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The Violence of Representation: James, Sargent and the Suffragette

In the Spring and Summer of 1914, immediately before the outbreak of the First World War, militant suffragettes executed a series of attacks on paintings – mostly portraits – in public galleries. These began in early March with the slashing of Velasquez’s *Venus in the National Gallery* by Mary Richardson, and ended in mid-July with Margaret Gibb’s attack on Millais’s portrait of Thomas Carlyle.¹ On 4 May, the opening day of the Royal Academy, a woman ‘of distinctly peaceable appearance’² entered the gallery and wandered through several rooms before stopping in front of John Singer Sargent’s portrait of Henry James, commissioned by the author’s friends for his seventieth birthday a year earlier. According to eyewitness accounts, she then drew a meat cleaver from her muff and proceeded to hack at the painting, smashing the glass and slashing the canvas in three places before she was restrained by attendants and angry visitors. She was later identified as a suffragette named Mary Aldham, alias Mary Wood.³ At Marlborough Street Police Court, when the portrait was said to be worth £700, she commented that its value would be less had a woman painted it.⁴ Writing to the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) she gave further indications of why she had chosen this form of protest:

I have tried to destroy a valuable picture because I wish to show the public that they have no security for their property nor for their art treasures until women are given their political freedom [...]

Government rests upon the consent of the governed. Women do not consent to the present mode of government, leading, as it does, to the ruin of the souls and bodies of women and little children through sweating and prostitution.

People will say of me what they said of Mary Richardson, that I am not logical in what I do. I am not concerned with that. I want to say to the public, “You shall not live in safety and peace until women have the vote.” I have said it through destroying this picture.⁵

Aldham suggests a link between the suffragist threat to property, a category that – in this case – involves both monetary and aesthetic value, and the physical and spiritual damage caused by economic inequality. Her statement participates in a discourse that runs through this series of attacks, both in the suffragettes’ declarations and in press

responses: the symbolic equivalence between painted and physical bodies. Mary Richardson famously stated that she had ‘tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the Government for destroying Mrs Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history’;⁶ in Aldham’s statement the implied identification reaches beyond the bodies of suffragettes subjected to police brutality and force feeding to the ‘souls and bodies of women and little children’ wronged by a political system in which women’s voices are suppressed.

Strangely enough, James had depicted portrait-slashings in two tales written decades before Aldham’s attack, ‘The Story of a Masterpiece’ (1868) and ‘The Liar’ (1888); but as Thomas J. Otten points out, efforts to interpret the incident in relation to James’s fiction have been frustrated by the lack of proof that the suffragette knew the work of either James or Sargent.⁷ The curious coincidence remains just that. Nevertheless, Aldham’s action, read alongside other suffragist acts of militancy and contemporary responses to these acts, reflects tellingly on a significant web of ideas in James’s work. In an 1887 article on Sargent, James wrote that there is ‘no greater work of art than a great portrait – a truth to be constantly taken to heart by a painter holding in his hands the weapon that Mr. Sargent wields’.⁸ The power attributed to portraiture here is explored extensively in James’s novels and short stories.⁹ Nick Dormer in *The Tragic Muse* (1890), who chooses portrait-painting over a career in politics, believes that great portraits bypass political change, imagining that the subjects of these works join hands to form ‘the indestructible thread on which the pearls of history were strung’.¹⁰ The suffragettes’ attacks threatened this indestructibility, but as James’s image of the painter’s ‘weapon’ suggests, his conception of portraiture involved its own forms of violence – a violence that relates to women’s exclusion from the fields of political and artistic representation. Both in James’s fiction and other contemporary cultural sources, the dangers of female access to these privileged spheres are conveyed in terms of commercialisation and the debasement of culture; however, James’s exploration of the overlap between advertising and artistic representation suggests a deep ambivalence on the subject.

Aldham’s prediction that her act would be interpreted as illogical proved accurate (not least, perhaps, because contemporary commentators disregarded the majority of her statement, and more recent accounts appear only to have consulted the short extract reproduced in the mainstream press). In a letter to *The Times*, Edmund Gosse

called it an act of ‘senseless malice’, protesting that James had ‘nothing whatever to do with politics’, while *The Daily Express* characterized Aldham as ‘wild’ and ‘hysterical’.¹¹ *The New York Times* pointed to James’s sympathetic portrayals of women, reflecting that ‘the meaning of the British militants is past finding out’. ‘They should be put in asylums and kept there’, the author concluded.¹² These responses relate to a more general tendency to represent suffragette militancy in what Janet Lyon has called ‘the language of lunacy and morbid egomania’.¹³ Lyon draws attention to articles that appeared in *The Times* in March 1912, long before the attacks on artworks, which figured militant actions as symptoms of the same feminine malady – a ‘thirst for publicity’ – that could cause ‘violent loquacity’ and ‘ill-judged incursions, without talents, into literature or art’. Such tendencies were particularly common among unmarried women with ‘no domestic duties’.¹⁴ The message is familiar: women who stray beyond their allotted domestic sphere and seek representation in the fields of art, politics, or simply through verbal utterances, are part of a disease that threatens society.

Interestingly, the connection between failure of signification and desire for publicity was also put forward by critics of militancy within the suffrage movement. Laura Mayhall relates how members of one suffrage group, the Women’s Freedom League (WFL), ‘urged that protests should “be logical,” that is, should make sense to the ordinary person’; the emphasis of militant attacks should shift away from ‘attracting public attention’, and towards ‘hampering the mechanisms of government’.¹⁵ In 1911 WFL member Teresa Billington-Greig complained that the Pankhursts’ WSPU put ‘Militant machinery [...] into action purely for its advertising values’. She compared them to ‘a business firm’ which ‘advertises to bring the class of customers with whom it is most profitable to deal’, and asked ‘Is this the method of revolution or stage management?’¹⁶ James’s interest in the perceived overlap between politics, theatricality and publicity is evident in *The Bostonians* (1886), in which Verena Tarrant’s histrionic performances make her an effective advertisement for the feminist cause.

Suffragist responses to these accusations are both surprising and instructive. As Caroline Howlett points out, Mary Richardson’s reply to H. G. Wells’s dismissal of her attack on the Rokeby Venus as the act of ‘an overwrought lady’, devoid of ‘symbolical bearing upon the status of women’, indicates that his inability to interpret

her act is consistent with the way in which women's artistic representations have been suppressed throughout history.¹⁷ According to Richardson, men

must realise and recognise that women are possessed with the new gift of Prometheus's fire, and that they will write in fire or any other element as long as conditions deny them an entrance into the eternal city of their own evolution and progress [...] My hieroglyphic on the Velasquez 'Venus' will express much to the generations of the future.¹⁸

Richardson demonstrates the meaning of her act and presents it as art. Similarly, by inscribing her own sign onto the portrait of a man who would be remembered entirely for his art, Mary Aldham ensured that, for some viewers at least, Sargent's painting would also record the history of her cause. An eyewitness account of Aldham's attack in *Votes for Women* implied similar parallels between painting-slashing and artistic representation, whilst turning the common charges of meaninglessness, crude commerciality and lack of aesthetic sense back onto the 'elegant cultured crowd' in the gallery, who were transformed into 'a red-faced, brawling crowd' with 'ugly naked souls, and violent evil speech'. Their inability to understand the reason for the attack, recognise the horror of their own transformations, or see 'that there was something in the world more valuable and even more beautiful than the finely-wrought portrait of a fine writer' caused the correspondent to wonder 'what Mr. James's subtle writings conveyed to these crude obvious minds, or whether they really could discriminate between a Sargent picture and a lithograph advertisement of a mustard plaster'.¹⁹

Henry James was not in a mind to suggest such comparisons, and in many respects his private response to the incident – expressed in replies to friends and well-wishers – corresponded with that of the mainstream press. In one letter he called Aldham 'idiotic', and in another, sarcastically commented that 'the taste and sense and general fine feeling for things represented by the smash of an object really precious to the general mind [...] are matters to be acclaimed for the light and wisdom and reason that they shall bring to our councils!'²⁰ Nevertheless, it is also evident from these letters that the incident resonated with his own ideas about violence and representation. Lynda Nead comments that Richardson's slashing of the Rokeby Venus was described by the press in 'language usually reserved for the sensation

murder',²¹ and James's response to Aldham's attack shows that he was fully conversant with the type of word-play that identifies chipped paint and torn canvas with 'bloody gashes'.²² To Jessie Allen he wrote, 'I naturally feel very scalped and disfigured', and to anti-suffragist Mrs Humphrey Ward he played on the coincidence between the physical infirmity that prevented him from writing letters by hand, and the proximity of his pictured hand to one of the slashes.²³ For James this symbolic identification applied to the process of portraiture as well as the finished product. In 1897 he had written to the artist William Rothenstein who had asked him to sit, 'how shall I dare to say Yes to your [...] flattering proposal that I shall lay my own head on the block? You can so easily chop it off to vent any little irritation'²⁴

James's fascination with the links between portraiture and violence became evident early on, in his 1868 tale 'The Story of a Masterpiece'. Here he reveals an important source for his understanding of this conjunction of ideas in a reference to Browning's 'My Last Duchess' (1842), after which one of the paintings in the story is named. The 'masterpiece' of the story's title betrays its painter's unfavourable feelings towards his attractive subject, who is also his ex-lover. Her wealthy fiancé, whilst acknowledging the high merit of the portrait he has commissioned, reads there the failings he already suspects in his betrothed – her coldness and incapacity for deep feeling – and expresses the opinion that its 'reality' is 'brutal': 'if I were Marian', Lennox protests to the painter, 'I should feel as if you'd done me a certain violence'.²⁵ The story's denouement appears to reverse the situation in Browning's poem, in which the responsive living woman is silenced while her wondrous likeness remains. Though Lennox's deluded passion is marred by the revelations of the truthful portrait, he resolves not to dash Marian's admittedly materialistic hopes for the future, and instead vents his disappointment on the painting that testifies to another man's recognition of her failings. Seizing a 'long, keen poinard', he 'thrust it, with barbarous glee, straight into the lovely face of the image. He dragged it downward, and made a long fissure in the living canvas' (295). James's 'living' chimes with Browning's 'Looking as if she were alive',²⁶ providing a clue to the perceived interchangeability between paint and flesh that became so important in James's later works. Lennox's act is an assertion of his will – a way of imposing his particular meaning onto the image of his betrothed; but as in Browning's dramatic monologue, one of the most troubling features of this tale is the limitation of the woman's possibilities for signification. Her

point of view is almost entirely neglected, and the reader is left with an unsettling sense of the extent to which her economic powerlessness has dictated her behaviour.

'The Liar' (1888) revisits several of the same ideas: the portraitist who is also a jilted lover; the psychological power of portraiture; the stabbing of a painting. Here, however, the scrutiny is shifted away from the viewer and the sitter – though in this case it is the latter who perpetrates the physical act of violence – and onto the portraitist, Oliver Lyon. In exposing his sitter's weakness (Colonel Capadose's propensity to tell tall stories) Lyon betrays a lack of human sympathy, a malicious intentionality, and a species of monomania that are absent from the earlier tale. The notion that portraiture involves an element of violence is introduced through the legend that Sir David Ashmore, another of Lyon's subjects, refuses to be painted until he is very old because he is 'sure that [...] he would die directly afterwards' (CT 6, 388). This story, told by a woman sitting next to Lyon at dinner, turns out to be false – a reminder that the sort of exaggeration and performance that Capadose indulges in is, to an extent, an inevitable part of smooth social intercourse. Nevertheless the experience of sitting for Lyon seems far from painless. If this successful portraitist prides himself on an ability to penetrate beneath the skin of his subjects, Sir David is 'as submissive as if portraiture in oils had been a branch of surgery' (405). The comparison is in keeping with James's reference to Sargent's 'mastery' of his medium as a 'sharp, completely forged weapon' in his essay of 1887.²⁷ However, the significance of this episode lies not in what Lyon uncovers regarding his sitter, but in Sir David's remarks about Capadose, which reveal a human understanding and a willingness to consider the whole man that contrasts with the one-sided portrait that Lyon eventually paints. Sir David presents Capadose's compulsive lying as an illness that his friends 'usually understand' and 'don't haul him up' on, and mentions that 'he's very kind – he sticks to his wife and is fond of his children'. 'There is', Sir David assures the portraitist, 'no harm in him and no bad intention' (407). This is more than can be said for Lyon, who untruthfully 'professed to have felt a quick friendship' for the Colonel, and deceives his wife into believing that his desire to paint him is based on good faith – that he will 'bring [...] out' what Mrs Capadose calls his 'noble' nature (419).

Aside from his deceit and hypocrisy, Lyon's main failing is his simplifying vision. In portraying Capadose he wishes to 'set him up in that totality [of experience] about which he had talked with Sir David' (415), but here his use of the word 'totality'

implies a finality of judgment rather than breadth of understanding, while the term ‘set him up’ signifies entrapment. Lyon initially intends the portrait to be ‘a masterpiece of subtle characterisation, of legitimate treachery’ (415), only decipherable by those in the know, but later he decides that the Colonel’s character as a liar ‘should be perceptible even to the meanest intelligence – as overtopping as it had become to his own sense in the living man’, for by this stage he ‘saw nothing else’ (419). The painter’s observation that Capadose ‘used a very big brush’ (413) in telling anecdotes applies quite as fittingly to his own generalizing acts of representation.

Lyon’s intention of reducing the Colonel’s identity to one unfavourable trait appears to be triggered by an even more damaging desire, which he shares with Browning’s Duke: a wish to control or even suppress his beloved’s perceptions of and responses to others. When he first sees Mrs Capadose, her visual and aural occupation with her husband piques him: ‘She was listening, but she was also looking [...] Lyon was slightly disappointed that she could let *him* look at her so long without giving him a glance’ (389). He revisits this moment of absorption twice at later points. His own appreciation of Mrs Capadose is largely based on her beautiful surface, which he describes in terms appropriate to an art object. She has ‘the most charming head in the world’ of which ‘there could never be a replica’ (389); she is ‘an antique’ (400), ‘a sort of Roman type’ (391). These observations exemplify an idea that James frequently returns to: the interchangeability between women and art pieces as objects of male desire.²⁸ Indeed, one of the ironic features of the tale is that it was ‘the sight’ of one of Lyon’s paintings of Mrs Capadose that leads the Colonel to ‘fall in love’ (395) with her. Given these associations, it is unsurprising that a significant part of Mrs Capadose’s attraction for Lyon is her supposed lack of responsive faculties. These are described in pathological terms:

She was still the least spoiled beauty he had ever seen, with an absence of coquetry or any insinuating art that seemed almost like an omitted faculty; there were moments when she struck her interlocutor as some fine creature from an asylum – a surprising deaf-mute or one of the operative blind. (396)

When the Colonel destroys his own tell-tale image, ‘making a long, abominable gash’ with a ‘small Eastern dagger’, the act is depicted as a ‘sort of figurative suicide’ (431).

(Unlike in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which appeared two years later, the perpetrator's body remains intact.) But what is more to the point is the act of representational violence committed by the narrator, whose intense exhilaration upon witnessing the stabbing stems from his conviction that he has succeeded in superimposing his own interpretation onto Mrs Capadose's view of her husband.

'The Liar', written twenty-six years before the slashing of Sargent's painting, is the last of James's works to depict a physical attack on a portrait; but it does not mark the end of the author's fascination with the pitfalls of portraiture. In the two later tales examined here, the explanation of a personal motive on the part of the painter is lessened or – in the case of 'The Beldonald Holbein' – removed completely, so that the violence inherent in visual representation becomes the main focus.

Oliver Lyon's attitude towards Mrs Capadose implies a causal relationship between woman's object-status and her deprivation of subjectivity, but in the 1896 tale 'Glasses' this relationship is presented in shockingly literal terms. Flora Saunt's exclusive reliance on attracting men's looks – not only to secure her financial future through marriage but as the basis for her entire sense of self – leads directly to her blindness, as she persistently refuses to compromise her beauty by wearing the prescribed spectacles that would save her sight. Though the painter-narrator calls this obstinacy 'mad' (CT 9, 342), it is the violence of his reactions to the idea of his 'favourite sitter' (351) wearing glasses that renders her madness comprehensible. Flora's physical myopia is matched by a distorting tendency in her own acts of representation: as with Colonel Capadose, 'nothing in her talk ever matched with anything out of it' (331-32). The antithesis of this condition is embodied by the expressively ugly Mrs Meldrum, whose vision, aided by her 'goggles' (324) and supplemented by her wide human understanding, is far-reaching and incisive. The 'universal light' that she directs outwards onto the world (rather than back onto herself) competes with the faculties of the male artist, who is forced to recognize that 'she knew so much more about everything and everybody than I could ever squeeze out of my colour-tubes' (333). It is consistent with James's politics of representation that Mrs Meldrum's intelligent face is 'indescribably out of drawing' (318).

'Glasses' is packed with visual signifiers, and in many instances these are connected with violence, pathology and bestiality. Flora promotes herself as an animal to be sold, 'I've good eyes, good teeth, a good digestion and a good temper. I'm sound of wind and limb!' (327), and while Lord Iffield's response to this false advertising is

to return 'the animal as unsound' (360), Dawling reacts with an image of coercion: 'I would take her with leather blinders, like a shying mare' (343). The violence also works the other way, as Mrs Meldrum figures the removal of Flora's spectacles as taking off 'her muzzle' – an action that will make her 'as dangerous again as ever' (359). The grotesque conflation of the oral and visual parallels her horrific observation that Flora's eyes are 'good for nothing but to roll about like sugar-balls [...] in a child's mouth' (323), and according to the logic of the story, this second type of violence is caused by the first – the reduction of her being to the all-consuming attractiveness of her face. If the reductive act of looking is at various points described in violent terms, Flora Saunt's face, like that of the gorgon Medusa, can cause 'petrification' (332) in those who gaze upon it. In the theatre she is 'the aim' of fifty gun-like glasses, but when the narrator has 'levelled' his at her, he finds himself 'fixed to the spot' by the 'simple inability to cease looking at her' (363-64). Freud famously linked the Medusa myth with the fear of castration,²⁹ and Flora's effect on men can also be perceived as emasculating. There hangs 'from her belt a promiscuous fringe of scalps' (333), and Geoffrey Dawling falls in love 'as he might have broken his leg [...] the fracture was of a sort that would make him permanently lame' (336).

Here the language of art that is so often deployed by James to denote female objectification is intermingled with notions of commerce and advertising. Having recognised that her 'clear course' (321) in life is to catch a wealthy husband with her looks, Flora insists that her full name should appear in the Royal Academy catalogue that advertises the narrator's portrait of her. This tactic proves effective, and for one admirer, the artist's mediation in the transaction is entirely discounted. Dawling had, the narrator tells us, 'on the mere evidence of my picture taken [...] a tremendous fancy to her face [...] a judgment for which the rendering was lost in the subject, quite leaving out the element of art' (329). The young man comes to the studio 'only because he wanted to purchase' (330), so that the narrator asks 'why, for the sort of enjoyment he desired, it wouldn't be more to the point to deal directly with the lady' (330) – one of several suggestions of prostitution in the tale. In view of these associations between women, images and the purchasability of each, it is unsurprising that Lord Iffield's purchase of the portrait reignites the narrator's hopes of his marrying her (331).

It becomes increasingly evident that the painter and the beauty have been brought into league by their respective interests in the mutually beneficial art and marriage

markets. Like John Singer Sargent, the narrator owes much of his professional success to commissions from wealthy American women, and the example of the English Flora Saunt suggests that, as with Sargent, his paintings can lead to their social, or even marital, success. The narrator immediately recognises that Flora's appeal is of a 'showy' nature, that she is 'a beauty of the great conscious, public, responsible order' (319) who draws 'giggling, nudging spectators' (321), but this only increases his interest in her. He feels that he 'would have made a high bid for a good chance to paint' her (319), and informs her at once that his 'main business with her would be just to have a go at her head' (322) – an expression suggestive of physical attack. Like Oliver Lyon's, his approach to his sitter is both one-dimensional and exploitative. He 'had studied her face for a particular beauty', but once he is 'sure it was gone for ever' (361) he abandons her 'for dead' (363) – a phrase which conveys the extent to which her looks are seen to constitute her existence. He also reveals that the sort of thing he wants, artistically, to do with Flora, he 'could almost with [his] eyes shut do [...] in a single line' (331). This may be seen as a version of the representational method employed by the painter-narrator in 'The Special Type' (1900), who seeks 'instinctively, to represent sitters in the light of the thing, whatever it may be, that facially, least wittingly or responsibly, gives the pitch of their aspect' (*CT* 11, 188).

For the artist-narrator in 'The Beldonald Holbein' (1901), the single 'thing' that gives the 'pitch' to Lady Beldonald's aspect is the figurative 'glass case' that has preserved her 'against every breath of air' (*CT* 11, 285). The way in which he arrives at such evaluations is both violent and hasty. He rebuffs Lady Beldonald's suggestion that he and his artist friend Outreau may need to talk to the Holbein-like Mrs Brash in order to gain the insight needed to paint her, saying 'we see bang off – with a click like a steel spring'. He adds, 'That's the way I saw you yourself, my lady [...] that's the way, with a long pin straight through your body, I've got you' – a sadistic comment meant to violate Lady Beldonald's impenetrable surface whilst implying that, like a preserved butterfly, she is already dead. Afterwards he notes that 'this, for reasons, had brought my guest to her feet' (293).

If, according to the narrator, Lady Beldonald's encasement means that she has remained untouched by life, it also means that, like Flora Saunt, her sense of self – and indeed her very consciousness – is confined to her status as an object of others' vision. As a result, she is unable to recognise and appreciate the qualities of others – a circumstance that accounts for her blindness to the Holbein-like qualities of Louisa

Brash. This failure of vision is conveyed through a grotesque comparison which belongs to the same group of ocular images as Flora's 'sugar-balls': 'She looks *naturally* new, as if she took out every night her large, lovely, varnished eyes and put them in water' (285).³⁰ The italicised '*naturally*', which means the opposite of what it says, recalls a common advertising claim. At other points she is compared to 'bottled fruit' preserved 'in syrup' (284), and a 'box of sardines' (290). But if the portraitist recognises his subject's commodity-like qualities, like the narrator of 'Glasses', he also plays a key role in this commodification.

In the narrator's evaluative scheme, Lady Beldonald's appearance of newness fits her for the commercial 'show-window' (285), while the evidence in Mrs Brash's face of 'time and life', those 'artists who beat us all' (297), fit her for her sixteenth-century 'frame' (306), and the appreciation of the 'superior, sophisticated' (301) London art-world. However, appreciation is also an economic process, and the distinction between these two display contexts is repeatedly questioned. The purpose of the proposed portrait of Lady Beldonald – as her sister-in-law Mrs Munden freely admits – is that its presence at 'the Academy' will help her to 'get on' socially, and thus act as a sort of advertisement, just as Flora Saunt's does (283-84). It should also be noted that the recognition and promotion of Mrs Brash as 'the greatest of all the great Holbeins' (290) is discussed in terms of commodity exchange. The narrator's first response to his friend Outreau's discovery is surprise that he should 'possess a Holbein, of *any* price, unawares' (290), and later, Mrs Brash's decline and eventual demise is attributed to the fact that her American city of origin was not 'a market for Holbeins' (306). Both women are irreparably damaged by the fact that their sense of self is entirely dictated by their respective markets.

In an 1897 review, James described Sargent's *Mrs Carl Meyer and her Children* as 'a picture of a knock-down insolence of talent and truth of characterization, a wonderful rendering of life, of manners, of aspects, of types, of textures, of everything'.³¹ Here the violence that James perceived in the process of portraiture is carried into the impression that the finished work creates. The language and pace of the description is partially echoed in *The Awkward Age* (published two years later) in Vanderbank's account of the 'staring, glaring, obvious, knockdown beauty, as plain as a poster on a wall, an advertisement of soap or whisky', that 'fetches such a price' in the marriage market.³² The visual impact of Sargent's 'vast & dazzling portrait' of *The Wyndham Sisters* (1899) was even sharper. To John Hay James wrote that he came

away feeling ‘as one feels when the lady is shot from the cannon’.³³ In both works the gorgeous opulence of the furnishings, dresses and accessories loudly proclaim the subjects’ wealth and social station, and in the second there is a dramatic extravagance about the way the sitters are posed. In 1911 James characterised Sargent as ‘the lightning artist’,³⁴ suggesting the rapid simplifying vision that characterises so many of James’s fictional portraitists; but the experience of sitting to Sargent in 1912 for a charcoal drawing commissioned by Edith Wharton caused James to modify his ideas about the painter’s working methods, and provided Sargent with a sense of the challenges of representing Henry James. To Wharton James wrote:

It proved, the 1st time, not to be a matter of the famous “one” impressionistic sitting at all – & he finds me difficult, perverse, obscure – quite as if I were a mere facial Awkward Age or Sacred Fount.³⁵

James’s reference to two of his most difficult novels implies a hope that Sargent’s portrait of his fellow artist will succeed in conveying the workings of his mind, and indeed, one of the most impressive things about the ‘living breathing likeness’³⁶ that Sargent painted the following year is its ruminative quality. When, on the other hand, Nick Dormer in *The Tragic Muse* (1890) sets about portraying ‘that oddest of animals’, the female artist, he has no interest in her career and she remains for him ‘primarily and essentially a pictorial object’. This reflection directly follows Basil Dashwood’s comment that, if placed in the vestibule of the theatre, her two portraits will ‘really help to draw’.³⁷

In James’s fiction, he repeatedly returns to the idea of women’s perceived status as works of art and the way in which this precludes them from the field of artistic representation, an exclusion that is often portrayed as painful. In one of his last stories, ‘The Velvet Glove’ (1909), the career ambitions of a beautiful but inferior female author are deprecated by a young ‘literary lion’, who feels that she should live romance and leave writing to men like himself: ‘Only live. Only be. *We’ll* do the rest’ (CT 12, 263). This serenely patronising entreaty is preceded by his violent reflection that had he possessed her divine beauty, he would neither read nor write, and ‘should have had no more arithmetic for computing fingers than any perfect-headed marble Apollo mutilated at the wrists’ (245). Interestingly, the founder of the Women Writer’s Suffrage League, Violet Hunt, asked James to sign copies of *The English Review*

containing this story to raise money for the suffragist cause. James agreed, but added, 'I confess I am not eager for the *avènement* of a multitudinous & overwhelming female electorate – & don't see how any man in his senses *can* be'.³⁸ Elsewhere James associates this all-engulfing feminine crowd with the debasement and commercialisation of culture. In 'The Future of the Novel' (1899) he relates the 'flood' of fiction that 'swells and swells, threatening the whole field of letters [...] with submersion' to an 'inarticulate, but abysmally absorbent' reading public, largely made up of women, the working classes, and 'the very young'.³⁹ The conceit may be linked with another group of images in which the popular but artistically inferior productions of women authors are identified with sweets in a shop.⁴⁰

This conjunction of ideas is instructive when considering James's strangely prescient image of the simultaneous emancipation of women and fiction from the constraints of propriety a little later in 'The Future of the Novel', which was published six years before the onset of suffragette militancy:

[...] as nothing is more salient in English life to-day, to fresh eyes, than the revolution taking place much more deeply in the quiet than even the noise on the surface demonstrates – so we may very well yet see the female elbow itself, kept in increasing activity by the play of the pen, smash with final resonance the window all this time superstitiously closed. The particular draught that has been most deprecated will in that case take care of the question of freshness.⁴¹

The closed window, related to the windows of authorial perspective in James's 'house of fiction', refers specifically in this case to the proscription of 'any but the most guarded treatment of the relation between men and women' in Anglophone literature of the nineteenth century, a precaution meant to protect women and children.⁴² The incongruous image of domestic confinement is reminiscent of Alice's imprisonment in the White Rabbit's house after one of her growth spurts, when she causes this creature to smash through what she thinks is a cucumber frame by snatching at it through the window. After all, it is just before this smash that Carroll's adventurous heroine, her elbow 'pressed hard' against the door, contemplates writing her own history.⁴³ Isobel Armstrong has argued that, contrary to the Patrician belief that 'window breaking is endemic to the lower classes and because of this *means nothing* and can be disregarded', there exists 'a language of glass-breaking'. In part, it represents a

‘violent shattering of barriers’ and an ‘insistence on being *heard*’.⁴⁴ In figuring the writing arm (or rather the indelicate jostling elbow) as the cause of this particular act of window-smashing, Henry James endows the ‘rioter’s habitual protest’⁴⁵ with the notion of articulacy. If, in his ‘scalped and disfigured’⁴⁶ condition, he was unable to do the same for Mary Aldham’s slashes, his fiction provides a context in which their significance can be read.

¹ Rowena Fowler provides a useful chart that details all the portrait slashings executed by suffragettes during this period. (‘Why Did Suffragettes Attack Works of Art?’ *Journal of Women’s History*, 2:3 (1991), 125).

² ‘Academy Outrage’, *The Times* (5 May 1914), 8.

³ Elizabeth Crawford identifies Mary Wood as Mary Aldham’s alias. (*The Women’s Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866-1928* (London: UCL Press, 1999), 6).

⁴ ‘Academy Outrage’, 8.

⁵ ‘Destruction of an Academy Picture’, *The Suffragette* (8 May 1914), 89.

⁶ ‘National Gallery Outrage’, *The Times* (11 March 1914), 9.

⁷ Thomas J. Otten, *A Superficial Reading of Henry James: Preoccupations with the Material World* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), 60-61. Otten also points out that Leon Edel’s claim that Mary Aldham ‘said she had never heard of Henry James’ is ‘unsupported by any cited source’ (177, note 2), and despite extensive research, I have been unable to discover such a source. Some recent accounts have concluded that her choice was based simply on the amount of press attention the portrait had been receiving (see for example Fred Kaplan, *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992), 551). Others, including John Carlos Rowe, have speculated about whether Aldham was ‘attracted to the imposing authority Sargent rendered in James’s head and vested torso’ which exemplified ‘upper-class patriarchy in Georgian England’ (‘Henry James in the New Century’, in *A Companion to American Fiction, 1865-1914*, ed. Robert Paul Lamb and Gary Richard Thompson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 519). This interpretation gains support from the slashings of John Lavery’s portrait of the King and Sir Hubert von Herkomer’s Duke of Wellington that occurred later that month. Otten makes interesting use of the event to explore a perceived continuity between the physical act of painting and the body of the viewer in this period.

⁸ Henry James, *Picture and Text* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1893), 114-15.

⁹ James wrote ten tales that were centrally concerned with portraits and portraiture, and several others in which they play an important part. Of these tales, six are narrated by the painter, and as Adeline R. Tintner convincingly demonstrates, many of them draw on James’s knowledge of Sargent, his studio and his lifestyle. (‘Sargent in the Fiction of Henry James’, *Apollo* (Aug 1975), 128-32).

¹⁰ Henry James, *The Tragic Muse*, ed. Philip Horne (London: Penguin, 1995), 463.

¹¹ Edmund Gosse, ‘The Academy Outrage: Mr Henry James and his Friends’, *The Times* (6 May 1914), 9; ‘Free Fight at the Academy’, *Daily Express* (5 May 1914), 1.

¹² *The New York Times*, ‘The Crazy Militants’ (5 May 1914), 10. An article in *The Academy* (cited in the American journal *Literary Digest* (27 June 1914), 1545), expresses a similar combination of anger and bafflement.

¹³ Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 103.

¹⁴ ‘Insurgent Hysteria’, *The Times* (16 March, 1912), 9.

- ¹⁵ Laura E. Nym Mayhall, *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Citizenship and Resistance in Britain, 1860-1930* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 106, citing ‘A Logical Protest’, *Vote* (22 February 1911), 195, and Charlotte Despard, ‘Lloyd George’s Pronouncement’, *Vote* (2 December 1911), 66.
- ¹⁶ Teresa Billington-Greig, *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Emancipation in a Hurry* (London: Frank Palmer, 1911), 127-29.
- ¹⁷ Caroline Howlett, ‘Femininity slashed: suffragette militancy, modernism and gender’, in *Modernist Sexualities*, ed. Hugh Stevens and Caroline Howlett (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000), 82, citing H. G. Wells, ‘Why I Like the Herald’, *Daily Herald* (15 April 1914), 10.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 83, citing Mary Richardson, ‘Letters of Fire’, *Women’s Dreadnought* (25 April 1914), 3.
- ¹⁹ ‘Destruction of an Academy Picture’, *Votes for Women* (8 May 1914), 490.
- ²⁰ Michael Anesko, ed., *Letters, Fictions, Lives: Henry James and William Dean Howells* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 458; W. N. Roughead, ed. *Tales of the Criminous: A Selection from the works of William Roughead together with fourteen letters to the author from Henry James* (London: Cassell and Company, 1956), 258.
- ²¹ Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), 38.
- ²² Letter to Mary Cadwal, in Susan M. Gunter, ed., *Dear Munificent Friends: Henry James’s Letters to Four Women* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 182.
- ²³ Leon Edel, ed., *Henry James Letters*, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1974-84), vol. 4, 712; Percy Lubbock, ed., *The Letters of Henry James*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1920), vol. 2, 379. See also James’s letter to Thomas Sergeant Perry: ‘I fall, physically, physiologically speaking, into holes of no inconsiderable depth’ (Lubbock, vol. 2, 380).
- ²⁴ Edel, *Letters*, vol. 4, 51.
- ²⁵ James, *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel, 12 vols (New York: Lippincott, 1962-64), vol. 1, 282. All subsequent in-text references to James’s tales will use the abbreviation ‘CT’.
- ²⁶ Robert Browning, ‘My Last Duchess’, in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 911.
- ²⁷ James, *Picture and Text*, 107.
- ²⁸ I have also explored this idea in ‘Something in the ballads which they sang: James’s “Rose-Agathe” and Tennyson’s *The Princess*’, *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations*, 14:1 (2010), 43-61.
- ²⁹ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Medusa’s Head’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955).
- ³⁰ The eyes of the objectified Lady Barbarina, for example, are ‘as beautiful as if they had been blank, like those of antique busts’ (CT 5, 290).
- ³¹ James, ‘The Guildhall and the Royal Academy’, in *The Painter’s Eye: Notes and Essays on the Pictorial Arts*, ed. John L. Sweeney (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 257.
- ³² James, *The Awkward Age*, ed. Ronald Blythe (London: Penguin, 1987), 31-32.
- ³³ George Monteiro, ed., *Henry James and John Hay: The Record of a Friendship* (Providence: Brown UP, 1965), 124.
- ³⁴ Lyall H. Powers, ed., *Henry James and Edith Wharton. Letters: 1900-1915*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), 202
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.
- ³⁶ Letter to Rhoda Broughton, in Lubbock, vol. 2, 330.
- ³⁷ James, *Tragic Muse*, 150, 462, 461.
- ³⁸ Philip Horne, ed., *Henry James: A Life in Letters* (London: Penguin, 2000), 478.
- ³⁹ James, *Literary Criticism*, ed. Leon Edel, 2 vols (New York: Library of America, 1984), vol. 1, 100.
- ⁴⁰ Examples of this association of ideas may be found in ‘Greville Fane’ (1892) and ‘The Lesson of Balzac’ (1905). In the latter he compares George Sand’s artistic complexion to ‘a large, polished, gilded Easter egg, the pride of a sweet-shop if not the treasure of a museum’ (*Literary Criticism*, vol. 2, 117). James’s antagonistic attitude towards female readers and authors has been explored by several critics, including Anne T. Margolis in *Henry James and the Problem of Audience* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), esp. 8-14, and Alfred Habegger in *Henry James and the “Woman Business”* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989). These studies also examine James’s appropriation of popular fiction by women novelists.
- ⁴¹ James, *Literary Criticism*, vol. 1, 109.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 107. This idea may also be found in tales of this period such as ‘John Delavoy’ (1898) and ‘The Story in it’ (1902).
- ⁴³ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, ed. Peter Hunt (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 33-34. Similarly, James’s whimsical observation that eighteenth-century

children ‘were not yet table-high’, but that ‘from the moment their little chins rested on the mahogany’, frank representations of sexuality had to be suppressed, may be compared to Alice’s inability to reach the golden key on the glass table in order to open the door to the garden, and her previous failure to squeeze herself through the small passage that leads to the garden when she is tall enough to reach the key. (James, *Literary Criticism*, vol. 1, 107).

⁴⁴ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination, 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 65; 57; 67.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁶ Edel, *Letters*, vol. 4, 712.