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Like many characters in Henry James’s tales, the narrator of ‘The Real Thing’ (1892) – an illustrator and aspiring portrait-painter – has a certain ‘perversity’: ‘an innate preference for the represented subject over the real one’. He continues, ‘I liked things that appeared; then one was sure. Whether they *were* or not was a subordinate and almost always a profitless question’.¹ Just *what* one is sure of is never made explicit, and the exact relation between ‘the represented subject’ and ‘things that appeared’ is left ambiguous, in Jamesian fashion. But this confession has a curious resonance in James’s theory of fiction, as well as in his various penned cogitations on the relationship between art, the creative process, and life. Such passages bring to the fore James’s preoccupation with the surface. I will argue that this image of surfaces becomes a crucial part of James’s imagination and of ‘undetermined capacity’: the obscure but charged spaces that can be felt in his narratives. The surface is what he, the artist, observes and tries to ‘catch’; it constitutes what he creates; it is the field of imagination upon which he can create, a blankness on which imagination can work; and it is also the blankness of the mask, the face, to which he is at once drawn and by which he is bewildered, or even, perhaps, dismayed.

‘Since we live in an *appearing* world’, Hannah Arendt asks in *The Life of the Mind*, ‘is it not much more plausible that the relevant and the meaningful ... should be located

¹ Henry James, ‘The Real Thing’, *The Real Thing and Other Tales*. London: Macmillan and Co. 1893. p. 11-12.

precisely on the surface?’² Significantly, as she points out, this question challenges a certain ‘hierarchy’ that has become ingrained in ‘our habitual standards of judgment’: ‘the old metaphysical dichotomy of (true) Being and (mere) Appearance, together with the old prejudice of Being’s supremacy over appearance’.³ Her question shifts the weight of attention from Being to Appearance, or, in the terminology of James’s artist, from ‘the real’ to ‘the represented’. The suggestion that ‘the relevant and the meaningful’ is located on the surface is pertinent to how one might read literary art, which moves the reader’s mind to imagine some depth *behind* the surface, even though, literally speaking, everything is located in the shapes of ink on the sheet of paper. What is given to the reader is the represented, in the form of verbal expression. James’s works are known for their investigation into the life of the mind and such themes as ‘the Jamesian consciousness’ form plentiful and profitable fields of inquiry in the wealth of criticism on James. His texts seem to invite the reader to delve into their depths. Adopting Arendt’s question encourages a shift in approach to track the various kinds of surfaces in James’s language: how James limns them and what of ‘the relevant and the meaningful’ one might find there. It draws attention to the suggestive productivity of surfaces in James’s texts.

James dissolves, or distorts, the dichotomy of surface and depth, appearance and substance. Critics have noted how James habitually couples opposites, sometimes with an intricately vague or incomplete logic: a pattern of thought that Ralf Norrman calls ‘chiastic inversion’.⁴ This process is observable in his perception of surface and depth from his earliest writings on his theory of fiction. In a revealing passage in ‘The Art of Fiction’ (1884), James, at forty-one, states that the novelist ‘competes with his brother the painter in his attempt to render the look of things, the look that conveys their meaning, to catch the colour, the relief,

² Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1978. Print. p. 27.

³ *Ibid.*, 30, 27.

⁴ Ralf Norrman, *The Insecure World of Henry James’s Fiction, The Insecure World of Henry James’s Fiction*. London: Macmillan Press, 1982. p. 137. For example, Norrman calls attention to a conversation in *The Golden Bowl*, in which ‘good faith’ and ‘false position’ ‘come to the same thing’.

the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle'.⁵ For James, the substance seems to become an inextricable element of the surface, and it appears, at least in this extract, that they even come to the same thing. He seems to evoke the substance by rendering the surface, in which case all the 'meaning', what he might call 'the whole thing', is part of the surfaces he paints with his strokes; and through this act he 'competes with life', which he equates with producing an 'illusion',⁶ however momentary.

These observations accentuate the emphasis James may have placed on the sense of performance in the phrase 'the human spectacle', with spectacle's root sense of 'public show'. Appearances and external signs become paramount in the theme of theatricality and illusion in *The Europeans* (1878). Although James did not include it in the New York Edition, this novel is still a useful text to look at for his art of fiction put into practice; its relative simplicity in content and in form makes it read almost like an *étude*. Critics have recognized the patterns of pastoral comedy and the 'closure' of four marriages packed into the last paragraph, in contrast to the more characteristic lack of closure that is essential in James, as discussed by Millicent Bell in *Meaning in Henry James*. J. A. Ward points out, however, that the novel 'almost conceals the suggestion of unresolvable difficulties, but it does not omit them'.⁷ In fact, it carries the seeds of many Jamesian themes and complexities that flourish as he proceeds in his career: another reason to turn to it in an analysis of James's art. In later and longer works that operate like 'some fine florid voluminous phrase',⁸ the reader is distracted by a profusion of material that obscures 'the figure in the carpet'. But this earlier novel seems to lay its stylistic techniques (comparatively) out in the open, as if to leave clues that the reader may trace.

⁵ James, 'The Art of Fiction', *The Art of Fiction and Other Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1948. p. 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁷ J. A. Ward, *The Search for Form: Studies in the Structure of James's Fiction*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967. p. 98.

⁸ James, *The New York Edition of Henry James*, vol. 19, 4. (*The Wings of the Dove*).

The novel begins with a narrow graveyard, ‘seen from the windows of a gloomy-looking inn’; Eugenia and Felix are looking out of it and at each other; and the narrator indirectly invites us to be an ‘attentive observer’.⁹ The ‘seen’ and the ‘looking’ is constantly mentioned, particularly with regard to who looks at whom or what and for how long. Both ‘look’ and ‘see’ (and their variants) appear more than six hundred times together throughout the book. ‘She looked at him a moment; then, without saying anything, she turned away’.¹⁰ Such portrayals come one after the other and the interactions between the characters are as much about how they are looking as what they are saying, or not saying. It intensifies the sense that neither the characters nor the readers can get under the surface, as it were, of what is presented to them – as we might experience a painting, or life.

James and his characters are keenly aware that they are ‘making a scene’ – especially Eugenia, who, somewhat like Blanche DuBois fixing colored shades onto the light-bulbs to live in and to involve others in her make-believe act, decorates her cottage with ‘pink silk blinds’, making the room ‘peculiarly bedimmed’.¹¹ There are repeated analogies comparing what progresses in the novel to ‘the theatre’, a ‘drama’, a ‘play’, an ‘exhibition’ in which Eugenia is the principal ‘actress’ and the Americans the ‘spectators’.¹² Comparably, in a chilling moment in *The American Scene* (1907), James imagines people at a hotel as ‘an army of puppets’ who ‘think of themselves as delightfully free and easy’;¹³ but in any social interaction, people act out a persona according to or against what is expected of them, including what they expect of themselves, or the image they wish to project. Adam Phillips muses in *Missing Out*, ‘there is something theatrical about being desiring creatures’.¹⁴ The

⁹ James, *The Europeans*, p.5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 115, 115, 171, 172, 171, 172, respectively.

¹³ James, *The American Scene*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1907. p.107.

¹⁴ Adam Phillips, *Missing Out*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012. p. 177.

characters read each other from exterior signs – from the surfaces that they observe – and they can only ‘guess the unseen from the seen’.

But this guessing is precisely what enables the imagination in the writer, the characters, and the reader. The power to ‘guess the unseen’ is what constitutes one’s capacity for experience, as James expounds in ‘The Art of Fiction’.¹⁵ In *Techniques of Ambiguity in the Fiction of Henry James*, Norrman interprets James’s peculiarly copious ‘looks’ in *The Europeans* as ‘ambiguity signals’ that ‘[hint] at hidden meanings’, or ‘secret dimensions’.¹⁶ What is noteworthy here, however, are the devices through which James makes these ‘dimensions’, or the reader’s expectation of such a space *behind* the surface, so substantial. This quality is most conspicuously embodied by Eugenia’s character, though not restricted to her. To Felix’s ‘spiritual vision’, his sister ‘was always like the lunar disk when only a part of it is lighted. The shadow on this bright surface seemed to him to expand and to contract’.¹⁷ To Robert Acton, the aspect of Eugenia that slips from his grasp is ‘the indispensable unknown quantity’ in an ‘algebraic problem’.¹⁸ ‘There is more than there looks to be’, he says,¹⁹ and just as he tries to understand ‘what she said’, ‘what she meant’, and ‘something between the two’ in their conversations,²⁰ the novel probes these nebulous spaces that are beyond the complete understanding of all the characters, the reader, and even, perhaps, the author himself. In this novel and other works, at the heart of James’s art of fiction seems to be the ‘pursuit of the unknown quantity’ that intensely absorbs Robert and carries the reader into the same absorption: hence, its indispensability.²¹

¹⁵ James, ‘The Art of Fiction’, p. 11.

¹⁶ Norrman, *Techniques of Ambiguity in the Fiction of Henry James*, Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1977. p. 118.

¹⁷ James, *The Europeans*, p. 132.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

“‘What if Eugenia – what if Eugenia – ?’” he [Felix] asked himself softly, the question dying away in his sense of Eugenia’s undetermined capacity’.²² The dash that leaves things unspoken – a prominent punctuation in James’s works – creates an undefined space that is comparable to the effect of other linguistic techniques abundant in *The Europeans*: the negative and the subjunctive. These are evident from the very first sentences: ‘A narrow grave-yard in the heart of a bustling, indifferent city ... is at no time an object of enlivening suggestion; and the spectacle is not at its best when ...’ or ‘If, while the air is thickened ... the calendar should happen to indicate ... it will be admitted that no depressing influence is absent from the scene’.²³ James so often writes what is not, what might be if, and what appears to be, that ‘what *is*’ almost becomes a profitless or, at least, a bewildering question as the artist in ‘The Real Thing’ suggests. By expressing through negatives, James does not delimit the possibilities of what things can be like Eugenia, who says ‘nothing’ that is ‘by no means wholly untrue’.²⁴ The subjunctive also creates a vague space that is neither in the past, present, nor future; neither true nor untrue. These spaces that do not exist in what can be called ‘the actual’, but surely *do* exist – these shadows that expand and contract – gain imagined substance as we wait for things to be revealed or realized.

Speaking of the haunting presence of ‘the un-lived life’, Phillips explains how waiting in frustration is the ‘precondition’ for desire’s ‘flourishing’: ‘the imagining is in the waiting. In consciously contrived instant gratification, neither desire nor the object of desire is sufficiently imagined’.²⁵ Suppressions become meaningful in the characters’ relations in *The Europeans*, where all characters suppress an action or speech at some point. And once, James gives it away, saying, ‘the narrator of these incidents is not obliged to be more definite’.²⁶ When a character refrains from giving expression to something nebulous in his thoughts, the

²² Ibid., p. 95.

²³ Ibid., p. 5.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 51.

²⁵ Phillips, *Missing Out*, p. xx.

²⁶ James, *The Europeans*, p. 116.

narrator follows suit. At work here are the methods of writing that James recommends in a letter to Mary Augusta Ward in 1899, to create for the reader ‘a wait to begin to guess’ the subject and to write with ‘that magnificent and masterly *indirectness*’.²⁷ In James’s work, these elements of waiting make us actively imagine, developing the substance in the surface presented to us by the writer.

The image of the surface appears again and again in James’s writings to represent the potentiality of imagination in the human mind. Impressions are received on some kind of surface, and imagination, in James’s habit of thought, *does* things to surfaces. In *The Europeans*, the Americans are as one might picture James’s ideal audience; their attention to Felix is ‘like a large sheet of clean, fine-grained drawing-paper, all ready to be washed over with effective splashes of water-colour’.²⁸ Fine-grained paper soaks deep; as Henry wrote to his brother William in 1888, ‘the great thing is to be *saturated* ... with life’.²⁹ In the 1909 Preface to *The Ambassadors*, James depicts the ‘wide field of the artist’s vision’ that hangs ‘like the white sheet suspended for the figures of a child’s magic-lantern’, for a ‘moveable shadow’ to be projected onto it.³⁰ The blank surface is a field of possibilities: possibilities that are, inevitably, sacrificed through the act of writing, or living and making choices, but never utterly lost. James’s art ‘remain[s] full of a sense of alternatives’.³¹

The blank surface makes a peculiar appearance in the 1908 Preface to *The Turn of the Screw*: ‘my values are positively all blanks save so far as an excited horror, a promoted pity, a created expertness ... proceed to read into them more or less fantastic figures’.³² ‘Values’ is an elusive term; we might first think of principles or moral standards, but it also holds mathematical, linguistic, and artistic meanings. It is as if he reads into, and creates upon, the

²⁷ James E. Miller, ed., *Theory of Fiction: Henry James*, p. 155.

²⁸ James, *The Europeans*, p. 54.

²⁹ Miller, ed., *Theory of Fiction: Henry James*, p. 63.

³⁰ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. viii.

³¹ Millicent Bell, *Meaning in Henry James*, p. x.

³² James, *The New York Edition of Henry James*, vol. 12, p. xxii.

emptiness of ‘zero’ some material (yet illusory), positive value. This passage calls to mind the missing ‘turn’ in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) that is forever left a heavy blank as a burnt letter. For Densher, that ‘turn had possibilities that, somehow, by wondering about them, his imagination had extraordinarily filled out and refined’.³³ Imagination in James’s imagination generates value and form upon blanks, even apophatically; figures of speech give rise to figures.

James makes a large claim for expression’s power to *form* in ‘Gustave Flaubert’ (1902): ‘expression ... *makes* the reality’, and ‘we move in literature through a world of different values and relations, a blessed world in which we know nothing except by style, but in which also everything is saved by it, and in which the image is thus always superior to the thing itself’.³⁴ The represented, the appearing illusory surface, is valued again over any metaphysical ideal of *the* truth or ‘the real thing’. He seems to be asserting, in concordance with Arendt’s question, that ‘the relevant and the meaningful’ is ‘located precisely on the surface’, at least in the world of literature. This understanding of literary ‘expression’ makes itself felt in his discussion of art’s ‘Form’ – the root meaning of ‘fiction’ – in a letter to Hugh Walpole in 1912. ‘Form alone *takes*, and holds and preserves, substance – saves it from the welter of helpless verbiage....’³⁵ To put it differently, borrowing a phrase he uses elsewhere, these notions of art may be called ‘a saving selection’.³⁶ Expression is not necessarily an ordering operation, but one that creates values like coordinates from which one can orient oneself in ‘the crabbed page of life’.³⁷

This image of life as a ‘crabbed page’ is a potent metaphor. Ross Posnock effectively argues, ‘[I]legibility is precisely what James often seeks nearly to defeat’.³⁸ And as evident at

³³ Ibid., vol. 20, p. 396.

³⁴ Miller, ed., *Theory of Fiction: Henry James*, pp. 89-90.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 266-7.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 72. (1908 Preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*).

³⁷ Ibid., p. 236. (1908 Preface to *The Princess Casamassima*).

³⁸ Posnock, ‘Affirming the Alien: The Pragmatist Pluralism of *The American Scene*’, p. 230.

his arrival in New York in *The American Scene*, James may have had a propensity to be intrigued by ‘the chaos of confusion and change’, by the difficult puzzles of recognition, which he portrays, in a curiously linguistic simile, ‘like the spelling-out of foreign sentences of which one knows but half the words’.³⁹ Even so, this does not mean that he is without anxiety about things that come too close to unrecognition, incomprehension, or illegibility.

The world of fiction, to James, is a ‘luminous paradise’, where, crossing ‘the loved threshold’, he can cast off his ‘discouragements and lapses, depressions and darkneses’; ‘the air of life fills my lungs’, he writes in his notebook in 1891, ‘and I believe, I see, I *do*’.⁴⁰ Interestingly, it appears to be through, or in, fiction that he is enabled to *do*, to act, and to live his life. There is something that unburdens him and sets him free in this world of imagination, yet entering it does not always *save*. It is also accompanied by a certain perturbation. Only the next day after the entry quoted above, he returns to his notebook: ‘To live *in* the world of creation – to get into it and stay in it – to frequent it and haunt it ... this is the only thing – and I neglect it ... from a strange nervous fear of letting myself go’.⁴¹

To let oneself go is one of the recurring locutions in James’s works and it is intriguing to compare this instance to another usage in ‘The Jolly Corner’ (1908), a tale of a ‘poor gentleman’ who frequents and haunts ‘great blank rooms’ full of his wandering imagination, to ‘stalk’ the presence of ‘some strange figure’ that represents to him what he ‘might have been’.⁴² He senses the figure behind a closed door:

It was as if there had been something within it, protected by indistinctness and corresponding in extent with the opaque surface behind.... The indistinctness mocked him even while he stared, affected him as somehow shrouding or challenging certitude, so that after faltering an instant on his step he let himself go with the sense that here *was* at last something to meet, to touch, to take, to know — something all unnatural and dreadful, but to advance upon

³⁹ James, *The American Scene*, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Miller, ed., *Theory of Fiction: Henry James*, p. 88.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴² James, ‘The Jolly Corner’, pp. 199, 198, 203.

which was the condition for him either of liberation or of supreme defeat. ... Brydon ... saw, in its great grey glimmering margin, the central vagueness diminish, and he felt it to be taking the very form toward which, for so many days, the passion of his curiosity had yearned. It gloomed, it loomed, it was something, it was somebody....⁴³

The more one reads it, the more this passage begins to resemble the process of literary creation. Letting himself go – in the very act James in his notebook fears to do, to live in the world of fiction – Brydon senses the vagueness taking form, like formless thoughts shaping into expression. The creativity of language pulls the form into being, as ‘gloomed’ leads to ‘loomed’, and ‘something’ turns into ‘somebody’. There is *something* behind the closed door: an ‘undetermined capacity’ made intensely present by Brydon’s (and James’s, and the reader’s) imagination. And the ‘indistinctness’ mocks him as if it is an as yet untamable subject that challenges the writer to pin it down.

In various places, James describes the creative process in comparable terms, echoing the ‘beast in the jungle’ imagery that he recurrently employs. In the Preface to *The Ambassadors*, he thinks of his “‘hunt” for Lambert Strether’ as ‘the capture of the shadow projected by my friend’s anecdote’.⁴⁴ Once, in his 1908 Preface to *What Maisie Knew*, he recalls how all themes break loose at some point; ‘it roams, it hunts, it seeks out and ‘sees’ life’.⁴⁵ He sees in the kernel of *The Wings of the Dove* a theme that ‘seemed particularly to bristle’ like a threatening creature, about which ‘the wary adventurer’ must ‘walk round and round’, with a ‘charm that invited and mystified alike that attention’.⁴⁶ The nervousness that James feels in letting himself go and ‘surrender[ing] to his talent’ (as the novelist Dencombe does in the short story ‘The Middle Years’) comes from the dual nature of the attraction; it

⁴³ Ibid., p. 224.

⁴⁴ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. ix.

⁴⁵ Miller, ed., *Theory of Fiction: Henry James*, p. 87.

⁴⁶ James, *The New York Edition of Henry James*, vol. 19, p. v.

can grant him paradisiacal ‘liberation’, but it can also deal him ‘supreme defeat’.⁴⁷ Since Brydon can be said to be searching for his own narrative of life, his possible ‘defeat’ is approximate to the author’s possible inability to handle a theme, to generate or to mold a narrative, from a void into distinct forms: a ‘something’, a ‘somebody’. ‘To let one’s self go’, ‘to surrender one’s self’ to one’s ‘talent’ or ‘obsession’ – these words often signify to James the submergence into the literary act, to be pulled into the abysmal ‘as by a siren’s hand’.⁴⁸

How does James imagine this abysmal space in which the unknown and unnamed lurk and bristle? Interestingly, such a space is visualized as another kind of (potentially) blank surface: a face or a mask. The sharpest shock that Brydon encounters is the face of the figure: the face of unrecognizable alterity. ‘The face, *that* face, Spencer Brydon’s? –’, he searches for words as he struggles to face and comprehend the apparent reality.⁴⁹ Even prior to this, strange faces appear. Just as the ‘indistinctness’ mocks him, ‘the blank face of the door’ challenges him, dares him to *act*.⁵⁰ It echoes the vocabulary with which James discusses writing, emphasizing that it is an act, a *doing*. Another unsympathetic, undecipherable surface comes in the form of ‘hard-faced houses’ that speak ‘so little to any need of his spirit’.

Great builded voids, great crowded stillnesses put on, often, in the heart of cities, for the small hours, a sort of sinister mask, and it was of this large collective negation that Brydon presently became conscious....⁵¹

It is significant that these voids and stillnesses gain such a constructed substantiality, as though this nothingness can be perceived because of the mask, the blank face that covers it. And at the same time, it is through the construction of his words that the ‘voids’ can become

⁴⁷ Miller, ed., *Theory of Fiction: Henry James*, p. 85.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85. (‘The Middle Years’, 1893).

⁴⁹ James, ‘The Jolly Corner’, P. 225.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

‘buildded’, the ‘stillnesses’ ‘crowded’, and the ‘negation’ aggregated into a ‘collective’ – somehow, though illusorily, solid.

There is a faint trace here of the image *The Europeans* begins with: a ‘narrow graveyard in the heart of a bustling, indifferent city’. Graves are hollow spaces, holding empty vessels that will turn to dust themselves, and ‘indifferent’ matches the unresponsiveness of the ‘sinister mask’. With all his consciously periphrastic style, and despite his professed confidence as one who perceives, there seems to be, in these instances, something at the heart of things that James cannot quite put a finger on. A perusal of his works soon makes clear that he habitually uses vague adjectives such as ‘great’ and ‘some’; ambiguous pronouns such as ‘everything’, ‘nothing’, and ‘something’ abound, sometimes interchangeably. These words seem ‘to expand and to contract’, like the shifting substance that the nondescript line of the dash can carry. James forms spaces of ‘undetermined capacity’ both in the way he unfolds his tales and in his linguistic style. Although this is one method through which he makes the reader’s imagination work, it is debatable whether these spaces *can* be named at all.

In crossing the threshold into ‘the world of creation’, and in confronting life that is ‘infinitely large, various and comprehensive’,⁵² James seems to have come face to face with what he has called ‘mysteries abysmal’.⁵³ There are some moments in his writing when the abysmal becomes overwhelmingly ineffable. We can witness such an occasion in a notebook entry from 1905, when he visits the family graveyard at the Cambridge Cemetery. In the stillness of the dusk air, he is intensely affected by the experience: ‘Everything was there, everything *came*; the recognition, stillness, the strangeness, the pity and the sanctity and the terror, the breath-catching passion and the divine relief of tears’.⁵⁴ Recalling the inscription on Alice’s urn takes him ‘so at the throat by its penetrating *rightness*’, as if it is one of his

⁵² Miller, ed., *Theory of Fiction: Henry James*, p. 94. (Letter to The Deerfield Summer School, 1889).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 232-3. (1908 Preface to *The Princess Casamassima*).

⁵⁴ *The European*’s Felix, if he saw James’s countenance, might remark: ‘That’s a capital mixture’.

bristling beasts that spring. Having written out this turmoil of emotions, however, he continues:

But why do I write of the all unutterable and the all abysmal? Why does my pen not drop from my hand on approaching the infinite pity and tragedy of all the past? It does, poor helpless pen, with what it meets of the ineffable, what it meets of the cold Medusa-face of life, of all the life *lived*, on every side. *Basta, basta!*⁵⁵

His expression intensifies with every surge of ‘why do I’, ‘[w]hy does my’; ‘what it meets’, twice repeated; and ‘of the ineffable’, ‘of life’, expanding into ‘of all the life’. The ‘all’ rings throughout this passage, which forms a hollowness in the mouth (and blows faintly through the ‘cold’): a comprehensive term, yet one that can be void, holding an undefined, ‘undetermined capacity’. In such an evocative account of his experience, it seems strange that he should call this ‘unutterable’. But the fact that he rewrote this portrayal considerably for *The American Scene*, leaving out what seems to be the most crucial details, suggests that he may have been unable to complete his rendering, too deeply affected to include it, or kept back from treating it any further by something, perhaps ‘a strange nervous fear’. As Sharon Cameron points out, James’s revision of the passage ‘in effect reverses everything significant about it’.⁵⁶ It is not rare for him to use ‘*basta*’ at the end of an entry to keep himself from writing more. Here, however, it is as though he feels a vital urgency to cast these images away: to look away so that he will not be permanently petrified.

Again, it is the image of the face that becomes crucial; the effect hangs on ‘what it meets’ of the ineffable, its surface. The phrase ‘the life *lived*, on every side’ forms a space like that of the narrow graveyard ‘in the heart’ of Boston in *The Europeans*. The perceiver is not *in* the life, but walled out, as it were, as if facing a ‘sinister mask’ of ‘builded voids’ on all sides. Medusa’s face, here, is like the face of ‘inconceivable’ alterity that Brydon sees, which makes

⁵⁵ Edel and Powers, eds., *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, p. 240.

⁵⁶ Sharon Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James*, p. 15.

him turn, face down, to the hard ground – as Marcher does in the face of the cold ‘knowledge’ of his unlived life in ‘The Beast in the Jungle’, as the governess does in *The Turn of the Screw*, and as Milly does, figuratively, in *The Wings of the Dove*. As with the ‘blank face of the door’, or the ‘sinister mask’ that covers the voids and stillnesses, one can never know what is really behind – if anything.

In *The Europeans*, shadows of or within characters hover between the lines and the question of the (il)legibility of people, even of family, becomes apparent. With a little tweak of circumstances, this illegibility can take on a darker shade, which leads to the almost paranoiac ‘guessing the unseen’ (on the part of characters as well as readers) in James’s tales. In various instances in James’s writings, the possible illegibility of things condenses into surfaces one may not be able to penetrate, a space onto which meaning cannot be easily affixed. The ‘cold Medusa-face of life’ is a startling formulation for someone who will, about a decade later and less than a year before his death, proclaim to H. G. Wells: ‘I live, live intensely and am fed by life, and my value, whatever it be, is in my own kind of expression of that’.⁵⁷ But it seems that, as ‘the motive’ of *The Wings of the Dove* worries him sometimes ‘by a sealing-up of its face’, there are things at the heart of life that he could not penetrate, know, or name: a cold ‘sealing-up’ that he felt all the more keenly for his voraciously active imagination.⁵⁸

According to William Gavin, William James thought ‘human beings can experience more, ontologically, than they can linguistically conceptualize or describe’.⁵⁹ Henry James’s recognition of ‘the ineffable’ in his experience at the family graveyard suggests that he may have agreed with this, as he was also ‘with’ William in other philosophical matters. Nevertheless, Henry still looked to the expression of language to find meaning, even in his last years. He ruminates in ‘The New Novel’ (1914): ‘the value of the offered thing, its whole

⁵⁷ Miller, ed. *Theory of Fiction: Henry James*, p. 91. (Letter, 10th July 1915).

⁵⁸ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. vii.

⁵⁹ William Joseph Gavin, *William James and the Reinstatement of the Vague*, p. 95.

relation to us, is created by the breath of language, that on such terms exclusively ... we know it....⁶⁰ For a writer who is sometimes illustrated as a ‘visionary poet’, committed to ‘visionary being’, it is worth noting that he associates the ‘breath of language’ so closely with knowing, and that this creates the ‘value’.⁶¹ In this passage, he seems to be discussing the process through which the value of the given, the ‘*donnée*’, or the ‘germ’, is developed through expression; but at the same time, as the novel under consideration here is about the writer’s memories, the phrase ‘the offered thing’ can also be applied to what James has called ‘the gift of life’.⁶² While describing the creative process in a Preface, he writes of ‘the expression, the literal squeezing-out, of value’.⁶³ But it is not that the value is squeezed out from inside something; it is, rather, *made* onto, or into, a surface by ‘the breath of language’. Expression gives life and his own self a value, a worth. This perspective offers one way to understand how so much was at stake in James’s literary creation, which could lead to ‘liberation’ or to ‘supreme defeat’.

Let us return to the artist’s ‘perversity’ in ‘The Real Thing’: his ‘innate preference’ for ‘things that appeared’, for ‘then one was sure’. This essay has emphasized how this ties into the significance of performance in *The Europeans* – which calls for waiting, for guessing the unseen from appearances on the surface – as part of its endeavor to animate the reader’s imagination, as well as to ‘compete with life’. As James once voices Maupassant’s views in an article in 1888, ‘[t]he particular way we see the world is our particular illusion about it’.⁶⁴ Acting (and performing) can make such illusions appear, bringing them closer to certainty, or, at least, constructing a surface that one may be ‘sure’ of.

⁶⁰ Miller, ed. *Theory of Fiction: Henry James*, p. 285.

⁶¹ Carolyn Porter, *Seeing and Being: The Plight of the Participant Observer in Emerson, James, Adams, and Faulkner*, p. 121.

⁶² Percy Lubbock, ed., *The Letters of Henry James*, vol. 1, 100. (Letter to Grace Norton, 1883).

⁶³ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. ix.

⁶⁴ Miller, ed., *Theory of Fiction: Henry James*, p. 64. (‘Guy de Maupassant’).

This process is still what keeps him going in 1914, when he is nearly seventy-one. In response to a ‘melancholy outpouring’ from a friend, Henry Adams, James sends his recently published *Notes of a Son and Brother* along with this message:

... the purpose, almost, of my printed divagations was to show you that one *can* ... still want to – or at least can behave as if one did. ... It all takes doing – and I *do*. I believe I shall do yet again – it is still an act of life. But you perform them still yourself – and I don’t know what keeps me from calling your letter a charming one!⁶⁵

His ‘printed divagations’, he says, is proof that one can still want to talk, to write, to ‘find [one’s] consciousness interesting’, and to live. While ‘divagations’ could be a term he employs for its self-deprecating tone, it also brings in the sense of the generative effect of writing. One digresses because the act of writing engenders new, unexpected thoughts: comparable to how ‘gloomed’ slips into ‘loomed’, as the vagueness takes shape, in ‘The Jolly Corner’. A melancholy letter has the potential to be charming, for it is still expressing in a style, and it is still ‘an act of life’.

Even in despondency, one can find new resources for living as long as one keeps doing; and, for James, the key seems to be to express in written surfaces. His letter calls to mind Emerson’s exclamation at the end of ‘Experience’ (1844), an essay he wrote, in part, after the death of his son: ‘up again, old heart!’⁶⁶ James senses a vital connection between these acts of writing and of living, one enabling the other as a performance. One can be sure of an act. At times, James seems to say, we may not be completely certain that we ‘still want to’, but we can always surely act as though we do, and this *doing* – in his case, this *expressing* – is what generates value and meaning. If expression makes reality, acting becomes an apparent truth.

⁶⁵ Lubbock, ed., *The Letters of Henry James*, vol. 2, pp. 373-4.

⁶⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Experience’, p. 93.

‘I liked things that appeared; then one was sure. Whether they *were* or not was a subordinate and almost always a profitless question’. James’s artist prefers things that appear and people who act, instead of those that really are. When the artist in the story confronts ‘the real thing’, his artwork suffers; there is no space for him to imagine as he renders what he sees. He anticipates the perspective that Arendt puts forth, as quoted in the beginning of this essay. James’s texts demonstrate how ‘the essential’ does not necessarily lie ‘beneath the surface’, and ‘the surface’ is often far from “superficial”; they seem to suggest, as Arendt does, how ‘our common conviction that what is inside ourselves, our “inner life,” is more relevant to what we “are” than what appears on the outside’ does not work.⁶⁷ For James, not only is the surface what the artist attempts to render, it becomes the reality made by his expression. A blank surface teems with possibilities, accommodating figures formed by the imagination: a surface upon which the artist can create. At the same time, the inaccessibility and obscurity of what may be behind the surface, the ‘undetermined capacity’ of the unfathomable – regardless of whether there *is* anything behind it at all – is an indispensable element of what activates the imagination. The imagination, set in motion by these suggestive surfaces, can make forms and possibilities intensely present. Even the unfathomable, or ‘mysteries abysmal’, are confronted in the language of surfaces, such as the ‘sinister mask’ or the cold ‘face’. It is a piece of text – the inscription on the surface of Alice’s urn – that evokes such a wrenching response in James, bringing him face-to-face with ‘the all unutterable’.

James’s works explore nebulous spaces – voids behind a sinister mask, the unknown behind a closed door, or the ‘undetermined capacity’ behind a theatrical face that only provides exterior signs – that are suggested by surfaces, but are not, or cannot be, directly limned. Shifting with possibilities and uncertainties, these spaces are beyond the complete

⁶⁷ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 30.

recognition of the characters and of the reader. And as James's pen may drop in the face of the ineffable, there are things in the blank surface of the door – or on the cold face of life – that seem to be beyond the grasp of the author himself. As Michael Wood suggests, 'a book may know more than its author does, or may know different things'.⁶⁸

A curiously similar phrase that James uses in *The Europeans* and, thirty years later, in 'The Jolly Corner' encapsulates the effect of 'undetermined capacity' on the perceiver with an active imagination. When Felix's 'spiritual vision' makes him sense the unfathomable in Eugenia, she is portrayed as a partly-lit 'lunar disk', and the 'shadow on this bright surface seemed to him to expand and to contract'. In the latter story, Brydon sees, in 'the vague darkness', a thin glimmering arch of light from the dawn along the margin of the door, which 'seemed to play a little as he looked – to shift and expand and contract'.⁶⁹ These are both descriptions of appearances: each perceiver looking at what *seems* to him. It is these undefined spaces which keep possibilities in play that make these passages so suggestive.

The remarkable part about the portrayal of Eugenia is that the light and the shadow are both, in the end, on the surface. The shadow, because of its vagueness, may seem to expand and to contract, but they are part of the surface. What is thought to be behind the apparent is actually not behind; and what may be called 'the essential', what one might conjecture to be her 'inner life', is actually part of her surface. It does not matter whether there is anything behind, or within, as long as the surface keeps the perceiver – the character, the reader, the writer – imagining.

The 'undetermined capacity' therefore seems to become a metaphor for the potentiality of a literary work. A book is something more than the fixed writings on the page. It is something that can shift and expand and contract, as it acts on the imagination of each reader, and as it is (always) read in changing contexts and associations. The spaces that are

⁶⁸ Michael Wood, 'What Henry knew', p. 13.

⁶⁹ James, 'The Jolly Corner', p. 224.

left undetermined in James's texts seem to come to hold an almost infinite capacity. The 'substance' that is inextricable from the 'surface' of art can keep shifting, like these vague shadows or shapes that James portrays, precisely because of the undetermined spaces that the representation of surfaces makes possible.

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