The impressionism of The portrait of a lady: knowledge and freedom

Article

Accepted Version

The Impressionism of *The Portrait of a Lady*: Knowledge and Freedom

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The protagonist of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), Isabel Archer, seeks both knowledge and freedom. Later in the decade, James collected some essays on fiction as *Partial Portraits* (1888) in which he conceived of knowledge and freedom as the novelist's goals, too. Isabel begins the novel with little of either. In this she resembles the predicament of the English novel in the 1880s, as James described it. I will argue that James equips first Isabel and then the English novel with an "impression" in order to inform and free them. Indeed, in the decade of *Portrait* the impression became central to his fictional project, not least as the centerpiece of the manifesto of fiction which concludes *Partial Portraits*, "The Art of Fiction" (first published in *Longman's Magazine* in 1884). What James dramatizes in his novel is that while impressions can educate and free novelists and characters, they can also deceive and confine them. Along with its epistemological companion—the idea—the impression is a source of knowledge with differing implications for freedom.

Isabel reflects that her aspirations include "the union of great knowledge with great liberty" in the celebrated nocturnal chapter in which she begins to be aware of the intimacy between her husband Gilbert Osmond and their scheming friend Madame Merle.[1] In "George Eliot's Life" (1885), a review of a biography of the recently deceased novelist, later collected in *Partial Portraits*, James also connected knowledge and freedom, and he did so via the impression. He wrote that "the effort of the novelist is to find out, to know, or at least to see."[2] But, among much praise for Eliot, he went on to regret that her knowledge had been in some ways circumscribed due to the loss of freedom she experienced once she had sequestered herself away with her married lover G. H. Lewes. As a result, he implied, knowledge derived from books displaced her "personal impression[s]" (*GE* 677).

In “The Art of Fiction” James called the novel a “personal impression of life.”[3] The most famous impression of *Portrait*, Isabel’s of her deceivers, strikingly anticipates another impression in “The Art of Fiction.” Isabel’s unexpected impression through a doorway of Merle and Osmond looks forward to a vignette in “The Art of Fiction,” three years later, in which James shows the impressionist work of the novelist of genius, someone “on whom nothing is lost” (*AF* 510). Despite “The Art of Fiction,” critics, encouraged by the reservations James expressed about painterly and literary impressionism in the 1870s and 1880s, have tended to see him as mainly invested in the language of impressionism in the second half of his career.[4] In this article I demonstrate that James’s *Portrait* is in part an early exploration of the role of impressions in acquiring knowledge and freedom, which James later continued in a theoretical mode in his essays of the 1880s about the art of fiction. While James’s *Portrait* has often been understood as a study of Isabel’s idealism, I will bring to the fore a counterbalancing empiricism within the novel which is especially evident in its recognition scenes centered on impressions.[5] William James characterizes philosophy in *Pragmatism* (1907) as a clash between two temperaments, “free-willist” rationalism (which includes idealism) and fatalistic empiricism. This distinction helps me to offer a new account of the role of the impression in his brother’s fiction as a form of knowledge which mediates between freedom and confinement. I will also try to show how the aesthetic idealism of the novel’s various aesthetes can be seen as a response to the imprisoning fatalism which William James believed was inherent in the material world posited by empiricism: the metonymy in James’s art of impressions (and the best literary impressionism), and also in his characters’ acts of connoisseurship and curation, can, on occasions, invest the material with liberating ideas. And, through her final romantic impressions of the novel, Isabel’s imagination “discencumbers” her own experience sufficiently that she has room to make a moral choice.

The impression is a concept with potentially conflicting implications, both empiricist and idealist.[6] It is perhaps the central concept of the empiricist tradition that began with John Locke and David Hume. It implies that knowledge is rooted in an individual's first-hand perception of the external world. Locke and Hume argued "that all our knowledge is founded" in "*experience*."[7] For them, every simple idea derives from a simple sensation, which Hume called an "impression." The mind builds more complex ideas out of these original ideas by perceiving them internally. Impressions, however, also had their idealist aspects. Hume, in one of his many sceptical moments, suggests that our notions of the solid objects of external reality are a "fiction" which our imagination "feign[s]" by assuming that our transient impressions are enduring.[8] Perhaps to avoid this disabling scepticism, psychologists and philosophers of the nineteenth century avoided the term "impression."

During the nineteenth century, the impression was taken up by painters, critics, and novelists. Landscape painters in France in the 1820s began to describe their preliminary studies in oil paints as capturing their "impressions." The scandal of the later "impressionists" was that they exhibited such mere impressions. Influenced perhaps by empiricism, they championed the impression as a spontaneous, personal perception of a scene, captured outdoors and in the moment, free of inherited aesthetic knowledge. French literary impressionists—such as Daudet, Maupassant, and the Goncourts—brought more ideation to their impressions, as we might expect of artists whose medium was language. The literary impression became still more idealist in the hands of critics such as Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, associated as they are with aestheticism and "impressionist criticism." The imaginative freedom afforded by their version of the impression underlay their highly idiosyncratic responses to works of visual and verbal art, such as Pater's extravagantly eccentric description of the *Mona Lisa* in *The Renaissance* (1873).

Portrait and *Partial Portraits* demonstrate that if you get the impression's compromise between idealism and empiricism wrong, you may walk into traps and lose your freedom, or be confined to a blinkered vision. If impressions are our source of knowledge, this is freeing in that it encourages us to go out into the world and to form our own opinions. But they may be confining, limiting our knowledge to the surfaces of the material world. If, however, the imagination augments the impression, we may see what lies beyond the material. On the other hand, if the imagination is too transformative of the impression, we may be deceived in our perceptions, or by impressions others have crafted for us.

While his views on the impressionist painters would soften later, the younger James thought that the impressionists communicated too little knowledge through their impressions. In 1876 in Paris he attended the second exhibition of impressionist paintings, seeing works by Renoir, Monet, and Pissarro. Like most critics, he criticized the painters for presenting their raw sense impressions as finished works of art. He thought their impressions were unimaginative, "[un]worthy of record," "simplification[s]."[9] James had more sympathy for the French literary impressionists. Daudet in particular had "an extraordinary sensibility to all the impressions of life." [10] He admired their freedom to observe life uninhibitedly: Daudet was "so free" (*AD* 509), while Maupassant's fictions led him to champion the "perfect freedom" of the "art of the novelist."[11]

Even then, however, James felt that their privileging of the knowledge provided by impressions confined them to a superficial view of the world which did not account for character and psychology. James wrote that Daudet is "much less concerned with the moral, the metaphysical world" than he is with the "sensible" (*AD* 501). The "moral" is "the reaction of *thought* in the face of the human comedy" (*GE* 674, italics added). Unlike English novelists, the French often missed the moral: Flaubert is indifferent as a "painter of ideas and moral states."[12] Maupassant "has simply skipped the whole reflective part of his men and

women" (*GM* 385). It was only in Daudet that James found "the idea and the picture melt[ing] everywhere into one," the idea fusing with the impression.[13] In these moments, Daudet's imagination freed him to learn, within the world of the sensible, about a moral world of ideas, beliefs and emotions. James's praise of Maupassant helps us to see that it is metonymy which achieves this (the substitution of an attribute of something—including a part of it—for the thing itself): occasionally his "visual sense" "*selects* unerringly . . . catches the particular thing in which the character of the object or the scene resides," through an "admirable system of simplification" (*GM* 368, 372). However, this simplification too often degenerated in James's view into the oversimplification of painterly impressionism: one of Maupassant's vignettes is "an impression, as painters say nowadays, in which the figures are cheap" (*GM* 369).

English novelists, in James's view, had the opposite problem to the French: too few impressions and too many ideas. Eliot was, for him, representative of this predicament. While Daudet's "source of information" could be "the personal impression," Eliot's was increasingly books (*GE* 677). Daudet and Maupassant's freedom contrasts with Eliot's loss of "freedom of observation" and "free aesthetic life," when she shut herself away with a man of ideas, Lewes.[14] She no longer "inhal[ed]… impressions," leaving behind her earlier "pre-eminently . . . empirical" work, with its "natural . . . observation" (*GE* 670, 672, 674).

The impressionist painters and novelists lacked freedom, since their knowledge was based on superficial impressions; the English novelists lacked freedom, since their knowledge was based on too few impressions. In "The Art of Fiction," which James called a "plea for liberty," he promoted his own impression as a compromise between the two.[15] James's essay responds to Walter Besant's own "The Art of Fiction" (1884) in which he prescribed a series of rules for elevating fiction into an "art." Chief among these was his insistence that everything in fiction which is "not the result of personal experience and observation is

worthless . . . To take an extreme case: a young lady brought up in a quiet country village should avoid descriptions of garrison life."[16] James's response to this attempt to confine novelists' freedom of subject was to develop his own version of the impression, one which was informed by the French, but which sought to be more imaginatively penetrating.

James's impression allowed him to sidestep Besant's rules while also satisfying their basic demand for veracity. By all means "write from experience," but realize that "impressions *are* experience"; indeed, the novel is an "impression of life" (*AF* 510, 507). Since Hume, impressions had been characterized as individual, intense and fleeting, all of which helped James make bids for the freedom of the novelist. If an impression is individual, its content and form cannot be prescribed in advance by rules. If a novel is an impression, its value lies in its intensity; any prescription will weaken its intensity and imaginative penetration. Finally, if a fleeting impression constitutes experience, the novelist is free to write about people or episodes with which they have the most cursory acquaintance.

In "The Art of Fiction" James chose a female novelist to illustrate his liberating impression, presumably because she lacked the freedom and hence the knowledge of her male counterparts. This "woman of genius," based on the novelist Anne Thackeray Ritchie, managed to give a convincing impression in one of her stories of young French Protestants purely on the basis of a fleeting impression of some young men through a doorway as she climbed a staircase in Paris: "it lasted only a moment, but that moment was experience" (*AF* 509, 510). How? She did so with her "imagination assisting" her "impression" (*AF* 509). Ritchie's imaginative impression offers her the freedom to write beyond her material station in life, beyond gender, nationality and the threshold of a doorway.

The impression also allows James to evade the dictate that fiction must have a "conscious moral purpose" (*AF* 508). While the French literary impressionists had a "large, keen way of looking at life" (*GM* 377), and could be "*personnel* . . . [in] giv[ing] one's self

away in one's books," English novelists, by contrast, had "certain impressions and ideas, to which we are unwilling to give a voice" (*AD* 502). In the face of this inhibition, James asserts the impression: "taste" is only a "secondary aid" for the novelist—"the first is a capacity for receiving straight impressions."[17] James implicitly redefined Besant's notion of "moral" by calling English prudishness "moral timidity" (*AF* 519). For James, "the essence of moral energy is to survey the whole field," since "the province of art is all life" (*AF* 519, 515). This obligation to know everything (to see everything, with the help of unblinking impressions) became, paradoxically, for James a kind of artistic freedom: "no one can ever have made a seriously artistic attempt without becoming conscious of an immense increase—a kind of revelation—of freedom" (*AF* 515). For James, knowledge and freedom, then, especially as instanced in the impression, are complicatedly symbiotic.

This symbiosis plays out in interesting ways in James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. Isabel has to consider to what extent various kinds of knowledge might aid or obstruct her pursuit of freedom. The education which Isabel undergoes is reflective of how James developed his own distinctive impression. Isabel experiments with different epistemologies, different sources of knowledge: idealist, impressionist, aesthetic, and empiricist. Recent critics have tried to account for the fact that "James writes Isabel as a series of images that refuse to coalesce into a singular frame with definitive motives, morals, feelings, and goals" by conceiving of her character as anti-novelistic (a character in flight from plot) or anti-psychological (an anticipation of the decentered subject).[18] I account for Isabel's lack of coalescence with reference to the philosophy, psychology, aesthetics and painting of James's time (especially as instanced in the impression), which I treat as intertexts rather than influences. Painting and aesthetics aside, if asked to make an argument of influence, I would confine myself to the claim that James had mediated access to the psychologists and philosophers I discuss via the texts he had read of his brother and Walter Pater. Both of these

authors synthesized large amounts of philosophy and psychology, including Hume and, to a lesser extent, Locke.

When we are introduced to Isabel, as she makes her first visit to the Touchetts' house, Gardencourt, she seems to be an independent empiricist who relies on her own impressions. We are told of her "comprehensiveness of observation"; with "alertness . . . she evidently caught impressions."[19] Yet in an analepsis which takes us back to the first encounter between Isabel and her aunt, Mrs Touchett, in Albany four months earlier, we learn that adolescent Isabel neglected her impressions in favor of her ideas, perceiving life secondhand through books. In this respect, Isabel is like William James's model of the "rationalist" (a category which includes the "idealist").[20] William defined rationalists as "going by 'principles,'" "intellectualistic," "idealistic," "optimistic," "free-willist," and "dogmatical," as against "empiricists" whom he sees as "going by 'facts,'" "materialistic," "pessimistic," and "fatalistic."[21] But Isabel is often forced to acknowledge the demands of empiricism, and so one way of understanding her and the novel is as a quest to find an accommodation of the two temperaments, both of which seem necessary for her survival and appreciation of life.[22]

Isabel's early youth has rationalist characteristics. She finds freedom within herself, in the exercise of her imagination, stimulated by books: "she carried within herself a great fund of life" (35). Mrs Touchett first comes across Isabel "seated alone with a book," in a ground-floor room which had once housed one of the two entrances to her grandmother's house (22). Isabel "had never opened the bolted door [of the disused entrance] nor removed the green paper . . . from its side-lights" (25). This image anticipates in reverse the open door through which Ritchie in "The Art of Fiction" is able to engage imaginatively with experience. Schooled at home, Isabel is withdrawn from experience and observation, founding her knowledge on the inherited wisdom which she finds in books. The effect of this lack of

exposure to first-hand impressions is to make Isabel the intellectual daughter, typically ensconced in a "history of German Thought," perhaps idealist (25).

How then does Isabel become the apparent empiricist of chapter one? She has been "taken up" by her aunt, Mrs Touchett, who, arriving in Albany, "gave her so many fresh impressions" (22, 28). James describes Mrs Touchett's inquiry "into the condition of her nieces" in empiricist terms: she has "no need of writing, for she should attach no importance to any account of them that she should elicit by letter; she believed, always, in seeing for one's self" (27). In England, Isabel's impressions are also reminiscent of those James identified in the work of the French literary impressionists: vivid and imaginative appreciations of English life which make her feel free. One of a line of impressionable young heroines in James's fiction, Isabel is "fresh and natural and quick to understand," with a "candid and susceptible mind" (57, 29).

Yet some of Isabel's rationalist characteristics persist when she is in England, meaning she is never a "blank page, a pure white surface" (as Pansy is described later), a Lockean *tabula rasa* (331). She tells Ralph that "I am said to be too theoretic" (49). She is pulled both towards her old ideas and to her new impressions—like many aesthetes, who were influenced by both empiricist and idealist thought, such as Pater, or his eponymous Marius the Epicurean, whose bildungsroman of 1885 is subtitled "his sensations and ideas." While finding a new material freedom in England, Isabel's lack of money puts pressure on her to marry. Despite this, she rejects the proposals of two suitors, English aristocrat Lord Warburton and American businessman Caspar Goodwood, declaring her independence in terms which are partly empiricist. When Lord Warburton invites her to seek the testimony of his friends, she says, "I don't need the recommendation of your friends" (111). Explaining her refusal to Ralph Touchett, Isabel claims that she wants "to look about me . . . to see for myself" (157). There is also a rationalist or idealist strain to these decisions: she rejects the

material wealth of these men as encumbering her freedom. In the face of the "fatalism" of her own "material" situation, she asserts her imaginative will in "going by 'principles'" and "free will," to use William James's definitions of the empiricist and the rationalist. Similarly, Isabel resists Madame Merle's suggestion that identity manifests itself in a person's "things": "nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; on the contrary, it's a limit, a barrier" (211). I don't see Isabel as an idealist operating within an empiricist world, but as someone in whom both temperaments are active, sometimes at odds with each other.

If her refusal of Warburton is an idealist flight from the material, a reversion to her earlier state in Albany, it is frustrated when Ralph Touchett transfers to her his large inheritance. He apparently does this for similarly idealist reasons: he wants to offer her the freedom to "gratify" her "imagination," and, in so doing, gratify his own (192, 195). Dorothy Van Ghent ascribes the "subtlest . . . consciousnesses" of James's protagonists largely to the freedom they enjoy through the immense amount of money with which he endows them.[23] (Unfortunately Ralph's action also allows others to gratify their imaginations at his and Isabel's expense). Isabel initially reacts to her windfall by continuing to "gratify her imagination": her acceptance of penurious Osmond is another rejection of the material. Not only does she embrace a man with few things, she also transfers the material weight of her fortune to a man who has the necessary taste to sublimate it aesthetically. Early on, Isabel tells Ralph that a "fortune means freedom" but later realizes that

> At bottom her money had been a burden, had been on her mind, which was filled with the desire to transfer the weight of it to some other conscience. What would lighten her own conscience more effectually than to make it over to the man who had the best taste in the world? (233, 449).

Here we notice a curious parallel between Osmond's character and the impression's mediation of the moral and the sensible. Osmond is, in Mrs Touchett's eyes, "a critic, a student of the exquisite" (287). Osmond believes that "one ought to make one's life a work of art" (323). We could say, then, that he translates his "fine perceptions" (275), his discriminating impressions, into exquisite arrangements of objects with which he makes further impressions. He is, after all, in Ralph's scornful formulation, "the incarnation of taste" (363). As an aesthete, then, Osmond invests material with a governing idea, finding a freedom beyond the merely "sensible" through a discriminating arrangement of objects, just as the best impressionists do through metonymy. This is why Isabel gives Osmond her fortune. Madame Merle alludes to this kind of alchemy in the conversation with Isabel which I have just mentioned, about "things." Merle offends Isabel by saying "I have a great respect for *things*!" (211). Merle then offers a kind of aestheticized and materialistic version of Hume's sceptical notion that perhaps the self is nothing more than a bundle of transient impressions: for Merle, the self is a bundle of "things" which embody one's taste.[24] Madame Merle says of the self that "It overflows into everything that belongs to us . . . one's clothes, the books one reads, the company one keeps," with the result that "One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self" (211).

"Taste," then, is presented as a means by which ideas can liberate us from what William James thinks of as the imprisoning determinism of the material, as can be seen when Madame Merle visits Pansy in the prison that is her convent: "she has a charming little room, not in the least conventual, with a piano and flowers. She has arranged it delightfully; she has so much taste" (580). Similarly, it is the exceptional taste of Ned Rosier, Madame Merle and Osmond that makes their collections, which are materially modest, more than the sum of their parts.

Isabel has to develop her own self-deluding aesthetic habits in order to marry Osmond. The misreading of Osmond which leads her to marry him is the kind of misprision an aesthetic critic might make through his impressions. If Isabel's impressions hitherto had lacked imagination, perhaps in allowing her to dismiss so quickly Lord Warburton's offer of marriage, they now become too imaginative, like Pater's, or even like Wilde's, whose impressionistic "critic as artist" sees the object "as in itself it really is not."[25] Her aesthetic impressions romanticize Osmond so that she is for a time blind to his faults. Rather than allowing her to gratify her imagination, as Ralph had hoped, her fortune places a strain on her imagination to romanticize Osmond into an appropriate financial recipient. Osmond's own aesthetic idealism similarly leads to a flawed appreciation of Isabel as an artistic object. A lack of knowledge of the other imprisons each in a loveless marriage.

Isabel makes the grave mistake of marrying Osmond through a series of failures of perception in which the aesthetic and the empiricist aspects of her impressions are at odds: on the one hand many of her impressions—like those of the painterly and literary impressionists—have failed truly to penetrate Osmond's alluring aesthetic surfaces; on the other hand, those few that do seem to have penetrated this surface have in fact been distorted by her innate ideas and ideals, both romantic and intellectual, idealizing what would otherwise be dull or bleak.[26]

Isabel believes that, from the start of her association with Osmond, she has had her eyes open. Reflecting on her first meeting with Osmond with Ralph, and anticipating her trip to his villa in Florence, she says, "I shall see Mr. Osmond for myself" (262). However, her early faith in her powers of perception reflects a facile notion of empiricism, reminiscent of Besant's realism (as described by James in "The Art of Fiction"):

> She always returned to her theory that a young woman whom after all every one thought clever, should begin by getting a general impression of life. This was necessary to prevent mistakes, and after it should be secured she might make the unfortunate condition of others an object of special attention. (56).

Such perfunctory empiricism may also remind us of what James thought were the over-simplifications of the painterly impressionists and of Maupassant. Isabel marries Osmond once she relaxes what James describes more generally as "the working of . . . observation" (269): after returning from her grand tour with Madame Merle, "she told Ralph that she had 'seen life' in a year or two, and that she was already tired, not of life, but of observation" (371).

Isabel's imagination falsifies her impressions in three ways, as she realizes in her vigil of chapter 42. Her theory about Osmond means that she perceives his weaknesses as strengths; she wrongly groups certain of his characteristics into a beautiful pattern; and she mistakes a part of him for the whole. As a result of these three errors, Isabel realises that she has been a poor critic: "she had not read him right," she had misconstrued Osmond as a portrait (earlier, the narrator compares his beard to that of a sixteenth-century painting, while Isabel perceives him as one of the drawings in the Uffizi [449, 239, 260]). William James and Pater argued that our perception imposes provisional patterns on the moving atoms of reality in order to offer us intelligible sense impressions.[27] In chapter 42, Isabel realizes that she has made a mistake in this process: her existing ideas apperceive her impressions of Osmond's poverty and loneliness by casting a pattern round them designated "noble" (449). (Apperception is the notion that perception combines sensation, from outside, with ideation, from within). In doing this, Isabel has created what William James called "illusions," whereby the "power of imagination . . . falsif[ies] present impressions of sense."[28] Her final

error in perception results from her inability to read the kind of metonymy in which Ritchie or, on occasions, Maupassant were practised: "he had not disguised himself, during the year of his courtship, any more than she. But she had seen only half his nature then . . . she had mistaken a part for the whole" (448–49).

To mistake a part for the whole is classified by William James as an error in "reasoning" called a "confusion."[29] William contrasts such "reasoning" with "empirical thinking," and, as one of William James's chapter titles explains, "In Reasoning, We Pick Out Essential Qualities" from objects.[30] William James explains that "the only difference between a muddle-head and a genius is that between extracting wrong characters and right ones. In other words, a muddle-headed person is a genius spoiled in the making."[31] Ritchie was a "woman of genius" because of her gift for impressionist metonymy, but Isabel is no genius (*AF* 509).

It is only when Isabel receives a more empiricist impression that she fully recognizes her situation and can make freer choices. Now her self-destructive flight from the material stops and she makes a kind of accommodation with it. In a scene strikingly prescient of James's description of Ritchie's impression, Isabel, a sensitive woman receives an unexpected and illuminating impression through a doorway, a moment which—eventually—allows her, like Ritchie, to reach the "truth" (543). Hitherto, Isabel has confused her aesthetic impressions of Osmond with empiricist ones. But now aesthetic or romantic impressions allow her to use this new knowledge as the basis for a free moral choice, rather than a vengeful one, as we will see.

Isabel's famous revelatory impression in chapter 40 is better understood as one of a cluster of three through which she realises that she is being deceived. The first is the famous impression Isabel receives of Madame Merle standing and Gilbert Osmond sitting. The second impression is the return of this impression during Isabel's vigil. The third impression

Isabel receives courtesy of Osmond's sister, Countess Gemini, who tells her that Pansy is Osmond's illegitimate daughter. Isabel's first impression is an example of what Locke and Hume, respectively, called "sensation," or "external sensation," the second is an example of their "reflection," or "internal" perception.[32] The third impression is not perceptual but conceptual. Each of these three impressions involves a defamiliarization of Isabel's perception: they are described respectively as "something new," "strange" and "bewildering" (429, 446, 575). Early critics of impressionist painters were similarly bemused by the painters' alien broad brushstrokes. In William James's terms, these impressions are sensations, rather than perceptions, since their usual apperceptive links have been broken, rendering them unassimilable to Isabel's past experience. It is the impressions' strangeness which allows them to be liberating: prior to this, Isabel's empiricist freedom to observe has been weakened both by the determinism inherent in the way her imagination works, and by the efforts of Osmond and Madame Merle to deceive her. The first impressions of James's recognition scenes are influenced by painterly and literary impressionism. The later reflective impressions owe more to the impression's history in philosophy, psychology, and aesthetic criticism.

In Rome, Isabel returns to the Palazzo Roccanera from a typical walk with Pansy in the Campagna. She enters her private drawing room alone, beyond which lies a "large ante-chamber": "Just beyond the threshold of the drawing-room she stopped short, the reason for her doing so being that she had received an impression" (429). The impression is odd: Osmond is sitting while Madame Merle stands, and there is a "familiar silence" between them (429).

James emphasizes the materiality of Isabel's impression: it "struck" her twice, and she "felt it as something new" (429). It halts her: "she stopped short" (429). The information she receives is material, bodily, not semantic or conceptual (she does not overhear anything).

What is unusual is Osmond and Merle's "relative position" (429)—only if they were intimates would a man allow a woman to stand while he sat. Isabel has the freedom to observe this because for once she herself has managed not to make an impression, to evade the material: "the soundlessness of her step gave her time to take in the scene before she interrupted it" (429).

There is a little apperception, however. For Isabel, "the thing made an image, lasting only a moment" (429). This sentence anticipates Ritchie's impression in "The Art of Fiction"; for Ritchie, "the glimpse made a picture; it lasted only a moment, but that moment was experience" (*AF* 510). Both their impressions undergo immediate aesthetic treatment within the mind to compose themselves into a picture: Ritchie makes more progress in this, though, than Isabel—"she had got her impression, and she evolved her type" (*AF* 510). Isabel lacks "the power to guess the unseen from the seen" (*AF* 510). She more passively witnesses "something detected" (429).

The second important impression occurs in chapter 42 during what James calls in the preface "my young woman's extraordinary meditative vigil," in which she sits up alone, reflecting on Osmond's angry insistence that it is within her power to marry off Pansy to Lord Warburton.[33] Her "soul was haunted with terrors":

> What had suddenly set them into livelier motion she hardly knew, unless it were the strange impression she had received in the afternoon of her husband and Madame Merle being in more direct communication than she suspected. This impression came back to her from time to time, and now she wondered that it had never come before. (446–47).

This second impression is the return of her daytime impression of sensation, in which something external made an impression on her mind. It returns as a Humean "impression of reflection," in which the memory of this impression makes another impression on her mind. For James, reflection is often a form of internal perception, as in the empiricist tradition of Locke and Hume, and this chapter is no exception. Her process of reflection also has analogies with the composing power of the pre-impressionist painter's mind. The early defamiliarization she experienced, characteristic of impressionist painting, is now partially overcome in a vigil in which her mind begins to assimilate the impression. In James's late fiction he represented this process rather as a pre-impressionist, classical painter might put together the *paysage composé*, the composite picture, in his studio, by fitting together and finishing earlier studies, impressions gathered *en plein air* earlier in the day. In the preface James calls it Isabel's "vigil of searching criticism" (*AN* 57). There are also, then, analogies here with the aesthetic critic who, after a day in an art gallery, refines the impressions of paintings he has seen.

James also represents Isabel's "terrors" in empiricist terms; her impressions and ideas are represented as atoms which move according to laws of association, the terrors moving to the front of her thought "as quickly as a place was made for them"; they are associatively "set . . . into livelier motion" by the impression of Osmond and Merle which comes "back to her from time to time" (446, 447). Isabel's mind is more passive in these reflective phases of recognition than James's later protagonists.[34]

The last of the three impressions that comprise Isabel's recognition is a conceptual one, rather than perceptual or material. It is an auditory impression which provides the kind of verbal revelation that Isabel's first silent impression lacked. Osmond's sister, Countess Gemini, supplies Isabel with the information which will explain Isabel's previous impression of reflection, and the impression of sensation from which it derived. The Countess begins

with a revelation about Pansy's supposed mother, Osmond's dead wife: "My first sister-in-law had no children!" (571). The Countess later sums up Madame Merle's motivations in trying to marry off Pansy to Warburton:

> "She has failed so dreadfully herself that she is determined her daughter shall make it up."
>
> Isabel started at the words "her daughter," which the Countess threw off so familiarly. "It seems very wonderful," she murmured; and in this bewildering impression she had almost lost her sense of being personally touched by the story. (575).

Isabel reacts to the Countess's story by receiving a "bewildering" impression of it (575). To some extent this seems to be a deliberate effort, rather than something experienced passively: she names the situation "very wonderful" (575). This "wonder" refers back to an earlier implicit impression of the Countess's same story, several pages before: "Isabel sat staring at her companion's story as at a bale of fantastic wares that some strolling gipsy might have unpacked on the carpet at her feet" (573–74). James here uses motifs from romance to make the "mere still lucidity" of recognition, in the words of the preface's description of chapter 42, "as 'interesting' as the surprise of a caravan or the identification of a pirate" (*AN* 57). Here Isabel seems again to intend to construe the "story" in this way: she "sat staring at her companion's story" (573). The Countess's story has become an exotic trinket from a romance, offered to her by a strolling gipsy. In the 1908 text James adds a second "wonderful" impression which the Countess has of Isabel as she is about to name Madame Merle: "'As for her veritable mother—!' But with this Pansy's wonderful aunt dropped—as, involuntarily, from the impression of her sister-in-law's face, out of which more eyes might

have seemed to look at her than she had ever had to meet."[35] James again dramatizes recognition by using "incidents" from romance figuratively.

There is another reason for James's enlisting of romance to describe Isabel's impressions. These deliberately "wonderful" aspects of her impressions mean that she is viewing her experience, here the story of her husband's past, as though it were a work of art, a fiction. She derives this fictive impulse in part from the deceptions of Osmond and Merle: the Countess describes how "with the aid of a change of residence" on Osmond's part, from Naples to Florence, "the little fable was easily set going" that Pansy was Osmond's deceased wife's daughter (572). These fictional forms affect how she receives the new information: "she had almost lost her sense of being personally touched by the story" (575). In my view, romance is not only the right genre for reflecting this kind of overwhelming experience but also allows Isabel to enlist the aesthetic for moral purposes. Isabel's romantic impressions, by detaching her from the situation, allow her to be sufficiently disinterested to be altruistic, to make a free moral choice, to keep her promise to Pansy, as she later seems to.

In the preface (1907) to the New York Edition of *The American* James describes romance as a "deflexion" from reality (*AN* 30). The real is what we cannot escape knowing—what "we cannot possibly *not* know, sooner or later"—while the romantic is what "we never *can* directly know," "the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire" (*AN* 31–32). Romance shows "experience liberated, . . . disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it," "uncontrolled by our general sense of 'the way things happen' " (*AN* 33, 34). The invocation of the romantic in these later impressions indicates that Isabel "never can directly know" what lies at the heart of the Countess's story: she thus respects her deceivers' unknowable otherness. It also shows how Isabel is disconnected from the rest of her experience. The "conditions that we usually attach" to experience and "the way things

happen," become increasingly remote from the moment Isabel sees Madame Merle standing and Osmond seated; the explanatory concepts that the Countess offers to these percepts is the peak of all this strangeness.

James's description of how the genre of romance functions could account for Isabel's romantic impressions. But it also affords her more freedom in that it allows her to assert control over this new knowledge since she channels it through the "beautiful circuit[s]" of her own thought (*AN* 32). True, the impressions comprising Isabel's recognition of how she has been denied her freedom also put her in touch inescapably with the "real," what she "cannot possibly *not* know, sooner or later" (*AN* 31). She is the bewildered and passive empiricist subject, or impressionist heroine, struck by "facts" which repeatedly return at night, "fatalistic" and "pessimistic," in William James's description of the empiricist. (Her spiteful sister-in-law is determined to spill the beans.) Through her romantic impressions in the company of Countess Gemini, however, Isabel reasserts herself. She enlists her imagination to try to understand the story, because romance is the genre in which the imagination is least fettered. Isabel's earlier impressions of Osmond and Madame Merle were defamiliarized in the sense that they were unprecedented. Now her imagination, unable to assimilate them before, makes unexpected and exotic associations. Isabel, in objectifying the Countess's words as a wonderful story, almost disowns any personal interest in it. As a result, she is able to become a disinterested witness to all the intrigue, rather than a wounded party. This allows her an extraordinary degree of imaginative sympathy, in which she experiences compassion for Osmond's first wife ("he must have been false to his wife" [573]), and for Madame Merle ("how the poor woman must have suffered at seeing me—!" [575]). If her recognition, and the impression's role within it, were somewhat passive – she was after all, according to the preface, "under the spell of recognitions"—this moral and aesthetic aspect is more active (*AN* 57).

The aesthetic aspects of the impression can sometimes enhance their role in the recognition of empiricist reality. In James's later fictions the search for the aesthetic often causes his protagonists to happen on the truth; aesthetic templates can then help them to read this truth.[36] Here the action of the aesthetic template is moral, and in a way which exceeds the "moral" of his essays of the 1880s. It not only offers the kind of penetrating perception of Osmond and Madame Merle's psychology and ethics which James felt was beyond the grasp of the painterly and literary impressionists, but also allows an imaginative sympathy and compassion which inform her return to Rome, perhaps to fulfil her promise to Pansy. Metonymy is a form of simplification which involves imaginative projection. The metonymy of impressionism, whether painterly, literary or that of James's novelist of genius, involves the "power to guess the unseen from the seen," as when Ritchie infers a whole way of life from a glimpse, or we fill in the gaps between a painter's broad brushstrokes. Isabel's romantic impression offers a different kind of imaginative projection. This is a candidate for an instance of what James describes in "The Art of Fiction" as the "one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together" (*AF* 520). If Isabel is in some ways a prototype for Ritchie, in this sense the prototype outperforms the finished product: the dramatic example of Isabel perhaps helps us to understand this central but obscure Jamesian tenet. James's novelistic and theoretical treatments of the impression share the sense that the moral and the aesthetic sense combine in their commitment to observing all, seeing all. But Isabel expands the ethical possibilities of the aesthetic impression. During her courtship with Osmond, she confuses her moral sense with her aesthetic sense. But she then shows how the aesthetic sense can enhance the moral sense. By romanticizing Madame Merle and Pansy's situation, she gains enough distance to pity them. This is perhaps what motivates her to continue to be imprisoned in her marriage. The impression's knowledge has not made her free, but it has freed her to make a moral choice.

<a>Notes

1 Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Philip Horne (London: Penguin, 2011), 453. All further references to the novel are to this edition, unless otherwise indicated, whose text is based on the 1882 edition (rather than the 1908 New York Edition), and are included in the text.

2 Henry James, "George Eliot's Life," *Atlantic Monthly* 55 (May 1885): 677. All references to James's essays, including those reproduced in *Partial Portraits*, unless otherwise indicated, are to their first appearances in print in periodicals. All further references to this essay are included in the text with the abbreviation *GE*.

3 Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," *Longman's Magazine* 4 (September 1884): 507. All further references are included in the text with the abbreviation *AF*.

4 See, for example, Daniel Hannah, *Henry James, Impressionism, and the Public* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2013), 27. Adam Parkes usefully characterizes *Portrait* as impressionist in its somewhat elusive central character, in the demands placed on the reader by being as bewildered as its protagonist, and in its open ending (*A Sense of Shock: The Impact of Impressionism on Modern British and Irish Writing* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], chap. 1, Oxford Scholarship Online Literature). Others have shown how Isabel thinks pictorially (for example, H. Peter Stowell, *Literary Impressionism, James and Chekhov* [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980], 177–86), and Marianna Torgovnick, *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism, and the Novel: James, Lawrence, and Woolf* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985], 158–74).

5 Some critics see Isabel's idealism as American, particularly Emersonian, for example, Millicent Bell, *Meaning in Henry James* (London: Harvard University Press, 1991), 90.

6 For a fuller history, see chaps. 2 and 3 of John Scholar, *Henry James and the Art of Impressions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

7 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Vol. 1, ed. John W. Yolton (London: J.M. Dent, 1961), 77.

8 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 253–54.

9 Henry James, *The Painter's Eye: Notes and Essays on the Pictorial Arts*, ed. John L. Sweeney (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1956), 217–18.

10 Henry James, "Alphonse Daudet," *Century Illustrated Magazine* 26 (August 1883): 500. All further references are included in the text with the abbreviation *AD*.

11 Henry James, "Guy de Maupassant," *The Fortnightly Review* 49 (March 1888): 386. All further references are included in the text with the abbreviation *GM*.

12 Henry James, "Pierre Loti," *The Fortnightly Review* 49 (May 1888): 650.

13 Henry James, *Partial Portraits* (London: Macmillan, 1919), 199.

14 James, *Partial Portraits*, 46, 50.

15 Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson, *Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson: A Record of Friendship and Criticism*, ed. Janet Adam-Smith (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1948), 102.

16 Walter Besant, *The Art of Fiction* (Boston: Cupples, Upham, 1885), 18.

17 James, *Partial Portraits*, 399.

18 Jessica Krzeminski, "'The discovery was tremendous': Sex, Secrets, and Selfhood in *The Portrait of a Lady*," *The Henry James Review* 40, no. 3 (2019): 276. Examples of the anti-novelistic approach include Elizabeth Brogden and Miciah Hussey; a recent example of the anti-psychological approach is Phyllis van Slyck. See Elizabeth Brogden, "Isabel Archer and the Burdens of Centrality," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 50, no. 2 (2017): 255–77; Miciah

Hussey, “Eyeing the Beholder: Henry James’s Immaterial Portrait of a Lady,” *The Henry James Review* 37 (2016): 174–90; Phyllis van Slyck, “Isabel Archer’s ‘Delicious Pain’: Charting Lacanian Desire in *The Portrait of a Lady*,” *American Imago* 70, no. 4 (2013): 633–61.

19 Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Nicola Bradbury (Oxford: World’s Classics, 2009), 33. This edition reproduces James’s revised New York Edition text of 1908.

20 This is confusing since idealism and rationalism are distinct philosophical positions. But James emphasizes that in rationalism and empiricism he is describing two “temperaments,” or “tempers,” throughout the history of philosophy. See William James, *Pragmatism*, ed. Fredson Bowers and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (London: Harvard University Press, 1975), 11–13. I sometimes follow him in this.

21 James, *Pragmatism*, 13.

22 My understanding of these competing temperaments *within* Isabel prevent me subscribing to Matz’s exciting argument that the marriage of Isabel and Osmond is an allegory of impressionism’s often doomed combination of vital impressionability and aesthetic sophistication or, as we might say, impressions and ideas. See Jesse Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 86–87, 106–7.

23 Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 212.

24 Hume, *Treatise*, 252.

25 Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Volume 4, Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 159.

26 In this respect, Isabel's impressions anticipate those of Lambert Strether, which I analyze in *Henry James*, chap. 5.

27 Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1873), 207–8; William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 273.

28 William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 2, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (London: Harvard University Press, 1981), 743, 731.

29 James, *Principles*, vol 2, 976n17.

30 James, *Principles*, vol 2, 956.

31 James, *Principles*, vol 2, 976.

32 Locke, *Essay*, 78; Hume, *Treatise*, 7–8.

33 Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (New York: Scribner's, 1962), 57. All further references to James's prefaces are to this edition and are incorporated in the text with *AN*.

34 I describe Lambert Strether and Maggie Verver's more active impressions and recognitions in *Henry James*, 189–95, 241, 246.

35 James, *Portrait*, ed. Bradbury, 577.

36 Scholar, *Henry James*, 179–86, 255–58.