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Peter Rawlings

(i) *Writing, Reading, and Organicism*

In the 'Conclusion' to his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Pater anatomized life and supplied a physiology of the consciousness. The constituent elements of life are the 'physical' and the 'inward world of thought and feeling'.¹ The forces of physical life 'extend beyond us', the 'clear perpetual outline of face and limb' being 'but an image of ours under which we group them—a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it' (p. 208). The analysis of the inward, reflective self, moves from experience, through the individual's impressions within that world of experience, and to the isolation of such impressions in their 'perpetual flight'. If, as with art, the organic body as a visible entity is a function of the imagination and the individual's capacities for selection and design, then the world of objects, which breaks down on reflection, exposes the 'solidity' of such objects as only an attribute 'with which language invests them' (pp. 208-209). For Pater, in this 'Conclusion' at least, such an analysis leaves the work of art on one side as an entity in some kind of objective domain. The 'desire' is for 'beauty', and the 'love' is of 'art for art's sake'. The project of the 'poetic passion' is 'frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moment's sake' (p. 213). Elsewhere, Pater established the 'constant effort of art' as one of obliterating the distinction between 'matter and form': 'the mere matter of a picture' is 'nothing without the form, the spirit, of the handling', and 'this mode of handling, should become an end in itself'.²

This distinction between the physical life and the reflective, or the outer and the inner, was also made by the French physiologist Claude Bernard:

for an animal there are really two environments. The *external one*, in which the organism is placed, and the *internal* one, in which live the elements of the body tissues. The existence of the being is not lived in the external environment . . . but in the *liquid internal milieu* formed by

¹*Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London, 1873), pp. 207-208; subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the text.

²'The School of Giorgione', in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, p. 141.

circulating organic fluids.³

Bernard located the vital within, rather than without; in the process, he effectively liberated such life from the determinants of that external environment within which the organism as a whole was, by then, firmly positioned in scientific discourse. His belief was that the external environment was a '*determined external physico-chemical condition*' and that the 'organic conditions' of the internal environment were consequent on '*pre-established laws*' (p. 150).⁴ But, removing such anterior determinants from the analytical realm, he argued that

we cannot do more than *contemplate* vital morphology, because its essential factor, heredity, is an element not accessible to us and we cannot control it as we do the physical conditions of vital manifestations (p. 148).

The terms of Pater's identification of the life of art as a function of the union of matter and form, perhaps more surprisingly, also surface in Bernard. It is part of his account of what vitalizes matter:

we must distinguish *matter* and *form* . . . on its own, protoplasm is only a living *substance*, it is not a *living being*. It has no form which characterises *defined life* A living being is *protoplasm that has been fashioned* (p. 126).

'Form', for Bernard, is an *atavistic substance*'; it is identical with those pre-established laws of the internal environment (p. 154).⁵ The 'primary essence of life is a developing organic force' which, because its origins are not susceptible to analysis, might as well be called 'life': 'we call properties vital which we have not yet been able to reduce to

³Claude Bernard, *Phenomena of Life Common to Animals and Vegetables*, translated by R. P. and M. A. Cook (Dundee, 1974); originally, *Leçons sur les phénomènes de la vie communs aux animaux et végétaux* (Paris, 1878) p. 48; subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the text.

⁴Bernard's physiology is far from unproblematically intra-organic, given that he locates his principle of life in genesis. (George Henry Lewes had divided accounts of the organism into the extra- and intra-organic. Extra-organic 'hypotheses' posit the 'animating' of 'life-less matter by unknown powers'; intra-organic positions involve seeking 'the cause . . . within the organism itself. *Problems of Life and Mind*, First series, London, 1874-1875, II, p. 22.)

⁵Relevant are Henry James's preoccupations with 'origin and growth', the 'productive germ', 'nursed intention', 'pregnant themes', 'the "genesis" of the book', the 'parental breast', the 'virus of suggestion', and so on in his Prefaces to *The Tragic Muse* and *The Spoils of Poynton*, in *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James*, edited by R. P. Blackmur (New York and London, 1934), pp. 79-81, 119.

physico-chemico terms'.⁶ On this evidence, then, the discursive practices of Pater and Bernard are not so much isomorphic as identical: one writes of art in scientific terms, the other of science in the aesthetic, this chiasmus implying structures fundamental to the projects of both.

The subjectivism of Pater's position was announced from the outset: 'to regard all things and principles of things as inconstant modes or fashions has more and more become the tendency of modern thought' (p. 207). It was certainly, at least, a clear tendency of organicist discourse. Coleridge attacked the

arbitrary division of all that surrounds us into things with life, which have fallen within my knowledge . . . and things without life—a division grounded on mere assumption.⁷

Similarly, R. B. And J. S. Haldane argued that

teleological and aesthetic significance belong to objects only in so far as they have been invested with these features by the subjective operation of thought.⁸

This is very much the tenor of observations made by Josiah Royce, in an article which, typically, has as its objects both the scientific and the aesthetic:

The organism is an aggregate of tissues. But in its behaviour in the presence of the outer world it shows adaptation and integration of parts, so that we can call it one, not a mere aggregate . . . aggregations are organised wholes only when they behave as such in the presence of other things. A statue is an aggregation of particles of marble; but as such it has no unity. For the spectator it is one; in and for itself it is an aggregate.

There are some pressing issues here for my later exploration of Oscar Wilde, Henry James, and the reading problematic. Henry James's 'The Art of Fiction' is imperatively

⁶*An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, translated by Henry Copley Greene (New York, 1949), pp. 92-93; originally, *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale* (Paris, 1865).

⁷Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Hints Towards the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life*, edited by Seth B. Watson (London, 1843), p. 21.

⁸R. B. Haldane and J. S. Haldane, 'The Relation of Philosophy to Science', in *Essays in Philosophical Criticism*, edited by Andrew Seth and R. B. Haldane (London, 1883), p. 43.

preoccupied with reconciling experience, impressions, representation, and the expression of all three in the novel as art object.⁹ Pater, however, defines art as reflexive, and the function of a process which involves breaking down experience into isolated impressions. The medium of such art is the lone consciousness of the artist rather than novels produced for the market-place or anywhere else. But when dealing with the product, rather than rhapsodizing about the process, Pater himself was anxious about the role of the artist in purely organicist accounts of art which discounted the artist, leaving him to preside over a 'blindly organic process of assimilation', a process exchanged for 'the most luminous and self-possessed phase of consciousness':

The work of art is likened to a living organism. That expresses truly the sense of a self-delighting, independent life which, the finished work of art gives us: it hardly figures the process by which such work was produced.¹⁰

That central tenet of organicism, development *ab intra* rather than *ab extra*, gives rise to anxieties over the position of the artist in relation to his work and entails similar anxieties over its readers.¹¹ If the world only exists—in a vital sense, as an organized whole—for the subject, then novels are written by readers rather than writers. The reader who analyses, by definition, decomposes the text; interpretation displaces it; and the possibility of a passive, or neutral, reading presupposes an objectivity denied by, among others, Pater, Royce, and the Haldane brothers. Bernard's morphology, with its emphasis on 'form' (when united with matter) as the vital constituent of life implies that the life of a work might be in its genesis. There are difficulties, of course, in establishing quite what amounts to a union of form and matter in any text, especially when the 'form', a work's genesis, is unavailable, inaccessible, or even incredible.

The artistic experience, on Pater's aesthetic in the 'Conclusion', depends on erasing lines, not drawing them. Any fixing of relations falsifies the endless, web-like, concatenations of life. Henry James accepted organic definitions predicated on infinite connections; but with them, he also accepted the challenge to circumscribe potentially

⁹Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction' (1881), in *Partial Portraits* (London, 1888). See my article: 'Resisting Death: Immanuel Kant, Science, and Henry James's "The Art of Fiction"', *Studies in Languages and Cultures* (Kyushu University, Japan), 9 (1998).

¹⁰Walter Pater, 'Coleridge', in *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (London and New York, 1889), pp. 80-81.

¹¹Coleridge made much of the distinction between 'life', where the 'unity . . . is produced *ab intra*', from within, and the 'mechanical' which he saw as unified externally, '*ab extra*'. See his *Hints Towards a More Comprehensive Theory of Life*, p. 42.

endless development:

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.¹²

(ii) Impressions: Laurence Sterne and James on Reading

In 1897, an anonymous contributor to the *Quarterly Review* brought under scrutiny the following extracts from Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*:

Writing, when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation: As no one, who knows what he is about in good company, would venture to talk all;—so no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding, would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself.

I would go fifty miles on foot, for I have not a horse worth riding on, to kiss the hand of that man whose generous heart will give up the reins of his imagination into his author's hands,—be pleased he knows not why, and cares not wherefore.

--Writers of my stamp have one principle in common with painters.—Where an exact copying makes our picture less striking, we choose the less evil; deeming it even more pardonable to trespass against the truth, than beauty.—¹³

'The first two quotations,' the article continues

¹²Preface to *Roderick Hudson*, in *The Art of the Novel*, p. 5.

¹³Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67), fourth edition, 6 vols. (London, 1760-1762), II, Ch. 2, p. 68, III, Ch. 12, p. 60, II, Ch. 4, p. 24.

stamp Sterne as an antagonist of the classical, the last as a champion of the impressionist manner, for by 'truth' we take him to mean outward facts and not inward nature.¹⁴

The 'impressionist' writer's 'appeal is to experience, his medium is the feelings, his method a style of suggestion rather than of representation' (p. 173). Such writing, in a key familiar from the melodies of Pater, 'lends itself to vivid glimpses of life or nature through the medium of awakened associations' (p. 175). The burden, unlike in the 'descriptive method' (p. 185), is on the reader: 'all is conveyed by suggestion to our emotions' (p. 192).

Even on the evidence of these quotations from *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne's antagonism to what this writer calls the 'classical', let alone his precursive 'impressionism', is not that clear cut. The novel is hardly seen, in Oscar Wilde's terms, as 'simply a suggestion for a new work', but as a means of communication, the metaphor for which is a conversation controlled by the conventions of 'decorum and good breeding'.¹⁵ The stress appears to be on the potential of the reader's imagination, on his creative participation; but 'properly managed' implies limits as does 'understanding'. The second quotation, in fact, states explicitly that it would be charitable for the reader to 'give up the reins of his imagination into his author's hands'—again the metaphor is one of surrendering control, of subjugation—and that he should do so uncritically: 'he knows not why, and cares not wherefore'. Sartre's analysis of the classical author-reader relation is relevant:

in no case is there any question of discovering new countries of the mind, but only of putting into shape the *commonplaces* adopted by the *elite*, in such a way that reading . . . is a ceremony of *recognition* analogous to the bow of salutation, that is, the ceremonious affirmation that author and reader are of the same world and have the same opinions about everything.¹⁶

But however great the apparent distance between Sterne and 'impressionism', the passages from *Tristram Shandy* picked up by the *Quarterly Review* writer have a relevance to James's conflicting conceptions of the relations between writer, reader, and

¹⁴'Fathers of Literary Impressionism in England', *Quarterly Review*, 185 (1897), pp. 173-194 (p. 183); subsequent page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

¹⁵Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', in *Intentions* (London, 1891), p. 144.

¹⁶Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* (1948), translated by Bernard Fechtman, with an Introduction by David Cauter (London, 1967), p. 68; originally, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature* (Paris, 1948).

text. Metaphors of decorum invoke that control against which the chaotic reading stimulated by the text is defined. The reader's 'half' is both understated and presented in hierarchical terms: 'leave him something to imagine, in turn'. The author lacks a horse of his own, and therefore the 'reins' of 'imagination' ('reins' implying both imagination and control), and must consequently persuade the reader to 'give up' his. At this level, the writer is completely dependent upon the reader, and the extent of that dependence corresponds to the intensity of the suggestion. As with James, the author's dependence in this kind of writing is on the reader's imagination, but an imagination which to survive as a writer he must control. These tensions are held, and held off, at the level of metaphor.

In one of his earliest reviews, James wrote on these questions in a way usefully comparable to Sterne's:

In every novel the work is divided between the writer and the reader; but the writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters. When he makes him ill, that is, makes him indifferent, he does no work; the writer does all. When he makes him well, that is, makes him interested, then the reader does quite half the labor. In making such a deduction as I have just indicated, the reader would be doing but his share of the task; the grand point is to get him to make it. I hold that there is a way. It is perhaps a secret; but until it is found out, I think that the art of story-telling cannot be said to have approached perfection.¹⁷

James is less vague than Sterne about what he sees as being the reader's 'share'.¹⁸ He criticizes George Eliot for concluding *Adam Bede* with an account of Adam's sorrow at 'Hetty's misfortune' which is 'not a *sufficient* sorrow for the situation' (p. 17). The

¹⁷'The Novels of George Eliot' (1866), in *Views and Reviews* (Boston, 1908), pp. 1-37 (p. 18); subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the text. I have corrected the 'different' of *Views and Reviews*, to 'indifferent' (in 'makes him indifferent'), in line with the original article in *Atlantic Monthly*, 18 (1866), pp. 479-492 (p. 485).

¹⁸Susanne Kappeler, in *Writing and Reading in Henry James* (London, 1980), believes that the 'reader's share' (p. 75) 'originally derived from E. H. Gombrich's expression "the beholder's share" in *Art and Illusion* (London, 1968), Part III' and quotes from Frank Kermode's 'Recognition and Deception' (1974), reprinted in *Essays on Fiction, 1971-82* (London, 1983), pp. 92-113 in arguing that it has become 'established' in 'literary critical discourse' (p. 220). James's review demonstrates that the phrase cannot derive from Gombrich; although in acknowledging this, Frank Kermode mistakenly refers to 'The New Novel' (1914). There, James was writing about the two halves of the writer's responsibility: to be saturated in the subject and to treat it fully. See Henry James, *Notes on Novelists* (London, 1914), pp. 249-287 (p. 258).

reader should have been left to *deduce* that 'Adam, healed of his wound by time, should address himself to another woman' (p. 18). James is rejecting the conventional 'coda' of the typical nineteenth-century English novel and, in ways which at this stage show some confidence in readers, seems to be moving towards a belief in the occasional value of suggestion rather than statement. For James, George Eliot fails to make imaginative demands on the reader partly because she packs her narrative with the kind of commentary which, in Sterne's terms, violates the rules of polite conversation. Additionally, her commitment is to description and analysis rather than to suggestion: 'as compared with writers whom we are tempted to call decidedly imaginative', James writes, 'she must, in my opinion, content herself with the very solid distinction of being exclusively an observer' (p. 36).

There is a disposition here, then, to what seems to be a measure of creative reading, to some kind of equivalence of task between writer and reader. For Ellman Crasnow, 'the well-made reader' in James, 'is the active reader'.¹⁹ I would argue, however, that the work may be divided between writer and reader, but that the writer remains in control: the reader, in a hierarchical model similar to Sterne's, is the writer's labourer. There is a tension between production and process; between the resistant, the descriptive, and the suggestive, the impressionistic. Vitality depends upon process, upon active and independent production by the reader. And yet there must be control if the text is to exist as a product of the author. Sterne has his 'stamp' ('Writers of my stamp') and Fielding's narrator in *Tom Jones* is keen to have the opening, theoretical and speculative chapters of each book of that novel—above all, concerned with craft—as

a Kind of Mark or Stamp, which may hereafter enable a very indifferent Reader to distinguish, what is true and genuine in this historic kind of Writing, from what is false and counterfeit.²⁰

James inherited a Romantic legacy, related aspects of which were a fashionable antagonism towards the 'public' at large and a division between imaginative readers and the reader in general. It is important to distinguish between real anxieties about readers and reading and the adoption of this Romantic posture. A writer might publicly eschew a wide readership, partly as a rationalization of his own lack of popularity, and yet privately dream of one. Another dream, both generated by and yet incompatible with that

¹⁹James as Janus: Opposition and Economy', in *Henry James: Fiction as History*, edited by Ian F. A. Bell (London, 1984), pp. 137-155 (p. 151).

²⁰Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*, 6 vols. (London, 1749), III, Bk. 9. Ch. 1, pp. 303-304.

of popularity, is hinted at in the significant similarities there are between a typical passage from Huysmans's *À Rebours* and some of James's responses to these difficulties:

The novel, thus conceived, thus condensed in a page or two, would become an intellectual communion between a hieratic writer and an ideal reader, a spiritual collaboration between a dozen persons of superior intelligence scattered across the world, an aesthetic treat available to none but the most discerning.²¹

In 1890, Henry James wrote to William James in a similar vein: 'One has always a "public" enough if one has an audible vibration—even if it should only come from one's self'.²² He envisaged, in a way which signalled his own direction in the 1890's and 1900's, an ideal audience in terms not dissimilar to Huysmans'. Lost in reveries among the Ford Madox Fords and the John Singer Sargents at Burlington House in 1897, James's thoughts wandered to a recent reading of Anatole France's *L'Orme du Mail*. Reflecting on that writer and his readers, James's concern was not with the 'particular multitude dependent upon, in the artistic thought to admire and to buy', but with 'the public involved or implied, the public addressed and aimed at, wooed, whether won or not'. He characterized his sense of Anatole France's implied readership: 'Oh, the admirable people; the intelligent, exquisite, delicious people; oh, the people to commune with, to live with, to work for!' In this light, that analogy made by James as early as 1866 between character and reader becomes particularly potent. Here in 1897, the illumination in James's conclusion is of the ideal, internal reading of an imaginative kind which he often attempted to circumscribe within his own texts in the 1890's. Only Anatole France could answer as to whether 'any public so particular' exists; but 'the game, for our own part, is sufficiently played when we have dreamed that there *may*, in the very world, be such good company'.²³ The corollary, and it is implied in that letter to William James, is that only writers, and writers of an acutely sensitive kind, can read.²⁴ This is also the thrust of a comment made by James on Flaubert in 1893:

²¹J.-K. Huysmans', *À Rebours* (1884), translated as *Against Nature* by Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), p. 199.

²²23 July 1890, *Henry James Letters*, edited by Leon Edel, 4 vols. (London, 1974-1984), III, p. 300.

²³'London', *Harper's Magazine*, 41 (1897), pp. 562-563; reprinted in part in *Henry James: Essays on Art and Drama*, edited by Peter Rawlings (Aldershot, England and Vermont, USA: Scolar Press, 1996), pp. 509-510.

²⁴'To criticise is to appreciate', wrote James in his Preface to *What Maisie Knew*, 'to appropriate, to take intellectual possession, to establish in fine a relation with the criticised thing and make it one's own'; *The Art of the Novel*, p. 155. James not only doubted the capacity of most readers to 'criticise' in this way, he

It is only a reader here and there in all the wide world who understands to-day, or who ever understood, what Gustave Flaubert tried for; and it is only when such a reader is also a writer, and a tolerably tormented one, that he particularly cares.²⁵

(iii) Henry James's 'The Science of Criticism' and Oscar Wilde's 'The Critic as Artist'

Henry James's 'The Science of Criticism' is one of his most important engagements with the problem of the marauding critic in the fashionably scientific and impressionistic climate of the 1890's. Significantly, the general reader, as distinct from the critic, is mostly a conspicuous absence in 'The Science of Criticism'. The absence corresponds to the implying of his or her complete subordination to an ideal critic, 'the real helper of the artist, a torch-bearing outrider, the interpreter, the brother', who 'has to understand for others'.²⁶ The first point to be made, then, is that James practically discounts here those readers at large who were often the objects of his attention in the 1870's and 1880's. The narrator in *The Bostonians* (1886), for instance, addresses the reader in a traditionally obtrusive way; typical of this rhetoric is a plethora of phrases such as 'it may be communicated to the reader', and 'it shall be confided to the reader that in reality'.²⁷ Similarly common, in *The Tragic Muse*, are addresses such as 'the reader shall learn these things in time, if he care enough for them'.²⁸ Readers, in these novels are still presupposed, reckoned with, and manipulated. The second point to be made in connection with 'The Science of Criticism' is that James sees his texts as requiring interpretation, mediation; but what these concepts mean for him in this context is another matter.

Oscar Wilde's *Intentions*, which included his 'The Critic as Artist', also appeared in 1891.²⁹ An examination of this essay, in conjunction with James's, helps to illuminate

was constantly anxious about reading as 'possession'. Arguably, the 'one' of the Prefaces is James himself as he rereads, revises, and repossesses.

²⁵Gustave Flaubert' (1893), in *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (London, 1893), p. 146.

²⁶Henry James, 'The Science of Criticism' (1891), reprinted by James, under the title 'Criticism', in *Essays in London and Elsewhere*, pp. 271-278 (pp. 276-277); subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the text.

²⁷*The Bostonians*, 3 vols. (London and New York, 1886), II, Ch.24, p. 114, I, Ch.15, p. 185.

²⁸*The Tragic Muse*, 3 vols. (London and New York, 1890), I, Ch.2, p. 19.

²⁹'The Critic as Artist', in *Intentions* (London, 1891). Page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

some of the contemporary critical concerns directly relevant to the question of reading and narrative authority. Wilde, like James, addresses the issue of the nature and function of the critic and leaves the reader as such on one side. In effect, this is to make a distinction between critical readers—when of a particularly sensitive, indeed professional, kind—and the common reader, from whom the writer expects little. A remark in James's Preface to *The Tragic Muse* suggests that this was also a distinction on which he insisted:

the reader with the idea or the suspicion of a structural centre is the rarest of friends and critics—a bird, it would seem, as merely fabled as the phoenix.³⁰

In its concern with the relation between art and the critic, Wilde's essay does more than express a preference for an ideal kind of reader. Ernest, Gilbert's (Wilde's) antagonist in the dialogue, suggests that

the higher you place the creative artist, the lower must the critic rank Because the best that he can give us will be but an echo of rich music, a dim shadow of clear-outlined form' (p. 135).

Gilbert's insistence is not only that 'Criticism is itself an art' (p. 136), but that 'the critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticises as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour' (p. 136). Wilde's argument is that criticism 'deals with art not as expressive but as impressive purely' (p. 139); and hence his conclusion that 'to the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own, that need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticises' (p. 144). A sense of certain critics as particularly creative readers has now been mobilized quite radically: his recorded impressions amount to a work of art that can not only displace, but replace, the original.

There are respects in which James's positions in 'The Science of Criticism' are at the same time both more conservative and more radical than Wilde's in 'The Critic as Artist'. Throughout his essay, James displays a commitment to that economy, to those principles of selection, which dominate his aesthetics and which, increasingly in the 1890's, he saw as being particularly relevant to the situation of literature in the marketplace. Frequently, and for reasons which only emerge towards the end of the essay, these aesthetic principles are communicated through metaphors of containment entailing

³⁰*The Art of the Novel*, pp. 45-46.

corresponding threats of sinking, flooding, bursting, and so on. Once again, in the conflicting metaphors it deploys, the text surfaces that antagonistic binary of the 'mechanical' and the 'organic'; the former involving control, circumscription, and production, the latter implying indeterminacy, interactive membranes rather than enclosing boundaries, and 'vital' processes. This binary conflict is there in 'Nona Vincent', Wayworth's excitement being over 'the refreshment of calculation and construction, the incorruptibility of line and law', and the need of a 'perpetually throwing over the cargo to save the ship'.³¹ A 'Note' to *Theatricals: Second Series* (1895) confirms James's apparent adherence to principles of control but, again, implied is what must be sacrificed:

The lesson consists for the most part, as the author of these remarks has somewhere else ventured to express the matter, in the periodical throwing overboard of the cargo to save the ship.³²

As late as 1914, in 'The New Novel', James persists with metaphors similar to those which open 'The Science of Criticism':

no equal outpouring of matter into the mould of literature, or what roughly passes for such, has been noted to live its life and maintain its flood, its level at least of quantity and mass, in such a free and easy independence of critical attention.³³

It is clear from 'The Science of Criticism' that James's instinct for 'the sublime economy of art', as defined against the 'splendid waste' of 'life', created problems for him in a commercial age of mass-production and reading.³⁴ 'Literary criticism', for instance, is likened to a 'river that has burst its dykes' (p. 271). It amounts, because of a 'paucity of examples' in terms of good novels, and so on, with which to work, to a 'deluge of doctrine suspended in the void' (p. 271).

Wilde, too, deplored the quality of much that was the object of critical attention:

³¹'Nona Vincent' (1892), in *The Real Thing and Other Stories* (New York and London, 1893), pp. 131-178 (pp. 137-138).

³²*The Complete Plays of Henry James*, edited by Leon Edel (London, Philadelphia, and New York, 1949), p. 351.

³³'The New Novel' (1914), in *Notes on Novelists* (London, 1914), pp. 249-287 (p. 249).

³⁴Preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, in *The Art of the Novel*, p. 120.

anybody can write a three-volumed novel. It merely requires a complete ignorance of both life and literature (p. 125).

His strategy, in 'The Critic as Artist', is one of displacing such work by insisting on the creative nature of ideal criticism. James seems to be moving in a similar direction in making a distinction between the commercial practice of 'reviewing', with all the passivity that the very word implies, and the 'art of criticism' (p. 271). In the appropriate language of mass-production and an industrial economy, James writes that

periodical literature is a huge open mouth which has to be fed—a vessel of immense capacity which has to be filled. It is like a regular train which starts at an advertised hour, but which is free to start only if every seat be occupied (p. 133).

Wilde has his 'second-rate *littérateurs* [*sic*] (p. 98), and James his 'schoolmasters' (p. 276) and 'ladies and gentlemen' who 'turn an honest penny by the free expenditure of ink' (p. 272). For Wilde and James, professionalism was not the same as commercialism (although the welcome, and cultivated, irony for Wilde, and not for James, was his enormous commercial success); and neither would have disagreed with an emphasis on the craft of the artist. As Wilde put it: 'all fine imaginative work is self-conscious and deliberate' (p. 121).

What James misses in criticism is that diffusion of 'great light' (p. 273) which he thought it should provide. He begins to characterize the ideal critic in terms similar to those in which he characterizes the artist: the critical gift is 'absolutely rare' (p. 275), 'inestimably precious and beautiful' (p. 276); and that 'absolutely rare', as we shall see is more than mere hyperbole. This critical gift proceeds from 'deep sources, from the efficient combination of experience and perception' (p. 276) and is similar, by analogy, to that literature which 'lives essentially, in the sacred depths of its being' (p. 274). It is worth noting, even at this point, that James does not see the vitality of literature as depending on creative reading or criticism. James's critic moves even closer to being an artist here when earlier injunctions for the apprentice novelist are recalled: 'write from experience only' and 'try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost'.³⁵

But, consonant with the terms of that 1866 review of George Eliot, the critic, like the reader, is given only limited independence: he is controlled by, and subject to, the

³⁵'The Art of Fiction' (1884), in *Partial Portraits* (London and New York, 1888), pp. 375-408 (pp. 389-390).

authority of the artist. (Whether or not it is possible to exercise such authority is another matter.) James is quite explicit about the role of the critic as

the real helper of the artist, a torch-bearing outrider, the interpreter, the brother. The more the tune is noted and the direction observed the more we shall enjoy the convenience of a critical literature (p. 276).

The critic's task is not to substitute his own impressions, of a randomly imaginative kind, for those of the artist; nor, in Wilde's terms, to treat the work of art as itself a subject for imitation, for the creation of a work of art of his own. For James, the ideal critic 'has to understand for others'; that 'others' being about as near as the reader pure and simple gets to the surface in this essay, and 'his life', in sacrificial terms, 'is heroic, for it is immensely vicarious' (p. 277).

James established an analogy between critic and artist only to disrupt it: the critic is 'connected doubly' with 'life':

he deals with the experience of others, which he resolves into his own, and not of those invented and selected others with whom the novelist makes comfortable terms, but with the uncompromising swarm of authors, the clamorous children of history. He has to make them as vivid and free as the novelist makes *his* puppets, and yet he has, as the phrase is, to take them as they come (p. 278).

Superficially, the critic stands in the same relation to his authors as the author does to his characters: both authors and characters are puppets. The analogy between authors and critics is developed further, too, in that 'the material' on which ideal criticism 'is exercised is subject to selection, to restriction' (p. 275). Crucially, though, the author intervenes between the critic and his characters, the characters themselves, the subjects of any texts, are not available for manipulation except to the author. Also, and by sharp contrast with Wilde, the critic is far from being able to treat his author and their texts as the material for independent creation: authors, 'he must take as they come'. A significant distinction between James and Wilde emerges in the final words of 'The Science of Criticism': criticism, for James, is not 'creation' but 'translation': the critical 'portrait' is a 'text preserved by translation' (p. 278).

At this point, James appears to have profoundly conservative attitudes towards the relation between author and reader, especially given that the ideal critic is a particularly sensitive reader of an 'absolutely rare' kind (p. 275). James's sense of this relation is

reinforced by metaphors of courtly, conventional behaviour which have affinities with the language deployed by Sterne in the extracts from *Tristram Shandy*. James likens the ideal critic to a 'noble figure completely equipped', to a 'knight who has knelt through his long vigil and who has the piety of office' (p. 276). The writer-text-critic hierarchy, then, is informed for James by a code of 'honour': the critic 'is always under arms' (p. 277). This is resonant of one of the narrator's comments in 'The Figure in the Carpet':

For the few persons, at any rate, abnormal or not, with whom my anecdote is concerned, literature was a game of skill, and skill meant courage, and courage meant honour, and honour meant passion, meant life.

Corvick sees his attempt to detect a coherent pattern in Vereker's work in terms similar to those used by James in 'The Science of Criticism': he wants to avoid meeting Vereker until successful because 'he had no wish to approach the altar before he had prepared the sacrifice'.³⁶

But there is evidence that James is intent on establishing a compromise between the rampant critical recreations approved of in Wilde's 'The Critic as Artist' and the exercising of some kind of control which, if successful, however, would render any text disanalogous with the organism. This strategy partly involves taking the possibility of creative reading out of the public domain altogether, displacing it by means of contained interpretations within the texts themselves. One passage in particular in 'The Science of Criticism' is relevant to these issues:

The case is therefore one for recognising with dismay that we are paying a tremendous price for the diffusion of penmanship and opportunity, that the multiplication of endowments for chatter may be as fatal as an infectious disease, that literature lives essentially, in the sacred depths of its being, upon example, upon perfection wrought, that, like other sensitive organisms, it is highly susceptible of demoralisation, and that nothing is better calculated than irresponsible pedagogy to make it close its ears and lips (p. 274).

The threat to literature is expressed in familiar terms: the 'diffusion' and 'multiplication' of criticism which it must resist. Criticism of the 'chatter' variety, far from being

³⁶'The Figure in the Carpet', in *Embarrassments* (London and New York, 1896), pp. 3-66 (pp. 36, 32).

beneficial to the literary organism, is capable of fatally infecting it. Two defensive strategies are hinted at.

The life-giving source of a work, its essence, perhaps its potential for autonomy, can be buried, concealed: 'literature lives essentially, in the sacred depths of its being'. When James supplied prefaces to his New York Edition, his principal aim, I would argue, was that of constructing a paratext of mysterious origins to which he alone had problematic access. By this means, his became the only possible readings; and these, his prefaces withhold. Proximate is the 'heredity' of 'vital morphology', regarded by Bernard as inaccessible, as well as that notion of 'form' as an 'atavistic substance'.³⁷ In the second strategy, a text can become ultimately resistant to intervening criticism by being mute: 'nothing is better calculated than irresponsible pedagogy to make it close its ears and lips'. Notoriously for some readers, that muteness in James's later writing took the form of unreadability. As Rebecca West put it:

he splits hairs till there are no longer any hairs to be split, and the mental gesture becomes merely the making of agitated passes over a complete and disconcerting baldness.³⁸

Both strategies—umbilical re-possession and hermetic obscurity—work in a similar way: it is difficult to contradict the possibility of inaccessible depths and endlessly entangled origins; and the silence of unyielding obscurity implies imponderable profundity.

It becomes apparent that James's 'absolutely rare' critic is, more or less, simply that: he is idealized out of existence:

To lend himself, to project himself and steep himself, to feel and feel till he understands and to understand so well that he can say, to have perception at the pitch of passion and expression as embracing air, to be infinitely curious and incorrigibly patient, and yet plastic and inflammable and determinable, stooping to conquer and serving to direct—these are fine chances for an active mind, chances to add the idea of independent beauty to the conception of success.

'Sentient and restless', this critic who 'reacts and reciprocates and penetrates' seems

³⁷Claude Bernard, *Phenomena of Life Common to Animals and Vegetables*, pp. 148, 126.

³⁸Rebecca West, 'Reading Henry James in War Time', *New Republic*, 27 February 1915, pp. 98-100; reprinted in *Critical Essays on Henry James*, Critical Thought Series, No. 5, edited by Peter Rawlings (Aldershot, England and Vermont, USA, 1993), pp. 145-147 (p. 146).

increasingly spectral (pp. 276-277). James himself casts the critic as an 'apparition' (p. 276); and an apparition of a specific type at that. The ghost of Hamlet's father is 'armed at point, exactly, cap-a-pe'; and James's critic is 'armed *cap-à-pie* in curiosity and sympathy' (p. 276).³⁹ Hamlet's ghost, its 'questionable shape', has become a defining enigma in western culture.⁴⁰ Such interrogations James is content to relegate to the realm of the after-life.

For James, then, ideal critics are as ephemeral as the ghost of Hamlet's father. Furthermore, and ludicrously, nothing of consequence is required of these insubstantial entities. How little James expects such invisible critics to intervene in his texts, and how weak a sense of 'interpretation' is involved, becomes apparent from the way in which the French are praised because they handle 'the subject in general with finer finger-tips', this instead of blundering 'in and out . . . as if it were a railway station' (p. 275). The text remains in tact, there to be handled gingerly from the outside. In so far as these texts themselves are concerned, James's preoccupation is with 'how literature resists' (p. 274) the deluge of criticism of a less sensitive kind, where it does. Bichat's definition of life as that which resists death licences a retrieval of 'resistance' as an important element of organicist discourse.⁴¹ His anatomical project involved analysing, or breaking down, the organism until those tissues of resistance could be identified. The processes of life were no longer on the surface, but within. Paradoxically, analysis was the means by which they could be both revealed and disintegrated.⁴² Examining vital properties, however, as Bernard argued, leaves the vital as elusive as ever.⁴³

James contrasts an *ab extra* with an *ab intra* method of criticism:

There are a hundred labels and tickets, in all this matter, that have been pasted on from the outside and appear to exist for the convenience of passers-by; but the critic who lives *in* the house, ranging through its

³⁹*Hamlet*, I ii 200; *The Riverside Shakespeare*, second edition, edited by G. Blakemore Evans (Boston and New York, 1997).

⁴⁰*Hamlet*, I iv 43.

⁴¹'Life consists in the sum of the functions, by which death is resisted', Marie François Xavier Bichat, *Physiological Researches on Life and Death*, translated by F. Gold (London, n.d.) p. 21; originally, *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort* (Paris, 1810).

⁴²The research was into 'the intimate structure of the organs' in order to establish 'the limits of every organized part', organization being synonymous with 'life' (vital 'properties . . . disappear as soon as these particles lose their organic arrangement'); *General Anatomy, Applied to Physiology and the Anatomy of Medicine*, translated from the last French edition by Constant Coffyn, 2 vols. (London, 1824) I, pp. iv, li; originally, *Anatomie générale, appliquée à la physiologie et à la médecine* (Paris, 1801).

⁴³*An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, p. 93.

innumerable chambers, knows nothing about the bills on the front (p. 277).⁴⁴

The extent and nature of James's disjunction between critic and artist emerges when this passage is compared with his account of the artist's role in his 'house of fiction'. The critic is contained within the work itself, 'ranging through its innumerable chambers', whereas the artist is posted at various windows, or on container-like balconies, which represent 'literary form': this is another model, then, for the way in which the critic's activities are controlled by the author through the medium of his form.⁴⁵ James sees the confines of the text itself as the proper domain for interpretation; a domain, at least, where in a fragile kind of way, he believes that such interpretation can be contained.

Life might be spontaneous, but art, by definition for James, exists only by arrangement. In the Preface to *The Tragic Muse*, James exploited the word 'economy' in order to arrange a correspondence between art and life, implying in the process an ascendancy of art over life:

There is life and life, and as waste is only life sacrificed and thereby prevented from "counting," I delight in a deep-breathing economy and an organic form.⁴⁶

Ellmann Crasnow suggests that 'deep-breathing' and 'economy' involve 'the convention or artifice of economy' being 'naturalized by the epithet "deep-breathing"; 'economy' is then 'fit for organic company'. But in terms of its antecedence, the concept of 'economy' is not in need of naturalization. 'Economy' has its roots in *oikonomia*: *oikos* being 'house' and *nomos*, 'a law'.⁴⁷ Aristotle's teleological approach to the household, with its 'end' organized around the self-sufficiency of its individual members, is relevant.⁴⁸ Economical households were, like organisms, ends and not means; that was the principle of life in both cases.⁴⁹

⁴⁴Compare: 'the first advantage of his taste will be to reveal the absurdity of the little stickers and tickets'; 'The Art of Fiction' in *Partial Portraits*, p. 399.

⁴⁵Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 46.

⁴⁶*The Art of the Novel*, p. 84.

⁴⁷James as Janus: Opposition and Economy', in *Henry James: Fiction as History*, edited by Ian F. A. Bell, pp. 137-155 (p. 149).

⁴⁸The word "economy" refers etymologically to the conventions (*nomoi*) of and distribution (*nemesis*) within the household (*oikos*); Marc Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore and London, 1978), p. 89.

⁴⁹This retrieval of the word 'economy' is a necessary gloss, of course, on the extent to which James's 'house of fiction' (Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, in *The Art of the Novel*, p. 46) is an organic metaphor.

James as distinct from Wilde, in theory at least, was concerned with the need to draw lines between art and life, whilst preserving the vitality of the former. As he wrote to H. G. Wells:

The fine thing about the fictional form to me is that it opens such widely different windows of attention; but that is why I like the window so to frame the play and process.⁵⁰

The art object must be distinct and circumscribed, resistant, if it is to exist and it is in these terms that process must be controlled. Consciousness, of which reading and interpretation are modes, is the vitalizing and circumscribing faculty. What is important in that Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* is that 'consciousness', without which 'literary form' is 'nothing', is the 'artistic consciousness'. It is this 'artistic consciousness' which, no matter how obliquely, produces the narrating consciousness that constructs and construes a particular text. A hermetically sealed object, a closed system, will suffocate; an organism, an open system, must interact with its environment. In subscribing to an organicist aesthetic, James has to combat this pernicious entailment. James's narrating consciousnesses often attempt to act as a kind of vital penumbra, like the membrane of a cell:

the cell membrane is not a wall or a skin or a sieve. It is an active part of the cell; it decides what is inside and what is outside and what the outside does to the inside.⁵¹

One of its functions, and the hence the significance of that 'the teller is but a more developed reader', is not to supply a privileged interpretation in an *ab extra* way, but to displace, to purge, the reader's own interpretation.⁵² That this strategy can stimulate

For Aristotle on the 'household', see *The Politics*, in *Aristotelis Opera*, edited by I. Bekker (Berlin, 1831), 1252a1-23 to 1259b17, translated by T. A. Sinclair, revised by Trevor J. Saunders in *The Politics* (Harmondsworth, 1981), pp. 53-97.

⁵⁰6 July 1915, *Henry James Letters*, IV, p. 767. The process depends on framing, on circumscribed production. In his drama, James discovered that mechanical plots only were available for such framing, synthesizing, functions, this as part of more disturbing discoveries to do with the organic and the mechanical, with life and death. In narrative fiction, there was at least the possibility of implying an interactive and life-like membrane of apparent circumscription.

⁵¹Daniel Mazia, 'The Cell Cycle', *Scientific American*, 230, No. 1 (January 1974), pp. 54-64 (p. 63).

⁵²Henry James to Charles Eliot Norton, 19 November 1872, *Henry James Letters*, I, p. 310. For an application of this idea of narratorial displacements of the reader, see my 'Henry James and "Brooksmith": Circumscribing the Task of Reading', *Kyushu American Literature*, 38 (1997), pp. 51-64.

precisely what it aims to control can undermine, as was clear to James in 'The Figure in the Carpet', the whole circumscriptive process.

For Matthew Arnold, the critical business was that of seeing 'the object as in itself it really is', whereas Oscar Wilde delighted in reversing this formulation: 'the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not'.⁵³ However unwittingly, James's subscription to an organicist aesthetic—'a novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism'—aligned him with the radical subjectivism of Wilde, and with a Pater who argued that

"To see the object as in itself it really is," has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever, and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is.⁵⁴

James's 'The Science of Criticism' was part of his attempt to reconcile the objective imperatives of authorship and text-production with the vital perils of textual being in its environment of appropriative readings.

⁵³Matthew Arnold, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (1864), in *Selected Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, edited by Christopher Ricks (London and New York, 1972), pp. 92-117 (p. 95); Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', p. 144.

⁵⁴Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', in *Partial Portraits*, p. 391; Walter Pater, 'Preface', *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, p. i.