude's oil-painting: "Class struggle: the contrast drawn between the aesthetic prejudices embodied in the respective techniques of oil-painting and water-colour opposes originality and revolution to banality and (bourgeois) conservatism." This is a fascinating insight, but it should be clear that according to terms of the present study, the "battle of the sexes" found in *L'Oeuvre* bears not on types of paint, or on art at all: it is found, on the one hand, in Claude's flight from reality into a hazy realm of erotic fantasy, and on the other, in Christine's effort to make Claude, through love, into a complete human being. Patrick Brady, "Symbolic Structures of Mediation and Conflict in Zola's Fiction: From "Une Farce" to "Madame Sourdis" to *L'Oeuvre*." *SubStance*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Winter, 1971-1972), pp. 85-92; pp. 90-91, p. 89.

broadly, and a mother distinguished itself from the lover. This maternal feeling for her grown-up child was made of the vague, infinite pity which moved her, the illogical weakness she watched it falling into at every hour. . . .”¹⁰⁵ This pity for her “grown-up child” bears indeed all the hallmarks of unconditional maternal affection. Not only does she manage their household expenses on the same income Claude supported himself alone on before; she gradually overcomes her modesty and agrees to pose for the nude in his major work. Her serving in both roles receives further accentuation when the pair eventually move into the workshop to cut costs, typifying a tendency towards overlapping roles in both directions: no longer does physical space maintain the distinction between work and domestic life. Their home becomes a grimy caricature of the synthetic vision projected in Claude’s great image of labor and leisure.

Christine’s choosing to live with Claude out of wedlock (thereby foregoing various privileges) already represents a tremendous sacrifice, and the treatment she endures at his hands as she poses for his ill-starred painting is tragic enough. Yet her fate takes on an even more bitter irony when one considers what she has given up. Both lovers are effectively “orphans.” Claude’s parents are gone; yet he hardly experiences this as a deprivation, save for the occasional bitter thought about his mother. Though he has siblings and cousins, his obsession with his work—and the *rente* that supports this—effectively seems to excuse him from cultivating any family relationships. Claude is, to all appearances, unattached, his own man, bound only by ties of friendship and shared passion to the Plassans confraternity in Paris. Christine is not so fortunate, having no relations at all, and having been given a lady’s education, leaving her with no useful skills; luckily, she has managed to get set up with a job reading to a wealthy woman, Madame

¹⁰⁵ “À cette époque, son cœur s'ouvrit, plus large, et une mère se dégagea de l'amante. Cette maternité pour son grand enfant d'artiste était faite de la pitié vague et infinie qui l'attendrissait, de la faiblesse illogique où elle le voyait tomber à chaque heure. . . .” (4:208)

Vanzade, who comes to love the girl and regard her as a daughter. Yet her attraction to Claude, born of participating in the *Plein air* painting by posing for him, of sharing his pain when she sees it mocked and laughed at in the Salon des Refusés, leads her to break away from someone with whom she had sworn to remain: “Each day, Madame seemed to feel for her an even greater tenderness; she was constantly giving her gifts . . . and she herself loved Madame, had cried one night when the latter called her ‘my daughter,’ she swore never to leave Madame now, her heart drowned with pity at seeing her so old and infirm.”¹⁰⁶ When Claude, hearing this, can only remark that the woman probably intends to make Christine her heiress, Christine is surprised, then dismisses the idea: “What would I become?” No doubt Christine’s character is not fully developed in the novel, but one senses between the lines at such moments that she is not content, like he is, to be taken care of like a child. She goes to him abruptly—breaking with Madame Vanzade, seemingly not on good terms—and effectively becomes *his* mother. She sacrifices comfort, affection, and a likely inheritance to be with Claude.

Production

Once Claude begins to surrender to the allure of his highly symbolic, Romantic dream-vision, the attitude towards his model changes as well. As we saw above, the first time he draws Christine she is comfortably asleep, and he is surrendering his mental faculties to the experience of representing her in the present moment. But working on the ill-fated “masterpiece” changes the artist’s relationship to time. As he slips into growing financial precarity, his confidence in the scope and impact of the work grows increasingly strident. Like a capitalist counting on future

¹⁰⁶ “Chaque jour, Madame semblait éprouver pour elle une tendresse plus grande; c'étaient sans cesse des cadeaux, une robe de soie, une petite montre ancienne, jusqu'à du linge; et elle-même aimait beaucoup Madame, elle avait pleuré un soir que celle-ci l'appelait sa fille, elle jurait de ne la quitter jamais maintenant, le cœur noyé de pitié, à la voir si vieille et si infirme.” (4:98)

profits, Claude is reaching forward into the future. Whereas before he had been content to let his work mature into inevitable triumph in the fullness of time, now Claude is banking on success, expressing increasingly wishful certainty that the titular work occupying the latter half of the novel is the one that will finally establish him—“*celui-ci, c'est le succès.*”

Christine becomes part of this effort not as a partner or in a position of any dignity, but as a sort of unpaid employee. Her experience, as registered in the novel's indirect discourse and in her later outbursts against her husband, reveal a bitter consciousness of reification, a sense that her value for him is reducible to the shape and color the surface her body presents in certain lights, and not at all its other functions. Here, models are distinctly devalued—used to produce a thing of potential value, the living, breathing bodies themselves are thrown out after use. This is the self-alienation Christine undergoes as she poses for Claude's ever-thwarted masterpiece. She is eager to help her husband, wants to facilitate the creation of the projected masterpiece—if only for it to finally be done. She recalls how moved she was by the *Plein air* painting she modeled for, the sense of partnership she felt with the artist upon seeing the completed work. Yet for Claude this is no collaboration, but a kind of exploitation. Christine's situation is, indeed, almost emblematic of the mystified employee. Believing herself a contributor to a visionary and remunerative project, she comes to a keen emotional awareness of the reification of her own body—that is, the “partial system” of its surface. Asked to hold deathly still for days at a time, she must repeatedly watch the painter destroy the results in his regular fits of frustration. All the while, Claude denies her the physical contact she longs for as his partner, and has no hesitation about announcing at every opportunity the theory of energy economy guiding dictating his

perverse abstinence: “genius must be chaste, one must only sleep with one’s work.”¹⁰⁷ Christine comes to recognize herself as displaced in his affection by the represented figure on the canvas.

Even the supreme expression of her body’s “productivity”—their son Jacques—is a source mainly of inconvenience for Christine, even of shame, until the boy finally dies of the old Rougon malady, allowing Claude finally to paint *him* in peace. This affords the artist the chance to be a “creator” even as he follows his doctrine of subjects painted at the moment of observation. The only way he can compete with Christine’s maternity while staying consistent with his principles is through the very death of his subject. Within this imaginative constellation, we might say Jacques is the “fleur, l’absente de tous bouquets,” yet Claude’s position is the very reverse of Mallarmean artistic impersonality. He wants to bring what is “inside” himself out onto the canvas and establish his own greatness in the world: “he worked with the blind obstinacy of the artist who opens up his flesh in order to draw from it the fruit that torments him.”¹⁰⁸

From Christine’s own brooding reflections, we gain a vision of Claude as factory boss, demanding endless uncomfortable posing sessions, and of Christine herself as laborer. The analysis by the early Marx of estranged labor in his 1844 manuscripts yields terms highly suggestive for understanding what this activity suggests about Claude’s artistic career overall: “Thus, if the product of his labour, his labor *objectified*, is for him an *alien*, hostile, powerful object independent of him, then his position towards it is such that someone else is master of this object, someone who is alien, hostile, powerful, and independent of him. If his own activity is an unfree activity, then he is treating it as activity performed in the service, under the dominion, the

¹⁰⁷ “le génie devait être chaste, il fallait ne coucher qu’avec son œuvre” (4:347)

¹⁰⁸ “il travaillait avec l’obstination aveugle de l’artiste qui s’ouvre la chair, pour en tirer le fruit dont il est tourmenté.” (4:204)

coercion and the yoke of another man.”¹⁰⁹ Rather than the productive activity itself, Christine effectively sells her husband the vision of her body as the raw material on which he can construct his masterpiece. Nevertheless, the movement of estrangement or alienation (Marx’s *Entfremdung*) is apparent in the portrait’s becoming an antagonist for Christine herself: “Now she was becoming her own rival, was no longer able to look at her own earlier image, without being bitten to the heart by a spiteful envy! Ah! How this image, this study made from her, had weighed on her existence!”¹¹⁰ The analogy between the wife trying to help her husband finish his painting and the laborer selling work for a wage is of course not perfect, but what is most important here is Claude’s internalization of the very evil he had sought to remain free of: market exploitation. Christine perceives her substance getting used up, becoming almost physically smaller as the “Femme” takes on greater dimensions on the canvas and in Claude’s imagination: “she was outraged to witness this diminution of herself, this other lover who slapped her in her own home.”¹¹¹ She even makes a desperate attempt to renew their intimacy on his own ground by learning to paint, an effort that ends in embarrassment when she finds him treating her as if he were one of his male associates: “he had forgotten the woman in her, as though fooled by this common endeavor, on a foot of simple comradery, man to man.”¹¹²

Passive labor

¹⁰⁹ *Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 78.

¹¹⁰ “Voilà qu'elle devenait sa propre rivale, qu'elle ne pouvait plus regarder son ancienne image, sans être mordue au cœur d'une envie mauvaise! Ah! que cette image, cette étude faite d'après elle, avait pesé sur son existence!” (4:255)

¹¹¹ “elle s'indignait d'assister à cette diminution d'elle-même, à cet autre amour qui la souffletait dans son ménage” (4:238)

¹¹² “il achevait d'oublier la femme en elle, comme trompé par cette besogne commune, sur un pied de simple camaraderie, d'homme à homme.” *Ibid.*

The psychological torment depicted in this relationship renders explicit certain subtly dissociative aspects of the model's experience during nineteenth century. As Marie Lathers observes, models of this time occupied a unique space at the junction of labor value and femininity; they were valued as material for representing women, but bourgeois moral codes (forbidding women to disrobe in front of men) led to their assuming a role as something else: "Even though the 'passive' labor of models was often denied status as true work, modeling *was* paid work, and models in the nineteenth century were largely from the working classes. Female models were thus *workers*, but as such they were not recognized (or recognizable) as *women*. . . ." ¹¹³ Lathers's analysis of *L'Oeuvre* admirably historicizes Christine's situation as model within contemporary discourses surrounding the nude model's physicality and how this corporeal nudity received various contradictory constructions informed by bourgeois morality and perceptions about maternity. However, her analysis does not extend this observation about a model's labor to how Christine's posing appears within the overall synthetic picture of the novel. For if models of the time were paid workers, Christine quite explicitly poses for free. She proposes this when Claude considers hiring a model, claiming it would be better for them to save the seven francs per session. Readily agreeing, Claude quickly falls into the habit, seemingly less concerned with the discomfort he subjects her to because they are now married: "he treated her like a mere model, was more demanding than if he would have paid her, never worrying about abusing her body, because she was his wife." ¹¹⁴ He even makes cruel jokes about the "fee": "What, already? But you've only been posing a quarter of an hour! So you don't want to earn your seven francs?" he joked with a surly air, thrilled with his work. . . . "Let's go, no

¹¹³ *Bodies of Art*, p. 173.

¹¹⁴ "Et, bientôt, l'habitude en fut prise, il la traita en simple modèle, plus exigeant que s'il l'eût payée, sans jamais craindre d'abuser de son corps, puisqu'elle était sa femme." (4:240)

laziness!”¹¹⁵ The only “payment” Christine in fact receives, or even desires, in return for this self-exposure is a small token of affection, a kiss as she gets dressed. This desire, and her willingness to tolerate his coarse jokes about remuneration, show the extent of her commitment to him; his eventual neglect even of this modest recognition reveals how thoroughly exploitative the relation becomes.

III

“the value of money”

While, as we have seen, Cézanne should not be overhastily read into Claude, the obvious identification of Sandoz with Zola invites reflection on the author’s own pronouncements about an artist’s financial situation in Paris.¹¹⁶ Decades earlier, Zola had addressed the painter on precisely this matter in terms that anticipate the meritocratic polemic of his essay “L’argent dans la littérature” while encouraging frugality, moderation, and resourcefulness. Cézanne is preparing to come to Paris, where Zola has already taken thorough stock of the expenses faced by artists in the capital. Besides much encouragement and talking-up of the advantages the

¹¹⁵ “Comment, déjà! cria Claude. Mais il y a un quart heure au plus que tu poses! Tu ne veux donc pas gagner tes sept francs?» Il plaisantait d’un air bourru, ravi de son travail. . . . ‘Allons, allons, pas de paresse!’” (4:241)

¹¹⁶ For Edmond de Goncourt, apart from his complaint about Zola plagiarizing *Manette Salomon*, it was the conjoined presence of *two* heavily autobiographical figures in the novel that pushed him over the edge: “I like encountering Zola in his books, at least it’s a human that he has studied—and he seems to have known so few of them, humans, men or women! But truly, to find him in a single novel producing two characters, Sandoz and Claude, out of his own personality: it’s too much!” *Journal*, vol. 2, 5 April, 1886, Fasquelle and Flammarion (Paris), 1956, p. 1237. It is difficult to determine which particular aspects of Zola’s character the diarist was irritated to find in such profusion in Claude; the artist in any case bears the mark of many artists of the time. But Zola clearly wanted readers to hear the author’s voice in Sandoz.

painter will enjoy there, Zola broaches the “pecuniary question” and enumerates the various costs his friend will encounter, in order that the latter might face his coming existence with a clear vision. After presenting an inventory of these expenses (one which he insists is not exaggerated, but, if anything, optimistic), the writer strikes a paternalistic note: “Moreover, this will be a very good school for you; you will learn the value of money” and learn likewise that “an intelligent man must always get himself out of a tight spot.”¹¹⁷

Zola thus fancied himself capable in financial matters, and may be said to crown his rather complacent self-image with the depiction of Sandoz’s success in *L’Oeuvre*. If Claude’s trajectory moves from a moderate promise of success through an increasingly untethered struggle into eventual failure and suicide, Sandoz’s career moves in the opposite direction, punctuated by his hosting three dinners for his friends in increasingly comfortable lodgings. Though the financial details of the novelist’s career receive nothing like the treatment of Claude’s own situation, the material details surrounding these dinner scenes amply attest to his economic status at each moment. Martine Gantrel has analyzed the “social and professional ascension of Sandoz which the framing of the dinners allows us to establish exclusively through reference to details of household economy—first and foremost, the menus and wines, and the number of domestics.”¹¹⁸ Gantrel’s analysis highlights a number of salient details about the rise of the Sandoz household as it parallels Claude’s story, while noting that the comparison which the novel almost explicitly invites is anything but streamlined or subtle. Indeed, there is even a kind of self-promotion at work as the narrative depicts Sandoz’s gradual integration into the class against which he and Claude had defined themselves: “here, the Sandoz salon is not part of the story but is on the

¹¹⁷ 3 March, 1861, quoted in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, 4:1343.

¹¹⁸ Martine Gantrel, “Zola et ses doubles: Les Instances d'auto-représentation dans *Pot-Bouille* et *L’œuvre*,” in *Les Cahiers naturalistes*, vol. 75, January 2001, pp. 87-98, p. 90.

order of commentary and metadiscourse; it is an added element, an *incise* of the author to confirm what the descriptions of the dinners have already shown: namely, that the Sandoz couple are not like other bourgeois and that their salon, devoted to friendship and not to ambition, is an anti-salon.”¹¹⁹ Although it is true that the Sandoz salon is not devoted to ambition, the writer’s career is evidently fragile enough to exclude potentially compromising associations, such as the as-yet-unmarried Christine. Fearful of exposing himself to gossip-mongering spies that would subject him to public ridicule for hosting such a guest, Sandoz awkwardly asks that come to his home alone.

By the end of the novel Sandoz has not only embarked on his ambitious cycle of novels, but has even begun to sell. Zola proceeds in this novel by presenting two extremes, then revealing some more successful “middle” way. In the case of *L’Oeuvre*, this latter path may be seen to come across as a more viable or compelling one, not least because it is, in material terms, quite transparently that of Zola himself. By the novel’s final segment (approximately five years after the opening), the indefatigable author has at last struck upon success—perhaps mirroring that of the previous installment, *Germinal*, or the even earlier success of *Nana*. What is more, he has seen his effort through in a way that has not cost him his artistic integrity (and for which Claude acknowledges his admiration at what proves their final meeting).

For occupying such a small portion of the novel relative to Claude and Christine, Sandoz is endowed with a disproportionate degree of authority in commenting on its events. Indeed, some have found this to be the primary flaw in the book. Pasco, in particular, claims that Sandoz is the reason *L’Oeuvre* never succeeded in the way Zola’s other major works did, despite having many elements in common with them. Including a character that directly references the author’s

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

own overall ambition and theories, then showing his ideas borne out by events and his career succeeding where others fail, turns the narrative into a *roman à thèse* of the most transparent kind: “At times, especially when Sandoz talks, . . . one has the uncomfortable sensation of the Master's professorial finger driving points home.”¹²⁰ David Baguley similarly observes that “The ruin of Claude’s household becomes an *apologia pro domo sua*, as the ruin of Claude’s art becomes a justification for Zola’s naturalist aesthetics, for as Sandoz says unequivocally, his friend goes off course from the moment he stops observing nature.”¹²¹ Not only is Sandoz intrusive—there is also a suggestion of miserliness about him. As we have already seen, it is the character of Claude that receives Zola’s documented generosity towards his friends in need. Sandoz, for his part, does not open his pocketbook on anything like such a scale until the end of the novel, where he assumes responsibility for the painter’s funeral arrangements. Michel Serres makes much of this fact in an ironic critique of Zola’s self-portrait. “He who, amid his banquets, did not offer a *liard* so his friend could have some bread to eat. He pays for the burial of the man he allowed to starve. He gives for death and not for life, this theoretician of the good life.”¹²²

The germ in the skull

However one may view the presence of this authorial spokesman in the novel, his final major speech serves to show that, even with success, for Zola there is no escape from the brutality of alienation. His work has exacted its price. The effects we see most visibly inscribed in Christine’s awareness of the exploitation and denaturing wrought by her husband reveal

¹²⁰ “The Failure of “L’Oeuvre,” p. 54.

¹²¹ “L’Oeuvre de Zola: Künstlerroman à thèse” *French Literary Realism and the Artist’s Model*, Lincoln (University of Nebraska Press), 2001, p. 195.

¹²² *Feux et signaux de brume: Zola*, Paris (Grasset), 1975, p. 353.

themselves forcibly also in Sandoz's outburst, where he laments the erosion of his own subjectivity, the grim result of the commitment to his task.

“I whom you perhaps envy, my friend, I who am beginning to do business, as the bourgeois say, who am publishing my books and making some money—well, I'm dying of it! . . . Listen, work has taken my entire existence. Little by little, it has stolen my mother, my wife, everything I love. It's a germ placed in the skull, which eats up the brain, invades the trunk, the limbs, which gnaws away the entire body. As soon as I get out of bed in the morning, work seizes hold of me and nails me to my table without allowing me a breath of fresh air; then, it follows me to lunch, where I dully chew over my sentences with my bread; then, it accompanies me when I go out, comes home and eats out of my plate, lies down upon my pillow at night, so merciless that I never am capable of stopping the work currently in progress, whose growth continues, even into the depths of my sleep. . . .”¹²³

Sandoz finds himself subjected to the constant solicitations of *le travail*, though from an inner injunction rather than any boss or foreman—one which is perhaps for that reason all the more pernicious. Where Claude's painting seeks a symbolic overcoming of the work-leisure division, Sandoz embodies this transcendence in his very existence. Lacking the clearly defined limits of work life and home life, Sandoz's brain, even his body, become colonized, “gnawed” upon by the obsessive germ of his great project. Against the loss of comradeship brought about by the fracturing of the group, Sandoz scarcely gets to enjoy even the domestic comforts available to him. Having set up a household of his own, it seems even the presence of his wife and his mother can do little to distract or relieve him from the preoccupation of his work: “My poor wife has no

¹²³ “Tiens! moi que tu envies peut-être, mon vieux, oui! moi qui commence à faire mes affaires, comme disent les bourgeois, qui publie des bouquins et qui gagne quelque argent, eh bien, moi, j'en meurs!... Écoute, le travail a pris mon existence. Peu à peu, il m'a volé ma mère, ma femme, tout ce que j'aime. C'est le germe apporté dans le crâne, qui mange la cervelle, qui envahit le tronc, les membres, qui ronge le corps entier. Dès que je saute du lit, le matin, le travail m'empoigne, me cloue à ma table, sans me laisser respirer une bouffée de grand air; puis, il me suit au déjeuner, je remâche sourdement mes phrases avec mon pain; puis, il m'accompagne quand je sors, rentre dîner dans mon assiette, se couche le soir sur mon oreiller, si impitoyable, que jamais je n'ai le pouvoir d'arrêter l'œuvre en train, dont la végétation continue, jusqu'au fond de mon sommeil...” (4:262)

husband; I am no longer with her, even when our hands touch.”¹²⁴ The productive conscience is an implacable, inescapable foreman which has insinuated himself into the artist’s brain and thus condemns the latter to a life of toil and mental isolation. Against the inconstant but inspired vision of Claude’s *oeuvre*, Sandoz is condemned to the dreary quotidian reality of *le travail*.

¹²⁴ “Ma pauvre femme n'a pas de mari, je ne suis plus avec elle, même lorsque nos mains se touchent.”

Chapter 2: “Poet of millions”: Art versus Money in *L’Argent*

In broad outline, the plots of *L’Oeuvre* and *L’Argent* describe a similar shape. A highly competent man gains grudging recognition for his talents and enjoys some early success. He views his work as a path to divinity, and becomes fixated on meeting a goal others recognize as irrational, pursuing glory in an overt parallel to Napoleon Bonaparte. His efforts, resonant with analogies to childbirth, perversely lead him to neglect his own children. Drifting into obsession in his increasingly mad quest for glory, he flagrantly exploits those around him until they become casualties in his own climactic failure. In the universe of the *Rougon-Macquart*, money and painting are analogous vehicles of *passion*.

Curiously, Zola chooses to approach this passionate adventure of *L’Argent* in a more tendentious spirit. Where *L’Oeuvre* was in large part an indulgence in fond reminiscence, this is to be a *roman à thèse*. Well in advance of its composition, Zola has already formulated a clear, if fragmentary, statement he wishes to make about its subject: “Do not strike at money. The worst and the best of things. The great things done with it. It is necessary that Saccard have a fruitful idea somewhere, and that the poor bless him, whereas others curse him. Have at the end this concert of benedictions and execrations.” (f. 14).¹²⁵ The imperatives he gives himself point to an intentional attitude of resigned acceptance. At the same time, as already evident in the word “fruitful” here, the novel seeks to yoke this calculated ambivalence towards the subject matter together with a quasi-mythological, cosmic meditation about *life*. Where *L’Oeuvre* was at times transparently autobiographical, *L’Argent* will be expressly argumentative.

¹²⁵ An extremely useful summary of the progress of Zola’s plans for the novel as revealed by the *Ebauche* can be found in Halina Suwala, “L’Ebauche de *L’Argent*,” in *Mimesis et semiosis: littérature et représentation*, dir. Philippe Hamon and Jean-Pierre Leduc-Adine, Editions Nathan, pp. 39-55.

Taking a synthetic view of the latter novel, however, one finds that this difference is inessential. Zola attempts to orchestrate a story that will bear out the content of Saccard's preaching while discrediting the preacher. The result is a highly muddled statement, relying on two secondary characters to serve as the author's *porte-parole*, neither of whom is seriously harmed by Saccard's activities on the Bourse. Mme. Caroline, Saccard's collaborator and occasional lover, undergoes an ordeal of recognition; upon discovering the truth of his character and crimes, she first condemns him, then reaches grudging acceptance of his doctrine and moves on with no hard feelings. Having made a fortune off of his project and given it away, she is neither better nor worse off than when it began, and so her preternatural good cheer amid the ruin of the conclusion rings hollow. The only unambiguous approval of money comes almost as an afterthought through Jordan, a figure entirely unconnected to the Bourse, another self-insert character fulfilling the same role as Sandoz in *L'Oeuvre*—to undermine the significance of the main plot by showing the “correct” example.

“froid, glacial, dénué d'intérêt”

If *L'Oeuvre* was a matter of personal recollection, *L'Argent* proved far more demanding. In the first place, it involved making extensive notes based on published materials and conducting rigorous interviews with people knowledgeable on the subject. But the composition of the novel itself also proved challenging. This is noteworthy, considering the degree to which money lends motive force to nineteenth-century fiction. As we have discussed in the Introduction, it is so often the very engine of plot in these fictions: the contested inheritance, the theft of valuables, the mercenary marriage, the confrontation of “old” and “new” money, and so on. Yet on closer inspection, it is less certain that foregrounding money itself can support a compelling novelistic narrative. According to Zola's public remarks, the difficulties he faced

were owing to the subject matter itself. Money is obviously an essential aspect of the Second Empire society he undertook to examine, yet not one that rewards direct novelistic scrutiny: “It is very difficult to make a novel about money,” he declared in an interview for *Gil Blas* in 1890; “It’s cold, glacial, devoid of interest.”¹²⁶ As we saw in *L’Oeuvre*, the money question is everywhere, but in a secondary sense. Money is what Claude would like to ignore, but cannot. It does not motivate action, but conditions it, does not dictate but determines. The actions of individuals are always situated within directly described financial circumstances that help to account for them, but do not exhaustively explain them. Events and relationships, in other words, are grounded *qualitatively*. In *L’Argent* the quantitative assumes center stage; the entire plot revolves around the rapid rise, and catastrophically sudden fall, of the Universelle share price. A number that merely grows and shrinks does not represent a concrete dramatic transformation. As Simmel observes, when as you add one quantity of money to another, the result is merely one larger sum of money, leaving no trace of the two distinct elements that formed it, or the smaller elements that once formed those. This amorphous nature sets money against those entities in which form is important, notably the aesthetic: “the universal formlessness of money as money is certainly the root of the antagonism between an aesthetic tendency and money interests.”¹²⁷

No doubt the difficulty of composition was in part a result of conflicting desires on Zola’s part as to what it should achieve. Scanning the materials surrounding its composition, one finds traces of a divided vision. As we have seen, the novelist wishes to achieve a scientific impartiality on which he can pride himself as a literary naturalist. In this respect, money is an

¹²⁶ Quoted in *Les Rougon-Macquart: Histoire naturelle et sociale d’une famille sous le Second Empire*, Paris (Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1967, vol. 5, ed. Armand Lanoux and Henri Mitterand, p. 1236. References to the text of *L’Argent* (hereafter cited in parentheses) also refer to this edition.

¹²⁷ *Philosophy of Money*, p. 494.

ideal subject: already staked out as ripe novelistic territory by the likes of Balzac, money not only remains a matter of daily concern to the public readership, but also comes burdened with an inherited freight of (largely negative) moral associations, extending at least as far back as the Bible. What better topic on which to strike the pose of neutrality? Taking up the challenge, Zola records, in his Ebauche for the novel, instructions to himself to produce a work “[o]n money, without attacking it nor defending it. Do not oppose . . . what is called our century of money to what are called the centuries of honor (those of the past).” Assuming a hard-nosed disinterestedness, he seeks to avoid any lapse into facile nostalgia. Yet even at this early stage, he cannot help pushing toward the opposite extreme, with plans to show “that money has become for many the dignity of life: it sets free, it is hygiene, cleanliness, health, almost intelligence.” Whatever such personal values can be highlighted by the availability of this resource, what attracts the novelist above all is the image of *power* it represents: “the irresistible force of money, a lever that lifts the world.”¹²⁸ This theme of power receives further amplification shortly after work has begun on the novel, when the *Gil Blas* interview appears on April 8, 1890. By this point, he has already abandoned the dispassionate daydream of “*sans l’attaquer, sans le défendre,*” and emerges here fully on the side of the defense: “I believe I will speak well of money. I will extol, I will glorify its generous and fertile power, its expansive force. I am not one of those who carp about money. I take as my starting position the principle that money well-employed is profitable to all of humanity. I will make an apology for money, despite the future

¹²⁸ Sur l’argent, sans l’attaquer, sans le défendre. Ne pas opposer . . . ce qu’on appelle notre siècle d’argent à ce qu’on nomme les siècles d’honneur (ceux d’autrefois). Montrer que l’argent est devenu pour beaucoup la dignité de la vie : il rend libre, est l’hygiène, la propreté, la santé, presque l’intelligence. . . . Opposer la classe aisée à la classe pauvre. Puis, la force irrésistible de l’argent, un levier qui soulève le monde. Il n’y a que l’amour et l’argent. (Ebauche de *L’Argent*, pp. 378-79. Quoted in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, 5:1244.)

attacks that I will certainly draw upon myself.”¹²⁹ Has thus moved from the attitude of evenhandedness and curiosity to the resolute determination of the *roman à thèse*. More dramatically, the pose-striking of the interview situation leads Zola to indulge in some iconoclastic thrill-chasing, consciously challenging readers to “attack” him for his refusal to attack money. Seeking to stand apart from received opinion, he digs in his heels along the same lines sketched out a decade earlier in *L’Argent dans la littérature*. He even dusts off a pet pejorative from that context, *déblatérer*, to anticipate the whining of potential critics. For all this insistence, he senses in the *Ebauche* that such a provocative case must be made through the most extreme possible example. “What I need is an enormous, gigantic affair” and an “audacious man. . . . One of these abrupt, sudden rises toward prodigious heights, followed by an immediate fall, a complete annihilation.”¹³⁰ Not only must the share-trading aspect of the story be utterly catastrophic for everyone involved. To attempt the full exposition of his case, Zola needs a man who is more than merely “audacious”; he needs, first, a fully realized caricature of the worst excesses of speculation distilled into a kind of ideal type (Saccard). Then, to undermine the obvious conclusions, he will add an equally improbable incarnation of generosity, hope, and intelligence (Mme Caroline), someone capable of looking clearly upon this character and forgiving him.

What prompted the move from neutrality to apologetics? A likely answer suggests itself in the earlier essay on money in literature. If, as Zola sets forth in his notes for *L’Argent*, money

¹²⁹ “Je crois que je dirai du bien de l’argent. Je vanterai, j’exalterai sa généreuse et féconde puissance, sa force expansive. Je ne suis pas de ceux qui déblatèrent contre l’argent. Je pars de ce principe que l’argent bien employé est profitable à l’humanité tout entière. . . . Je ferai l’apologie de l’argent, malgré les attaques futures que je vais certainement m’attirer.” (Quoted in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, 5: 1236-37).

¹³⁰ “Il me faut une affaire énorme, gigantesque, qui prenne un homme audacieux et le rende maître de la Bourse, du marché financier en l’espace de quelques années. Une de ces montées brusques, soudaines, vers des hauteurs prodigieuses, suivie d’une dégringolade subite, d’un anéantissement complet.”

is “the dignity of life for some,” it is more than safe to say that for him this group includes writers. The attempt at a “neutral” depiction of money creates a practical problem which, as we will see, leads to unresolved ambiguities. If it is his profession that prompts his respect for money, he has nevertheless already represented indirectly—but transparently—himself and the crowning of his efforts with financial success as Sandoz in *L’Oeuvre*. One may assume that he does not wish to retread old ground (although it is true in this case that reusing the main character from *La Curée* is a surprising artistic choice). For reasons of his own, then, Zola chooses to address money in its most wide-ranging societal effects; he decides to structure the novel around speculation on the Bourse—a topic on which he must acquire thorough documentation—rather than around a side of money with which he has any firsthand experience. To this end, he retells the story of the Union Générale’s rapid rise and fall, displacing it with flagrant anachronism to the Second Empire and tweaking his recycled protagonist with qualities drawn from its director Eugène Bontoux. Critics have not generally found it one of his more successful works; if the topic itself is abstract, this representational problem was likely compounded by Zola’s lack of experience with it—Balzac, after all, had never failed to find amid financial concerns matter for dramatic vividness and narrative vigor. Indeed, as F.W.J. Hemmings observes, “The shadow of Balzac falls over these pages, but unlike Balzac, Zola had to rely on his imagination to picture the workings of a speculator’s mind.”¹³¹

“L’Argent dans la littérature”

If the point of *La Curée* was a version of extended social critique, here that novel’s main character serves an ostensibly contrary purpose. Here Zola proposes, if not an apology for

¹³¹ *Emile Zola*, Oxford University Press, 1966 [1953], p. 250.

money, then a presentation that will sublimate facile moral outrage at its destructiveness into a kind of chilly aloofness. To this end, perhaps such a character, a kind of limit-case of egoism, seemed the most appropriate: if someone so singularly self-centered, ruthless and calculating can be excused, then perhaps so can the rest.

The tendentious qualities of *L'Argent* were evident to critics upon its publication. Judith Gautier, writing in the *Rappel* in 1891, notes that Zola did not honor his affectation of neutrality: “It would seem at first glance that the novelist, faithful to his custom, has shown himself impartial, leaving the reader draw conclusions; but that is not at all the case. This time, M. Zola takes a position on the matter.” She suggests that in fact Zola’s veering away from the center was determined first by the appeal of socialism before rebounding abruptly to the opposite pole. “The socialist tendencies of *Germinal* appear again, fondled with predilection, in the character of Sigismond, disciple of Karl Marx. Only, as the realization of Sigismond’s dream is too distant for M. Zola to base his argument on him in order to reach a conclusion, on second thought he is of the opinion that money, despite all the vices it engenders, the ills it causes, must be absolved.”¹³² Gautier takes for granted Zola’s need to *conclure*. This secret hunger for resolution compels the novelist to select the most expedient, presently most feasible alternative. Such a complex topic, which affects more or less everyone, demands a pragmatic answer, and for Zola this means a reluctant acceptance of money as a social force. On this reading, the choice was determined by impatience to adopt a position. Gautier’s reading assumes a kind of intellectual game in which certain habits of thought determined the author’s moves. Certain personal reasons, however, seem much more compelling. For *L'Argent* is not the first time Zola addressed the subject of money—he had done so a decade earlier, and with no novelistic indirection.

¹³² Quoted in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, 5:1279.

Before we turn to *L'Argent*, we must consider what is at stake for Zola in the question of money and in his lending it the possibility of positive valuation. Some have suggested that Zola simply felt a greater sense of optimism following the birth of his two children with Jeanne Rozerot.¹³³ This may be, but a positive valuation of money was nothing new from his pen by this point, a fact which may come as some surprise. According to Georg Lukács, Flaubert and Zola, emerging in a bourgeois society already thoroughly entrenched, could only express their disapproval by standing outside of it entirely; yet their chosen profession was one entirely integrated within the social order: “For them the only solution to the tragic contradiction of their situation was to stand aloof as observers and critics of capitalist society. At the same time they became specialists in the craft of writing, writers in the sense of the capitalist division of labor. The book had become merchandise, the writer, a salesman of this merchandise. . . .”¹³⁴ For Lukács, this represents a certain grim irony about their situation. But halfway into his great *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, Zola was only too pleased to be such a salesman.

The Zola of 1880, basking in the windfall of *Nana* (1879), his second major success after *L'Assommoir* (1877), had already reached a decidedly optimistic view of money. He expresses the healthy modern relation of this substance to the arts in the essay *L'Argent dans la littérature*. Part literary sociology, part homiletic, the essay presents the newly successful Zola's convictions as to the essentially meritocratic nature of the artistic marketplace. Writers of the Third Republic, says Zola, enjoy the good fortune, unique in history, of freedom from the patronage system. Previous generations were cut off by the prevailing social conditions from an open-eyed expression of the world around them; in such conditions “writers do not give themselves the task

¹³³ Hemmings, *Emile Zola*, p. 256.

¹³⁴ “Narrate or Describe?” in *Writer and Critic*, trans. Arthur D. Kahn, The Merlin Press, 1970, p. 119.

of producing the truth about beings and things, but that of painting them according to the accustomed mechanism.”¹³⁵ It is the signal virtue of money to liberate the search for truth from the constraints of convention. *Contra* Sainte-Beauve’s futile protests against the rising tide of *la littérature industrielle*,¹³⁶ Zola welcomes the new artistic marketplace not merely for the unprecedented literary effects, the realistic or “scientific” matters permits writers to approach, but also the newfound freedom afforded the latter by the democratization of letters: “once the people know how to read, and once they can do so inexpensively, the business of the bookstore increases tenfold, the writer easily finds the means of living by his pen. Thus, the protection of the great is no longer necessary, and parasitism disappears from mores; an author is a worker like another, who makes his living by his work.”¹³⁷ The successful author, however rich he may become through the sale of his works, nevertheless has the honor of being “un ouvrier comme un autre,” rather than a mere “virtuose qui joue des airs sur la rhétorique de son temps.”¹³⁸ There is no doubt something self-congratulating in Zola’s fiercely meritocratic vision of the artist: “Eat potatoes and mushrooms, break stones by day and write masterpieces by night. Only, tell yourself this: you are a talent, a force, you will arrive nonetheless at glory and fortune.”¹³⁹ Only

¹³⁵ “les écrivains ne se donnent pas la mission de faire la vérité sur les êtres et les choses, mais celle de les peindre selon le mécanisme convenu” “L’argent dans la littérature” in *Le Roman expérimental*, Garnier (Paris), 2006, p. 172.

¹³⁶ He was not alone. As Edmond de Goncourt wrote, “Au fond, je crois bien que c’est le commencement de la fin de la pure littérature,” cited in John and Muriel Lough, *An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century France*, London (Longman), 1978, p. 250.

¹³⁷ “. . . dès que le peuple sait lire, et dès qu’il peut lire à bon marché, le commerce de la librairie décuple ses affaires, l’écrivain trouve largement le moyen de vivre de sa plume. Donc, la protection des grands n’est plus nécessaire, le parasitisme disparaît des mœurs ; un auteur est un ouvrier comme un autre, qui gagne sa vie par son travail.” *Ibid.*, p. 182.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

¹³⁹ “Battez-vous, mangez des pommes de terre ou des truffes, cassez des pierres dans la journée et écrivez des chefs-d’œuvre la nuit. . . . [S]i vous êtes un talent, une force, vous arriverez quand même à la gloire et à la fortune.” *Ibid.*, p. 193.

the real talents will rise to the top. The essay amounts, as Colette Becker observes, to a “veritable profession of faith,” advancing “affirmations that were for the time provocative, even scandalous.”¹⁴⁰ By *argent* Zola no doubt really means the modern literary marketplace—previous writers obviously relied on money, if from more stable sources—in which case it is more accurately certain innovations in printing and gradually increasing literacy that liberated the artist.¹⁴¹ Transposing the violent impersonality of nature onto society (“La grande loi de la vie est la lutte”), Zola embraces a radical individuality for the artist. In this assessment, all failure is justified, and by the same token all success bears witness to a genuine superiority—as opposed to the factitious merit generated by patronage networks or state-subsidized art. All failures are lumped together *a priori* as evidence of personal weakness or lack of talent.

A picture worth a hundred thousand francs

By the time of *L'Argent*, then, Zola has quite personal reasons for wishing to “extol” the virtues of the subject matter, reasons stemming from his own vocation as an artist. As we will see, this prejudice leads to a unique tangle of associations between the aesthetic and the financial. Saccard’s obsession with money bears obvious similarities to that of Claude with painting. It is the only thing he cares about—a thoroughgoing monomania. But as we saw in the last chapter, *L'Oeuvre* is noteworthy for its close attention to financial details in the lives of the artists it describes. This is necessary for (presumably) verisimilitude; a career in art represents a great risk, and narrating a young artist’s life naturally involves accounting for his ability to

¹⁴⁰ Becker: “Zola et l’argent,” in *Les cahiers naturalistes*, no. 78, 2004 (pp. 27-40), p. 27.

¹⁴¹ On the development of a market in which artists could support themselves without state sponsorship, see Lough, *An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century France*, pp. 223-57 and *Writer and Public in France: From the Middle Ages to the Present Day*, Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 275-370.

survive. Reversing the poles, we immediately see that the opposite is not the case. *L'Argent* is a novel decidedly unconcerned with the aesthetic, with very few exceptions. These exceptions, however, are important. Most of the aesthetic imagery in the novel sets art and money in opposition.

To the world of the Bourse depicted in *L'Argent*, art has little use other than as an ornament of class distinction or a vehicle of money. For example, standing in Daigremont's drawing-room, waiting to confer with the wealthy man about joining the initial group of investors in the Universelle, Saccard pauses to contemplate a Meissonier painting on the wall: "Madame's voice continued to sing, exhaling a tender, despairing lamentation, tragic in scope; while Saccard, returning to the middle of the room, had paused before a Meissonier, which he estimated at a hundred thousand francs."¹⁴² While Daigremont's wife sings a doleful piece that hints at the results of their efforts, Saccard ignores the music to admire the painting. Although the work is not named, the artist's fame is chiefly owing to his historical paintings—specifically, military scenes of Napoleon and his armies. We may well speculate that Saccard's contemplation further develops the Napoleonic parallel, the financier's cherished self-image. However this may be, his only response is to estimate the cost—art here is pure exchange value.

Indeed, in this novel the notion of a "masterpiece" comes in for indirect mockery on the lips of the debt-collector Busch, as he unleashes a tirade detailing the efforts that his work demands of him. If he charges his victims far more than their original creditor advanced them, this is only fair, considering the infinite pains he must take, the extensive research, months and years of following leads and waiting: "This affair, we have nourished it for months, we have

¹⁴² "La voix de madame continuait, exhalant une plainte de tendresse, éperdue, d'une ampleur tragique; tandis que Saccard, revenu au milieu de la pièce, s'était arrêté devant un Meissonier, qu'il estimait cent mille francs." (5:106)

dreamed of it, worked on it as on one of our masterpieces, it has cost me a crazy sum, at only two sous per hour!”¹⁴³

The Universelle does manage find a use even for literary talents, mainly through a multifaceted advertising and propaganda campaign in the newspapers it purchases. The shady former professor Jantrou, chased out of work for mysterious reasons, applies his writing talents to the mere puffing up of Saccard’s brother in the press, producing “wrote political articles with a florid and elegant professorial style, which even his adversaries deemed ‘of the purest Atticism.’”¹⁴⁴

La salle des épures

Although literary or representational art figures very little in the novel, it nevertheless plays in key role in firing up Saccard’s imagination at the outset. This takes place as he visits his neighbors in the Princesse d’Orviedo’s *hôtel particulier*—the engineer Hamelin and his sister Mme Caroline. This pair have been reduced to a poor existence, and it is while finding a work arrangement for Hamelin that Saccard comes upon the pictorial souvenirs of their travels in the Middle East and plans for various projects:

But on the walls, an improvised decoration brightened up the emptiness, a series of maps, a row of bright watercolors, each sheet fixed with four nails. It was his portfolio of projects that Hamelin had thus displayed, notes taken in Syria, his whole future fortune; and the watercolors were Mme. Caroline’s, views taken over there, types, regional costumes, what she had noticed and sketched while accompanying her brother, with a highly personal colorist’s sense and also without pretentiousness.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ “Cette affaire, mais nous l’avons nourrie pendant des mois, nous y avons rêvé, nous y avons travaillé comme à un de nos chefs d’œuvre, elle me coûte une somme folle, à dix sous l’heure seulement!” (5:288)

¹⁴⁴ “. . . il écrivait des articles politiques d’une littérature universitaire soignée et fleurie, que ses adversaires eux-mêmes reconnaissaient ‘du plus pur atticisme. . . .’” (5:173)

¹⁴⁵ “Mais, aux murs, une décoration improvisée égayait ce vide, une série de plans, une suite d’aquarelles claires, chaque feuille fixée avec quatre clous. C’était son portefeuille de projets qu’Hamelin avait ainsi étalé, les notes prises en Syrie, toute sa fortune future; et les aquarelles étaient de Mme Caroline, des vues

This impressive visual arrangement fills Saccard with questions about the places depicted and Hamelin's intentions for the various buildings he has sketched. Taken as a whole, the display produces a formidable effect: picturesque memories of the past combined with the precision of building plans stretching their mathematical lines into the future. One picture in particular arrests his attention, "a watercolor representing a wild place, an arid gorge, blocked up by a gigantic heap of collapsed rocks crowned with bushes."¹⁴⁶ This site, Hamelin explains, is one of the gorges of Mount Carmel, where there is a deposit of silver simply waiting to make the fortune of someone enterprising enough to go and get it.¹⁴⁷ Hamelin's projects, in brief, offer the missing half of the equation in Saccard's proposed bank. With great undertakings to fund, efforts with such potential to capture the imagination of the public, he will be able to launch the *Universelle* and begin his ascent to the top of the Bourse. Beauty, vision—to say nothing of the labor Hamelin performs by traveling back to these places to oversee the projects—these are needed to lend shape to the abstract financial ambitions of the "poet of millions."

Poète des millions: être Dieu

de là-bas, des types, des costumes, ce qu'elle avait remarqué et croqué en accompagnant son frère, avec un sens très personnel de coloriste, sans aucune prétention d'ailleurs." (5:60)

¹⁴⁶ ". . . une aquarelle qui représentait un site sauvage, une gorge aride, que bouchait un écroulement gigantesque de rochers, couronnés de broussailles." (5:62)

¹⁴⁷ David F. Bell astutely observes that Hamelin's evocation of the silver mine, in Saccard's ears, already rings with the slippage of the French *argent* between silver and money: "What lies beneath the earth is but an inert metal—only the labor of extraction and refinement can transform it into money. Aristide's advertising campaign, however, sublimates the labor investment involved in order to create the impression that the *argent* is in its money form from the outset, that the mine is a veritable well of currency waiting to be thrown into circulation and to return to the bank's investors." *Models of Power*, p. 129.

We have seen in *L'Oeuvre* how the artist's ambition gradually reverts from serving as a channel for representing reality towards assuming the divine power to *create* reality. If such delusive tendencies lead nowhere in the domain of art, *L'Argent* hints disturbingly that they can gain real traction on the floor of the Bourse. Claude, for all his supposed loyalty to realism, gradually slips into a romantic-symbolic megalomania. Even before this, he occasionally utters unsettling notions about the equivalence of the artist to a deity: "Ah! Life ! Life ! To feel it and portray it in its reality, to love it for itself, to see in it the only true beauty, eternal and changing . . . and to cause life, to make men, that is the only way to be a God!"¹⁴⁸ Here in any case is an active notion of productivity as a path to immortality. Saccard's preference, on the other hand, is to submit his bid for personal glory to chance. The engine for this lottery must be a great project, capable of arousing imaginations, of inflaming people with passion: "What harm do you see there? The risks are run voluntarily, spread out over an infinite number of people. . . . One loses, but one wins, one hopes for a lucky number, but one must always be ready to get an unlucky one and humanity has no dream more stubborn or more ardent—tempting chance and obtaining everything through its whim, being a king, being a god!"¹⁴⁹ If both men hunger for personal aggrandizement, their chosen means of pursuing it diverge widely in tactics and scope. Claude's is a path of constant attention and activity, performed in a state of relative autonomy, where the work cannot harm anyone but the artist. Saccard's defense of speculation amounts to little more than a paean to the coin toss. Yet to set up his undertaking, he needs capital from a

¹⁴⁸ "Ah! la vie, la vie! la sentir et la rendre dans sa réalité, l'aimer pour elle, y voir la seule beauté vraie, éternelle et changeante . . . et faire vivre, et faire des hommes, la seule façon d'être Dieu!"

¹⁴⁹ "Les risques, tout est là, et la grandeur du but aussi. . . . Quel mal voyez-vous là? Les risques courus sont volontaires, répartis sur un nombre infini de personnes, inégaux et limités selon la fortune et l'audace de chacun. On perd, mais on gagne, on espère un bon numéro, mais on doit s'attendre toujours à en tirer un mauvais, et l'humanité n'a pas de rêve plus entêté ni plus ardent, tenter le hasard, obtenir tout de son caprice, être roi, être dieu!"

group of trustworthy people, and eventually from thousands of smaller shareholders as well. While Claude's is intended (at least at the outset) as an effort to help others *see things as they are*, Saccard must devote considerable energy to bringing others round to his own deluded vision. He must expend tremendous energy convincing people not to sell their shares when it becomes clear that the Universelle is overvalued. Successfully encouraging people to buy and hold ultimately means inspiring them to believe in himself. And so he does. Claude leaves behind nothing after his death but an impoverished widow and the memory of a man "soaked in romanticism"; Saccard, despite failure and incarceration, retains followers. Even after the disaster, some who should have every reason to reproach the shady money-man remain loyal: "It was the death of us, when they put him in prison. And he is still the only one who would be able to save us now. I said so to the judge: 'Sir, give him back to us, and I would trust him again with my fortune, and I would trust him with my life, because that man is the good Lord, you see! He can do as he wills.'"¹⁵⁰ To become a god means to become a cult leader. No loss is great enough to ruin the spell. Corinne Saminadayar-Perrin notes that even his failure aligns with the pattern: "At the end of the novel, Saccard, in his cell peopled with dreams and invaded with papers, evokes the (equally mythical) figure of the poet in prison."¹⁵¹

Given the influence Saccard wields over others through his gilded evocations and cosmic theorizing, it is easy to see in him a mere silver-tongued con man. Such a view finds ample support in his repeated insistence that shareholders refrain from selling, and in the magnitude of the losses following the collapse. But the poet in *L'Argent* is an entity that both exercises an

¹⁵⁰ "Ç'a été notre mort, qu'on le mette en prison. Et il n'y a encore que lui qui pourrait nous sauver.... Je l'ai dit au juge: 'Monsieur, rendez-le-nous, et je lui confie de nouveau ma fortune, et je lui confie ma vie, parce que cet homme-là, c'est le bon Dieu, voyez-vous! Il fait tout ce qu'il veut.'"

¹⁵¹ "Fictions de la Bourse," *Cahiers naturalistes*, vol. 50, no. 78, 2004 (pp. 41-62), p.55

influence and submits to it. “He ceased to have control over himself. He was the man of the millions he was making, triumphant, and constantly on the point of being defeated.”¹⁵² Like Claude Lantier, he is not merely inspired by but beset with a vision. Saccard is the *poète des millions* not because he uses money as the medium to produce beauty, but because it is for him beauty itself. This inner compulsion, and the ability to transmit it through personal magnetism, make of him a figure perhaps closer to the poet of the *Ion*, divinely (or infernally) inspired.

Il faut tuer l'argent!

Zola's reports of struggle in addressing the novel's “glacial” topic are not surprising, considering the extent of its engagement with quite technical matters of establishing and running a bank as a vehicle for speculation. *L'Argent* is a novel in which money is loudly heard about but rarely seen. As we have observed, the story turns mainly on money's abstract, quantitative dimension as *value*. It exists in numbers uttered by the shareholders of the Universelle or rapidly scrawled by Saccard upon slips of paper. Two noteworthy exceptions to this pattern serve in fact to make the same point on a broader spatio-temporal scale. Kolb, working in gold arbitrage, witnesses such transformation up close. The premise of Kolb's work is the basic arbitrariness of value of precious metals (and of all commodities, for that matter)—in this case gold. One country prices it low, another high: the same material is molded into shapes representing different values, values with no direct basis in the substance itself. Thus, Kolb buys the metal wherever it can be had cheaply (in this case as Spanish coins), melts it down and recasts it into a form fit to go where it is valued more highly. Saccard hears the clinking of the metal emanating from below, and his imagination immediately transforms it into a romantic image: “a bright

¹⁵² “Saccard cessa de s'appartenir. Il fut l'homme des millions qu'il gagnait, triomphant, et sans cesse sur le point d'être battu.” (5:262)

ringing of gold pieces caused his ears to perk up. It seemed to come from the bowels of the earth, continuous, light, and musical, like in a tale from the *Thousand and One Nights*. . . . It caused the ears of passersby to ring all year long. Now Saccard smiled smugly at this music that was like the subterranean voice of this neighborhood of the Bourse, seeing in it a good omen.”¹⁵³ Gold is not merely a commodity to Saccard, but an enchanted substance, exercising great hallucinatory power over him. He hears the sound of value growing through the play of supply and demand; this naturally appeals to his ears because it represents the same principle underlying the tactics he will employ in driving up the share price of his company.

This motif of the arbitrariness of value reappears later in the novel, this time with the opposite effect of disturbing and provoking Saccard. The occasion is a conversation with Sigismond, a student of the writings of Karl Marx and a socialist philosopher in his own right, producing vast heap of notes outlining a coming redistribution of wealth. In Sigismond’s pronouncements Saccard confronts the disturbing implications of the fluctuating value of money (and of a share). Money, explains the philosopher, is the emblem of the system of alienated labor which exploits workers while allowing for the creation of colossal fortunes; the new society will thus do away with it altogether, replacing it with work vouchers (*bons de travail*), a new medium of exchange based on the average productivity of the workplaces: “He had found a sou among the papers on his table, and held it up in the air between two fingers, as though it were the designated victim. . . . ‘We must kill it, kill money!’”¹⁵⁴ If the sound of gold being melted down

¹⁵³ “une claire sonnerie de pièces d’or lui fit dresser l’oreille. Cela semblait sortir des entrailles de la terre, continu, léger et musical, comme dans un conte des *Mille et une Nuits*. . . . Les passants du trottoir en ont les oreilles qui tintent, d’un bout de l’année à l’autre. Maintenant, Saccard souriait complaisamment à cette musique, qui était comme la voix souterraine de ce quartier de la Bourse, il y vit un heureux présage.” (5:83)

¹⁵⁴ “Il avait trouvé un sou parmi les papiers de sa table, il le tenait en l’air, entre deux doigts, comme la victime désignée. . . . ‘Il faut tuer, tuer l’argent!’” (5:284)

excites and inspires Saccard, Sigismond's prophecy here offends his sensibility. But Saccard's outrage highlights more than a mere difference of opinion. Their respective terms of assessment reveal a fundamental difference of understanding. For Sigismond's discourse trains upon money an analytic gaze, highlighting its supposed usefulness as a measure of value and its real effects on both those who create that value and those who appropriate it. For Saccard, this peculiar substance exists as a poetic image, one whose beauty gives meaning to his life:

No more money, no more gold, no more of those shining stars that had brightened his life! Wealth had always for him been embodied in this dazzling glare of new coins, raining down like a spring shower through the sunshine, falling like hail to the ground, covering it with heaps of money, heaps of gold, which one stirred with a shovel for the pleasure of their radiance and their music. And they wanted to do away with that joyfulness, that reason for fighting and living!¹⁵⁵

Saccard's vision is essentially magical. Money falls from the sky like a meteorological event. The truth of its social origins appears nowhere on the horizon beyond his fanciful spring shower. Nor is money valued in this image for its use as a medium of exchange. Its value lies in its sensual properties—its sound and the glint of its newly minted surface. But these virtues only assume the fullness of their effect when money is present in profusion, in “heaps.” It is a vision that evokes the possibility of being rich, but one that allows for spending great sums no less than for getting them—ceaseless exchange, a total metabolism of money.

Sigismond's references to labor and household economy fall on deaf ears because Saccard is only incidentally fascinated by money's *uses*. Even so, the philosopher's words are not without power over the poet of money. For they are in large part Saccard's own words, only

¹⁵⁵ “Plus d'argent, plus d'or, plus de ces astres luisants, qui avaient éclairé sa vie ! Toujours la richesse s'était matérialisée pour lui dans cet éblouissement de la monnaie neuve, pleuvant comme une averse de printemps, au travers du soleil, tombant en grêle sur la terre qu'elle couvrait, des tas d'argent, des tas d'or, qu'on remuait à la pelle, pour le plaisir de leur éclat et de leur musique. Et l'on supprimait cette gaieté, cette raison de se battre et de vivre !” (5:284)

pushed further to their logical conclusion. Whatever power his golden reverie may possess, Saccard knows it is a historically contingent one, for this is what he tells those vestiges of the aristocracy like the Beauvilliers when desperation drives them into his office: value has migrated away from landed estates, it has mobilized into the circulating forms of money, of stocks and shares. Sigismond's discourse recapitulates much of this material, but further observes that the days of capital growth itself may be numbered. As the philosopher continues to contemplate the sou on the table, it presents a concrete reminder that the new vehicles of value will age and die no less than the material coins themselves: "He had become absorbed in the contemplation of the sou, as though he had dreamed that he were holding the last sou of the old ages, a sou gone astray, having survived that dead, antiquated society!"¹⁵⁶ Despite the emotional reaction his words provoke from Saccard, they clearly disturb the man enough to make his poetic faculty of vision play tricks on him as he looks out the window upon the Bourse itself, which suddenly seems to flicker "as though melted under the shroud of the rain, a pale specter of a Bourse, about to vanish into grey smoke."¹⁵⁷ If Kolb's furnace is an invitation to exploit opportunities to get rich, Sigismond's sou shows up the pettiness of such schemes. Everything is in flux, the only constant is change, and wealth itself, no less than the Spanish coins, will ultimately be transformed.

Actions and passions

¹⁵⁶ "Il s'était absorbé dans la contemplation du sou, comme s'il eût rêvé qu'il tenait le dernier sou des vieux âges, un sou égaré, ayant survécu à l'antique société morte." (5:285)

¹⁵⁷ "comme fondue sous le linceul de la pluie, un pâle fantôme de Bourse près de s'évanouir en une fumée grise." (5:285)

Describing the book to a correspondent by comparison with *Pot-Bouille*, the author points out that it contains “less irony, more passion, and a more solid *ensemble*, I believe.” Whether there is so much less irony we will have occasion to consider. The word “passion” here is of the greatest interest in *L’Argent*, particularly in arriving at a profile of this protagonist. There is a subtle bifurcation throughout Saccard’s career between *passion*, his dominant characteristic, and *action* as represented by the labor undertaken by Hamelin (and echoed throughout by the French word for shares in a company, *actions*).

The interaction of action and passion in *L’Argent* furnishes more than a perverse psychological curiosity. It is also how Zola attempts to solve the fundamental narrative problem of money in itself, its “glacial” and uninteresting character. To be sure, the key to Saccard’s activities lies entirely within his subjugation to the influence of *la passion*. From mysterious regions he has been visited by a primal image of shining, newly minted gold coins raining in mythic abundance from the sky. At the same time, if he fantasizes about gathering up coins by the cartload, he is moved by the spending no less than the getting. The prolonged tension of amassing wealth and the orgasmic release of gifting and expenditure are equally integral parts of his psychic makeup, provided that all tend toward the promotion of his personal glory. This movement of growth and diminution—in Saccard’s wealth in parallel with the Universelle’s share price—lends an obvious narrative shape to the text of *L’Argent*. The images of Saccard as “poet” all seem to imply a degradation of poetry, its reduction to mere advertisement and enticement, to enchantment as a type of manipulation: “But he had always been the man of imagination, seeing things too grand, transforming his seedy deals into poems. . . .”¹⁵⁸ This

¹⁵⁸ “Mais il avait toujours été l’homme d’imagination, voyant trop grand, transformant en poèmes ses trafics louches d’aventurier. . . .” (5:314)

treatment of “poetry” is paralleled by similarly ironic depictions of the representative visual arts. Daigremont’s expensive Meissonier painting, Mme Caroline’s attractive watercolors which effectively lead to the launching of the Universelle: in *L’Argent*, those sensuous forms of value which seemingly exist outside the abstraction of the market are made to reaffirm it.

Yet if the aesthetic has been thus strategically contained from the outset, it implicitly reasserts itself at the level of narrative structure. In this respect *L’Argent* forms a kind of complement to *L’Oeuvre*. We saw in the earlier novel an aesthetic quest, seemingly undertaken outside the realm of market pressures, which was nevertheless gradually poisoned by the economic, the movement of exchange, the slippage into fanciful efforts at symbolic compensation. An inverse movement seems to take place in *L’Argent*. The tight circle of a plot closely tracking a quantitative value represented by money seems to exclude from its windless enclosure the qualitative texture of the aesthetic; yet as we have seen, Zola complained early on about the lack of novelistic interest in the topic of money itself, and he sought to solve this problem through resorting to various metaphors (warfare, childbirth) and other strategies (amorous and adulterous subplots, fairy tale imagery, the staged confrontation of philosophical ideas) all revolving around the volatile figure of Saccard. To understand the necessity of these strategies it is enough to imagine Zola’s attempting to organize the novel around Gundermann, not the “poet of money” but money itself become human. The inherent narrative provocation posed by a money society is revealed through this confrontation of the impassioned Saccard with the anhedonic Gundermann. This confrontation receives illumination if we turn briefly to Peter Brooks’s narratological interpretation of the Freudian drive theory. The pleasure principle seeks to achieve gratification, thereby restoring the subject to a prior state of tranquility. It thus represents an analogy with the forward-moving drive of narrative itself, which ends with the

fulfillment of what Brooks calls “narrative desire.” The movement of a fictional text comes into being through the tension arising in a moment of dissatisfaction or desire. As Brooks observes, “plot starts (or must give the illusion of starting) from that moment at which story, or ‘life,’ is stimulated from quiescence into a state of narratability, into a tension, a kind of irritation, which demands narration.”¹⁵⁹ This tension then seeks, through a series of obstacles and delays, to work itself out until reaching extinction in the moment of success or failure.

Virtually none of this is true of Gundermann. The contrary of Saccard and his ego-asserting antics, Gundermann is an exemplar of successful, efficient, above all *quiet* wealth accumulation. He is virtually Saccard’s antagonist throughout, but perhaps most fully embodies Zola’s notion of “money well employed.” Nor does he exhibit any of the impassioned vices which destroy social and familial bonds. This is a man who has become a kind of “master” of money, and who, in the battle of the Bourse, is willing (and able) to sacrifice a great deal in his commitment to logic. But he has in addition completely sacrificed himself, and all pleasures—even gustatory ones—for his mission. Indeed, we might say this is the real source of Saccard’s “sacred terror” of the man:

Why, with so much gold, keep adding even more, when one couldn’t buy a pound of cherries and eat it in the street, take any passing girl to a waterside *guinguette*, enjoy everything that is sold, enjoy idleness and freedom? And Saccard who, in his terrible appetites, could still reckon with the disinterested love of money for the power it confers, felt seized with a sort of sacred terror at this figure, no longer that of classical avarice which hoards, but of the impeccable worker, without need of flesh, having become almost abstract in his sickly old age, who obstinately continued to construct his tower of millions, dreaming only of leaving it to his heirs to make it grow further. . . .¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ “Freud’s Masterplot,” in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, Harvard University Press, 1992 [1984], p. 103.

¹⁶⁰ “Pourquoi cet or inutile ajouté à tant d’or, lorsqu’on ne peut acheter et manger dans la rue une livre de cerises, emmener à une guinguette du bord de l’eau la fille qui passe, jouir de tout ce qui se vend, de la paresse et de la liberté ? Et Saccard, qui, dans ses terribles appétits, faisait cependant la part de l’amour désintéressé de l’argent, pour la puissance qu’il donne, se sentait pris d’une sorte de terreur sacrée, à voir se dresser cette figure, non plus de l’avare classique qui thésaurise, mais de l’ouvrier impeccable, sans

The notion of providing for a family simply does not register for Saccard, who is fundamentally estranged from his children (even Maxime, who only occasionally appears out of a condescending curiosity about his father's activities). Moreover, his weaknesses as a financial manager, which sow harm for others and bring ruin upon himself, are also what allow the story to be told at all. A dramatic rise and a cataclysmic fall: such is the stuff of narrative. Against this, Gundermann merely keeps building his "tower of gold" higher and higher, as his forbears did before and his children will do after. If the subject of money itself is "glacial, devoid of interest," then this is why such a story could not be told about Saccard's adversary, *l'homme chiffre*. In the figure of Gundermann, Zola presents the very limits of the narratable. With no passions or desires, he inspires terror in Saccard and is his most fitting antagonist, this man who lives on milk, unable to digest food, and who enjoys the respect of foreign princes yet lives a rigorously determined existence. We might say that for Saccard, much of the recycled, stereotypical antisemitic rhetoric that he directs against Gundermann (eventual world-domination and other common stock motifs in the Bourse-literature of the time¹⁶¹) is undergirded by this more primal intimation of an existence cut off from desire.

Presented with the plan for the Universelle as a potential investor, Gundermann immediately recognizes its dismal prospects, informed entirely by an impression of Saccard's abilities: "you will collapse, that's mathematical; because you're far too passionate, you have too much imagination. . . . You'll be eaten before three years are up" (5:97). Gundermann's laconic—and prophetic—answer to Saccard's request for funding neatly encapsulates the

besoin de chair, devenu comme abstrait dans sa vieillesse souffreteuse, qui continuait à édifier obstinément sa tour de millions, avec l'unique rêve de la léguer aux siens pour qu'ils la grandissent encore. . . ." (5:96)

¹⁶¹ cf. Christophe Reffait, *La Bourse dans le roman du second XIXe siècle*, pp. 166-76, pp. 435-46.

defining quality about the latter's relation to money—its essentially fantastic nature. Against Gundermann's insistence on the omnipotence of *la logique*, Saccard's conception of money's origin and uses is fanciful at best. It is what makes him so dangerous to others as well as to himself. Fairy tales, castles in the air, visions of a sterile world rendered fruitful, of money extracted from the ground and raining from the sky: the mental world surrounding the activities of the Universelle is a thoroughly enchanted one. One of the most useful fantasies instrumentalized by the bank is that of relocating the Pope to Jerusalem, which wins over the participation of Catholic investors.¹⁶² But even Saccard, who does not share in the religious fanaticism promoted by the Universelle, nevertheless reveals a certain superstitious bent throughout the novel.¹⁶³ His activities are repeatedly cast in the language of fantasy: "In broad strokes, with his ardent speech that could transform a money matter into a poet's tale, he explained the superb enterprises, the certain and colossal success" (5:101). The sound of gold pieces coming from Kolb's "seemed to come from the depths of the earth, continuous, light and musical, like in a story from the *Thousand and One Nights*" (5:83). He is "fatalistic, believing in luck," and takes success as a sign to continue, "knowing that lucky days do not begin again" (5:102, 108). Against Gundermann's mathematical acumen and implacable rationality, Saccard has the dubious "faculty" of "getting drunk on his own enthusiasm, of arriving at faith through his burning desire to succeed" (5:110).

Une force inexpugnable

¹⁶² Appealing to the religious passions of the French was a highly successful strategy for Bontoux and the Union Générale. See on this point Frederick Brown's account in *For the Soul of France: Culture Wars in the Age of Dreyfus*, New York (Knopf), 2010, pp. 59-80.

¹⁶³ The same can be said of Busch—another foil and narrative antagonist to Saccard—who buys up cheap debt on the hunch that it will ripen into a good investment: "He often obeyed what he called the stroke of inspiration, yielding to an abrupt divination, going off on the hunt upon a simple sign from his intuition, even if he must wait until afterwards to get certitude and resolution from the facts." (5:142)

Lending further warmth to his “glacial” topic, Zola magnifies the confrontation of the two money-men through the motif of warfare, yet another scheme to accommodate the binary oppositions making up the texture of *L’Argent*. We have already noted the frequent parallels between Saccard and Napoleon. The supreme emblems of the warfare analogy in this case are Saccard and Gundermann, and their respective relations to the money they control develop this analogy further. Money itself on the Bourse is equated with infantry—it is the essential weapon that will allow for the steady advance of a financial concern, but it is also, within certain limits, expendable. Vast sums must sometimes be sacrificed, or “massacred,” in order to win the war—a motif that appears with increasing frequency as Saccard starts buying back the shares that people have sold. Having a larger “army” allows him to project an image of security for the *Universelle* as it illegally invests its own resources in propping up the share price. In a war of attrition, however, such an outfit cannot win against a greater force. That greater force is here represented by Gundermann, who has maintained his position as “king of the Bourse” by dint of vast reserves maneuvered logically: “thus it was, at each liquidation, a new battle, whose victory infallibly went to him through the decisive virtue of great battalions.”¹⁶⁴ The “combat” that will unfold between the two men is foretold in these opening characterizations, with Saccard’s tactics cast in the light of mere opportunism. Gundermann “was not a speculator, a captain of adventures, maneuvering others’ millions, dreaming, like Saccard, of heroic combats in which he would win, gaining immense spoils for himself thanks to the aid of mercenary gold, engaged under his orders. . . . Saccard, watching him, remained for a moment crushed under this thought

¹⁶⁴ “c’était ainsi, à chaque liquidation, une nouvelle bataille, où la victoire lui restait infailliblement, par la vertu décisive des gros bataillons.”

that all that money he moved was his own. . . . A billion of one's own . . . is an unassailable force."¹⁶⁵ If Saccard is briefly "crushed," he fails to take the lesson of true possession to heart, and allows his eagerness to take down the man himself to dictate his decisions, with results that this passage already makes predictable. Later, once Gundermann has concluded the Universelle is overvalued and begun his campaign of short-selling the company, it is only a matter of time of time, according to his logical analysis, before his predictions bear fruit. If in the meantime he must lose millions at each liquidation, he can after all afford to—such is the security of an "unassailable force."

Cautious and dispassionate, Gundermann embodies the model of virtuous acquisition, of money as the "calm passion." In an earlier period, when apologies for capitalism were more ambitious and perhaps more compelling, Shaftesbury had summarized the relation of financial gain to psychology, and his terms neatly contrast this benevolent moderation of Gundermann with Saccard's consuming drive:

If the regard toward [acquisition of wealth] be moderate, and in a reasonable degree; if it occasions no passionate pursuit—there is nothing in this case which is not compatible with virtue, and even suitable and beneficial to society. But if it grows at length into a real *passion*; the injury and mischief it does the public, is not greater than that which it creates to the person himself. Such a one is in reality a self-oppressor, and lies heavier on himself than he can ever do on mankind.¹⁶⁶

The only qualification one might make in such a comparison is that Saccard merely goes to prison, where his activity must briefly grind to a halt before the sentence is commuted through

¹⁶⁵ "Il n'était point un spéculateur, un capitaine d'aventures, manoeuvrant les millions des autres, rêvant, à l'exemple de Saccard, des combats héroïques où il vaincrait, où il gagnerait pour lui un colossal butin, grâce à l'aide de l'or mercenaire, engagé sous ses ordres. . . . Un instant, Saccard, qui le regardait, resta accablé sous cette pensée que tout cet argent qu'il faisait mouvoir était à lui. . . . Un milliard à soi . . . est une force inexpugnable." (5:94-95)

¹⁶⁶ *Characteristicks*, p. 336, quoted in Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before its Triumph*. Princeton (Princeton University Press), [1977] 1997, p. 65.

his political connections, whereas the “injury and mischief” wrought by his passion upon the public—not least the shareholders he has duped—is catastrophic.

This opposition itself is more fuel for the furnace of Saccard’s obsession. A competitive element offers release to the other major aspect of his passion for speculation: the desire to assert himself, a major aspect of his character that motivates much of his behavior.

To fight, to be the strongest in the hard war of speculation, to eat the others in order not to be eaten, this was, following his thirst for splendor and pleasure, the great cause, the sole cause of his passion for business. If he did not hoard money, he had the other joy, the struggle of great numbers, fortunes launched like army corps, the clashes of competing millions, with defeats, with victories, that intoxicated him.¹⁶⁷

On the one hand, he wishes to satisfy his appetites. Yet more significant is his megalomania, his wish to assert himself as an image of power visible to all. In this respect the comparisons to world leaders – particularly to Napoleon himself – are particularly noteworthy. The passions exhibited in this quintessential “homme d’argent” border on the pathological (a fact accounted for, in the wider context of the *Rougon-Macquart*’s inheritance scheme, by his ancestry).

Saccard’s passion drives him completely, which explicates the divergence of his morals from those of the other characters. A particularly fine example is in the princesse d’Orviedo’s charitable project, the Œuvre du Travail, a set of rehabilitation centers for troubled youth into which she has poured her fortune. This moment in the novel demonstrates an essential quality of Saccard which, while closely aligned with his financial ambitions, still expresses itself even with respect to money he has no intention of seizing. He conceives a “vague project” to handle the finances of the Oeuvre. The idea mingles his passion for money, his desire to occupy himself

¹⁶⁷ “Se battre, être le plus fort dans la dure guerre de la spéculation, manger les autres pour ne pas qu’ils vous mangent, c’était, après sa soif de splendeur et de jouissance, la grande cause, l’unique cause de sa passion des affaires. S’il ne thésaurisait pas, il avait l’autre joie, la lutte des gros chiffres, les fortunes lancées comme des corps d’armée, les chocs des millions adverses, avec les déroutes, avec les victoires, qui le grisait.” (5:57)

with a project while grasping his way out of his current financial straits, with sheer megalomania. This latter element, in particular, has the effect of amplifying the scope of the (still imaginary) project and his attachment to it, presenting itself to his fancy as a second chance—“une incarnation nouvelle, une brusque montée d'apothéose”—and the language of his reverie becomes all the more exaggerated for the desperation it expresses, stretching out the quantities until they take leave of reality altogether (“he would make them bear fruit, these millions, would double them, triple them, would manage to use them so well that he would make of them a world.”¹⁶⁸) An occasion not for acquiring wealth but for giving it away, the princesse’s work piques Saccard’s desire to amplify his image, here as a public benefactor, “dispenser of this royal charity, [to] channel this surge of gold that was flowing over Paris.”¹⁶⁹ The fantasy approaches the ridiculous as Saccard moves himself practically to tears by the integrity of his imaginary self: “he was moved, for he was of a perfect integrity, not a single sou remained at his fingers.”¹⁷⁰

But the passage also notably singles out the qualities that make Saccard the most appropriate kind of hero for a novel like this, with his “facultés d'homme d'affaires.” These faculties represent Simmel’s calculating function augmented to the highest degree (“sa ruse, son obstination, son manque complet de préjugés”), a moral blank slate that will stop at nothing and discard no method that works.

Within his visionary’s skull was a giant idyll, a reckless person’s idyll, in which there was no desire to redeem his former financial robberies. He had dreamed of it his whole life, his conquest of Paris. To be the king of charity, the adored God of the poor multitudes, to become unique and popular, to get the world’s attention, it went beyond his ambition. What wonders would he not realize, if he were to turn his faculties as a businessman, his cunning, his obstinacy, his complete lack of prejudice to use in being good! And he would have the irresistible strength that

¹⁶⁸ [il] les ferait fructifier, ces millions, les doublerait, les triplerait, saurait si bien les employer qu'il en tirerait un monde.”

¹⁶⁹ “dispensateur de cette royale charité, canaliser ce flot d'or qui coulait sur Paris.”

¹⁷⁰ “il s'attendrissait, car il était d'une probité parfaite, pas un sou ne lui demeurait aux doigts.”

wins battles, money, coffers full of money, money which often does so much harm and which would do so much good if only one applied one's pride and pleasure to giving!¹⁷¹

The passage is a study in amorality, highlighting at once the intellectual power Saccard could bring to charitable works while casually aligning this skill and shrewdness with the ultimate egoism which these faculties serve. Notably, the narrator lingers on the fact that Saccard's ambitions are not (like the *princesse's*) motivated by a need for atonement.

Thinking to maximize the effects of this plan (and obviate any gossip that might undermine it), Saccard proposes giving these joint efforts the seal of marriage, and is promptly refused. The account of the havoc wrought on Saccard's psyche upon this refusal is significant in its illumination of his emotional life. The princess still gratefully accepts his directorship of the project, but the refusal disturbs the daydream in which Saccard has been indulging, provoking anew his bitterness and wounding his vanity.

For a whole week, Saccard felt a violent chagrin, as at the loss of a cherished idea; . . . like a sentimental romance brings tears to the most abject drunkard, this colossal idyll of good works done through the use of millions had moved his old pirate's soul. He was falling once more, and felt as though he had been dethroned from on high. Through money he had always wanted, at the same time as the satisfaction of his appetites, the magnificence of the princely life; and he had never had it high enough. . . .¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ “Ce fut, dans son crâne de visionnaire, une idylle géante, l'idylle d'un inconscient, où ne se mêlait aucun désir de racheter ses anciens brigandages financiers. D'autant plus que, tout de même, au bout, il y avait le rêve de sa vie entière, sa conquête de Paris. Être le roi de la charité, le Dieu adoré de la multitude des pauvres, devenir unique et populaire, occuper de lui le monde, cela dépassait son ambition. Quels prodiges ne réaliserait-il pas, s'il employait à être bon ses facultés d'homme d'affaires, sa ruse, son obstination, son manque complet de préjugés! Et il aurait la force irrésistible qui gagne les batailles, l'argent, l'argent à pleins coffres, l'argent qui fait tant de mal souvent et qui ferait tant de bien, le jour où l'on mettrait à donner son orgueil et son plaisir!” (5:55-56)

¹⁷² “Toute une semaine, Saccard éprouva un violent chagrin, ainsi qu'à la perte d'une idée chère; non pas qu'il se sentît retomber au gouffre du brigandage; mais, de même qu'une romance sentimentale met des larmes aux yeux des *ivrognes* les plus abjects, cette colossale idylle du bien fait à coups de millions avait attendri sa vieille âme de corsaire. Il tombait une fois encore, et de très haut il lui semblait être détrôné. Par l'argent, il avait toujours voulu, en même temps que la satisfaction de ses appétits, la magnificence d'une vie princière; et jamais il ne l'avait eue, assez haute. Il s'enrageait, à mesure que chacune de ses

On the one hand the satisfaction of appetites, on the other a projected image of power and dignity (“en même temps que la satisfaction de ses appétits, la magnificence d'une vie princière”), money is the means for gaining all worldly satisfaction. Feeling “dethroned” by the princesse’s refusal, Saccard seems moved to cry, and his dejection is placed beside the weeping of another kind of addict, further pathologizing his preoccupation. Lastly, the reactive quality of Saccard’s passion reveals itself in the economy of hope and anger. While he has unlimited reserves of energy for fantasizing, he is most likely to be moved to action (and to a rash one) by disappointment.

Enfancement

Adopting a psychoanalytic optic, Antonia Fonyi attempts to understand Zola’s position towards money through examining its “unconscious foundations” and positioning them on the moral continuum of the period: “The moral ideal underpinning nearly all nineteenth-century literature is founded on the opposition of two great categories, those of having and being.”¹⁷³ Money, plainly enough, is the typical object of *having*. But the logical extreme of this mode of relating to money is hoarding. Such an “anal” tendency appears in *L’Argent* in the person of Gundermann and in his cavernous vaults of cash reserves. Against this stands Saccard’s outward, “urethral” tendency: “Gundermann, the ‘*marchand d’argent*’, wants to have more than he has, whereas Saccard, the ‘*poète du million*’, wants to be, or at least appear, more than he is.”¹⁷⁴ Fonyi refines this alignment of money values (positive and negative) with developmental phases

chutes emportait un espoir. Aussi, lorsque son projet croula devant le refus tranquille et net de la princesse, se trouva-t-il rejeté à une furieuse envie de bataille.” (5:56-57)

¹⁷³ Fonyi Antonia. Zola : “question d'argent. Ambivalences financières et modèles inconscients dans *L’Argent*,” in *Romantisme*, 2003, no. 119. “Le privé et le social.” pp. 61-71, p. 69.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

as presented in psychoanalytic discourse by pointing out that, in the scheme of valuation surrounding Saccard (where money is positive), money represents more than urine—more than a self-directed form of satisfaction. It is also the seminal substance that impregnates the maternally coded earth: “As for the money which brings about this new life, it symbolizes not urine, of course, but sperm. . . .”¹⁷⁵

All this of course usefully sums up how Zola himself saw this work, and lends greater definition to his statement that “il n’y a que l’amour et l’argent.” Yet whatever Zola’s intention may have been, his narrative systematically reveals the cracks in this defense. For life and reproduction must entail more than the creative act itself. They also include, notably, the raising of the children emerging from the “necessary excesses” of creation. This aspect of social and familial life lies beyond the limits of Saccard’s sphere of activity. Indeed, amidst the financial “enfantement” that demands all of Saccard’s time and mental energy, he is unavailable even to visit his newly discovered son Victor where Mme Caroline has installed him at the Oeuvre de Travail. He does not meet the boy even once. Despite the wealth that passes through his hands, he leaves his child with nothing save for (following Zola’s genetic framework) the tendency towards sexual assault that led to his conception.

Nor is leaving Victor at the Oeuvre de Travail the only case of Saccard delegating the work of production and reproduction to others. The story’s great project (which prompts the creation of the Universelle) is a large-scale series of efforts to be undertaken around the Mediterranean. But this activity is performed by his neighbor, the engineer George Hamelin. Saccard is merely the “money man.” Just as Victor’s social development appears only secondhand through the princesse d’Orviedo’s reports, so too is Hamelin’s progress depicted

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

only in his letters to his sister Mme Caroline. This proves to be a key figure in Zola's design. Given the violent and obsessive quality of Saccard's passions, and his restless attachment to money as the means of satisfying them (with the attendant unscrupulousness as to the ways for procuring this money), the novel puts all of the pieces in place for a polemical statement against the ills of money's influence in modern society (i.e. the Second Empire). Yet this is precisely what Zola does not do—and this quite intentionally, planned from the start. (The notes from the *Ebauche* described above demonstrate this.) Instead, he inserts a rather unexpected complementary character, the generous and practical Mme Caroline, as a surface against which to test the evils of Saccard.

The childbirth motif hovering over Claude's artistic efforts returns here, appearing now in Saccard's pet analogy of speculative excess with "la luxure" as forces that create life. For Saccard money, like Claude's painting, is a vehicle of reproduction, a notion no less ironic in this novel. Just as Claude's quest leads to neglect of his child (who eventually dies), so Saccard, in an act of violence, fathers a child whom he does not raise—indeed, he only discovers Victor's existence when the boy is thirteen, and never meets him. Like the list of titles for that work, many of them synonyms for and descriptions of childbirth, Saccard's rhetoric includes frequent and repeated metaphors of procreation—money ought to be invested as capital in order to "faire des petits." Seemingly to demonstrate this thesis, Zola enlists the gentle, intelligent character of Mme Caroline. This figure invests in his company, becomes Saccard's occasional mistress, and occupies a privileged position for observing his movements in the world. Zola seems quite clearly to intend her as the most authoritative perspective on Saccard, giving her the last word in the novel and even putting Saccard's own ideas in her mouth.

We can better grasp Mme Caroline's function in the novel by glancing at her narrative foils, of which the most obvious is the *princesse d'Orviedo*. As a young woman the *princesse d'Orviedo*, we are told, had allowed herself to fall into an arranged marriage out of sheer obedience. Religious yet worldly, she resembles Mme Caroline at the moment of her marriage. The princess was ignorant of her husband's activities, of where his money came from—details accounted for to the reader only in sinister terms of “mud and blood” and of fleecing gullible poor people through the mechanisms of the Bourse. When she finally does discover these shady origins, she can only feel guilt. Having accepted and enjoyed this ill-gotten wealth following his death, she feels herself implicated in the crime and wishes to make amends. For the *princesse*, at least, the abstraction of money cannot cleanse it of moral impurity. Since keeping the fortune would be accepting complicity in robbing the poor, she instead sets up the *Oeuvre de Travail* in an effort to redeem herself from the evils responsible for the fortune she has enjoyed: “she lived now only in an ardent fever of renunciation and reparation. In this woman . . . all her repressed affections, especially the failed love for a child, blossomed into a veritable passion for the poor, the weak, the disinherited, those whose stolen millions she believed herself the unhappy possessor, and to whom she swore to make royal restitution, in a shower of charity.”¹⁷⁶

The two women undergo comparable vicissitudes at different degrees of social elevation. Most significantly from a financial perspective, both women are no longer married. But whereas the *princesse* was widowed, inheriting the entire bloodstained fortune of her husband, Mme Caroline has separated from a petty-bourgeois millionaire—a brewer whose inveterate

¹⁷⁶ . . . elle ne vivait plus que dans une ardente fièvre de renoncement et de réparation. Chez cette femme qui n'avait pas été amante et qui n'avait pu être mère, toutes les tendresses refoulées, surtout l'amour avorté de l'enfant, s'épanouissaient en une véritable passion pour les pauvres, pour les faibles, les déshérités, les souffrants, ceux dont elle croyait détenir les millions volés, ceux à qui elle jurait de les restituer royalement, en pluie d'aumônes. (5:52-53)

drunkenness brought out a murderous jealousy. Mme Caroline is perfectly content with poverty, even at the risk of serious discomfort. In this respect she is also the antithesis of Saccard. The cunning financier deems himself to have been wronged, and his efforts on the battlefield of the Bourse represent an attempt to reclaim his due; he cannot rest until he has acquired that to which, for reasons of his own, he feels entitled. Mme Caroline, on the other hand, does indeed have grounds for bitterness. Based on the vague outlines given regarding her former husband, her happiness—in fact, her very life—was under threat from his alcoholism and violent fits. Yet upon extricating herself, she demands no restitution. Instead she insists on a clean break: “she found herself once again poor, having insisted on demanding no *pension* from the man she was leaving.”¹⁷⁷ This insistence suggests more than a simple refusal to be reminded of the past. It is as though Mme Caroline, like the princesse, recognizes that a transfer of money can create or maintain a relation between individuals. More than a bitter or prideful gesture, foregoing any right to compensation reveals her insistence on keeping her circle of relations clean. Ultimately, she will do the same after the call of the Universelle. Having sold off all her and Hamelin’s shares, she turns over the money—more than seven million francs—to the authorities before taking leave of all her connections in Paris.

Mme. Caroline is thus no more interested in being rich than the princesse d’Orviedo. Like the latter, she is also childless, and no less disappointed by the fact: “it was her custom to say that only one grief had remained bleeding in her—that of not having had a child.”¹⁷⁸ Indeed, what is noteworthy about this turn the novel takes towards a “conversion” of Mme. Caroline to the

¹⁷⁷ “elle se retrouvait pauvre, s’étant obstinée à ne réclamer aucune pension de l’homme qu’elle quittait” (5:58).

¹⁷⁸ elle avait coutume de dire qu’un seul chagrin était resté saignant en elle, celui de n’avoir pas eu d’enfant (5:60)

doctrine of gain as life and fecundity, is the fact she is not a mother herself. Indeed, the motif of motherhood appears frequently in *L'Argent*, and most cases of real or figural motherhood developed in it end in failure. Mme. de Beauvilliers fails in her efforts to provide for her daughter's future. Young Alice, the last descendant, sees her dowry lost in the disaster (and her virginity taken by the depraved Victor, a brutal symbolic *coup de grâce* in the overtaking of landed fortunes by capital). The widower Dejoie, likewise, hopes to raise a dowry for his daughter Nathalie, for whom he has been "like a mother and a father." Indeed, the example of Nathalie Dejoie presents a notably stark, almost literal statement of the opposition of life and money, with respect to family connections. Nathalie's father has invested in the Universelle in order to raise the 6,000-franc dowry demanded by her potential husband. As elsewhere, the principle of gain becomes here an end in itself, crowding out the interests it was meant to serve. Having long since raised the necessary funds that will allow her to start her family, the Dejoies choose rather to let the money reproduce itself, a course his daughter approves of: "One doesn't want to plug the spring, when money is flowing out. Oh! Théodore understands very well, given that, if Papa has more [rente], that's so much more capital that will come to us someday. . . . We've had the six thousand francs for months now, we could marry; but we prefer to let them make their little babies [on aime mieux les laisser faire des petits]. . . ." ¹⁷⁹ Once the money has disappeared with the rest, Nathalie gives up on her desired marriage prospect and leaves home without a word to take up with a neighbor.

¹⁷⁹ "Seulement, que voulez-vous? on ne peut pas boucher la source, quand l'argent arrive. Oh! Théodore comprend très bien, attendu que si papa a davantage de rente, c'est davantage de capital qui nous reviendra un jour. . . . On a les six mille francs depuis des mois, on pourrait se marier; mais on aime mieux les laisser faire des petits. . . ." (5: 269-70)

Witnessing the wreck of these families in the collapse, as Saccard and her brother are taken into custody, Mme Caroline is left to make the “apology” for money and speculation. But by the time this occurs, she has already been primed by her own personal crisis with the man. Having discovered his affair with another woman earlier on, Mme Caroline is prevented from leaving immediately by the arrival of a letter from Hamelin, a glowing report on the progress of their various projects. Here, the germination and painting motifs combine to produce a report of great persuasive power for her: “Soon, cities would grow up again along the fertile slopes of Lebanon. But above all, he painted a brilliant picture of the isolated Carmel gorge, where the silver mine was in full operation.”¹⁸⁰ The gorge is “like the gigantic nest of a population just being born.”¹⁸¹

Phrases from Saccard came to her, scraps of theories about speculation. She recalled this idea that, without speculation, there would be no great, living, fertile enterprises, any more than there would be children without lust. This excess of passion, all this life shamefully spent and lost, was necessary to the very continuation of life. . . . Money, poisonous and destructive, was becoming the ferment of all social vegetation, served as the necessary compost for great works whose execution would bring peoples together and pacify the earth. She had cursed money; now she fell into frightened admiration before it. All the good was born of that which wrought all the evil.¹⁸²

By the time the collapse comes, Mme Caroline has thus already come round to the view Zola wishes to promote. Yet despite this device of a kind of official spokesperson inserted to

¹⁸⁰ “Bientôt, des villes repousseraient aux flancs fertiles du Liban. Mais, surtout, il faisait une peinture très vive de la gorge écartée du Carmel, où la mine d'argent était en pleine exploitation.” (5:222)

¹⁸¹ “pareil au nid gigantesque d’une population qui naissait.” (5:224)

¹⁸² “Des phrases de Saccard lui revenaient, des lambeaux de théories sur la spéculation. Elle se rappelait cette idée que, sans la spéculation, il n'y aurait pas de grandes entreprises vivantes et fécondes, pas plus qu'il n'y aurait d'enfants, sans la luxure. Il faut cet excès de la passion, toute cette vie bassement dépensée et perdue, à la continuation même de la vie. . . . L'argent, empoisonneur et destructeur, devenait le ferment de toute végétation sociale, servait de terreau nécessaire aux grands travaux dont l'exécution rapprocherait les peuples et pacifierait la terre. Elle avait maudit l'argent, elle tombait maintenant devant lui dans une admiration effrayée. . . . Tout le bien naissait de lui, qui faisait tout le mal.” (5:224-25)

anticipate and redirect the reader's judgment, the results are ambivalent. For the broader movements of *L'Argent* seem to follow much the same pattern of *L'Oeuvre*, as we have seen throughout. And pushing this observation further brings us to a conclusion about money wholly opposed to anything Zola may have had in mind, far from being necessary to "life as it is" or deserving to be sanctioned as the corruption necessary to nourish new generations. Saccard's mythology of money, no less than Claude's reversion to the creation motifs of romanticism, emerges as a kind of compensatory illusion, a reassuring balm for a male-dominated milieu excluded from the fuller participation in the "continuation of life" that is childbirth.

Une lutte brave

If *L'Argent* seems to show Zola attempting to dramatize in fiction a thesis he had already developed in essay form, the result is ambiguous. Saccard's energy and persistence certainly lend him some resemblance to the image of the writer in *L'Argent dans la littérature*. His reassurances that "speculation only devours the blunderers"¹⁸³ are not without a parallel in that essay's discrimination of true talent. Henri Mitterand goes so far as to suggest Zola may even have a "secret complicity with him—being, like him, the man of schemes calculations, networks and wagers."¹⁸⁴ However, a much more direct incarnation of that heroic image appears in the figure of Paul Jordan. A hard-working writer, Jordan embodies Zola's idea of the writer of true talent who will stop at nothing to succeed. This means—as it had meant for Zola himself—a journeyman period spent eking out a precarious existence in the daily press: "Jordan—whose father, a banker from Marseille, had long ago committed suicide following some disastrous speculations—had been pounding the pavement in Paris for ten years, mad about literature, in a

¹⁸³ "la spéculation ne dévore que les maladroits." (5:135)

¹⁸⁴ *Zola, II. L'homme de Germinal: 1871-1893*, Paris (Fayard), 2001, p. 986.

brave struggle against the bleakness of poverty.”¹⁸⁵ The details of Jordan’s background foreshadow the disaster of the bank, and the unhappy fate of Mazaud. Indeed, the fact that it was Jordan’s father who ruined the family through speculation calls into question the premise of Saccard’s reproductive rhetoric. The writer’s presence inevitably evokes a basic opposition in his novel between art and money; in the struggle against poverty, Jordan’s path is decided in advance.

The presence of Jordan, though minor, is impossible to ignore. He is the only character who deliberately avoids any connection to the Bourse. Moreover, his sudden triumph at precisely the moment of general collapse casts him (and his wife Marcelle) in a unique light in the final chapters. The young writer’s career suggests Zola’s uncertainty about Saccard and Mme. Caroline as effective vehicles for his thesis. Jordan’s heroic efforts—and eventual success—are prefigured almost exactly by a hypothetical figure in the earlier essay.

What I can say is that money leads to the growth of beautiful works. Imagine, then, in our democratic age, a young man who falls upon the Paris pavement without a sou . . . , eking out a rather poor living from the newspapers, and managing, by an effort of will, to write works outside of his day-to-day job. Ten years of his existence go by in this terrible struggle. Then, success arrives; he not only has his glory, but he has made his fortune; he is now safe, and has rescued those dear to him from poverty, having sometimes paid the debts left him by his family. . . . Here money has its grandeur.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ “Jordan, dont le père, un banquier de Marseille, s’était autrefois suicidé, à la suite de spéculations désastreuses, battait depuis dix ans le pavé de Paris, enragé de littérature, dans une lutte brave contre la misère noire.” (5:26)

¹⁸⁶ “Ce que je puis dire, moi, c’est que l’argent fait pousser les belles œuvres. Imaginez donc, en nos temps de démocratie, un jeune homme qui tombe sur le pavé de Paris sans un sou . . . , vivant du journal plutôt mal que bien, arrivant, par un effort de volonté, à écrire des œuvres, en dehors de sa besogne quotidienne. Dix années de son existence se passent dans cette lutte terrible. Puis, le succès arrive ; il n’a pas seulement sa gloire, il a fait sa fortune ; le voilà à l’abri, ayant sauvé les siens de la misère, ayant quelquefois payé les dettes laissés par sa famille. . . . L’argent a ici sa grandeur.” “L’Argent dans la littérature,” p. 194.

The ten years spent in journalism, the struggle to write fiction in brief snatches of spare time, even phrasing like *battre le pavé*: all return a decade later to characterize this humble character: “No, literature did not feed a man; he had a project for a novel that he could not find time to write, and so he necessarily went into journalism. . . .”¹⁸⁷ There is one noteworthy difference, however. The figure evoked in the essay more or less directly evokes Zola himself, whose father’s death saddled him and his mother with considerable debt—debt which the indefatigable novelist, with his own success at last at hand, was able to pay off. In *L’Argent*, familial expenses stem not from poor Jordan’s family, but to his in-laws the Maugendres, a switch that allows for an element of poetic justice. For as the writer tells Saccard early on, his in-laws disapproved of the marriage, believing him too poor to provide with money: “the Maugendres, who had no faith in a poet, and believing they had done a great deal simply by consenting to the marriage, had given nothing, on the pretext that their daughter, after their death, would have their fortune, enriched with savings.”¹⁸⁸ Although they are retired from industry (M. Maugendre was a successful tarpaulin manufacturer), they soon become emblematic of the speculating frenzy overtaking the society. Against this ethos of excess, the Jordan couple exhibits the virtue—otherworldly in this novel—of self-sacrifice in the name of love. Because Saccard’s rhetoric of easy wealth proves extremely seductive to the society at large, the Jordans’ ethic of valiant struggle predictably alienates others. This appears vividly when Marcelle, pursued over a minor debt by Busch and fearful of seeing their modest furnishings repossessed, finally seeks help from

¹⁸⁷ “Non, la littérature ne nourrit pas son homme, il avait en projet un roman qu’il ne trouvait pas le temps d’écrire, et il était entré forcément dans le journalisme, où il bâclait tout ce qui concernait son état, depuis des chroniques, jusqu’à des comptes rendus de tribunaux et même des faits divers.” (5:27)

¹⁸⁸ “les Maugendre, qui se défiaient d’un poète, croyant avoir beaucoup fait en consentant au mariage, n’avaient rien donné, sous le prétexte que leur fille, après eux, aurait leur fortune intacte, engraisnée d’économies.” (*Ibid.*)

her parents. Her mother's tirade against the young couple illustrates greed's corruption of even the closest family ties, but it also highlights the resentment of those who choose comfort: "when one had married a starving artist, a man who wrote books, one had to accept the consequences of one's stupidity; one didn't go trying to fall back on the family. No! She didn't have a sou for lazy people who affected a refined disdain for money and dreamed only of eating up other people's."¹⁸⁹ These words assume a grim irony after the collapse, when the Maugendres find themselves more than broke. Having gambled away more than they could afford on *Universelle* shares, they will scarcely be free after selling off their home and possessions. This is coincidentally the moment that Jordan has a stroke of luck, selling his first novel and finding "himself rich with several thousand francs, all doors henceforth open for him; he burned to get back to work now, sure of fortune and glory."¹⁹⁰

Paul Jordan lives up to Zola's ideal in another way as well. Not only does he refuse to invest in the *Universelle*, but he succeeds as a novelist through submitting to the terms of the marketplace. These terms, in the fiercely meritocratic vision developed in "L'Argent et la littérature," include not only accepting the forward march of history but also willingly forgoing any manner of patronage: "il est peu honorable de rêver une littérature entretenue." Lest the lesson of Paul's success should be missed, Zola includes Marcelle's dream, her wish—now impossible thanks to the ruining of her parents—to offer such assistance to her husband: "When

¹⁸⁹ "quand on avait épousé un meurt-de-faim, un homme qui écrivait des livres, on acceptait les conséquences de sa sottise, on n'essayait pas de retomber à la charge des siens. Non! elle n'avait pas un sou pour les paresseux qui, avec leur beau mépris affecté de l'argent, ne rêvent que de manger celui des autres." (5:273)

¹⁹⁰ "Il venait d'avoir une chance. Après tant d'années de travail ingrat, son premier roman, publié d'abord dans un journal, lancé ensuite par un éditeur, avait pris brusquement l'allure d'un gros succès; et il se trouvait riche de quelques milliers de francs, toutes les portes ouvertes devant lui désormais, brûlant de se remettre au travail, certain de la fortune et de la gloire." (5:348)

Paul was poor, I had a dream. Yes! Just like in fairy tales, I dreamed that I was a princess and that one day I would bring my ruined prince an enormous quantity of money, in order to help him to be a great poet. . . . And now he has no need of me, now I'm nothing more than an encumbrance, with my family!"¹⁹¹ Jordan's success reveals the superfluity of such gestures; he does not need her family's money. For the writer, making it in the marketplace means above all *freedom*—freedom from the need to flatter anyone's prejudices or to utter anyone else's opinions. Beneath its naïve generosity, Marcelle's dream expresses a basic power differential that Zola is at pains to take apart. For by having followed through on their youthful engagement despite her parents' lack of support, Marcelle has already placed herself on the side of art against money, and placed the pair's relationship on the footing of equals. Jordan's present willingness to support her impoverished parents simply cements this bond. His success thus inverts the power dynamic between the two parties of the impoverished artist and his condescending middle-class in-laws.

Finally, the Jordan couple's happy fate calls Saccard's metaphors of "luxure" into question. Not only does the suicide of Paul's father already hint at the dark side of speculation from the very beginning; at the end, they are the only successful case of reproduction in sight. Nathalie Dejoie runs away from home after her father loses the money for her *dot*; the broker Mazaud has committed suicide after being ruined by his clients, leaving behind several small children; Victor, conceived through rape, merely repeats the act to which he owes his existence before fleeing; his victim, Alice de Beauvilliers, has also lost the money that would have allowed her to marry; the Princesse d'Orviedo's Oeuvre de Travail, representing in part a compensation

¹⁹¹ "Moi, quand Paul a été pauvre, j'ai fait un rêve. Oui! comme dans les contes de fées, j'ai rêvé que j'étais une princesse et qu'un jour j'apporterais à mon prince ruiné beaucoup, beaucoup d'argent, pour l'aider à être un grand poète.... Et voilà qu'il n'a pas besoin de moi, voilà que je ne suis plus rien qu'un embarras, avec ma famille!" (5:348)

for her childlessness, is the site of Victor's crime, and its operations successfully drain the ill-gotten fortune of her late husband. Amid this grim series of conclusions, the Jordans alone stand at the cusp of a promising future. Their joy in Paul's success is amplified by the fact that they are expecting a child. For the young writer, the two are complementary: "There will soon be three of us; we can admit it now that I'm a gentleman who is making a living!"¹⁹² By the terms set throughout the novel, theirs is the only success story. Yet even here, Zola makes a point of muddying the waters. He does this by staging Jordan's expression of gratitude towards Saccard (for finding work for him and ridding them of an aggressive debt collector) to an incredulous Mme. Caroline. If Jordan succeeds where Saccard and his shareholders failed, the young writer nevertheless bears respect for the man. "He's always been nice to me. I'll never forget the way he rid us of the terrible Busch. . . . When you see him, Madame, be sure to tell him that our little household remains extremely grateful to him."¹⁹³

Conclusion

Although Sigismond briefly reminds Saccard that money derives its value from *labor*, the novel often appears to accept at face value this fictional object—which is the result of a complex process of abstraction; by treating its uses and effects as a set of empirical observations comparable to those performed on the natural world, the novel's reflection on money can only drift into a sterile equivalency.¹⁹⁴ Sigismond's explanation refers to the Marxist account of the

¹⁹² "Eh! oui, nous allons être trois, on peut bien l'avouer, maintenant que je suis un monsieur qui gagne sa vie!" (5:345)

¹⁹³ "Il a toujours été gentil avec moi. Je n'oublierai jamais la façon dont il nous a débarrassés du terrible Busch. Et puis, c'est tout de même un monsieur très fort... Quand vous le verrez, madame, dites-lui bien que le petit ménage lui garde une vive reconnaissance."

¹⁹⁴ In this it seems the author was not alone. See Roger Bellet, "La Bourse et la littérature dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle," in *Romantisme*, no. 40, 1983, pp. 53-64. "It is uncertain whether the Bourse ever had its Balzac. . . . The economic and financial enigma that the literature of the 19th century attempted to solve, the 'monster' it sought to tame, to disengage from 'mores' and give back to morality did not

origin of money's value in "socially useful labor time." But labor-time means laborers, a force largely absent from this novel. The engineer Hamelin is less a laborer than a kind of manager, and his activities take place far from the theater of speculation. Such an occultation, like the guiding methodology responsible for it, is a symptom of its historical moment. Fredric Jameson sums up this situation in describing naturalism's "new classification of narrative material according to specialization, or the division of labor; witness Zola's systematic mapping out of the 'topics' of the Rougon-Macquart series into the various themes of railroads, finance, . . . and the like. What needs to be stressed, however, is that this new 'solution' is in reality part of the problem: the crisis of the social totality is the result of the same phenomena—reification, social fragmentation, the division of labor, Taylorization—which dictate the terms of the naturalist organizational strategy."¹⁹⁵ While this is no doubt broadly true of the *Rougon-Macquart* and perhaps naturalist fiction generally, what is of interest here are the striking ways in which the "topics" of these two novels overlap, the common motifs and narrative strategies pervading both of them. Like Claude's painting, Saccard's speculation is a kind of creative mania. But structurally, what we saw in *L'Oeuvre*—the development of Claude's story through constant reference to money—is not fully reversible here. The aesthetic makes an appearance in Saccard's narrative, but in a faded, debased form, as a vehicle for parking wealth (i.e. through investment), and as a tool for manipulating people.

What does emerge as a noteworthy and provocative parallel is the way in which this passion for money and speculation appear, like Claude's painting, as endeavors towards the

nourish any epic and allowed no strong novelistic derision. The literature of the 19th century did not manage either to speak the historical reality nor erect it into a literary myth. Zola, who tried, managed only to subordinate it to the ambiguous myth of Money" (p. 64).

¹⁹⁵ *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Ithaca (Cornell University Press), 1981, p. 190.

creation of life, set in direct comparison to the concrete example of childbirth. In both cases, of course, the effort is a failure. Claude kills himself, and by the end of *L'Argent* the only spokespeople for the reproductive power of money are a criminal monomaniac who does not raise his own children and a woman who has none. And yet in both cases, a shadow-Zola intervenes, a moral authority (whose authority is grounded in nothing more than his own financial success as an artist) to say a few nice words. Zola, it seems, cannot talk about money without talking about himself. Paradoxically, the novelist's own success in the marketplace undermines his thesis and prevents him from singing the praises of money.

Chapter 3: Seeing Things As They Are: *The Tragic Muse*

We have seen how, in Zola, financial matters intervene in the artistic space, often in such subtle ways that one may safely wonder if the author himself stood at great enough distance to perceive the constellation of values his novel stages. In those examples dramatized by Henry James, the individual artist literally cannot afford to be indifferent to such concerns.¹⁹⁶ James himself maintained that an artist's traffic with the marketplace was, if a necessary evil, not one to submit to passively.

It isn't—I think—in trying to give what the main public and the *gros* reader want that I shall seek the right remedy. They 'want' simply bottomless *niaiserie*—look at Mr. Smith's bookstalls and you'll see. Give them what one wants oneself—it's the only way, *follow* them & they lead one by a straight grand highway to abysses of vulgarity.¹⁹⁷

It is instructive in this regard to compare two of James's major fictional treatments of an artist's life. In both *Roderick Hudson* (1875), his first major novel, and the more mature *The Tragic Muse* (1890), the artist is confronted with a character offering a chance for financial freedom. In the first case, a talented but untrained American sculptor is offered a trip to Rome and financial support to study antique sculpture, with disastrous consequences. As we shall see, the relative leisure afforded by such generosity opens the way to various forms of temptation and, even worse, a kind of phrase-mongering idleness that is debilitating for an artist's productive vigor. If James more famously could show how a generous inheritance—which should presumably bring about greater freedom and independence – risks grinding its recipient “in the very mill of the conventional” (in *The Portrait of a Lady*), his lesser-known *Künstlerromane* support a similar

¹⁹⁶ See letter to Hendrik Anderson in Introduction.

¹⁹⁷ Letter to Florence (Mrs. Hugh) Bell, Texas, 7 February 1890. *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Philip Horne. Penguin, 1999.

proposition about an artist's productive forces. The poisoned-gift motif appears again in the case of *The Tragic Muse*, where the benefactor personage now presents the artist with a severe choice. The scion of political family recently bereft of father and husband, Nick Dormer must choose whether to satisfy his family or himself. On the one hand, a comfortable marriage to Julia Dallow, widow of a passionate art collector, who herself has little interest in such matters, and who wishes instead to use her means to launch Nick on a political career. On the other, "the strong, sane joys of the artistic life"; for we quickly learn that Nick's "private ideal of happiness was the life of a great painter of portraits" (XXIV, 254).¹⁹⁸

In James's *Künstlerromane*, money takes on different moral valuations depending on its quantity and its origins. Small-scale money transactions for work performed are good, as they allow for the artist's development, especially if the latter exhibits careful frugality. Large fortunes represent temptation and—hidden in plain sight in the guise of a gift—compulsion, the limitation of freedom. They inevitably introduce into human relations the transactional element, which immediately shades into exploitation, the supreme evil in James. We saw earlier that for Simmel, money's abstract character means that a sum's nature is unchanged by its addition to another. What these novels suggest is that increased quantity in fact does in fact result in a qualitative change, a kind of intensification of its gravitational pull. This pull threatens to divert the individual artist from the natural course of his or her unfolding. Moreover, these novels challenge the inherited notion that money in itself suffices to let one "possess" anything else of value. For the Jamesian artist, the greatest possession is self-possession, a state of autonomous development which the art market enables, but which large private fortunes threaten to

¹⁹⁸ *The Tragic Muse*, ed. Philip Horne. London (Penguin), 1995. References in the text are to this edition; Roman numerals indicate chapter number, and Arabic numerals indicate page numbers.

undermine. At the same time, what makes this autonomous development, this “unfolding” possible, is money itself; so that in a sense one may say these novels anticipate and echo the position of Zola in “L’Argent dans la littérature.”

The great shadow of Balzac

We observed in the Introduction James’s constant devotion and reference to Balzac, an artistic loyalty which he readily acknowledged throughout his career. It appears once more in the late Preface to *Roderick Hudson* in connection with the setting of the early chapters. Regretting the “fond fatuity” of bestowing the concrete name “Northampton Mass” on Roderick’s birthplace without applying a “systematic closeness” to its description, the novelist pleads as a mitigating circumstance this youthful devotion: “But one nestled, technically, in those days, and with yearning, in the great shadow of Balzac; his august example, little as the secret might ever be guessed, towered for me over the scene. . . .”¹⁹⁹ This is a characteristic example of James’s habit of dropping slightly misleading hints. He briefly evokes Balzac in relation to setting, yet does not observe that Mallet is in part an American reimagining of Cousin Pons, who returns from his own sojourn studying music in Rome with an extreme fascination for art and antiquities. Balzac’s young composer goes on to spend his paternal inheritance on artworks, then squanders the maternal legacy in further leisurely travels throughout Italian cities, “staying in each as a dreamer, a philosopher, with the insouciance of the artist who counts upon his talent in order to live, as prostitutes do upon their beauty. Pons was happy during this splendid voyage, as much as

¹⁹⁹ Adeline Tintner observes of such “secrets” of James’s complex intertextual practice, “His ‘secrets’ are really open secrets. James clearly . . . provided the educated reader with liberal clues and factual signposts, like the pebbles dropped by Hop O’ My Thumb to lead his brothers and sisters out of the forest—a figure from James’s favorite fairy tale.” Adeline Tintner, *The Book World of Henry James: Appropriating the Classics*, p. xxi.

was possible for a man full of soul and delicacy, whose ugliness prevented him *success among women*. . . .”²⁰⁰ For Pons, the contemplation of visual beauty is a substitutive satisfaction for physical love, among other disappointments. As we will see, Roderick’s aesthetic interests also serve as a way to fill an inner void. He also shares Pons’s taste for a bargain. The composer, Balzac tells us, “n’admettait pas d’acquisition au-dessus de cent francs et, pour qu’il payât un objet cinquante francs, cet objet devait en valoir trois mille.”²⁰¹ As Rowland meditates on his initial plan of acquiring the treasures of Europe, he envisions “himself in imagination, more than once, in some mouldy old saloon of a Florentine palace, turning toward the deep embrasure of the window some scarcely-faded Ghirlandaio or Botticelli, while a host in reduced circumstances pointed out the lovely drawing of a hand.” Yet the parallel is most striking for the differences it throws into relief. The key difference is that the composer Pons in fact has some artistic skill, albeit in a different domain. He can contentedly eke out a hand-to-mouth existence on the strength of his skills, where Mallet decrees himself incompetent in advance. This difference of nerve shades into an even more essential distinction, one which highlights James’s awareness that a figure like Balzac’s was impossible in nineteenth-century New England. Against Pons’s ethic of indulgence, his “*insouciance*,” Mallet is burdened with “an uncomfortably sensitive conscience.”

An awkward mixture

²⁰⁰ “Il voulut visiter à loisir Venise, Milan, Florence, Bologne, Naples, séjournant dans chaque ville en rêveur, en philosophe, avec l’insouciance de l’artiste qui, pour vivre, compte sur son talent, comme les filles de joie comptent sur leur beauté. Pons fut heureux pendant ce splendide voyage autant que pouvait l’être un homme plein d’âme et de délicatesse, à qui sa laideur interdisait *des succès auprès des femmes*. . . .” (*Le Cousin Pons*, Gallimard ‘Folio,’ 1973, p. 33).

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

James sets all of the pieces in place to suggest that Mallet's peculiarities—his idleness and most distinctly his deep fascination with the visual arts, are a direct result of his retroactive consciousness of privation, coupled with a massive fortune. His father, afraid of “spoiling” the boy, gives him the education of “a poor man's son” rather than a very rich one's, apparently neglecting to consider any more moderate course. The upshot of this perverse upbringing is that Mallet turns out very idle indeed—his interest in art keeps him busy traveling and soon, as he has begun to plan, collecting—but without any susceptibility to active vice. Without a tendency to ruinous expenditure, Mallet can maintain himself in his idleness easily, yet the emptiness of his existence appears to weigh upon him at the outset. This of course accounts for his sudden proposal to Roderick, mere days after meeting him. Wishing he could have been a poor genius, Mallet can at last resign himself to being neither thanks to a human instrument that he can pay to create for him.

While nominally the tragedy of the dissipated sculptor, *Roderick Hudson* is no less an ironic portrait of the Puritan-as-aesthete that is Rowland Mallet, with all the hypocrisy this implies. Mallet's mind is torn between apparent opposites of the aesthetic and the practical. Successful activity in either of these spheres requires a forward energy that Mallet lacks. This lack seems to result from his possession of a large fortune. Such material ease produces a distance or detachment from the activity around him, reducing him to an observer. “He was an awkward mixture of strong moral impulse and restless aesthetic curiosity. . . . Oftenest, . . . he wished he were a vigorous young man of genius, without a penny. As it was, he could only buy pictures, and not paint them.” He would prefer to have the gift of genius and be poor. This wish suggests an awareness in the back of Mallet's mind that poverty generates activity. Purchasing artworks is a substitutive satisfaction for executing them. His initial scheme before setting off is

to buy up enough works to set up a museum in an American city. Despite the use others may get out of the museum, Mallet's "personal conception of the useful" is likely too severe to be satisfied by such a venture. For while we receive no details about his awakening to aesthetic pleasure, we find much information about his Puritan values. His aesthetic interests have their origin apparently in a rebellion against an artificially deprived childhood. (Mallet is the product of a perverse educational experiment by his father.)

The first noteworthy fact we learn about Mallet is that, for all his belief in his inability to create art, he is able to act when compelled by a certain inner fire. This determination first appears precisely in connection with his inheritance. Gifted with only a third of his father's property, the young Mallet had witnessed the distribution of the rest to "various public institutions and local charities" and, his third being already quite generous, we are told he "never felt a moment's jealousy of his fellow-pensioners." Yet while Mallet is neither greedy nor jealous, he has lingering resentment towards the author of his life and of his privations, and seizes the chance to direct this animosity at the first comer. When one of these institutions claims there is a revised will in which it was to be treated more handsomely still, Mallet loses no time in swatting it down. He does not feel his existence threatened by the case; this is clear from the fact that he promptly donates the disputed amount elsewhere. The reason behind his reaction is more peculiar: "He cared nothing for the money, but he had felt an angry desire to protest against a destiny which seemed determined to be exclusively salutary. It seemed to him that he would bear a little spoiling" (176). Determined to rebel against his father's Puritan moral stringency, he nevertheless willingly parts with a sum that might have been seen as a further means towards his desired "spoiling." Evidently, the courts represent the first arena in which the son can strike a blow against the shade of paternal austerity.

In his manipulation of initial circumstances, James establishes a subtle but unmistakable association between money and death. It is not simply that the dead leave behind property and fortunes that evoke their memory while furnishing an object of desire for the younger generations. Rather, money entails the stagnation of production and vitality. Because creative work is so thoroughly of a piece with existence itself for James, we may say that the career of the aesthetic aspirant resisting the temptations of worldly fortune recapitulates in miniature a broader conflict of the frigid, ossified past against the spontaneous liveliness of the present. This conflict between the Jamesian mode of “being,” represented by creative work, and that of mere “having,” represented by the possession of a sufficient fortune to render remunerative work superfluous, is analogous to that envisioned by Marx between the living dynamism of labor (an essential aspect of humanity’s “species-being,” in his terminology) and the dead accretion of value embodied by capital, with all its coercive monumentality. Erich Fromm summarizes in his study of the having and being modes of existence: “Labor, for [Marx], represents human activity and human activity is life. Capital, on the other hand, represents for Marx the amassed, the past, and in the last analysis, the dead (*Grundrisse*). One cannot fully understand the affective charge which the struggle between capital and labor had for Marx unless one considers that for him it was the fight between aliveness and deadness, the present versus the past, people versus things, being versus having.”²⁰²

In *Roderick Hudson*, this specter of “death” naturally inhabits the inherited wealth of Rowland Mallet who, despite his great interest and thorough knowledge of the visual arts, is paralyzed by its acquisition. Burdened with an overactive conscience, Mallet is keenly aware that his existence is virtually useless to his relations and contemporaries. Apart from playing a minor

²⁰² *To Have or to Be?* P. 78.

part in the Civil War, he has shown no interest in productive activity of any kind. Enamored with art, he nevertheless considers himself incapable of producing it. His fortune isolates him, and at the outset of the novel he is eager to find something outside himself in which to take an interest. He soon enough finds it in Roderick Hudson, a gifted sculptor from New England, who shows great promise but is chained to a clerkship for which he shows no aptitude.

Mallet's solution to his own disconnected, driftless state is to remove this young man from his own circle of acquaintance. By financing Roderick's artistic apprenticeship in Rome, and buying in advance the "masterpieces" the idea is guaranteed to yield, Mallet seeks to fill the void in his own sense of being, to provide himself secondhand with an active, productive existence. His project thus echoes Marx's famous quip from the 1844 *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* about the omnipotence of the wealth, the ability to channel one's financial means into securing the qualities and abilities one lacks simply through paying others to express them: "That which exists for me through the medium of *money*, that which I can pay for, i.e. which money can buy, that *am I*, the possessor of the money. The stronger the power of my money, the stronger am I. . . . Do I not therefore possess all human abilities? Does not money therefore transform all my incapacities into their opposite?"²⁰³ Mallet of course never directly expresses such self-aggrandizing sentiments (indeed it is Roderick himself who soon adopts the habit of bragging), yet one senses in the opening how troubled he is without any vocation of his own, and we are made to sense that, despite genteel urbanity and ready generosity, Mallet is not simply being nice.²⁰⁴

²⁰³ Trans. Gregor Benton, in *Early Writings*, London (Penguin), 1992, pp. 376-77.

²⁰⁴ Oscar Cargill observes that the presence of Mallet shows James, already in his first long fiction, making use of the ironic, indirect method that will become virtually synonymous with Jamesian "point of view": "The greatest mistake we can make about Rowland is to assume that James offers him as a flawless antithesis to Roderick. . . . Rowland Mallet is the first of those Jamesian characters whose

This is the first major appearance of James's recurring "poisoned gift" motif, which will receive its most famous treatment in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). In that work, Isabel Archer is provided with an immense fortune thanks to the silent intervention of her ailing cousin, Ralph Touchett. Knowing he is not long for the world, and impressed by Isabel's strong sense of independence, Ralph endows her with the means of expressing herself in conditions of maximum freedom. Though Mallet is not literally dying like Ralph, one senses no less in his sponsorship of Roderick an urge to let the gift of his money help him to live. Just as Isabel's wealth exposes her to a sinister fortune-hunting plot, Roderick's first taste of independent means leads him straight into temptations that pave the way for his sterility and failure.

"Don't speculate on it."

While leisure is sometimes said to lead to an undervaluation of labor, for Mallet its result is an overvaluation of Roderick's gift. At one point, the sculptor gambles away the money from his first commissions, but assures Mallet he can make himself right financially through quickly producing a new statue. This is too much for Mallet, who promptly remonstrates: "If you have got facility, revere it, respect it, adore it, treasure it—don't speculate on it." And he wondered what his companion, up to his knees in debt, would have done if there had been no good-natured Rowland Mallet to lend a helping hand." (257) Not only is the outburst comical for Mallet's lack of self-awareness (the situation has only arisen due to his bringing Roderick to Rome). This injunction is startling in its inaptness, revealing more about the speaker than about his mentee. Roderick, by cultivating careless habits among low company, has dug himself into debt. A

amplitude is not wholly measured by the printed page but must be supplied from hints thereon by the active imagination of the reader." *The Novels of Henry James*, p. 31-32.

different temporality underlies debt than that of speculation. The debtor lags behind, weighed down with obligations from the past as he trudges forward to the starting line. This forward movement itself is threatened by further backsliding, as in taking on a new debt to pay off an old one. Even successful escape from this infernal cycle confers not so much joy as mere relief. Any present income immediately loses the glimmer of gratification through its being already spoken for. (“Poor Roderick owed every franc of the money.”) Debt is the negative force that weighs upon the present and, through the mechanism of interest, threatens to grow ever more powerful. It is not only the antithesis of surfeit, but undermines its very possibility. Speculation, on the contrary, typically presupposes a degree of “disposable income.” The speculator so fortunately equipped looks ever forward, weighing probabilities and venturing present investment for a stake in future success. Such is the financial aspect of Mallet’s own position when he makes his initial proposal. And although the gravity with which Roderick’s relations receive the news of his departure foreshadows trouble, Mallet retains a detached optimism about this success. This optimism comes out when his cousin Cecilia, addicted to Roderick’s company, demands he pledge the boy’s success:

“You guarantee us. . . , I hope, the masterpieces.”

“A masterpiece a year,” said Rowland smiling, “for the next quarter of a century.” (199)

It is a lot to promise from someone else’s work, but Mallet is possessed of his idea. He derives a justification for his interference in the lives of others through an appeal to strictly aesthetic values, construed on utilitarian lines: “Then I . . . asked myself whether I had a right to step in between him and his obscurity. My sense of his really having the divine flame answered the question. He is made to do the things that humanity is the happier for!” (198) We previous saw Saccard promoting a version of the “invisible hand” doctrine to justify his speculative project,

and convert others to it, in the financial realm. James here positions Roderick's wealthy benefactor transposing this tenet into the aesthetic sphere. For Roderick to follow through on a series of masterpieces will not only satisfy his inner need to produce—and Mallet's need to redeem the inner stigma of unearned wealth—but will simultaneously perform a service to “humanity.”

Mallet plays many roles for Roderick: friend, patron, mentor. However, as a patron, his interest is not only in the few works the sculptor has already made, but in also his very development. This is part of the promise the sculptor's mother and fiancée extract from Mallet before allowing the pair to set sail. Yet the transactional element of their relationship vitiates Mallet's mentoring role, producing a strain between them. Roderick thinks of Mallet almost as a boss, or judgmental paternal figure: “I have a perpetual feeling that you are expecting something of me, that you are measuring my doings by a terrifically high standard. You are watching me; I don't want to be watched. I want to go my own way; to work when I choose and to loaf when I choose. . . . I want a taste of absolutely unrestricted freedom.” (249)

Laying up a treasure

In his highly indirect way, James seems to highlight, from the point of view of aesthetic production, a course practically opposed to such outsized visions. Indeed, in his first major novel *Roderick Hudson* (1871), he had shown how a promising young sculptor fritters away his talent in daydreams of magnificent works: “They shall be simply divine forms. They shall be Beauty; they shall be Wisdom; they shall be Power; they shall be Genius; they shall be Daring. . . . Then there are all the Forces and Mysteries and Elements of Nature. . . . I mean to do the Morning; I mean to do the Night! I mean to do the Ocean and the Mountains; the Moon and the West Wind.

I mean to make a magnificent statue of America!” One could not be further from the “vivid image and the very scene.” With such otherworldly ambitions, Hudson is left at the mercy of his fickle “genius” with little room for more modest practice. His eventual dissipation and artistic sterility are enabled by the gift of money from the cultivated amateur Rowland Mallett, who finances his stay in Rome, with disastrous results.

Against these visions of well-funded “genius,” emphasis falls on indefatigable industry in conventional forms—the artist must support himself financially while keeping the fire hot for future, more ambitious work.²⁰⁵ Here, Hudson’s erratic pretensions and long periods of lethargy contrast with the efforts of the modest and indefatigable Sam Singleton: “when he first came to Rome he painted worthless daubs and gave no promise of talent. Improvement had come, however, hand in hand with patient industry, and his talent, though of a slender and delicate order, was now incontestable. It was as yet but scantily recognized, and he had hard work to live.” Nevertheless, work he does, laying up a store of sketches that will leave him with a fund of materials when he is eventually called back home to Buffalo. James expressly juxtaposes Roderick’s career to Singleton’s, reintroducing the latter at key moments, always in the same attitude of patient industry; Singleton yields not only a kind of comic relief from Roderick’s emotional intensity, but a tacit commentary on his labors, or lack thereof.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ It is easy to see how this maps onto James’s own career, and striking to what a degree he had already worked it out in his earliest major production. Hudson almost seems like a fictional prefiguration of Hendrik Anderson, who was also an American sculptor with vast ambitions, and a close friend of James, who advised him to “make the kettle boil” (see Introduction).

²⁰⁶ Adeline Tintner observes, “It is Singleton who embraces America, bringing back what he learned in Rome to nourish him in his native land. In his quiet way, he ends up casting a giant shadow as he is shown to be headed for a successful career like that of Asher Durand or Thomas Cole.” *Henry James and the Lust of the Eyes: Thirteen Artists in His Work*, Baton Rouge (Louisiana State University Press), 1993, p. 122.

When Mallett encounters Singleton a few months after their first encounter, he witnesses the happy fruits of the young man's provident habits. Not only does his regular work sustain him financially, but his very approach to this work is cast as a kind of thrift: "sleeping on straw and eating black bread and beans, but feasting on local color, rioting, as it were, on chiaroscuro, and laying up a treasure of pictorial observations. He took a devout satisfaction in his hard-earned wisdom and his happy frugality." Against the loud, boastful, tempestuous Hudson, Singleton (always a subject of gentle amusement to the other artists in the Roman colony) is frequently qualified as "little" and maintains a constant attitude of good cheer; he is reluctant to acknowledge his own accomplishments until Rowland draws them out of him, commenting on his noticeable confidence after a highly "profitable" three months:

. . . "Yes," [Singleton] said at last, in a fluttered tone, "I feel much more sure of myself. I have got more facility!" And he lowered his voice as if he were communicating a secret which it took some courage to impart. "I hardly like to say it, for fear I should after all be mistaken. But since it strikes you, perhaps it's true. It's a great happiness; I would not exchange it for a great deal of money." (260)

Though Singleton appears very little in the novel, such statements show him to be a primary foil to Roderick's grandiosity. Especially noteworthy in this respect is the last sentence, which negatively evokes the titular protagonist. Not only does Roderick's boastfulness present a singular contrast with Singleton's mousy humility. Roderick has in fact accepted a "great deal of money" from the would-be benefactor Mallett, and has seemingly forfeited his native artistic gifts in the exchange. Excessive leisure, and the financial ease that undergirds it, are staged as a kind of poison to artistic productivity. By exposing the worker to idle amusements and dangerous romantic entanglements, they open up too many outlets for squandering creative energy. It is telling that, when these twin influences lead to the sculptor's eventual apparent suicide, it is Singleton who discovers the body.

Late in the novel, Mallet chances upon Singleton in the Swiss Alps, predictably recording his impressions, but “with a guilty air, as if it cost his modesty a pang to be detected in this greedy culture of opportunity” (437). When at last Singleton is recalled to the cares of the world—represented by “a father who was cashier in a bank and five unmarried sisters”—he is able to reconcile himself to necessity thanks to his frugal habits and careful use of his time; once more the equation of industry and thrift appears: “He would have been grateful for another year in Rome, but what must be must be, and he had laid up treasure which, in Buffalo, would seem infinite.” (437-38)

The Tragic Muse constantly stages a life of artistic production as being in conflict with a more conventional (and socially acceptable) life—and thus also as being financially riskier. Each of its main characters must cut a path somewhere between these competing claims. As mentioned, Nick must choose between the brush and a political career. Nick’s cousin Peter Sherringham has already chosen and is making his career as a diplomat, but is an enthusiast for dramatic effects, and keeps a stall at the Théâtre Français. He seeks a kind of vicarious, but theoretical, second life in art by sponsoring the stage training of amateur actress Miriam Rooth, the “tragic muse” of the title. He is in love with her, but cannot as a determined careerist allow his position to be compromised by a wife in the theater. He embodies a more romantically muddled version of Rowland Mallett’s judging generosity. Then there is Miriam herself, whose mother wishes to marry her off to someone, but who is skilled with languages and works hard to overcome her lack of obvious talents in order to make a career on stage. For Miriam the choice seems to be not one at all; she seizes the opportunities given her from the first, and does not allow Peter’s approaches to distract her. Her eventual marriage to an unremarkable actor (but a

fine agent and manager) is mainly a convenience, even a necessity, for her position. Finally, there is Gabriel Nash, for whom life and art present no such painful contradictions. He makes of his life a work of art, and serves little purpose in his own life, and only a brief (but essential) one in Nick's. The portrait Nick begins painting of him eventually fades to nothing, a kind of Dorian Gray *avant la lettre*, and there is little question that he embodies, at least in part, a gentle criticism of the aestheticism promoted by Oscar Wilde during this period.

James approaches the question of how seriously art should be taken through two highly divergent, alternating points of view, corresponding to the productive and receptive sides of the question. Roughly half the novel follows the son of a recently deceased Liberal politician, Nick Dormer, who struggles between, on the one hand, following in his father's footsteps, thereby guaranteeing material security to his mother and unwed sisters, and on the other, the much less certain prospect of attempting a career in painting. Nick appears to have something of a knack for political speeches, like his late father. This has led to talk of marriage with the widowed Julia Dallow, a devoted Liberal activist. Such a plan offers temptation not only in the form of Julia's own fortune, but also that of a promised settlement, upon their marriage, from the ageing Mr. Cartaret, an old parliamentary friend of the father who is eager to offer support to the son in the same line.

“It isn't everything to be rich”

Money occupies an ambiguous position in this novel. On the one hand, it appears in the form of a dead value, as landed property or inherited possessions (Mr. Cartaret's money, George Dallow's art collection or that of Miriam's father Mr. Roth). In this form, its main role is to tempt. The artist characters face the temptation to renounce their special productive impulse – to

see, to “do,” – in order to safeguard their own existence and that of their dependents. On the other hand, there is money as income derived from *work*. Miriam finally gains a welcome stream of this after some time on the stage (we learn Peter has generously gifted her the rights to a mediocre play for four-hundred pounds), and by the end Nick seems to be modestly launched as well. In other words, James in this novel comes surprisingly close to demonstrating Zola’s proposition from “L’argent et les lettres” regarding the salutary relation of artistic production and the marketplace. It is hardly the unqualified celebration shown by his cross-Channel *confrère*, but we see that independent means can lead to sterility (as in the case of Gabriel Nash, who has given up on writing in favor of his new cult of aesthetic “being”), and that struggle and uncertainty foster growth. Zola’s cherished *indépendance* is likewise venerated throughout by Nick, first as a loss to mourn (when he gets engaged), then as a prospect to welcome (when the engagement falls apart). And while Zola’s Claude begins to succumb to his perverse obsession as he begins eating into his capital, James’s hero and heroine seem to thrive in conditions of material uncertainty. This uncertainty is synonymous, for Nick, with the freedom he prizes above all else, a position that his mother can only view as absurd. Their conflicting notions of freedom produce much of the tension in the first half of the novel. Lady Agnes asks:

“What freedom *is* there in being poor? How can you do anything without money, and what money can you make for yourself—what money will ever come to you? That’s the crime—to throw away such an instrument of power, such a blessed instrument of good.”

“It isn’t everything to be rich, mother,” said Nick, looking at the floor with a particular patience—that is with a provisional docility and his hands in his pockets. “And it isn’t so fearful to be poor.”

“It’s vile—it’s abject. Don’t I know?”

...

“Besides,” he easily went on, “there’s other money in the world than Julia’s. I might come by some of that.”²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ *The Tragic Muse*, ed. Philip Horne. London (Penguin), 1995, p. 162. References in the text are to this edition; Roman numerals indicate chapter number, and Arabic numerals indicate page numbers.

Uppermost in the ranks of those dead with a controlling grasp on Nick is his father Sir Nicholas himself, often entreating the son in the voice of the mother: “Your father would have valued [marriage to Julia] for you beyond everything. Think a little what would have given him pleasure.... He's with you always; he takes with you, at your side, every step you take yourself. He'd bless devoutly your marriage to Julia; he'd feel what it would be for you and for us all” (XIII, 161). This should serve to show the extent of the claims on Nick at the beginning of the novel. As the following pages will show, these claims are associated above all with the continuity of the past in the present, an upholding or preserving which demands a personal sacrifice—in Nick's case, the sacrifice of the exercise of his inner creative faculties, indeed worse, their application towards a shallow, “humberging” occupation in Parliament. James here stages the opposition between money – a tool used by the dead to manipulate the living – and art, while eschewing the facile gestures of aestheticism, by depicting successful application of something resembling the Protestant work ethic to the aesthetic domain.

Seeing things as they are

Money and material well-being are implicitly opposed to aesthetic production in the novel, particularly through the motif of vision and its metaphorical extension. This motif is introduced by Gabriel Nash, who laments that so rare an artistic talent as Nick Dormer should have allowed his precious eyes to languish by taking up politics: “He was made to see—to see all over, to see everything. There are so few like that.” (II, 35) When Julia accuses Nick of being an unregenerate artist (rather than the great parliamentarian she had so hoped to see him become), his own self-doubt (and the desire to appease his mother) prompts him to deny his abilities in

that field, the capacity of his eyes to meet the high standard of such a job: ““There are all sorts of things; one must be caught young and put through the mill—one must see things as they are. There are very few professions *that goes with*” (XXVII, 280). This key phrase neatly encapsulates both the rare gift that Nick feels called upon to cultivate and the material stakes of such an effort; for “things as they are” in this novel otherwise refers to an economic shrewdness which serves to check fanciful assumptions or hopes. If Nick’s sister Grace still holds out the belief that Mr. Cartaret loves Nick well enough to bestow a fine inheritance unconditionally, his mother fully recognizes the truth that any such gift is contingent on his marrying Julia: ““It isn't so hard to prevent people giving you money... He hasn't told me, but that's the way things happen.’ Lady Agnes was less optimistic than her daughter, and such optimism as she cultivated was a thin tissue with the sense of things as they are showing through. ‘If Nick becomes rich Charles Carteret will make him more so. If he doesn't he won't give him a shilling.’” (III, 39)

Humbugging and pottering

Nick has an uneasy awareness that others are determined to take him for something he is not—namely, his father – but allows himself to be pushed along in order to secure his family’s position. While he is dimly aware that he would like to try his hand at an artistic career, the lately widowed Lady Agnes impresses on her son, “the hope of the Dormers,” the vulnerability of their position and the supreme importance of money to those who lack it.

Often it is suggested that James’s novels are pervaded with money because this precious resource amounts to freedom, the characteristic Jamesian theme. Dorothea Krook goes farther still, rather overstating the case when she says that James relies on “millionaires and heiresses” in his novels because they are “‘representative’ of all humanity in the modern world in exactly

the same sense as Shakespeare's kings, queens, and princes are representative: in the sense that they are the acknowledged symbols of supreme power and prestige in their society."²⁰⁸ Although such a claim could easily be made for Maggie Verver in *The Golden Bowl* or Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*, it is too much to extend this to the entire corpus, which is often at least as concerned with *getting* money as with having it. And in the case of *The Tragic Muse*, the promise of money on the large scale represents mainly the opposite of freedom. It is a means of preserving a kind of ossified status quo, and as such represents the claims of the dead on the living.

It is tempting to say that James's presentation equivocates somewhat with respect to the stakes of Nick's career. Critics often describe the novel's central dilemma as a "choice" Nick must make between painting (and possibly poverty, for himself and others) or politics. Such a simple characterization is belied by the fact that Nick ends the novel on the threshold of a career as a portraitist, while his relatives live comfortably with Julia in one of her houses. Moreover, though these opposing directions do present a dilemma for Nick, at the very outset he has actually *already* chosen to appease his mother. What is characteristically Jamesian about how Nick's dilemma resolves itself is that, burdened with a keen sense of guilt and a horror of "hypocrisy" (a frequent term, along with "humbugging," of Nick's sections), he is prepared to renounce any earnest artistic pursuit in favor of mere driftless "pottering" in his studio in order to satisfy everyone else.

The major change only happens when he asks Julia to let him steal a few days (likely his last) at his studio. A series of events (mainly the intervention of Gabriel Nash) brings Miriam, now working in London, to the studio to pose for a portrait. In a scene worked up to a pitch of

²⁰⁸ *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James*, p. 13.

shocking melodrama, Julia happens to witness the two of them in this situation, and calls off the engagement later that day. Nash has floated the idea of Nick “throwing up” his seat, but it is this cancellation of their wedding by Julia that finally leads him to do it.

The decision fully to embrace his adopted path, come what may, entails for Nick a rigor of consistency that gives a momentary impression of heartlessness. Nick must, to his mind, give up even more than the promise of Julia’s wealth and collections—already his family has taken up residence in one of her houses, and their projected departure has so far produced no concrete results. This situation prompts something of an overcorrection in his conduct, and he demands they inform Julia of their intention immediately to vacate. The decision visibly hurts his sisters, but the relinquishing of his seat has prompted in Nick a more thorough commitment to hard-nosed principles: “Nick was aware that for the most part he didn't pass for practical; he could imagine why, from his early years, people should have joked him about it. But this time he was determined to rest on a rigid view of things as they were” (XLVII, 457). If previously he has been vague, allowing himself to slip into positions whose falsity makes him feel a “hypocrite” (the narrator’s term) and a “humbug” (Nick’s own), he now refashions his habits to accord more adequately with the consistency he seeks in his work. Indeed, such an illustration seems to be the main function of this particular episode, since Julia, after allowing them to leave and retaking possession of the house, simply invites them back to stay with her.

Paying and borrowing

The other primary point of view exhibiting the novel’s events is that of Nick’s cousin Peter Sherringham, a young diplomat with an abiding interest in the theater. His main trajectory is to aid and support Miriam (often financially) as she hones her skills for the stage, until

admitting he is in love with her and asking that she renounce the theater and join him for a “respectable” life. When she refuses, he asks for an assignment in some faraway land, and upon returning abruptly marries Nick’s sister.

Though Sherringham fancies that “he himself could pass for Wilhelm,” he is not an artist but a devoted patron. Although his fascination with the young actress causes him considerable confusion throughout the novel, around a third of the way into the novel the reader is made privy to a certain strain of ruthless careerism hidden beneath the affable theatre devotee. The narrator imparts this information in no uncertain terms:

There was only one thing in life his mind had been much made up to, but on this question he had never wavered: he would get on, to the utmost, in his profession. That was a point on which it was perfectly lawful to be unamiable to others—to be vigilant, eager, suspicious, selfish. He had not in fact been unamiable to others, for his affairs had not required it: he had got on well enough without hardening his heart. Fortune had been kind to him and he had passed so many competitors on the way that he could forswear jealousy and be generous. But he had always flattered himself his hand wouldn't falter on the day he should find it necessary to drop bitterness into his cup. This day would be sure to dawn, since no career could be all clear water to the end; and then the sacrifice would find him ready. (XVIII, 201)

The passage does much to cast a certain light on Peter’s earlier behavior and prefigures the conclusion to his involvement with Miriam. Surprising and suggestive here is the sense that in fact Peter has never been “tested,” never undergone an ordeal or been forced into a serious choice of the Wilhelm Meister variety. His generous disposition is explicitly accounted for by luck – which has so far conveniently afforded him those secondary advantages that reward kindness, and allowed him to bide his time until the moment he should really have to throw someone over for his career. These observations, coupled with the telling note about his matrimonial expectations – “he had his positive idea of the perfect ambassadress, ... and with

this idea Miriam Rooth presented no analogy whatever” (XVIII, 203) – mitigate the struggles of his own divided consciousness for the moment, at least.

Representing a different, more socially sanctioned form of careerism than Nick, and cultivating the *enjoyment* of art (specifically dramatic) over its production, Peter nevertheless follows a plot trajectory comparable to Nick’s, occupying the negative space, so to speak. Though he calls himself “poor,” Peter’s circumstances are never in serious doubt, and he offers regular financial support to Miriam until her career gets off the ground. Nevertheless, a sublimated notion of *cost* haunts his narrative path. Peter has had, from far back, a premonition that a day will come on which he must sacrifice some unspecified source of happiness, allow some “cherished enjoyment” to be “dashed out of sight.” He can only speculate on what it will be, but fancies he will have what it takes when the day comes: “he had always flattered himself his hand wouldn't falter on the day he should find it necessary to drop bitterness into his cup” (XVIII, 201). James employs a financial metaphor striking in the callousness it attributes to Peter’s assimilation of the calculating mental habits of his profession:

At any rate it never had occurred to Sherringham that he himself might be the sacrifice. You had to pay to get on, but at least you borrowed from others to do it. When you couldn't borrow you didn't get on, for what was the situation in life in which you met the whole requisition yourself? (XVIII, 201)

It is difficult at this point in the novel to parse the figure to determine what Peter has been “borrowing” and “paying” up until now, or in what case “he himself might be the sacrifice.” Of course, after he is rejected by Miriam he does indeed ensure that she is “dashed out of sight” by taking a job on the other side of the world. But viewed retrospectively, the figure also seems to hint towards this very rejection, and even imply a certain poetic justice to it. For Miriam has quite literally had to “borrow from others” to advance in her own career, most notably from Peter. He quietly pays for her lessons from Mme Carré, and sees that she is able to study the

actors of the Français regularly. And seen from her vantage point he is indeed the sacrifice when she refuses his “handsome ‘worldly’ offer.”

By refusing this offer, Miriam simply applies Peter’s system to her own life and career, and her doing so demonstrates consistency and singleness of purpose, while Peter himself betrays a lurking contempt for the art which affords him so much amusement. Although he defends the theater with vehemence against the cavils of Gabriel Nash, his thoughts and reflections throughout reveal a condescension, even a disdain, that he seems not always to recognize. He reveals as much in a comment to Miriam:

“In the trade I follow we see things too much in the hard light of reason, of calculation...; but it's good for the mind to keep up a superstition or two; it leaves a margin—like having a second horse to your brougham for night-work. The arts, the amusements, the esthetic part of life, are night-work, if I may say so without suggesting that they're illicit. At any rate you want your second horse—your superstition that stays at home when the sun's high—to go your rounds with. The Français is my second horse.” (XII, 141-42)

His superficially urbane metaphor, viewed within the context of his full narrative path, betrays shame. But he expressly articulates his fear of shame when Miriam points out that she need not give up her profession if they were to marry; that provided she could achieve her “glory,” she would be willing to share it with him: “‘The husband of an actress? Yes, I see myself that!’ Peter cried with a frank ring of disgust.” (XXI, 236)

“Work—work—work!”

Although not a point of view character, Miriam appears many times throughout the novel, most often with Peter while in Paris, then also with Nick briefly in London. Her trajectory exemplifies the ethic of constant work, applied intelligence, observation, and practice which Mme Carré recommends to her upon her first, unpromising exhibition.

The relation of an artistic career to money is more pressing and less ambiguous for Miriam than for the other characters. She must succeed or perish, in effect, and though her first recitation for Mme Carré (a distinguished successor of Rachel) reveals no evident signs of talent or skill, she will eventually make her career by applying that lady's counsel: "Work—work—work! ... *Il n'y a que ça*. Work like a horse, night and day" (VII, 95). Unlike Nick, Miriam has no discernible options to fall back upon, and her mother is all the more worried for it: "So much depends—really everything!... It's either this," and she rolled her eyes expressively about the room, "or it's—I don't know what!" (VII, 84). This lady has eked out an upbringing for her daughter mainly through selling off precious objects collected by her deceased husband. Despite Mrs. Rooth's frequent allusions to her distinguished forbears "the Neville-Nugents of Castle Nugent," they do not have any visible social or familial connections; the only person they know in London is Gabriel Nash, whom they met through selling him a precious pot.

For Miriam, cost itself is a barrier to entry in her field, and the doors it has hitherto closed for her have left her deeply driven to succeed:

She had seen very little acting—the theatre was always too expensive. If she could only go often—in Paris for instance every night for six months—to see the best, the worst, everything, she would make things out, would observe and learn what to do, what not to do: it would be a school of schools. But she couldn't without selling the clothes off her back. It was vile and disgusting to be poor, and if ever she were to know the bliss of having a few francs in her pocket she would make up for it—that she could promise! (VIII, 109)

By the midway point of the novel, Miriam has found some success on the London stage, while Nick has little to show for his situation in either direction, so that Miriam in effect becomes his first patron:

"I'll buy it from you—what you're doing: I'll pay you well when it's done," said the girl. "I've got money now. I make it, you know—a good lot of it. It's too delightful after scraping and starving. Try it and you'll see. Give up the base, bad world."

"But isn't it supposed to be the base, bad world that pays?"

"Precisely; make it pay without mercy—knock it silly, squeeze it dry. That's what it's meant for—to pay for art." (XXV, 264)

If there is something almost arrogant in Miriam's strident pronouncements, she clearly emerges as the hero of the novel, perhaps more than Nick himself. She is one of James's rare success stories. The source of this eventual success is the play *Yolande*, which she owns thanks to Peter's generosity and which has allowed her to make a positive step forward. Still, what this part of Miriam's career most reveals is her willingness to make certain compromises along the way, for she hates the piece itself: "Our ridiculous play. That's the name of the impossible woman. She has put bread into our mouths and she's a loaf on the shelf for the future. The rights are mine." (XXVI, 266). Not only has this "impossible" role provided provisions, but Miriam's relentless work ethic has effectively made of it a deeper mine for practice than anyone might have suspected. As though heeding James's call in "The Art of Fiction" to "be one of the people on whom nothing is lost," she reveals her talent for making a lot of a little: "she learned so fast—learned something every night, learned from the same old piece a lot more than any one else would have learned from twenty." (XXX, 311)

Gabriel Nash observes of Miriam that she is unlikely to create problems for herself by marrying the wrong person or any other such misstep, as she has the clear-headed shrewdness so prized by the characters in this novel. Informing Peter that his cherished actress is in love with Nick – a fact otherwise barely hinted at – this oracular observer assures him that she herself would recognize such a pairing as an abyss of foolishness: "Imagine him writing her advertisements, living on her money, adding up her profits.... The right man for that, if she must have one, will turn up. *Pour le mariage, non.*" He sums up his assessment by noting that she really "quite sees things as they are" (XXXVI, 356). The phrase is echoed by Miriam herself when she rejects Peter for the second time: "It's indeed a misfortune that you're so sensitive to

our poor arts, since they play such tricks with your power to see things as they are” (XLVI, 433). The more visually gifted Miriam soon marries her manager Basil Dashwood and together they acquire a theater, where she will go on in her career, with anticipated success.

Negative actions

If James in this novel ventures closest to a flirtation with values classifiable under the rubric of “aestheticism,” it is for purposes far removed from mere promotion or exposition of them. The most brilliant illustration of this is the character of Gabriel Nash. This figure serves several dramatic functions in the novel, not the least of which is rekindling the artistic flame in Nick as he finds himself drifting toward renunciation, and later encouraging him to continue after seeing the quality of his work. Nick’s attachment to Gabriel occasions much comedy in the novel, mainly by its contrast with the fierce antipathy he arouses in everyone else. His ridicule for the seat in the House of Commons is perfectly calibrated to shock Lady Agnes, not least his misunderstanding of “pocket-boroughs” as “boroughs that filled your pocket. To do that sort of thing without a bribe—*c’est trop fort!*” (IV, 47) His talk strikes Biddy “mainly as the twaddle of the under-world,” and she is mystified as to how Nick can tolerate such a man. Julia dubs him simply “disgusting” (II, 33, XXVIII, 287).

Miriam’s plot is joined to Nick’s when Nash introduces them at the novel’s outset. But the latter figure, having served his main dramatic purpose, henceforth wanders desultorily in and out of the frame. He does encourage Nick to resign his seat and offers praise and encouragement for his painting, but otherwise is largely a source of commentary on the lives and vicissitudes of the main characters, offering comic relief in the form of epigrams and witticisms. He is frequently likened to Oscar Wilde in the critical literature, and rightly so, given his provoking

lack of seriousness about everything the protagonists care about. Yet even at his early introduction, when Nick recalls his famous witty generalizations in their school days, how he “turned them off as the man at the street-corner distributes hand-bills,” Nash warns that he’s outgrown them. For Nash, generalizing, like writing, is too much a productive act: “My only good generalizations are my actions,” which are in his case consciously invisible. This is appropriate, as James’s portrayal of Nash is carried out from first to last in resolutely negative terms.

"You can't see them with the naked eye. Moreover, mine are principally negative. People's actions, I know, are for the most part the things they do—but mine are all the things I don't do. There are so many of those, so many, but they don't produce any effect. And then all the rest are shades—extremely fine shades.... Shades of impression, of appreciation.... All my behaviour consists of my feelings." (II, 33)

As Nash proceeds to indulge in his elaboration of the good life, the basic assumptions of his worldview become clearer. He has devoted himself to the pursuit of the “fine” and “exquisite” such as can be experienced only in fleeting impressions. Indeed, it quickly becomes apparent that he espouses the values articulated by Walter Pater in the famous conclusion to *The Renaissance*.

Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive for us,—for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?²⁰⁹

²⁰⁹ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. New York (Oxford University Press), 2010, p. 119.

An ethics of inactivity, then. Yet what stands out both in Nash's personal statement of his position – and the Paterian text that has inspired it – is the seriousness with which he approaches it. His is not the policy of unabashed laziness that James's respectable English characters often take it for, but a determined effort of attention, motivated by an awareness that one's most essential resource – life itself – is a limited one. We gather from his early conversation with Nick and Biddy Dormer that his generalizations were known to exercise and express "the noble faculty of disgust," but has since found that this sentiment simply costs him too much. "A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life." For Nash, this dictates his refusal to waste his time – not to say the delicate instrument of his sensibility – with anything that will generate "disgust" or other unpleasant feelings: "we've only one life that we know anything about: fancy taking it up with disagreeable impressions! When then shall we go in for the agreeable?" At every moment, then, beautiful and valuable impressions are slipping away. Valuable to the individual spirit, that is to say – for Nash's system offers virtually nothing that can be shared with others, save for his own personality, the aesthete's supreme work of art.

"We pay too much attention to the ugly; we notice it, we magnify it. The great thing is to leave it alone and encourage the beautiful."

"You must be very sure you get hold of the beautiful," said Nick.

"Ah precisely, and that's just the importance of the faculty of appreciation. We must train our special sense. It's capable of extraordinary extension. Life's none too long for that."

"But what's the good of the extraordinary extension if there is no affirmation of it, if it all goes to the negative, as you say? Where are the fine consequences?" Dormer asked.

"In one's own spirit. One is one's self a fine consequence. That's the most important one we have to do with. I am a fine consequence," said Gabriel Nash. (II, 34)

Over a decade before James went to work on this novel, he recorded in his notebooks a sliver of anonymous dialogue, seemingly unrelated to any other projects of the time, which shines additional light on Nash's oddly pronounced intention of going all in only for the "fine."

- A. 'Don't you hate the English?'
- B. 'Hate the English – how?'
- A. 'Don't you hate them as a nation?'
- B. 'Hating a nation is an expensive affair. I have taken too much stock in the human race to be able to do so. I can't afford it. It would ruin me.'
- A. 'Ah, if you regulate your emotions upon economical principles... !'²¹⁰

If the character of "A" gets the last word here, it is unlikely James meant to employ this snatch of dialogue in any broader statement about "hating" the nation he would eventually adopt as his own. But it does suggest the ridiculousness of adopting "economical principles" in one's emotional life. Nash, then, like "B," is a miser of sentiment. His "activity" is all inward, and the terms in which he conceives of its production of value resemble nothing so much a kind of cult of Balzacian "energy" in the passive voice. His stated intention is to hoard "the happy moments of our consciousness," to save "as many as possible from the dark gulf." In a subsequent conversation with Nick, Nash will distill his principles into the briefest formula:

"Being is doing, and if doing is duty being is duty. Do you follow?"
"At a very great distance."
"To be what one *may* be, really and efficaciously," Nash went on, "to feel it and understand it, to accept it, adopt it, embrace it – that's conduct, that's life." (XXIII, 252)

The dialogue strikingly prefigures the statement by Gilbert about the use of criticism in the second part of Oscar Wilde's "The Critic as Artist" (which would not appear until the following year,

²¹⁰ January 18th 1879, *Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers, p. 9.

under the title of “The True Function and Value of Criticism” in the journal *The Nineteenth Century*): “the contemplative life, the life that has for its aim not *doing* but *being*, and not *being* merely, but *becoming*—that is what the critical spirit can give us.”

Nash, then, has his own unique economy by which to regulate his life, one which leads him to a forceful critique of contemporary theatrical conditions. If there is a definite element of parody in the portrayal of Nash, more than one critic has rightly noted that he serves a more than strictly mechanical purpose, airing views on the state of the English theater that were probably not altogether unlike James’s own views.

“...the *omnium gatherum* of the population of a big commercial city at the hour of the day when their taste is at its lowest, flocking out of hideous hotels and restaurants, gorged with food, stultified with buying and selling and with all the other sordid preoccupations of the age, squeezed together in a sweltering mass, disappointed in their seats, timing the author, timing the actor, wishing to get their money back on the spot—all before eleven o'clock. Fancy putting the exquisite before such a tribunal as that! There's not even a question of it. The dramatist ... has to make the basest concessions. One of his principal canons is that he must enable his spectators to catch the suburban trains, which stop at 11.30. What would you think of any other artist—the painter or the novelist—whose governing forces should be the dinner and the suburban trains?”

Noteworthy in this diatribe is the fact that the contemplative space of the aesthetic has, for Nash, virtually no relationship to time—neither the time of day nor the age itself. The “exquisite” vibrations in whose pursuit he now spends his days are strictly private by the given terms of his system. An essentially social art form like the theater, necessarily tied as it is to commercial and commuting schedules, thus cannot but repel, disappoint, and indeed disgust him. The inevitably commercial transactions necessary for basic living are denounced as “sordid preoccupations of the present age,” any external constraints on the timing of a performance unspeakable: “What crudity compared with what the novelist does!”

It is comical to see how such a commentary on “‘essentially brutal nature of the modern audience’” is placed at the opening of a novel largely concerned with the theater, and bizarre to consider that it was to precisely this captious public that James turned for the next five years after completing this novel.²¹¹ But what Nash excoriates as the “basest concessions” form part of the broader motif of artistic compromise, which develops throughout the novel and with which this particular novelist had apparently long since made his peace.²¹²

Conclusion

Ultimately, the conflict between art and money in this novel can be best stated through their relation to time. Money is of the past, and the agents of its temptations are figured throughout as ghosts. The most beseeching of these is Sir Nicholas Dormer, whose property has devolved, through the perversity of primogeniture laws, upon the utterly selfish and undeserving Percy, placing Lady Agnes and the younger Dormers in their itinerant condition and all their hopes on poor Nick. At one point early on, Nick refrains from joining his family until dinner in order to postpone seeing “his mother solemnly attended by the strenuous shade of his father” (V, 67). Shortly after this, when he has just won his seat as representative for Harsh and while the Dormers are all together at Julia’s house there, Lady Agnes implores him to propose marriage. The grounds for her request are mainly material, seeing as she does the chance finally to

²¹¹ He later echoed these words in explaining to Howells why he took up the “sordid profession of the playwright”: “if one could get 4 hours for representation, as Dumas and Sardou do, one might do something large—make a picture with something of the scale of life. But a paltry 2 h. & ½ is the most the Anglo-Saxon public will stand, & that means—for the representation of anything the least complex—the skimpiest & paltriest treatment.” (10 January, 1891. Quoted in Anesko, *Letters, Fictions, Lives*, p. 285)

²¹² Indeed, even disregarding the author’s subsequent “dramatic years,” both theater and canvas were regular personal figures for his own production, as F.O. Matthiessen observes: “His own analogies for his work were always with painting or with the stage.... His leading symbols are all literary and pictorial.” *The Major Phase*, pp. 71-72.

reestablish her daughters' prospects, to effect "a regilding of his sisters' possibilities." But more than anything it is the pressure to appease the expectant shade of his father that compels Nick to satisfy her: "What was filial in him, all the piety he owed, especially to the revived spirit of his father, more than ever present on a day of such public pledges, became from one moment to the other as the very handle to the door of the chamber of concessions" (XIII, 164). To the supplicating hand of the father is soon joined the welcoming one of another ghost. The late George Dallow, who has left to his wife an exquisite art collection and a large income, now figures to Nick's consciousness as a congenial predecessor, merely preparing the way for the young man by setting up the home and its furniture and accessories: "...the house rose over his head as a museum of exquisite rewards, and the image of poor George Dallow hovered there obsequious, expressing that he had only been the modest, tasteful organizer, or even upholsterer, appointed to set it all in order and punctually retire" (XIII, 164-65). The combined effect is to urge Nick in the direction of continuity, toward upholding established modes of living, material (Dallow's) and professional (Sir Nicholas's). And the effect does its work: the following day Nick proposes, and Julia accepts.

Eventually, Mr. Cartaret too will join the ranks of the ghosts, leaving nothing at all to Nick now that the wedding is off. The degree to which the work of Nick's future takes precedence for him over this money from the past is neatly revealed in an aside during their final conversation. Even while explaining to Mr. Cartaret why Julia has called off their engagement, in the full knowledge of the implications for this benefactor's generosity, he cannot restrain his portraitist's eye from going to work on the ailing man: "He wished he might make a sketch of him, from the life, as he had seen him after breakfast; he had a conviction he could make a strong one, which would be a precious memento" (XXXIII, 335). He has come to see Mr. Cartaret in

order to make a clean breast of it, to extricate himself, as tactfully as possible for the sake of the man's nerves, from his "humbugging" position, and can easily trade the generous settlement for a "memento" more to his liking. Even here the paternal note is sounded: "'I loved you—I loved you as my son,' the old man wailed." But by now the voice that haunts Nick is that of his vocation, and its intrusion here signals his movement towards the other tradition which has been calling to him all along. "...[I]f I were to do exactly as I liked I should spend my years reproducing the more or less vacuous countenances of my fellow-mortals..." he has already announced to Gabriel Nash. "[T]he independent effort to do something, to leave something which shall give joy to man long after the howling has died away to the last ghost of an echo—such a vision solicits me in the watches of night with an almost irresistible force" (XXIV, 254).

A later passage amplifies the drift of Nick's inclinations here, and offers the most fully developed statement of the value that is opposed to money in this novel, the contrary pole of bequests and doweries and settlements. While painting Miriam's portrait, he cannot help comparing her "glow of glory" to the comparatively poor showing of his own delayed, still uncertain success. He has acquired a strong enough feeling of commitment to his task that he can now soothe his anxieties with "the sense that it was to the thing in itself he was attached." Presently the narrative yields some insight into this "mystic value" the thing in itself. As Nick wanders in the museums, whose collections previously had been "sometimes rather a series of dead surfaces to him," he is now struck with "the sanctity of the great portraits of the past," for the strange portals they open towards time itself and the movement of humanity:

These were the things the most inspiring, in the sense that while generations, while worlds had come and gone, they seemed far most to prevail and survive and testify. As he stood before them the perfection of their survival often struck him as the supreme eloquence, the virtue that included all others, thanks to the language of art, the richest and most universal. Empires and systems and conquests had rolled over the globe and every kind of greatness had risen and passed away, but

the beauty of the great pictures had known nothing of death or change, and the tragic centuries had only sweetened their freshness. The same faces, the same figures looked out at different worlds, knowing so many secrets the particular world didn't, and when they joined hands they made the indestructible thread on which the pearls of history were strung. (XLVIII, 462-63)

Nick's contemplation of the paintings yields an intimation of immortality, but only for them. Suffused with the negative, the works, once produced by history, suddenly seem to transcend it. They "survive," bearing witness to a creative act which has long outlived subject and artist alike. These faces, like that of Ozymandias "survive ... the hand that mock'd them / And the heart that fed." Forged like diamonds out of the violent pressures of history, thrown up from convulsions they have outlived, the works likewise testify to an order of existence parallel to, yet somehow independent of, organic life – an order from which the mind, awed by distance in time as at the view from some sublime summit, can derive a spiritual nourishment: "Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity, cold pastoral.' It is to this frigid, impersonal, yet uniquely human order that James refers with the term "the thing in itself," and it is to continuing this tradition, rather than simply reincarnating his father, that Nick begins to devote himself. Here he vacillates between a frustrated deafness to the many-voiced fascination of art – "the language of art, the richest and most universal" – and a rapt contemplation of its silent message. The juxtaposition of universal (representation) and particular (modern reception) invited by these strange, oddly immortalized faces yields their viewer an astonishing insight: as in a reversed figure-ground illusion, the "great pictures" no longer adorn the thread of linear history, but constitute instead "joined hands" in the contemplative space of the viewer to evoke a supratemporal aesthetic order against which to view the accidents of history.

Chapter 4: “Paid in full”: Money and Aestheticism in *The Golden Bowl*

We saw how, in *La Curée* and *L'Argent*, money constituted a poisonous element in the sustaining of family relationships. If financial gain is the primary motivation for Saccard's marriage to Renée, the continued quest for ever greater fortunes creates ultimately fatal rifts in his own family as well as those of the other characters. The theme of *The Golden Bowl* is the reconstitution of family relationships, but pervaded as it is with the language of financial exchange, money is no longer driving force of the plot. Here, the fortune upon which the drama rests is already securely in the hands of the successful businessman Adam Verver, who has renounced money-getting in favor of a new project, acquiring the artistic treasures of Europe in order to set up a museum in “American City,” a “temple” to his own peculiar religion. The only character explicitly motivated by the need for money is Prince Amerigo, who is already on the point of acquiring it through marriage to Adam's daughter as the novel begins. If the *The Golden Bowl* includes within its dense tapestry many of the major thematic motifs of the nineteenth-century novel – the quests for money and for marriage, adultery, empire – its extreme peculiarity lies in the fact that none of these furnishes the spring of its dramatic problem. The narrative voice solicits some attention as to the location of this spring, emphasizing as it does the great effort all of the characters put into not harming each other. For Maggie, this is simply the natural mode of her existence; in Mrs. Assingham's words, ““She wasn't born to know evil. She must never know it.””. The words foreshadow naturally enough that she *will* come to know it, together with the father who oddly, unaccountably, shares her obsessive kindness and apparent naivety: “They each knew that both were full of the superstition of not ‘hurting,’ but might precisely have been asking themselves, asking in fact each other . . . whether that was to be, after all, the last word of their conscientious development.” Yet there is something self-serving in this “kindness” as it

extends to people outside themselves, most notably their spouses, reaching perverse extremes of generosity—first, when Adam marries specifically to relieve Maggie of the guilt of having abandoned him for her own husband; then, when Adam renders the incredibly phrased “service” to the Prince of taking care of his married life—meaning, in a word, continuing to absorb all of his daughter’s time despite both of their marriages: “Mr. Verver, decidedly, helped him with it—with his wedded condition; helped him really so much that it made all the difference. In the degree in which he rendered it the service on Mr. Verver’s part was remarkable—as indeed what service, from the first of their meeting, had not been? He was living, he had been living these four or five years, on Mr. Verver’s services. . . .” (240).

It is from these dubious charities of Adam Verver that the narrative tension arises. For the Ververs’ continued exclusive enjoyment of each other’s company effectively throws their spouses constantly together. The “point of view” of Book Third (the first segment following Adam’s marriage to Charlotte) is an odd commingling of the Prince’s with odd occasional scraps of Charlotte’s (the only exposure we receive to her perceptions and interpretations in the book); yet if the pair’s own interpretation of the situation here is also self-serving, conveniently casting them as the passive “victims” of the Ververs’ way of life, it is nonetheless true: “Nothing stranger surely had ever happened to a conscientious, a well-meaning, a perfectly passive pair: no more extraordinary decree had ever been launched against such victims than this of forcing them against their will into a relation of mutual close contact that they had done everything to avoid.” Once the Prince and Charlotte have found they must accept being thus “forced” together, and once this acceptance has erupted into a new “pledge” of romantic involvement, their relation becomes burdened with the responsibility of constant discretion; the reverse side of the Ververs’ “superstition of not ‘hurting’” then reappears in the extreme tact of the pair’s intimacy, “that

intimacy of which the sovereign law would be the vigilance of ‘care,’ would be never rashly to forget and never consciously to wound” (265).

How, then, does this situation arise? Adam Verver, despite his “small” presence (both physically, as the novel frequently insists, and in terms of his point of view), sets the basic tone of all the characters’ lives, weaves (by dint of his numberless millions) the enchantment in which the others must find their way. This basic tone of the novel is quite close to nineteenth-century aestheticism, whose modes of valuation can be seen on display throughout the novel not only with respect to the precious objects that Adam has been purchasing, but to the human beings he and Maggie have “acquired” (again thanks to his vast fortune). Although Maggie has no obvious conflict with her father at any point in the novel, nevertheless it becomes clear that she cannot properly begin her married life until he (and his wife) have gone away. Although the Prince and Charlotte are thus culpable according to the standard moral conventions of the nineteenth century, the novel’s overall effect is to establish their guilt as relative to the acquisitive mania of the Ververs, producing a mirror-effect between the former pair’s “community of passion” and the latter’s “community of interest.” Ultimately, all money-relations are relations of control, and the novel shows that even when they become sublimated into seemingly exalted “aesthetic” interests (“interests that were the extinction of other interests,” as the narrator slightly punningly puts it), these are simply a mask for a more rarefied form of domination. Maggie’s marriage only takes place thanks to her fortune. Indeed, the choral commentary of Bob Assingham confirms how her father’s fortune takes up the space more properly belonging to a mind or personality when he observes to his wife: “She’s very nice; but she always seems to me, more than anything else, the young woman who has a million a year” (). So she had seemed to the Prince at the time of their

first meeting and even that of their marriage. But to rescue her marriage, Maggie must “pay” with more than money.

1. The Prince

The opening chapters of *The Golden Bowl* present a strange world in which human beings give one another appraisals more properly befitting inanimate objects—specifically, appraising them with respect to price. Jean-Christoph Agnew identifies this trend in James’s work generally: “The only things Jamesian characters actually produce are effects. A person’s effects are always contrivable, alienable, acquirable in James’s fictive world. And in the measure that social life approximates a traffic in effects, the social selves generated therein acquire the durable and resilient features of goods. Over time, the ensemble of a person’s effects – the product of the mutual effort to appropriate and to *be* appropriate – congeals into character.”²¹³ As apt as Agnew’s terms are for a work exhibiting such relentlessly reifying tendencies, he deploys them too generally. This is very much the way that the Ververs interact with their soon to be spouses, first the Prince, then Charlotte. Their characters are, in a certain sense “congealed” values worth a certain (nameless) amount of money, but they are specifically treated as *aesthetic* values. And much like *The Portrait of a Lady*, with its identification of aestheticism with sinister manipulative strategies in the character of Gilbert Osmond, so here this view of human value is subject to an implicit (and occasionally explicit) critique.

The Prince – the only other well represented point of view in the novel besides his wife’s, and the first one – has a different manner of viewing and analyzing the social world he has entered. The major note of this viewpoint is sounded at the novel’s opening, where he struggles

²¹³ “The Consuming Vision of Henry James,” p. 84.

to grasp the basis of his own “value” in the eyes of the Ververs. We have seen how, in *The Tragic Muse*, money served as a vehicle for the claims of the past on the present, weighing down Nick Dormer with obligations to the dead and threatening to foreclose his possibilities of artistic self-assertion. Here money is freely offered to the Prince, in exchange for negligible obligation (it proves to be far less of one than even he imagines) of marrying Maggie and starting a family with her. The Prince wishes to create for himself a life not in keeping with the general pattern of his family, whose all-too documented crimes and follies he sees not as part of his “person,” but as an “inexpugnable scent” in which he is “steeped as in some chemical bath” (36). The only way he sees out of this is to ally himself with massive American wealth, while at the same time resolving to be “not in the least hard or voracious, not to insist on his own side of the bargain” (36). He must strike out along a new path, and if “what had come to him wouldn’t do he must *make* something different. He perfectly recognized . . . that the material for the making had to be Mr. Verver’s millions” (36-37). “He was allying himself to science, for what was science but the absence of prejudice backed by the presence of money? His life would be full of machinery, which was the antidote to superstition, which was in its turn too much the consequence, or at least the exhalation, of archives” (37). Even as he walks about in London’s commercial district, he cannot look upon plate glass, or indeed hear the crank of a window shutter without being reminded of his new station in life: “There was machinery again, just as the plate glass, all about him, was money, was power, the power of the rich peoples. Well, he was *of* them now, of the rich peoples; he was on their side – if it wasn’t rather the pleasanter way of putting it that they were on his” (37).

Yet even as he recognizes with genuine humility the opportunity he is on the point of enjoying thanks to this marriage, he cannot but be somewhat confused as to the source of the

Ververs' interest in him. He knows the interest is great, if measured by how much they are willing to pay for him—for in spite of his “humility,” there is no question that the price was high indeed. He is overwhelmed and awed by Adam's supreme generosity, Adam “whose easy way with his millions had taxed to such small purpose . . . the principle of reciprocity” (28). He recalls an earlier conversation with Maggie, in which she had explained Adam's interest as an aspect of his general aesthetic mania. We learn that Adam will soon undertake to establish a museum back in America, and that a nobleman for a son-in-law will make for as dazzling an acquisition as any of the paintings and sculptures he has been buying up from the old world:

‘You're at any rate a part of his collection,’ she had explained - ‘one of the things that can only be got over here. You're a rarity, an object of beauty, an object of price. You're not perhaps absolutely unique, but you're so curious and eminent that there are very few others like you - you belong to a class about which everything is known. You're what they call a *morceau de musée*.’

‘I see. I have the great sign of it,’ he had risked - ‘that I cost a lot of money.’

‘I haven't the least idea,’ she had gravely answered, ‘what you cost?....’

‘Wouldn't you find out if it were a question of parting with me? My value would in that case be estimated.’

She had covered him with her charming eyes, as if his value were well before her.

‘Yes, if you mean that I'd pay rather than lose you.’ (33-34)

Despite the playful tone of their exchange, Maggie's being compelled to “pay” (through sacrificing her father) in order to hold on to her husband will be one of the novel's major concerns. The insertion of such severe diction (“gravely answered,” “a question of parting with me,” “I'd pay rather than lose you”) into the pair's casual flirtation hints that a more broadly conceived, metaphorized notion of “cost” or “value” will hang over the narrative. Meanwhile, their words here firmly establish the tenor of the Prince's main preoccupation—his comfortable confusion with the family he is marrying into, and what his place in it is to be. He has been “collected” through the fortune of the Ververs, thanks to his elaborate and sordid family history. This history is only hinted at, but we are given plainly enough to understand that his forbears

exhibited a notable degree of greed in their activities, and he is in consequence eager to act in a different fashion. Thus his own “value” as an individual is somehow split from the beginning—there is the aspect of him “about which everything is known,” as Maggie describes him, and then there is his the private aspect with its own motivations and desires for the conduct of his life. Maggie remarks that she does not know what her new husband “costs,” but she is not the only one; the Prince himself is genuinely preoccupied, even haunted by the question of the value he offers to the Ververs in exchange for his charming bride and access to Adam’s unlimited financial resources. Charlotte seems to know quite clearly how to hold up her end of the bargain after her marriage, but the Prince’s inability to answer the question for himself leads him to the home of Mrs. Assingham to seek illumination.

He receives no help from this friend, since she promptly informs him that his former lover Charlotte has come to London for his marriage and his staying with her. Even before the visit, however, the Prince knows he will receive no real guidance from her as to “what they expected him to do. She would answer him probably: ‘Oh, you know, it’s what we expect you to be!’ on which he would have no resource but to deny his knowledge” (41). But we also learn immediately that he himself is capable of making such appraisals of someone’s “being.” A few minutes into his visit, Charlotte enters the Assinghams’ home, offering the Prince a moment to look at her alone, and the terms in which he does so establish a vivid sense of intimacy and deep familiarity:

But it was, strangely, as a cluster of possessions of his own that these things in Charlotte Stant now affected him; items in a full list, items recognized, each of them, as if, for the long interval, they had been ‘stored’ - wrapped up, numbered, put away in a cabinet. While she faced Mrs. Assingham the door of the cabinet had opened of itself; he took the relics out one by one, and it was more and more each instant as if she were giving him time. . . . He saw the sleeves of her jacket drawn to her wrists, but he again made out the free arms within them to be of the completely rounded, the polished slimness that Florentine sculptors in the great

time had loved, and of which the apparent firmness is expressed in their old silver and old bronze. He knew her special beauty of movement and line when she turned her back, and the perfect working of all her main attachments, that of some wonderful finished instrument, something intently made for exhibition, for a prize. He knew above all the extraordinary fineness of her flexible waist, the stem of an expanded flower, which gave her a likeness to some long loose silk purse, well filled with gold-pieces, but having been passed empty through a finger-ring that held it together. It was as if, before she turned to him, he had weighed the whole thing in his open palm and even heard a little the chink of the metal” (58-59).

The passage, in its metaphoric profusion, is a sort of overture announcing several of the novel’s primary motifs. The Prince is imitating Maggie with the language of his interior reflection. He has just been recalling her overwhelming verbal resources – the ease with which she dashed off a comparison of her faith in his honesty to the entire contents of a boat – and his intention to cultivate such facility: “She had images . . . that were drawn from steamers and trains, . . . from an experience of continents and seas, that he was unable as yet to emulate” (56). Here he tries his hand straightaway at a verbal blazon that also employs the Ververs’ peculiar language of human appropriation. The “items” constituting Charlotte’s person for him are like treasures “stored” in boxes and put away, another image that recalls Maggie and her father ransacking Europe and hiding their things in various vaults: “There are things . . . that father puts away . . . which he stores, has already stored in masses, here and in Paris, in Italy, in Spain, in warehouses, vaults, banks, safes, wonderful secret places.” (34). The beauty of her physical attributes and the effects produced by her movements stir his imagination with terms drawn from the visual arts. Like the Prince for the Ververs, she constitutes for him in part a precious artwork made for display, figuring in the exhibit of his imagination as he himself is expected someday to figure in Adam Verver’s museum. He “knows” each attribute of her, and without having exchanged anything for her, has a keen awareness that she somehow still belongs to him.

The final image gives us pause, however, as it highlights an important distinction between how the Ververs make use of the Prince and how they will later employ Charlotte once she has joined their curious family. In figuring to himself the relation in which he stands to the Ververs, with their lack of clear “expectation” from him and their “large blank assumption of merits almost beyond notation,” the Prince has found a fitting image for his situation: “It was as if he had been some old embossed coin, of a purity of gold no longer used, . . . of which the ‘worth’ in mere modern change, sovereigns and half-crowns, would be great enough, but as to which, since there were finer ways of using it, such taking to pieces was superfluous. . . . [H]e was to constitute a possession, yet was to escape being reduced to his component parts.” Convenient as this may sound on the face of it, for the Prince it simply means he has no clear sense of his responsibilities towards his new wife or his father-in-law. The elaborate financial metaphor, considering the slippage in the notion of “value” within this novel, effectively shows that the Prince does not feel he can offer anything in particular (beyond his name and title, the only attributes that obviously fascinate them) to his new family: “What would this mean but that . . . if they didn’t ‘change’ him they really wouldn’t know – he wouldn’t know himself – how many pounds, shillings, and pence he had to give?” (41). Thus, his silent admiration of Charlotte and his contemplation of her “parts” has the immediate effect of distinguishing how the two of them are to be valued as “acquisitions” for the Ververs. We know already that Charlotte is effectively destitute, but the Prince’s image for her is that of a coin purse in which he can hear “the chink of the metal.” Whereas he is simply an old coin – highly valuable no doubt, but better kept on display and out of anyone’s hands, she is destined for eventual exchange and interaction—with the general social world the Ververs so selfishly ignore, with the eventual visitors to Adam’s collection, and most particularly with the Prince himself.

As the Prince later reflects on his general lack of responsibility in his new life, he accounts for the situation in terms that emphasize at once his convenience and his exclusion. Adam “relieves” him of the responsibility of spending time with his own wife in the same way he removes any other obstacles to his freedom:

Mr. Verver . . . took care of his relation to Maggie, as he took care, and apparently always would, of everything else. He relieved him of all anxiety about his married life in the same manner in which he relieved him on the score of his bank-account. And as he performed the latter office by communicating with the bankers, so the former sprang as directly from his good understanding with his daughter. This understanding had, wonderfully—*that* was in high evidence—the same deep intimacy as the commercial, the financial association founded, far down, on a community of interest. (240)

The passage is extremely curious in the brutal indifference toward Maggie it assumes on the Prince’s part. Whatever may have been his initial feelings about his wife (and we are given to believe that he was extremely fond of her), at this point he has been effectively shut out of their family life, and since Maggie always takes their child with her to her father’s house, he has nothing else to keep him occupied. He is reluctant even to show his face at Adam’s house lest he appear to lack “a sufficiency of work in the world” (261). He has thus drifted into a life of restless idleness, and by the time Charlotte happens to stop by, presumably to see Maggie, he yet “intensely hope[s]” that she will stay upon learning his wife is away (242).

This frustration and confusion with his family life, more than five years after his marriage, only continues to grow as he realizes that he and his father-in-law (whom he now figures as an “infant king”) will never grow closer. After he has embraced his proximity to Charlotte and the two have “sealed their pledge,” he becomes more conscious of how Adam looks at him, as though the latter is continuously verifying his value:

This directed regard . . . [was] much of the same order as any glance directed . . . to the figure of a cheque received in the course of business and about to be enclosed to a banker. It made sure of the amount—and just so, from time to time,

the amount of the Prince was made sure. He was being thus, in renewed instalments, perpetually paid in; he already reposed in the bank as a value, but subject, in this comfortable way, to repeated, to infinite endorsement. The net result of all of which, moreover, was that the young man had no wish to see his value diminish. He himself, after all, had not fixed it—the “figure” was a conception all of Mr. Verver’s own. (264)

As the “Prince” half of the novel is drawing to a close (culminating in his visit to the Gloucester inn with Charlotte), he is no closer to understanding why or how the Ververs value him. He does not have any control over it, since “the ‘figure’ was a conception all of Mr. Verver’s own.” But whereas prior to his marriage he had worried over “how many pounds, shillings and pence he had to give” – that is, what contribution he could make to the life of his new family – now he is concerned simply to enable Adam to preserve a high estimation of him.

2. Adam

If the Prince must feel his way blindly along in navigating the unprecedented social situation created by his new American family (and if Maggie must do the same later after recognizing something anomalous in their lives), it is Adam Verver whose certainty and self-possession sets the tone and gives the cues to which the other characters must respond, his fabulous wealth that establishes the perverse modes of valuation which they adopt.

Adam is the only character with nothing material at stake, having only the happiness of his daughter to safeguard. His sole moment of uncertainty – when he proposes to Charlotte during their trip to Brighton – comes back to this priority. Only briefly does the narrative voice dwell in the regions of Adam’s sensibility – specifically, in the relatively short Book Second – but these chapters, briefly surveying the results of his daughter’s marriage and childbirth, and leading up to his own marriage, are vastly informative about his assimilation of all values into his sole connoisseur’s eye—the precious artworks he is buying up for future display in his imagined museum, his acquisition of a noble prince for his daughter’s household, and finally a

young wife for himself to complete his own. If that impecunious pair must view their respective positions in terms of aesthetic collection and of contractual “work,” it is because their lives are entirely governed and guaranteed by the massive wealth of small, quiet Adam Verver.

Adam’s mental habits are made no secret of in the novel. Maggie points out early on that the great Museum which he intends to establish for his collection back in “American City” is “the work of his life and the motive of everything he does,” and that the Prince is ““a part of his collection..., one of the things that can only be got over here. You’re what they call a *morceau de musée*.”” (33). It is likely that the figure of Adam, innocent and accommodating as he is, furnished James primarily with a figure through whom to criticize the “aestheticist” trend in Britain at the time. This is suggested by the cup metaphor used to describe his appreciation of people and objects alike. The mere brute fact of the Bowl’s physical presence also alerts us to the importance of its figural underside, of those other vessels (mental cups, metaphors for experience and appraisal) evoked throughout the novel. Most startling of all is the reduction of earthly “objects,” human and aesthetic alike, to a measure mysteriously figured as gustatory, to the array of their relative tastes in Adam Verver’s special “cup.” The drift of the novel compels the comparison: the two objects – real and imaginary – share the quality of having been produced by a “lost art,” and the breaking apart of the former in the second volume is an implicit critique of this method of valuation. When Maggie draws her father’s attention to Charlotte’s excellence, to her being “the real thing” (an authentic artifact, the novel’s idiom, here, for a viable spouse, as against those comparatively frivolous possibilities, the Miss Lutches and Mrs. Rance), Adam is impressed with the truth of the observation. He perceives at last Charlotte’s “reality,” an obscure aesthetic quality (veiled with the plainest of terms) whose apex he has hitherto only recognized in his precious *objets*.

The note of reality, in so much projected light, continued to have for him the charm and the importance of which the maximum had occasionally been reached in his great ‘finds’; it continued, beyond any other, to keep him attentive and gratified. Nothing perhaps might affect us as queerer ... than this application of the same measure of value to such different pieces of property as old Persian carpets, say, and new human acquisitions. . . . He put into his one little glass everything he raised to his lips, and it was as if he had always carried in his pocket, like a tool of his trade, this receptacle, a little glass cut with a fineness of which the art had long since been lost, and kept in an old morocco case stamped in uneffaceable gilt with the arms of a deposed dynasty. As it had served him to satisfy himself, so to speak, both about Amerigo and about the Bernardino Luini he had happened to come to knowledge of at the time he was consenting to the announcement of his daughter’s betrothal, so it served him at present to satisfy himself about Charlotte Stant and an extraordinary set of oriental tiles of which he had lately got wind, to which a provoking legend was attached. . . .

The passage signals its critical import by direct interpretation (“nothing perhaps might affect us as queerer. . .”), but also by an oblique intertextual meander in the next sentence:

It was all at bottom in him, the aesthetic principle, planted where it could burn with a cold still flame; where it fed almost wholly on the material directly involved, on the idea (followed by the appropriation) of plastic beauty, of the thing visibly perfect in its kind; where, in short, despite the general tendency of the ‘devouring element’ to spread, the rest of his spiritual furniture, modest scattered and tended with unconscious care, escaped the consumption that in so many cases proceeds from the undue keeping-up of profane altar-fires. (169).

This flame imagery, coupled with an explicit reference to the “aesthetic principle” as a lens for the evaluation of beauty and value, is unmistakably an echo of the famous Conclusion to Walter Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*: “To burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.”²¹⁴ (Pater 120). Yet, even disregarding James’s ambivalent relationship to British aestheticism²¹⁵, there is irony in this use of the phrase; for the movement of Pater’s rhapsodic eulogium is always toward the transitory, prizing not contemplation of objects but experience of fleeting sensations: “Every moment . . . some mood

²¹⁴ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Oxford, p. 120.

²¹⁵ See Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture*, Stanford (Stanford UP), 1990, especially ch. 3.

or passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive for us, - for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end.”²¹⁶ More damning still, from this point of view, is Adam’s use of the same yardstick to measure incommensurable values: for “it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike.”²¹⁷ Beyond the sin of equating his daughter with his late wife in his widowhood, Adam transgresses by his comparison of *everyone* to works of art, and by his building a collection to fill the void left by his wife. Distinctly, the collection is an elaborate, ever expanding physical substitution, a repository for those libidinal energies left objectless following her death.

Like the Prince, Adam perceives his current life as incommensurate with earlier existence. We are told little about the kind of work he did, and aside from some vague hints about securities trading we know little about the origins of the Verver fortune, but those origins are cast as explicitly belonging to the time “before,” when he was still deluding himself about the fascination of “forging and sweating” in the name of money-getting: “They were things at least he had had to believe he liked, just as he had believed he liked transcendent calculation and imaginative gambling all for themselves, the creation of ‘interests’ that were the extinction of other interests, the livid vulgarity, even, of getting in, or getting out, first” (131). Equally distant in both time and Adam’s consciousness is his first marriage to Maggie’s mother, who died shortly after childbirth. The brief reminiscences about her exhibit an odd mixture of fondness and condescension. Probing into the origins of Adam’s “accepted monomania,” we find that it arose following her death. It is as though, the terms set forth by the novel, the aestheticist orientation

²¹⁶ Pater, *Renaissance*, p. 119

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

towards the world arises as a kind of compensation for a more conventional (and in the novel's constellation of values, seemingly more desirable) basis of interaction—namely, love and sex. It is a “substitutive satisfaction,” in the Freudian vocabulary. Viewed from this optic of familial structure and sexual norms, Adam's acquisitive obsession comes to resemble Claude Lantier's productive one in *L'Oeuvre*, insofar as it takes the place of any “normal” absorbing passion, and is seemingly the exclusive terrain of men. Just as Claude laughs at Christine's earnest efforts to share in his hobby, Adam's own reminiscences on his awakening to “sight” cast this recent chapter of his life as incompatible with the continued presence of his late wife. “Would she have prevented him from ever scaling his vertiginous Peak?—or would she, otherwise, have been able to accompany him to that eminence, where he might have pointed out to her, as Cortez to *his* companions, the revelation vouchsafed? No companion of Cortez had presumably been a real lady: Mr. Verver allowed that historic fact to determine his inference” (130). Adam's point of view is closed to the reader following his engagement to Charlotte, but Maggie observes later with what care and assiduity her new step-mother embraces his interest: “One of the attentions [Charlotte] had from immediately after her marriage most freely paid him was that of her interest in his rarities, her appreciation of his taste, her native passion for beautiful objects and her grateful desire not to miss anything he could teach her about them. . . . [T]hanks to her admirable instinct, her range of perception marching with his own and never falling behind, she had probably not so much as once treated him to a rasping mistake or a revealing stupidity” (534-35).

It is as though Adam is no longer accessible to romantic interest following the birth of his aesthetic passion. Considering his dismissive recollection of Maggie's mother, his new relation with Charlotte might be expected to satisfy this new interest, offering a community of “taste” for him. Indeed, as Dorothea Krook explains, this quality had furnished a major point of communion

in her relationship with the Prince: “What Charlotte Stant . . . principally has in common with Maggie’s husband is that she, too, conducts her life in the light of the touchstone of taste. In her, it is true, the aestheticism is acquired rather than inherited; but it is so highly developed, and so intimate an expression of her personal genius, as to appear as natural as the Prince’s.”²¹⁸

Charlotte’s “aestheticism” is expressed in the “kind and quality of her beauty,” the “perfection of her social accomplishments,” her “presence of mind,” in “*minutiae* such as her dress,” and in her “taste for bold, free enjoyments of the kind in which, besides the boldness and freedom, the sensual element is also distinctly present.”²¹⁹ If this aestheticism is “acquired rather than inherited” (like that of the Prince), this is equally true of Adam Verver. Yet the most imaginative use Adam can find for the gifted young woman who becomes his wife is to dispatch her to social engagements that bore him and to enlist her services as guide to visitors of his collection. The relationship between these two, obliquely presented though it is, casts an ambiguous light on Adam’s supposed “taste.” For example, it is long after Charlotte has joined the family as a guest and unintentionally driven away the women pursuing him that Adam begins to perceive her value, and even then he requires help. He is oblivious to Charlotte’s being “the real thing” until Mrs. Assingham feels moved to inform him of it, “as if her portrait, by some eminent hand, were going on, so that he watched it grow under the multiplication of touches. Mrs. Assingham, it struck him, applied two or three of the finest in their discussion of their young friend” (166). Such impercipientia has led some critics to suspect that the inflated emphasis on Adam’s “taste” is meant ironically. Robert Pippin, for example, claims that “Adam remains, as always, a fatuous

²¹⁸ *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James*, p. 246.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 246-47.

romantic whose interest in beauty is never shown to have any dimension other than possession.”²²⁰

The proposal itself is revelatory of Adam’s substitution of aesthetic values (bathed in the aura of money as these are for him) for affectional ones. It takes place in Bright, where Adam plans to purchase a rare set of tiles, and whither he has invited Charlotte as the companion of his errand. Oddly, though Adam is anxiously planning to “speak” throughout their visit, it is somehow the purchase itself – and Charlotte’s having witnessed it – that pushes him over the edge and determines the decision.

She had listened to the name of the sum he was capable of looking in the face. Given the relation of intimacy with him she had already, beyond all retraction, accepted, the stir of the air produced at the other place by that high figure struck him as a thing that, from the moment she had exclaimed or protested as little as he himself had apologized, left him but one thing more to do. A man of decent feeling didn’t thrust his money, a huge lump of it, in such a way, under a poor girl’s nose—a girl whose poverty was, after a fashion, the very basis of her enjoyment of his hospitality—without seeing, logically, a responsibility attached. (184)

Adam construes to himself an ethical basis for proposing to Charlotte, as though she would have expected any other activity from their planned errand to view and possibly purchase the tiles. A less generous reading of Adam’s character might suggest that he has undertaken sufficiently to dazzle the poor girl with his wealth in order to better the chances of her accepting.

As Agnew perceptively notes of this passage, the sense of “a responsibility attached” following the event echoes the old obligation to wed after premarital sex—only here, the event in question is simply a purchase, and more specifically, a concrete revelation of Adam’s vast financial resources (a sum too shocking to reveal even to the reader): “The restraints of delicacy and tact

²²⁰ *Henry James and Modern Moral Life*, p. 79

usually reserved for sexual misadventures are here transferred to the marketplace.”²²¹ This substitutive satisfaction of financial exchange for more directly personal forms of interaction receives a further touch subsequently, when Charlotte reveals to the Prince that she will not bear Adam a son as she had expected. Similarly, Laurence Holland singles out this scene, with its juxtaposed “deals,” as highlighting how any semblance of affection or personal interest is rigorously absorbed into a commercial exchange: “The transaction at Brighton . . . is a stunning and appalling amalgam of intimacy and commerce, with Adam breathing more intimately on the cheek of the tiles he buys than on Charlotte and sacrificing appreciative pleasures to the efficiency of his purchase. . . .”²²²

What might have seemed interpretive extravagance on the Prince’s part in assessing his relation with his father-in-law in Book First receives confirmation as the latter becomes the “center of consciousness” in Book Second. Adam sees in the Prince precisely what Maggie had playfully described, a *morceau de musée*, a “representative precious object”: “Representative precious objects, great ancient pictures and other works of art, fine eminent ‘pieces’ in gold, in silver, in enamel, majolica, ivory, bronze, had for a number of years so multiplied themselves round him and, as a general challenge to acquisition and appreciation, so engaged all the faculties of his mind, that the instinct, the particular sharpened appetite of the collector, had fairly served as a basis for his acceptance of the Prince’s suit” (128).

Yet if it was Adam’s collector’s passion that determined his accepting the Prince as a son-in-law (rather than, say, his daughter’s preference or wishes), the highly aestheticized terms in which he expresses his appreciation for this young man reveal a further dimension of his

²²¹ “The Consuming Vision of Henry James,” p. 95.

²²² *The Expense of Vision: Essays on the Craft of Henry James*, p. 362.

personality, namely a preoccupation with personal convenience under the guise of hair-splitting aesthetic perception:

. . . [Adam] was insensible to no feature of the felicity of a contact that, beguilingly, almost confoundingly, was a contact but with practically yielding lines and curved surfaces. “You’re round, my boy,” he had said—“you’re *all*, you’re variously and inexhaustibly round, when you might, by all the chances, have been abominably square. I’m not sure, for that matter,” he had added, “that you’re not square in the general mass—whether abominably or not. The abomination isn’t a question, for you’re inveterately round—that’s what I mean—in the detail. It’s the sort of thing, in you, that one feels—or at least I do—with one’s hand. Say you had been formed, all over, in a lot of little pyramidal lozenges like that wonderful side of the Ducal Palace in Venice—so lovely in a building, but so damnable, for rubbing against, in a man, and especially in a near relation. I can see them all from here—each of them sticking out by itself—all the architectural cut diamonds that would have scratched one’s softer sides. One would have been scratched by diamonds—doubtless the neatest way if one was to be scratched at all—but one would have been more or less reduced to a hash. As it is, for living with, you’re a pure and perfect crystal.” (126)

The extreme fussiness of Adam’s subtle distinctions regarding the Prince’s presence (the “general mass” as against “the detail,” “so lovely in a building, but so damnable . . . in a man,” “doubtless the neatest way if one was to be scratched at all”) no doubt produce an initial impression as of a collector so obsessed with the “appropriation of plastic beauty” that he lacks alternative terminology for describing human beings. This is true and unsettling enough. However, Adam’s verbal pyrotechnics also have the effect of obscuring what he is in fact talking about. The intensely visual and tactile diction of the speech in fact has connection to any clear visual or personal qualities of the Prince; it is an elaborately worked figure expressing the fact that he simply allows Adam and Maggie to do whatever they like without complaint, that his acquiescence in their plans and habits may always be taken for granted. This is true even of their relation with his child: “It was of course an old story and a familiar idea that a beautiful baby could take its place as a new link between a wife and a husband, but Maggie and her father had, with every ingenuity, converted the precious creature into a link between a mamma and a

grandpapa” (140). If for Adam the Prince is simply “*round*,” to a spectator he might as well be dead for all his influence in the life of his child, “a hapless half-orphan, with the place of immediate male parent swept bare and open to the next nearest sympathy.”

The degree to which Adam’s aesthetic preoccupation has colonized his mind cannot be overstated. As noted above, it is this which determined his acceptance of the Prince into his family—rather than, say, the preference or wishes of his daughter. It can be tempting to see in her a kind of exception to the total aesthetic reification to which his eyes subject the world. It is, after all, with her that he spends most of his time and shares the details of his exploits. Yet perhaps most striking of all is Adam’s private image for his own daughter. If she is the person most important to him, the one toward whose happiness and safety all of his actions are directed, she figures no less in his interior gallery as a supreme example of “plastic beauty.” To this peculiar inward eye, she presents

...the appearance of some slight slim draped “antique” of Vatican or Capitoline halls, late and refined, rare as a note and immortal as a link, set in motion by the miraculous infusion of a modern impulse and yet, for all the sudden freedom of folds and footsteps forsaken after centuries by their pedestal, keeping still the quality, the perfect felicity, of the statue; the blurred absent eyes, the smoothed elegant nameless head, the impersonal flit of a creature lost in an alien age and passing as an image in worn relief round and round a precious vase. She had always had moments of striking him, daughter of his very own though she was, as a figure thus simplified, “generalized” in its grace, a figure with which his human connection was fairly interrupted by some vague analogy of turn and attitude, something shyly mythological and nymph-like. The trick, he wasn’t uncomplacently aware, was mainly of his own mind; it came from his caring for precious vases only less than for precious daughters. (161-62).

Whereas the Prince, by dint of his family history and upbringing, “showed somehow the great marks and signs, stood before him with the high authenticities, he had learnt to look for in pieces of the first order,” the association of Maggie with antiquity and with exquisite form is entirely a product of Adam’s imagination (128). The vision is all the more striking for its contrast with the

impression she makes on others – who call her “prim” and compare her appearance to that of a nun. He is aware of the discrepancy, but perfectly willing to “let consistency go” in these inner visions. Noteworthy in this connection are the “blurred absent eyes” on this imagined statue. The entire passage has the effect of calling his own faculty of vision somewhat into question, while Maggie herself will later be forced to cultivate a new power of perception in order to correct the imbalance in her domestic life. Though Adam fancies a gulf of time somehow separating him from this precious object that is his daughter, “a figure with which his human connection was fairly interrupted,” it is rather his extreme wealth and what it permits him to take for granted that seem to alienate *him* from his surroundings.

In positing a more subterranean corrupting influence of wealth, this interpretation accepts at face value the novel’s odd portrayal of Adam’s outward personal qualities, his generosity and his genuine desire to put others’ needs before his own. Such acceptance is difficult to square with any concern for “realism” in this novel, and many critics have taken issue with this emphasis on Adam Verver’s innocence. Matthiessen observes that James deliberately endows Adam with “paradise innocence,” makes him “simplicity incarnate” in a way that places tremendous distance between him and both his acknowledged master Balzac and also the American “naturalists” like Dreiser who portrayed such types: “In drawing such a character James is at the farthest remove from Balzac, whose most brilliant moral studies are those of the transforming and corrupting power which wealth exercises upon its possessor. James was always ready to confess that he did not have the shadowiest notion of business; but by picking a character like Adam Verver he obligated himself to some knowledge of the type of men who were making the great American fortunes. . . . Mr. Verver’s moral tone is far more like that of a benevolent

Swedenborgian than it is like that of either John D. Rockefeller or Jay Gould.”²²³ But then *The Golden Bowl* is surely one of James’s least realistic productions, by any definition of the term. Whatever one may think of the verisimilitude of its major characters, loosely based as the Ververs are on people James actually knew, the stylistic peculiarities should alert the reader that James is attempting something beyond his more usual presentation of cases taken from overheard gossip and personal observation.²²⁴ This project lies beyond any facile moralization about the earnest, generous (if self-critical and self-consciously “selfish”) characters as the agents of an agonizing separation of lovers (agonizing at least for one of them); James’s narrative reveals the chilling impersonality of power supported by wealth. The novel’s setup renders impossible any simple condemnation of the Prince’s and Charlotte’s adultery through the placement of the Ververs as the determining influence on all their lives. This is contrary to the view set forth by Gabriel Pearson, for whom “it is impossible to escape the impression that James really half-believed in the redemptive power of some alliance between taste and money-power. Moreover, Adam Verver is a special kind of capitalist, whose fortune has been generated in the same mysterious and occult way that James sometimes represents his own fiction as having been. By some strange logic, James’s ignorance comes also to symbolize Verver’s mystery – the purely verbal means with which James has to conjure his career becoming the equivalent of the cerebral means with which Verver has conjured his fortune.”²²⁵ Whatever Adam’s previous work may have entailed, it is difficult to square the notion of his “forging and sweating” with a purely “cerebral” approach to money-getting. Moreover, though later passages

²²³ *Henry James: The Major Phase*, pp. 89-90.

²²⁴ On Francis and Elizabeth Boott as the models for the Ververs (as well as for Gilbert Osmond and Pansy in *The Portrait of a Lady*), see Edel.

²²⁵ “The Novel to End All Novels: *The Golden Bowl*,” in *The Air of Reality: New Essays on Henry James*, ed. John Goode, p. 337.

in the novel figure Adam as a kind of magician weaving a spell around the other characters, this does not invite a comparison to James's verbal artistry: that parallel lies exclusively with Maggie, who is compared in several places to a stage dramatist and "a beautiful Author," as well as several types of performance artist. Adam is, "at the best," the money-man: "He would have figured less than anything the stage-manager or the author of the play, who most occupy the foreground; he might be, at the best, the financial 'backer,' watching his interests from the wing, but in rather confessed ignorance of the mysteries of mimicry" (149). And that is precisely the point—his aesthetic obsession and its refrigerant effect on his human relations blinds him to the broader consequences of his actions, and his unlimited financial resources give him infinite means to execute those actions.

Such an assessment supposes a high degree of subtle irony, an interpretation some critics are unwilling to credit. F.R. Leavis insists that "our attitude towards the Ververs isn't meant to be ironical. We are to feel for and with them. . . . That in our feelings about the Ververs there would be any element of distaste Henry James . . . seems to have had no inkling."²²⁶ This may be broadly true of Maggie, who may be said to be the "heroine" insofar as the novel has one. But despite Adam's affable personality and benevolent presence in the life of his daughter, the passages quoted above indicate something highly detached, almost inhuman, in his interactions with the world around him. There is even an element of the ridiculous about him. One noteworthy element in his composition, for example, which even could be said to set him apart from the Paterian ideal that his descriptions evoke, is the degree of overlap between his "appreciations" and a more active conception of his collecting. He is flattered by the idea of "the affinity of Genius, or at least of Taste, with something in himself," and by his significant

²²⁶ *The Great Tradition*, pp. 195-96

proximity as “patron” to the creative force of such genius itself: “He was equal, somehow, with the great seers, the invokers and encouragers of beauty—and he didn’t after all perhaps dangle so far below the great producers and creators” (128-29). It is difficult to imagine Henry James, consummate “producer and creator,” writing such a sentence in all earnestness.

3. Charlotte

Adam’s vast financial resources allow him to meet any costs either he or any of those he cares for may encounter without the slightest inconvenience. But the dominant theme of this novel is precisely the “costs” of happiness and how they are exacted. Charlotte is the paradigmatic case of this, not only in what she must suffer for those satisfactions that she herself enjoys, but also in her paying the cost of the others’ happiness. To satisfy the dream of her husband, and above all to restore peace to the marriage of Maggie and the Prince, she must be shuffled offstage, back to America where she has never had a life, and where nothing awaits her. This is rendered all the more quietly tragic insofar as she appears to be the most gifted of the entire cast. She has the most “talents,” with social and intellectual gifts worthy of James’s greatest heroines—yet her lack of independent means dooms her to a life of “service” of one kind or another, even after she has married into wealth. If she is comfortable at first with the “work” Adam gives her, representing his household to the world outside, she has failed to take into account that their lives will not always be so.

The early chapters immediately introduce Charlotte as failing carefully to reckon up costs. The most obvious and strange instance of this comes in the scene of the eponymous golden bowl. Having persuaded the Prince to help her find Maggie a wedding-present, she wanders with him into a Bloomsbury shop, where they are presented with the bowl. After the Prince, having immediately perceived the flaw, goes outside to wait, Charlotte asks the price of the

shopkeeper—it is fifteen pounds, which he claims is less than its value but which represents the lowest he can go. It is thus rather startling how she reports on the interaction, upon rejoining the Prince empty-handed.

“His price is so moderate.” She waited but a moment. “Five pounds. Really so little.”

“Five pounds?”

He continued to look at her. “Five pounds.”

He might have been doubting her word, but he was only, it appeared, gathering emphasis. “It would be dear—to make a gift of—at five shillings. If it had cost you even but five pence I wouldn’t take it from you.” (111)

The scene is above all noteworthy for introducing the only clearly named price in the book. But the inaccuracy of Charlotte’s account, coming immediately after the real figure, raises questions immediately. The Prince’s possible “doubt” here, and Charlotte’s brief hesitation before specifying the figure, suggest that perhaps she is simply lying to him. Having already seen his disgust with the bowl and his mistrust towards the shopman, she minimizes the harm by under-reporting the cost. In the very brief time that she has figured in the narrative, she has already done this more than once. Having asked the Prince to come out on the pretext of a shopping expedition, she immediately reveals to him that she really only made the request to have an hour alone with him. Such gestures show the Prince was wrong to treat their earlier conversation as a low-stakes sociable meeting, and that he is already slipping back into a relation that could compromise him with the Ververs.

Though Charlotte clearly remains attached to the Prince and to the memory of their earlier time together, the narrative plainly establishes that this is a one-sided relation, and that the Prince allows himself to be borne along by Charlotte’s managerial abilities as a consequence of his idleness. Immediately after the afternoon in Gloucester, the commentary by the Assinghams which closes Volume One deflates any presumed seriousness in the affair. The humorously

oracular Fanny observes to her husband that the Prince, after all, does not really care for Charlotte: “men don’t, when it has all been too easy. That’s how, in nine cases out of ten, a woman is treated who has risked her life” (319). It is a recurring (though often implicit) proposition in the book that love exacts a price—sacrifices, effort, work. This is of course what Maggie will learn for herself, once she has discovered the affair. The Prince seems to have already recognized this on the eve of his wedding: “He had been pursuing for six months as never in his life before, and what had actually unsteadied him, as we join him, was the sense of how he had been justified. Capture had crowned the pursuit—or success, as he would otherwise have put it, had rewarded virtue. . .” (28). We are given no details about the form of the pursuit, but assured that it has stamped on his new relations a value beyond all others, and lent him a resolve to live up to the scale of his newly sealed privilege: “If there was one thing in the world the young man, at this juncture, clearly intended, it was to be much more decent as a son-in-law than lots of fellows he could think of had shown themselves in that character” (28-29). So when he is confronted with Charlotte, whom he has never told Maggie he knows, he is apprehensive and reluctant to offer anything. She, on the other hand, offers him a speech, expecting nothing in return:

“I don’t care what you make of it, and I don’t ask anything whatever of you—anything but this. I want to have said it—that’s all; I want not to have failed to say it. To see you once and be with you, to be as we are now and as we used to be, for one small hour—or say for two—that’s what I have had for weeks in my head. . . . That’s what I was to have said. I didn’t want simply to get my time with you, but I wanted you to know. I wanted you”—she kept it up, slowly, softly, with a small tremor of voice, but without the least failure of sense or sequence—“I wanted you to understand. I wanted you, that is, to hear. I don’t care, I think, whether you understand or not. If I ask nothing of you I don’t—I mayn’t—ask even so much as that. What you may think of me—that doesn’t in the least matter. What I want is that it shall always be with you—so that you’ll never be able quite to get rid of it—that I *did*. I won’t say that you did—you may make as little of that as you like. But that I was here with you where we are and as we are—I just saying this.

Giving myself, in other words, away—and perfectly willing to do it for nothing. That’s all.” (95-96)

If Charlotte is “willing to do it for nothing,” the Prince is perfectly willing to take it for what it is worth and leave it at that. But if Charlotte’s actions early on show her asking for more of the Prince than she initially lets on, far more serious are the costs she unwittingly incurs for herself. This too is addressed early on—from the first mention of Charlotte, in fact, by Fanny Assingham as she alerts the Prince to Charlotte’s having come for the wedding:

“She has acted impulsively—but she has acted generously.”

“She has acted beautifully,” said the Prince.

“I say ‘generously’ because I mean she hasn’t, in any way, counted the cost. She’ll have it to count, in a manner, now,” his hostess continued. (54)

Within the immediate context – a discussion of Charlotte’s general situation, with particular attention to her financial circumstances – Mrs. Assingham’s words allude most obviously to the cost of travel. But the subsequent revelation of their prior affair endows her words here (as is so often the case with Jamesian dialogue) with further resonance. If Charlotte has mainly come to London, as she subsequently confesses, in order to arrange a brief moment along with the Prince (under the pretext of their shopping expedition), the “cost” she will presumably bear for it is the sight of him marrying another woman. And this pattern will repeat itself in the momentary intimacy they share following her own marriage to Adam. If she acts “generously” here (read, in Mrs. Assingham’s gloss, without “counting costs”), the “cost” will now be permanent separation when Maggie effectively banishes her back to America. Thus, the relation between the Prince and Charlotte is always conditioned by costs of a sort. Consider even the erotically charged language of their first kiss following their marriages: “with a violence that had the next moment sighed itself to the longest and deepest of stillnesses” –James’s terms figure the attraction between the two as explosive and short-lived, leaving behind only a death-like tranquility, “the

longest and deepest of stillnesses.” The very terms of their involvement, in this most rigorously Jamesian presentation, figure a passionate love affair as total expenditure, releasing tension with destructive force. As against this, we are left comparatively to wonder what becomes of these terms of spiritual exchange when the Ververs have left and Maggie’s marriage is saved.

In the Prince’s marriage, he is overwhelmed and awed by Adam’s supreme generosity, Adam “whose easy way with his millions had taxed to such small purpose ... the principle of reciprocity” (28). In a word, the Prince does not know what is expected of him. Charlotte, on the contrary, quite clearly knows what is expected at her end and how to uphold it—namely, by “mount[ing] cheerfully the London treadmill” and “tak[ing] over ... the burden of a visiting-list that Maggie ... had suffered to get inordinately out of hand” (259). If she only takes up her duties as guide to the visitors of Adam’s collection during the period leading up to their departure, there remains the reasonable inference that this role must have been part of Adam’s plan from the beginning. If the Prince was acquired in order to feature (figuratively) within the Museum, Charlotte was bought in order quite literally to work there.

But if this later work strike’s Maggie ear as “the shriek of a soul in pain,” for the time that they remain in England Charlotte accepts her social obligations cheerfully as part of an honestly presented contract. “What could be more simple than one’s going through with everything,” she asks the Prince, “when it’s so plain a part of one’s contract?” (260). She thus frankly holds up her end of the bargain, assuming the burden of social visits as though performing “the duties of a remunerated office” (260). To perform these duties to the full extent of her capacities is what she regards as “just one’s decency and one’s honour and one’s virtue.” Such untiring dedication to her new role, such self-directed generosity in simplifying the lives of Adam and Maggie, she describes to the Prince as “my rule of life, the absolute little gods of my worship, the holy images

set up on the wall” (260). The fact that Charlotte speaks these words to the Prince shortly after the scene of their renewed commitment to each other presents grounds for certain surmises. For one thing, it may be true that Adam’s proposal to Charlotte and the life they have led since marrying does indeed have the explicit air of a commercial transaction. (She will shortly inform the Prince also that they will never have a child.) Her placing such emphasis on her conscientious performance of “duties” minimizes the affectional ties between her and her husband. More to the point, it offers an alibi for her “decency,” her “honour” and her “virtue”—quite as though beginning an affair with her stepson is consistent with “decency,” provided she only stay true to the Ververs’ social “treadmill” and continue to let them enjoy their time alone together. Such scenes present the reader with the only clues as to the possible plans and assessments of Charlotte’s “point of view”—and they are all ambiguous, as she is explicitly playing the role of a kind of actress for the Ververs, doing the work of “representation at large” on their behalf, appearing all the while to enjoy doing so: “There were possibilities of dulness, ponderosities of practice, arid social sands, the bad quarters-of-an-hour that turned up like false pieces in a debased currency, of which she made, on principle, very nearly as light as if she had not been clever enough to distinguish” (259).

The Prince exhibits what we might characterize as an “aesthetic” interest in Charlotte. Not least among those qualities contributing to his admiration for her is precisely her uniqueness, her rarity. Judged by the right eyes and mind – and we are given to understand that the Prince’s are assuredly equipped for such appreciation – Charlotte emerges as a kind of rare bird. She is paradoxically “enriched” by her “want of means.” If the Prince is cast as something “about which everything is known,” as an “exhalation of archives,” Charlotte’s mode of appearance is, on the contrary, something spontaneous and self-created, the happy result of mysterious natural

gifts. The Prince's value for the Ververs derives from his representative status as a specimen of a type. Charlotte, it seems, could not possibly be subjected to any such categorizing operation:

Nothing in her definitely placed her; she was a rare, a special product. Her singleness, her solitude, her want of means, that is her want of ramifications and other advantages, contributed to enrich her somehow with an odd, precious neutrality, to constitute for her, so detached yet so aware, a sort of small social capital. It was the only one she had—it was the only one a lonely, gregarious girl *could* have, since few, surely, had in anything like the same degree arrived at it, and since this one indeed had compassed it but through the play of some gift of nature to which you could scarce give a definite name." (64)

Such rare personal qualities might, in another story, serve to describe a heroine, and the repeated tributes to her intelligence, abilities, and beauty serve to make of her, in the opinion of many critics, a kind of unacknowledged tragic protagonist.²²⁷ For all her uniqueness, she is to be brought on in a supporting role for the Ververs' perfectly static existence. Despite their expressed good intentions to give Charlotte a space to exercise her talents (and one must believe they do mean it), there is a double-edge to this idea. It is Maggie who first plants the idea in her father's mind that he could marry Charlotte as a way of affording her this opportunity:

"Isn't it always a misfortune to be—when you're so fine—so wasted? And yet," [Maggie] went on, "not to wail about it, not to look even as if you knew it?"
"Well, she mustn't be wasted. We won't at least have waste." (160)

"Waste" here would mean the application of some personal talent to purposes unworthy of it, or the failure to apply it at all. Particularly noteworthy here is Maggie's impression that Charlotte does not *know* she is "wasted," as though the entire problem were one of their own imagining.

The exchange suggests, among other things, that Maggie's compassion for Charlotte (of whose

²²⁷ Leavis, for example, feels that "if our sympathies are anywhere they are with Charlotte and (a little) the Prince, who represent what, against the general moral background of the book, can only strike us as a decent passion; in a stale, sickly and oppressive atmosphere they represent life." *The Great Tradition*, pp. 195-96.

unhappiness in love she has some vague awareness) extends perhaps too far. Though Charlotte has casually mentioned to the Prince that she might have liked to marry, she also asserts her willingness to remain single: “There are things, of sorts, I should be able to have—things I should be able to be. The position of a single woman to-day is very favourable, you know” (67).

To the Ververs such a “favourable” position would constitute a squandering of Charlotte’s special gifts. She represents a valuable resource, and such resources must not be “wasted.” Their success in making thorough use of her is immediate and impressive. But just as the money imagery of the Prince’s earlier reflections (himself as an ancient embossed coin, Charlotte as a silk purse full of coins) introduced a crucial distinction in the respective value each holds for the Ververs, so her social dexterity further sustains the distinction:

the act of representation at large and the daily business of intercourse, fell in with Charlotte’s tested facility and, not much less visibly, with her accommodating, her generous, view of her domestic use. She had come, frankly, into the connection, to do and to be what she could, ‘no questions asked’ . . . (258-59)

Like the accommodating Prince—who is “*round*” where he might have been “abominably square”—Charlotte adopts a “generous view of her domestic use.” But whereas for the Prince this roundness lies in his utter passivity, his fading quietly into the background of his own life, Charlotte’s domestic use is highly active. Where the Prince could not solve the riddle of his usefulness to the Ververs either through reference to “being” or “doing,” Charlotte recognizes without instruction the nature of her role – “to do and to be what she could” – and assumes it effortlessly. Her work in this domain proves highly suitable for the Ververs’ purposes, as Maggie observes to her father: “she only wants to know what *we* want. Which is what we got her for!” (393)

Given the stunning social success she achieves (for herself but more broadly for the Ververs) following her marriage, and the alacrity with which she succeeds at arranging a

prolonged private afternoon with the Prince following the Matcham visit, it can be tempting to see in her general competence the reverse-side of a calculating duplicity. On this reading, Charlotte is a “survivor” in the most shrewdly opportunistic sense, making an impossibly brilliant marriage in order to rescue herself from a future of impoverished spinsterhood, meditating all the while the means to have her cake and to eat it.

Yet such an assessment supposes a rigorous economic determinism that James’s narrative nowhere endorses. We have already noted her willingness to embrace unmarried life. Moreover, if we are treated to an extravagant show of Adam’s “delicacy” at the moment he finds himself compelled, as for responsibility’s sake, to share with her the wealth he has just vulgarly allowed to be named, we witness no less, in the opposite direction, Charlotte’s forbearance as she refrains from immediately accepting a marriage that would solve all of her worldly problems. In fact, Charlotte expresses clear reservations, asking how Maggie might feel about such a match, to which Adam replies directly that it is precisely to make his daughter happy that he has taken such a step, to allay her burdensome sense of the “difference” she has made to their relationship by marrying: ““She constantly thinks of it—it allows her no rest. To put her at peace is therefore . . . what I’m trying, with you, to do. I can’t do it alone, but I can do it with your help. You can make her . . . positively happy about me”” (188). From this moment, the purely transactional nature of their marriage is impossible to ignore (even if Adam appears to forget having said this while speaking to Maggie later on). If the flirtation between Maggie and the Prince in the first chapter is cast in crassly financial metaphors, there is nevertheless the impression that it is precisely this—flirtation.²²⁸ Here, on the other hand, the transactional element is far from metaphorical or

²²⁸ Mull brings a necessary measure of common sense into the debate about Maggie’s use of financial and aesthetic metaphors in discussing human relations: “It is a hasty reading indeed which makes of the first chapter’s Maggie . . . a hard little acquirer for whom people have the manipulable status of objects. . . . The primary inference we can draw . . . is that Maggie’s remarks are not to be interpreted as seriously

playful. Worse still, Adam makes clear that he wants to have Charlotte on someone else's behalf—not “in all freedom,” as she had desired of the Prince.

If the costs we have seen Charlotte facing earlier are made on her own behalf for the sake of satisfying her desire for contact with the Prince, the final price she must pay is entirely for the happiness of others. Maggie imagines that, beyond the suffering she has consciously inflicted on Charlotte, the solution of shipping her back to America represents an even more fatal – but necessary – blow. Charlotte's loss will be the direct gain of Maggie and the Prince. Throughout the second half of the novel, Maggie has pictured her own silent domination of Charlotte as a gilded cage, has figured her father's homecoming plan as a “long silken halter looped around [Charlotte's] beautiful neck”; now, to the Prince, she expresses the feeling of having caused her stepmother's *death*:

“She's wonderful and beautiful, and I feel somehow as if she were dying. Not really, not physically,” Maggie went on. . . . “But dying for us—for you and me; and making us feel it by the very fact of there being so much of her left. . . . It's as if her unhappiness had been necessary to us—as if we had needed her, at her own cost, to build us up and start us.” (579-80)

It is literally true that everything relating to Maggie's involvement with the Prince from the beginning came at Charlotte's “cost,” and that even her own marriage to Adam, if it was to her material advantage, nevertheless cost her even more. (Being so close to the Prince that the temptation finally undid their efforts, but also marrying Adam so that he could make Maggie happy, and finally having to settle in to her new “job” with her husband back in American City.)

intended, that they are uttered with an extravagance and a nervous gaiety which the Prince reads as characteristically American but which the reader can view as more peculiar to this particular American girl, who sees herself, even at the presumed crest of her early felicity, as trembling for her life. . . . Maggie's repudiation of knowing in any detail what the Prince cost is ample repudiation of her thinking in cash terms, just as his value, which seems to hover before her, is hardly a financial one.” *Henry James's 'Sublime Economy,'* pp. 121-22.

Maggie's sensitivity to the loss is somewhat compromised by her continuing to regard Charlotte as a resource to be exploited—there is “so much of her left.” Only now she is destined to serve Adam and the visitors of American City. The severity of Charlotte's punishment is mitigated, for the Ververs, by the fact that they are still making good “use” of her: “Great for the world that was before her—that [Adam] proposed [Charlotte] should be: she was not to be wasted in the application of his plan. Maggie held to this then—that she wasn't to be wasted” (593). There are critics who have taken this seriously as a happy ending. Krook thinks that the coming chapter in Charlotte's life is to be a more “worthwhile and enduring” success than what she has enjoyed at Matcham or elsewhere.

She was, in short, to realise herself more fully and splendidly in the service of Adam's “idea” than she had ever before been able; and though her greatness at Matcham may have been more brilliant, her greatness in American City will be more worthwhile and enduring. And because the triumph of good over evil, especially when achieved at the cost of much suffering, is the ultimate form of success, and because the pure in heart rejoice particularly in such successes, Maggie Verver's last words to her father are “It's success, father” and his to her, “It's success.”²²⁹

Krook implies that Maggie represents “the pure in heart”—but this does not really make sense; the point of Volume Two is Maggie's awakening to the knowledge of “Evil—with a very large E” as Fanny Assingham puts it. Krook's assessment here rests on several assumptions, not the least of which is that Maggie's words to her father represent something like an authoritative “moral” in the novel, at least as regards Charlotte. It may be success for Adam's “idea,” but it is vividly clear at this point, the final pages of the novel, that this idea is completely at odds with Charlotte's own desires for her “success.” Maggie has for weeks been picturing Charlotte as her own and her father's tortured prisoner, so this outcome represents only a kind of “successful”

²²⁹ *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James*, pp. 309-10.

subjugation of her problematic mother-in-law. Maggie's earlier concerns about what will become of her father's reputation once he returns to America (the people "will tear it to pieces") project a certain futility about the entire project; it is difficult to imagine such a setting as conducting to Charlotte's "more worthwhile and enduring" success. Indeed, the entire situation of their departure, which all four characters refrain from discussing as from embarrassment at its cause, carries an undertone of grotesque failure—and Maggie's having engineered it is difficult to square with her being "pure in heart."

Laurence Holland, identifying Maggie's intentions with those of the novel itself, sees in this indirect portrayal of Charlotte the very key to its meaning: "The novel's aim, like Maggie's, is not to indulge in righteous condemnation of Charlotte's errors but to muster compassion for the gorgeous woman who has been otherwise excluded from the community of passion she has sought (by the disdainful Prince in Rome, by the "stiffer proprieties" of marriage that are now enforced upon her by James as well as by Fanny, Maggie, Adam, and the Prince) and to create in her a new commitment to her marriage, the redemption of her bargain with Adam" (391). Although this clearly captures Maggie's intentions (who avoids "outrage" towards Charlotte, and does not want the Prince's "confession" later), Maggie's final assessment suggests a qualified success at best.

4. Maggie

James's notebook entries about this novel reveal a particular apprehension about the territory his theme wander into, its sensational aspect—"the adulterine element. But may it not be simply a question of handling that?" His "handling" of the topic is no doubt unique in the literature of adultery—neither the sensational extreme of lasciviousness (of the kind he associated with Zola), nor Puritan moral severity tempted him. Indeed, what is odd about the novel is, for a topic that

evokes such burdensome associations or moralizing baggage, the extent to which it inverts or altogether ignores such norms. A striking case appears early in Maggie's marriage, when we learn that beneath her sweet and innocent exterior lurks a raging competitive element that enjoys watching the effect of her husband on other women: "she never admired him so much, or so found him heartbreakingly handsome, clever, irresistible, . . . as when she saw other women reduced to the same passive pulp that had then begun, once for all, to constitute *her* substance." (146) Indeed, they make jokes with one another about toying with the envy of those excluded from their happy union, and do so with the characteristically melodramatic imagery of Maggie's "romantic" imagination: "There was really nothing they had talked of together with more intimate and familiar pleantry than of the license and privilege, the boundless happy margin, thus established for each: she going so far as to put it that, even should he some day get drunk and beat her, the spectacle of him with hated rivals would, after no matter what extremity, always . . . suffice to bring her round." Such lurid imagery, amid the aureate gentility of Jamesian narrative, is eye-catching to a degree beyond mere joking. The notion that Maggie could forgive domestic terror if only her possessiveness should be flattered transmutes her father's acquisitive drive into the assured satisfaction of an ever-renewable sexual jealousy.

Even while she torments Charlotte by withholding the fact that she knows of the affair (with the Prince, as we later learn, doing the same in silent solidarity with his wife), Maggie pities her stepmother. Yet even this pity is rooted in jealousy, as evinced in the troubled outbursts Maggie attributes to her in her imagination:

"You don't know what it is to have been loved and broken with. You haven't been broken with, because in your *relation* what can there have been, worth speaking of, to break? Ours was everything a relation could be, filled to the brim with the wine of consciousness; and if it was to have no meaning, no better meaning than that such a creature as you could breathe upon it, at your hour, for blight, why was I myself dealt with all for deception?" (567)

Such imagined cries of protest from her stepmother show that Maggie senses deep insecurity about the quality of her relationship with the Prince compared to that once enjoyed by Charlotte. We are given no clear information about why Charlotte originally became attached to the Prince, what it was she valued in him. Still, it is clear enough that Maggie *feels* she is inflicting great pain on Charlotte (“the shriek of a soul in pain”; the images of the halter, the gilded cage). The abuse Maggie has jokingly suggested she could excuse for the feeling of proud possession hints at a subtle sadism on her own part that receives vivid elaboration in the final sections as the departure of Adam and Charlotte approaches.

When that moment arrives, what we discover is that, while the language of acquisition and detached appreciation and the appropriation of “human furniture” continue to constitute the common ground for Maggie’s interaction with her father, something new suddenly emerges once he has left. Though they obviously cannot broach the elusive topic of *why* Adam is taking his wife away now, they can yet meet over the acknowledgement that “Charlotte’s great!”—that is, that she will be an immense aid to him in the months and years to come. Maggie finds great relief in this common acknowledgment: “It was all she might have wished, for it was, with a kind of speaking competence, the note of possession and control; and yet it conveyed to her as nothing till now had done the reality of their parting. They were parting, in the light of it, absolutely on Charlotte’s *value*—the value that was filling the room out of which they had stepped as if to give it play...” (593). Maggie’s internal assessment of this ambiguous final parting seems to place Charlotte squarely on the side of Adam’s possessions. For all her earlier pity for Charlotte, the shrieking soul in pain, the prisoner in the gilded cage, led about with Adam’s silken halter around her neck, Maggie now finds relief in her father’s reverting to the “note” of human acquisition. If Charlotte’s presence for Maggie has become an overwhelming

and suffocating one for her, she can at least speak of this presence with her father in their old aestheticizing parlance, and even feel comforted that such discussion of “values” furnishes a polite pretext, between them, for this departure: “If Maggie had desired at so late an hour some last conclusive category to place him in for dismissal, she might have found it here in its all coming back to his ability to rest upon high values” (593). The motifs of collection, exchange, of human intimacy figured as financial transaction, reach their resolution in these final moments. For all the overbearing quantity of tacit communication taking place, all that is said explicitly refers to the “good things” Maggie has acquired for her house and to the “rightness” of Adam’s marriage (593). Whatever profound changes have been wrought in Maggie by her gradual and fraught awakening to knowledge, Adam’s relation to his collection remains as it was before—only animated now by the final human addition, ready to be set in motion by the “greatness” of his “dazzling” wife, hereafter doomed to spend her days playing *cicerone* in the country she detests. If the Prince had originally been a *morceau de musée*, there is no longer a question of his contributing to his father-in-law’s projected institution, now or ever. That possibility, and presumably Maggie’s ever reuniting with her father, appear foreclosed by the unspoken, but for all that no less operative assumption of rupture, “that strange accepted finality of relation, as from couple to couple” (590). It must remain tacit, of course, in order to suppress the reasons for it: “To do such an hour justice would have been in some degree to question its grounds – which was why they remained, in fine, the four of them, in the upper air, united through the firmest abstention from pressure” (590).

The degree to which Maggie’s and Adam’s relationship has always figured itself through the mediation of precious artworks has been glanced at already in the father’s image of his daughter as a Capitoline statue. Here the pattern is conducted through his gaze, caressing and

conferring this time rather than appropriating, at a painting, “an early Florentine sacred subject” (588-89), that he had given her as a wedding present. Maggie knows he bears towards this work “an unqualified esteem,” so much so that, in a startling image, she imagines that this object he has loved and passed on to her will contain the closest thing to a part of himself left behind for her:

The tenderness represented for her by his sacrifice of such a treasure had become, to her sense, a part of the whole infusion, . . . as if the frame made positively a window for his spiritual face: she might have said to herself, at this moment, that in leaving the thing behind him, held as in her clasping arms, he was doing the most possible toward leaving her a part of his palpable self. (588-89)

It is the first and only salient image in the novel of an object betokening an absentee, and its mention at this moment indirectly evokes the golden bowl – with its history of abortive bestowals and its densely tangled network of figurative associations – and the shop scene, in which Charlotte refuses to accept a “*ricordo*” from the Prince. Here the gift has been accepted, and will remain with Maggie as a concrete representation of her father.

That such a scene should represent a parent’s final farewell to his child amply demonstrates much of the novel’s strangeness, but Maggie’s moment alone with the Prince in the final pages suddenly re-establishes an earlier array of terms which hint at their achieved intimacy. The sudden shift brought about by the Ververs’ departure is registered in the onset of calm, as though for the first time: “Stillness, when the Prince and Princess returned, . . . might have been said to be not so much restored as created” (594). With the departure of the Ververs, the terms of owning and paying are altered. No longer himself an item attesting to a “rare power of purchase,” the Prince now holds the metaphorical bag of money with which Maggie has “begun to be paid in full.” With the Ververs out of the way and the seriousness of Maggie’s interest both *in* him and *for* him vividly present to his heightened senses, Amerigo no longer feels himself an old rare coin for display, but a valuable sum to offer to his wife. The Prince’s

“payment” was sacrificing Charlotte for Maggie—wordlessly letting his wife arrange the situation as she saw fit. Part of the interest of this scene is in its reflection – now from Maggie’s point of view—on the first chapter. If the Prince at the outset lacks a clear perspective on the value he constitutes for the Ververs, in the final pages he has exchanged this uncertainty with his wife. In this section, he has full knowledge of the value he is bestowing upon his wife, a figure of which he leaves her briefly uncertain. Watching him approach her, Maggie awaits “the certification of the amount. Amerigo knew it, the amount; he still held it, and the delay in his return, making her heart beat too fast to go on, was like a sudden blinding light on a wild speculation. She had thrown the dice, but his hand was over her cast” (594). Maggie pauses before the possibility that he is about to offer “a confession,” and rejects the idea: “if *that* were her proper payment she would go without money.” No: just as Charlotte had first figured for the Prince as both a “cluster of attributes” possessed by him and as a purse full of readily usable coins, so here the Prince appears to be offering, amid the haze of these overlapping private conceits, the exclusive possession of himself. To avert further reference to the affair, she makes a casual compliment, only to have the Prince dismiss at once any discussion of Charlotte. “I see nothing but *you*.” And the truth of it had, with this force, after a moment, so strangely lighted his eyes that, as for pity and dread of them, she buried her own in his breast” (595). That the Prince can banish at a stroke her evocation of his former lover may well inspire dread, and Maggie’s pity is assuredly all for the “hated rival” she has banished in the flesh. But Maggie’s burying her eyes at the end shows that she is making a decisive break from her father’s reifying gaze, an attitude she has never earnestly held in any case. Everything in the final scene is engineered to make Charlotte’s departure appear the source of relief, the remedy that creates the “stillness.” But in terms of the reading outlined in the preceding pages, it should be clear that it is Adam’s

departure that finally clears the way for tranquility, for a more genuine human intimacy and a more satisfying form of “reciprocity,” between the Prince and the Princess.

If there is a notable silence (besides Charlotte’s) in the novel’s ultimate reaffirmation of the couples’ sexual exclusivity, it is in the narrator’s refusal (or inability) to deal in a straightforward fashion with the matter of sexual love. The grounds for Maggie’s initial attraction to the Prince are curiously muted. Of course, the outrageous language of reification she employs to describe the Prince in the opening chapter have led some to conclude that he constitutes for her no less than for Adam a kind of trophy, and ultimately that the Prince’s “private self” is as sealed to her as it is to anyone else, since the Ververs can only appreciate that “public” aspect of his character that is “the exhalation of archives.” More convincing on this score is Donald Mull’s interpretation, that this language represents the facetious flirtation of a highly strung, sheltered young woman who is indeed passionately attached to the man she is about to marry.

The reader is left in an interpretive limbo between two equally unsatisfactory alternatives. On the one hand, the greedy young heiress “wins” in the greatest way available to her—crushing a “hated rival” beyond mere jealousy, actually taking away the man Charlotte had thought she finally had. Maggie is on thus merely the girl who has everything, as Charlotte reflects when considering a marriage-gift early on, and according to this reading Maggie would be a kind of emotional miser, jealous of what she has. How can such a being be satisfied, if not by seeing the security of her possession threatened and reaffirmed? She is thus hermetically sealed off from the satisfactions of genuine friendship. Even Fanny Assingham, her other closest friend, occasionally figures as a kind of servant to the Princess. Within the melodramatic terms given by the narrative, then, this is a coherent reading.

Yet those terms are themselves subject to some mitigating interpretation. The joking and reflexive use of melodrama must soften this judgment, such that on a simpler, contrary reading, Maggie simply admires and adores her husband, and feels a rather innocent pride in showing him off to others. The difficulty is that the “public” aspect of her admiration is so much on display, whereas her “private” attachment receives only vague allusions. Even so, whatever that attachment may be, Maggie ultimately must—and does—pay for her it through sacrificing the presence of her father.

We may more clearly approach this critical impasse—or aporia, to use a now somewhat dated critical jargon—through a topical survey of the overarching symmetry between its two volumes. Apart from those interludes constituted by the Assinghams’ commentary, each of the two volumes exhibits a broadly tripartite structure which we may summarize in terms of whose goals are achieved, and we may identify these agents easily, as they are the point-of-view characters. In Volume One, the point of view moves from the Prince (Book First) to Adam (Book Second) and back to the Prince (Book Third). Here, the men represent two poles, with Maggie as the element that brings them together. Despite the Prince’s obvious fondness for his wife, there is no pretense between them or from the narrator that his part in the match was guided by motives other than mercenary ones. Granted, he wishes not to “insist on his side of the bargain”—but then, he does not need to, because the extent of Adam’s generosity is already more than he feels equipped to reciprocate. On Adam’s side, Maggie announces plainly at the outset that the basis of her father’s interest in the Prince was precisely the historical encumbrances from which he seeks to disentangle himself. The Prince and Adam each have something the other requires, and Maggie’s role in the first half of the novel is more or less reducible to an instrument facilitating this union.

Of course, if Maggie's initial role is to enable this union of Old-World culture to New-World wealth, it is noteworthy that the men have so little contact with one another. This is why I claim the "fault" of the novel lies ultimately with Adam. The Prince intends to become a part of the Verver family; he anticipates a deeper connection with his father-in-law, and is surprised and disappointed not to have found it. Adam, on the other hand, has simply purchased an object for the collection, and is only too pleased to find that the Prince is "round," yielding passively to the circumstances established for him, where he might have been too abominably "square."

In the second half, Maggie's point of view takes over definitively for Books Fourth through Sixth, and it is her goals that are to be achieved. Now a new tripartite structure emerges, but it is one in which the positions of the adulterous pair are ambiguous, depending on how one interprets these goals. On the one hand, we may say Maggie and the Prince are the two poles, with Charlotte in the middle serving ultimately to bring them closer together, in a merging movement broadly analogous to that of Volume One. Such a reading gains support from Maggie's shocking statement to the Prince at the end:

"She's wonderful and beautiful, and I feel somehow as if she were dying. Not really, not physically," Maggie went on. . . . "But dying for us—for you and me. . . . It's as if her unhappiness had been necessary to us—as if we had needed her, at her own cost, to build us up and start us." (579-80)

On the other hand, we could say that the structure is one of antagonism: Maggie crushing the rival Charlotte through her newly asserted exclusive possession of the Prince (who occupies in this case the passive middle position). This reading would draw support from such details as her avowed taste for competition with "a hated rival":

. . . she never admired him so much, or so found him heartbreakingly handsome, clever, irresistible, . . . as when she saw other women reduced to the same passive pulp that had then begun, once for all, to constitute *her* substance. (146)

Extending the novel's eponymous image into the symbolic sphere it so persistently insists upon, we may say the "flaw" that undermines the crystal is not the secret history between Charlotte and the Prince, because symbolically the Bowl does not in fact represent the beautiful, blissful "equilibrium" (a recurring term) created by the two marriages. The apparent equilibrium, as Maggie quickly discovers once she awakens to a deepened consciousness of the situation, is not a thing of solid gold but a gilded surface. Maggie's desire for her husband is itself the "hidden crack" beneath the gilded appearance, the silent void on which the too-perfect matrimonial symmetry engineered by Adam's millions must founder.

Conclusion

The picture that emerges from the preceding studies is one in which the aesthetic and the financial coexist with explicit textual persistence. Yet the essential quality of this relationship is highly unstable.

In Zola, each represents one potential avenue for the channeling of human creative energy. As such, each is also cast as a counterpart to another, more conventional outlet for this energy (human and non-human): on the one hand, maternity; on the other, the vital nourishment offered by decaying organic matter. Although both of these efforts end in failure, the latter seems to matter tremendously for Zola, who repeats the formula throughout *L'Argent* and in his preparatory notes, and once more through the benevolent voice of Caroline at the novel's conclusion.

James's artistic gaze, which sees a kind of relentless contiguity in the world, seems to recognize a financial element in most aspects of human behavior—whether as ends or means simply depends on the “circle” he draws around his subject. In his fictions, which depict artists much more frequently than Zola's, art and money are seemingly impossible to dissociate. Their various connections are tracked in fictions spanning virtually his entire career. Money (in the form of inherited wealth, landed estates, and so on) represents a persistence of dead energy through time. Artistic representation, on the other hand, is a living—and enlivening—energy. It is an energy which can bring people together, where the business vocation often occasions bitter antagonism, and receives virtually no explicit representation in the Jamesian corpus.²³⁰

²³⁰ His two major businessmen – Christopher Newman in *The American* (1875) and Adam Verver in *The Golden Bowl* (1904) – only step onto the narrative stage after renouncing their affairs. A vague allusion to someone Newman cheated or hurt in business is offered by way of explaining what prompted his early retirement; Verver, as we saw, experiences a kind of semi-religious “conversion” to the cult of beauty

These examples are instructive because both writers approached their respective careers as a profession, eschewing, and at times explicitly criticizing, the various aestheticist posturings among their contemporaries. Neither viewed his artistic aims as existing in opposition to commercial imperatives, or looked upon a paying audience as a fatal compromise to the integrity of his work. For all their differences, viewed comprehensively, both represent the emerging type of the professional novelist supporting himself through regular work, while the scope and intellectual ambition of this work risked alienating readers and publishers and thereby undermining their careers. Yet in their respective fictions, we see plainly enough that money and art can rarely enjoy a harmonious, unproblematic coexistence. Nick Dormer is constantly at war with himself in choosing between security for himself and his family on the one hand, and the fascination of his craft on the other. Despite the youthful dreams and ambitions binding together Zola's artist-figures in *L'Oeuvre*, growing out of Romanticism and endeavoring to advance beyond it into new modes of representation, their eventual integration into a market society produces deep fissures between them; Claude's effort at rebellion finally ends in madness and suicide. This is not to suggest that the artist-figures in these works are specifically allegorical figures for their James and Zola any more than Claude is a direct stand-in for Cézanne. Each is, rather, in his own way, emblematic of the problem of the artist in the nineteenth-century marketplace in ways that both include and transcend their respective creators.

What emerges most consistently from the preceding studies is the tendency of art and money to serve, in conflicting directions, as vehicles for energy. Even accepting Marx's definition of money as a depository of "socially useful labor time," we here refer to congealed or

after an adulthood spent amassing millions. We are seemingly given to understand that our interest and sympathy in these repentant former capitalists is conditioned on their having left the field.

ossified energy in a broader sense, for of the characters whose exploits form the substance of these novels, despite their activity and industry, none can be said to “work” in the sense of selling their time, exchanging their labor for a wage representing a fraction of the value they create on behalf of a capitalist. Yet even in these cases, seemingly far removed from the site of production (be this the land, the factory, or whatever), the financial motif assumes an obsessive persistence, a constant latent preoccupation when it is not, as for Zola’s Saccard, an overtly acknowledged goal in itself. As Jess Nunokawa observes, this is a common quality in the “domestic” fictions of the period: “The nineteenth-century novel never ceases remarking the reach of market forces into the parlors, bedrooms, and closets of a domestic realism that thus never ceases to fail in its mission to shelter its inhabitants from the clash of these armies. . . . The novel’s celebration of domesticity as a sanctuary from the vicissitudes of the cash nexus is everywhere spoiled; everywhere the shades of the countinghouse fall upon the home.”²³¹

Money as an object of fascination is of a bold and unique kind, one that is radically impersonal. Art, on the other hand, transmits a comparatively personal, subjective expression of mental and physical energy, testifying to moments of careful attention in ways that invite the receiver to appreciate, to critique, and to compare notes. To view such works through the lens of money is to become aware of their espousal of competing notions of value. These notions—the commercial and the “aesthetic,” broadly conceived—reproduce in the various fictionalized universes of the novel the conflicting priorities that underlie its production.

If Zola and James share, as we saw in the Introduction, a certain fascination with money as the hard-won reward of literary labor, their respective treatments of the matter could not be more divergent. Both are naturally drawn in their fictions to the financial element as the major

²³¹ *The Afterlife of Property*, p. 4.

force conditioning so much of nineteenth-century life. Zola's approach is to hypostatize the subject, insofar as this deceptively concrete material will allow, by devoting a novel to the Bourse. Placing it at the center of the narrative, endowing it with qualities explicitly likened to a beating heart, Zola must nevertheless organize events around a central character, and so reintroduces Saccard, the "poet" of wealth, as an emblematic figure for speculative excess.

James, on the other hand, seems rarely *not* to be talking about money, whatever the ostensible matter of his fictions. Although the melodramatic influence in his works makes it easy to read moral judgments into the financial dealings between characters, it is worth noting that James's private views on the subject of money seem never risen above the level of the pragmatic. If money is an omnipresent element and condition the modern world for James, nevertheless, the abstracting operation involved in Zola's approach—announcing a theory of money's role in human life, set in cosmological terms—was utterly alien to his imagination. This instrument, in his own account, attached itself obsessively to minute particulars, restrained itself always to "the vivid image and the very scene; the light of the only terms in which life has treated me to experience."²³²

Even so, he was far from pushing in the other extreme, purging his work of any mention of this vital element. The omnipresence of money in daily life is precisely why so many of his fictions turn upon it. Indeed, the aristocratic air of avoiding all talk of money comes in for ruthless mockery in the tale "The Pupil." Here, a tutor is hired to instruct a young boy in a family that puts on distinct airs of gentility and good-breeding, and so artfully contrive to eschew vulgar talk of dollars and cents that the hero rarely receives any payment for his work at all. That he accepts this exploitation out of fondness for his charge—a possibility the family is overtly

²³² *A Small Boy and Others*.

banking on—makes this just one more instance in which human relations in James are shown as opening up an ethical realm beyond zero-sum calculation. For Zola, the enabling power of money aligns it, according to a certain grim necessity, with those passions that drive all human conduct; the Jamesian ethic of renunciation, on the other hand, often means individuals arrive at self-expression through relinquishing a guaranteed fortune.

However one may view their respective failings, Claude Lantier and Saccard are *super-men*, embodiments of larger-than-life ambition who execute their designs outside any recognizable moral framework and largely without regard for the risks they may lead others to run. Claude, we see, is capable of considering Christine's position when he observes that she forfeits a possible inheritance from Mme. Vanzade by leaving her employ—but he welcomes her into his household despite this (as it allows him to keep an unpaid model at hand); nor can he stop himself from rapidly painting their son Jacques when he discovers that the boy, through parental neglect and inherited sickness, has died. The lives and deaths of others are all grist for the mill of his colossal ambitions, as are the life-savings of Saccard's shareholders to that of his bank. Both men reach for the stars, and fail spectacularly, harming many others in the process. Money and artistic creation seem reducible almost to vehicles of the ego, sought after in increasing desperation as the ground crumbles beneath the seekers' feet. For all the interaction of these two elements in the fictions we have analyzed, their ultimate foundation seems to be this promethean impulse: the delivery of something new into the world, come what may, with all the glory attaching thereto.

In his highly indirect way, James highlights, from the point of view of aesthetic production, a course practically opposed to such outsized visions. Indeed, in *Roderick Hudson*, he had shown how a promising young sculptor fritters away his talent in daydreams of

magnificent works along such lines: “They shall be simply divine forms. They shall be Beauty; they shall be Wisdom; they shall be Power; they shall be Genius; they shall be Daring. . . . Then there are all the Forces and Mysteries and Elements of Nature. . . . I mean to do the Morning; I mean to do the Night! I mean to do the Ocean and the Mountains; the Moon and the West Wind. I mean to make a magnificent statue of America!” One could not be further from the “vivid image and the very scene.”

Viewing the two writers from the broadest perspective, we may compare their official declarations of method with financial figures. We recall that Claude Lantier, besides the capital he has inherited from his parents and that sustains him for the first half of *L’Oeuvre*, has received something else: an obscure malady that seems to affect his vision, and makes him a monomaniac subject to extreme highs and lows in his work: “cet inconnu héréditaire, qui parfois lui rendait la création si heureuse, et qui d’autres fois l’abêtissait de stérilité.”²³³ Capable as he is of rational thought, he worries that this mysterious disease will ultimately dispose of him: “le détraquement héréditaire qui, pour quelques grammes de substance en plus ou en moins, au lieu de faire un grand homme, allait faire un fou.”²³⁴ If it is true, as David F. Bell has observed, that “[e]conomic structures dominate the social forms analyzed in Zola’s fictional series,” examples like this remind us that they also furnish the controlling image of the series itself.²³⁵ For presiding over the Zolian universe is of course the figure—not merely metaphorical but literal—of inheritance. Zola wishes to apply his analytical method with scientific rigor to a single family, thereby demonstrating the essential unity of its members beneath the superficial variety they exhibit. They are “intimately linked to one another” through direct familial bonds, by virtue of their

²³³ *Les Rougon-Macquart*, Gallimard (“Bibliothèque de la Pléiade”), Paris, ed. Henri Mitterand, vol. IV, p. 53.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 245

²³⁵ *Models of Power*, p. 170.

common forbears, with all the misfortune this entails according to the Zolian system: “Je veux expliquer comment une famille, un petit groupe d’êtres, se comporte dans une société, en s’épanouissant pour donner naissance à dix, à vingt individus, qui paraissent, au premier coup d’œil, profondément dissemblables, mais que l’analyse montre intimement liés les uns aux autres. L’hérédité a ses lois, comme la pesanteur.”²³⁶ These ancestral threads extending through time no longer find expression simply in the concrete matter of property and assets or the intangible advantages of privilege (though of course some, like Claude, do enjoy these, at least for a time), but in the inheritance of psychological disease. The various personages of the Rougon-Macquart are bound together by a linear view of human destiny, one which is overall a vision of decline. This of course contrasts with the optimism of Zola’s personal, meritocratic account of artistic success in the market, as we saw earlier—but in either case, it is a vision of linear progression.

The pattern emerging out of the Jamesian vision, we may say, is rhizomatic, observing connections that extend infinitely in all directions, with each point potentially connected to every other. James refers to the artistic challenge of continuity in a now-famous passage from the Preface to *Roderick Hudson*. But the challenge, in his case, lies not in producing continuity but *limiting* it, setting artificial boundaries on what he calls “developments”—these being “the very condition of interest, which languishes and drops without them”—in order to create a well-proportioned work. In a characteristic metaphor of the novelist as a visual artist, James defines his enterprise in terms of this basic coherence that must govern all represented developments, “the painter's subject consisting ever, obviously, of the related state, to each other, of certain figures and things. To exhibit these relations, once they have all been recognised, is to ‘treat’ his

²³⁶ *Les Rougon-Macquart*, vol. I, p. 3.

idea, which involves neglecting none of those that directly minister to interest. . .” Such an effort, however, entails not only an insistent artistic generosity, an abundant attention to those areas of plot and character which are “directly” relevant, but a correspondingly rigorous exclusion of those which are not—this *triage* constituting the true challenge for the artist attuned to the general interconnectedness of all things: “Where, for the complete expression of one's subject, does a particular relation stop—giving way to some other not concerned in that expression?” James arrives at an ontological proposition of almost Spinozian scope, coupled to an artistic ethic worthy of his pragmatist brother: “Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so.”

These connections or “relations” which the storyteller must navigate recall the thoroughgoing, interpenetrated character of the money economy as Simmel describes it. Simmel presents a grimly comprehensive assessment of money’s effect on all aspects of modern life. The “all” is to be insisted upon, for money’s character as a universal equivalent places all objects into the nodes of a universal exchange matrix. This in turn promotes in people a kind of appraising or “calculating” faculty that eventually extends beyond simple market exchanges to subsume everything:

[M]oney is everywhere conceived as purpose, and countless things that are really ends in themselves are thereby degraded to mere means. But since money itself is an omnipresent means, the various elements of our existence are thus placed in an all-embracing teleological nexus in which no element is either the first or the last. Furthermore, since money measures all objects with merciless objectivity, and since its standard of value so measured determines their relationship, a web of objective and personal aspects of life emerges which is similar to the natural cosmos with its continuous cohesion and strict causality. This web is held together by the all-pervasive money value, just as nature is held together by the energy that gives life to everything.²³⁷

²³⁷ *The Philosophy of Money*, p. 467.

If “relations stop nowhere,” this is in part because so much of the world under the money economy becomes interchangeable and thereby connected. Land, labor, manufactured goods, time itself: essential qualitative differences become irrelevant as they assume commensurable quantitative values. This results from, among other causes, the opening up, in the modern world, of new avenues of economic opportunity and exploitation. This is of course true of the James family fortune itself (so much of which would be squandered by Henry’s Sr.). The founder of the family, William of Albany, was born to tenement farmers in Ireland, and crossed the sea to New York, aged eighteen, just after the American Revolution. Through a combination of real-estate investment, banking, and salt manufacture he amassed an enormous fortune.²³⁸

Our analyses have shown that, for James, these boundless reticulations arise in part from the pervasive influence of economic relations extending in all directions. Through participating in the literary market as a regular producer no less than Zola, James nevertheless pursued much further the vision of money as a vehicle of human relations. In this, he followed Balzac—for James, no less than for Marx, “the father of us all”—who observed the new post-Revolutionary society around him with such fervor and acuity, and set about documenting a world dominated by “l’omniscience, l’omnipotence, l’omniconvenance de l’argent,”²³⁹

Acts of artistic creation, and careers built on such acts, inescapably put into play dynamics that find their purest expression in modes of economic activity. Investment, speculation, exploitation, ends-into-means rationality, all find expression within or surrounding the fictional artistic careers we have examined. At the opposite pole, in aesthetic receptivity, we have also seen in *The Golden Bowl* how a hypertrophied faculty of aesthetic valuation, applied to

²³⁸ See Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Untried Years: 1843-1870*, pp. 19-21.

²³⁹ *La Maison Nucingen, précédé de Melmoth reconcilié*, Gallimard (Paris), coll. “Folio,” Ed. Anne-Marie Meininger, 1989, p. 130.

human beings, likewise repeats these gestures of domination. In this morally fraught environment, actions and works must be weighed out and measured for their possible harm. Despite the ways in which the aesthetic and the economic reflect one another in these works, it would be impossible to assimilate such interpretations into some far-ranging polemical program shared by their authors. What they do share is a presentation of the sphere of artistic production and reception as an arena for the warring impulses of economic drives, and a use of the fictional space as a kind of laboratory in which to observe these conflicting movements. There emerges from these studies a quiet core of conviction, a subtle insistence that, in art as in life, the only viable path forward lies in a certain assumption of risk, a willingness to expose oneself—but only oneself—to failure and loss.

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